



REGION CINCE

The **WIZARD'S**
Fate

The *Erpik Trilogy*
Volume Five

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DragonLance

Ergoth Volume 2

The Wizard's Fate

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Chapter 1

Soldiers and Diplomats

Raising a tin cup to his lips, Tol of Juramona took a sip. The water was warm and brackish, but it cut the thick coating of dust from his throat. He spat, noting it was tinged with red.

“Are you well, my lord?” asked his comrade, Darpo.

“Well enough.”

Tol had taken a hard knock from an enemy horseman. The blow had left his jaw black and blue and loosened a couple of teeth. The plainsman who landed the blow was with the gods now. Tol had separated his head from his shoulders.

During this brief lull in the battle, Tol and his men had ridden into a shallow draw to down bread and water. Wine would have been more welcome, but after ten years on campaign, wine was in short supply.

Tol removed his helmet. Beneath the heavy iron pot his long brown hair was soaked with sweat. He untied the thong at the back of his neck, letting the breeze blow through his hair. The wind off the bay was cool—too cool. Winter was coming, and life in the open on the Tarsan coast would soon be even more difficult.

Through the swirling dust, Tol spied a rider galloping toward them. His company drew swords and interposed themselves between their commander and the approaching stranger. When they saw he wore Ergothian trappings, the warriors relaxed.

“Dispatch coming,” Frez announced. A spearman of great repute, Frez was one of Tol’s companions from the early days in Juramona.

When Tol first came to that provincial town as a mere boy, twenty years before, Frez and his fellow foot soldiers had been in the pay of the Marshal of the Eastern Hundred. Since then, they’d all come far, in station and location. Tol, the farmer’s son, was now Lord Tolandruth, Champion of the Empire; Frez and Darpo were his chief lieutenants.

The young dispatch rider hauled his mount to a skidding stop. “Message from Lord Regobart!” he cried, voice cracking.

Tol dismounted and made his way to the rider, parting his men’s horses with easy shoves. Not a big man, he was compact and very strong. Taking the dispatch from the messenger, he saw the youth’s hands were shaking.

“Nervous, boy?” he asked, not unkindly.

“The enemy has sortied, sir!” The messenger’s fist spasmed, drawing the reins tighter and causing his sweat-streaked horse to prance in a half-circle. “They mean to break Lord Regobart’s position!”

Tol studied the missive. His reading skills had improved over the years, but the abbreviated script used by Regobart’s scribe was hard to decipher. Frowning, he held the square of parchment up to Frez and Darpo.

“Does that say twenty thousand, or thirty?”

Frez, less literate than his commander, merely shrugged. Darpo, a well-traveled former sailor, pushed blond hair from his face and peered at the writing. “Thirty thousand,” he said firmly.

Tol’s face split in a fierce grin. “They’ve come out at last!” he said, spirit rising in his voice. “Anovenax has committed the garrison—the Tar sans have come out!”

He strode back to his horse and leaped into the saddle. “To your positions, men! At last we can carry out the plan!”

By the dispatch rider Tol sent message to Lord Regobart to hold on. Tol and his men were coming hard and fast.

Before departing the young warrior bared his dagger in formal salute. “My lord! I have long prayed to Corij for this day!”

“So have we all, son.”

Tol’s retinue broke up, each man riding out to resume command of his horde of one thousand men. Only Frez remained close by his commander’s side. The two of them rode down the ravine, toward the battlefield where eighty thousand warriors and sixty thousand horses had churned, screamed, fought, and died.

The Imperial Army of Ergoth had battled its way to the very gates of Tarsis. Behind its thick white walls, the city’s thousand spires gleamed, despite the haze of dust drifting overhead. Beyond the spires lay the Bay of Tarsis, dotted with numerous ships of the Tarsan fleet. The normally placid blue water of the bay was dotted with whitecaps. A strong offshore wind churned the water and kept the great galleys, crowded with highly paid Tarsan marines, from reaching land.

Tol squinted against the sunlight. Three, perhaps four, hours of daylight remained. The battle must be concluded before sunset or their great gamble would fail.

He and Frez guided their mounts to the ridge above the ravine. On their right, battle raged between Lord Regobart’s thirty hordes and the city’s army. The Tarsan commander, Admiral Anovenax, was bold and brave but not much of a tactician—very like his opponent, Regobart. The admiral had marched forth from the city with his entire garrison thinking to smash the Ergothian army and enable the Tarsan fleet to dock. With the Tarsan forces thus united, the imperial hordes would be outnumbered and cut in two. All that would be left to them was ignominious retreat.

However, the admiral’s plan had not brought him the swift victory he’d expected. Foiling his triumph were the inhabitants of a cluster of tents set up on the rolling dunes two leagues from the city. There, priests employed by the empire worked the powerful and prolonged wind spell that held the Tarsan fleet at bay. Twice the Tarsans had tried to destroy the clerics; first, in a night raid that failed, and then with magic of their own. Their hired magicians had called forth a flock of fire-ravens, living birds made of flame. Imperial spellcasters countered with torrential rain, and the fire-ravens were extinguished before they could do serious damage. Now Anovenax was concentrating his attack on the tents.

Sixteen hordes were under Tol’s command, the six thousand horsemen and ten thousand infantry which made up the Army of the North. All lay flat on their bellies, the riders’ horses likewise down. Rolling dunes screened them from the sea and from sharp-eyed city sentinels.

The preponderance of foot soldiers in Tol’s command was unique in an empire forged by the Riders of the Great Horde, but Tol had made a specialty of leading men on foot. He and his tough, well-trained, highly loyal force had won many signal victories. In the past decade they had marched all the way from Hylo in the north, fighting eleven battles large and small, to arrive at this place, where they hoped to end the war that had raged so long between Ergoth and Tarsis.

Tol drew his saber and lifted it high. “Rise up!” he cried. “Now is our time! For Ergoth!”

Sixteen thousand men rose as one. Shouting “Ergoth! Ergoth!” they came streaming over the ridge.

The horsemen spread out to confuse the enemy about their true numbers; the footmen marched in close order to convey overwhelming strength.

As the first block of spearmen reached him, Tol got down from his rawboned gray mount and tossed the reins to a surprised Frez. "I'll fight this battle on my own two feet," he said.

He accepted a spear from a nearby warrior, telling Frez to remain in the saddle, the better to bring the news from other fronts. Frez dismounted anyway and sent both their horses cantering away.

"After the battle, you may flog me for disobedience, my lord," Frez said to his glowering leader. "But now, shall we fight?"

The going was hard—the soldiers had to slog through loose sand while burdened by the weight of scale shirt and leggings. In addition, each man had an eight-foot spear ported on his right shoulder and a brass and wood shield slung on his left arm. Tol was glad he'd taken the time for water, brackish or not.

The din of combat grew louder with each dune they crossed. A vast melee was boiling under the walls of Tarsis. Regobart's force, nearly all cavalry, had been bent backward like a huge bow.

In the center of the battlefield was a bizarre sight: four enormous turtles, each six paces high, and each carrying upon its back a tall wooden hoarding. The Tarsans had bought the creatures at great expense from the breeders of Silvanost, where they were used to tow ferries across the Thon-Thalas. From the makeshift platforms on the turtles' backs, Tarsan archers showered the Ergothians with arrows. No weapon in the imperial army could penetrate the shells of the giant turtles.

"Quarter turn, right!" Tol shouted.

The marching block of men slanted off, avoiding the slow-moving, implacable turtles. Arrows fell on them like a deadly squall. Men toppled, pierced in the head or shoulders. The phalanx closed the resulting gaps and kept going. They had no choice but to ignore wounded comrades; if they paused, more men would fall. The surest way to save Ergothian lives was to come to grips with the enemy as quickly as possible.

Riderless horses galloped past, eyes wide with pain and terror. Broken weapons cracked underfoot, and the sand was stained with large scarlet patches. At Tol's order, spears were leveled. A section of Regobart's cavalry scrambled to steer clear of the approaching block of warriors. Catching sight of the banner of Juramona, Tol's hometown, the cavalry let out a roar of approbation.

"Tolandruth! Tolandruth!" they chanted, raising high their bloodied sabers. Tol's footmen pushed through open lanes between the cheering horsemen.

The Tarsan soldiery grouped behind the spearhead of giant turtles was composed mainly of mercenaries, with a few city dwellers pressed into the ranks. The mercenaries were a mixed lot: leather-clad plains nomads, Thoradin dwarves wielding double-axes, and a few wild elves from the forest lands, their faces painted with red, blue, and green loops and lines. Tarsan officers led this contingent. Their bright golden headgear made them easy targets for the Ergothians.

Tol swung his phalanx smartly in a half-turn left. The leading ranks of the Tarsans, long-haired sailors now serving as spearmen, recoiled at the sight of five hundred Ergothians maneuvering with such unity and precision. Tol watched them brace themselves for the inevitable collision, setting their feet firmly as inexperienced soldiers were wont to do. To his expert eyes, the Tarsans with their spears couched looked like a picket fence standing in the path of an avalanche.

For the last few paces the quick-moving Ergothians leaned forward, now almost running. Arrows flickered in from the platforms atop the creeping turtles. One creased Tol's cheek. He ignored the sharp sting, blinking away involuntary tears. The clash of arms was at hand.

Iron spearheads, backed by the weight of a full phalanx, hit the Tarsan line. They went down like grass before a scythe, hurled backward into their comrades and knocking them likewise flat. Tol's

men penetrated five ranks deep before they were stopped. Ergothians in the rear ranks laid their spears on the shoulders of their comrades and pushed. All the maneuvering and strategy came down to this: bodies of armed warriors shoving at each other.

On either side, other blocks of Ergothian spearmen struck the enemy line. Horns blared, and the Tarsan ranks opened to reveal a corps of archers. At spitting distance they lashed the Ergothians with arrows. The soldier on Tol's right dropped, pierced through the eye. Tol put up his shield in time to block an arrow coming at his face. The bronze-tipped shaft penetrated halfway through his shield.

"Get those sons of snakes!" he cried.

Men four ranks in the rear broke formation and charged. The archers were northerners, from the wild coast east of Thoradin. They stood their ground admirably, bombarding the Ergothians with deadly missiles. At the last moment the archers melted back into the Tarsan army, several lofting arrows backward at their foes as they ran. It was a masterly performance, and Tol grudgingly admired their skill.

Freed by the pressure of Tol's counterattack, Lord Regobart re-formed his horsemen and charged again, aiming to cut off the Tarsans from their city. A small band of mercenary cavalry tried to defend the gates but proved no match for the fury of Regobart's Great Horde. With their guard routed, the Tarsans had to close the city gate to keep Regobart out. The massive brass portals swung shut just as the lead riders reached them. From atop the walls, stones, molten lead, and arrows scourged the Ergothians. Lord Regobart recalled his men.

Cut off now, the Tarsans did a remarkable thing. Instead of surrendering or trying to fight their way back into the city, they continued to drive toward the distant row of tents where the imperial priests labored. For a moment the Ergothians did not react, so surprising was this bold move. The four giant turtles ponderously changed formation from a wedge to a line. One of Tol's phalanxes tried to stop a green behemoth, jabbing it continuously with their spears. The beast's shell and leathery hide turned aside all their efforts.

Frez appeared at his commander's side. "They're not themselves today!" he shouted in Tol's ear. "They fight like wild men."

Tol nodded. "They'll expend every life they have to reach our mages—then their fleet will have a chance to save the city!"

"Can we stop those monsters?"

Tol craned his neck to see over the sprawling battle. The hoarding on each turtle's back held fifteen to twenty archers. The wooden structures, pointed at the fore, reminded him of the forecastle of a ship. That thought brought a grin to his face.

"Let's board 'em!" he said, clapping Frez on the back.

Tol withdrew his phalanx, ordering the rest to keep up the pressure on the Tarsans. Marching swiftly behind the line of battle, his men grounded their spears and drew swords. With about four hundred men fit to fight, Tol sent a hundred against each of the four turtles.

"Scale them any way you can," he ordered. "Rope and grapnels, a human ladder—whatever you can devise!"

One group dashed off to the closest turtle. Bracing themselves against the nearly vertical slope of the beast's shell, they laced their arms together. More of their comrades clambered up their backs to their shoulders and repeated the pose. Tol's band used shields to create footholds for the next wave to scale the great creature's side. All this occurred under a constant hail of arrows. Fortunately for the Ergothians, the safest place to be was up close to the crawling giants. There the turtle's bulk shielded them from the Tarsan archers.

Tol, Frez, and a dozen soldiers climbed the staircase of shields to the top and threw themselves onto the turtle's back.

The shell was steeply curved here, but the Ergothians were able to crawl up the smooth shell. Tarsans on neighboring animals shouted and pointed at the encroaching enemy. More arrows whistled in and several of the climbing Ergothians tumbled to the ground, their bodies studded with white -fletched Tarsan missiles.

Tal reached a more level area and drew himself into a crouch. Survivors of his band gathered behind him. All drew sabers.

With a shout, Tol vaulted over the low wooden hoarding and planted a booted foot on the chest of a wide-eyed Tarsan archer. His men swarmed in behind him, howling for blood. Some of the archers had star-headed maces for close combat, but these were no match for Tol's swordsmen. The Ergothians cleaved through the enemy in short order, shoving dead and wounded foes over the side to clear the small structure. Soon only the turtle-driver remained.

The driver, a Silvanesti hired when the turtles were purchased, sat on the forward slope of the shell. Bare-chested, wearing loose white trousers that ended above his knees, the elf was screened on each side by a low wooden wall. His bare feet rested in niches carved into the forward face of the shell.

Tol put the edge of his saber to the elf's throat and demanded he halt the beast.

Calmly the driver replied, "Kill me, and nothing will stop the great Zeboim."

The turtle named for the tempestuous sea-goddess was by now only half a league from the tents housing the imperial clerics. Frustrated, Tol sheathed his sword and ordered the insolent Silvanesti dragged from his perch.

There were no reins or other obvious means of control, but with its driver gone, the turtle did slow a bit. Tol slid into the leather seat and tried yelling for the creature to halt. Zeboim continued to plod directly toward the vulnerable tents.

Frez leaned over his commander's shoulder. "The elf's nearly naked," he said. "Mayhap the beast needs to feel skin?"

Tol unwound his leggings and removed his boots and stockings. Planting his bare feet in the carved niches, he tried to influence the giant with pressure from one foot, then the other.

Zeboim swung his huge head from side to side. A deep grunt gusted from his nostrils. Tol's men cheered him on, while he gave all his attention to the task. Sweat rolled down his face. Zeboim was foremost of the turtles; Tol was close enough now to see the pennants on the tent tops. A solid wall of Ergothian infantry had formed between the tents and the oncoming giants, a gallant, if futile, gesture.

Tol's men had seized a second turtle but failed to wrest the other two from their owners. Ergothians on the captured turtles took up Tarsan bows and loosed arrows at the two beasts still controlled by the enemy.

Tol exerted more and more pressure with his right foot. With agonizing slowness, the beast bore into a turn until it was crawling straight at another turtle, one still under Tarsan control. Between the slowly converging creatures the air was thick with arrows. A quartet of missiles shattered around Tol's naked feet and more thudded into the low-walled box that sheltered his upper body.

He glanced back to see the other beast captured by his men had halted for some reason, but even that slight movement stirred Zeboim off his path. Wiping sweat from his eyes, Tol concentrated on keeping the giant on his collision course.

"Stand ready, men!" he shouted.

The driver of the other turtle was so distracted by the general melee that he didn't notice Zeboim's

approach until it was too late. Zeboim's nose touched his comrade's shell. Then he kept moving doggedly forward until gradually his head was forced back into his shell.

When the two domes collided, the impact shook Tol hard, though he was out of the driver's seat in a flash, sword drawn. His diminished band followed him as he leaped, still barefoot, onto the other turtle. He snagged the rail of the enemy hoarding and swung a leg over it. Only a handful of Tarsans remained on the platform, and when the blood-spattered gang of Ergothians stormed aboard, the archers threw down their bows and begged for their lives.

Three of the four turtles had been captured. The last, the southernmost, experienced a mutiny when the Silvanesti driver proved unwilling to continue the charge alone against the Ergothian tents. Instead, he wheeled his beast away from the fighting and toward the seashore. The archers he carried, unable to control the beast themselves, had no choice but to abandon their perch. The last anyone saw of the fourth turtle and his driver, they were paddling far out to sea.

Their final thrust defeated, the Tarsan mercenaries grounded their arms and surrendered. Admiral Anovenax had managed to escape capture with a small retinue of loyal retainers, and they re-entered the city. But the surviving members of his army of thirty thousand were captured.

Back on the ground, boots and leggings restored, Tol reorganized his scattered forces. Casualties had been heavy. He himself had received a few minor wounds. Loyal Frez had not even a scratch, but word came that Darpo had been gravely injured. Tol found him lying on his back on the ground, shielded from the glare of the setting sun by a wall of fellow soldiers.

Felryn Felryn's son, cleric, healer and a friend of Tol since his arrival in Juramona, was working on the wounded man. Sleeves rolled back to free his lean brown arms, Felryn probed Darpo's side gently for the head of the arrow. Darpo's brown eyes were open, his face moist with sweat. The scar that ran from his left eyebrow to his left ear stood out sharply white against his waxy pallor. His gaze flickered briefly to Tol, but he had no strength to acknowledge his commander.

There was no better healer in the empire than Felryn, not even in the imperial household. Time had thinned his curly hair and streaked its black with white, but the skill had not left his long, powerful fingers. He located the arrowhead and deftly removed it. Darpo gasped. Felryn spoke to him soothingly, applying a clotting powder to the wound. An assistant raised the injured man's head so he could sip a soporific from a silver cup. Darpo's eyes closed.

"Will he live?" asked Tol softly.

"I think so, but that is in Mishas's hands," Felryn said. "I dress their wounds. It is the goddess who heals them."

Horns blared, the sound followed by the rumble of hooves. The foot soldiers parted ranks as a contingent of horsemen thundered in. Leading them was a white-bearded warrior with a black leather patch over his right eye. Lord Regobart had lost one eye in a duel when he was a young man.

"My lord!" he hailed Tol. "The day is ours!"

Tol approached the general's horse, replying more temperately, "The battle is won, anyway."

Behind Regobart were arrayed some of the highest warlords in the empire. Although their names were a roll call of imperial glory, Tol's many victories made him their equal. Even so, most of them looked upon him as an upstart, a clever peasant whose martial success smacked of unnatural influences or illicit magic.

Regobart would not allow Tol's caution to tarnish what he saw as the glory of this day. "The war is won," he insisted. "I have summoned the city to surrender, and the princes and syndics have signaled their willingness to parley."

Tol frowned. It was true they had vanquished the last sizable fighting force in Tarsis, but the city's

defenses were still intact, and the Ergothian armies were not equipped to conduct a long siege. In spite of the efforts of the imperial priests, the Tarsan fleet remained in place, a potent threat. If they escaped the bay, they could wreak immense havoc along the empire's lengthy coastline.

None of these thoughts troubled the warlords arrayed before Tol. Triumph was evident on every face.

"When is this parley to take place?" Tol asked.

"Tonight, four hours past sundown. A pavilion will be erected by the Tradewind Gate." This was the same gate through which the Tarsans had sortied that day.

The wounded and dead were removed to camp, and thousands of dejected Tarsan prisoners were marched away under guard. Tol paraded them within bowshot of the walls, to make sure the city-dwellers could see their defeated army. The sun, sinking into the bay, bloodied the white stone walls and gilded the hulls of the Tarsan fleet, still held by magical winds and hovering like birds of ill omen.

* * * * *

Tol hated diplomacy.

It was not that he opposed talk. In fact, he rather enjoyed it, and he thoroughly approved of any measure that lessened bloodshed. Unlike the typical imperial warlord, who regarded his warriors as expendable, Tol valued the life of every soldier under his command. Of humble birth himself, he did not ascribe to the notion, common among noble Ergothians of the Great Horde, that dying for the empire was the greatest honor a warrior could achieve. Tol preferred life to honor, as a rule.

Diplomacy, however, was something else again. It required him to wear his formal armor, a flimsy set of plate enameled in imperial crimson, to tame his unkempt hair and beard, and to try to look fierce and amenable at the same time. There would be interminable discussions of boring points of trade, land rights, tariffs, and indemnities; veiled threats and counter-threats would be made, the same ground would be covered and re-covered until a sane man felt like screaming.

In Tol's tent, Kiya and Miya helped lace him into his fancy general's armor. The sisters had been with him fifteen years. Ostensibly wives and hostages given by their father, Chief Makaralonga of the Dom-shu tribe, whom Tol had captured in battle, in reality the women were more like big sisters (each was a head taller than he) than hostages. Wives they were not, either. Tol's heart lay elsewhere.

Tol studied his reflection in a dull brass mirror. Just past thirty, broad-shouldered and stocky, with a square face and long brown hair, he had grown to look very like his father. Even the short beard he sported, in place of the sweeping mustache favored by the empire's elite, was very like Bakal's. He suddenly realized he was now about the age Bakal had been when Tol had left the family farm to begin his training as a warrior in Juramona. Where was his father now?

The crimson armor, jeweled dagger, and velvet mantle Tol wore as a warlord and the General of the Army of the North couldn't keep him from looking like who he was. In spite of twenty years' service and the favor he enjoyed from the imperial regent, Crown Prince Amaltar, he still felt like an impostor hobnobbing with the high and mighty. The decade he'd spent campaigning in the wilds had only strengthened that feeling.

Kiya flipped her long horsetail of blonde hair over her shoulder and announced, "You look like a bushberry," naming the bitter, inedible, and bright red fruit of a forest vine.

"A bushberry with whiskers," Miya added. She had short golden-brown hair and a lighter build than her warrior sister. In charge of Tol's household and domestic affairs, she had a skill as a haggler

which made her the bane of merchants across the empire.

Tol divided a sour look equally between them. “Exactly what I needed to hear before facing the nobility of Tarsis.”

Kiya made a dismissive sound. “You’re twice the warrior of any of those snobs.”

“And you’re the Crown Prince’s champion,” put in Miya. “When he becomes emperor, your star will know no bounds. Why should you be unhappy?”

A face flashed into Tol’s mind—green eyes and a smile framed by a rich fall of dark brown hair. Valaran. Ten years had passed since he’d last heard from his beloved, ten years of silence that puzzled him. Despite the passage of time, the distance between them, and the fact she was married to Crown Prince Amaltar, Tol still could not forget her. Val was lodged in his heart, a thorn that could never be removed.

The sisters knew of that old pain, but with the practicality of their forest upbringing, they saw no point in dwelling on it.

“You’re right, I’ve no reason to be unhappy,” Tol replied firmly, replacing his frown with a smile. “Life is good.”

Kiya grasped him by the shoulders, staring hard into his eyes. “Let the Tarsans see the great Lord Tolandruth in all his glory. By the gods, I wager if you glare at them the right way, they’ll melt into their fancy boots!”

The jest had its intended effect, lightening his mood. Seating his ceremonial helmet on his head, Tol stepped outside.

Torches blazed at the entrance to his tent, and his honor guard snapped to attention when he emerged. All his old comrades were present, save the wounded Darpo: there was balding Frez, dark-skinned Tarthan, Fellen the engineer, and Sanksa, the Karad-shu tribesman.

Looking them over with a grin, he suddenly missed Egrin, Raemel’s son, the man who more than any other had made a warrior out of a clumsy peasant lad. Egrin had become Marshal of the Eastern Hundred when his predecessor, Lord Enkian Tumult, dared to criticize Prince Amaltar’s leadership during the worst part of the war against Tarsis. Removed as marshal, Enkian was made Warden of the Seascapes, the wild, desolate northwest coastal province. Not only a demotion, it was a dangerous assignment. Tarsan ships raided the Seascapes regularly. The previous two wardens had died leading their men against Tarsan raiding parties.

Wind lashed at the burning torches and drove sand against the soldiers’ armor. Tol pulled on a pair of studded gauntlets, the last detail of his formal outfit, and strode away flanked by his retinue. He didn’t like twenty armed men following his every move, but generals were expected to have entourages.

They marched through camp. At every junction soldiers turned out to cheer them. Even the camp followers joined in. By the time Tol reached the pavilion where the meeting was to take place, the whole Ergothian camp resounded with his name.

Lord Regobart was waiting outside the tent with his own large honor guard. He inclined his head politely to his young colleague.

“Welcome, my lord. I was able to track you by your stealthy approach,” Regobart said.

Tol removed his helmet, smiling at the old warlord’s jest, and they conferred in confidential tones. Regobart wanted to establish his primacy in the upcoming negotiations. He was twice Tol’s age, a warrior of long service to the empire, and the scion of one of the oldest and noblest families in Ergoth. His ancestor, also named Regobart, had fought at the side of Ackal Ergot, founder of the empire, yet he knew the younger man had the acclaim of the troops and the powerful backing of the prince regent.

“You speak for the emperor here, my lord,” Tol assured the elder general. “You understand these matters far better than I.”

Regobart looked relieved. “Shall we put our brand on these sheep?”

Tol did not believe the Tarsans would be so compliant. Nonetheless, he nodded agreement, and thus they entered the great tent.

Regobart had spared no effort to make the pavilion extravagant. The center room was easily twenty paces across. Thick carpets covered the sand, and light was provided by six brass candle-trees, each holding twenty fat tallow candles. A trestle table in the center of the room was laden with ewers of wine and beer. Along the rear wall a cold repast had been laid out on another table. The Tarsan delegation hovered there, murmuring among themselves and eyeing the guards posted around the room.

The entrance of the two enemy generals silenced the desultory talk. The Tarsans—eight men and four women—sorted themselves into a line. The central place was held by a tall noble, finely made and clad in a pale linen robe edged with gold. A gilded chaplet sat on his head.

“I am Valgold, Prince of Vergerone,” he said, pressing a be-ripped hand to his chest and bowing slightly. “I speak for Tarsis.”

“Regobart, Lord of Caergoth.” The elder general gestured to Tol. “And this is Lord Tolandruth of Juramona.”

Glancing down the row of enemy leaders, Tol spotted a face he recognized. It belonged to a woman of striking appearance, with black hair and prominent amber eyes. She was elegantly attired in a close-fitting gown of green velvet and stood with one hand on her hip, the other holding a heavy goblet. Her gaze moved from Regobart to Tol and back, with no sign of recognition.

Prince Valgold began to introduce his colleagues: first, Syndic Trylani, a portly, balding fellow; then Syndic Formigan, ebony-skinned; and Princess Shelei Gozandstan, a silver-haired matron dressed entirely in white. Four strands of lustrous gold chain encircled her neck and hung to her waist.

Regobart bowed. “Princess Shelei and I have met. Greetings, Your Highness.” Unsmiling, she acknowledged the general with a barely perceptible nod.

Syndic Pektro was the one with wine-stained fingers and crumbs in his brown beard. Prince Helx of Mokai was a clean-shaven young man with a cruel expression and a dagger poorly concealed beneath his purple robe. Syndic Tomo, a stout fellow clad in a leather-girded tunic, was the only Tarsan still eating.

Masters Vyka and Rorino, and Mistress Xalia Tol, were immediately recognizable as priests. Plainly dressed, all three wore incised amulets on chains around their necks and stood with hands clasped at their waists. Vyka was the elder of the men; Rorino, no more than twenty. Xalia, about Tol’s own age, wore the medallion of a priestess of Shinare.

The striking, raven-haired woman in green velvet was Syndic Hanira. Tol had glimpsed her first some fifteen years earlier, in Prince Amaltar’s tent before the campaign against the forest tribes of the Great Green. Later, she’d served as the Tarsan ambassador to the imperial court in Daltigoth. She’d made an audacious appearance before the regent in manly attire, an act calculated to unsettle the conservative warlords. It had worked. Tol certainly remembered Hanira.

The last Tarsan was a red-faced man whose hands and face bore many small cuts. This was Admiral Anovenax. Tol was surprised to meet his adversary face to face.

“My lord admiral,” he said. “I compliment you on the good fight today.”

“Not good enough,” said Anovenax bitterly. He had a deep, powerful voice. Bawling commands from the quarterdeck of his flagship, he must be quite impressive.

At Lord Regobart's invitation, everyone took their places at the table. They presented an interesting tableau. On one side, the twelve richest and most powerful people of the city of Tarsis; on the other, only Tol and Regobart.

"Let me begin by saying we are here to bring about an end to the war between our states," Regobart began. "I have a list of our requirements given to me by the prince regent." He held out a sheet of parchment to Prince Valgold.

The prince quickly scanned the document, eyes darting down the short list. "This is unacceptable," he said bluntly. "Agreement would mean the end of Tarsis."

"If the war continues, there will be no Tarsis," Regobart replied coldly.

"That remains to be seen!" Anovenax growled.

"Would you care to try conclusions with us—again?" asked Tol, bristling.

Regobart placed a hand on his comrade's arm, and Prince Valgold called for calm. Valgold handed the list of demands to the man on his left, the portly, balding Trylani. He read it and passed it down. In moments, all the Tarsans had seen it.

Hanira spoke firmly. "Tarsis cannot live without the ships of its navy," she said, gesturing with one hand. Her fingernails were long and painted a pale rose color. Tol had never seen such a fashion, not even in the imperial court.

Admiral Anovenax offered his vigorous agreement with this statement, but Lord Regobart interjected, "Your raids on our coast must end. Either you stop them, or we shall." At that Anovenax took instant umbrage.

The arguments escalated, about fleets and trade and war indemnities to be paid to the empire in gold. At one point Prince Helx's harsh expression drew into an even fiercer frown, and he asked sarcastically, "Why stop with gold? Why not enslave us all and be done with it?"

"I will gladly entertain alternatives," Regobart answered, refusing to be baited. "Silver, copper, grain—"

"Hostages?"

The single word from Hanira silenced the room.

Tol and Regobart exchanged a glance. Tol asked, "What do you propose?"

"That a certain part of the indemnity be rescinded in favor of a number of volunteer hostages to be sent to Daltigoth in token of our peaceful intentions."

"Noble hostages?" Tol asked. "You, lady?"

Valgold flushed, and Prince Helx looked furious, but Admiral Anovenax snorted with amusement. "As well try to put a panther on a leash!" he scoffed.

Most of the Tarsan men in the delegation laughed nervously and shifted in their chairs. Princess Shelei frowned in reproof. The three clerics lowered their eyes. Only Hanira herself seemed unperturbed.

"My countrymen jest with you," she said evenly. "As head of the Golden House, I've had many sharp dealings with them."

"Golden House?" asked Tol.

"The guild of goldsmiths and jewelers," Prince Valgold explained, then quickly shifted the subject back to the more serious questions of trade.

The discussion lasted far into the night. Another meal was served by Ergothian orderlies. Wine flowed, but all kept their heads clear. At times tempers flared. Prince Helx, with arrogant rudeness,

dismissed a compromise proposed by Lord Regobart.

Regobart smote the table with his fist, declaring he would turn Tarsis into a tidal pool if need be.

Helx jumped up, hand hovering over his dagger. “Do your worst, you savage! How will you breach our walls, eh? With sabers?”

The prince had a point, Tol reflected. Victorious as they were in the open field, the Ergothians still did not have the means to ravage and reduce the great city.

Tol had kept silent through most of the stalemate, watching and listening, and he felt he was beginning to understand what mattered to the Tarsan delegation. For all their talk of freedom and culture, what truly set their blood coursing was money.

Breaking the charged silence, he said calmly, “We don’t have to destroy your walls, Your Highness. We can occupy your country. If all supplies to the city were cut off, how long would your food hold out? How long would your gold supply last?”

“Gold is not bread,” said the admiral quickly.

“No, but gold is the lifeblood of Tarsis, is it not? Will you sacrifice your fortunes to save your lives? How about the fortunes of your comrades, not to mention the common folk of Tarsis?” Tol let his questions hang in the air, then added, “When you’re paupers, what good will your pride be?”

Silence reigned. At last, Prince Valgold stood. He rolled up the list of Ergothian demands and slid the parchment into his voluminous sleeve.

Scanning the assembly with tired, bloodshot eyes, he announced, “It is late. I will take your demands to the City Assembly. You will have our response soon.”

When the Tarsans were gone, Regobart filled a goblet with strong red wine and drained it.

“Bloody merchants,” he said. “Call themselves princes? There’s no nobility in counting money!”

Privately, Tol agreed, but then, he didn’t see that riding a horse and killing people made one noble either.

He and Regobart took their leave of each other. Tol was so exhausted he thought he would be asleep as soon as he fell into bed. Instead, he slept very poorly. The yowl of a panther out in the dunes disturbed his rest. He even stumbled outside, sword in hand, dressed only in his breechnap, seeking to kill the beast. The only sound to be heard was the wind, hissing over the sand.

At dawn, the Tradewind Gate was thrown open abruptly. Alarms sounded in the Ergothian camp, and warriors rushed to fend off what they imagined was a last-ditch Tarsan attack. Instead of soldiers, however, a band of officials emerged, flanked by heralds.

One of the horn-bearing heralds, his eyes bright with tears, announced, “By order of the princes, syndics, and City Assembly, the city of Tarsis hereby yields to the forces of the Ergoth Empire!” He choked, cleared his throat, and continued. “Here are our counterproposals to the emperor’s demands!”

A youth dashed out and presented a large scroll to Lord Regobart, who had arrived with hair uncombed and still in his sleeping gown. At his side, Tol, haggard from his unsettled night, watched as Regobart broke the seal and opened the scroll. The elder general’s expression grew hard.

“They refuse to give their fleet,” he reported, “and they offer only one hundred thousand gold pieces instead of five hundred thousand!”

Tol shrugged. “Does it matter? It’s a goodly sum. Leave them their ships—or better, demand a token reduction of, say, one hundred galleys. They’ve surrendered. Leave them some pride and they won’t be so resentful in the future.”

Regobart struggled with conflicting emotions. As the warlord of a mighty empire, his inclination

was to squeeze a defeated foe for every last drop of blood. As a diplomat, he knew even better than Tol that it was often wiser to let a loser retain some dignity.

The Tarsan officials were waiting, glaring at their conquerors with impotent hatred. Regobart drew himself straight and spoke loudly to them.

“In the name of His Imperial Majesty Pakin III and Prince Regent Amaltar, I accept these terms,” he said. “Let every gate of the city be opened! We shall enter and receive your surrender at noon today!”

Cheers erupted from the warriors who’d rushed to the gate believing themselves to be under attack. The jubilant men engulfed their generals. Cries of “Ergoth! Ergoth!” alternated with “Regobart!” and “Tolandruth!”

In the confusion, a man in Tarsan livery sidled up to Tol and thrust a note in his hand. Tol turned to confront him, but the fellow melted quickly into the crowd. Tol unfolded the small square of foolscap. It bore the seal of the Guild of Goldsmiths.

Hanira of the Golden House, the note read, requests the pleasure of your company for dinner at her residence. On Emerald Square, in the Crucible District. At Sunset.

Faintly, over the tumult of celebration, Tol heard the call of a panther.

Chapter 2

Golden House

Tol struggled with the buttons on the high collar of his tunic, his face reddening.

“I say it’s a trap,” Miya repeated. “I say go,” countered Kiya, normally the more cautious of the sisters. She helped Tol fit the broad belt around his waist, adding, “She’s rich, beautiful, and a woman of influence in this city. She probably wants to discuss business.”

Miya snorted, and the two sisters were off again. While they argued, they helped him struggle into less martial finery. Since he’d returned to the tent and told them about the invitation from Hanira, Kiya and Miya had disputed nonstop about whether he should go. Miya feared an assassination plot. To put a stop to her relentless urging, Tol had donned a light mail shirt under his tunic. It wouldn’t stop an arrow or sword, but it would turn aside a dagger thrust from close range.

Kiya dismissed her sister’s fears. Trained forest fighter that she was, she had a low opinion of city-bred women. They had nothing more in their heads than thoughts of clothes and pretty baubles. It was nothing but a flirtation.

Still, when Miya departed to call for Tol’s horse, Kiya said quickly, “You wear the amulet?”

Tol assured her he did. The Irda nullstone was sewn into the waistband of his smallclothes, so it would always be close.

As a youth, he’d come across an ancient, forgotten ruin at the headwaters of the Caer River. There he had found a small artifact. Strands of copper, silver and gold had been braided together to form a circlet, the free ends joined by a bead of copper. On the bead was etched a complex pattern of angular lines and curving whorls. A piece of dull black glass filled the center of the circlet. It was a pretty find and fit easily in the palm of Tol’s hand, so he’d kept it.

Later, he learned from the wizards of Daltigoth that his simple souvenir was in fact a millstone, an exceedingly rare relic of the lost Irda race. It had one unique ability: it absorbed all magical power it came in contact with.

Yoralyn, the elderly leader of the White Robes in Daltigoth, warned him there were people who would slaughter entire cities to possess such a powerful artifact, so he should destroy it. Unwilling to give it up, Tol did not heed her words. He did, however, keep the amulet a secret. Only Kiya knew he possessed it.

In spite of his dismissive attitude toward Miya’s worries, Tol recognized that he was indeed taking a chance. No Ergothian troops would enter Tarsis until tomorrow, when a small group would escort Lord Regobart to the City Assembly for the formal ceremony ending hostilities. Tol was placing himself alone in the midst of his former foes, but Hanira’s invitation was too intriguing to decline.

He declined the sisters’ offer to escort him. To those unfamiliar with his strapping hostage-wives, the notion of them acting as his personal escort while he visited the home of a beautiful woman would have seemed shocking.

“If Lady Hanira harms me, it would be a disaster for Tarsis,” Tol pointed out reasonably. “What she wants to see me for I don’t know, but I can’t believe this is merely a crude plot against my life.”

Brown eyes serious, Miya folded her arms and loosed a last volley of objections, including, “She’s too old for you.”

Tol ignored her as he buckled a sash to his belt and slipped his jeweled dagger, presented to him by Prince Amaltar years ago, into the silken sling. Miya seized him by the shoulders and spun him around to face her.

“If you get killed, what would happen to Sister and me?”

“When I die, you’re both free to return to the Great Green.”

Kiya broke her sister’s grip and stepped between her and Tol. Holding out Tol’s dress sword to him, she said over her shoulder, “You see, Sister, there’s still a chance to be free of this brute!” Tol laughed and buckled on the sword.

Glowering, Miya muttered, “We put out the lamps when we go to sleep. It’ll be dark when you return. I hope you trip and fall.”

Kiya cuffed her, none too gently, and Tol made his escape.

The fiery disk of the sun was just touching the Bay of Tarsis. Wind swirled, frosting the distant water with whitecaps. Although the fighting had ceased, the Ergothian priests maintained their wind spell to keep the Tarsan fleet at sea.

On the wind-tossed ships, sailors were hoisting lanterns to the top of each ship’s mast to mark the vessel’s position in the coming darkness. One by one, all the galleys acquired a single yellow star. These rose and fell with each roll of the waves.

Two soldiers arrived and saluted. These were the men Tol had asked Frez to pick to accompany him.

The soldier on his right identified himself as Sarkar, corporal of the Long Knife Horde; he named his comrade as Belath. The second fellow dipped his head.

“I see you brought your cloaks as I requested,” Tol said. Both soldiers carried long, dark blue wraps over their arms. “Put them on. We’re not declaring ourselves tonight.”

As the two men obeyed, Sarkar said, “Begging your pardon, my lord, but is this really wise? Entering the enemy’s stronghold with just two men—”

“I’m expected and welcome,” Tol said. “Besides, aren’t three warriors of Ergoth more than a match for any number of Tarsan merchants?”

Buoyed by his words, the soldiers took two horses from the picket line for themselves as Tol mounted his own animal, Shadow.

The sun was half-buried in the sea now, and the cloudless sky was a palette of colors, from darkest red in the west to pale rose directly overhead and sapphire eastward. Tol put the sinking sun on his left and rode to Tradewind Gate.

The massive portal stood open, as had been agreed under the terms of the truce. However, the lack of Tarsan guards was somewhat surprising.

An amber glimmer appeared in the shadowed depths beyond the gate. Nervous, Sarkar and Belath reined up.

“What ails you men?” Tol asked, pulling up as well.

“I don’t know,” said Corporal Sarkar. “Just an odd feeling.”

“I expect we’re being met, since I don’t know the way,” Tol replied. “Is that so strange?”

The men could hardly disagree with their leader. The three of them moved on.

Lofty white walls towered over them, cutting off the last of the sunlight. Although the battlements

looked empty, Tol saw glints of metal in the arrow slits of a watchtower by the gate. Their progress was noted.

The sound of their mounts' iron-shod hooves echoed off the masonry, and the glimmer of light ahead grew brighter. Slowly, the shadows resolved into a figure: a slender rider on horseback, holding a lantern. At first, Tol thought it a beardless boy, but drawing nearer, he realized the light-bearer was a young girl.

She appeared no more than fifteen or sixteen. Mounted on a fine bay horse, she wore striking livery comprising a cloth-of-gold tabard over black tights. Her yellow hair was drawn back in a short, thick braid.

Tol identified himself and asked, "Are you my guide?"

"I am, my lord," she replied, her voice high and clear. Glancing at the two soldiers, she added, "My orders are that you must proceed alone, my lord."

Both Sarkar and the taciturn Belath began to protest, but Tol held up a hand for silence. "I must have my retainers," he said.

"I was bidden to bring only you."

"Then return to your mistress with my regrets," Tol said coldly. "A warlord of Ergoth does not scurry about unaccompanied, like a common lackey."

The girl clenched her mount's reins in small white fists, biting her lip in indecision. "My lord, you are awaited," she said, as if that made the difference.

Tol tugged on the reins, as Shadow whirled in a tight circle. "If the syndic wants to see me so badly, then she can come to our camp. Let's go, men."

They hadn't ridden ten paces before the guide cantered up behind them. "My lord, please! The lady I serve will be sorely disappointed if I return without you!"

"Then let my men come with me."

She gave in. As they turned about once more, Tol asked her name.

"Valderra, my lord. Most call me Val."

The name scored a sharp wound on his heart, but Tol let nothing show on his face.

"Lead on, Valderra."

Inside the city wall, the houses were high and handsome, faced with buff-colored stone and with steeply pitched roofs covered in green tiles. Through narrow gaps in the closed shutters Tol could see dim lights flickering. The streets, although wide, paved, and clean, were eerily empty and unlit. An Ergothian city of similar size, like Caergoth or Daltigoth, would have street lamps burning at every corner and torches in sconces by the door of every shop and tavern.

Tol remarked on this. Valderra explained that because of the prolonged war, supplies of tallow and lamp oil, which had to be imported into Tarsis, were almost exhausted.

"Why are there no folk about?" Sarkar wanted to know.

Valderra's lips set in a firm line. "We have a severe curfew. There has been trouble at night." She kept her eyes fixed ahead. "Malcontents. Criminals."

Twilight had arrived when they reached Emerald Square in the very heart of Tarsis. A vast columned building, gabled and turreted, squatted on a hill overlooking the square. Valderra identified it as the City Assembly, with adjacent palaces for the city's rulers. Tol took the opportunity to ask her the difference between a syndic and a prince.

"Princes are hereditary proprietors of the city's affairs," the girl said, eyes rising to the marble

complex above them. “They’re descendants of the founders of Tarsis. Syndics are the chosen heads of city guilds.”

So princes were born, syndics made. That fit Tol’s impression of Hanira.

“It’s not correct then to call your mistress ‘Lady’?” he asked.

Valderra shook her head. She wore several tiny gold rings in each earlobe and these tinkled musically with the gesture.

“Syndic Hanira is not a Lady,” she said quite seriously.

Tol smiled. Miya would agree with that statement, no doubt.

Emerald Square was actually two intersecting squares, creating a cross-shaped plaza at the foot of Palace Hill. For the first time since entering Tarsis, the small party encountered other traffic. Virtually all of it was on foot, including several luxurious palanquins carried on the shoulders of bearers. Although cloaked in relative anonymity, the four riders drew stares.

“Horses must be in short supply,” Tol reasoned.

Valderra nodded. “Most were taken for the army.”

Golden House stood at the end of one of the arms of the plaza. Six stories tall and filling the width of the plaza, it was beautiful, but built like a miniature fortress. An outer wall surrounded it, and the house itself showed massive contours. Every corner, every window inlet and doorway was rounded and radiused, giving the impression the whole building had been cast in a single piece instead of constructed. Each window facing the square had its shutters open and a rack of candles burning on its sill.

The gate was closed. Flames leaped in brass braziers—or were they gold? Flanking the gate were guards in livery like Valderra’s, standing with spears ported.

Valderra announced their party. The guards exchanged disapproving glances at learning Tol had brought retainers. They began to protest, but Tol soon put a stop to that.

“Stand aside, you louts!” he bellowed in his fiercest battle-field voice. Both guards flinched. “I have business with your mistress, and these men are with me! Now admit us!”

Immediately, the near guard produced an iron key as long as his arm. It had been dangling from his belt, and Tol had mistaken it for a scabbard. The guard inserted the huge key into a slot in the gate and, with the other sentry’s help, twisted it until a loud clank announced the lock had disengaged.

Once Tol’s party was inside, the gilded gate swung shut and the lock clanged as it was secured. Belath muttered unhappily about being trapped inside.

Uniformed servants appeared out of the dancing torchlight and held Shadow while Tol dismounted. No one came forward to assist Sarkar or Belath.

“Will you see to my men?” Tol asked, and Valderra nodded.

Gesturing at the two warriors, she rode away toward a garden nestled between the wall and the house proper. The garden contained fruit trees, and lush green shrubs trimmed and shaped to resemble all manner of whimsical items—a bell, a leaping dolphin, a flock of birds rising into the air.

When she realized the two Ergothians hadn’t moved to follow her, Valderra halted between a leafy statue of a minotaur and a rearing unicorn.

“My lord,” Sarkar said to Tol. “Our place is by your side!”

“All will be well. Go with the girl. Be pleasant but vigilant. I will send for you if I need you.”

Unhappy but obedient, the two men followed their young guide into the topiary.

Tol was met at the door by an older woman in a high-necked, golden gown. Plump and gray-haired, she radiated competence and serenity.

“My lord,” she said, clasping her hands at her waist and bowing. “I am Zae, Keeper of the Golden House.”

“You are the syndic’s chamberlain?”

“Just so, my lord. Will you come this way?”

The entrance hall was staggering. Tol had never seen anything to equal it, not even in the imperial capital. The view overhead went straight to the roof, six floors above. At each level, on three sides, balconies faced the atrium. Underfoot, a carpet woven of golden thread covered a floor of polished black granite. Gilded statues, half again life size, lined both sides of the hall. Extremely lifelike, some statues were portly, some wizened and stooped, a few youthful and strong. Zae explained they represented former syndics of the Guild of Goldsmiths and Jewelers.

Between each statue was a bright globe, perched atop a slender marble column. Each globe emitted a soft, warm light. The air was sweet with the unobtrusive hint of floral incense.

The richness of his surroundings—the heavy tapestries, thick carpets, and ornate furniture—amazed Tol. Even the knobs and hinges of the doors they passed were covered with gold.

Zae told him the Golden House comprised two hundred rooms. Begun in the sixty-sixth year of the city by Syndic Morolin, the house had taken eleven years to build. Hanira had lived here since Year 221 of the city.

Realizing the figure meant nothing to Tol, Zae added, “She has been in residence for fifteen years, my lord.”

At the end of the monumental hall, a corridor crossed at right angles. Zae turned right, leading Tol to what she called the Minor Hall.

She stopped before a pair of tall double doors. They parted for her, swinging in silently. Each was quite thick and probably weighed several hundredweight, but no motive force was visible, here or in the room beyond. The great doors opened seemingly of their own volition.

A wave of noise hit Tol. The Minor Hall was revealed to be as large as the Feasting Hall of the Riders of the Horde in Daltigoth. Instead of an intimate dinner, Tol found himself facing a room occupied by at least fifty guests, all of whom seemed to be talking at once.

Zae paused and spoke to a man who wore golden livery and an open-faced helmet of shining gold. In response, he struck the stone floor with his staff, commanding attention.

“Guildmasters, syndics, and princes!” the fellow boomed. “His Excellency, Lord Tolandruth of Juramona!”

The chatter and clatter ceased instantly. All eyes turned to Tol. Striving to appear casual and calm in the face of so many judgmental stares, Tol unhooked the pewter frog at his throat and handed his cloak to Zae. He thanked her for her help.

“I am here to serve, my lord,” she said, and withdrew. The doors closed behind her.

The continued silence was deafening. Tol walked to the table. An enormous feast was laid out, but no one had partaken yet. All stood or sat around the long, heavy table, drinking from delicately shaped golden goblets. Most of the Tarsans were men, well fed and with red faces. Apparently they’d been drinking a while.

Hanira rose from her place at the head of the table. The only other face Tol recognized was that of young Prince Helx, seated at Hanira’s right hand. The blond prince did not rise but glowered at Tol, pale blue eyes tracing his every move.

“My lord,” said Hanira. “Welcome to Golden House.”

Tol executed a slight bow. “Thank you. I hope I have not inconvenienced you by arriving late.”

“Not at all.” She extended a smooth arm to indicate an empty chair. The single ring on her hand held the largest diamond Tol had ever seen. It flashed like a beacon in the glow of massed candles.

“Won’t you be seated?”

Those were the last words he would hear from her for several hours. She had placed him at the foot of the table, directly opposite herself. Although it was obviously a place of honor, Tol was vaguely annoyed to find himself so far from his hostess.

Spurs and sword jingling accompanied his every footfall. A servant stood at his chair, a gesture Tol at first did not understand, but as he approached, the servant pulled the chair out for him. When a second lackey offered to take his sword, he frowned the fellow into retreat. Unhooking the scabbard from his belt, Tol sat down and laid the weapon across his lap.

Tol had been a long time away from the grand dinners of the Ergothian capital. The life of a soldier on the frontier had roughened the edges Valaran had worked to smooth during his time in Daltigoth. Still, he found himself surprised by the affected manners of the Tarsans seated nearest him. In wary silence, they eyed him throughout dinner as if he was a beast they might provoke with the slightest word. He didn’t try to initiate conversation.

Considering the sumptuousness of the surroundings, the food was rather plain. Tol supposed even the wealthy Hanira had to deal with the shortages caused by war.

Wine there was in plenty, both native red and Silvanesti white, the nectar of the elves. As the evening wore on, Tol drank more and more, mostly out of boredom. Isolated at the end of the table, he amused himself by studying the Tarsans.

Hanira was at least ten years older than him. In her early forties, she had reached the age when a woman’s face either fines down or plumps up. The former was the case with Hanira. Her cheekbones were high, her chin a trifle sharp, but her most arresting feature was her eyes. Large, they were the warm color of honey or polished wood. Even at this distance, Tol was very much aware of her gaze when it fell upon him.

In a room full of curled hair, silk and brocade finery, and powdered faces, Hanira seemed elegantly natural. She wore her raven-black hair simply, parted in the center and drawn forward over her right shoulder into a single heavy braid. Her gown was of ruby silk, with a high collar in back and a low neckline in front. At her throat, between the wings of her collar, a dark jewel—onyx or jet—glinted.

The sullen Prince Helx, seated on her right, kept trying to capture her attention, reaching for her hand. She evaded him time and again. The prince obviously was attempting to woo his hostess, but she brushed him off with smiling, casual replies and chatted gaily with the elderly man on her left.

The party grew loud, as parties do when wine is consumed in quantity, then began to falter as the effects took hold. As the hour grew late, guests rose from the table, bowed to their hostess, and tottered out. Some required the support of a servant or two to make their way from the room. Tol kept his head and his seat. He was the only Ergothian in attendance; he must have been invited for some reason. He wouldn’t hasten to leave until he learned what that reason was.

A regiment of boys appeared to ferry the dishes away. As they staggered out under the weight of dozens of golden plates, other servers gathered goblets on trays. Through the swirl of activity Tol saw Helx speaking in low tones to Hanira, with an intent expression in his light blue eyes. She was leaning back in her great chair, seeming to distance herself from his entreaties.

Tol stood and clipped the scabbard to his belt again. Walking around the end of the wide table, he approached his hostess at a deliberate pace. The sight of the fearsome enemy warlord on his feet froze the bevy of servants in various poses. The clatter and the tinkle of cutlery ceased abruptly.

Helx and Hanira watched him draw near, but only Hanira smiled.

“My lord,” she said warmly. “Was the dinner to your liking?”

Her voice was like a fresh draft of wine. Slightly more befuddled by the wine and the room’s heat than he’d thought, Tol answered rather bluntly: “Your palace is magnificent, but the repast was a bit plain.”

“Food is in short supply,” Helx snapped.

“Is that why you surrendered?” Tol responded, again too bluntly, keeping his eyes on Hanira. He dragged the chair on her left out with his foot, unbuckled his sword, and sat down. “Not enough food to withstand a siege?”

Helx leaped to his feet. “Insolent savage! Remember where you are!”

Tol grinned disarmingly, his attention still on the woman before him. “Begging your pardon, lady. I mean no disrespect—to you.”

Helx’s hand flashed to the dagger under his draped blue robe. Tol leaned back, both hands on his scabbard. “Your Highness, be calm.”

The prince’s hand tightened on his dagger. Hanira lost her bland, pleasant manner and said sharply, “Helx, don’t be a fool! Sit down!”

“I won’t be insulted by this—this barbarian!”

Hanira leaned toward Tol, saying sweetly, “Pay him no mind, Lord Tolandruth. You have my leave to bloody him if he acts up.”

Tol threw back his head laughing. White-faced with fury, Helx demanded, “Hanira, give me your answer! I have a right to know!”

She picked up her goblet. Just before the golden rim touched her lips she murmured, “Go home, Helx. It’s late, and you are no longer amusing.”

“I demand an answer!”

“Sounds to me like you got an answer, boy.”

Tol’s chuckling comment goaded the prince into drawing his slim silver blade, eight inches long. Fast as he did this, however, he found the tip of Tol’s dress sword pressed into his throat.

The prince froze, seething with fury, and looked at Hanira. She calmly sipped her wine.

Helx lowered his dagger. Tol took his sword from the fiery young man’s neck. Pale eyes riveted on Hanira’s unconcerned face, Helx drove his blade into the tabletop, burying a quarter of its length in the richly polished wood, then turned on his heel and stalked out. On the way he shoved aside any hapless servant who came within reach.

“Poor fool,” Hanira murmured when he was gone. “He imagined I’d swoon at the chance to marry him.”

Tol’s brows rose in surprise. The prince seemed the merest puppy compared to the mature, sophisticated Hanira.

“He’s an ardent and usually agreeable boy,” she added, “but the time is long past for me to consider marriage again.” A smile touched the corners of her mouth. “Besides, I couldn’t bear the loss of status.”

Hanira rose, and immediately Zae was at her side, poised to assist her.

“I will retire now, Zae,” Hanira said. “You have the key?”

The older woman bowed. “Yes, mistress.”

Tol stood, but before he could speak, Hanira swept out a side door. Like the door through which Tol had entered, this one opened without her touching it.

Zae bade Tol sit and indulge in a strengthening draught. He wanted no more drink, but she gently insisted. The liquid a lackey poured from a slender amphora was not wine. It was thick, with a pearlescent blue sheen. Zae said only that it was a “decoction of many ingredients,” and very healthful.

Tol eyed the goblet uncertainly. The liquid had a mild aroma, not unpleasant, but more animal than vegetable. Milk of some kind, he reckoned.

“Juramona!” he whispered, raising the cup high, then draining it in one gulp.

The liquid was cold. When it hit his stomach, Tol felt his head abruptly clear of the wine-induced fog. His fingers and toes knotted involuntarily then relaxed. A smile spread over his face.

Zae nodded sagely. “An ancient family recipe,” she said. Dipping a hand into her sleeve, she brought out a small object and pressed it into his hand. “Your key, my lord.” She pointed toward the side door where Hanira had exited.

The so-called key was a small figure, no larger than his thumb, made of silver. It depicted a crouching man, clutching a bar or rod.

Zae said, “That is Shinare, patron deity of the Golden House. There is much treasure here, many precious things. Every door in the Golden House is secured by an ancient spell. Only the key of Shinare unlocks them.”

Without further explanation, she said, “Good night, my lord,” and swiftly withdrew.

From chatter and gaiety, the Minor Hall now resounded only with silence. No outside sounds penetrated its walls. The heat generated by the crowd of diners was dissipating, the room cooling rapidly.

Tol had two choices: follow Zae and return to camp, or follow Hanira and stay the night. The potion he’d drunk had left him feeling alert and utterly clear-headed. Staring at the tiny silver image of Shinare in his hand, he made his decision.

The key opened the side door. When his hand touched the cool metal doorknob, a slight prickling sensation passed through his fingers, telling him magic was present. The knob turned easily enough.

A candle flickered on a table in the dim corridor beyond. Just a few steps away was a set of steps, leading up. A faint trace of perfume lingered in the air. Hanira had passed this way.

Tol picked up the candle and ascended the stairs. At the top, the way left was dark. To the right a second candle glowed in a wall niche. He went that way.

A trail of lighted candles led him to an ornate door, perfectly round and as wide across as he could stretch his arms. The portal was decorated in high relief and looked exactly like a giant gold coin, complete with a stylized rendering of the walls of Tarsis. Again, the key fit.

Tol put a hand to the door and pushed, but it didn’t immediately budge. A much harder shove finally caused the massive door to swing slowly inward. From its ponderous weight, he realized the door was made of solid gold.

The room beyond was capacious, and illuminated with racks of candles. The chamber was divided into more intimate spaces by wooden screens, carved and painted. The scent of Hanira’s perfume was stronger here, and a melodious tinkling sound wafted to Tol, borne on the warm air like the music of wind chimes.

He wended his way through the maze of screens, his footfalls muffled by thick carpets. He passed through sitting rooms, a study, and a private dining spot, all equipped with light, elegant furniture

draped in rich brocades. On the small dining table was a golden bowl brimming with fruit. Tol plucked a fine ripe pear.

A curtain of gold and black silk closed off the passage out of the dining nook. Tol bit into the pear and parted the curtain with a sweep of his hand.

“Welcome,” said Hanira.

* * * * *

The candles had gone out hours ago, leaving as the only light the glow from a blue glass globe by Hanira’s bed. About the size of a man’s head, the globe perched on a polished marble column and emitted a soft, silent illumination.

Tol turned over, seeking Hanira, but the bed was empty.

Getting out of bed, he winced as his bare feet touched the cold marble floor. His clothes had been left in the sitting room below, where he’d found Hanira.

Strange evening, he mused. He’d come to Golden House a victorious general with seduction in mind, but in the end, he was left feeling like the conquered one. Years of service to the empire, a score of battles, large and small, had not prepared him for this night.

He wrapped a thin blanket around his waist and went down the stairs to the sitting room.

His clothes and Hanira’s were strewn about the floor and furniture. Donning his linen breeches, he checked his waist-pocket for the nullstone. It was still there.

Feeling more secure now that he was at least partly dressed, Tol went looking for his hostess.

Great beams crisscrossed the high, vaulted ceiling like the strands of an enormous web. He easily made out the sheen caused by the blue glimmer of the globe by the bed. There was only one other light source in the entire, vast chamber, a mild amber glow off to his left. Hanira must be there. One of the many things he’d learned about her in their brief time together was she never slept in the dark.

The story of her life, as she’d related it to him, had been both horrifying and fascinating. Of common birth, she had gained all she possessed by sagacity and ambition. When her third husband, Morgax, syndic of the guild of goldsmiths, had died, she had assumed control of the guild. It hadn’t been easy. Many in the guild opposed her, as she was not an artisan herself, but she outlasted some of her enemies and actively ruined others. Her arsenal of weapons included bribery, extortion, persuasion, and not a few dagger thrusts in the night.

Once her rule of the goldsmiths’ guild was established, Hanira set out to take control of the jewelers’ guild as well. In a struggle that cost several fortunes and a number of lives, she merged the two separate guilds into one powerful, wealthy organization under her absolute control. All of this she had accomplished by age forty.

“Not bad for a poor girl and former courtesan,” she’d explained. “We’re much alike, Tolandruth of Juramona. From the time you defeated Tylocost in Hylo, I’ve followed your doings with great interest. I knew we’d cross paths again, sooner or later. We’re conquerors, you and I. We should be allies.” Trailing a rose-painted fingernail down his chest, she added, “We should be friends.”

He was flattered and wary at the same time. Hanira was entirely captivating, yet he knew he could never turn his back on her. He put off answering her proposal, using revived passion to evade the issue of an alliance. Later, he feigned sleep, which became real enough when Zae’s invigorating tonic wore off.

Now he found the source of the amber glow and there found his lover as well. She slept in an alcove, screened from the rest of the room. He gaped, astonished.

Hanira was completely enclosed in a rectangular shell of flawless, clear crystal, like a coffin made of glass. Lamps burned at each end of the box. The panel over her face was not fogged with breath, but he could see her ribs expand with every breath.

After his initial surprise, he quickly grasped the reason behind the weird arrangement. This was the price Hanira paid for her success—reposing each night in a beautiful crystal cage to foil assassination.

Just then he heard a metallic scrape in the darkened chamber behind him. His senses, honed by war, immediately recognized the sound of a blade being drawn somewhere nearby. He rushed out of Hanira's chamber to the sitting room, hunting through his discarded clothing for his sword and dagger. This particular sword was largely ceremonial—its straight blade thin, damascened and pretty, but hardly a warrior's weapon, yet it would serve, and he also had his dagger.

Something bumped into one of the many wooden partitions somewhere in the vast room. Tol climbed a tall chair and peered around. Back in the direction of the door he'd entered by, he spied the slight movement of one of the screens.

Though underdressed and barefoot, he prepared to fight. He decided not to rouse Hanira. If this was an assassination attempt, she would be safer within her crystal enclosure. If he called for Hanira's guards, he would betray his position to whomever was out there.

Now he heard sounds from a second direction—perhaps a second attacker. Off to his right, there was another sword-scrape. Three assassins?

He waited, heartbeat accelerating, as the muffled footfalls came nearer. He timed his first move with care. Two intruders were approaching straight at him, and one flanked him on the right. The two were nearer, and when he judged them close enough, he ran forward and planted a foot squarely on the tall wooden screen in front of him. It flew back, crashing into something that prevented it from falling. Tol heard a raspy snarl as the panel shattered to kindling.

Facing him were two hulking figures, thick-necked and bald or perhaps wearing smooth helmets. In the dim light it was impossible to tell. Tol presented his sword in his right hand, dagger in his left. The pair lumbered forward.

As they drew closer, he realized with a start that the two were not human, but he wasn't sure exactly what they were. Man-shaped, half a head taller than himself, the two creatures wore neither clothes nor armor. Their bodies were made of some translucent substance, tinged blue. Their faces were vague, frightening representations of normal features, with bumps for eyes, thin noses, and simple slits for mouths. Wielding swords, they rushed at him.

He met the near one's overhand chop with his thin dress sword. The blow made his hand sting. Tol slashed at its neck. He felt the dagger tip rake over rubbery flesh, but the creature gave no sign it felt any pain, and no blood flowed from the cut. Tol leaped back to avoid the second monster's blade.

Tol scrambled around Hanira's furniture, thinking frantically. He'd never heard of a race of beings like these. They were sent to kill—who? Hanira or him? Both Syndic Hanira and Lord Tolandruth had many enemies.

The third intruder was crashing through screens off to Tol's right. Hanira slumbered on in her glass box, and Tol led the monsters away from her. If they did not follow, if they went for the syndic, he would know their true target.

They followed him. They seemed brutes, strong but dull-witted. One of the monster's legs became tangled in one of Hanira's low couches. Tol let out a yell and jumped over a chair, lunging at the creature's chest. It parried, but too slowly. Tol's narrow sword blade hit and penetrated. He leaned

into the thrust, knotting the considerable muscles in his shoulder. The monster's flesh was denser than a man's, but he pierced it with a full span of metal before his blade stopped. His strange foe seemed unaffected, no blood, no evidence of pain. Had it no organs to pierce, no arteries to slash?

Fending off counterblows with his dagger, Tol tried to work his sword free. The other creature aimed a cut at his neck, swinging its weapon in a wide arc. Tol ducked and iron cleaved the air over his head. He still could not free his sword. Cursing, he endured a rain of blows from the attacker he'd impaled. In between parries, Tol hit the impaled creature with the jeweled pommel of Prince Amaltar's dagger. It was like punching a bale of leather, causing no real harm.

The sword-swinging monster landed a hit, the tip of its sword piercing the rim of Tol's right ear. In a fury, he let go his sword and grappled with the creature who'd wounded him. The faceless beast was effortlessly powerful, but Tol gradually forced it back. Without a sound of protest or alarm, it fell on its back, smashing one of Hanira's delicate side tables and losing its grip on its sword.

Tol snatched up the weapon. With a snarl, he brought the heavy blade down on the prostrate monster's head, cleaving it in two. The creature quivered like jelly, arms flailing, slit mouth open. Tol leaned back to avoid a slash from the other monster, still carrying his sword in its chest, then planted a foot on the fallen one's chest and struck again. The good iron blade severed the creature's right arm at the shoulder.

Tol yelled in triumph and stood back, expecting the wounded monster to succumb. Instead, it rose to its feet, and the severed limb leaped about like a spawning salmon, fingers opening and clenching as though searching for its foe or owner.

Such enemies could not be slain by ordinary means. That being clear, Tol was not ashamed to flee. He ran through a gap in the screens. Clumsily, but with mindless persistence, the two monsters followed him, leaving the syndic behind.

Sweating, panting, and with blood running down his jaw from his injured ear, Tol paused in a corridor made of tall wooden panels to collect his racing thoughts. He'd never fought magical beings before. Too bad he didn't have a spell-caster with him.

A revelation struck him like a clothyard shaft. Why did he need magic against magical foes? Did he not have the Irda millstone?

Wood splintered around him. The monsters were near.

How could he use the millstone against them? Should he strike them with it somehow?

A loud crash, nearer yet, sounded. Then another, behind Tol. They were encircling him.

Tol slit the stitching around the pocket holding the nullstone. In trying to move quickly, he fumbled it, dropping the artifact. It bounced beneath a table. He cursed under his breath and went to his knees, groping in the shadows.

Suddenly, his right wrist was seized in a painful, bone-crushing grip. Fantastic though it seemed, the monster's severed limb had him! It must have crawled after him on its own, outdistancing its owner's ponderous body.

Tol's hand went numb, and the sword fell from his nerveless fingers. He jabbed at the disembodied arm with his dagger, but it merely tightened its numbing grip. Bone grated on bone in his wrist, and he gasped with pain.

He heaved the severed arm onto a nearby cushioned settee and frantically sawed at its narrowest point, the wrist, with the edge of his knife. The arm fought him back, flailing and twisting like a vengeful snake.

Now the other attackers appeared—two at one end of the corridor and the third, the one that was missing its arm, at the other end. Tol swiftly dropped to his belly, and crawled along the rug, dragging the severed arm awkwardly along. The three monsters advanced with heavy tread, but

Tol's groping hand finally came down on something hard and metallic. The millstone!

He rolled over and slammed the Irda artifact against the severed arm. Instantly, the powerful limb went stiff. Its fingers were still locked savagely around his wrist, but when he struck it with the butt of his dagger, the arm cracked. Elated, he hammered the limb until it was reduced to lifeless pieces.

Jumping to his feet, Tol yanked the lacing from the calf of his smallclothes. He swiftly used the linen strip to lash the millstone to the hilt of his dagger.

A sword streaked at his head, his own ceremonial weapon, now wielded by the one-armed thing. He ducked, and it shattered the oiled wood paneling behind him.

Whirling, Tol smashed the blade of his dagger against the dense blue flesh. The magical creature gave a start and then solidified into immobility, immediately turning to ashy white stone. Tol kicked hard at its leg, knocking out a sizable chunk. The suddenly inert monster toppled, shattering when it hit the floor.

The other two creatures were soon overcome in similar fashion. Parrying their attacks, choosing his openings with care, Tol struck each of the monsters with his millstone-enhanced dagger, and soon enough the fight was over.

Tol slumped in a chair, limp, gasping. His pulse throbbed in his battered ear, and wide bruises were darkening on his right wrist. He cradled his injured limb to his chest, muttering dire curses against whomever had sent the murderous beings.

A pale glow of light appeared around him. Hanira had arrived, bearing a candelabrum. She wore a robe of golden silk and a dazed, confused expression. Her black hair was loose around her shoulders.

Regarding the devastation in her private chambers with admirable aplomb, she asked, "What's this?"

"Assassins. Magical creatures, sent here to kill."

Her brow furrowed. "How did they get in? No one has ever penetrated the wards of Shinare which shield Golden House!" She nudged the debris of one shattered monster with the toe of her golden slipper. Shaking her head, she said, "Golems! I've not seen the like since I was married to my first husband."

"Golems?"

"Beings of clay or stone, animated by magic and set to a specific task. They're mindless and will persist in their duty until destroyed."

She set the candelabrum on a table and planted her hands on her hips. The gesture parted her loosely tied robe and revealed she wore nothing underneath but a slender golden band encircling her waist. Tucked into the band was a stiletto.

"This is my fault," she said. "My enemies must have learned of our meeting and fear I will make an alliance with you." Her honey-colored eyes narrowed. "This isn't the first attempt on my life. I shall make inquiries, and those responsible will be found."

Hanira asked how he had bested the powerful golems.

"My dagger is enchanted," he lied, placing a hand on the hilt. "I tried to fight the things with my court sword. It was no better than a feather duster."

She put her arm around him soothingly, steering him back toward her bed chamber. At first Tol resisted, thinking he should return to camp, report what had happened here tonight. If truth be told, he was sore and injured, and Hanira was a beautiful woman; the danger seemed over. He let himself be led.

“I suppose Helx may be behind this,” Hanira mused, as they walked together slowly. “I rejected him tonight, and he has the money to hire any mage he wants.”

Hanira doctored his injuries, soaking a cloth in spirits and dabbing away the blood from his ear. From a small aromatic cedar box, she took balm, which she applied to his bruises. Finally, she tore a silk sheet into strips and made a tight bandage for his arm.

When she was done, he held up his wrapped arm, admiring her work.

“As a girl I was apprenticed to a healer,” she explained, “but circumstances led me elsewhere.” She’d become a courtesan at seventeen and had remained one until she married her first husband at twenty-two.

Tol had been nearly lulled into sleep again, when a tumult arose at the chamber door—a mob of servants led by Zae. Armed with kitchen knives and makeshift clubs, they’d rallied to defend Hanira.

“Mistress! Are you well? All the wards are down!” Zae cried, her eyes taking in the wreckage. She was still in her dressing gown, gray hair askew.

Hanira assured her people she was uninjured. A male servant behind Zae relayed terrible news. Six men lay dead in the courtyard. Four of Hanira’s household guards and Tol’s own escort had perished trying to stop mysterious intruders.

Tol was furious with himself. Sarkar and Belath had paid a high price for his dalliance.

Four marks past midnight, Zae reported, the main gate had been battered down by three powerful attackers. Hanira’s guard had tried to stop them but were slain. Sarkar and Belath, sleeping in the guards’ house, heard the noise of battle and rallied to action. The rest of the household, unarmed servants and lackeys, had cowered in their rooms until Zae finally managed to muster them in the entry hall.

Hanira thanked them all profusely, promising rewards to all for their bravery. The servants departed, leaving the syndic and the general alone once more.

“Zae is quite a woman. You’re lucky to have her,” Tol said.

Hanira closed the medicine chest. “I don’t have her. She had me. Zae is my mother.”

* * * * *

A strange and fateful night, and by dawn Tol still was not sure what to make of the peculiar events. He saw to the burial of brave Sarkar and Belath, and he was expected at Lord Regobart’s morning council to plan the armistice terms between Ergoth and Tarsis. Hanira saw him off, but since the attack, she’d shed her seductive air and behaved in a more preoccupied, businesslike fashion.

Even as he was about to leave her mansion, a quartet of riders skidded to a stop in the courtyard. They were men of Tol’s Army of the North, led by Frez. The steadfast warrior sprang from the saddle, calling for his commander.

“I’m here,” Tol answered, stepping outside. Briefly he filled Frez in on what had happened last night, about the golems, and the fate of Sarkar and Belath. Frez had important news of his own to impart.

“Couriers arrived this morning, my lord! Couriers from Daltigoth!” Frez replied. “The emperor is dead!”

Pakin III, emperor of Ergoth, had been in poor health for the last dozen years. His eldest son, Amaltar, had ruled as regent for the past decade.

“Has Prince Amaltar ascended to the throne?” Hanira, standing at Tol’s shoulder, asked.

“The warlords have pledged their loyalty to him,” said Frez, “and my lord, we are recalled!”

Tol stiffened as if struck. “Recalled?”

All the highest imperial warlords had been summoned to attend the coronation. Only Lord Regobart was excused, as he must conclude the negotiations with Tarsis.

“We’ll leave at once!” Tol declared. He strode forward a few steps, then halted abruptly. He looked back at Hanira. “I won’t forget you.”

She laughed lightly, and the old, knowing look came back to her face. “No, you won’t.”

They rode hard back to camp.

Chapter 3

The Path Unseen

For a nation of warriors, a change of monarchs heralded a risky time. Ambitious power-seekers could spring from nowhere and lay claim to the throne, throwing the empire into another dynastic struggle. The Pakin clan had been quiet for years, its last pretender having been shortened by a head almost two decades earlier, but there were still Pakins about. Nor was Amaltar safe from his own family. His younger brother, Prince Nazramin, possessed considerable power and influence. Nazramin was the very ideal of the hard-riding, hard-living warlord of old Ergoth. Indeed, many Riders of the Great Horde preferred him to Amaltar, whom they saw as a pallid, palace-dwelling schemer. Sensing Nazramin's popularity with some warlords, Amaltar had forbidden his brother to participate in the Tarsis campaign, lest he reap more glory at his elder brother's expense.

At the moment Tol thought little about such things. He cared only that he was going to Daltigoth at last. After ten years away, he could at last get to the heart of deeply troubling matters. The renegade wizard Mandes, whom Tol had rescued from a band of wild bakali years before, had gone to the capital after Tol's destruction of the monster XimXim and his defeat of the Tarsan general, Tylocost. Although sent by Tol to carry word of his victories, Mandes had usurped those triumphs. The defeat of Tylocost was credited to Lord Urakan, who had died in the battle. The death of XimXim Mandes claimed for himself.

That was but half the cup of Tol's bitterness. More painful, and far less explicable, was the complete silence from his beloved Valaran. Ten years had given Tol much time to speculate. Val was only one of Amaltar's several wives and had assured Tol the prince cared little for her, yet Tol wondered if Amaltar had discovered their relationship. Perhaps Valaran had been compelled to keep silent, had fallen ill, or had found someone else to love, someone not so long gone and so far away.

Tol had long consoled himself with a single thought: Valaran was in Daltigoth, and one day he would return to her. That day had finally come.

The Army of the North would remain at Tarsis under Lord Regobart's command. Tol and a small escort would travel fast and light to the capital. He chose five to accompany him: Kiya, Miya, Frez, the healer Felryn, and Darpo. Darpo was recovered enough from his wound to ride but not enough to fight. However, he was one of Tol's longest-serving retainers and Tol did not wish to leave him behind.

The Dom-shu hastily packed the contents of the tent. Conversing at the top of their lungs—their normal tone between themselves—they tossed everything from clothing to cutlery at each other, stowing all in the appropriate containers. In saddlebags went the few things they were taking along; the items they were leaving behind were packed into large, leather-bound chests. The chests would be carted home later.

Tol stood by the center pole of the tent, reluctant to budge from his safe spot. Kiya was flinging knives and spoons past him to her sister, who caught them with casual precision.

"So, husband! You had a rough time in town, eh?" said Miya as she dropped utensils into an open chest.

"It wasn't all bad," he replied.

“Spare us the sordid details.”

“Ware, sister!” Kiya called and tossed a hatchet. Tol flinched as the hand axe whirled through the air toward Miya’s face. Without a blink, Miya snatched the tumbling tool by its handle.

“Did the Tarsan woman make any demands?” asked Kiya, searching for her next projectile.

The question struck Tol as funny, and he laughed. Kiya reddened.

“No, she asked for nothing,” he said.

Both women stopped packing. “Nothing?” said Miya. “No deal, no bribe, no threats?”

Kiya looked positively disappointed. “What in Bran’s name did you talk about?”

“We didn’t talk much—a little about ourselves. She told me of her early life.”

Kiya stooped and picked up some loose clothing. “Clever,” she murmured. “Very clever. She invites an enemy into her home and bed but makes no demands on him.” Wadding the clothes together, she shoved them at Miya. “She didn’t make a conspirator of Tol, she made a friend.”

Even after all their years together, he was still surprised by Kiya’s acumen, and privately he agreed with her assessment. For all Hanira’s ruthlessness, he liked her. She was an amazing woman. He understood why men like Prince Helx made fools of themselves over her. Back in camp now among his own people, he found that Hanira’s allure had faded. The prospect of returning to Daltigoth—and Valaran—had done much to dim her seductive memory.

Felryn arrived, and Tol stepped outside to ask what news he brought.

The cleric of Mishas shook his head. “Little, I fear. Even after two days’ work, I cannot determine who could have sent those golems. There are four or five in Tarsis capable of it, but all are accounted for.”

Felryn had agreed with Tol’s reasoning that he, and not Hanira, must have been the golems’ intended victim. Perhaps a spy tipped them off to his whereabouts, but the creatures would have found Tol no matter where he was that night.

Horsemen galloped by, throwing up sand. Felryn bent to brush off his legs. “A powerful spellcaster was at work,” he said in a low voice. “To create and command three golems at once and break the ancient wards of the Golden House are feats worthy of a magical master. You must be careful, my lord. Whoever did this will try again.”

When he’d first found the Irda nullstone, Tol had shown the artifact to the healer, who dismissed it as a harmless trinket. Once he learned its true nature from the White Robe wizard Yoralyn, Tol had kept it a closely guarded secret. Yoralyn was dead now, and the only others who knew he possessed it, Yoralyn’s colleagues Oropash and Helbin, had vowed to keep his secret, fearful of the chaos that would erupt if the nullstone’s existence became known.

Whoever had tried to kill him in the Golden House had failed. However long it took, Tol vowed to Felryn, he would discover the one responsible and mete out justice for the deaths of his loyal men. It was very possible, he added with a grim smile, that Hanira was right, and his unknown enemy was a Tarsan rival of the guild leader, in which case he felt confident Hanira would do him the favor of finding and punishing the culprit first.

Miya put her head through the tent flaps. “We’re done. The bags are full. Sister has gone to fetch the horses.”

For years the Dom-shu women had resisted riding horseback. Their tribe were forest-dwellers in the vast woodland known as the Great Green, and regarded the use of horses as a weakness. Real men and women walked on their own two feet, the sisters always said. However, on the long campaign from Hylo to Tarsis—a distance of hundreds of leagues—Miya and Kiya had reluctantly learned to ride.

Frez and Darpo appeared, each leading two horses. Darpo was pale and stood slightly hunched, favoring his side, but he saluted his commander with fervor.

When the Dom-shu sisters returned on their own animals, Frez moved to boost his injured comrade into the saddle, but his commander intervened.

“It’s my honor,” Tol said. Darpo put his booted foot in Tol’s cupped hands, and Tol tossed him up into the saddle.

“What way do we take, my lord?” Darpo asked, in a voice shaky with pain.

Tol wanted to get to Daltigoth as quickly as possible. His fellow warlords were riding north to the Great Plains River, to circumvent the mountains and the dangerous, impenetrable Great Green. They would then turn west, entering the empire northwest of Tol’s hometown of Juramona in the province of the Eastern Hundred. That would require more than thirty days of travel. Tol had a different route in mind.

“We’ll cross the Harrow Sky Mountains,” he said, referring to the range on the west side of the Bay of Tarsis. “Then we’ll cross the hill country to the Gulf of Ergoth and take ship to the capital.”

There were raised eyebrows all around. Felryn said, “That’s rough territory, my lord.”

He was putting it mildly. The Harrow Sky hill country was a wild land, infested with bandits, petty independent warlords, and wild tribes. The coast was rife with fierce pirates. Several emperors had launched punitive expeditions to suppress the outlawry there, but none ever managed to conquer it.

“I am Prince Amaltar’s champion,” Tol said firmly. “My place is at his side, and as quickly as possible. We will cross the mountains.” Felryn didn’t like the plan, but he protested no more.

It was midmorning when Tol led his small party to Lord Regobart’s tent. The commander of the Army of the East was surrounded by scribes and clerks, all busily making copies of the proposed peace treaty with Tarsis. At Tol’s approach, Regobart left the murmur of voices and scratching of quills, and greeted his fellow general.

“If luck and the gods are with us, we’ll get to Daltigoth in twelve days,” Tol said, looking down from Shadow’s broad back.

The old warlord’s single gray eye widened. “Twelve days! Do you fly on Silvanesti griffons?”

Tol described his chosen route. Regobart’s reaction was much the same as Felryn’s.

“Prince Amaltar needs his Champion, but he needs him alive!” the old general said tartly.

He squinted at Tol’s small entourage, knowing without asking that this was all the escort the younger general intended to take. With a shake of his gray head, he said good-humoredly, “Well, at least you have the Dom-shu with you. They’re as good as a regiment of horsemen.”

Kiya’s expression didn’t change, but Miya preened slightly under the old warrior’s praise.

Tol handed over the muster rolls of the Army of the North, and passed his baton, symbol of his command, to Regobart.

“Many warlords are leaving. Do you think the Tarsans will make trouble once we’re gone?” he asked.

Regobart waved the question away. “No! When they heard the emperor had died, they became even more docile!” He winked. “They fear that without a supreme lord in command, our troops will run wild and sack the city. The Tarsans are treading very lightly indeed!”

Tol clasped hands with Regobart and turned Shadow away. He and his people rode through the busy camp, passing out of the stockade via the north gate.

The splendid spires of Tarsis were visible over the city’s white walls, but Tol could not make out the Golden House. He faced forward again and saw the others had moved on ahead. Only Felryn

lingered behind with him.

“When one door closes,” the healer said, “somewhere another opens.”

* * * * *

They skirted the north end of the bay, reaching the Torrent River by sunset. Too wide to be spanned by a bridge and too rough for most small boats, the river usually was traversed by means of an anchored ferry. However, the ferry station was abandoned and several outbuildings had been burned, probably by marauding imperial cavalry.

They decided to operate the ferry themselves. There were two large barges tethered to the shore by heavy cables. One craft lay awash, a casualty of war. The other seemed intact. Thick skeins of woven rope stretched from the east bank to the western side, a quarter league distant. They would cast off on the remaining barge and pull themselves along by means of the ropes.

Dismounting, they led their horses onto the flat-bottomed craft. Frez and Miya untied the mooring lines. The swift current immediately tugged the ferry away from shore. The sudden lurch frightened the horses, who chivvied and pranced until Felryn and Darpo calmed them. Only Shadow remained placid, merely twitching his long tail several times. Tol had once praised his mount’s composure in the face of danger; Kiya had retorted it wasn’t composure but stupidity: the big gray horse was, she opined, dumber than a tree root.

“Everyone but Darpo take hold of the rope,” Tol ordered.

The wounded soldier protested his special treatment, but Tol ordered him to mind the horses as well as his aches and pains. The rest of them began to pull.

Bit by bit, the ferry crept away from shore. The sun was setting behind the mountains, from here only a far-off smear of purple on the horizon. As they hauled on the rope, Darpo sang an old seafaring song. In his youth he’d sailed the trade route between Hylo and the lands of the northern coast. The scar he bore was a memento of that former life, earned when a line had snapped and lashed his face.

The sea chantey lent rhythm to their task. As they pulled more in unison, the barge’s pace increased.

By the time they reached the western shore, twilight had come. Buildings on the far shore were intact, but silent and dark. All who were able had fled the advancing Ergothians for the safety of walled Tarsis.

The barge was tied off, the horses led ashore. Tol rode up to the ferrymaster’s house. The door was ajar. He called for a torch.

The interior of the ferry station was a shambles; it had been ransacked in a search for valuables. Miya, Felryn, and Tol kicked through the debris in search of maps.

Tol found what he sought in set of pigeonholes on the inside wall. Handing the torch to Miya, he pulled several documents from their holes, scanning and discarding them one by one. At last, he spread one curling parchment wide. It was a Tar-san map of the Harrow Sky region. The dangerous land west of the mountains was only vaguely rendered, but the passes leading to it through the high mountains were clearly shown. Directions to those passes were what Tol needed.

A sharp call from Kiya, still outside, sent the searchers hurrying out of the wrecked house. The others, still mounted, were all pointing toward the river.

Hovering high in the air over the lapping waves was a shimmering light. Perhaps a handspan wide, it quivered like living flame, but had a most unnatural color—a frosty blue.

Felryn couldn't identify the sight, but Miya suggested it was only a will-o'-the-wisp.

Her sister sneered. "So high in the air? Over flowing water?" Kiya said. "Don't be daft!"

The blue light neither advanced nor retreated. As he stared at it, Tol had the odd feeling he—all of them—were being watched in return. He mentioned this to Felryn, who shrugged.

With no other recourse, they ignored the strange light and rode on. Tol wanted to make the foothills before they camped for the night.

They did so, though not without misgivings. Each time one of them turned to check, the light was still there, following and flickering in the air just behind them.

Before midnight Tol called a halt. They'd left behind the sandy coast and entered a thinly spread pine forest. The ground was rising, and more stone had appeared in the soil. Frez found a small stream, and there they made camp.

Felryn sat cross-legged on the stony ground and closed his eyes. Gripping the engraved silver disk he wore around his neck—the sign of his patron deity Mishas—he tried to identify the silent blue light. Then he tried to banish it. After a time, with sweat trickling down his face, he opened his eyes.

"Powerful," he muttered. "It is of a different order, far beyond my abilities. It's a strange manifestation, but I don't sense any threat from it. It just watches."

"That's threat enough for me!" Kiya said.

She braced her bow and pulled an arrow from her quiver. As she nocked it, Felryn placed two fingers on the shaft. His lips moved in silent incantation, then he gestured for her to proceed.

Kiya drew the bowstring to her ear. The dark and the amorphous nature of her target made distance hard to gauge, but she squinted over the broadhead and let fly. The bowstring hummed, and the arrow whistled away. To everyone's surprise, the glow suddenly vanished. They waited, breath held, but it did not reappear.

Miya clouted her sister on the shoulder. "Well done!"

"Good shot," put in Darpo, and Tol added his own commendation.

Kiya lowered her bow. "I don't think I even got near it," she said, frowning. "The shot was way low."

Felryn agreed with Kiya's assessment. "I don't believe the arrow or even my feeble dispersal spell is responsible. I think whoever sent it recalled it. We've halted for the night; there's no reason to shadow us if we're not going anywhere."

His words gave them little pleasure. There was scant conversation the rest of the night, and they took turns standing watch, with Tol taking the first shift.

Clouds obscured most of the stars. As his companions settled down to rest, Tol leaned on his spearshaft and studied the sky.

The college of wizards in Daltigoth kept the sky clear over the imperial palace at all times. When he'd first arrived, Tol had thought this an act of silly luxury, a perquisite of the emperor always to have bright sunshine by day and glittering stars by night. Later, he'd realized the strategic value of clear weather. No lofty spies could float over the palace grounds unseen, if the sky was always free of clouds.

Twelve days to Daltigoth, he reminded himself. Twelve days till he could right the wrong done to him a decade ago. Twelve days until he saw Valaran again.

After ten years, a wait of twelve days should not be difficult, but suddenly it seemed interminable.

* * * * *

“I’ll never be a mountaineer!” Miya swore.

Leading his horse along a narrow ledge, his back pressed against the mountain, a drop of a thousand paces before him, Tol agreed wholeheartedly. Wind gusted in his face, whipping his cloak. His companions were strung out behind him, all likewise hugging the rock wall. Darpo, though not fully healed, made the traverse with no more difficulty than the rest of them.

“Are you sure this is the right way?” Miya’s voice was shriller than usual; she was not fond of heights. Tol assured her it was. She’d already asked that same question twice.

The path was clearly marked on the Tarsan map he’d taken from the ferrymaster’s house, but the simple lines on the chart had not prepared them for the narrowness of the ledge or the height of the drop. Wiser than their riders, the horses had balked at crossing the ridge, even the usually stolid Shadow, so they were blinkered. Miya let it be known she’d rather be hooded, too. Adding to everyone’s distress were the still-higher peaks they could spot ahead.

Although the season was late summer, the air was thin and cold. The Harrow Sky was the highest range of mountains known to the Ergothians. Snow still lay thickly on the highest slopes.

The trail had been hacked out over the centuries by traders seeking to avoid the dangerous coastal route. Perilous though the mountains were, they offered at least a chance of survival. The trade monopoly enforced by the Tarsan navy offered none at all.

The wind picked up, howling down the pass. Shadow snorted and jerked at his reins. Eyes tearing against the wind’s icy bite, Tol tightened his grip on the halter, and doggedly ordered them to press ahead.

By late afternoon, they were through the gorge known as H’rar’s Graveyard and on a wide, flat plateau. They’d encountered no other travelers, which was as Tol had expected; the usual flow of trade through the mountains had been choked off by the war between Tarsis and Ergoth.

On boulders, though, they found messages left by previous travelers. “Spit with the wind,” “Make your water downhill,” and other such sage advice was scratched into the rocks. Spotting one he couldn’t read, Tol asked Felryn, the most educated member of the party, if he could translate.

“That’s Dwarvish,” the healer said. “I haven’t read the dwarf tongue in a long time.” He frowned thoughtfully and followed the lines of script with his finger. “ ‘The Hammer of Reorx opens and closes all doors.’ I think that’s right.”

“Who’s Reorx?” asked Kiya.

“A godling, Corij’s squire, though the dwarves and gnomes revere him as the highest deity of all,” Darpo said.

“So a pithy proverb known only to dwarves,” Miya said dismissively, face red from the ever-present cold wind. “Let’s move on. I’m frozen!”

At the far end of the plateau, the passage into the high pass was flanked by two huge, irregularly shaped columns. From a distance, they seemed to be natural rock formations, but as the party drew closer, they were revealed to be statues, ancient, weathered figures of colossal size. They stood erect, with one foot forward and their arms tight against their side. The southern statue was headless (its head lay broken on the ground). The northern colossus was intact, but its features were so worn as to be unrecognizable.

The group halted, awestruck by the size and obvious age of the monuments. Practical Miya finally broke the spell. “What sort of fools would go to all the trouble to raise such things in this forsaken place?” she said.

“The Irda.”

Felryn looked at Tol, surprised. “You know their ancient history, my lord?”

“Only a little.” He had learned a few things from the well-read Valaran. “Ruins of the Irda are found only in remote places. All other traces of their reign have been plundered away.”

There was no way to know who the great colossi were meant to represent. Gods, kings, or heroes—after such a span of time, it was impossible to say.

The icy wind abruptly died. Darpo, glancing back the way they’d come, called their attention to an odd sight.

Spilling up from the lower pass behind them onto the plateau was a thick white fog. In spite of the stillness of the air, the vapor was slowly spreading across the open ground as though pushed by unseen hands. In moments, as they watched, it bulked up several paces high, then began to twist and writhe. The breeze picked up again, but it had changed direction. It now rushed toward the fog, as though the vapor drew it in.

As they stood transfixed by the peculiar sight, Felryn’s face suddenly took on an expression of alarm.

“We must go!” he cried, seizing his horse’s bridle. “Now, my lord! Run!”

None questioned the healer but immediately sprinted for the gap between the ancient monuments, dragging their horses after them.

What had been a rushing wind quickly became a blasting gale. The white fog had spun itself into a tornado and churned toward them, scoring a ragged line in the stone of the plateau. They were bombarded by flying grit. The wind rose to a deafening roar.

Frez, last in line, was lifted off his feet. Only the weight of his horse and his grip on its reins kept him from being sucked into the thundering white column; Kiya saw him and shouted for help; the big woman was fighting for all she was worth to maintain a grip on her own terrified beast.

Tol hurled himself onto Shadow’s back and rode to his man. So great was Shadow’s fear of the tornado, Tol was forced to dig his spurs into his sleek hide.

When he reached Frez, Tol grabbed him around the waist. Frez let go his reins, and his horse, screaming in panic, galloped straight into the white cyclone. To their horror, the spinning wall of wind and vapor shredded the animal to bits, like a ripe apple thrown against a grinding wheel.

Tol hauled Shadow around as Frez slid onto the saddle behind him. This time no spurs were needed; the gray horse galloped headlong away from the tornado and back toward the rest of the group.

The others had taken shelter behind the headless colossus. As he thundered toward them, Tol shouted for them to get moving.

The passage beyond the statues was exceedingly narrow, no wider than the girth of a single horse. Trying to make haste, yet hampered by the tightness of the passage, Miya went first, leading her mount. Kiya followed, then Darpo. Tol and Frez dismounted, and Tol pushed his comrade ahead of him into the passage.

The tornado had almost reached the statues, yet for some reason Felryn had lingered behind. The healer was hunched by the mountain wall, standing over a square block of stone carved out of the plateau itself.

Tol bellowed at him to follow them, but Felryn turned and shouted back, “This is the hammer! The Hammer of Reorx! Remember the inscription? We must strike the hammer!” Felryn gestured wildly at the loose rocks by Tol’s feet. “Strike the stone!”

Tol didn’t fathom him in the least, but in the face of imminent death, he chose to trust his old friend.

Bending, he picked up a stone the size of a loaf of bread.

A surprised cry brought Tol's head around. The advancing tornado had pulled Felryn off balance. The healer's feet flew out from under him, and he was drawn backward. His large, strong hands scrabbled vainly for purchase against the side of the mountain.

"Strike the hammer!" he shrieked, before vanishing into the gap between the statues.

Every muscle straining, Tol raised the stone over his head and dashed it onto the carved block. A loud, metallic clang resounded.

The wind yanked him this way and that, and Tol lost his grip on the heavy stone. His hobnailed boots skittered over the ground as he was pulled toward the cyclone. Like Felryn before him, he flailed his arms wildly, seeking a handhold.

Just as he'd given up hope, Tol beheld an amazing sight: the colossi were beginning to move! Pivoting on their bases, the giant statues slowly turned inward to face each other. A tremendous grinding noise, audible even above the thunder of the tornado, reverberated through the canyon.

The giants plowed ahead, closing the distance between themselves. The gap between them had been six or seven paces; soon, it was barely two. Felryn had wisely interpreted the meaning behind the Dwarvish inscription. Striking the carved block—"Reorx's hammer"—opened and closed the passage. The time-worn Irda statues were not mere monuments: they were an ensorcelled gate.

Danger wasn't done with Tol yet. The roaring column pressed against the colossi, seeking to squeeze between them, and Tol was held against the statues by its force. Up close (too close!) he could see the white surface of the tornado was made up of tiny, glittering shards. Ice, mostly, with some fragments of loose stone. Where the spinning crystals touched the statues, the surface of the stone was polished away.

The bases of the colossi finally touched, choking off the passage and the wind completely. Tol dropped to the ground. His head pounded from the sudden silence, and his body ached as though he'd fought a battle.

"Husband?"

Kiya crouched by him. Miya was staring in awe at the statues. She asked about Felryn. Tol did not answer. Felryn had saved them all but doomed himself.

Tol's face was red and raw from the flying dust. Memory of Felryn's terrible death brought a stinging to his eyes that had nothing to do with dust. Kiya helped him to his feet.

"Felryn—" he began to explain, then had to swallow hard to continue. "Felryn solved the dwarves' riddle. Striking that stone"—he pointed at the Hammer of Reorx—"causes the statues to move, to open or close the pass."

Touching the massive stone figures, they discovered the statues were intensely cold. The tornado could still be heard shrieking on the other side.

"It's trying to grind its way right through the stone!" Kiya said.

Tol had to force himself to take up Shadow's reins and move on. The suddenness of the healer's demise had stunned them all, but there was nothing to be gained by remaining.

Frez took Felryn's horse, a gentle old nag called Stumbler. Single file, they made their way through the narrow canyon. In subdued voices, they discussed the strange events. None of them, not even the widely traveled Darpo, had ever heard of a phenomenon like the ice cyclone, not even in the high, wild mountains.

Tol rode wrapped in silence. He, for one, did not believe the tornado was a freak of nature. The sky had remained clear and blue as lakewater even as the cyclone raged. It had come seemingly from nowhere and made straight for them, as though seeking to devour Tol and his people. The storm had

been raised by magic—potent magic—Tol was certain. Twice now someone had tried to kill him with sorcery, and twice he had escaped, though not without cost. Two of his soldiers had died in Tarsis and now Felryn.

Tol jerked the reins, halting Shadow. The others stopped behind him. The setting sun was half hidden by the mountain peaks ahead. Staring straight into the crimson fire, Tol drew his jeweled dagger and held it high. Bloody sunlight flashed off the dagger's gold-filigreed blade and silver-wrapped brass hilt. In the pommel, the hen's egg ruby glowed as though afire.

"My lord, what is it?" Frez called.

"Just saying good-bye."

Still holding his dagger aloft, Tol silently saluted the gallant healer.

Chapter 4

A Hard Gift

Knuckles white with strain slowly relaxed. Blood rushed in, setting his fingertips ablaze with a thousand pin-pricks. In the phosphor glow of the spirit-orb, the hands did not match. One was pinkish-white and soft, with stubby fingers and blunt nails. The other had long, tapering fingers and was the color of polished teak.

Mandes let out the breath he'd been holding. The strip of rag he'd been wringing in his fists fell into the shallow copper basin, disturbing the shadowy scene there.

The shadows obscured too much. Had it worked? Was the danger over at last?

God's death, Lord Tolandruth was difficult to kill! This ill-born son of a northland pig farmer must die. Mandes would not allow all he had accomplished, all he had made for himself, vanish simply because Tol of Juramona was coming back to Daltigoth.

Exhaustion made his head reel. There was blood in his mouth. He could taste it, thick and salty. The whirlwind he'd created in the far-off mountains had claimed at least one life. Someone's blood was on his tongue, he knew that.

Pushing himself to his feet, he cast about for water, wine, anything to cleanse the ugly taste from his mouth. As he stumbled about in his half-lit sanctum, he brushed against a hanging cymbal. Moments later his servant, Yeffrin, appeared in answer to the unintentional summons.

"You called, master?" the elderly servant rasped, squinting into the darkened room.

Mandes whirled, shoving his hands into his deep sleeves. "How dare you enter without my permission! Get out!"

"But, master, you rang—"

"Get out!"

Lightning flared behind the sorcerer's eyes. A swirl of wind followed, catching up loose scraps of parchment and tangling Yeffrin's long gray hair around his face.

With a terrified gasp, the servant retreated, blindly grabbing the brass handle and yanking the door shut. .

"If you enter unbidden again, I'll have your eyes plucked out!" Mandes screamed, voice breaking.

He snatched up his gloves and worked the tight-fitting leather onto his hands. He hated for anyone to see his ill-matched limbs and never appeared in public without the gloves. He even slept in a loose-fitting pair.

A cough spasmed in his chest. It escaped his lips explosively, flecking his chin with tiny droplets of blood.

Yeffrin was fleeing down the stairs at his best hobbling pace when he heard the thunderclap resound inside his master's private chamber.

* * * * *

Valaran awoke with a start, not knowing what had interrupted her rest. No dream or nightmare remained in her mind. Clumsy with sleep and sightless in the darkened room, she swept her hand out to see if anyone was lurking nearby. She touched only the golden lamp beside her bed, sending it clattering to the floor.

Anywhere else in the royal apartments such a sound would have brought servants running, but because this was the bedchamber of Princess Valaran, all was silent.

She seldom passed the night with her husband, Crown Prince Amaltar. Their marriage was amiable, but a family alliance rather than a love match. When she was sleeping alone, Valaran wanted no servants hovering about. Only idiots, she was fond of saying, allowed people to wait on their every whim.

Swinging her bare feet to the floor, she made her way to one of the high, narrow windows. Clouds capped the sky, blocking the stars. The only light came from the city below, reflected off the low-hanging ceiling of clouds. No sound reached her through the window glass.

A shiver shook her, and she gripped her arms tightly. It was summer; why was her room so chill? Numb fingers fumbling a bit, she managed to get the lamp lit. The light showed the breath misting from her lips. Her room was freezing cold!

Something had happened—something dangerous and dark, and of such import that the premonition of it had reached out and awakened her from a sound sleep.

A warm liquid trickled from the corner of her mouth. Instinctively, her hand went to her lips. Her fingertips came away smeared with a dark stain. She went quickly to a bronze mirror and studied her reflection. Her nose wasn't bleeding, and she hadn't bitten tongue or lip, yet the trace of blood remained on her mouth, almost as though it had dripped there while she slept.

Drawn to the window again, she finished wiping away the blood, then pushed open the window sash. An icy wind rushed in, knifing through her silk nightgown.

Even as she gasped in shock, the frigid blast vanished, and the normal heat of a summer night erased all traces of the unnatural cold.

Tol was coming.

The thought surfaced in her mind, so suddenly, so sharp and clear that she gasped again. The lamp slipped from her fingers. It hit the tile floor and went out, rolling to a stop beneath the window seat.

Tol was coming back after ten years away. Valaran knew it as certainly as she knew the sun would rise tomorrow. Her pulse quickened.

Crickets sang from the palace's rooftop garden. Far away in the night-shrouded city a dog barked once.

All seemed peaceful, but Valaran's peace was over. Life—hers and that of a great many more people—was about to get much more complicated. Tol had that effect. Things happened when he was about. Lives changed. Blood was shed. The fate of dynasties hung in the balance. He did not seek such momentous occurrences, but they were his destiny. The gods walked in Tol's footsteps.

Valaran pulled the sash closed with a sharp bang. If the gods wished to shadow him, let them, but she certainly did not. She was done with him. That part of her life was over. Over and finished. It had to be.

In bed again, she could not sleep for wondering whose blood she had tasted. It couldn't be Tol's. He never seemed to get hurt, not seriously.

The princess turned on her side and firmly closed her eyes.

It did not matter who was hurt, as long as it was not her.

* * * * *

Tol's party continued crossing the highest range of the mountains. Progress was slow. Neither man, woman, nor horse could climb in the cold, thin air for more than half a day before bone-numbing exhaustion set in. Even with the knowledge they had an unseen enemy on their heels, they could move no more quickly. At night, a leaping fire was needed to warm them enough for a fitful rest.

They crossed the lofty divide at the lowest notch they could find, a pass known as Ging's Reach, named for the famous centaur pathfinder. Descending from the heights proved as difficult as ascending. The little-used path was awash in loose gravel, making footing treacherous. Even now, in late summer, the ground was thick with frost until well past dawn. In another two turnings of the moons, Ging's Reach would be a solid sheet of ice.

All of them wore long woolen scarves wound around their face to keep out the cold. That and the need to conserve breath meant there was little talk. They were alone with their thoughts.

Tol tried to distract himself from thinking about Felryn's death by pondering who might be the author of the magical attacks. Any number of Tarsans regarded him as an enemy, since he had smashed three of their armies and brought their city to its knees, but in the end he discarded the notion that a Tarsan was behind the attacks. Not even the hot-headed Prince Helx would continue to seek Tol's death once Tol had left Tarsis and Hanira. Tarsans loved gold too much to waste time and money on pointless revenge.

Another of his old enemies, the elf general Tylocost, was currently being held captive at Juramona. The Silvanesti mercenary had been Tol's prisoner for eleven years but had neither the means nor the opportunity to stir up trouble. It hardly seemed likely he would wait so long to conspire against Tol.

The only place where Tol's enemies were rich enough, powerful enough, and single-minded enough to launch two such murderous plans was the imperial capital, Daltigoth. The empire was in turmoil over the succession, making this a perfect time to settle old scores. In Daltigoth, he knew, dwelled his worst enemies.

Prince Nazramin, younger brother of Amaltar, hated Tol for personal reasons. Although of humble birth, Tol had been ennobled by the late emperor, Pakin III. In spite of this, many Ergothian nobles considered him nothing more than a peasant with pretensions above his rightful station. For years Crown Prince Amaltar had used Tol as his foil, to blunt the bold, martial Nazramin's popularity and undercut his schemes. The younger prince was barely respectful to his brother, but he openly despised Lord Tolandruth. Still, Nazramin's violent style lent itself more to an assassin's dagger than to golems or tornadoes of ice.

Unbidden, Valaran's face appeared in Tol's mind. What of Val? Could the years have turned her rejection of Tol into something twisted and evil, outright hatred? Almost immediately, he unconsciously shook his head. Not even for the sake of argument could he believe that Val craved his death.

The candidate who emerged as the likeliest instigator was Mandes. Rogue wizard, betrayer, stealer of Tol's glory, Mandes's particular expertise in fogs, mists, and weather spells had earned him the nickname "Mist-maker" from the Hylo kender. The ice tornado had all the hallmarks of his handiwork.

Mandes had originally fled Tarsis because he refused to submit to the discipline of High Sorcery, preferring the less structured yet darker life of a renegade spellcaster. Since rescuing him in the

wilds and sending him to Daltigoth, Tol had followed the wizard's career with grim interest. Mandes also hated Tol, less explicably and less openly. Treachery was deep in his blood.

After arriving in Daltigoth, Tol knew, Mandes had quickly established himself as a servant to the wealthy and powerful, performing his art to gratify their whims. The wizards of Daltigoth, led by Mistress Yoralyne (until her death) and now headed by the weak but well-intentioned Oropash, tried to rein in the renegade, but too late. Mandes had grown too powerful for them to touch. He had even found favor with Crown Prince Amaltar, and Amaltar now sat on the throne of Ergoth.

Deep in thought, Tol dropped back in line until he was trailing the others. They were all on foot, leading their horses over the uncertain ground. Up front, Darpo and Kiya suddenly stopped short.

Miya walked into her sister's horse and grumbled loudly. Kiya silenced her, hissing, "Listen!"

They stood, white clouds of breath pluming around their heads in the bright, cold air. From far away came a recognizable sound: the kiss of metal upon metal, musical but menacing.

"Swordplay," breathed Frez.

The ravine they were descending boasted high peaks on both sides. A few scraggly trees clung to the mountainside, dwarf pine and buntram, still green despite the cold. The air was as still as glass. Kiya, the best tracker among them, slowly turned her head, seeking the source of the sound. She pointed to her left, southwest.

Tol flipped back his heavy cloak, exposing the hilt of his saber. Frez and Darpo did likewise, and Kiya strung her bow. Although not trained as a fighter, Miya was handy with her bronze-capped staff. She was also a mean stone-thrower.

Bunched together, the group continued warily down the ravine. At bottom, the passage divided. One path went due west, the other bore southwest. They halted.

"We don't always have to go looking for trouble," Miya said, looking somewhat longingly at the western path.

Kiya spat on a stone. Her spittle froze even as she was speaking. "It would be dishonorable to ignore those in distress," she said, giving her sister a narrow-eyed look. Miya glared right back.

"Warriors of the empire must defend its citizens." Frez's words caused Miya to sigh. Appeals to duty were irresistible to Tol. There was no question now which way they'd be going.

They mounted, and with Tol leading, entered the southwest passage. The going was steep, but the rock was weathered and eroded, the ruts and grooves providing better footing for the horses than they'd had for days.

As the little band wound through the ravine, the sounds of conflict waxed and waned. At times they heard nothing, then they'd round a curve and the noise became so distinct they could almost make out voices. After another league passed, Kiya moved to Tol's side.

"Let me go ahead."

He nodded. Kiya dismounted, tossing her reins to Tol. She climbed the rocky slope on the north side of the ravine and disappeared among the boulders perched precariously on the mountainside.

A shrill, bleating note echoed through the canyons. It was not an Ergothian horn. The Harrow Sky hill country was rife with robber bands and small armies of marauders serving self-styled lords. The sounds could represent a battle between one petty princeling and another. If so, it was none of their business and Tol would withdraw with a clear conscience.

Kiya came back, moving quickly.

"It's a caravan," she said, panting in the thin air. "Ambushed!"

"How many brigands?" asked Tol.

“Forty or fifty, on foot. Humans, centaurs, and I think I saw an ogre among them. Their prey is a caravan of ten wagons. The caravan is drawn up in a ring around an outcropping of stone, but ten little men are too few to hold off the robbers.”

“Little men—you mean kender?” Tol asked.

Kiya shook her head. “No, stout little men—dwarves. They will not survive without help.”

Tol drew his saber. Miya sighed again.

“Cheer up, sister,” Kiya told her. “Exercise will warm your blood!” Miya muttered darkly.

They rode down the draw, pausing where the ravine opened onto a broader valley. Screened by trees, they surveyed the situation.

Ten large, ox-drawn wagons were circled around a broken spire of stone. Two of the wagons had been burned, and bodies littered the ground. The dwarves were putting up a valiant fight.

A roar of voices and the clatter of arms announced the return of the bandits. They were a motley crew, as Kiya had said, and forty-three in number, men mostly, and a handful of centaurs. A towering figure in rust-streaked armor stood on a ledge overlooking the battle. His remarkable size marked him as an ogre.

Tol explained his plan of attack. “We’ll let the robbers get deeply engaged with the dwarves again, then we’ll surprise them. Make as much noise as you can—whoop and shout like we’re five hundred instead of five.” To Kiya he said, “Put a few arrows in that big fellow, won’t you?” She promised she would.

After bellowing and brandishing their arms awhile to intimidate the defenders, the bandits rushed forward again. They attacked with no order, no discipline. Each robber ran screaming at the wagons, waving a sword, axe, or spear. Centaurs galloped in with a club in each hand.

The dwarves, bearing short swords and axes, appeared on the sides of their wagons. They were pitifully few.

Miya’s horse, a nimble black creature she’d named Pitch, stamped and snorted, catching its rider’s tense mood. Frez’s and Darpo’s mounts likewise shifted.

“Steady,” Tol said, Shadow standing placidly beneath him. The robbers were nearly to the wagons. “Steady.”

Blades clanged loudly in the crisp mountain air. Screams of pain shortly followed as sword, axe, spear, and club struck home. It was bloody business, shocking even to seasoned warriors like Tol and his men. They were professionals, accustomed to fighting other professionals. The fracas below was nothing more than a brutal melee.

A dwarf, impaled on a long spear, was hoisted off his feet and hurled in a wide arc by two men. Robbers, trying to climb aboard the wagons, fell back without arms or hands or heads.

Tol drew his sword. “Forward, at the gallop!”

They burst through the thin line of trees with a concerted shout of “Juramona!”

If their battle cry was lost in the noise of combat, the rumble of their horses’ hooves was not. Brigands furthest from the wagons faced about, uncertain what to do. Ambushing merchant caravans was their livelihood, but there was no profit in fighting Ergothian cavalry. Some bolted. By the time Tol’s people reached the fight, half the bandits had fled.

Tol aimed for the nearest, biggest foe, a centaur. He sabered the man-horse across the back, blade slashing through the creature’s fur vest. The centaur twisted his torso around and swung a huge spiked club at Tol’s face. Dodging, Tol thrust under the brawny centaur’s arm, piercing him in the ribs. Momentum carried Tol into the falling centaur, who collapsed under Shadow’s hooves.

Pivoting, Tol sabered left and right, wounding a bandit with every stroke. He knew that men who lived on the edge of life—vicious and violent as they were—feared mutilation worse than death; death in battle was usually quick, but a gravely injured man could suffer long agonies before finally succumbing. With deep sword cuts on their backs and shoulders, the thieves abandoned the fight and scrambled for safety. Frez would've ridden after them, but Tol called him back.

Miya whacked one fleeing robber on the head with her staff, stunning him. Seizing him by his dirty blond topknot, she dragged him across her saddle and brought him to Tol.

“Want a prize?” she said, grinning.

She let go of the man's hair, and he fell to his knees. Tol presented his sword tip to the brigand's face.

“Heed this, churl,” he said in his most menacing voice. “The army of Lord Tolandruth has claimed these mountains for Ergoth. Disperse, and your lives shall be spared. Continue to plunder, and every brigand caught in the hill country will be tied to a stake and burned alive.”

Miya chuckled appreciatively, brown eyes glittering, and her merriment unnerved the robber even more.

“Answer, do you understand?” Tol demanded. The fellow nodded furiously. “Then go—and spread the word!”

All the brigands who could run were fleeing now. The ogre, obviously the chief of this pack of wolves, never entered the fight. Tol drew his little band up between the ogre and the wagons, and waited for the frightened thief to deliver his message to the ogre chief. Cowering before his leader, he relayed Tol's threat with suitable arm waving and eye-rolling. The ogre clashed his upper and lower tusks together and gave in inarticulate roar. He started down the ledge toward them, but Kiya put an arrow in the turf at his feet.

The hulking ogre halted and made an obscene gesture at the Dom-shu woman. Unperturbed, she fitted another arrow and drew her bowstring taut. The ogre clashed his tusks again, then stalked away after his vanishing followers. In moments the valley was peaceful again.

Eight haggard, blood-spattered dwarves emerged from the tethered wagons.

“The blessings of the Maker God on you all!” called a white-bearded dwarf. He wore a long brigandine studded with brass plates and carried a well-used battle-axe on his shoulder. “Tell me your names, strangers, so I may honor your memories for the rest of my days!”

Introductions were performed, with Tol naming himself simply as “Tol.” No need to clutter matters with titles and reputations.

“Men of Ergoth, are you not?” Tol said this was so, and the dwarf added, “I am Mundur Embermore, of the clan Hylar, and these are my retainers.”

“Hylar?” said Darpo. “The high clan of Thoradin? You're a long way from home, Master Embermore.”

“Aye, 'tis true, and well I wish I were in the halls of the mountain king again!”

He explained that the dwarves had been sending out mining expeditions to different mountain regions, and they'd found rich diggings in the Harrow Sky range. Gold, and better still, iron.

“There are veins of red ore in these peaks that make the mines of Thoradin look like Aghar holes,” he proclaimed.

“Master Embermore, these mountains are no healthy place to work,” Tol cautioned.

It was true enough, but Tol also knew the new emperor would not be pleased to learn that dwarves were exploiting the riches of a land so close to the empire's border. He urged the dwarves to depart

quickly. The bandits might recover their nerve at any time, especially if they realized Tol's "army" was only five strong. Mundur saw the wisdom of this and ordered his thanes to work with an impressive, booming voice.

Two wagons had been destroyed, and three of the ox teams slain, but from the remnants Mundur Embermore reorganized his caravan. However, the dwarves could not move on until their fallen comrades were solemnly interred. Tol understood their sentiment, and he and his people stood a nervous watch while the dwarves honored their dead.

When the last stone was placed on the last cairn, Mundur approached Tol, still mounted on Shadow.

"Our brothers will sleep in peace, thanks be to you and the Maker God," he said. His deep-set blue eyes were rimmed with tears. "A thousand blessings on your noble brow, Ergothian!"

"We can't let thieves run free," Tol replied, embarrassed by the dwarf's continued gratitude.

"No, indeed!" Mundur smiled, showing broad yellow teeth. "Allow me to repay your gallantry in my own small way. May I see your sword?"

The rest of Tol's party collected around him as he drew his saber and offered the hilt to the dwarf.

Mundur ran a thick thumb over the flat side of the blade, then licked it. "That's good iron. Mined in the west of your country, no more than five winters past I'd say."

He summoned one of his thanes, and the two of them measured the saber with great care.

"You favor a curved blade, soldier?" Mundur asked, and Tol admitted he did. To his helper, Mundur said, "Bring Number Six."

The thane retrieved a long wooden box from one of the wagons. When this was presented to Mundur, the elderly dwarf opened it and removed a finished sword with a long, curved Made and a cup hilt made to enclose the wielder's hand completely. He presented the weapon to Tol.

"Try this, Ergoth."

The cup hilt was somewhat snug, as the grip had been sized for a dwarf, but Tol's own hands weren't overly large. The weapon's length was right and its balance excellent. Sweeping out from the oil-finished hilt, the blade was quite thin, and displayed an intricate pattern of whorls in its surface.

"We made up a number of sample weapons at the mine," Mundur explained. "To show the folks back home what can be done with the metal we found here. What think you of the blade?"

Tol swung the saber. It was fast and light, but he doubted the thin blade would stand up long in close combat. As politely as he could, he said so.

Mundur's eyes gleamed. "It will serve you well, a very long time. The sword is yours, warrior. A small gift from Mundur Embermore to his benefactor. Use it in good health!"

Chuckling deep in his chest, Mundur departed. With much waving, shouts of gratitude, and whip-cracking, the dwarves formed their caravan and went on their way.

Kiya took the sword from Tol's hand and brandished it a few times. "I feel no magic in it," she said, handing it back.

"I doubt there is any." He slipped his old, much-used saber back in its scabbard and regarded the new weapon with a practiced eye. "Mundur's a miner and a smith, not a spell-caster."

"A handsome blade, though," Frez noted. Miya commented sourly that gold would've been a better reward than another sword, no matter how well wrought.

Tol hung the new weapon from a thong behind his saddle bags. As Shadow jounced along, the cutting edge wore against the end of a saddlebag. No one noticed until the contents of the bag spilled out on the stony ground.

Darpo rode up from behind and pulled the dwarf blade free. With no more force than its own weight, it had sliced through the thick leather bag.

“Some edge!” Darpo declared, handing the weapon to Tol.

Miya picked up Tol’s scattered belongings. When she saw his tin drinking cup, she whistled loudly between her teeth. The cup was also deeply scored by the blade.

Tol dismounted. Sword in hand, he tossed the ruined cup in the air and slashed at it with Mundur’s blade. The cup flew into two halves, bisected.

“*It is enchanted!*” Miya exclaimed.

Kiya gave Tol a quick look, lifting her eyebrows. He shook his head and casually rested a hand at his waist where he wore the millstone. He had touched the blade to the Irda artifact, with no result. The sword’s power lay not in magic but in superb craftsmanship.

“Try something harder, my lord!” Darpo urged.

Tol pulled a silver coin from his belt pouch. Holding the saber edge up, he balanced the coin on it. With a single, sharp heave, he brought the saber over in a wide arc. Two silver semicircles landed on the ground. Kiya offered a brass spoon, and Mundur’s blade sliced it just as easily.

Miya stooped and retrieved a black iron horseshoe from Tol’s fallen gear. Wordlessly she held it out. This would be the supreme test. Horseshoes were forged from the toughest iron. A common saber could be ruined by hacking a horseshoe; it might even snap in two.

Tol tossed the horseshoe into the air and swung the blade hard. He felt only a slight resistance, heard a snap, and the horseshoe hit the ground in two pieces. The edge of Mundur’s sword wasn’t even nicked.

Frez whooped, Darpo laughed, and the Dom-shu sisters clapped each other heartily on the back. Tol slipped the dwarf blade into his empty scabbard.

“A good sword,” he said, calmly. Unable to maintain his facade, he grinned suddenly. “I think I’ll keep it!”

Miya, the inveterate haggler, was all for going after the dwarves to see whether more blades could be bought. Kiya finally had to take Fitch’s reins and lead her sister away from temptation.

* * * * *

The sun was high. Since they’d descended from the heights, the day had turned sultry indeed, with white haze rising up to obscure the once brilliantly blue sky. Trees became common again as the land flattened. Behind them, the silent gray mountains they’d conquered looked like a forbidding fortress. Miya marveled that they’d managed to cross such lofty peaks.

Spread below them, the Harrow Sky hill country resembled a quilt, a patchwork of green vales and brown hills. With Tarsis four days behind them, Tol expected to reach the sea in another four.

At his order they shed their distinctive Ergothian clothing, trading scarves, hoods, and cloaks, until each of them looked appropriately anonymous. No sense announcing themselves as imperial warriors, Tol said. A small band of wanderers—perhaps robbers themselves—would invite much less attention than Ergothian soldiers.

A few leagues farther on, signs of habitation grew more and more common. Smoke was on the wind, from hearths and campfires. Here and there crude vegetable patches appeared, gouged out of the flinty hillsides. The hardscrabble gardens reminded Tol of his childhood. He’d spent many a morning hoeing in such fields alongside his father, mother, and two sisters.

As always, thoughts of his family brought a pang to Tol's heart. Not having seen them for years, he had searched out their farm as he led the Army of the North southward on its long trek to Tarsis. He'd found the tiny homestead, tucked in the hills south of Juramona, but it was abandoned. The pens had fallen down, and the house in which he'd been born was roofless and derelict. No trace of his family remained. Caught up as he was in a war, Tol could not take time to look for them.

The first person they encountered since the dwarves' departure was a little girl. With only a willow switch, she was herding a trio of pigs, each as large as herself. She shied away from the five riders, driving her charges off the path. Although only about twelve years old, she had hard eyes and a long dagger tucked in the rope knotted around her waist. She gripped its wooden handle as they passed.

"The natives are so friendly here," Miya snorted.

"You grew up free in the forest," Tol said quietly, as they gave the wary child a wide berth. "A farmer is surrounded by enemies: the weather, insects, thieves, overlords. Life makes you hard—or you die."

They came to a village nestled between three hills. An open town, with no wall to defend it, it was a cluster of stoutly built log houses centered on a common well. One of the larger homes had a porch. As they passed the open door, Kiya sniffed.

"Beer," she said.

Darpo added, "Someone's roasting a joint of beef."

"A tavern!" Miya reined up. "Civilization at last!"

Tol would have preferred to ride straight through, but his own stomach growled in response to the smells of cooking. He turned Shadow toward the porch. A rangy, barefoot boy in dirty hide treads came out and tied their mounts' reins to a hitching post. Tol gave him a few coppers to watch their animals.

Dismounted, they stretched knotted limbs. Tol warned them to say nothing about who they were or where they were going.

This early, the hostel's only inhabitant was the innkeeper. She was a sharp-eyed old woman with a face like a hatchet. Tol and his companions affected an air of laconic indifference and seated themselves around a rude trestle table. Once they were settled, the innkeeper came over.

"Well?" she said, raising thin gray eyebrows.

"Beer. Bread. Meat," Tol intoned. She gave a twitchy nod and headed off to the rear of the house.

The common room was dark and low ceilinged, and smelled strongly of smoke and spilled brew. Shafts of daylight slanted in through chinks in the ill-fitting plank walls and dust motes tumbled lazily in the light. The floor was dirt, covered by a layer of crumbled pine bark. The surface of the table was crisscrossed by knife cuts.

The old lady returned, laden with food and drink. She fairly staggered under her load, and Frez would've gotten up to help her. Tol tapped his arm to halt him. Soldiers of Ergoth might assist a burdened old woman, but stray wanderers would not be so polite.

Despite her gaunt appearance, the innkeeper was strong. She made it to the table without spilling a drop or losing a single loaf. She doled out the victuals with practiced ease. Every diner received a flat loaf of hearth bread and a wooden mug of dark beer. In the center of the table, the woman placed a steaming rib roast, sliding the hot meat from her platter directly onto the none too clean tabletop. Food dispensed, she held out a red, work-worn claw.

Still maintaining his tight-lipped pose, Tol put what he thought was a stingy amount in the old woman's hand, two silver pieces. She took the money readily, testing each coin between the only two molars in her head, then left them.

Darpo and Frez, accustomed to more civilized ways, were a bit nonplussed, but the Dom-shu sisters overcame any reticence they felt and began slicing off slabs of beef.

“Not bad,” Kiya declared of the food.

Miya agreed through a mouthful of bread.

Tol took a sip of beer. The brew was young and raw, no older than his last haircut, but the flavor was surprisingly good. He drained the mug quickly.

Just then a stranger entered the rough tavern. Silhouetted in the open doorway, he surveyed the room with hands on hips. As he sauntered their way, Tol’s party continued eating but kept wary eyes on the fellow.

“Greetings,” he said, halting in the shadows three paces from their table. “Do you belong to those horses outside?”

Miya swallowed beer and said, “Yes, what of it?”

“We don’t see horses much around here, that’s all. Passing through?”

He stepped into a shaft of sunlight. He had a pleasant face, round cheeked and swarthy, with dark hair cut in a bowl shape, and narrow, gray-green eyes. His chin was clean of whiskers and his ears upswept into points, but his solid build proclaimed his mixed parentage.

When Tol said they were indeed only passing through, the half-elf came closer. Clad all in dark brown leather, he had twin daggers in his sash belt, pommels out for quick drawing. Tol tensed and knew Kiya, Darpo, and Frez were likewise on guard.

The stranger smiled, lifting his arms slightly away from his sides, as though to reassure them. “I see you are obviously prosperous folk, but would you be interested in a fair-paying job?” he asked.

“What sort of job?”

“A simple one, excellent sir. Escorting a few wagonloads of goods to the coast.”

Tol would’ve smiled, but he realized the gesture could be misunderstood. This slippery fellow had taken them for mercenaries—a reasonable error—and wanted to hire them to go just where they intended to go anyway!

“How much?” asked Miya, rising to her feet. She was a head taller than the half-elf, and her eyes were alight with interest. She could reduce even the hardened street merchants of Daltigoth to tears with her relentless bargaining.

Unlike most men, the half-elf seemed unperturbed by the Dom-shu’s size. Looking up at her calmly, he replied, “Since you’re mounted, one gold piece per day.”

It was a respectable offer, but Miya barely even considered it. By the time she was done, the stranger had agreed to one gold and one silver per rider per day, plus two meals per rider. After a glance at Tol, Miya sealed the deal.

“My name is Orlien,” their new employer told them. “I’m a merchant hereabouts, and I need to get four wagons to the coast in four days. Is that well with you?”

The deadline would require fast moving, but that suited Tol, and he agreed. Smiling broadly, Orlien bade them come to the corral on the west side of the village when they were done with their meal.

Once the half-elf was gone, Darpo said, “If he’s a merchant, I’m the empress of Ergoth.”

Kiya was nodding. “Those knives he wears are assassin’s tools!”

Her words had triggered a bitter memory for Tol. His boyhood friend Crake had left Juramona to seek his fortune in Daltigoth. Instead of wealth, Crake had found a career as a hired assassin and spy. He’d carried knives much like Orlien’s. Crake had learned of the nullstone and tried to take it,

and Tol had been forced to fight his former friend to the death. Although more than a decade had passed, he'd never told anyone the identity of the assassin he'd killed.

Ironically, it was that victory that had helped bring him to the attention of Prince Amaltar and the emperor. It also had further strengthened his resolve not to reveal the millstone's existence.

As these thoughts were flashing quickly through Tol's mind, he said, "Well, whatever he is, this 'job' suits our needs very well. We'll need a ship to take us across the gulf to Ergoth. Orlien must have a ship waiting if he's on such an urgent schedule. One way or another, the ship'll take us to Ergoth."

Careful to avoid the appearance of haste, Tol's party finished their meal then ambled outside. The corral Orlien spoke of wasn't hard to locate in so small a village. By a single barn and pen four wagons were drawn up. Rather than the usual oxen, two sturdy draft horses were hitched to each wagon. Horses were rare and expensive in the hill country, as Orlien himself had noted when he greeted them. If he owned eight of the animals, he was not a poor man.

The first two wagons were loaded, their freight covered by thick tarpaulins and secured by crisscrossing ropes. Each of the last pair was framed with wooden hoops supporting a canvas roof that hid their cargoes.

Orlien emerged from the barn, followed by a fearsome henchman. Hugely muscled and scarred, the fellow had tufts of curly white hair sticking out all over his enormous body. One eye was gone, the socket covered by a leather patch. He wore furs and rested a dwarven battle-axe on his meaty shoulder.

"Greetings, noble friends!" Orlien called, spreading his arms wide. "Time is short. Shall we get underway?"

"What are we carrying?" asked Tol with feigned indifference.

"Goods I acquired locally: rough gems, medicinal plants and mushrooms, honey of the mountain bees, and other such. My trade. My life." Orlien smiled again.

Miya had moved toward the last pair of wagons. As she reached a hand out to touch one, the axe came off the big man's shoulder and he took a step in her direction.

"Lady, please!" Orlien said, raising his voice, but quelling his henchman with a sidelong glare. "Those contain delicate goods. Things that would be damaged by the sun."

Shrugging, Miya moved away from the covered wagon. The other one—the last in line—suddenly rocked a little, and a muffled thumping was heard.

Orlien's ready smile slid from his face. "That one's not delicate. That's Faranu, a notorious mountain bandit," he explained. "The good people of this village captured him during a raid not ten days past. There's a price on his head, to be paid by the Marshal of the Southern Hundred in Ergoth. He's wanted there for murder and a host of other foul crimes."

Surprise changed to understanding. "Well, why didn't you say so?" Kiya said. "We'll see he gets there."

"We hate bandits," agreed Miya, nodding.

Tol said, "This Faranu—does he have followers who might try to rescue him?"

Orlien looked away for a moment. "Well, yes."

"How many followers?" asked Frez quickly.

The half-elf hemmed and hawed but finally replied, "No more than twenty, certainly. Mountain trash. No match for professionals like yourselves."

Miya looked to Tol, a hopeful expression on her face, and he nodded. Fists on hips, she said, "You

just raised our pay, friend Orlien. Taking such risks is going to cost you.”

He wriggled and resisted like a hooked trout, but Miya was relentless. As shadows lengthened in the street, Orlien finally cracked.

“All right!” he said, sweat dripping from his chin. “Two gold pieces each, plus a silver for every bandit you kill.” He glared. “But I won’t pay for wounded ones!”

“Done,” said Tol, anxious to get underway.

Each wagon had a driver and a hired guard riding on its bench. Orlien’s axe-wielding henchman (whose name was Yull) rode on the wagon that carried the villain Faranu.

Orlien walked down the line of horses, doling out single gold coins to each member of Tol’s party. “Yull will pay you the balance when you deliver my goods to the ship’s owner. Good luck, and make haste!”

The caravan rolled out of the village just as the sun began to dip beneath the western hills. Tol assigned one of his people to each wagon, giving Kiya the plum task of watching the one containing the captive bandit. He himself rode ahead of the lead wagon.

Following the winding trail around the foot of the many hills, they soon lost sight of the village. The sun slowly vanished, painting the undersides of the towering columns of cloud a brilliant pink. Tol set a brisk pace. They had four days to reach the coast or they would miss their ship, Orlien had warned.

Four days to the sea, two days to cross the gulf if the winds were fair, and then Tol would be in Ergoth once more.

Chapter 5

Number Six

The journey was not a pleasant one. The road they followed was no Ackal Path, wide and paved and well tended. Instead, rutted and rugged, the dirt track wound this way and that around the foot of every hill, never remaining straight for more than a few dozen paces. With the view so limited, it was a perfect place for an ambush. Everyone stayed tense and watchful, but the first day passed without incident.

The first night in camp, before his people dropped wearily onto their bedrolls, Tol worked out new dispositions for the next day's ride. Two scouts would ride a goodly way ahead of the wagons, looking for any signs of trouble. A third rider would precede the caravan but stay in sight of it, and the last two would trail behind the wagons so as not to seem a part of the company. In this fashion Tol hoped to keep a wider eye over the territory they had to traverse.

Darpo had the first watch, but before they settled down to sleep, Miya quietly related what she'd observed earlier in the evening.

She had lingered by Faranu's wagon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the famous bandit. She was about to sneak a peek inside when Yull appeared, axe in hand. She had withdrawn, but not before she saw the wagon driver enter the canvas enclosure carrying a bucket of ripe apples.

Kiya scoffed at her sister's tale. "They feed their prisoner only apples? No bread? No meat?" Miya stubbornly repeated what she'd seen.

"I'm surprised they feed him at all," Tol said sleepily.

Quiet descended, broken only by the low whirring of insects. Tol's rest was troubled, however. He dreamt he was lying on cold, hard ground (which was true) and a silent figure stood a few steps away in the dark, watching him. The sensation was so vivid he woke, hand reaching for his saber hilt.

It was very late, when even the night birds are still. Prop -ping himself on one elbow, Tol surveyed the camp. The wagons were arrayed in a semicircle, with the Ergothians in the middle. Each wagoner and guard slept in their conveyance.

Tol spotted motion. Kiya had relieved Darpo, and was walking outside the ring of wagons. Darpo snored softly behind Tol.

All seemed peaceful, so Tol lay down again, but when he fell asleep, the dream returned. This time his dream self got up, sword in hand, and challenged the phantom watcher. Without a word, the silent figure vanished into the greater darkness of the night. For an instant, Tol saw the figure's profile by starlight.

Felryn!

Tol lurched awake. Kiya was shaking him hard.

"Husband!" she hissed. "Be quiet, or you'll wake everyone!"

"Too late," groaned Darpo.

It took Tol a moment to shake off the confusion of his vivid nightmare. He told Kiya what he had dreamed. In the telling, it all sounded very ordinary, not frightening at all, but Kiya did not sneer.

“Felryn’s spirit continues to watch over you,” she suggested. “If you dream of him again, don’t challenge him. Be friendly. Welcome him. He may have a message to impart.”

Orlien’s drivers and guards were rising. Only Miya, a notoriously heavy sleeper, hadn’t stirred. To wake her, Tol resorted to a trick he’d invented, and which Kiya had adopted as well: he bent down and kissed Miya on the forehead.

“If you’re not my husband or sister, prepare to die,” the Dom-shu woman murmured.

“Husband,” said Tol, grinning. “Dawn breaks. Arise!” Grimacing, Miya complied.

The caravan resumed its journey as the eastern horizon warmed from indigo to rose. Crows squawked from the hilltops, and deer darted out of sight as the wagons drew near. Kiya watched them wistfully. Fresh venison would be a welcome change from their campaign rations.

The winding trail they followed merged into a larger path that ran more westerly. The wagoners steered their ponderous carts onto this new track, jouncing hard over tree roots and deep ruts.

For the first time since leaving Orlien’s village they encountered other travelers, all on foot. They had the look of itinerant laborers not averse to part-time banditry. Rangy men, neither old nor young, their faces were hard and eyes sharp. Horses and laden wagons drew their gazes. Word would get around quickly; they hoped none of Faranu’s men were among the wanderers they passed.

The wagoners paused at midday to water the horses at a spring. A rude wall of fieldstone surrounded the waterhole. Tol and Darpo had been riding in the vanguard position; they sat on the wall watching the drivers tend to their animals. The black-haired wagoner who drove Faranu’s prison carried two buckets. One was shared by his team, the other he passed to Yull, who took it into the back of the wagon. A short time later he emerged; the bucket was empty.

“Thirsty fellow,” Darpo remarked curiously, and Tol nodded.

Yull went to the front of the wagon and hauled a heavy burlap bag out from behind the driver’s seat. He filled the bucket from it, spilling part of the contents on the ground. Then he went inside again with the laden pail.

Tol inspected the spill. Grain—oats, to be precise—trickled through his gloved fingers. The wagon jounced as Yull stepped down from its rear, and Tol dusted his hands and sauntered back to the spring.

Darpo queried him with a look. “What do apples, water, and oats suggest to you?” Tol asked.

“Horses,” the scarred warrior replied immediately.

Tol agreed. “Something odd is going on,” he said but had no firm idea yet of what.

They moved on. Nothing untoward happened until midafternoon. Tol and Darpo were trailing in the rearguard position, and Kiya was riding in front of the wagons. Frez and Miya were scouting ahead when a man on horseback approached, the first rider they’d seen.

A slight fellow wearing a leather jerkin, he cantered by Frez and Miya without appearing to notice them. As he drew near Kiya, however, he veered slightly toward her. Without warning, the Dom-shu woman nocked an arrow, drew, and shot the man from his horse.

The lead wagoner hauled back on his reins. The caravan lurched to a stop, beasts stamping and wagoners cursing the abrupt halt. Tol and Darpo galloped forward, ignoring the cries of the lead wagoner that Tol’s “savage” had shot an unarmed traveler.

Kiya dismounted and rolled the dead man over. She yanked back his hood, revealing the shock of

braided hair and pointed ears of a woodland elf. When Kiya parted his jerkin, they saw he wore a ring mail shirt. Strapped to his back, its pommel only barely visible above the neck of his jerkin, was a concealed sword.

A warrior skilled in such a method of carry could wait until he was abreast of his target, then draw and stab in one lightning-fast motion. Kiya had acted to save her own life.

“How did you know he was armed?” Frez asked.

“I saw the shoulders of his jerkin rise each time his horse put a foot down. Something under his jerkin was bouncing slightly. A sword, a mace, something.”

Yull appeared, gesturing angrily at them to move along. Not knowing whether the dead elf was a lone warrior or someone’s scout, they rolled him off the road and tied his horse to the back of a wagon. The caravan continued on its way.

Around the next big hill, the road straightened, and they could see ahead almost half a league. Not another soul was in sight.

Frez and Miya pulled their mounts to a halt. The Ergothian drew his saber.

“Woman,” he said, “tell Lord Tolandruth we’re in trouble.”

Miya wasted no time questioning the veteran soldier but wheeled Pitch in a tight circle. The wagons rolled slowly up behind Frez and stopped. Miya cantered down the line. As she passed her sister, Kiya nocked another arrow.

Before Miya reached Tol, the air around them flashed as bright as a sun. Pitch balked and reared, but Miya held on. The draft animals neighed in fright and yanked against their heavy traces. The wagons were suddenly burning!

Drivers and guards leaped for their lives. Pitch shied away, nimbly climbing the hillside sideways to escape the billowing flames. Miya held on for dear life and shouted, “Husband! We’re attacked! The wagons burn!”

From their place forty paces back, Tol and Darpo had seen the caravan halt. With a cry of “Fire!” Darpo pulled his sword and galloped ahead.

Tol drew his new dwarf-forged saber and followed quickly. In spite of the cries from his people and the wagoners, he saw no flames. The rearmost wagon, slightly askew on the road, looked the same as always. The driver was crawling away in the dust, beating at his pants legs. Yull emerged from the canvas enclosure yowling and slapping at his head and face with meaty hands. Neither man was on fire, though they obviously thought they were.

“It’s a trick!” Tol shouted, as Shadow galloped toward the beleaguered caravan. “There’s no fire! Watch out for an ambush!”

He left Darpo to guard the rear wagon. Ignoring the screeches of Yull and the driver, Tol spurred Shadow up the hillside and caught the reins of Miya’s terrified horse. Fumbling for the millstone, he clapped a hand to Pitch’s neck, and the horse calmed. Grasping Miya’s wrist, Tol broke the illusion for her as well.

“It’s an illusion,” he said. “There’s no fire! Are you all right?”

She was and very angry at being tricked. “I’m going to crack some skulls for this!”

“Fine! Follow me!”

Tol also broke the spell for Kiya and her horse. Likewise furious at being deceived, Kiya joined Tol and her sister as they rode to relieve Frez. They found him beset, surrounded by eight attackers on foot. He was keeping them off with sweeps of his saber. Her horse at full gallop, Kiya rose in the stirrups and loosed an arrow, taking down an opponent armed with a billhook.

A shower of stones fell on Tol and the Dom-shu. On the crest of the facing hill stood foes with slings whirling. Leaving Kiya to drive the attackers back with swiftly loosed, well-placed arrows, Tol and Miya rode to Frez's aid.

Their opponents were nothing more than a rabble, armed with whatever arms they had gleaned from earlier victims. Tol's dwarf blade—"Number Six," as Mundur Embermore had called it—split iron and bronze with equal ease. He struck down two robbers with only two blows, cleaving a helmet (and skull) in twain and piercing a brazen buckler.

Having lost the element of surprise, the raiding party fled, leaving three of their number lifeless on the road. Kiya got another, a sling-wielder on the hillside, at a range of two hundred paces. Frez had a few cuts, as did his horse, but those were the only injuries among Tol's party.

They rode slowly down the line of wagons, which had been abandoned by drivers and guards alike. Frantic to escape the phantom flames, the draft horses had torn free of their traces and run away into the distance.

Darpo was waiting by the last wagon. His eyes were wide as he hailed Tol and gestured to the wagon he guarded.

"My lord," he said, "you must see this!"

Tol peered through the parted canvas. Lying in the bed of the wagon was what appeared to be a young horse, a colt, with a coat the color of clover honey. That made sense, given the rations Yull had been feeding their prisoner. Then the colt lifted its head and all such prosaic thoughts fled.

A single horn, white as cream, protruded from the animal's forehead.

"Mishas save us!" breathed Frez. "A unicorn!"

The men stared in open-mouthed shock, but the Dom-shu women fell to their knees, gasping. Among their forest-dwelling people, the unicorn was revered as a demigod, the living embodiment of the wild.

"Sacrilege!" Kiya said, her voice choked with fury. "The young Forestmaster must be released!"

Tol did not share the Dom-shu's reverence for the rare animal, but he pitied the hobbled beast and was angry at Orlie for lying to them. He climbed inside the wagon and drew his dagger. The unicorn watched him with soft, sad eyes, fringed with golden lashes.

"Easy, there," Tol said soothingly. "I'll not hurt you. Let me cut those bonds—"

As soon as the thongs holding the colt's legs parted, the creature exploded into action, driving its horn at Tol's chest. The Ergothian dodged clumsily, hampered by the close confines of the wagon. The cool ivory horn instead slid along his neck. Then small golden hooves smacked into Tol's chest. He fell backward against the canvas. It split, and he tumbled out of the wagon to land on the dusty road.

Angry shouts greeted his abrupt appearance. Yull and the wagon guards had returned.

Realizing the secret was out, Yull unlimbered his single-edged axe and led the hired men against their ostensible escort. They were five against five, but having the mighty Yull on their side seemed to offer the attackers an edge.

Tol had lost his dagger when the unicorn kicked him, but he still had Number Six. With the cry, "Juramona!" he rallied his comrades.

Yull's men charged. Although not soldiers, they were well-versed in this sort of brawl. With spears and round brass bucklers, they drove the Ergothians away from the wagon and backward up the sloping hill. Yull urged them on, waving his ugly axe and growling. He paused at the rear of the wagon to glance in at the captive.

With a loud *thock*, a pair of tiny, unshod hooves hit Yull directly between his leather eyepatch and good eye. He staggered back, knees wobbling. The unicorn colt sailed out of the wagon. As soon as his front hooves touched ground, his back legs lashed out.

Yull's cry caused his men to turn. Immediately, Tol charged. He and his people surged down the hill, slashing at their distracted foes.

Ignoring the resurgent Ergothians, Yull stalked toward the unicorn. Kiya raised her bow, but it was struck from her hands by a skillfully thrown spear.

"Tol!" she yelled. "Save the young Master!"

Tol, dueling with a guard, heard her plea. He lopped off his opponent's spearhead. The guard brought up his buckler to ward off another blow, and Number Six's point penetrated the brass shield and stopped a hair's breadth from the fellow's right eye. Yelping, the guard abandoned his shield and took to his heels.

Tol freed his blade and closed on Yull. The big man was trying to snag the unicorn's trailing bonds. He planted one foot on the leather thongs. The unicorn stumbled as its hind legs were caught. Yull raised his heavy axe—

"Stop!" Tol bellowed. "What will your master Orlie do to you when he finds out you killed such a prize?"

The idea was enough to give the angry brute pause. Torn between fear of Orlie's retribution and the desire to slaughter the insolent beast who'd hurt him, Yull hesitated. For the first time in the entire journey, he spoke.

"You not steal!" he said, pointing from Tol to the trapped unicorn.

"I've no intention of stealing anything," Tol replied, continuing to close the distance between them. "I intend to set him free."

"No! Valuable! Bring much gold!"

Tol didn't doubt that. The horn alone had medicinal and magical qualities that would fetch awesome prices in the markets of Daltigoth or Tarsis.

Glaring at the hulking man before him, Tol said, "You've no right to hold such a rare creature. Yield now, and I'll spare your life."

Yull's face split in a gap-toothed grin. "Many try to kill Yull. All dead now. You, too, little man."

Tol jerked his head over his shoulder. "You're alone."

One by one, the wagon guards had been slain or had given up. Kiya had a bad gash on her forearm, earned when the bow had been struck from her grasp, but she'd wrapped a strip of cloth tightly around the wound. She and the rest of Tol's party stood behind him, ready for further combat.

"Let the unicorn go," Tol urged. "Be free of Orlie, and make your own life."

Yull's answer was a powerful sideways slash with his axe. Tol felt the wind from it as he leaped back. Regret flashed through his mind. He would have to kill Yull to free the unicorn.

Before battle could be joined, a chorus of shrill, keening whistles filled the air. Frez, Darpo, and the Dom-shu sisters found themselves engulfed by at least a hundred painted woodland elves. The elves swarmed over them, tearing swords from their hands and immobilizing them with the sheer press of their bodies. Tol, Yull, and the unicorn were likewise surrounded, but the elves did not assault them, merely trapped them inside a living wall of half-naked, painted flesh. More than two score short bows, arrows nocked, were aimed at the two antagonists.

Tol raised his hands slowly. "Peace," he said loudly. "I mean no harm to you or the young Forestmaster!"

A pair of elves darted forward and freed the unicorn. Yull started to resist, but the collective creak of drawn bowstrings halted him.

A female emerged from the crowd. Her short, spiky black hair was painted with streaks of blue and yellow. She wore a heavy collar of hammered silver beads and carried a tall staff with a forked silver head. From the way her comrades parted for her, Tol took her to be their leader. She barked a few short phrases in her native tongue.

“Miya,” Tol said, “tell her we’re hired fighters, and we mean no harm to the unicorn. Tell her we meant to free it.”

“That’s asking a lot of my poor Elvish,” Miya muttered, then spoke haltingly in the elf tongue.

The female elf studied Tol with a cold, calculating eye, then replied.

“I think she called you a liar,” Miya said. “She says we’re thieves, trying to steal the young Master from Orlien’s men.”

The elf woman spoke again, angrily, and Miya struggled to understand and relay the words to Tol.

Hunters had stolen the unicorn from the forest where the elves dwelt, far to the north of the hill country. They’d sold the rare creature to Orlien for gold. Practically the entire tribe had come south to find the unicorn, which they regarded as their personal godling.

Miya’s command of the language was not up to the task of persuading the elves of her party’s benevolent intentions. The unicorn was led away, and the elves continued to hold the Ergothians and Yull.

Tol thought fast. The elf woman was in command, but she was unarmed; perhaps she was not a chief, but the tribe’s shaman. Her silver adornment and staff lent credence to this theory. With that in mind, he told Miya to propose the elves test him to learn whether he was telling the truth.

The elf woman waved the idea aside. Two score bowstrings tightened.

“Do you care nothing about justice?” Tol cried, and Miya translated as quickly as she could. “I’ve always heard the woodlanders esteemed truth and justice above all other virtues!”

That caused some murmuring in the ranks of elves. Miya told him, “They say, ‘The grasslander is right. Evil will follow us if we slay the just along with the guilty.’ ”

The elf woman lifted a hand, and the murmurs ceased. She stood nose to nose with Tol—they were of a height—and repeated a short phrase four times. He felt a faint flicker of heat across his face, as he did when encountering magic, but the Irda artifact he carried shielded him completely.

The shaman drew back, startled at her failure.

Seeking to press this advantage, Tol said, “Tell her, because I speak the truth, the gods protect me from her spells. None of her magic can hurt me. She can cast any spell she wants, and it won’t effect me.”

Miya only stared at him, and he snapped, “Tell her!” Miya did so.

The elf woman threw back her feather-lined cloak, revealing a close-fitting suit of green-dyed deerskin. Planting her fists on her hips and looking Tol up and down, she laughed and rattled off several comments.

Miya translated: “She says she is Casmarell, the fourteenth descendant of the great Casmarell, first shaman of her people in the time of the Awakening, in the Age of Dreams. She calls you ‘Creekstone.’ ”

“What?” Tol demanded.

“Her exact words were ‘one as smooth and slippery as a flat stone in a flowing creek.’ ”

“Never mind the insults. What about my challenge?”

In answer, the shaman snapped an order to her followers. They seized Tol, plucking the saber from his hand. Kiya, Frez, and Darpo tried to intervene, but Tol ordered them back.

The elves propelled him to an alder tree by the edge of the road and lashed his hands around the trunk behind his back. The elf shaman stalked toward him, parting the ranks of her followers like a plowshare turning turf. Yull and Tol’s companions had no choice but to follow along behind her.

She gestured broadly with her staff, waving its forked silver head in a circle above her. Miya translated her words.

“She will, um, test you with all the spirit power of the woodland race and, um, if you are telling the truth, the gods will protect you.”

Darpo said, “My lord, be of stout heart! We’ll get you out of this—”

“There is no reason to fear,” Tol replied quickly. “Be still.”

Casmarell pointed her staff at Tol, and commenced a low, guttural chant. Again, he felt a weak flicker of heat on his exposed skin but nothing more. She lowered her staff.

Tol smiled cheerfully. Casmarell frowned.

Hazel eyes never leaving his face, she backed away five paces. Throwing her arms wide, she let out a terrifying shriek.

The elves nearest her shrank back, averting their eyes and covering their ears with painted hands. Kiya, Miya, Frez, and Darpo blinked rapidly as their vision blurred, then winced as pain flared in their heads.

This was the Death Shout. According to legend, the greatest shamans among the wild elves could literally scream an enemy to death. Tol did not look away and bore Casmarell’s fury with his eyes wide open.

Beneath her tribal paint, the shaman’s face darkened from the strain of the Shout. Slowly, she brought her hands together, raising the pitch of her scream as her fingers touched. The air itself rang with the concussion, and Casmarell bent forward against the thrust of her own spell. Dust and dry leaves took to the air.

Tol lifted his chin. Although it took effort, he managed to smile.

Finally the shriek died. Staggering from her effort, Casmarell reeled backward, to be caught by her followers. She shook off their help, snapping a peevish phrase Miya did not need to translate.

Awed mutterings circulated among the elves. Not only had the human escaped an agonizing death, he was smiling insolently at their shaman. Was he truly protected by the gods?

Casmarell smote the ground with the butt of her staff. A tremor echoed through the earth, and a clap of thunder rolled through the cloudless blue sky. She spoke a terse incantation and rushed at Tol.

The Dom-shu sisters and Frez surged vainly against the arms restraining them. Darpo got a hand free and downed one of his captors with a punch. Yull watched Tol’s imminent demise with a wide, gap-toothed grin.

Tol awaited Casmarell’s rush as calmly as he could. The millstone would be little help if she meant to bash his skull. His legs were free, so he tensed, ready to lash out when she came within reach.

The forked silver tip of Casmarell’s staff drove at Tol’s face. One of his knees twitched upward, but the shaman halted suddenly, still out of reach. The staff wavered over the bridge of his nose for a moment then she touched it to his forehead. A prickling sensation passed down through his heels and up through his head, but otherwise he was unaffected.

Trembling, Casmarell opened her eyes. They were shot through with blood from the strain of her

efforts. Seeing Tol still utterly unmoved, her strength failed. The staff dropped from her hands. Her legs buckled, and the elf woman slumped to her knees.

The hands holding Kiya, Miya, Darpo, and Frez slowly slackened, then were withdrawn. One by one, the hundreds of Wildrunner elves faced Tol and went down on one knee, their heads bowed. Frez hurried to untie his commander.

Tol picked up the shaman's staff. It was a dark stave of vallenwood, worn smooth as brass by years of handling.

Casmarell rose up suddenly, a flint knife in her hand. She did not attack Tol, however, but was trying to pierce her own heart. Kiya caught her wrist from behind and twisted the stone blade from her hand.

The elves also had released Yull. The hulking mercenary took to his heels at once, and the elves ignored him. They began to chant a single word, softly, over and over.

“ ‘Creekstone,’ ” Miya translated. “They mean you, Husband.” This time the epithet was said with respect.

An elf with a brass circlet on his head came forward and prostrated himself before Tol. He spoke then looked to Miya.

The Dom-shu woman was startled. “He says he is Robisart, war chief of their tribe. He hails you as the new shaman of his people.”

Kiya laughed briefly, but Tol hushed her with a glance. “Tell the chief he honors me, but I cannot accept. Besides, he has a shaman.” He helped the miserable Casmarell to stand. She trembled in his grip. “Tell them to take the unicorn and go in peace,” he added.

Tol turned away. He located the dwarf-made sword and returned it to his scabbard. The mob of painted woodland elves followed him, watching his every movement raptly.

Casmarell knelt at his feet and spoke quietly. Miya looked very uncomfortable, and Tol had to prompt her twice to translate the shaman's words.

“She offers herself to you,” Miya said. “She thinks she can, um, partake of your powers if she becomes your mate.”

There was no laughter from the Ergothians or Kiya this time. Casmarell's distress was too plain.

Tol took the shaman by the shoulders and lifted her again to her feet. Looking her in the eyes, he said, “Go home, Casmarell. Minister to your people.”

Miya translated as he put the staff back in Casmarell's hands. She took it, but her expression showed plainly that the ancient wood no longer held any power. The nullstone had apparently swallowed it all.

The Ergothians recovered their horses and gear, abandoning the rest of the caravan. Darpo suggested giving the contents to the elves. Tol agreed, and Miya relayed the news. With whoops, the elves fell upon the wagons and carried off Orlie's ill-gotten goods.

Tol's party rode away. They hadn't gone fifty paces before Kiya spotted Casmarell trailing after them on foot.

The Dom-shu woman's face held an unaccustomed look of sadness. “Maybe I shouldn't have stayed her knife,” she murmured.

Tol frowned. “She'll get over it,” he said. “She has her Forestmaster back. Miya, tell her again she must go and take care of her people.”

Miya did so, but added, “Husband, you have a way of sticking in people's heads. I doubt she'll forget you.”

They turned away again, riding on for a moment in silence, and then Darpo asked, “How did you withstand the elf’s magic, my lord?”

He did not answer but urged Shadow to a trot, eager to put distance between himself, Darpo’s question, and the lonely figure of Casmarell still standing in the road.

* * * * *

They smelled the sea long before they saw it. Salt flavored the wind that tossed the juniper trees so common in the hills above the Gulf of Ergoth. Brown soil changed to white sand.

It was late afternoon, six days out of Tarsis. The clash with the elves had cost them an extra day, as had a running encounter with a dozen bandits the day after they freed the unicorn. Six of the bandits had perished and the rest dispersed, leaving Tol’s party free to make the final dash to the coast.

Frez was scouting ahead. From atop a high dune, he spotted the sea and waved to his companions to hurry and join him. Soon all of them were looking down upon the windy bay.

Although there was no proper port for many leagues, three ships lay offshore. The three were “in irons,” as Darpo phrased it. Prows pointing directly into the wind, sails furled, they remained in place, bobbing slowly atop the low swells.

Unscrupulous captains would draw up to any likely spot on the eastern coast, hang a lantern from their tallest mast, and wait. Eventually, thieves would turn up, eager to unload their swag. Later the smugglers would sail to Ergoth, Sancrist, or Tarsis, peddling stolen property in shady seaside markets. Nevertheless, the three ships were a welcome sight. One of them was their way home.

They rode down the dune, the horses’ hooves slinging up goutts of loose sand. Whistles and shouts from the shore showed they’d been spotted. Ox-drawn carts stood on the beach near several mounds of goods, no doubt ill-gotten. Sailors in baggy pants and stocking caps prowled the scene with pikes on their shoulders. The thieves and sailors watched the newcomers with cold calculation.

Tol skirted the crew busy with the ox carts. With such a full cargo on their hands, they’d be less interested in passengers. Further down the beach four longboats were drawn up on the sand, their crews waiting idly for more purloined goods to come their way. Tol led his people to them.

“Greetings,” he called. “What ship are you?”

The mate—*so* marked by the gray tassel on his black cap—pointed to a blue-hulled roundship rolling in the surf behind him. “The *Blue Gull*. Captain Torwalder is her master. Who be you?”

“Soldiers, out of work. We seek passage to Thorngoth.” This was the port at the mouth of Greenthorn River, across the gulf.

The mate pushed the cap back on his sunburned head. “Imperial territory? Why would you want to go there?”

“It’s a big port,” said Tol, shrugging. “A good place to get lost.”

“Cost ya.”

Miya couldn’t resist. “How much?”

The mate spat on the sand. “Fifty gold for the five o’ you and the horses.”

“Fifty!” Miya exploded. “For fifty gold pieces we could buy our own ship and hire a better crew than you!”

The mate countered with a cheerfully obscene suggestion, and Miya plunged into the negotiations with enthusiasm. They at last agreed on a price of sixteen gold for their passage and the conveyance

of the horses. The mate was red-faced and grumbling by the time the deal was struck, as were most who tried to out-bargain Miya.

A freshening wind stirred the waves, making the trip out to the *Blue Gull* rather hair-raising. The longboats rose and fell like hatchets, cleaving the sea with great foaming splashes. Tethered behind the boats, the horses swam against the tide, eyes rolling with anxiety.

Drawing alongside *Blue Gull's* flaking hull, the Ergothians had to call upon all their agility to make the leap from the heaving longboats and grab the rope ladder hanging down the ship's side. Former sailor Darpo managed handily enough, but as soon as Tol jumped for the ladder the longboat dropped out from under him, and he was thrown back among the rowers. Only his pride was hurt, and he eventually made it aboard.

The *Blue Gull* was a tubby vessel, only slightly longer from stem to stern than it was broad in the beam. The roundship rode in the water like a great boot, high at the stern and low at the bow. It had a single flush deck, with timber hoardings built over each end—sterncastle and forecastle. Darpo noted the ship's rig, although well worn, was in good repair and the crew seemed to know their vessel well.

Captain Torwalder proved to be a young man, with a neatly trimmed, pointed blond beard and very heavy eyebrows. In a resonant voice, he ordered a boom rigged out to lift the horses on board. One by one the animals were hoisted from the waves. Most rolled their eyes in alarm at the unfamiliar form of transportation. Miya's Pitch neighed shrilly and kicked his slender legs, and even Shadow balked at first.

The horses were soon safe in the hold, but the ship could not yet weigh anchor. *Blue Gull* was empty save for Tol and his party; the smugglers needed to take on more cargo.

They lingered offshore the rest of the day but no more goods arrived, and Tol pressed the captain to depart. When the tide turned before sundown, Torwalder finally agreed. His men fell to the capstan, winching the anchor up from the shallow water.

The great buff-colored sail unfurled and *Blue Gull* wallowed out to sea. Once clear of the surf, the ungainly vessel came into its own and rode the sea with dignity, if not speed.

"Slow passage," Darpo remarked. He scanned a sky painted scarlet by the sunset. "Fair weather, though. If the wind holds, we should make Thorngoth in two days."

"Barring pirates, storms, or the whims of the Blue Phoenix," Frez muttered. He was not a good sailor and clutched the windward rail, his face the color of chalk.

The Dom-shu sisters, on the other hand, were delighted with their first taste of the sea. They went from port rail to starboard, talking excitedly about everything they saw. Kiya was enchanted by the ship and its working, while Miya raved about the sea. When a section of water roiled just off the starboard bow, she cornered a busy sailor and demanded to know what caused the disturbance.

"Dolphins," said the fellow dismissively.

He'd seen such sights thousands of times, but Miya crowed gleefully. She hung over the railing, watching the capering creatures.

As dusk closed in, Torwalder hung a hooded lantern on the binnacle for the steersman to see by. Kiya asked why the lantern was so small.

Torwalder rested his hands on the buckle of his sword belt. "Light carries far over the ocean at night," he replied. "It don't pay to be seen too well too far."

"Pirates?"

The captain let the word hang in the air, answering by not answering.

They ate bread, and shellfish soup served from a common iron pot below deck. Whether it was the

rocking motion of the ship, the hearty fare, or the busy time they'd had with various bandit groups, the entire party was ready for sleep soon after supper. As the 'tween decks was stuffy and smelled strongly of tar and fish oil, they opted to sleep on deck.

They spread their bedrolls on the sterncastle, out of the way of the working sailors, and settled down. Since none of them had passed a full night in sleep since leaving the camp at Tarsis, Tol decided not to bother posting a watch. Torwalder's men seemed to have things well in hand.

Tol unbuckled his sword belt and lay down between Miya and Kiya. Number Six, Mundur's wonderful blade, curved neatly up against him. By starlight he noticed a single glyph engraved unobtrusively on the sword's brass pommel. He couldn't read Dwarvish, but knew the symbols for numbers; the glyph was the numeral six.

Overhead, the rigging seemed to rake the starry sky, creaking and groaning with every roll of the beamy hull. Only two days to Thorngoth, Tol thought, as slumber settled over him like a thick quilt. The journey upriver to Daltigoth would seem a pleasure jaunt after what they'd been through already.

He dreamed once more of Felryn. This time he kept his nerve and did not accost the shade or let it disturb his rest, and the shadow of the slain priest of Mishas stood by *Blue Gull's* steersman all through the night.

Chapter 6

The King of the Sea

Bare feet thumped loudly on the plank deck. Kiya rolled over and awakened Tol.

“Something’s happening,” she whispered, and sat up. He followed suit, sheathed saber in his hand.

Torwalder’s crew was scrambling up the rigging while the master of the *Blue Gull* bellowed orders. Normally the roundship had a single thick mast, stepped in the belly of the ship. This morning a light pole mast had been erected on the forecastle, and a triangular sail billowed out from it. Men aloft on the main yard were lashing spars in place. Soon winglike trysails blossomed from the spars. All this new canvas sent *Blue Gull* galloping hard through the waves, an inelegant pace that threw up huge gouts of water from the blunt bow.

Tol went to the rail and called to Torwalder in the ship’s waist. “Captain! What’s wrong?” The young seafarer pointed astern. Beyond *Blue Gull*’s foaming wake were four vessels, two galleys and two lesser, oared ships known as galleots. All four had gray-green hulls, making them hard to distinguish from the sea or the dull, predawn western horizon behind them. The Tarsan Navy was still held impotently in the bay before their fallen city. Legitimate traders did not sail in galleys. These could only be pirates.

Miya, Frez, and Darpo had awakened and were staring aft as well. Quickly, the entire party buckled on their weapons.

Tol hurried down the ladder and approached Torwalder.

The captain waved him away, but Tol would not be put off.

“When did we pick them up?” he asked.

“When the stars set. Been on our stern ever since, keeping the same station.”

A line pulled free and the port trysail flapped uselessly in the wind. Torwalder bawled curses at the foolish sailor whose knots had failed, and the fellow scrambled to make them fast again. Tol returned to his comrades and shared the captain’s news.

“Can we outrun them?” Kiya wanted to know.

Darpo shook his head, looking grave. “A lean lugger in a morning gale might, but this tub will never outspeed that pair of quinquiremes. Ships that size have crews of forty not counting rowers. The galleots’ll have a dozen each.” Including Torwalder’s crew, there were only seventeen souls on the *Blue Gull*.

When the galleys were first spotted, Captain Torwalder had turned *Blue Gull* away from her northwest course; he was now running before the wind north by east. The gulf narrowed ahead. They could see tantalizing hints of land off the port side. By the time the sun rose out of the eastern sea, the coast of Ergoth was plainly visible, though still leagues away.

“Why don’t we just run for shore?” asked Miya, eyeing the distant coast wistfully.

“The pirates would overtake us long before we reached it,” Darpo said. “They’d box us in, cut off our room to maneuver, and have us in their hands like a ripe plum!”

Torwalder had no intention of being trapped. The cunning young captain steered for shallow water. His lightly laden roundship drew far less than the heavy galleys. The galleots could pursue them in even shallower waters, but the odds for *Blue Gull* would be much improved if she could shed the two powerful quinquiremes.

The sea chase settled into a protracted affair. Whenever the pirates crowded Torwalder, he zigzagged toward shore; the deep-draft galleys fell back, and Torwalder would dash out to sea again. After a time, the Dom-shu sisters grew frustrated with the tiresome chase.

“Let’s have at them!” Miya declared loudly. “Enough running away!”

Torwalder had climbed the ladder to the sterncastle to see their pursuers more clearly. Her words carried easily to him, as they were meant to.

“You don’t want to fight them,” he said, once he was back on the deck again. “Them they don’t kill outright end up chained to an oar, where you row until you die. You womenfolk they might sell ashore as slaves—after they tired of you.”

Pulling his curly brimmed hat down to shade his eyes, Torwalder studied the pirate squadron.

“Can’t make out the ensign at this distance,” he grunted. “Don’t know who they are.”

Among the numerous freebooters haunting the gulf, some were especially notorious. These included Morojin, a vicious, one-eyed pirate; Xanka, self-styled King of the Sea; the brothers Hagy and Drom, known as the Firebrands from their habit of burning captured vessels—usually with the hapless crews still on board; the female pirate, Hexylle, who commanded an all-woman crew; and Hagbor, the fearsome sea ogre, who was said to eat his prisoners.

Around noon, the wind died. *Blue Gull*, which had been churning along at a decent rate, slowed to crawl. They were on the outward leg of one of Torwalder’s zigzags, in deep water near the center of the gulf. At the captain’s command, sailors dragged buckets of seawater up the masts and drenched the limp sails.

“Painting the sails,” Darpo told his comrades. Wet canvas caught even the tiniest breath of breeze.

It didn’t help. Slowly the two gray galleys closed in. The galleots dashed ahead of their bigger brothers, steering on either side of the roundship. Torwalder ordered his men to arms. Pikes and cutlasses were distributed. Four sailors armed with bows took to the rigging.

“Where would you like us?” Tol asked.

“Choose your own ground,” the captain replied stonily. “One part of the deck is as good as another to die on.”

Tol chose to defend the sterncastle. Frez and Darpo pried loose the ladders leading up from the lower deck and hauled them up. *Blue Gull* sat much higher in the water than the galleots, so at least the defenders would have the advantage of height.

“Two points port,” Torwalder cried. The man on the steering board bent to his task. A freshening breeze caught the sails, and the roundship surged ahead, bearing hard for the galleot on their left. The captain of the pirate craft either misread Torwalder’s intentions or simply failed to grasp his desperate purpose. The pirate ship held to its straight course. When the other captain finally woke to Torwalder’s plan, it Was too late.

“He means to ram!” Frez shouted.

Tol barked, “Hold on!”

In the last moment the galleot tried to sheer off, pivoting on its own length to elude the roundship. Sails swelling, *Blue Gull* drove on, snapping the pirate’s starboard oars like kindling. The oaken cutwater hit the galleot’s light planking. Although braced for the impact, Tol and his people were thrown to the deck. A deafening cracking sound filled the air.

Torwalder roared orders even as *Blue Gull* ground the enemy under its prow. The port side of the galleot rolled out of the water, oars flailing helplessly in the air. Screams rang out. With irresistible momentum, the roundship tore the pirate vessel in two.

Kiya got to her knees and crawled to the rail in time to see the stern half of the galleot rise high in the air before it sank. The slave rowers, chained to their benches, shrieked for help as the water rose around them. Heavily armed pirates scrambled over the side, but they were in little better shape. They couldn't swim long or far weighed down by armor.

"The slaves are dying!" Kiya cried, seizing Tol's arm.

"There's nothing we can do!" he shouted over the grinding crunch of shattering wood.

Blue Gull tore free of the galleot. Torwalder turned his ship smartly on a reverse tack and sped away. Sailors lined the rails, jeering their drowning foes.

Tol and his people crowded the rail as well, mesmerized by the spectacle. The rear half of the galleot slipped beneath the waves, and they saw only a few heads still bobbing on the surface. *Blue Gull's* archers sniped at the survivors from the rigging.

Torwalder had no time to enjoy his success. The other galleot had turned away to avoid the fate of its sister, but the big quinquiremes had put on speed and were bearing down on *Blue Gull*. Pennants fluttered from pole masts. Largest of these flags was a forked banner in red and white.

"The flag of Xanka," said Torwalder grimly. Their pursuer was the so-called King of the Sea.

White water curled from the heavy bronze ram on the snout of each quinquireme. Just as *Blue Gull* had smashed the galleot, so too could the pirates' rams pierce the roundship.

The galleys drew apart, coming up on either side of Torwalder's ship. Pirates were massed on the foredecks. Sunlight glittered off their naked blades. The ships were close enough that Tol could see the leers on the pirates' faces as they caught sight of Miya and Kiya.

Torwalder commanded his men to erect a boom from the mainmast as they had when the horses were hauled aboard. A spare anchor was winched up from this yard. When a pirate ship came alongside, Torwalder would swing the boom over their deck and drop the anchor. It might not smash all the way through the galley's hull, but the weighty hook was bound to wreak havoc among the pirates crowded together on deck.

The battle-god Corij and the Blue Phoenix, god of the sea, favored them. The wind improved, and *Blue Gull* crept ahead. On the leeward side, quinquireme pirates were manhandling a catapult forward to the bow. Tol told Kiya to aim her arrows at the catapult's crew when the time came. The Dom-shu woman swore that any who approached the machine would die.

The chase continued for half the afternoon. Even Torwalder became anxious. Why didn't Xanka close in? The galleys could overtake them any time they chose, but they seemed content merely to stalk the roundship. Once the sun began sinking in the west, the truth became clear.

A lookout on *Blue Gull's* masthead sang out. "Ships off the starboard bow!" A heartbeat later he added, "More ships to port!"

From horizon to horizon, a vast arc of ships spread across the gray sea. Oars foamed the water at their sides. Every ship bore the red and white pennant of Xanka.

Sailors abandoned their posts and swarmed around Captain Torwalder, all shouting at once. Threats were made.

Blows were exchanged. The young master of the *Blue Gull* struck down a man with the pommel of his cutlass.

Tol led his people to the main deck. They cleaved through the rebellious sailors, making their way to Torwalder. Cries of "We're done for!" and "Time to abandon ship!" rang out all around them.

“No one leaves my ship!” the captain thundered. “This is mutiny!”

“We’ll be slaughtered or slaved if we stay!” roared a sailor behind Torwalder as he raised a hatchet high.

Tol caught the weapon with his saber and turned it aside. Torwalder whirled and ran the man through with his cutlass. The mutineer was dead when he hit the deck.

That was enough for the crew. Throwing down their weapons, they ran to the rail. Torwalder chased them, slashing the nearest with his sword and bellowing commands. They paid him no heed, scrambling madly over the rail. In moments, the deck was empty save for Tol’s party, and the furious captain.

“My regrets you have to die on my ship!” Torwalder growled.

“We’re not dead yet,” Tol said staunchly, but neither he nor his people looked very confident.

Without steady hands on the steering board or trimming the sails, *Blue Gull* soon lost its way, luffing and turning beam-on to the following sea. The rhythmic thump of massed oarlocks grew louder as the skulking galleys closed in.

Grapnels whistled through the air, biting into *Blue Gull*’s port bulwark. Darpo stepped up to hack off the connecting lines, but Tol stopped him.

“This is one predicament we can’t fight our way out of,” Tol said evenly. “Put down your weapons and stand by.”

More grapnels snagged *Blue Gull*, and the ship was hauled in tight against the long hull of one of the biggest ships any of them had ever seen. Torwalder identified it as Xanka’s flagship, *Thunderer*, an “elevener”—so called because each oar was manned by eleven rowers.

Two boarding bridges crashed down to the roundship’s deck. A swarm of heavily armed pirates rushed across and quickly surrounded those remaining on *Blue Gull*.

Swords and other weapons were stripped away, hands shackled roughly behind their backs. The buccaneers struck their legs from behind, forcing them to their knees.

Across the gangplank came an enormous, broadchested man wearing fancy damascened armor inlaid with gold and silver, and a sword on each hip. Five daggers were visible, poked here and there in his wide red leather belt. On his head was a high, crested helm, likewise intricately damascened, which hid all of his face except his heavy, curled brown beard.

Once this gaudy apparition stood firmly on *Blue Gull*’s deck, he removed his helmet and tossed it to a nearby pirate. His face was deeply browned by the sun, his brown eyes wide-set, and his nose crisscrossed by broken veins.

“Who commands this vessel?” he demanded in a rough, nasal voice.

No one answered, so the pirate chief nodded at one of his men. The fellow hit the captive nearest him in the center of his back. Frez pitched onto his face, bloodying his nose.

The pirate chief ignored the snickering of his men. He eyed Torwalder up and down, taking in his obviously nautical attire. “You,” he said. “Are you this ship’s master?” Denial seemed pointless, so Torwalder grunted an affirmative.

With no further preamble, the pirate chief drew a sword with his left hand and severed Torwalder’s head from his body, all in a single motion. The pirates laughed and kicked the captain’s head around the deck until their master’s rumbling voice called them to order again.

Torwalder’s body was tossed over the side. His head was saved to grace the bowsprit of the *Thunderer*.

All the Ergothians, though battle veterans, were shocked by the suddenness of the captain’s demise.

Face set in a grim mask, body tensed to defend Miya and Kiya, Tol waited to see who the pirate chief would approach next.

“Landlubbers,” the chief said, regarding them thoughtfully. He sheathed his sword. “Well, you look sturdy enough, and I need good rowers on my ship. You are now the property of Xanka, King of the Sea!”

The pirates set up a loud cheer and fell to looting the luckless *Blue Gull*. Cursing, trying to resist, Tol, Frez, and Darpo were dragged aboard the galley. Kiya and Miya were held back under Xanka’s pitiless gaze. Miya’s face was pale but calm; Kiya’s showed only contempt for her captor.

Halfway across the boarding ramp, Tol lashed out, butting one pirate in the back and kicking another in the stomach. The first man toppled off the ramp and sank beneath the waves. Darpo dropped on his haunches and rolled backward, bowling over three pirates. Frez put his back to Tol’s and used his heavy infantry boots to kick down a foe who tried to draw a sword on him.

Their revolt was short lived. The pirates soon had the Ergothians under control, and the men were dragged the rest of the way to *Thunderer*. There, they were thoroughly beaten with sword pommels and pike butts. All three were left lying on the galley’s deck, gasping and bleeding.

A prodding toe roused Tol from his stupor. Xanka loomed over him. The chief ordered him to stand. When Tol could not, he was hauled to his feet by two buccaneers.

“You have some skill,” said Xanka. “Who are you?”

“Soldiers. Warriors,” Tol grunted.

A pirate handed Xanka Tol’s saber. “This is a good blade,” the chief said, turning Number Six so it caught the orange light of the lowering sun. “Where’d you get it?”

“From a dwarf metal merchant. We saved his caravan from a band of stinking thieves—”

Xanka shucked the scabbard and put the blade’s keen edge to Tol’s throat. “How about I remove your head with this fine dwarf blade, eh?”

“Bold words from a fat coward to an unarmed man in chains!”

Pirates in earshot gasped at this insolence. Xanka pressed the blade, drawing a thin line of blood on Tol’s neck.

“You can take all day to die, lubber!” Xanka hissed. His breath stank of fish and garlic.

Tol looked him straight in the eye. As loudly as he could, he declared, “You can kill me any time, craven. If you were a warrior and not a grubby, loud-mouthed sea bandit, you’d free my hands and fight me, man to man!”

Xanka laughed, casually hitting Tol in the jaw with the sword hilt. “You’re destined for carrion. String him up, men! Let’s see if he can spew his insults without a tongue!”

Four pirates seized Tol and started dragging him backward to one of the galley’s pole masts. Enjoying every word, Xanka explained Tol would be hung head down from the mast and his tongue cut out—and that would be only the beginning.

A noose was thrown around Tol’s feet, but before they hauled him up, he tried another thrust. Not usually given to boasting, he judged this particular audience might be impressed by martial success.

“Listen to me, savage!” he growled. “I’m no ordinary soldier! I am Lord Tolandruth, Rider of the Great Horde of Ergoth and General of the Army of the North!”

Darpo and Frez were horrified he had revealed himself. Their shocked expressions only added weight to Tol’s claim, and Xanka lifted a hand to halt the proceedings. His face lost some of its gloating expression and showed curiosity.

“You’re Tolandruth of Juramona?” he asked. With great dignity, Tol affirmed this. “The one who

bested the beast XimXim?”

“The same. I am the conqueror of Hylo, and I personally defeated both Spannuth Grane and Tylocost of Tarsis in single combat!”

From the crowd behind Xanka, a pirate demanded, “If you’re this great lord, why’re you traveling with just two men?”

“The old emperor has died. All warlords of the empire have been summoned to pledge fealty to the new monarch. I left Tarsis with a small band so I could move fast.”

Xanka regarded him in silence, and Tol held his breath for a frozen moment. With a shrug of his meaty shoulders, the pirate chief finally said, “Lords die same as anybody else. String him up.”

He turned away, but his men did not move to carry out his command. He repeated his order more loudly and with obscene emphasis. Still the pirates hesitated.

“What ails you?” the King of the Sea bellowed, spittle flying from his lips. “Do as I say!”

“We ain’t never disobeyed you, Captain,” said a lean, bald buccaneer, “but if he’s truly Lord Tolandruth—”

“He bleeds the same as any man, don’t he, Faerlac? His neck will snap if I twist it, won’t it?” Xanka raged. He backhanded the bald pirate, and another man within reach.

“Your men have more honor than you,” Tol said haughtily. “Give me my sword—or are you afraid to meet me in fair combat?”

Blood suffused Xanka’s face and he charged, ready to trample Tol into the wooden deck. Darpo and Frez started to move to shield Tol but found it wasn’t necessary. A wall of pirates intervened, keeping the enraged Xanka off the shackled Tol.

“Fight him, Captain!” urged Faerlac, the bald sailor. His split lip dribbled blood. “Slay him fairly, and your name will resound beyond the narrow gulf. The great Lord Tolandruth, cut down in single combat by the mighty Xanka, King of the Sea!”

The vision of future glory he painted slowly soothed his angry commander. The purple veins in Xanka’s bulging neck lost their virulence and his high color lessened. Tol first thought the appeal of fame had caught the pirate chieftain’s attention, but he suddenly realized it was something else.

Xanka was afraid.

Of Tol? Perhaps, but as Xanka’s dark eyes flickered left and right, Tol realized he feared something else even more: his own men. Pirate chiefs ruled by intimidation, and their reigns lasted only so long as they were successful. If Xanka faltered in the face of Tol’s challenge, his men might abandon him. Or worse, Xanka’s heavy body might be the one swinging from a rope tied to *Thunderer’s* mast.

The pirate chief broke the tense silence with loud laughter and declared he would hang Tol’s head from the bowsprit, next to Torwalder’s and the dozen other moldering specimens already there. The fleet, he said, would sail to the Turbidus Sands, a shoal near the north end of the gulf. There, he and Tol would fight to the death on *Thunderer’s* deck.

The pirates raised a loud and lusty cheer. Tol felt like shouting himself. His plan to buy more time had worked.

When the cheering subsided, the shackles were removed from Tol’s wrists. Darpo and Frez remained bound. Unable to do more for them, Tol asked for Kiya and Miya.

“They’re my wives,” he told Faerlac. “While I live, I will not see them abused.”

The bosun saw the simple justice in this and sent for the Dom-shu. A long time passed before they finally arrived, and the four sailors bringing them looked rather battered. The women’s arms were

pinioned with cloth straps, their ankles hobbled, and gags covered their mouths.

One sailor, sporting a darkening bruise under one eye, told Faerlac that Kiya was the fiercer fighter but Miya's sharp tongue was lethal. She had, he said, all but flayed the skin off their backs with her curses. At Tol's request, Faerlac agreed to remove Kiya's gag.

"Husband!" she said. "I rejoice to see you living!"

Tol quickly explained the situation. The merest ghost of a smile crossed Kiya's lips.

"May Bran protect you, Husband. We're in the gods' hands now!"

The captives were herded to the mast and left under guard. Tol was unfettered, but the pirates freed the others only long enough to bind their hands before them rather than behind their backs; at least they'd be able to balance more easily. Gongs sounded, and the great galley slowly got under way. The pirate fleet sorted itself into serried squadrons, with *Thunderer* front and center.

Xanka had one last chore before departing. Drawing away from the rest of the fleet, Thunderer turned ponderously in a half-circle. Below, the tempo of the rowing master's drum increased. The great elevener plowed ahead, straight for the looted roundship, which rolled in the swell, her sails down, her helm unmanned.

Foaming green water curled back from the pirate's saw-toothed ram. Xanka mounted to the forecastle and ordered ramming speed.

Thirty-two enormous oars rose and fell in perfect rhythm, the last light of day flashing off each blade as it plunged into the sea again. Although the ship was huge, *Thunderer's* three hundred fifty-two rowers gave it considerable speed. Wind whipped the captives on deck.

Blue Gull awaited its destruction blindly, like a calf poised for the butcher's blow. The pirates had no interest in horses, so Shadow, Pitch, and the rest were still in *Blue Gull's* hold. There was nothing Tol's party could do but watch helplessly as the pirate ship drove straight at the smaller vessel.

Cornets blared, warning of the collision. Darpo grabbed onto Frez, who held onto Miya's waist. The Dom-shu clutched Tol.

Xanka laughed uproariously. "See, lubbers, what fate awaits the enemies of the King of the Sea!"

The bronze-covered ram hit the little roundship at the waterline. With a loud crash, it burst through the heavy planking. On *Thunderer's* deck, the shock was surprisingly light. Splinters flew as *Blue Gull* was thrown up on the galley's downswept stem, timbers snapping like reeds. A few fragments fell on deck as *Thunderer* swept through the debris unhindered, turned sharply on its own length, and returned to the waiting pirate fleet.

His point made, Xanka retired below, a broad grin on his fleshy face.

* * * * *

When the pirates tired of guard duty, they fettered Tol's feet and left him with his shackled comrades. The Ergothians sat in a circle, their backs against the galley's main mast. Their supper was brackish water and biscuits so hard Kiya vowed an ogre's tusks couldn't gnaw through them.

Thunderer was brightly lit by night, lamps glowing every few steps along the rail. As the hold was crowded with slave rowers and whatever booty had been garnered this trip, the pirates spent most of their time on deck. Eating and drinking were pastimes with them, not just necessities, and they gamed constantly, casting dice against the forecastle bulkhead.

Behind *Thunderer*, the pirate fleet spread out as far as Tol could see. Yellow lanterns winked from every mast. Kiya said Xanka commanded two hundred nine ships.

“How did you get such exact information?” Tol wanted to know.

She shrugged. “I asked.”

The ships ranged from the mighty *Thunderer* down to light galleots such as Torwalder had destroyed. Xanka’s was just one of several pirate fleets in the gulf.

The empire had nothing fit to oppose so many crafty pirates. Egrin, Tol’s former mentor, had been sent south after the defeat of Tylocost in Hylo to organize defenses against pirate raids. A dedicated warrior, Egrin had established flying patrols along the coast, to oppose any landing the pirates made. He tried to set up a squadron of fighting ships, but Ergothians weren’t sailors and their ships were usually swiftly destroyed. A stalemate had existed for ten years. Egrin’s troops foiled the pirates’ attempts to raid the rich coastal districts, but the swarms of pirates completely choked off the Ergothians’ sea trade.

With only his four companions, Tol couldn’t hope to destroy an entire pirate fleet, but he could try to unman the pirates by defeating Xanka. Although ruthless and powerful and half again Tol’s size, Xanka seemed too far gone in the pleasures of the table and bottle to be much of an opponent. The fleshy pirate reminded Tol of Lord Odovar in his later years, changed from a vigorous, hearty warrior to an overfed martinet because peace bored him.

The captives dozed, sitting with their backs against the mast, until early in the morning, when a change in the cadence of *Thunderer’s* oars roused them. The ship was slowing. Men stood at the bow, sounding the depths with lead lines.

As the galley crawled through the Turbidus Sands, the leadsmen sang, “Six fathoms, an eighth!” then, “Full fathoms five!” The ship’s keel scraped. “Three fathoms, a fourth!” “The oarmaster stilled his drums, raising all oars, and *Thunderer* slowly glided to a stop.

The sea was flat calm. They were at the extreme north tip of the Gulf of Ergoth, only two leagues from shore. Pulling himself to his feet, Tol peered over the bulwark. A fantastic scene greeted his eyes.

Many more than just Xanka’s two hundred ships were gathered here. Hundreds of vessels, most much smaller than *Thunderer*, crawled through narrow channels in the shoals. This was the pirates’ lair, their hideout from the potent Tarsan Navy. Only an experienced pilot, familiar with the shoals, could navigate safely through the maze of sandbars.

Faerlac appeared. Accompanying him were two sailors bearing a short pole from which hung a steaming iron pot. The pot contained nothing more exotic than white bean porridge, but Tol and his companions fell upon it hungrily.

Faerlac squatted by Tol. “We’ve come to the Sands,” he said. “Two bells after sunrise, you and Xanka will fight.”

“May I have my sword, the one taken from me?”

“When the time comes.” The bosun gestured to the congregation of vessels around them. “Most every free chieftain is here. Word will be sent round to all the flagships. You’ll have a mighty audience for your duel.”

So it proved. The day waxed hot. In the clear air, the reflection off the water was intense. Pirates smeared black grease below their eyes to cut the painful glare.

Boats arrived from other ships, bearing pirate captains of every stripe. Many were obviously petty thugs, but a few arrived with more panache. Among the early arrivals were two striking young men in identical outfits—billowing trousers, high boots, and studded leather vests—identical but for one important detail: one’s garb was all black, the other’s pure white. These were the brothers Hagy and Drom, hailed as the Firebrands for their habit of burning looted ships.

A squat, swarthy figure with a drooping mustache reaching halfway down his chest proved to be

Morojin. His left eye was gone, gouged out in a fight long ago. In its place Morojin wore a carved ivory ball. Watching the pirate climb aboard with cat-like grace, Tol was grateful he wasn't dueling Morojin.

Hagbor, the notorious ogre pirate, was not present. His squadron was cruising the Cape of Khar. However, the lone female pirate, Hexylle, did come, with her female crew. Thick-armed and stout, Hexylle had skin brown and leathery as an old boot and deeply wrinkled from years of sun and wind. Her eyes were a brilliant blue, but she was as coarse and brutal as success in her chosen trade demanded.

The chieftains took up places of honor along the sterncastle rail. Crowded behind them were assorted first and second mates, bosuns, and other officers. The long waist of the galley was kept clear, although the rigging was black with clinging crewmen. Frez, Darpo, and the Dom-shu sisters were held under guard on *Thunderer's* forecastle overlooking the scene of the duel.

In the sweltering heat, Tol had stripped off his cloak, tunic, and shirt. Bare to the waist, he looked pale among the sun-baked pirates. Sailors in the rigging hooted when he appeared, led up from below by Faerlac.

Thunderer's bosun gestured fore and aft. "Here is your battlefield. You may not leave it unless your opponent leads you away." He bade Tol look up. "There are archers in the crow's nest. If you try to escape, they have orders to shoot you and your friends."

"I'll not run," Tol said.

Faerlac cupped a hand to his mouth and called through the open hatch. Two pirates climbed out, arms laden with weapons. They scattered daggers, pikes, swords, axes, and billhooks around. Tol's sword and dagger were returned to him. He shoved the ornate dagger into the waist of his pants and rested the flat of Number Six's blade on his shoulder. He was ready.

Xanka did not appear. A long interval passed. Tol and the spectators sweated under the remorseless sun.

Just as the crowd began to murmur and stir impatiently, the doors of the sterncastle cabin were flung open. Four dirty, barefoot pirates, got up in fancy stolen livery, strode out and put cornets to their lips.

Faerlac announced, "His Excellency, Xanka, master of the *Thunderer* and all squadrons of the Blood Fleet, the King of the Sea!"

The horns blared. The pirate lord stalked out of the cabin into the bright light, clanking as he walked. He was clad from head to toe in elaborate armor.

At some point in his career, Xanka had taken a warlord's parade armor and altered it to fit himself. Every surface was embossed with fantastic details: panthers roared at his shoulder joints, bears and bison snarled along his arms and legs. The helm was a fantastic rampant dragon, fanged mouth gaping at the crown. Tol had never seen such bizarre decorative armor, not even on the extravagant nobles of Daltigoth.

Xanka's men cheered as he advanced between the rows of heralds. Tol looked beyond his opponent and saw that unlike the mass of sailors, the other pirate captains were not impressed by Xanka's show. They sat along the rail, watching impassively and drinking from heavy, stemmed goblets.

Xanka halted a few steps from Tol. He carried four swords, one on each hip and two crosswise on his back. The greaves on his legs had special sockets to hold daggers. The spiked tail of the dragon on his helm was detachable. It was a mace.

From her place on the forecastle, Miya shouted, "Not fair! He wears armor, and our husband has none!"

"Tol doesn't need it," her sister replied.

The pirate chief drew the swords on his hips and waved them furiously over his head. His men roared approval, but Tol had to bite back a laugh. To his practiced eye, Xanka's display was ludicrous. He had to be sweating like a war-horse in that armor, which, for all its glitter, was nearly useless as protection. Embossing stretched metal thin, making such fancy armor less sturdy than ordinary flat plates would have been. There was a lot of brass on Xanka, too, and brass was vulnerable to an iron blade.

Faerlac held up his hands. Once the cheering quieted somewhat, he intoned, "This is a fight to the death. There are no other rules."

Hardly were the words spoken than Xanka came slashing at Tol with both blades. Tol leaped back, dodging awkwardly. Faerlac was not so lucky. The tip of one sword raked over his thigh. The bosun went down, bleeding. The startled heralds grabbed his arms and dragged him out of the way.

Xanka bulled on. Tol contented himself with parrying the swinging cutlasses. The bulky captain was surprisingly fast, and with two full-length swords, he made quite a threshing machine. Tol circled backward, avoiding an open hatch. He drew his dagger to provide some defense on his left side.

Thunderer's deck, which had seemed so open, now resembled a trapper's field. Everywhere were potential hazards. Coils of rope and raised coamings waited to snag Tol's feet. Open hatches were also perils. He had to step lively to avoid these pitfalls.

He let Xanka push him back amidships. Beneath a canopy of screaming sailors, Tol wiped sweat and long hair from his eyes and wished he'd asked for a headband. Retreating into the shadow of the mast, he continued to size up his foe..

His earlier appraisal of Xanka was being confirmed; the pirate chief was no match for him. A dozen years older and twice as heavy, Xanka had probably been a formidable fighter once. Now he was weighed down by years of over-indulgence. He had killer instincts, but his movements and reactions were predictable. A few more circles around the galley's deck and the heat would work its will on the man in the stifling armor, so Tol let Xanka put on a show for a while.

Xanka made a wild sideways cut with his left sword. Tol sprang into the air, high enough that the blade passed under his feet. The pirate followed with a savage downward sweep of his right blade, which Tol caught on his sword's guard. This was the first close blow he'd taken, and it surprised him. Despite everything, Xanka was strong. Backed by all his weight, the blow drove Tol to his knees. The pirates went wild.

Tol kept his composure, and Xanka did exactly what Tol thought he would: he thrust with his left sword, while bearing down on Tol with the right. Tol turned Xanka's attack with his stout dagger then drove the jeweled pommel into the pirate's throat. There was no plate there, just a hanging screen of scale-mail. Gagging from the blow, Xanka staggered back.

Tol got up, spun his saber around in a furious disengage, and brought the keen edge down on Xanka's left wrist. He pulled the blow, so the dwarf blade cut through the articulated gauntlet but not the flesh and bone beneath. Brass and iron rained on the deck.

Grunting with shock, Xanka backed away. The cheering faded. Some of the sailors could see their captain's left hand was bare, but they couldn't fathom what had happened.

Tol swiftly attacked again. Rather than waste energy slashing at armor, he thrust at Xanka's face and throat. The stout captain parried heavily, breath puffing with every swing of his swords. Tol caught the right sword in a binding parry and spun it out of Xanka's grasp. The cutlass flashed through the air and stuck point-first in the deck. Xanka promptly drew one of the swords on his back, but he was shocked at being disarmed.

Confident now, Tol toyed with his foe. He easily turned aside Xanka's cuts, taking care not to let the bigger man close in where he could use his strength and bulk to advantage. Sweat flowed down

Xanka's face like a miniature waterfall, drenching the fancy plate armor. His breath came in audible gasps.

Tol drove him back to the sterncastle and spared a glance up at the watching pirate captains. The Firebrand brothers were pounding the rail with their fists and howling for blood. Hexylle, ignoring the battle, conversed with some of her crew. Morojin watched the contest keenly.

Xanka took advantage of Tol's brief moment of inattention. He lashed out with his foot, driving his spiked sabatons into Tol's leg. Bleeding, Tol fell. Xanka laughed and rained vicious cuts over him.

Although his right calf was covered in blood and the five wounds stung ferociously, Tol knew they weren't deep. He rolled away from Xanka's wild attack, vaulted to his feet and caught both of the pirate's blades in a stunning cross-parry. Kiya, Miya, and Tol's men jumped to their feet, shouting, and even the pirates cheered this bold move.

Tol drew back, swiftly sheathed his dagger, and took the hilt of Number Six in both hands. He bored in, straight at the pirate's broad chest. Xanka tried to bind Tol's blade and spin him away, but the hard dwarf metal would not be denied. First one then the other of Xanka's cutlasses snapped close to the hilt. The point of Tol's sword drove into the captain's cuirass, where the raised image of a snarling bear caught the tip. Grunting with effort, Tol drove his sword point straight through the thin plate.

The roaring crowd fell instantly silent. Tol held his position, gazing implacably at Xanka's closed helm. Slowly, the hulking pirate reached a hand up over his shoulder and drew his last sword. Frankly amazed at the man's stamina, Tol recovered as the new blade whistled past his nose.

Gasping like a beached whale, Xanka tore off his helm. His hair was molded to his head with sweat. Blood ran down his breastplate.

"You'll pay for this!" he rasped.

"Come, fat man. We haven't got all day!" Tol retorted.

Boiling with rage, Xanka threw down his sword and seized a battle-axe, one of the weapons distributed around the ship. It outreached Tol's saber. Xanka swung the long-handled axe in a circle around his head, forcing Tol to duck.

On the next circuit, Tol held up his sword. His blade cut through the axe handle without pause. Sailors ducked frantically as the wicked head went spinning by and sailed over the rail into the sea. Xanka wasted no breath or time. He simply grabbed the nearest weapon, a billhook.

It was a fortuitous choice. Tol had no experience fighting a bill and soon found himself caught. Xanka hooked him and jerked him off his feet, the bill tearing open Tol's right shoulder. His saber skittered away. Tol scrambled after it, but Xanka grabbed his ankle and dragged him back. Wheezing with laughter, the pirate drew a wickedly curved dagger from the sheath in his right greave.

Tol suddenly changed direction and dived between Xanka's legs. Emerging behind the ponderous buccaneer, he snatched up a stray cutlass from the deck and swung. The crude iron blade rang harmlessly off Xanka's armor three times.

Frustrated, Tol threw the weapon at the pirate's head. He needed Number Six!

It lay in the scupper on the port side. Tol ran around Xanka to reach it. Pirates in the rigging thought he was trying to escape and jeered. An archer put an arrow in the deck at his feet. Over the pirates' hoots and catcalls, he could hear Xanka pounding after him. His fingers closed around Number Six's grip just as Xanka barreled up behind him, billhook reaching for his limbs.

Bleeding from shoulder and calf, Tol had had enough. He swung once, lopping off the head of the bill, then struck again, slicing through a section of the hardwood shaft. Reversing direction and closing both hands on the hilt, he swung a third time. Number Six punched through the fancy brass

pauldron and into the thick flesh of Xanka's right arm.

The pirate screamed. His cry of pain silenced the crowd once more. Tol freed his sword and stood back, ready to strike again.

Xanka fell to his knees. "No more!"

"This is a death match!" Tol snarled.

"No! Please! Don't kill me!"

His enemy was a braggart and a vicious, brutal thief, but Tol hadn't expected him to cry craven.

Blood coursed down Xanka's arm. Number Six had cut him to the bone, leaving his right hand useless. Tears streamed from his puffy eyes.

"On your feet!" Tol shouted.

"No more!" Xanka waved his left hand feebly.

Faerlac stepped out of the crowd. Standing over his wounded captain, he said into the awesome silence, "Rise and fight, if you can!"

"I cannot!" Xanka sobbed, clutching his wound. "My arm—!"

Tol had no illusions. If their roles were reversed, the pirate chief would slay him cheerfully and boast ever afterward about besting the great Tolandruth. Frez and Darpo would rot their lives away as slave rowers, while Miya and Kiya faced even worse fates.

As a boy Tol had watched the captured Pakin rebel Vakka Zan lose his head. Ever since, he'd had a horror of executions, felt only disgust at the killing of helpless prisoners. He'd risked his life to spare Makaralonga, chief of the Dom-shu and father of Kiya and Miya, after capturing him in battle. Ergothian tradition demanded that a conquered leader forfeit his head, but Tol could not kill a man who had yielded to him honorably. He and Felryn had concocted a phony execution and delivered another man's head to the emperor as Makaralonga's.

Tylocost he had spared, too, for no other reason than he found the elf general an intriguing opponent. By that time Tol's prestige was so high he could ignore calls for the mercenary's death. So Tylocost lived as a paroled prisoner in Juramona.

Hundreds of other Tarsan officers had passed through Tol's hands as the war went on. He spared them all, for they were fellow warriors, and honorable foes.

Xanka was neither.

All this flashed through Tol's mind in only moments, and he looked to Faerlac. The bosun was regarding his captain with contempt. Lip curling, Faerlac turned away.

Tol walked slowly around the kneeling pirate. He paused, sweaty fingers flexing around the sharkskin grip of his sword. The only sound on *Thunderer* was Xanka's hoarse weeping.

Tol raised Number Six high. With a single stroke, he cut off the King of the Sea's head.

Chapter 7

Doorway to Empire

Xanka's headless body slumped to the deck with a clatter of ornate armor. His head, rolling with the motion of the ship, ended in the scupper.

Tol straightened his back, both hands on his saber. The King of the Sea was dead. What would his subjects do now? Hundreds of eyes watched Tol, but no one spoke. He carefully wiped the blood from his blade and flung the dark crimson droplets on the deck, then met the stares of Xanka's pirate crew with a cold glare of his own. Although he had schemed to have Xanka fight him man to man rather than face a slow death by torture, he was unsure what would happen next. Perhaps he should treat this situation as he had the Battle of Three Rose Creek. At battle's end, the defeated General Tylocost had admonished him to raise his sword high and accept the fruits of victory.

Faerlac stepped forward and covered Xanka's body with a rough blanket. His action seemed to free the rest from their immobility. A scraping noise and the sound of footsteps, caused Tol to turn.

The pirate chiefs were descending from the sterncastle. The Firebrand brothers, faces rosy from drink, leaned on each other for support. Hexylle and her officers chatted in low voices among themselves. Tailing the rest, one-eyed Morojin surveyed the scene calmly. The brothers reached Tol first.

Drom, all in white, squatted by the corpse and lifted the covering for a better look.

"Neater than the headsman of Thorngoth. Look, Hagy!" he said, tapping the leg of his black-clad sibling. There was no anger in his words, only excitement.

Hexylle snapped her fingers, and one of her crew stepped forward bearing a stoneware jug. At the pirate's nod, a cup was filled and offered to Tol.

"It's hotter than a dragon's gut out here. Drink!" Hexylle said, her voice as coarse as her looks.

Tol took the cup and drained it gratefully. It wasn't wine or beer, but a clear fiery liquor he'd never tasted before. Heat flushed his face, but any liquid was balm to his parched throat.

"Thank you, lady," he said. Hexylle grinned broadly at that, blue eyes nearly vanishing in the leathery wrinkles of her skin.

Morojin, shortest of them all, stepped around Hexylle. "That blade of yours. May I see it?" he asked.

With studied calm, Tol handed it over. Morojin hefted the saber, swung it, even sniffed the blade. To Tol's relief, he returned it at once.

"That's a rare blade. Dwarf work, yes?" Tol admitted it was. Morojin stroked his long mustache thoughtfully, then tapped the hilt of a dagger in his belt. "This is of the same metal. It's said the dwarves hammer the very essence of fire into the iron. They call it 'steel.'"

The metal of Mundur's sword had a name. Tol turned the unfamiliar word over in his mind.

Morojin added, "Xanka was a fool. Got what he deserved."

The pirate ordered his yawl brought alongside so he could return to his flagship. When it arrived, he

paused by *Thunderer's* rail.

"Fine fight," he said, regarding Tol with a glitter in his good eye. "You're a wicked hand with a sword, lubber. Some day maybe I'll find out how good you are."

With a casual wave, Morojin departed. Hexylle and her women likewise gave a breezy farewell and left for their longboat. The Firebrands delayed a bit, making mock thrusts in the air as they refought the duel, black besting white, then white holding sway. Faerlac steered them to the rail and their own boat.

The idle crew of *Thunderer* broke up then, each man going about his business. Before Tol knew it, the oarmaster had resumed his beat, and the sweeps were rising and falling again, propelling the mighty elevener toward open water.

Kiya, Miya, and Tol's men worked their way down from the forecastle. Embracing Tol, Miya said in a low tone, "They cut us loose!"

"Are we free, do you think?" Frez muttered. None of the pirates seemed to be paying them the slightest heed.

Tol knew no more than they. "Stay close," he said. "We may get out of this yet."

At Faerlac's order, four sailors removed Xanka's body, dropping it over the side. The head Faerlac offered to Tol.

"It's customary for the new captain to hang the defeated foe's head from the bowsprit. Tells the fleet who's boss now," the bosun explained.

The Ergothians were thunderstruck. Kiya stuttered, "Husband is now your chief?"

"Of course. It's our law, written in the articles of the Blood Fleet. Anyone deemed equal in stature to the captain can challenge him for his position. Lord Tolandruth was certainly Captain Xanka's equal. He slew Xanka. Now he's out leader. What are your orders, Lord Captain?"

Miya and Darpo were grinning broadly; Kiya and Frez were stunned. Tol was as shocked as they, but had been too long a warrior to let his consternation show.

He said, "Make for Thorngoth. At your best speed." When Faerlac held up the dripping head, Tol added tersely, "Observe your law."

Xanka's severed head was duly hung from the bowsprit of his former flagship. One by one the other ships in the Blood Fleet dipped their pennants in acknowledgment of their new commander.

Tol and his people were escorted to the captain's cabin in the sterncastle. The outer room was crowded with Xanka's personal booty, the choice pickings of years of freebooting. Thick carpets covered the deck, and heavy tapestries in cloth-of-gold and burgundy brocade hung on the walls. So much fine furniture was jammed into the space one could hardly use it. Several leather-bound chests, sealed with stout iron locks, were scattered about. Faerlac handed Tol the key that fit the locks.

Exhausted, feeling his composure waning, Tol dismissed the bosun then sank onto one of the chests, mopping his brow. His wounds burned.

Miya plucked the key from his unresisting fingers. She opened a nearby chest. Tol heard her gasp.

"By Bran's beard! Husband, look at this!"

He expected treasure, and treasure it was. The box, knee-high to Miya, was filled to the brim with raw gemstones, chiefly rubies. The Dom-shu woman dug her hand into the heap of precious stones, letting them cascade from her fingers.

"What can the others hold?" Frez wondered aloud.

Miya stared at him for only an instant before rushing to throw open the other chests. One held silver

coins, another gold. A fourth contained gilded and jeweled trinkets—rings, bracelets, torques, earrings. Each chest held a warlord's ransom, and there were nine in the room.

While his companions pored over the late Sea King's loot, Tol went through the door into the aftmost cabin.

Xanka's personal quarters were even more extravagantly decorated than the anteroom. Golden statuettes and gilded temple lamps lined the walls. The carpet was so thick, Tol's booted feet sank into its softness and his footsteps made scarcely any sound. Sweet vapors wafted up from a golden censer, swaying with the motion of the waves.

The rear wall of the cabin was the ship's curving stern. It was set with glass panes, giving a splendid panorama of the sea behind *Thunderer*. The glare of the midday sun off the water filled the space with light.

Squinting against the brightness, Tol took a moment to realize he was not alone. Two women rose from the couches on which they'd been lying. One was tall, bronze-haired, with hazel eyes. Her gauzy costume emphasized rather than concealed her voluptuous figure. The other woman was much younger, little more than a girl, with ebony skin and the largest, darkest eyes Tol had ever seen. She was dressed as a sailor, but neither her outfit nor her close-cropped curly hair disguised her sex.

"So Xanka is dead," said the older woman. She folded her long fingers together. "The Dragonqueen will have his black soul."

Tol did not doubt that. "I am Tolandruth of Juramona," he said.

She bowed her head, sunlight playing across her smooth hair. "I am Dralie. This is Inika. We are—were—Xanka's consorts."

"How did he die?" asked Inika.

"He fought hard," Tol replied generously.

Inika's dark brows lifted. "Really? I'm surprised. He was a terrible coward."

Dralie took Tol's hand and led him past the couches. A table was set with heavy golden dishes, and laden with grilled squab, roast beef, four kinds of fish, and a tall amphora of wine. This was supposed to be Xanka's victory meal. A few steps further on, by the wide stern windows, sat an oblong box of brass and leather. Steam rose from the water it contained. s "What's that?" Tol asked.

"The captain ordered us to prepare his bath. It was a hot morning and he expected to work up a sweat."

Tol was fascinated. As a child on the farm and a warlord of Ergoth, he bathed by pouring buckets of water over his head. During the cold Daltigoth winters, the water would be warmed, but he'd never been in a bathtub in his life.

Dralie pulled out a chair for him. "Eat, master."

Hungry, he complied, but told her, "Don't call me that. I'm not your master."

When the women tried to feed him, he put a stop to that as well. It was no wonder Xanka had grown soft. Being waited on hand and foot was no life for an honorable man.

While he ate, Inika played a sweetly melancholy air on a reed flute, and Dralie sang. She had a rich, mature voice. When she finished, Tol asked the women how they had come to be here.

Inika came from a village on the north coast of the empire. It had been raided by a squadron of Xanka's ships. The pirates carried off two things: women and cattle. She was kept by the captain of the galley *Terror* until she caught Xanka's eye. She'd been with him a year.

Tol apologized, saying the empire should have protected her. She shrugged. "My duties here were

not too great. I eat well, and I have a roof over my head.”

“Well, you’re free now. When we reach Thorngoth, you can go ashore with my comrades and me.”

Inika said nothing, merely turned her dark eyes to Dralie.

The older woman had been born in Tarsis and apprenticed to the temple of Mishas as a priestess and healer. On a voyage to Hylo to found a new sanctuary to the goddess, her ship was taken by Xanka’s fleet. He wasn’t King of the Sea then, just leader of a flotilla of six ships. She healed the wounds he’d received in battle, and not long after became his consort.

She’d recounted her story calmly but now looked out the windows at the galley’s foaming wake, her face shadowed. “That was seventeen years ago.”

For the first time Tol felt a twinge of regret for what had happened. Xanka was a murderous bandit who deserved to be shortened by a head, but Dralie seemed to care for him. He began to apologize for her loss.

Dralie turned and looked at him as though he’d grown a second head. Then she spoke, and he finally understood.

“One who was a disciple of the goddess should not feel joy at the passing of a fellow being,” she said.

Her cold, even tone sent a chill down his spine. Finished with his meal, Tol got up to go. Inika caught his arm.

“Stay,” she said, “else the water will grow cold.”

“I don’t need—”

“You bear the dust of a long journey, my lord,” Dralie said. “It is your right to take your ease.”

They began undressing him. Tol resisted only half-heartedly. He was bruised, battered, and dirty. The two women disrobed him with detached efficiency and ushered him into the bath. It had lost some of its heat but was still pleasantly warm. Dralie poured scented oil into the water while Inika took up a soft brush and applied it to Tol’s back.

The cabin door opened and Kiya entered. Her eyes widened as she took in the scene.

“I wondered what kept you in here so long!” she said.

The others peered in around her, and Miya uttered a shocked oath.

“Who are these louts?” asked Dralie. “My wives,” Tol said.

“Who are these hussies?” demanded Miya. Tol considered carefully. “Xanka’s treasures.”

* * * * *

With Faerlac’s help, Tol summoned the masters of every ship in the Blood Fleet to *Thunderer* that night for a council. Quite an assortment of characters crowded the afterdeck of the galley. Gray-bearded salts with lined faces rubbed elbows with dashing youths in extravagant costumes of sashes, plumes, and kilts.

Tol’s party had lost not only their horses, but all their baggage when *Blue Gull* was sunk, so they raided Xanka’s bountiful wardrobe. Dralie helped find what they wanted and gave advice as necessary on how to wear their choices. After their initially chilly introduction, the Dom-shu sisters and Xanka’s consorts got along well.

They spruced up according to their natures, with Tol settling for a reasonably sober jerkin of wine-

colored leather, an Ergothian helmet, and a white mantle, and Miya going all-out in a robe of emerald green silk, topped by a turban in the North Seas fashion. Tol was pleased the gaudy clothing cheered her. She'd been fond of Pitch and had been grieving for the loss of her horse.

It was night, and the galley rode the gentle swells of the gulf. Lanterns lined the rail. The mob of pirate captains talked among themselves until Tol appeared on the sterncastle above them. He was flanked by his two men, Faerlac, the Dom-shu, Dralie, and Inika. A hush fell over the crowd.

“Men of the Blood Fleet! I am Tolandruth of Juramona, General of the Army of the North, Champion of the Regent of Ergoth, and Rider of the Great Horde!” He hoped the list of titles would give weight to his words. “By right of combat, I have become master of this fleet. If anyone cares to dispute my claim, let him do so now!”

The pirates eyed each other, muttering. Finally, a veteran captain with black hair and the features of a half-elf said, “What is your will, my lord?”

Tol folded his arms. “I intend to take the fleet to Thorngoth.”

That set off a rumble of surprised conversation. A young captain with a potbelly and a shaven pate yelled, “You mean to sack the port?”

“No. The town will not be molested. I will walk ashore and greet the imperial governor.”

More consternation. The pot-bellied captain shouted, “The garrison will attack us without mercy!”

“Not if we fly the flag of Ergoth.”

Silence fell. Tol let it stretch for a few moments, then explained.

“For years you have preyed upon the ships of every nation with skill and success.” Brutal skill and ugly success, he thought, but wisely did not say. “Your number has grown from a handful of independent vessels into a mighty fleet. Now I offer you a chance to become even greater. Submit to the authority of the empire, and I guarantee all of you will receive amnesty.”

Some greeted this offer with harsh laughter. Others did not. The half-elf captain shouted down those around him, then asked, “If we are pardoned, my lord, then what? How do we live?”

“As captains in the Imperial Navy of Ergoth.”

This caused even more harsh laughter followed by wrangling. A few pirates came to blows, and one band of hotheads charged the ladders leading to the sterncastle. Tol's companions, supported by Faerlac, drew swords and prepared to stand them off. Tol contented himself with glaring fiercely at the charging pirates.

“Stand down!” he barked. “By your own law, I am commander of this fleet!”

His words, backed by a quintet of naked blades, cooled the rebels' ardor. Grumbling, the attackers backed down.

The bald, pot-bellied captain called out, “What if we don't want your pardon? Will you force us?”

“I haven't the time or the power to force anyone. I've been summoned to attend upon the new emperor, and I want to reach Daltigoth in two days. Any ship and crew that wishes to take advantage of my offer is welcome. The rest may go and consider themselves absolved of their oath to the Blood Fleet.”

Fifty captains left immediately. The remaining one hundred fifty-eight argued loudly among themselves about the merits of Tol's plan.

Stepping back to let them hammer it out, Tol said, “What do you say, Faerlac?”

The bosun sheathed his cutlass. “I go where this ship goes,” he said firmly.

The half-elf captain stepped forward, and the rest quieted. “My lord,” he said, “what about our

property? What will become of it?"

Their loot, he meant. Tol had no time to dispute every coin and trinket the pirates had purloined. He said as much, and most of the remaining captains looked relieved.

"And the galley slaves?" the half-elf asked.

The wretched captives chained to the oars of the pirate ships were not criminals or prisoners of war, but unfortunates taken on the high seas by the Blood Fleet, even as Tol's party had been. That he could not countenance.

"All slaves must be freed," Tol stated flatly. "If you accept the emperor's charge and become officers in his navy, new rowers will be supplied from the prisons of Ergoth."

On this point he would not bend, and another thirty-odd captains departed. More disputations on various points saw another two dozen pirates leave *Thunderer*.

To the one hundred or so remaining, Tol declared, "Welcome captains! You've made a wise decision."

They would make landfall at Thorngoth just before dawn. Tol thanked the loyal masters and dismissed them—all but the half-elf.

The half-elf pirate was called to the sterncastle. He had a thin mustache and his black hair was cut short. Light gray eyes watched Tol warily. Tol asked his name.

"Wandervere, my lord, of the galleot *Quarrel*."

After questioning the captain further about *Quarrel's* capabilities, Tol revealed he wanted to ascend the Greenthorn River at Thorngoth and proceed inland via the canal that joined the river to the capital. A journey over water would be far swifter than galloping on horseback the thirty-eight leagues from the coast to Daltigoth. Amused by Tol's bold suggestion, Wandervere agreed.

Thunderer got under way again, oars rising and dipping in time to the great drumbeat. Before turning in for the night, Tol went below for the first time and addressed the rowers. As soon as they reached imperial territory, he told them, all slaves would be freed. Hundreds of gaunt, haggard faces stared at him without reaction, unable to believe his words. The rhythm of rowing was lost, and the galley wallowed to a stop. Tol repeated his promise.

From a rear bench a hoarse voice cried, "May the gods bless Lord Tolandruth!" A surprisingly strong cheer rose from the exhausted slaves.

Tol ordered water and extra rations for the slaves and returned to the deck. On the stair, he met Wandervere.

"You're not just a good man with a sword, I see," the half-elf commented, and there was no mockery in his gray eyes. "You know how to lead men. Those rowers will need no lash to spur them tonight. They're rowing to freedom."

The last of the loyal captains departed. From *Thunderer's* stern windows Tol watched the lamps on the bows of the pirate ships turn away. He passed the night alone in Xanka's broad bed. Dralie and Inika slept in the outer cabin with his comrades.

Some of the captains had a change of heart during the night. By the next morning, only sixty-six ships still followed in *Thunderer's* wake.

* * * * *

Before dawn, squalls of rain lashed the bay. The heavy elevener pitched and rolled in the shallow waters off Thorngoth's guardian fortress. Makeshift imperial banners whipped from the masthead,

but in the swirling rain, Tol wasn't sure anyone on shore could see them.

Thunderer crept ahead. The rest of the pirate fleet trailed behind in a wedge formation. High and dark, the stone walls of the fortress were forbidding in the grayish light.

"Steady," Tol said. "Let them see our flags."

"Oarmaster, eight beats!" Faerlac called out. The tempo of the rowing slowed.

The thin sound of a brass trumpet carried across the water—the call to assemble for battle.

"'Ware off!" Tol said, voice taut.

Even as he spoke, there was a thump, and a flaming missile arced up from the dark battlements. Frez scoffed. No catapult in the world could reach them this far.

A blazing javelin two paces long hit the water amidships and sizzled out, putting the lie to Frez's confidence.

"They can't see our colors," Tol said. "I'll have to go ashore. Prepare a small boat."

"In this weather, my lord?" Darpo protested, holding a rail to keep his balance.

"No one need go with me."

"Someone has to man the boat," Faerlac said. "I'll go."

Stung by the bosun's courage, Darpo and Frez volunteered immediately. Fortunately, the Dom-shu sisters were still sleeping; Tol knew they would have volunteered to go as well, and there wasn't room for everyone.

As a yawl was prepared, more catapult shots whizzed toward them. Tol ordered the fleet to draw off out of range and await his signal, once he'd apprised the garrison of the true situation.

No sooner had Darpo and Faerlac raised the yawl's single sail than a torrent of rain lashed over them. The small boat drove away from the towering side of *Thunderer*, and the galley was quickly obscured by mist and rain.

"Make for the quay below the sally port!" Tol shouted to Faerlac, at the tiller. Eyes slitted against the driving rain, the bosun nodded.

The wind shifted several times, buffeting the small craft mercilessly. The yawl was pushed toward the sandbar that shielded the mouth of the river then driven back out to sea again.

"Crazy wind!" Frez exclaimed.

Faerlac and Darpo, who both knew the sea, agreed. Could it be more of the evil magic that was stalking Tol? Nervously, he touched the concealed millstone.

Although Faerlac worked the tiller back and forth like an oar, trying to hold a course for shore, they could make no headway. The yawl spun, throwing everyone to the sides. Like a leaf in a whirlpool, the small boat flew out of control.

With a loud crack, the mast snapped and fell across the port side. The canvas sheet and lines closed over Frez. Trailing in the foaming sea, the sail dragged the boat to a stop. Water began pouring in over the side.

Darpo and Tol attacked the snarl of lines with their knives. In the stern, Faerlac held on grimly to the tiller, trying in vain to counteract the drag of the fallen mast. Frez flailed beneath the sail.

The yawl lurched suddenly, starboard side rising. Darpo lost his footing and pitched headfirst into the sea. Tol was tossed over the boat's ribs into the tangle of sail and rigging. A strong wave hit the high side of the yawl and rolled it completely over. The last thing Tol saw before they capsized was Faerlac, now lifted high above his head and still clinging to the tiller.

All was green-black seawater and rushing bubbles. Tol's right hand and foot were caught in the battered rigging. As the boat settled, he could feel himself being dragged down. He still had his dagger, so he hacked at the clinging lines.

He managed to free his hand, but his ankle was still trapped. Flickers of lightning briefly highlighted his underwater struggle, then even that light was lost as he continued to sink. Heart hammering, lungs burning, he felt the water grow colder and colder. His numb fingers lost their grip on the dagger. The ornate blade, gift of Crown Prince Amaltar, vanished into the depths. Hope seemed to drain away with the sinking weapon. The darkness was absolute.

Darpo had nearly given up hope when his questing hands closed around Tol's leg. The former sailor swiftly felt his way down to the snarl of lines and sawed through them with his knife. Looping an arm around Tol's chest, Darpo kicked hard for the surface.

When they broke through, both men gasped for air.

"My lord! My lord, are you all right?"

The white scar on the other man's face stood out in the gloom and Tol recognized his rescuer. He was coughing so hard he could not reply, so Darpo headed for shore, towing him behind.

Their toes touched bottom. His breathing easier at last, Tol pulled free of Darpo's arm. The two of them slogged ashore and fell, exhausted and gasping, on the mud.

They could see the pirate fleet rising and falling with the onshore swell. Between the ships and shore, however, was a distinct and separate squall, hovering off the mouth of the river. Lightning flashed in a circle of clouds above the swirling, lashing veils of rain. Outside the squall it was not raining at all, though the wind was up. As Tol had suspected, this was no natural storm.

The sharp prow of a ship drove through the wall of rain. A galleot, bow ablaze with half a dozen lanterns, emerged into the clear. Sailors lined the rails. They threw a line to a swimming figure. Backing oars on one side, the galleot swung round, presenting its starboard side to shore. A voice, amplified by a megaphone, shouted, "Aloo! Aloo! Can anyone hear me? Lord Tolandruth?"

Tol and Darpo scrambled to their feet, waving and shouting. The galleot swung toward them, oars churning. The light craft drove straight onto the mud, beaching itself. Unlike other sharp-hulled craft, the galleot's bottom was flat and shallow.

Once aground, sailors dropped over the side and carried lines from ship to shore. They drove large stakes into the mud and tied the galleot fast. The oars were run in. Rope ladders clattered over the side.

Wandervere strode through the surf. He was backed by armed pirates, swords drawn. For an instant Tol thought Wandervere meant to slay him and claim control of the remnants of the Blood Fleet, but as the half-elf pirate reached Tol, he sheathed his cutlass.

"My lord! I am pleased to see you!"

Wearily Tol offered his arm. Wandervere clasped it.

"Queer business, eh?" said the pirate captain, looking back at the squall, now gradually dissipating. "Never saw a blow like that stay in one spot so long."

"Neither have I. Did you find Frez and Faerlac?"

"We pulled the bosun from the sea, but no one else."

Horried, Tol pushed past him and ran to the water's edge. He called Frez's name over and over, but received no answer except wind and waves. He started forward into the surf, but strong hands restrained him.

"No, my lord!" Wandervere said, as two sailors held Tol. "He is lost! You can't save him now!"

Tol jerked free but made no move toward the waves. Instead, he stared out at the sea, shaking with sorrow and guilt. Frez's death was his fault. It was a fool notion to go ashore in a small boat. He'd hoped to save lives by preventing a battle between the imperial garrison and the loyal pirates, and the effort had cost the life of one of his best, bravest men.

Sorrow melted into rage. No, Frez's death was not his fault, not any more than Felryn's had been or the deaths of the two soldiers at Golden House. The hand of an unseen enemy bore the stain of his comrades' blood. It was on that shadowy figure that all the guilt lay.

"You'll pay for this, I swear it!" Tol shouted into the sky.

Before Wandervere could ask what he meant, the thunder of approaching hoofbeats caught their attention. A troop of riders was galloping over the mudflats with sabers drawn.

The pirates formed a tight circle around Wandervere and Tol, facing the mounted men. They were soon surrounded by riders.

Mastering his anger, Tol said to the pirates, "Now is the time to be calm. Make no sudden moves!"

He stepped through the ranks of anxious sailors. Surveying the imperial horsemen, he said in a loud, commanding voice, "Who leads this troop? Where is your officer?"

A rider in a rain-slicked mantle broke out of line, and rode to Tol. "You brigands wish to surrender?" he said haughtily.

Tol announced who he was and why he had come, adding, "These men, and all the men in the ships you see offshore, have volunteered to serve the empire. For this I have offered them a pardon in the emperor's name. Who is governor here?"

The young officer, Vanjian, was over his head. He knew the name of Lord Tolandruth—everyone in Ergoth did—but couldn't equate the illustrious general of legend with the sodden, rag-clad man before him. Still, the question was easy enough to answer.

"Lord Tremond is Marshal of the Coastal Hundred," he replied.

"Good! I know Tremond well. Take us to him at once!"

Vanjian was torn. Pirates would hardly tell such a fantastic story—it must be a ruse to introduce armed men into the citadel, yet, if this man was indeed Lord Tolandruth—

Backing his horse in a tight half-circle, Vanjian said, "I will take you to Lord Tremond, but you must lay down your arms first."

Grumbling among Wandervere's men boded ill until their captain stepped forward, unbuckled his sword belt, and handed it to the Ergothian commander. One by one, unhappy but compliant, his sailors followed suit.

"You have faith," Tol said in a low voice when Wandervere took his place at his side.

The half-elf gave him a sidelong look. "The word of Lord Tolandruth must be worth something," he replied, gray eyes amused.

With Darpo on one side and Wandervere on the other, Tol led the former pirates into Thorngoth. Lord Tremond met them in the outer bailey of his fortress.

Life in the fortress agreed with Tremond; he had gained weight since Tol had seen him last in Daltigoth. Blond, clean-shaven, and now in his forty-first year, he once more deserved his reputation as the handsomest man in the empire. When he recognized the muddy, bedraggled figure before him, he burst out laughing.

"Oh, for a portrait of this scene, that I could preserve your look forever!" he said, guffawing.

"Still plucking your beard, I see, Tremond," Tol replied. It was his usual jab. Women plucked hairs from their faces; priests shaved. Most warriors sported full beards.

Good-natured jibes exchanged, Tol explained about the pirates. The marshal's mirth vanished. Astonishment bloomed on his face.

"You captured the entire Blood Fleet single-handed?" he exclaimed.

Tol denied it and repeated what he'd said, about besting Xanka in a duel, but his words were lost in a welter of exclamations from the assembled soldiers: Lord Tolandruth had captured an entire fleet of pirates! The heads of half a dozen pirate chiefs decorated the bow of his ship!

"Tremond, will you stand by the terms I offered these men?" Tol said loudly, over the tumult. He gestured toward Wandervere and his crew.

"How could I break the word of Lord Tolandruth?" Tremond raised his dagger in salute. "Welcome, men of the Imperial Ergothian Navy!"

Dazed by the success of Tol's gambit, the pirates stared at each other and at the crowd around them. Tol saluted them with an empty hand since his dagger was at the bottom of the bay.

"Welcome to the empire!" he said. "Serve it well, and you shall always have a home."

Chapter 8

What Visions Come

When the weather cleared, the pirate ships passed by the fort and anchored in the estuary of the Thorn River. Freshly bathed and barbered, Tol stood on the battlements of the citadel and watched the ships nose in to shore and drop anchor.

Flanking Tol were enormous throwing machines, the likes of which he'd never seen before. Tremond said they were the work of an engineer named Elicarno, who'd come down from Daltigoth to install them. Two stout spars, each thrust into its own skein of cords, were mounted horizontally on a frame like a bow laid on its side. A windlass drew back a bowstring as thick as Tol's wrist, on a sliding wooden tray. The bowstring was secured by an iron ratchet. The ratchet was released by a simple trigger, a length of lanyard. Once the bowstring was drawn back, a huge arrow—some six feet in length and half as thick as the bowstring—was placed in the tray to launch. The whole contraption was mounted on a timber pedestal, heavy but so precisely balanced two men could swing the device from side to side or up and down to aim it. Impressed, Tol asked, "How far can it throw?" Tremond shrugged. He cared little for anything but women, food, and face-to-face combat from horseback. "Ignoble devices, if you ask me," he said. "Not worthy of a warrior at all. Still, they're useful for dealing with hostile ships, I suppose."

Before leaving the citadel, Tol met the maker of the remarkable catapults. Elicarno was dressed in a very plain, short-sleeved tunic of tan canvas. He had a shock of curly Mack hair and smudges of soot on his face. A pair of long scrolls were tucked under one arm. Earnestly, he lectured a member of Tremond's garrison.

"The skeins have to be tightened daily—daily, do you understand? The sea air will slacken them in no time. You won't be able to hit the ocean with a hambone if the skeins are slack!"

The gray-haired Ergothian listening to him rolled his eyes but nodded.

When Tol was introduced, Elicarno barely acknowledged him as he finished his instructions. Alone among the inhabitants of Thorngoth he did not seem to know or care who Lord Tolandruth was. To the busy engineer, Tolandruth of Joramona was merely yet another arrogant, ignorant warlord. When Elicarno finished speaking, Tol repeated his greeting. The engineer only grunted hello and walked away, studying the scroll spread wide in his hands.

The last pirate vessel, the great *Thunderer*, crept up the channel past the fortress. From this height, Tol could see crew members moving on deck. The beat of the oarmaster's drum reached his ears.

Tol made ready to depart. Tremond had assured him he would carry out Tol's plans regarding the pirate fleet. The Marshal of the Coastal Hundred, though not the brightest ember on the hearth, was honest and reliable.

"Don't worry, Tolandruth," Tremond had said. "I won't have any trouble with these rogues. They'll obey, or I'll hang the lot of them."

Tol suggested he take it easy on the pirates at first. "They're not used to discipline, so don't expect them to behave like imperial soldiers," he said. "If this scheme works, we'll have the beginnings of a real navy, and the Tarsans will think twice about raiding our shores again."

In the courtyard below the battlements Darpo and the half-elf captain, Wandervere, were waiting for Tol.

“The fleet is anchored,” Tol reported, as he and Tremond entered the courtyard. “Before we bring the men ashore, there are some dispositions to be made.” He looked his old comrade in the eye. “Darpo, you will remain in Thorngoth after I depart.”

“But, my lord—!”

Tol held up a hand. “You must. You are now in command of the first fleet of the Imperial Navy.”

Darpo was thunderstruck. He struggled for words, finally exclaiming, “My lord, I’m not worthy of such a high command!”

“Nonsense. You’ve been a warrior for twenty years, and before that you were a sailor.”

“I’m not a Rider of the Great Horde—”

“What does a horseman know of ships?” Tol scoffed, and clapped his scar-faced friend on the shoulder. “You’re the man for the job, Darpo. We need an Ergothian in command. When I see the emperor, I’ll ask him to confirm your appointment. As for rank—” He thought a moment. “A fleet commander is an admiral, like Anovenax of Tarsis. You are now Admiral Darpo!”

Tol saluted. His friend returned the gesture, embarrassed but visibly pleased.

More than military expediency motivated Tol’s actions. Since leaving Tarsis, he had lost two old and valued friends to murderous magical attacks. He had no intention of losing any more. Making Darpo admiral of the new Ergothian fleet was a wise and proper decision—it was also a way to steer him out of harm’s way. The more difficult task would be trying to do likewise with the Domshu sisters, ;

The waterfront was jammed with onlookers. Idle fishermen, boatmen, carpenters, sailmakers, sutlers, and merchants crowded the narrow streets of Thorngoth, curious and expectant. Word of the approaching pirate ships had first frightened the town. When the news spread that Lord Tolandruth had tamed the Blood Fleet, the crowd gathered to see the famous warlord as well as the fearsome pirates.

With an escort of forty spearmen, Tol, Darpo, and Wandervere marched down to the quay. The pirates had not come off their ships yet. The crowd on the waterfront spooked them. None of them was eager to step off a gangplank into what might prove to be a lynch mob.

Wandervere’s crew from the galleot *Quarrel* stood on the quay, awaiting their captain’s return. Seeing him with the Ergothians, they lined up on the dock in rough but regular order. Tol halted the escort and signaled to the carter who had been trailing them since they left the fortress.

“Captain, here are your men’s swords. Take them and the imperial cloaks that go with them.”

Quarrel’s crew broke ranks and helped themselves to the cutlasses piled in the dray. The scarlet cloaks around their necks didn’t make them look any more soldierly, but they did help reassure the former pirates that the promised amnesty was truly happening.

Aboard *Thunderer*, Tol, Darpo, and Wandervere were greeted by Faerlac. Behind the bosun stood Kiya and Miya, plainly unhappy they’d been left behind that morning. Dralie and Inika, dressed in their best finery, were present as well and eager to be off the galley.

Tol faced the former pirates. “Welcome to Ergoth! I have conferred With Marshal Tremond, and he will honor our agreement. No punishment will fall on you, so long as you don’t commit any fresh offenses. All officers will remain in command of their respective vessels.”

“Who will command *Thunderer*?” asked Faerlac.

“Darpo has been appointed admiral of the fleet. You will take your orders from him. Now take the

crew ashore, Faerlac. Give them the liberty of the town.”

The sailors raised a happy shout and rushed forward, engulfing their commanders. After a few moments of joyous mayhem, Darpo shouted for order. The ex-pirates quieted a little and filed down the gangplanks, dirty and ragged, but delighted with the sudden change in their fortunes. Many had spent years aboard ship, haunting random islands in the gulf, never daring to set foot in any civilized port. To them, the outpost of Thorngoth beckoned with all the glamour of the imperial capital.

Inika and Dralie sought out Tol. The younger woman was dressed in unrelieved white—low boots, leggings, and doublet. Dralie wore another gauzy creation, this one the color of old gold coins but shot through with metallic threads in a rainbow of colors. Both women moved in an invisible cloud of perfume.

Inika said, “My lord, what’s to become of us?”

“Only the gods know, lady,” Tol replied, smiling. “You have your freedom. Make of it what you will.”

Inika’s eyes were troubled, but Dralie’s expression was serene as she swept past, the hem of her sparkly gown scraping the deck.

“I would ask the gods to bless you, Tolandruth of Juramona, but I perceive they already have,” she said. “Farewell.”

Tol bowed. To Inika, still lingering, he said, “If you have trouble, lady, you may apply to Lord Tremond. He’s Marshal of the Coastal Hundred, and my comrade in arms. He will do right by you.”

Somewhat reassured, Inika departed.

The vast deck of the eleventh was empty now, save for Darpo, Wandervere, Tol, and the Dom-shu sisters. Tol charged the new admiral of the fleet with freeing the slave rowers and dividing Xanka’s treasure among them. The sixty-odd ships held close to a thousand slaves, but there was booty enough for all of them.

Darpo went down the gangplank. On the quay, he mustered the waiting spearmen and led them back aboard. Soon Tol could hear the sound of chisels cutting chains belowdeck on *Thunderer*.

Wandervere had watched these events with a bemused expression. “You have a marked habit for making things happen,” he said wryly. “I shall miss your company, my lord.”

“No need to miss me yet. You’re taking me upriver to Daltigoth.”

Quarrel’s draft would permit it to ascend the Thorn River and ply the canal to the capital, but Wandervere raised a salient point. They no longer had any rowers.

Tol shrugged. “Hire some. There are enough strong, willing, and idle arms in this town to man your oars.”

Wandervere left to make ready for the journey, and Tol was alone with Kiya and Miya.

Their frustration was palpable in the extended silence. “Speak, before you burst!” he finally said.

“How could you leave us behind?” Miya erupted. “There we were, sleeping in that stifling hole of a cabin while you nearly got yourself drowned!”

In a quieter tone, but no less angry, Kiya agreed. “It wasn’t right, husband. Our place is by your side, wherever you go.”

“No longer.”

His calm words brought forth strong objections from both women. Tol let them vent their feelings, then related his concern about an assassin with magical powers.

“Pah! You do not fear magic,” said Miya. “The gods protect you from sorcery. We know it!”

He frowned and told her to lower her voice. “It’s not myself I fear for,” he added. “I lost two old friends on the trail here. I won’t lose any more—especially not you two.”

At that, Miya did something Tol had never seen her do: she began to cry. Seeing her brown eyes fill with tears, he was moved, but Kiya, regarding him sourly, snorted.

“We are your given wives,” Kiya said, folding her strong arms. “That we do not act as wives has been best for all of us. We’re also hostages to the good behavior of our tribe. We’ve long known that. Our lawful place is with you. We have given up much to live with our bargain.” That was true enough, he knew. Kiya continued. “We faced the beast XimXim with you. For nigh on sixteen years and countless battles, Miya and I have never left your side for more than a few marks, and we’ll not leave you now.”

Her declaration made Tol realize anew how much he valued his sisterly forester companions? With his parents and sisters gone the gods knew where, Kiya and Miya were his family. That realization only hardened his resolve not to be the cause of their deaths.

Sternly he said, “This is not a debate! We’ve always granted each other the liberty to speak and do as each of us wills, but not this time! Though we are good...” He groped for an appropriate word. “...comrades, the time has come for you to obey me. You will both remain in Thorngoth, even if I have to ask Tremond to hold you in the fortress!”

The volume of this forceful declaration temporarily quieted the quay around them. He regarded them with a ferocious scowl as the usual noises slowly resumed.

Miya said, “No, we’ll follow you.”

Only his discipline as a soldier kept Tol from stomping a foot in frustration. “You will not!” he repeated. “Get this through your thick forester skulls! I forbid you to accompany me to Daltigoth! Once I’ve settled this business of the assassin, I’ll send for you, but not before!”

The air fairly crackled with tension. Miya looked miserably at her sister, tears still trailing down her cheeks. Kiya glared at Tol. He glared back.

At last the blonde warrior woman unfolded her arms and said, “Come, Sister.” She brushed past Tol and started down the gangplank. When Miya didn’t move, Kiya repeated her words sharply.

“But—!” Miya began.

Kiya whirled and stalked away. Tol turned a shoulder to Miya’s accusing, unhappy eyes, and the younger Dom-shu finally followed her sister to the quay.

The unaccustomed harshness left a bitter taste in Tol’s mouth. Far more bitter would it be if he were the agent of their deaths.

* * * * *

Quarrel was to sail at sunset that very day. A single cask of treasure was transferred from Xanka’s store to the galleot. Life in the imperial capital was expensive. To make an appearance required gold and plenty of it. Tremond provided two horses, armor, and provisions for the journey. He offered a contingent of troops, but Tol declined. *Quarrel* was a small craft, and such a heavy load would slow her greatly.

The lowering sun was painting the broad, sea-bound sky in shades of scarlet when Tol sprinted up the gangplank to the galleot’s foredeck. Wandervere, newly scrubbed and wearing fine raiment, greeted him.

“We’ve two rowers per oar, plus reliefs,” the half-elf reported, “and I had to turn away a dozen others who wanted to sign on.”

He bawled commands to his crew, and they cast off. Sailors poled the galleot away from the quay. The pointed prow caught the current.

The order was given to run out oars. Ten long sweeps protruded from each side of the boat. They hung, poised in the air, until Wandervere cried, “Drop oars! Make twenty beats!”

The oarmaster set the rhythm as ordered, and *Quarrel* pulled smoothly away from shore. Brown water curled back from the galleot’s ram. Fishing boats and other small craft scurried out of the way.

Lanterns at the bow and stern were lit. The sun was setting upriver. Thorngoth, lying low on the muddy banks of the river, seemed all brass and fire, painted by the dying light of day. Tol had said farewell to Darpo at the citadel, but hadn’t seen Kiya or Miya since they’d stormed off *Thunderer*. He imagined they were sulking somewhere.

Although small compared to *Thunderer*, among the river craft *Quarrel* seemed a giant. The sight of the long, rakish galleot sweeping past was enough to send lesser boats scurrying for the banks, their boatmen gaping in astonishment. Tol had borrowed an imperial banner from Tremond. The oversized flag, meant to wave from the battlements of the citadel, hung halfway down *Quarrel*’s mast and flopped in the slight breeze.

The country above Thorngoth was quite different from other parts of the empire. Tol’s homeland—the hills and plains around Juramona—was wild and largely unsettled. The north country, up to the borders of Hylo, was famed for its timber and cattle. The belt between Caergoth and the capital was covered by rich farmland and walled towns, and Tol had passed through the forests of Ropunt and the Great Green.

The Thorn River delta was low and damp, riddled with tributaries large and small which splintered off the main channel, seeking the sea. *Quarrel* kept to the deepest part of the river. As daylight waned and the stars winked into sight overhead, the river country came to life. Clouds of water birds whirled into the air, screeching. A mighty chorus of frogs sang in the shadows, their bass voices harmonizing with the high-pitched whirring of cicadas in the trees. The darker it got, the noisier the river grew.

Wandervere, too, was a stranger to the area. In fact, he reported, he’d never been more than a league inland in his life.

They dined on the quarterdeck under a canopy of stars. *Quarrel* maintained a steady pace of twenty beats, even during the changeover when the first rowers were relieved by a second set. At this rate, they would reach the fork in the river around daybreak. The eastern branch was navigable only to the foothills of the Aegis Mountains, the narrow range of peaks that shielded Daltigoth on the west. Ordinarily, Tol would have disembarked there and ridden the rest of the way to the capital, but a canal had been cut through the mountains. It connected the upper Thorn to the Dalti River. If the maps from Lord Tremond’s library were accurate, *Quarrel* should be able to drop anchor in the heart of Daltigoth’s canal district.

Before turning in, Tol warned Wandervere of the possibility of attack from his nameless enemy. He explained briefly the unnatural perils his party had faced on the journey from Tarsis.

To his credit, Wandervere remained unmoved, merely remarking, “I thought that squall before the river mouth was strange.”

“This enemy of mine may strike again at any time. We must be on constant watch.”

Wandervere showed his neat white teeth. “Vigilance will be maintained, my lord. We’re pirates, after all. Our lives and livelihood have long depended on sharp eyes and keen senses.”

Reassured, Tol went below to the small stern cabin and slept better than he had in days. The only thing that disturbed his rest was an odd dream; he thought he heard Miya's voice, bargaining hard for a jug of cider. It seemed so real he got up and checked the passage outside the cabin. All he saw were the rowers, bending their backs to the oars.

He went back into the cabin and lay down again. He obviously missed his Dom-shu companions even more than he'd realized.

* * * * *

Barely a hint of dawn was showing in the eastern sky when Tol woke. He dressed and went up on deck. Wandervere was there, one arm draped over the tiller, a floppy hat on his head. The galleot plowed along, still at a steady twenty beats per measure.

The half-elf pushed his hat back and hailed his august passenger. Tol asked if he'd been on duty all night.

"Many sailors boast they can guide a ship in their sleep," Wandervere replied. "I actually can."

Tol couldn't decide whether he was joking or not; the half-elf's expression seemed serious enough.

They had left the swampy delta country behind. On both sides of the smooth, silver river was a great forest, the trees beginning at the very shoreline. This was the wilderness of Hardtree, in ancient times a haven for dragons, centaurs, and other non-humans. The wars of Ackal Ergot and his successors had purged the forest of most of these inhabitants, but rumor had it some still lingered. Peering into the dark ranks of trees, Tol found it easy to imagine all sorts of creatures lurking within those shadows.

The river was broad and slow here. The galleot had the water to itself. River boatmen habitually tied up for the night, and none were stirring yet. Aside from a few sailors dozing, *Quarrel's* deck was as quiet as a farmyard in the gray predawn light.

Tol had been surveying the eastern shore, off their starboard rail. When he turned toward the bow, he saw something that brought his hand to the hilt of his sword.

"Who is that?" he hissed. "There, on the bowsprit!"

Wandervere straightened and looked where he pointed. Sure enough, a gray-wrapped figure stood far out on the bowsprit, although the spar was a simple pole no thicker than the calf of a man's leg.

The half-elf whispered, "No hand of mine could stand on the 'sprit like that!"

Drawing his saber, Tol rushed to the bow. *Quarrel* was flush-decked, so there were no steps to climb. A few paces from the bowsprit he halted.

"Come down from there!"

The apparition did not respond. Tol had an impression of two shining eyes staring out at him from under a loose -fitting gray cowl. He repeated his demand, but still the stranger did not comply.

Could this be yet another attempt on his life by his unknown foe? The thought filled Tol with fury and he rushed at the phantom.

"My lord, take care!" Wandervere called.

At the foot of the bowsprit Tol sheathed his sword. Turning, he made his way out along the narrow spar, sliding his bare feet sideways. The closer he got, the stronger grew the sensation the apparition was watching him, waiting for him.

The river was calm enough, but the forward motion of the galleot caused the bow to dip and rise in

time with each stroke of the oars. It took a great deal of concentration for Tol to keep his balance. The stranger seemed to hold his place effortlessly.

A pace away from the figure, Tol halted. “Who are you? Why do you plague me?” Silence was his only answer. The slight breeze that dried the sweat on his neck did not ruffle the watcher’s dark cloak.

Tol’s temper snapped. “Very well! I have an answer for you!”

He drew his saber, managing to maintain his wobbly equilibrium. The flash of naked metal stirred the apparition at last. It raised its hands in a very ordinary way, as if to ward off the blade. The growing light of dawn showed Tol a strange detail: the phantom’s hands were different colors. One was pale, the other dark.

“Trouble me no more!” Tol cried and thrust Number Six at the stranger.

When the tip of his saber touched the apparition, the gray-cloaked figure vanished, completely and instantly. Off balance now, Tol lost his footing and pitched forward.

The bowsprit hit him in the chest and he rolled off one side. Clutching his sword in his right hand and the spar with his left arm and leg, Tol dangled above the galleot’s streaming bow wave. If he fell, the ship would plow him under, its ram cleaving him like a soft clod of earth.

He was wondering whether he’d have to drop Number Six when a voice called out, “Hold on! I’m coming!”

Someone shinnied out onto the bowsprit. Strong hands grasped his left thigh, then his sword belt, and Tol was dragged along the spar toward the ship.

“Give me the sword!”

He held his arm back, and the dwarf-forged blade was taken from him. Several pairs of hands grasped his jerkin and hauled him roughly to safety. Sprawled on his back on the damp deck, Tol finally saw the faces of his rescuers.

Miya was breathing hard from her exertions. Standing beside her, still holding Miya’s belt, was Kiya.

“How did you get here?” Tol demanded.

“There’s gratitude for you,” said Miya, giving her sister a disgusted look.

“We’ve been aboard the whole time,” Kiya told him. “We signed on as rowers.”

Wandervere joined them, and Tol got to his feet. Ignoring the captain, Tol glared at the Dom-shu. “You disobeyed me!”

“Aren’t you glad we did?” Miya grinned and slapped him on the back, staggering him.

There was no denying it, and trying to maintain his outrage was pointless. He hooked a hand behind each sister’s neck (having to reach up to do so) and gave them a hearty shake.

“Next time you disobey me, I’ll have you bound in irons,” he growled.

Miya laughed. Kiya did not. She knew he meant it.

“My lord,” Wandervere said. “The apparition—did you see its face?”

Tol hadn’t. He did not mention the mismatched hands. An odd detail like that might prove important, if the phantom crossed his path again.

* * * * *

Quarrel reached the Dalti Canal as the sun cleared the horizon. A hodgepodge of small craft was queued up to enter the waterway from the river. The canal was closed at night by a massive boom of timbers anchored on either shore. A stone roundhouse, manned by a contingent of territorial soldiers, guarded the boom. Tol was surprised to see the boom still blocking the way. The canal usually was opened promptly at dawn.

The galleot moved like a dragon among the barges and flat-boats. Boatmen frantically poled their craft out of the way. Wandervere backed oars, stopping the galleot's ram just short of the boom. Trumpets blared, and the small garrison filled the battlements of the roundhouse.

Wandervere watched the Ergothians' reaction with amusement. Had he wished, he could have charged the boom and broken it asunder. As it bobbed peacefully in the slight current, *Quarrel's* friendly intentions should've seemed obvious.

Kiya was below, rowing, when they reached the canal. Miya, who was on a different rotation, was on deck with Tol.

Cupping hands to his mouth, Tol called, "Halloo! Captain of the guard!"

After some scrambling, an officer with a crest on his helmet appeared on the roundhouse parapet.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "What are your intentions?"

"This is Tolandruth of Juramona! I am summoned to the capital to attend upon the new emperor! Open the boom!"

The officer visibly started. "Lord. Tolandruth? Draco Paladin! Stand fast, my lord!"

Tol had little choice, short of ramming imperial property. With the blare of more horns, the garrison turned out on the stone quay below the little fort. The officer, followed by two aides, walked out on the catwalk that ran along the top of the boom. He halted below the prow of the ship and saluted briskly.

"It is you, my lord!" he exclaimed.

"Of course it is!" Miya said. "Who were you expecting? Pirates?"

The officer ignored her. "If my lord would come ashore, I shall explain!"

Though he chafed at any delay, Tol nodded. Wandervere's sailors dropped a rope ladder over the bow and he climbed down to the catwalk on the boom. Miya followed.

The officer bowed. "My lord, my name is Nazik. You won't remember me, but I served under Lord Urakan in Hylo. I was with you when we beat the Tarsans at Three Rose Creek."

Tol did not recall him, but he extended a hand and clasped Nazik's forearm. "Why is the canal still closed?" he said, bringing his host back to the matter at hand.

"Orders, my lord. All traffic heading for Daltigoth is to be thoroughly checked."

"Checked for what?" asked Miya.

Nazik blinked. "Anything treacherous or seditious."

Tol and Miya exchanged a quick glance. "There's no cargo on *Quarrel* but my party," Tol said. He gave a rapid account of his journey from Tarsis to Thorngoth, omitting completely the incident with the Blood Fleet, then asked, "May we proceed?"

Nazik snapped his ironclad feet together with a clank. "Certainly, my lord! My apologies for detaining you!"

"Never apologize for doing your duty."

Tol returned to the galleot. Behind him, Nazik bawled for the boom to be opened.

The heavy timber structure moved slowly back. Great oiled ropes, as thick as a man's thigh, slid over wooden tackle as the boom swung away from the ship. Wandervere called for a speed of eight beats, and *Quarrel* ghosted ahead. Its wake sent waves surging back among the waiting river craft.

While the half-elf tended to shipboard duties, Tol and Miya stood alone at the bow, watching the rich farmland of central Ergoth glide past them.

"Sounds like the new emperor is afraid of something," Miya said.

"Amaltar was always afraid," Tol replied in a low voice. "Assassins, poisoners, plotters—he kept me in Daltigoth for years to ward off imagined dangers."

"Only imagined?" Miya had lived in Daltigoth long enough to know how full of intrigue were the lives of Ergoth's rulers. Plots and counterplots were like meat and drink to them.

"A change of rulers is an especially dangerous time," Tol admitted.

"Well, they can keep their crowns and palaces. Someday I will put this all behind me and live like a real human should, in the woodland of my ancestors."

Her words surprised him. Sixteen years the Dom-shu sisters had been by his side, and not once had either of them expressed any desire to return to the Great Green. Miya was two years older than Tol, and Kiya three, and they always seemed to take each new experience in stride. Wonders that left Tol speechless barely turned their heads. To the tribes-women, everything outside their verdant home was equally strange and unnatural—whether it be the glories of Daltigoth, the splendors of wealthy Tarsis, or the terrors of the battlefield.

"Leaving any time soon?" he teased.

"Once you marry a real wife, you won't need Sister and me around any more."

"What real wife?"

"The one you truly love. Valaran."

Hearing her name, and in such a matter-of-fact tone, was like a blow to the face. Tol turned away, pretending to stare at the passing scenery.

The vagaries of fate had made the Dom-shu sisters partners in his romance with Valaran, after she had married the crown prince. For the three years Tol had lived in the imperial capital, Kiya and Miya helped him keep his secret trysts with Valaran.

After a long pause, he said, "Valaran is an imperial wife. She is beyond my reach now."

"Could she be the next empress?"

It wasn't likely. Valaran wasn't the highest born of Amaltar's eight wives, nor was she his first wife. Tradition dictated the new emperor choose his first wife to be his empress. Failing that, he would designate the mother of his chosen successor.

That thought gave Tol a pang, equal parts pain and curiosity. He didn't even know whether Valaran had children with Amaltar.

Being empress was certainly the highest of honors but not a pleasant life. The Empress of Ergoth lived in total seclusion. No one was allowed to see her save the Consorts' Circle, some servants, and the emperor. Anyone else caught in her company could be arrested and executed.

This total seclusion had its roots in the time of the first emperor, Ackal Ergot. His empress, Balalana, had been the wife of one of his chief enemies, the Lord of the Western Hundred. Ackal killed his rival and took Balalana for himself. To insure his successor would be of his own blood, and to prevent her first husband's supporters from using her to foment insurrection, he kept his empress in the heart of his ancient fortress, where she saw no man but him. Later, the isolation of the Empress of Ergoth became entwined with the worship of the goddess Mishas. The empress was

titular high priestess of the important and popular cult of the goddess of healing, and her purity and honor were held to be sacred.

It seemed ridiculously complicated to Miya, but she approved of Ackal Ergot's directness.

"If you love the woman and she loves you, just make her yours!" she said, and her pointed look told him she wasn't speaking only of Ackal Ergot and Balalana.

Kiya appeared on deck, soaked with sweat. Miya went below to take her stint on the oar, and Kiya headed aft for a dipper of cool water.

Watching the green fields unfurl before the galleot's prow, Tol pondered Miya's words. Years ago, he had wanted to make Valaran his, but she had resisted. Her duty, she said, was to marry Amaltar and further the fortunes of her family. She didn't love the prince, and he didn't love her. There was a family alliance, but one did not insult the honor of the imperial dynasty with impunity. If she'd refused his proposal, her entire family would've lost honor, and all their fortunes would have declined. Harsher emperors were known to murder or enslave the families of women who refused them.

Now, after a decade of silence from Daltigoth, Tol had no idea whether Valaran even remembered him, much less still loved him. Whatever his accomplishments, as a warrior and a general, he was no Ackal Ergot, to slay his lover's husband and take her for his own.

Chapter 9

The Champion

Quarrel pressed into the heartland of the empire. At times the canal was so clogged with traffic the galleot could make no headway. Small boats, rafts, and barges loaded with produce, livestock, or trade goods plied the canal, all heading for Daltigoth. When *Quarrel* was forced to halt, Wandervere stood on the bow, shouting at the boatmen to clear the way, but there was nowhere for them to go, and the galleot languished.

The many bridges crossing the great canal also were obstacles to the tall, seagoing vessel. Sailors had to unstep both of the galleot's masts in order to pass under the bridges. Even so, it was a close thing. At Raven's Crossing, the arch of the span was so low, all on deck had to lie flat. The oars were run in, and *Quarrel* cleared the underside of the bridge by little more than two handspans. When the galleot emerged on the other side, travelers on shore gave a spontaneous cheer.

The day, which had started fair, darkened as they made their way slowly up the canal. A seemingly solid mass of gray clouds filled the sky from horizon to horizon. It became apparent they would not reach the city before nightfall.

Kiya suggested they raise the imperial flag, blow loud trumpets and bull their way through the congestion, plowing under any who failed to get out of the way. Wandervere declared himself willing—their agonizing progress was wearing on his nerves—but Tol ignored their frustrated discussion.

At dusk, the sun dipped below the ceiling of clouds for the first time since late morning, and golden light suffused the valley. The surface of the stagnant canal took on the sheen of molten gold. The land, which had been gray in the failing light, glowed anew. Rich green fields, harrowed straight as a mason's rule, ran to the horizon, girded by bands of leafy trees. A flock of starlings circled the verdant fields. Tiny, sun-gilt figures of men and horses moved across the landscape.

Kiya and Tol stood at the rail. Wandervere joined them. "Merciful Phoenix," the half-elf murmured. "Is this a vision?"

The highest towers in Daltigoth had appeared over the rolling valley floor. Sunlight flashed off pinnacles sheathed in purest gold.

The great height of the towers was deceptive. Daltigoth seemed near but in fact was still many leagues away. At its present pace, *Quarrel* would not reach the capital until long after dark.

Kiya was still chafing at their maddeningly slow pace. To take her mind off it, she asked Wandervere how he'd become a pirate.

The half-elf's gray eyes remained on the stirring vista ahead. Folding his arms across his chest, he said, "While I was working as a raw hand on a coastal trader, I was captured by Xanka. The pirates were short handed, so after they murdered our officers they offered us common sailors a choice: join them or be fish food."

"Hard decision," snorted Kiya.

Wandervere shrugged. "I had no liking for the masters of my old ship. They were brutal wretches, beating us at every turn. I accepted Xanka's offer, and it was a good life, for a time. We roamed the

sea, free as fish, taking what we wanted. We had to duck the Tarsan Navy now and then, but while Ergoth and Tarsis were at war, we had a golden time.”

“You’ll miss the freedom,” Kiya said, an odd lilt in her voice.

“No, those days are done. Xanka had grown fat, foolish, and cruel. The war was over, so the Tarsan fleet would soon return to sweep the Blood Fleet back into the crevices again. Lord Tolandruth’s coming was the best answer to my problem—what to do when buccaneering had lost its allure.”

The throng of boats on the canal thinned at last. Wandervere called for four beats. *Quarrel* stirred ahead.

Golden splendor turned murky as the sun dipped below the horizon. Gray dusk claimed the land. The distant towers of Daltigoth were swallowed by the gathering darkness, but Tol knew they were there, waiting for him.

He and the pirate captain were not so different. Wandervere had forsaken the toilsome life of a deckhand for piracy. Tol had given up the struggle of farming to bear arms for the empire. Had he lived near the coast, he might have done as Wandervere had. The twists and turns his life had taken were startling to contemplate. From a muddy onion field to the halls of the imperial palace; from the Golden House in Tarsis to the deck of a pirate galley! Every step in between, no matter how small, was fateful. There was no knowing where his future path might lead.

He turned away to say something to his comrades and discovered he was alone. Sunset over, Kiya and the captain had left the bow.

* * * * *

After midnight, *Quarrel* reached the walls of Daltigoth. Guards on the barbican overlooking the waterway rubbed their eyes in astonishment as the seagoing ship emerged from the darkness. The canal was clear of small craft at last, but the channel had narrowed greatly, to the point where the oars on either beam barely cleared the stone causeways lining the shores.

Wandervere called, “Backwater.”

The rowers, seated facing aft, dropped their oars, then pushed them toward the stern to slow the galleot’s progress. At the proper time, the oars were drawn into the ship. Smooth as glass, *Quarrel* gently drew up to the canal master’s quay.

An officer, eyes still bleary with sleep, stumbled out of the barbican gate. Behind him trooped several dozen city guards. Tol was interested to see they formed a neat phalanx behind their commander—the very formation he’d taught the city’s soldiers years earlier.

“What in the name of bloody Chaos is this?” inquired the officer, staring up at the overhanging prow of the galleot.

“The good ship *Quarrel*, of the Imperial Ergothian Navy!” Wandervere called back cheerfully.

“There’s no such thing!” the officer snapped.

Tol, richly attired in regalia borrowed from Lord Tremond, appeared on deck beside the captain. “There is now, soldier. I am Tolandruth of Juramona, come from Tarsis to attend upon the new emperor.”

Even in the wavering torchlight, the paling of the officer’s face was obvious. “My lord!” he cried, drawing himself up and saluting quickly. “We heard rumors of your coming!”

“I would enter the city,” Tol replied. “Open the gate.”

The officer hastened to obey. With much shouting and gesturing, the heavy gates blocking the canal

were opened. Their motion generated a slight swell in the water, setting *Quarrel* to rocking.

“Send word to the palace I have come,” Tol called down, easily maintaining his balance after so long aboard ship. “Does The Bargeman’s Rest still stand?” Assured it did, he said, “I shall be there awaiting the emperor’s command.”

Quarrel crawled forward at one beat. The soldiers on the quay raised their spears in tribute as Tol passed, and their commander shouted, “Corij be with you, my lord! We are strengthened, now that you are here!”

The bowl-shaped canal harbor within the walls of Daltigoth offered just enough room for the galleot to turn about. Wandervere nosed his ship up to the dock Tol indicated, and lines were dropped. Nimble sailors leaped overboard and tied *Quarrel* to the stone-paved pier.

Miya and Kiya came up on deck. All the rowers left the hold and filled the waist of the ship, curious to see the empire’s greatest city.

Rising in tiers above the canal basin, Daltigoth by night resembled a heap of coals scattered with jewels. Thousands of windows winked with interior light, and thousands more were shuttered and dark. Massive villas, opulent private residences, temples, and towers thrust up into the cloud-capped sky, shadowing the lesser buildings below them. The streets were never completely devoid of traffic, even at this time of night, and from the galleot’s deck they could hear carts rolling, horses clip-clopping along, dogs barking, and the shouts of late revelers.

Behind Tol, a rower hired in Thorngoth uttered a heartfelt oath. “Who knew there were so many people in the world?” he said.

The Dom-shu sisters snorted, but Tol smiled. That had been his own reaction the first time he’d laid eyes on the capital of the Ergoth Empire.

While the crew worked to run out a gangplank, Wandervere sought out Tol.

“Now we are here, my lord, what shall I do?”

“Return to Thorngoth and report to Admiral Darpo for new duties.” Extending a hand, he thanked Wandervere for their safe passage.

The former pirate clasped his arm and grinned. “No one will believe I sailed a pirate ship into the heart of Ergoth!”

“It is an age of wonders. What we dare, we can do.”

Followed by sailors and awestruck rowers, Tol and the Dom-shu sisters descended the gangplank to shore. Once on the pier, Miya stomped her feet.

“Solid ground at last!” With a yawn, she added, “I’m for bed!”

They roused the innkeeper of The Bargeman’s Rest, who gaped at the enormous vessel tied up outside his establishment. When he learned the identity of his guest, he nearly fell over himself ushering Tol inside. He assured Tol that, although the inn was full, he would gladly turn out the lodgers from his best room, but Tol said pallets in the common room would be good enough.

Kiya and Miya set down the heavy chest they’d been carrying between them. It was the small cask of Xanka’s treasure that Tol had confiscated for his own use.

The innkeeper and four lackeys cleared space before the bar and spread furs and quilts on the flagstone floor. The sisters, tired from rowing, lay down one on each side of the chest and promptly went to sleep.

Tol removed his helmet, cloak, and breastplate. The innkeeper presented him with a brimming mug of beer.

“Welcome home, my lord,” said the master of The Bargeman’s Rest, beaming from ear to ear. “Now

you are here, all will be right!”

Tol was almost asleep before the implications of those words struck him. What was not right in Daltigoth?

* * * * *

Kiya awoke with the sound of the sea still in her ears. Although they were no longer on the pirate ship, she could hear a loud wash of noise, rising and falling like the surf against the shore. The common room of The Bargeman’s Rest was already light. Miya was still asleep, but Tol’s eyes opened even as Kiya sat up.

He obviously heard the strange noise, too. He looked questioningly at her, but she could only shrug. They both spotted the innkeeper and two of his servants hovering by the shuttered front windows. Tol rose and came up behind them.

“What is it?” he asked.

The innkeeper jumped and nearly fainted from fright. “My lord!” he gasped, bracing one pudgy hand against his underling’s shoulder. “We are besieged!”

Tol peered through the slats. The quay outside was packed with a milling throng, the source of the strange sound. They did not appear to be an angry mob, just ordinary folk in great numbers, filling the waterfront as far the eye could see. Talking, walking, eating tidbits sold by dockside vendors, they seemed to be watching the front of The Bargeman’s Rest.

Kiya had left her pallet and come to join Tol at the windows. She handed him his saber.

“Go and find out what they want,” Tol said to the innkeeper.

The fellow’s rubicund face paled visibly. “Me, lord?” he squeaked.

“You. Someone. Anyone!”

Nodding firmly, the innkeeper propelled one of his hired lads outside. When the door opened, the crowd surged forward. Tol’s hand tightened on his sword hilt, but the people stopped, obviously disappointed by the sight of the apron-clad youth.

“Is Lord Tolandruth within?” said a woman. Dumbly, the young man nodded.

“When did he arrive?” asked another matron.

“And when is he coming out?” another voice called.

The kitchen lad shrugged. At a word from Tol, the innkeeper hissed at the young man to come hack inside, then sent him and his comrade back to the kitchen.

“Why do they want me?” Tol wondered.

“All Daltigoth has awaited your arrival, my lord,” said the innkeeper simply.

Tol walked slowly back to where Miya still slumbered, and Kiya sat cross-legged on the floor. Turning abruptly to the innkeeper once more he asked, “But why? Why should the people crave my return?”

The innkeeper combed stray strands of gray hair from his face with thick fingers. Wiping his hands on his apron, more for something to do than because there was anything on them, he approached Tol deferentially.

“Things have been unsettled lately, my lord. The old emperor, may the gods grant him eternal rest, was a long time dying.”

“And the new emperor?”

The innkeeper looked pained. “It is not my place to speak ill of the Master of the Great Horde and the Strong Right Arm of Corij.”

It took some cajoling, but Tol finally extracted the story. The city had been mourning the death of Pakin III, as was proper, but the equally proper accession of Amaltar had not been entirely welcomed. In the days since the old emperor died, armed groups had appeared in the streets, wearing colored armbands or cockades to signify their loyalties. Amaltar’s partisans—and they were relatively few—wore Ackal scarlet. Gangs marked with black were followers of his brother, Prince Nazramin. Also seen were parties bearing blue bands, and another faction wearing white. No one dared wear Pakin green, at least not yet.

Slogans were shouted in the night, and every morning” another corpse was found in the street, knifed or strangled. A few houses had been put to the torch. Others were daubed with slogans of the contending factions.

“Where are the City Guards?” demanded Tol, outraged. “Can’t they keep order any better than that?”

The guards did their best, said the innkeeper, but their loyalties were divided like everyone else’s. Prince Amaltar remained closeted in the palace. He had not shown himself to his anxious subjects. It was said that he feared assassination.

As a young man, Amaltar had witnessed the assassination of his uncle, Pakin II. He’d been standing close enough he was splashed by the slain emperor’s blood. Ever since he had lived in dread of his own murder. All weapons were forbidden in his presence. Such strictures did his cause no good. In a warrior nation, a man did not display his fears openly, and ordering Riders of the Great Horde to remove their weapons was like asking them to go about naked.

“Now you are here, all will be right,” the innkeeper said fervently, repeating his words of the night before.

Tol sat down at an empty table, digesting the news. “What can I do? I have no followers, no faction behind me.”

“You’re the Emperor’s Champion.”

Tol turned. It was Kiya who had spoken.

One of Tol’s oldest titles, bestowed on him long before he became a victorious general, was that of Chosen Champion of Prince Amaltar. More than a mere honor, it meant Tol was expected to fight Amaltar’s battles for him.

The crowd outside stirred anew, and an urgent knock resounded on the inn’s door. The innkeeper hastened to answer the summons. When he saw who knocked, he opened the door immediately.

An Ergothian officer in magnificent gilded armor strode in with a flourish of his crimson mantle. Outside, visible through the open doorway, was a mounted troop of cavalry. They’d cleared a lane through the crowd.

The officer saluted. Tol knew his face, but the name eluded him.

“Relfas, my lord,” the officer said. “We served together in the Rooks and Eagles horde, back in the Great Green campaign.”

Nobly-born Relfas, along with the rest of the shield-bearers of Juramona, had refused to disobey orders and enter the Great Green after Marshal Odovar was ambushed by forest tribesman. Leading a small contingent of foot soldiers, Tol had rescued the trapped men, including his mentor Egrin. Tol’s career had begun with that victory, and Relfas had never forgiven him for daring to succeed.

“I come from the palace,” Relfas said loftily, smoothing his red mustache with a gloved finger.

“You are commanded to appear before the emperor this morning.”

Tol acknowledged the summons, and Relfas added, “I am to escort you to the palace. The streets are quite crowded these days.”

“And unsafe, I hear.”

Relfas clasped his hands behind his back, saying nothing.

Kiya, Miya, and Tol donned the few pieces of their trail-weary gear that they’d removed before sleeping, then ate a hasty breakfast.

Tol paid the innkeeper from the small chest of pirate treasure, then said to Relfas, “Lead on. You brought horses?”

“No, my lord. There were none to spare.”

Miya muttered under her breath. She recognized the ploy for what it was, a deliberate insult. No horse to spare for the General of the Army of the North? Ridiculous. But whose insult was it? Relfas’s, or someone higher?

Tol ignored the slight and buckled on his sword. Walking past Relfas, he went out the door.

A roar went up from the crowd, which was being held back by Relfas’s riders. Face set, Tol pretended not to hear.

Miya and Kiya emerged slowly from the inn, bearing the heavy box of treasure. The sight gave Tol an idea.

Raising his voice to be heard, he said, “I need four strong men to bear this chest to the palace. Who will volunteer?”

Dozens tried to push forward. Tol chose two sturdy longshoremen, a man dressed as a carter, and a thick-armed butcher. Bunks of timber were found, and the chest lashed to them. The bearers hoisted the heavy box to their shoulders.

Freed of their burden, the Dom-shu walked out of the inn’s shadow, blinking against the morning sun. The happy mob cheered them too, provoking a surprised grin from Miya and a stoic scowl from her sister. Relfas’s appearance was greeted by hisses, and he mounted his horse with abrupt, angry movements.

“Column, parade right by twos!” he shouted. The horsemen faced about, creating a wide lane in front of Tol and the sisters.

“It isn’t right, Husband,” Miya grumbled, eyeing Relfas’s showy, butter-colored horse ahead of them. “Why should you go on foot?”

“Never mind. A warrior’s worth isn’t measured by his height off the ground.”

Flanked by the Dom-shu sisters and trailed by the four men bearing the treasure chest, Tol set out a few paces behind Relfas and his troop. People crowding both sides of the street waved and cheered. Windows in the houses overlooking the streets had been thrown open and were filled with more happy Ergothians. Tol maintained the same calm expression he assumed on the battlefield. The people’s joy was intoxicating, but the reasons behind it troubled him deeply.

They traveled through the lower city. All along the route people turned out to see the Crown Prince’s Champion. The swelling of the crowd preceded Tol and his party by a few blocks, like the bow wave before a ship’s plunging prow. Along the way was evidence of the conditions the innkeeper had described: burned outbuildings and ominous patches of dried blood staining the cobblestone street. Whitewashed here and there were incomprehensible slogans like LAND FOR THE LANDED! and BLOOD AND SOIL!

Once they left the canal district, the houses were taller and the streets narrower. Relfas’s troopers

had to form a wedge ahead of Tol to part the growing crowds. Pale debris fluttering down on them proved to be flower petals tossed by onlookers in the windows overhead.

Miya laughed, lifting her hands to the yellow, red, and white shower. “Who is emperor here— Amaltar or you, Husband?”

“Mind your tongue,” he replied severely. “Things are very delicate just now. Don’t upset the balance with ill-chosen words.” Chastened, for once Miya did as he asked.

By the time they reached Dermount Square in the Middle City, the throng numbered in the thousands. Although peaceful, the press of bodies was so great Relfas’s escort could no longer make any headway, and the procession was forced to halt. Tol planted his hands on his hips and turned in a circle, taking in the immense crowd. Seeing him notice them, the people closest let out a roar, which echoed through the multitude.

Relfas rode back to Tol. “Make them cease these demonstrations!” he shouted above the din, working hard to keep his fractious mount under control.

The small clearing around Tol’s party, walled off from the mob by a thin line of horsemen, was shrinking. As people pressed in, the feel of too many unfamiliar hands caused the horses to prance and back away.

“Do something, or we’ll draw swords and cut our way out!” Relfas declared.

“Use your head!” Tol retorted. “Do that and we’ll be overrun!”

Relfas made no reply, but his hand dropped to his sword hilt. Tol’s one-time comrade was frightened. If pushed too hard, he would resort to swords, and the crowd’s mood would shift from joy to fury with the first stroke.

Tol said to the Dom-shu, “Whatever happens, guard your own lives. Protect the chest, but don’t sell your safety for it.”

“What will you do?” Kiya asked.

He shrugged. “Get through.”

Slipping past the mounted Relfas, Tol approached the edge of the surging mob. People of all ages and many races cheered frantically as he came nearer.

“Good people, let me through!” he shouted. “I must pass! The emperor expects me!”

He repeated this several times, until his words finally had an effect. Those nearest him complied and gradually a way was cleared. He waved for Relfas and the Dom-shu to follow him.

Striding through the narrow lane in the mob, Tol saw that not all the expressions were welcoming. A few stood out, like stones in a bowl of cream. The unsmiling ones wore armbands or headbands in black, blue, or white. He knew there were daggers under the cloaks of these hard-faced men, yet he felt strangely safe passing among them. Like Relfas, they were hostages to their own good behavior. If they dared strike at Tol, the mob would tear them to pieces.

Beyond Dermount Square, the low wall that demarcated the Old City channeled the crowd up the hill toward the imperial palace. For the first time Tol saw the shining white Tower of High Sorcery rising over the lesser rooftops. The elegant spire was wide at the base and narrowed as it rose. Small cupolas sprouted from its sides. The tower had been completed not long after the chief of the college, Mistress Yoralyn, had died, worn out by years of labor on the structure. Her successor, Oropash, was well-liked but a weak man. Under his leadership, the legitimate wizards and spellcasters of Daltigoth had lost ground to unscrupulous, unregulated practitioners who sold their magical skills to all comers.

Below the walls of the imperial Inner City was an open boulevard half a bowshot wide. Six companies of the Horse Guards were drawn up in a double line four deep, stretching all the way

from the Inner City gate to the mouth of Saber Street, the thoroughfare Tol was ascending.

He emerged from the row of temples surrounding the Inner City into the boulevard, ahead of his ostensible escort. Behind him, the excited crowd halted. Numbering in the tens of thousands, they could have flooded the street, sweeping aside the six companies by sheer weight of numbers, but the same respect that moved them to part for Tol now stopped them at the edge of the Imperial Plaza.

Tol drank in the view as he walked. The grandeur of the walled Inner City was as he remembered, save for the mourning banners draped over the wall and flying from the tower tops. Instead of the usual flare of Ackal scarlet, the white of lifelessness dominated the scene. The Horse Guards wore white mantles, and the officers had white plumes on their helmets rather than red ones.

Five warriors on horseback rode slowly to meet him. In the center was Draymon, commander of the Palace Guard. Older, heavier, his sweeping mustache sprinkled with gray, Draymon was still imposing on his tall charger.

“Greetings, Draymon, son of Gouran! I come in victory!” Tol called.

“Greetings to you, Tolandruth of Juramona, Bane of Tarsis!” the commander replied. “Your coming is like the breaking of a storm—we heard you from far off!” Folding his arms across the pommel of his saddle, Draymon leaned forward. “What is this mob on your heels?”

“A few friends and well-wishers. I’ve been away a long time.”

Relfas, the Dom-shu sisters, and the treasure bearers emerged from the throng. When Relfas reached him, Draymon’s welcoming expression drew into a fierce scowl.

“Idiot! How could you allow this to happen?” he snapped. “Your company swamped by rabble! The honored general forced to proceed on foot! You have disgraced the Horse Guards!”

“There was little Relfas could do about the crowd,” Tol said mildly.

“He should have taken a closed coach to fetch you.” Draymon waved a dismissive hand at Relfas. “Get out of my sight, dolt!”

White-faced, Relfas turned his elegant mount and cantered briskly through the Inner City gate. It was plain he did not appreciate Tol’s attempt to defend him.

“If he weren’t related to half the court, I’d post him to a rock overlooking the western ocean and let him guard the empire from stray seabirds,” Draymon grumbled. Tol shared the commander’s opinion of Relfas but disapproved of humiliating a proud warrior in public.

One of Draymon’s aides yielded his horse to Tol. Once mounted, Tol asked that Kiya, Miya, and the treasure be escorted to whatever quarters were set aside for him. He took his leave of the sisters then followed the commander to the palace. Draymon had been ordered to bring Tol to the emperor at once.

Time had not dimmed the magnificence of the Inner City. A thousand white pennants stirred in the warm breeze. They floated above the gigantic mosaic pavement that depicted the life and deeds of Ackal Ergot in millions of tiny colored chips of stone. The southern half of the Inner City was filled by the garden of the wizards’ college, now dominated by the enormous Tower of High Sorcery rearing up from its center. This great spire needed no mourning wrap, as it was faced from foundation to pinnacle in translucent alabaster.

Opposite the garden was the palace, a complex of buildings wrought in marble, gold, and warmer tones of alabaster, grown together over the centuries into a single sprawling structure. After the vibrant greeting given Tol by the common folk of Daltigoth, the Inner City seemed oddly lifeless. The large honor guard drawn up in the Imperial Plaza was completely silent.

Grooms ran to hold their horses, and Tol and Draymon dismounted. They ascended the broad steps to the palace doors. The massive bronze portals, ornamented with silver wreaths and golden suns,

swung back on iron tracks set in the marble floor. When Draymon and Tol entered the hall, two hundred guards arrayed in funereal white snapped to attention, their iron-shod heels clanging in unison.

“Hail Tolandruth, victor!” shouted the warden of the guard, and the warriors replied in unison, “Victory! Victory!”

As Tol and the commander passed through the facing lines of soldiers, each pair of men drew their sabers and saluted. Tol was unaccustomed to such pomp. It took effort not to flinch as naked swords flashed on either side, and the rattle of blades made his own empty sword hand itch.

They passed through a series of antechambers occupied by uniformed servants, idle courtiers, and elaborately dressed ladies of the court. Although it was still early in the morning, the inner chambers were already full of favor-seekers, ambassadors, priests, and ranking officers of the Great Horde. These last bowed as Tol passed. By custom, he ignored their tribute.

The passage jogged right. It had been Emperor Ergothas’ idea that no corridor in the palace should lead straight into any room. Ackal Ergot’s grandson was a master tactician and his notions of architecture were not mere eccentricity. Dog-legging the corridors made them easier to defend in case of attack.

Mighty doors ahead of them were closed. The warriors guarding them crossed their halberds before the portal.

Halting, Draymon said, “I bring Lord Tolandruth, by the emperor’s command!”

The captain of the audience hall guards went to announce them, entering the hall through a small side door. Moments later he returned, and the huge golden portals parted.

Warm, scented air washed over Tol. At the far end of the room, the golden throne of Ergoth stood on a raised dais. Between the throne and Tol was a crowd of richly dressed folk. All had turned and were regarding him expectantly, whispering among themselves.

Tol felt his heart begin to pound. He flexed his fingers over palms suddenly grown sweaty. “It’s only an audience, not a battle,” he muttered, trying to calm his nervousness.

Draymon heard him. Keeping his eyes forward, the commander whispered, “Battle would be easier.”

Tol glanced at him in surprise, but questions were forestalled as Draymon unhitched his sword belt and drew his dagger, handing both to a waiting lackey. Tol did the same, yielding his saber to another uniformed servant.

A gong was struck, silencing the assembly, and a herald boomed out, “Silence! Attend upon His Excellency, Lord Tolandruth of Juramona, General of the Army of the North, Chosen Champion of the Regent of Ergoth!”

Tol and Draymon entered the great hall, walking in step, their footfalls cushioned by thick carpet. As they traversed the distance between door and throne, whispers of “Is that really him?” “He’s so short!” and “He’s back” mingled with the oft-repeated word “farmer.”

Two decades had passed since Tol had left his family’s farm as a child, yet in Daltigoth, a man was always identified by his father’s profession. To many of these people, no matter how many signal victories Tol won, he would always be nothing more than the son of a farmer.

The hall was warm, stiflingly so. The tall windows were shut and covered with white draperies, in honor of the deceased Pakin III. Bronze braziers, styled to resemble torches, blazed in wall sconces. In spite of the close atmosphere, clothing tended toward heavy velvets and brocades, and the predominant color was white. The current fashion for women was to wear a stiff, starched headdress that wrapped around the forehead and pulled long hair away from the face to cascade down the back, exposing the ears and neck. Even in mourning, court dandies managed to indulge

their love of jewelry; Tol had never seen so many pearls and diamonds in his life.

Amaltar was the only one in the room not wearing white. Clad in scarlet robes, the new master of Ergoth stood out like a splash of blood on a snowy field. The throne sat at the end of the hall in a semicircular area thirty paces wide. On each side were ranged Amaltar's closest advisors. The warriors stood out by the glint of the iron they wore; the others were civilians and priests.

Behind the advisors were the members of Amaltar's household. His eldest wife, matronly Thura, stood closest to her husband. The other wives were arranged in strict order of precedence. Tol's heart found a new reason to pound as he sought out Valaran, Amaltar's fifth wife.

She appeared, still distant, as a slender figure in a proper white ensemble. A few paces closer, and Tol realized her gown and headdress were somewhat improperly trimmed with green. How like her that was! Val had never cared for the pointless whims of fashion, but she couldn't completely ignore the rules of protocol. The highlights of vivid green certainly matched her eyes. He could never forget those eyes.

When they had first met, she'd been reading a scroll in an alcove, away from the prying eyes of the court ladies who felt such bookishness unbecoming. Now she stood tall and straight, swathed in voluminous waves of white silk. Her stiff headdress curled back from her temples and around her ears, holding the long hair that fell past her shoulders. Unable to see her face clearly as yet, Tol found himself staring at Val's hair; pulled forward over one shoulder, the sleek mass gleamed a rich chestnut color in the torchlight.

Forcing his attention back to the emperor, Tol saw that Amaltar leaned hard on the right arm of his golden chair. His face was startlingly pale; against the scarlet of his robes, his skin had the pallor of marble. By tradition, he did not yet wear the imperial circlet on his brow, but his prince's crown, a simple ring of gold set with two large rubies. His black eyes were shadowed by dark circles and his shoulders hunched. He looked as though he hadn't slept in many nights.

When Tol and Draymon were six steps from the throne, a quartet of burly guardsmen stepped out, barring the way. The guardsmen were weaponless, of course, but had been carefully chosen for their imposing height and muscle. Draymon and Tol stopped.

"Here I leave you," said the commander with a nod. "May fortune continue to favor you, my lord."

Draymon withdrew. A chamberlain—it was Valdid, Valaran's father—bade the guards stand aside, and gestured for Tol to come forward.

Tol slowly advanced. Lacking a dagger, he struck his heels together and raised an empty hand in salute to his liege. Chamberlain Valdid's brow furrowed.

"Kneel," he hissed, tapping his gold-capped staff agitatedly on the floor.

"What?"

"Kneel before the emperor!"

Tol was taken aback. Kneel like a slave? He'd never been asked to do such a thing before, not before Amaltar, nor even before his mighty father.

The four burly guardsmen regarded him coldly. Perplexed, Tol sank to one knee. Pressing his sword hand to his breast, he said, "Forgive me, Majesty. I've been away so long I don't know proper manners."

"Rise, Lord Tolandruth. Approach."

Amaltar's voice sounded dry and hoarse and much older than his actual age. Tol stood and came forward.

"Great Majesty, I have come as you bid."

So intent was he on keeping his eyes away from the emperor's left, where Valaran stood, that his gaze shifted to those on Amaltar's right, and he spotted a familiar face.

Mandes!

The threadbare rogue wizard Tol had rescued from a band of wild bakali had certainly come up in the world. Looking sleek and well-groomed in his mourning robes, Mandes radiated success. A heavy silver chain lay around his neck, and a second silver band encircled a waist trimmer now than when Tol had last seen him. Although the top of his head was bald, his brown hair was long on the sides, pulled back and braided into a queue.

Hands tucked into his sleeves, Mandes regarded Tol with serene indifference. Tol forced himself not to stare at Mandes's left sleeve; that was the arm he had lost in the battle with the monster XimXim. He must have contrived some artifice to give himself the appearance of having two good limbs.

It was not lost on Tol that Mandes stood within reach of the emperor, while Oropash, head of the White Robe wizards, was nearer the back. The positioning was a clear indication of who had Amaltar's ear and who did not.

"Valiant general," Amaltar rasped, "you've been away too long."

"That was not by my choosing, sire." Tol threw a stern glance at Mandes. "Enemies kept me away."

Assuming he meant the Tarsans, the emperor nodded. "But you overcame them. You are the great sword of our empire, and we rejoice to have you at our side again."

Tol found it difficult to hide his surprise at Amaltar's condition. It was plain he was an unhealthy man. His Ackal face, with its strong chin and aquiline nose, had gone round and soft, while the rest of him seemed whittled to bone and sinew. Was it the burden of rule that wore a man down like this?

"I would hear of your final battle before the gates of Tarsis, and your journey here," Amaltar said. "I'm told you arrived by boat, sailing an oceangoing ship up the Dalti Canal."

"It was a pirate galleot, Majesty." Tol explained that a sizable portion of the Blood Fleet had pledged loyalty to Ergoth.

"Pirates?" said the officer nearest the throne. "The emperor's name cannot be stained by an alliance with bandits!"

Tol did not know the man. He was not one of Pakin III's old lions, but a youngish fellow, clad in glittering court armor and bearing a scar across his upper lip.

"I speak not of alliance, but submission," Tol replied tartly. "Sixty-six ships have pledged loyalty to the empire."

The sneer deepened. "And what is a pirate's oath worth?"

"More than the word of nameless palace heroes."

The officer's hand went to his hip, but of course he wore no sword in Amaltar's presence. Gilded armor clattered as he drew himself up.

"I have a name—an old and respected one," he said haughtily. "I am Pelladrom, son of Enkian Tumult."

Lord Enkian, Tol's old commander at Juramona, had been a remote, calculating man. His son was more of a hothead.

Pelladrom would have continued the exchange of insults, but Amaltar interrupted.

"Be still, young Tumult," he said hoarsely. "This is the time for my noble father's funeral, not yours."

Amaltar's advisors fell to debating the merits of the empire's new navy. The notion was raised of an expedition to Kharland, to colonize the hinterlands and exterminate the pirates who remained there. Kharland was lawless territory, claimed by a hundred petty local lords and chieftains. Ergoth would have seized it much earlier had not Tarsis insisted Kharland remain a neutral buffer between them. With the victory over Tarsis, Tarsan wishes were no longer relevant.

While the councilors wrangled, the royal consorts stood patiently, each with her respective offspring ranged behind her. For a man with eight wives, Amaltar had relatively few children. Pakin III, his father, had sired two dozen. The new emperor had only seven, and Tol noted with guilty relief that none stood behind Valaran.

She met Tol's eyes for the first time and he thought he would shout for joy. In ten years she had indeed changed—she had grown more beautiful. The slender, tomboyish girl he'd known had given way to a woman's figure and face, her cheekbones high and chin finely molded. Her gown was cut lower than those worn by the other wives and revealed a breathtaking view of creamy skin. However, her most arresting feature was still her eyes. Where once they had sparkled with youthful wit, like sunlight on new spring leaves, they now seemed cold and hard as emeralds. Her icy expression reduced him to the level of an insect crawling across a scroll she was reading.

It didn't matter. Just to see Valaran again was worth any amount of anger she might feel for his long absence.

The emperor stood slowly, his shoulders bowed down as though by an invisible burden, and put an end to the wrangling among his advisors.

"These discussions are better vented in council, not in court," he said.

The men bowed obediently. Tol caught a glimpse of Mandes's hands as the wizard made his obeisance. Alone among all the hundreds of people in the room, Mandes wore gloves. The thin white gloves were just visible at the ends of his long, flowing sleeves.

Chamberlain Valdid announced that other warlords returning from Tarsis were expected in five days, and upon their arrival, Pakin III's funeral would be held, followed by Amaltar's coronation. Only then, when he was officially crowned, would Tol's patron be fully master of Ergoth.

"Majesty, by what name will you reign?"

The chamberlain was shocked by Tol's direct question, but Amaltar showed no anger. In fact, the prince's former shrewd self briefly emerged from the prematurely aged man before them as he replied, "I shall be Ackal IV."

The news set the court humming. The last emperor by that name, Ackal III, had reigned one hundred sixty years earlier. A cruel tyrant, he had desecrated the temples of Daltigoth and massacred many guiltless priests he believed were plotting against him. For this he had been deposed by his cousin Mordirin and later was found mysteriously murdered inside a sealed room. Since then it had been considered bad luck to take the tainted name of Ackal.

Amaltar seemed unconcerned by the stir he'd created. He descended from the dais, walking stiffly to a side door. All in the hall went to their knees out of respect, except his privy council. They followed the emperor in a rustle of silk and soft clatter of armor. By the time Tol stood again, the imperial consorts had departed as well.

In a brief span of time, he'd beheld the changed man who was to be emperor, seen the faithless traitor Mandes exalted at his side, and made an enemy of the haughty Pelladrom Tumult, yet none of that remained long in Tol's mind. He could think only of how breathtakingly lovely was Valaran, the woman he loved.

Chapter 10

Rendezvous in White

Tol had hoped for an invitation to stay in the imperial palace, but none came. When he complained, Kiya told him sternly, "Given so many mysterious attempts on your life, I'd think you'd welcome a little distance between yourself and the palace."

After seeing Mandes again, Tol more than ever believed that the wizard was behind the strange incidents that had threatened him, but as usual, the Dom-shu woman was right. They spent a day searching for accommodations.

The inns were already brimming with the thousands of visitors who'd come for the funeral and coronation. Even if they hadn't been, Tol required more than a simple roof over his head. Whether he liked it or not, he needed a place worthy of Lord Tolandruth. Unfortunately, few homes remained available for rent.

In the end, it was Miya, the champion haggler, who found a suitable place. She took a turn through the marketplace and acquired new suede boots, a cask of Ropunt lager for half the usual price, and a tip on a house for rent.

"There's an empty villa in the Quarry district," she announced. "Cost you nine gold pieces a day."

The price was good for an entire villa, but the Quarry district was not exactly prestigious. Located just east of the Inner City, it was a vast bowl-shaped hollow left after the stone for the imperial palace was mined out. Over the years, it had filled with houses built tall and narrow to fit in the pit. Most of its residents were artisans, and though some were quite wealthy, the Quarry district did not compare to the Inner or Old cities as locations of distinction.

Tol made his displeasure plain. Since leaving the palace they'd tramped the busy streets of Daltigoth, all their possessions borne on the shoulders of hired porters. The endless circling through the streets, together with the crowds that collected wherever Tol went, had frayed his nerves. Living in the wilds for so long, he'd forgotten how claustrophobic life in the city could feel.

"Listen to you!" Miya chided. "Worried about an unseemly address, are you? Pretty high and mighty for a lad from Juramona!"

"Farm boy," added Kiya, eyeing him narrowly.

He glared at them for the space of two heartbeats, then a sheepish smile broke over his sweaty face. They were right. The Quarry district certainly was better than wandering the streets like a homeless acting troupe.

When they arrived, they found the district to be relatively quiet. Winding their way through the narrow, steep lanes to the address Miya had been given, the only sounds they heard were the tap of tinsmiths' hammers, the creak of baskets being woven, and the hum of potters' wheels. The peacefulness appealed to Tol, as did their proximity to the palace. He apologized for his earlier churlishness and commended Miya on her choice.

"All I sought was a bargain," she replied.

The white wall of the Inner City rose nearby, putting most of the Quarry district in shadow though it

was only early afternoon. Miya's find was located in the easternmost section of the former stone pit, the side farthest from the looming wall, and it was perched on the highest part of that area, a place fittingly called Noonday Ridge. The villa was in fact a mansion, the largest house in the Quarry district. Its rambling ground floor was surmounted by a much smaller second story, which was surrounded by elevated gardens. The whole house was encircled by a stout stone wall topped with a row of iron spikes.

The small caravan entered a courtyard. Miya pulled up the "To Let" sign and tossed it into waist-high weeds. No one had lived here in quite a while.

They were admitted by an elderly woman caretaker. Inside, the doorways were curiously low, just barely tall enough to allow the Dom-shu sisters to pass through without stooping. The old woman explained the villa had been built by a wealthy dwarf merchant named Rumbold. He had gone on an expedition to the east to buy iron four years ago and never returned.

The porters deposited Tol's chest of pirate treasure in the hall. Miya paid off the men and the caretaker, and they departed. Tol sat down on a low settee, leaned back, and exhaled gustily.

Kiya took hold of his chin and squinted into his eyes. "You're exhausted. You should go to bed," she announced.

He did feel drained of strength. The long campaign, the journey from Tarsis, the fight with Xanka, the tragic loss of Felryn and Frez, all of it hung around his neck like shackles. Seeing Mandes again had stirred up a mighty anger, but that wasn't an antidote to all the travails of the trail. Worse, the deep wound in his heart left by Valaran's long, unexplained rejection had opened anew. She had barely acknowledged his longing gaze. He didn't know how to stanch his emotions.

Miya set the cask of Ropunt lager down at his feet. Her agreement with her sister's prescription was plain. Grateful once more for the women's support, Tol took Miya's hand. With her other, she reached over and tousled his hair.

"Rest, husband," she said roughly. "You look like you've walked all the way from Tarsis!"

Although it was only four marks past midday, Noonday Ridge was submerging in the shadow of the Inner City wall. Tol hunted through the dim, dusty corridors of his new home until he found the master bedchamber. Rumbold's bed was generously sized for a dwarf's but barely accommodated Tol's modest height. He drank only a single cup of lager before succumbing to sleep.

The brass mug, bearing the arms of the lost dwarf's line, fell from Tol's slack fingers. It landed with a dull thump on the rug and rolled to a stop against the wall.

* * * * *

Half a league away, at a far more stylish address, the master of the house was in his private sanctum. Heaps of curling scrolls spilled off tables onto the floor, mingling with trays of half-eaten food. Everywhere the eye fell there were goblets stained with the dregs of many days' wine. No one was allowed in this room to clean it, and the occupant of the high-backed chair was too lost in thought to care about such mundane matters.

Mandes pressed the tips of both forefingers to his temples. Before him was a shallow silver pan filled with gently steaming liquid. He sprinkled various colored salts in the pan, noting how the swirling patterns changed with every addition. His lips barely moved as he whispered the words of power.

At last, he commanded, "Show me."

The lines of color resolved themselves into a scene—a kitchen or dining hall. The object of his

surveillance was seated at a rough table, sawing at a roasted boar's leg with a long knife.

"Come, voice," Mandes breathed.

"—and make a fool of himself," said a female, someone not in view. "He could lose everything!"

The woman Mandes watched put down her carving knife, the boar's leg forgotten. "He wouldn't do that," she said. "Our husband may be lovesick, but he's not stupid."

The unseen speaker snorted loudly. "This is no ordinary woman, sister! She's the emperor's wife!"

Mandes leaned forward, intrigued. Lord Tolandruth was still in love with Princess Valaran? That was a most interesting revelation.

A discreet knock on the door did not rouse him at first. Only after it was repeated several times did he realize the sound came from his own environs.

"What is it?" he barked, looking up from the pan.

The tall door opened a crack. A servant stood in the wedge of light created by the open door.

"You have a visitor, master."

"What is my first rule, Valgo? Never disturb me when I am in this room!"

Valgo bowed hastily, but said, "The visitor is high born, master, and most persistent—"

"They're all high born!" Mandes sighed wearily. His breath disrupted the image in the pan and the liquid turned muddy brown.

Irritated, he rose from his chair, determined to give his impertinent caller a case of boils. When he drew near the partly open door, he realized Valgo sported a rapidly swelling black eye.

"What happened to you?" Mandes demanded.

The servant's gaze flickered quickly back over his shoulder, a final attempt to warn his master, but it was too late. The door was shoved hard and flew open, just missing Mandes's nose. A lean, red-haired man dressed in blood-colored leather stood at Valgo's shoulder.

The sorcerer hastily erased his outraged expression and bowed. "Your Highness! Welcome to my unworthy house."

"Did you really think you could keep me out?"

"Of course not. You're always welcome, Highness."

Prince Nazramin, half-brother of Amaltar, swaggered in, shoving the cowering Valgo aside. Looking over the clutter of manuscripts and magical paraphernalia, the prince sniffed.

"I thought you had a woman in here, and that was why you didn't want any visitors."

"So I did, gracious prince." Mandes gave his best, oiliest smile. "Two women, in fact."

"Conjuring up company, eh? Saves paying them, I'll wager."

Nazramin took Mandes's own chair. With a single stroke of his quirt, he swept the table before him clear of its clutter. The scrying pan and several scrolls hit the floor. Liquid from the pan splashed the priceless scrolls before they rolled under the furniture.

"Attend me," said the prince loftily. "We have much to discuss."

Lips locked in a rictus of forced hospitality, Mandes dispatched Valgo for refreshment. He shut the door and slid the bolt into place.

Nazramin was seven years younger than Amaltar and a far different sort of man. While Amaltar had been groomed from birth to serve the empire, Nazramin had never served anyone but himself. He had made himself the living embodiment of all the cruelty and arrogance of the Ackal dynasty—

which to Nazramin meant all the power and glory. Vigorous, ambitious, hated and admired in equal measure, Nazramin stood at the head of a sizable faction of Ergothian warlords dissatisfied with Amaltar's cold, scholarly ways.

Mandes stood before the prince, hands folded and eyes lowered. Nazramin stared up at him, chewing on his thick auburn mustache.

"So the pig farmer has returned," Nazramin said at last. Mandes gave a slight nod. "Your vaunted magic did not stop him."

"My efforts took their toll, Highness. The country priest from Juramona perished in the mountains, and one of Tolandruth's favorite retainers died before Thoragoth."

"You killed a pair of cubs and spared the lion."

The sorcerer's bland smile hardened. "Lord Tolandruth spared himself, great prince. He is not an easy man to defeat."

Nazramin lashed out with his quirt. An Ackal family heirloom, the quirt was made from the hide of a bakali chief slain in personal combat by Ackal II Dermount. The braided lizard-leather whip split Mandes's cheek like a rotted peach; with a cry of pain, he fell to the floor.

"Never call that peasant filth 'lord' in my presence!" Nazramin roared. "Do it again and I'll have you flayed alive!"

Mandes looked up at him through eyes half-blind with tears. Blood ran down his neck. With shaking hands, he pulled a fine linen handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed at the burning wound. He said nothing. Explanations and apologies would merely make the volatile prince even angrier.

The sight of the cringing man pleased Nazramin, and he mastered his wrath, leaning back in the chair again. "You should know better than to say that to me, sorcerer," he said evenly. "Get up."

Mandes clutched the table and pulled himself to his feet. He was still shaking, as much from shock as from the pain. No one had dared to raise his voice to him in years, much less strike him. Rich and influential beyond his fondest dreams, he suddenly realized how ephemeral his status was before a prince of the realm.

Placing one booted foot on the empty table, Nazramin said, "You assured me your spells were infallible. How did the peasant escape?"

"At critical points, the conjurations weakened or failed completely. I cannot explain it." Mandes spoke haltingly, cradling his bleeding face. He cleared his throat and went on. "I thought the priest Felryn was protecting him with counter-spells, but Felryn died and the protection continued. Tolandruth must have other protection—probably an amulet or talisman. If this artifact could be removed—"

"Talisman, eh? What would it look like?"

The sorcerer explained the protection could take many forms. Commonly amulets were disks of metal inscribed with magical symbols, but they could just as easily be rings, jewels, or even a sword or enchanted dagger.

"My eyes at court tell me the pig farmer is carrying an unusual sword," Nazramin mused. "It's made of some sort of special metal, said to be harder than forged iron."

"If you procure it, Your Highness, I could try my magic against him once more."

A knock sounded at the door and Valgo begged permission to enter. Mandes unbolted the door, and the servant brought in a tray of amber nectar and sweetmeats. Nazramin took a tall, thin goblet of nectar and ignored the food.

Mandes looked longingly at a glazed walnut but chose a piece of soft, sugared cake. He took small bites and chewed carefully, mindful of his stiffening jaw.

“Our common foe has another weakness, Highness,” he said. “Princess Valaran.”

Nazramin laughed harshly. He used two very vulgar words to describe his brother’s wife. Mandes colored.

“We know that already. After the lies we have fed her, she might kill the peasant for us,” the prince said. He picked up the second goblet, Mandes’s serving, and drank it down as well. “I should love to see that!”

“There might be a better approach, Highness. Tolandruth will certainly seek her out under furtive circumstances. If caught together, both their lives would be forfeit, and only the emperor would bear the blame for their deaths.”

Nazramin blotted droplets of nectar from his mustache. “You’re a devious wretch, aren’t you, sorcerer? How can you insure they meet? I already have the princess watched at all times, but why would Tolandruth risk it after all this time? Surely he has other women.” He leaned forward, becoming caught up in the plot. “You could make a potion, an aphrodisiac. I’ll see it’s put in Valaran’s food—”

“That won’t be necessary, my prince. Just bring them together. Their natural passion will accomplish the rest.”

“After all this time, she detests the peasant bastard!”

Mandes had little experience of love, but he understood human nature far better than his noble patron. Valaran hated Tolandruth because she believed he had betrayed her by having a child with the forester woman Miya. Nazramin had forged that lie in a letter from Tolandruth to her ten years ago, and had reinforced it with more forged letters. Valaran had cut off all communication, and Mandes had taken pains to intercept Tolandruth’s letters to her, which dwindled over the years.

Now, if the couple was brought together and the truth revealed, their passion would rekindle tenfold, fanned by the misunderstanding and their long separation.

Nazramin was content to leave the details in Mandes’s hands. The prince said Valaran would provide a potent diversion while his agents got their hands on Tol’s saber, in case it was the talisman Mandes suspected was shielding him from his spells.

The prince was not yet ready to depart. He demanded to see the progress of their other ongoing project. When Mandes hesitated, Nazramin tapped the quirt weightily against the palm of his hand. Bloody handkerchief still pressed to his face, the sorcerer acquiesced with a bow.

On the room’s rear wall was a shelf piled high with pots of dried herbs, mineral powders, and trays of rough crystals. Mandes faced this wall and traced a sigil in the air with his left hand. A vertical line of light appeared, widening steadily as the hidden door opened in the seemingly solid stone wall.

Beyond was a niche lit by a smoky oil lamp. Within the niche was a black-draped table on which rested a statuette two handspans tall. Made of dully glinting gray metal, the image bore the unmistakable features of Nazramin’s elder brother. Affixed to the statuette were two screw clamps, one compressing the figure’s head, the other its chest. Every day Mandes tightened the screws a half turn. Every day, Amaltar grew a little more ill.

“Splendid,” the prince said, and smiled.

“A crude method, but effective,” agreed the wizard. “Almost no one uses image magic any more. Too easily countered if discovered.”

The prince approached the statuette. “Oropash and his people can do nothing. My brother has lost

all confidence in their abilities.” He rubbed a finger over each of the clamps, his touch as delicate as a woman’s. Resting his finger on the statuette’s middle, he looked back at the sorcerer, eyes aglitter. “Add a third one. On the belly.”

“As you wish, great prince.” Mandes bowed, but warned, “If too many clamps are used, the emperor will sicken too quickly, and people will suspect his weakness is not natural.”

“How long can he live with the current arrangement?”

“As long as Your Highness wants—a year, two years—or a day.”

Nazramin slowly took his hand away from the cruel, merciless clamps and straightened. “I can wait,” he said. “Many of the older lords feel the loss of my father, and they’ve transferred their sympathies to Amaltar. As time passes and he becomes weaker and more useless, more and more warlords are weaned to my side.”

With a final, feral grin, Nazramin gathered up his dark cloak and departed in a rush.

Left alone, Mandes hunted up a jar of ointment for his wound. Nazramin had been a good client for many years. Mandes could credit his rise in Daltigoth to Nazramin, to the many jobs performed for the prince, the public ones for all to see and the private ones that served darker purposes, but all along the wizard had loathed Amaltar’s brother. All along he had distrusted Nazramin’s ambition and cruelty.

After dabbing the soft unguent on his stinging cheek, he re-entered the niche. He lifted the heavy drape and withdrew a second hollow lead statuette that had been concealed beneath the table. This figure bore the face of Nazramin. Two clamps encircled its head. With great satisfaction, Mandes tightened both screws a full turn.

* * * * *

Three loud thuds echoed through the great house. In the kitchen, Tol and the Dom-shu sisters looked up from the remnants of their meal. It had been a good one, roast beef, prepared by Tol. For all their skills, the sisters were of little use in the kitchen. Miya freely admitted she could not cook. Kiya thought she could, but for the sake of all their stomachs she had to be prevented from doing so.

Tol buckled on his sword belt, and with a casual gesture, made sure the Irda millstone was still in its secret pocket.

Miya picked up the candle from the table. It was a timekeeper, divided into thick rings, called marks, representing the hours of the day.

As they made their way to the front door, the sound came again, three knocks booming through the silent house. Some -one with a heavy hand was pounding on the bronze portal.

Night had long since fallen; the time for casual visitors was well past. Kiya urged caution. Her hand rested on the hilt of her knife.

“Since when do assassins knock?” Tol said, and pulled the doors open.

Four tall figures stood before them, identically dressed entirely in white. Their robes swept the ground, and their heads were covered with stiff cloth cowls, styled to look like war helmets. The two in the rear carried lanterns.

“Lord Tolandruth.” It was hard to determine which of the two figures in front had spoken. “You are summoned to attend upon the emperor.”

“Doesn’t Amaltar ever sleep?” Miya blurted.

“The summons does not come from Crown Prince Amaltar,” the muffled voice solemnly replied. “His Majesty Pakin III requires your presence.”

“But he’s dead!”

Tol, although as confused as Miya, shushed her. “What is this about?” he asked. He decided it was the figure on his right who was speaking.

“The Emperor of Ergoth calls you to duty. Will you come?”

Kiya put a hand on his arm. “Don’t go, husband. No good can come of serving a dead man.”

“You must make yourself clean, and wear these.”

The fellow on Tol’s left held out a bundle of white cloth, its corners tied together at the top.

The bundle was weighty, but soft. Ritual garments, Tol assumed, like the ones the strange messengers wore.

“I will come,” he said.

The sisters exchanged worried glances. Tol was altogether too trusting.

“Come alone at midnight to the Tower of High Sorcery. Follow where you are led, and do not speak.”

The white-clad phantoms departed. Miya shut the heavy door.

“What sort of trick is this?” Kiya demanded. “Husband, you should not go!”

Tol smiled. “It’s all right. I believe they want me to stand vigil over the late emperor.”

This made sense to the sisters. Their tribe had a similar rite. The night before a dead chief was immolated on his funeral pyre, his family was expected to spend the night with him, making offerings to the gods.

Kiya went to the kitchen to heat water for Tol’s bath. He headed to his bedchamber and there untied the bundle. It contained a linen robe, a sash, a short cape, a simple cloth skullcap, and slippers. Even smallclothes had been provided. Every item was spotlessly white.

Miya watched as he laid out the funerary garments. “Honor or not, I still don’t like you going through the streets alone,” she said. “Wear that dwarf blade, will you?” He assured her he would.

Kiya arrived bearing a steaming kettle. Tol stripped and splashed hot water on his face, arms, and feet. The sisters watched with critical eyes, as though inspecting a prize bull.

“He’s held up well. Wouldn’t you say?” Miya asked her sister.

Kiya nodded. “Quite a few scars, but strong for a man his age.”

Tol paused in his ablutions. “What do you mean, ‘a man his age?’ ”

“His hair’s too short. Looked better longer,” Miya said with a frown.

“What do you mean, ‘a man his age?’ ” Tol repeated.

Kiya shrugged. “Well, you are past thirty—”

“Just past,” he said quickly.

“A man’s vigor peaks at twenty,” Miya said, “but you are holding up well.”

Tol planted fists on his bare hips. “Would you like to check my teeth while you’re at it?”

Miya waved his pique aside. “We see you chew every day. We know your teeth are good.”

She started to discuss other, more intimate facets of his physique, and Tol stamped his foot in warning. Grinning, the sisters fell silent.

Clean and dry, Tol donned the smallclothes, tying the drawstring waist snugly, and pulled the long robe on over his head. In short order he was dressed, down to the slippers and skullcap.

Worried his sword belt would smudge the white linen, he pulled Number Six from the scabbard, wiped the blade clean, and slipped it through his sash.

The timekeeper candle showed it to be just a half-mark short of midnight. Tol descended to the entry hall, trailed by the Dom-shu.

He had no time to hunt up a horse for hire, so he decided to walk to the tower. The sisters wanted to accompany him, at least as far as the Inner City gate. However, their mothering was getting on his nerves, so he ordered them to stay in the villa and guard the treasure.

Cool wind sighed through the streets. Working folk tended to turn in once it got dark, so there was little nightlife in the Quarry district. Robe billowing, Tol climbed the flat, winding steps leading up and out of the former stone quarry.

In the streets above, the few folk he passed gave him a wide berth, whispering, "Vigilant." He was glad the strange visitors had reminded him not to speak; it was considered a gross breach of etiquette to talk while wearing the robes of the vigil, but he'd never taken part in the ceremony before.

Overhead, stars played hide and seek behind clouds scudding before the wind. He noticed a bright light in the distance, and it took him a moment to realize he was seeing the white moon, Solin, shining over the peak of the Tower of High Sorcery, his destination.

Customarily, the emperor's vigil was held in the Temple of Mishas, but Tol wasn't surprised at the change of location. The Tower of High Sorcery represented one of the greatest achievements of Pakin III's reign, and holding the ceremony there would regain for the wizards some of the prestige Mandes had usurped.

Out of respect, he had left the nullstone behind, though, he felt very vulnerable. Not even the heft of the dwarf blade at his side could banish the feeling.

He chided himself for his fears. Did he need a talisman merely to traverse the streets of Daltigoth in sight of the imperial palace? Of course not. And what danger could there be for him at the emperor's vigil, in the very Tower of High Sorcery?

At the Inner City gate, the guards did not challenge him. Seeing the white robe of a Vigilant, they stood to attention and let him pass without a word.

The courtyard of the Imperial Plaza blazed with light. Tripods of torches stood between long rows of mourners. Rank upon rank of warriors and courtiers knelt on the hard mosaic, heads bowed toward the Tower of High Sorcery. Some looked up when Tol entered then resumed their prayers for the deceased emperor. The steady drone of hundreds of low voices filled the square.

Above the trees of the wizards' garden, the mighty Tower of High Sorcery glowed with its own light. Awed by the sight, Tol slowed. What mysteries were held within those shining walls?

He shook himself, then folded his arms and gripped his biceps hard. He had nothing to fear. No evil workings could penetrate the sanctum of the magical orders.

He picked up his pace, striding purposefully to the garden path that would take him to the tower. His footsteps on the quartz gravel path sounded loud in the stillness.

Many times as a young man Tol had stolen into this very garden to meet Valaran. The wizards guarded their privacy with a wall of sleep, but the millstone had allowed Tol to penetrate it with impunity. Holding Val close, he could protect her, too, and they passed many a golden hour in the shadowed glade by the fountain of the Blue Phoenix. The wizards had lowered the barrier for the vigil, and Tol now passed through without hindrance.

The tower rose from a circular plaza paved with white marble. A ring of robed wizards surrounded its base. Alternating Red Robe with White, they stood, eyes closed, hands linked, facing outward. The very air itself seemed charged with power.

Tol wondered fleetingly at the lack of Black Robe wizards. Red and White made him nervous enough; he was glad not to have to face wizards consecrated to evil magic.

A gap in the ring of wizards corresponded to the tower's only entrance—arched double doors, which stood open. White light shone within, paler and colder than the glow emitted by the tower itself. Straightening his shoulders, Tol went carefully up the ramp to the entrance. The wizards did not stir, speak, or open their eyes. He recognized only one face among them: Helbin, chief of the Red Robes.

Tol passed through the massively thick foundation walls into a chill, open chamber that comprised the entire ground floor of the tower. The ceiling of the chamber was domed. In its center was an opening, the end of a shaft that rose all the way to the tower's peak. Shining down through this atrium was the light of Solin. Focused and clarified, the white moon's pallid light was the only illumination in the chamber.

Directly under the column of moonlight was Pakin III's white-draped bier. The emperor was dressed in full regalia, lying on his back with his hands resting on his chest, clasping the imperial scepter. His hair and beard were the color of snow. Bathed in Solin's cold radiance, the old emperor seemed carved out of alabaster.

Humbled by this vision, Tol approached slowly. He had no specific instructions and was uncertain what he should do. His slippers made faint scuffing sounds as he circled the bier. Halfway around, he spotted another figure in white, a second Vigilant. He was pleased he wouldn't be alone.

The other mourner was kneeling, head bowed, by Pakin's left hand. By her slenderness, Tol could tell it was a woman, perhaps one of the old emperor's daughters. In spite of the stricture against speech it seemed wrong not to offer his sympathy.

In the silence, his intake of breath sounded like a shout, and the Vigilant's cowl head turned toward him. Green eyes flashed with surprise in the sere white light.

Valaran!

Whatever words he'd intended to say went unuttered as Valaran glared balefully at him. He could almost feel the darts of fury hurled by those emerald-hard eyes.

She put a finger to her lips. With a thrust of her chin, she indicated he should take his place on the other side of the bier, at the emperor's right hand.

Tol drew Number Six in a swift motion. After saluting Pakin III with broad sweeps of his saber, Tol knelt in the appointed place, laid his weapon down, and straightened the folds of his robe. Bowing his head, he smoothed his face into an expression of calm introspection, but inside he was fuming.

How dare she treat him so coldly! Returned at last, victorious from a long campaign in the east, narrowly missing death many, many times, and still she wouldn't even speak to him! Ten years he'd been gone—nearly eleven. Val had stopped answering his letters without one word of explanation. He'd believed their love was eternal, their passion unquenchable. What had happened?

The still form of the late emperor drew his attention. Long illness had leached the color from Pakin III; his hair, beard, and skin were white as Tol's mourning robes. A curious detail caught Tol's attention. Where the dead man's hands were wrapped around the handle of the scepter, the gaps between his fingers had disappeared. Finger flowed into finger without a break.

Startled, Tol studied Pakin III's face more closely. The lines on the aged face were not the sagging creases of skin, but sharper, more inflexible. His skin had an odd, flat sheen.

Tol stood and leaned over the late emperor to get a better look. As he entered the moonlight, he

shivered. Poets called Solin's aura cold, but he'd never taken their words literally. Yet the light, concentrated and directed through the tower, was indeed cold, icy as a high mountain stream. It washed the warmth from Tol's flesh, making him shiver hard. Doggedly, he persisted and touched the dead man's hand. The hand and wrist were rigid and hard.

Pakin III had turned to stone.

Was this a statue, standing in for the frail remains of the late emperor? Closer inspection forced Tol to abandon that notion. On the back of Pakin III's thin hand white hairs still sprouted, and age spots discolored the surface—yet the flesh had become something akin to alabaster. This then must be a special rite of the wizards' college, a bizarre magical embalming that slowly turned Pakin III's mortal remains into imperishable stone.

Valaran was watching him disapprovingly. The hood of her gown left only the oval of her face exposed. Contrasted against the white silk, her skin was a warm rose color. She'd never been an outdoor type, preferring the shadowed corridors of the palace, a quiet library, or the wizards' garden by night. Warm memories of the latter brought color to Tol's face. Clearing his throat, he resumed his kneeling posture.

Many times Val had shared with him whatever weighty tome she was reading. Books about the bloody deeds of her ancestors, the religious practices of the Silvanesti, or the marriage customs of gnomes, all were eagerly devoured by the inquisitive girl. Once, as they lay hidden on the roof of the palace, washed in the light of the setting sun, Valaran had begun reciting the epic of Huma, slayer of dragons. She had never finished the poem. Tol had plucked the scroll from her hands and loved her there and then on the ancient battlements. It was their most daring encounter, the one he cherished above all others. In the wizards' garden they were protected from intruders by the wall of sleep. On the palace roof, without such protection, they might have been discovered by anyone. Danger only sweetened the moment. It had been an immortal night.

From being chilled to the bone, Tol now felt uncomfortably warm. Passion, even recalled from so long ago, was stirring his blood. Perhaps it was disrespectful to be dwelling on old love rather than pious prayers, but Tol didn't think Pakin III would mind. The emperor had been an irreverent man, impatient with pomp and protocol. Valaran had been one of his favorites, and he indulged her like a fond grandfather.

Tol tugged at his robe, now clinging to his skin. The air seemed muggier than when he'd entered. He glanced across the bier and realized Valaran must be feeling the warmth, too. Shiny beads of sweat dimpled her forehead.

The failing light explained the change. Solin was progressing through the heavens, slowly leaving its place above the tower. As the cone of cold light shrank, the normal heat of late summer reclaimed the hall.

Tol bowed his head, closing his eyes. Rest in peace, great Pakin. Given the turmoil that was sure to follow, the reign of Pakin III might seem like a golden age in the days to come.

After a brief time, the sound of movement caused him to open his eyes. Solin was nearly gone from overhead, and Valaran had pushed back her cowl to cool her head. She lifted the heavy mass of hair from her neck and ears. Tol could see the tiny notch on the top of her left ear, souvenir of a childhood fight with Vorkai and Talmaz, her elder brothers. Ten years had honed her fine features. A woman's strength and beauty showed in every line, every contour.

Tol's knees ached from his long vigil. He shifted position slightly. Skinning back the sleeves from his arms, he opened the collar of his robe. The dark tan of his face and arms contrasted starkly with the white linen.

Valaran was looking at him. Catching his eye, she quickly averted her gaze. A small thing perhaps, but it was the first time she had looked at him without obvious ire.

Solin was gone. The only light now was a faint glow from the bier itself. Heat suffused the great domed hall. Sweat trickled behind Tol's ears. Valaran shifted slightly, brow furrowed with discomfort.

Fate must have brought them together like this, Tol mused. Fate, destiny, the gods themselves must have conspired to allow him to be alone with Valaran, even with the body of the dead emperor between them and no words spoken. This was a gift he hadn't expected. It had long been said that Tolandruth of Juramona was the luckiest warrior in the empire. Tol had never agreed with that. A wise man made his own luck.

Valaran parted the collar of her gown, opening it just enough to bare a wedge of skin. Transfixed, Tol watched a single drop of sweat curve down her neck to the hollow of her throat. It paused there, then plunged on, vanishing where the folds of her gown came together.

How much could a man bear? His throat constricted with the need to speak, yet one word, even a whisper, and the whole corps of wizards outside would rush in and punish the desecration of the vigil, a dishonor to both Pakin III and Amaltar.

I love you, Tol thought fervently, framing each word with such care he had to clench his jaw to keep them from escaping his lips. I love you, Valaran.

Time dragged, slow as resin oozing from a wounded pine. The ache in Tol's knees was nothing compared to the longing in his heart. He prayed for dawn, for release from this torture, but the heavens would not hurry to suit him.

A faint sound interrupted his long torment. Valaran had sighed. She rolled back her sleeves, baring her arms to her elbows. Her fingers were long and tapering, a lyrist's hands, though Val disdained idle pastimes like music. With her fingers spread, she could hold a manuscript open with one hand while holding her tea, or taking notes, with the other—no mean feat. Those hands had also gripped the back of Tol's neck with desperate strength when she'd feared he might leave her too soon. Not trifling things, those hands. He had been held by them often enough to revere them.

Again he caught her sneaking a glance at him over the bier. Was it his own wishful thinking, or had her expression softened? It wasn't love, but something other than anger flickering in her eyes. From her expression, it seemed to Tol she desired to ask him a question but couldn't quite frame the words.

He returned her gaze calmly, concealing his own inner turmoil with great effort. They studied each other, both perspiring in the stifling dimness. It came to resemble a contest to see who would look away first. Tol never wanted to look away ever. Solin's rays could harden him to stone right here, forever beholding the woman he loved.

When light did at last slant in, graying the high dome, it took some time before either of them recognized the dawn. Still they did not turn away.

Footfalls announced the entry of two members of the White Robe order. They halted at the foot of the bier. The younger bore a tray with a slender pitcher and two clay cups. The older wizard made the sign of Draco Paladin in the air, ending the vigil.

"Good morrow to you, Highness," he said. "Welcome the day, my lord. I am Perogen."

In unison, they turned away from each other to face the newcomers. Tol's tongue was thick, his throat parched. Coughing a bit, he said, "It was a long, hot night."

He got to his feet. His legs roared with pain as blood rushed back to long-folded muscles. Perogen extended a hand to help Valaran rise, but she ignored it and staggered upright unaided.

The younger wizard presented the tray of refreshments. He was about Tol's age, clean shaven, and with dark skin like Felryn. Perogen poured two measures of amber liquid from the slender pitcher. Silvanesti nectar. An ironic choice, Tol thought, given the events of Pakin III's life.

A cup was offered first to Valaran, who took precedence over Tol. She downed the nectar in a single long swallow.

Tol watched her slender throat work and swallowed hard himself. This vigil had been worse than some battles he'd been in. Well, not worse perhaps, but certainly hard to bear. He sipped his own nectar gingerly, letting it trickle down his dry throat.

Valaran set the cup back on the tray then carefully adjusted her gown, closing the neck and unrolling the sleeves. "Thank you," she said to the wizards, her only words all night. With a swirl of silk, she turned and walked swiftly out of the tower.

The young wizard frowned slightly at the obvious tension in the air. "Did the vigil pass well?" he asked.

"Well enough. I owe much to the late emperor. It was hard to say farewell to him," Tol murmured.

"We were told you were most devoted to him," said Perogen. "That's why you were given this duty."

"I'm honored." The import of the fellow's words suddenly occurred to him. "Who told you I was specially devoted to the late emperor?"

"Consort Valaran, my lord. It was her request that brought you here."

Tol smiled all the way back to the Quarry district. Upon his return, Miya made ribald comments about where he'd been, scoffing at the notion of a holy vigil. She knew that look, she teased. He'd been with a woman.

And so he had.

* * * * *

Mandes the Mist-Maker yawned and stretched. It had been a long night and a boring one. He could not use his magic to spy upon the dead emperor's vigil; the Tower of High Sorcery was well shielded against such intrusions. He was forced to rely on a more old-fashioned method to gain information about Lord Tolandruth's activities—he bribed a young Red Robe to act as his spy.

"They did nothing, master," his hireling reported. "They remained kneeling by the bier all night and never spoke."

Mandes smiled and readily gave the young wizard the promised six gold pieces. His informer seemed puzzled by his pleasure.

"Nothing happens for many days after a seed is planted," Mandes told him. "To expect a sprout the first night would be unnatural."

He dismissed the spy, reminding himself to ask Prince Nazramin to have the fellow killed. Anyone who could be so easily bought was a liability to their scheme.

Chapter 11

Force of Arms

More vigils followed. Each night two people with close ties to the late emperor stood watch over his remains. When the rites ended, Pakin III was completely transformed into stone, and then it was time for the coronation and funeral. Traditionally, the two ceremonies were performed sequentially. Only when the old emperor had been consigned to the gods could the new emperor be crowned. Because Pakin III's preservation depended on the natural course of Solin through the sky, the petrification process occupied several days.

In her rooms deep within the palace, Valaran felt half turned to stone herself. She'd known that after Pakin III's death the warlords of the empire would gather from all over to put their old master to rest and see a new emperor crowned. She knew that Tol would be one of those lords, of course he would. That was perfectly logical, and she prided herself on her logical and ordered mind. Unlike the featherbrained consorts and ladies-in-waiting who populated the palace, Valaran was well read, intelligent, rational—

She threw aside the roll of parchment on which she'd been writing. This was her fifth book, a history of the cadet branches of the Ackal dynasty. Five years she'd spent compiling genealogies, reading dry old chronicles from every corner of the realm where the many descendants of Ackal Ergot had spread, seeking to understand the impulses and motives behind the history. Now the sight of one man in the Tower of High Sorcery was driving all sensible thoughts from her head.

What was his gift? Why did this son of a peasant farmer hold such a grip on her heart and mind? He wasn't the smartest man in Ergoth, nor the strongest, nor the bravest. Tol wasn't even the best-looking man around. He was short, broad shouldered and thick necked, with a coarse, loud voice. And yet—

Valaran went to the window. She could see the wall of the Inner City, a patch of the wizards' garden, and the pallid glow of the Tower of High Sorcery beyond. White banners flipped slowly in the night breeze. Beyond the wall, the lamps of Daltigoth were lit.

Tol was real. When he took her out the first time through the streets of the capital to that noisy, dirty tavern, he was in his element and she was out of hers. The true world of sweat, dirt, and blood—that was the realm where Tol of Juramona stood tall and commanded respect. Not in the shadowed halls of power. Not in the scented courts of devious nobility and pampered consorts.

Damn him to the fires of all Chaos! She struck the heel of her hand against the wall, succeeding only in making her wrist hurt. Like an old scar, Tol brought with him an ache she had thought long healed. No, not a scar—more like a severed limb. Everyone knew that warriors or workmen who lost hands, arms, or legs experienced pain in the missing part long after the stump healed. Learned healers wrote treatises on why this was so. The Silvanesti sage Coralethian believed the soul of a living being was shaped like their flesh. When an arm was chopped off, the flesh passed away, but the soul of the limb still lived. It ached, as any limb of blood and bone would, when the phantom extremity felt cold or was tired or strained.

So it was with Valaran. She'd severed Tol from her life over ten years ago, but he was still there, a part of her soul. The missing part ached.

There was a cure, but she feared it would be worse than the pain.

* * * * *

Every day, more and more of the empire's warlords arrived in Daltigoth, assembling from all parts of Ergoth. Some were battle hardened and trailworn, others softened by years of idle luxury. The first high lords from the armies at Tarsis reached the capital five days after Tol's arrival. They brought news of the city's final capitulation. The princes and syndics had submitted to all the empire's demands, ceding coastal territory in Kharland, agreeing to remove the high tariffs on Ergothian trade goods and to use their navy to curb piracy, and allowing the establishment of an Ergothian garrison just two leagues from Tarsis.

Daltigoth went wild with joy at the news. The name credited with this considerable victory over a wily foe was Lord Tolandruth's. Men who had served in Tol's army came to his rented villa to pay their respects. As it would have been inhospitable to send well-wishers away without refreshment, Tol soon found his larder depleted and the Dom-shu sisters in revolt. Tol hired a cook and kitchen crew. To mollify Miya, who refused to allow anyone else to take over the marketing yet complained about the amount of food she had to purchase and organize daily, he himself agreed to help with the shopping. It would give him an excuse to get outside, moving among the people without ceremony.

On a gray morning four days after Tol's vigil, he and the sisters wheeled an empty cart out of the villa gates, headed to market; that is to say, Tol pushed the two-wheeled cart, and Kiya and Miya walked ahead of him. The dawn sky was low and threatening. The smell of rain was in the air.

It took considerable muscle to manhandle the pushcart through and up the twisty, uneven streets of the Quarry district. When they finally reached the level of the city proper, Tol was sweating. He wore no armor, only a light linen shirt and leather treads. His heavy saber hung from his left hip.

The nearest market square was in the Old City. It was a long, rather narrow square, lined with temporary stalls and stands. The food sellers inhabited the south end; the north was populated by potters, tanners, cobblers—those who peddled items other than food.

Tol and the sisters, were at the south end, and Miya had already acquired a side of bacon from a butcher at a startlingly low price, when a commotion broke out at the other end of the square.

A gang of men erupted into the market, their faces concealed beneath blue scarves. They assaulted anyone within reach and tipped over sellers' stands. From all around came screams and the cracking of wood. The noisy, crowded market fell silent as everyone looked up from their business toward the disturbance.

"Who wears blue?" Tol demanded, incensed. "Not some followers of the Pakin clan, are they?"

"I've heard talk about this band," Miya said in a low voice. "Skylanders, they call 'em. They're said to owe allegiance to a secret group of provincial landowners opposed to the new emperor."

"Who do they prefer?" asked Kiya. "Prince Nazramin?"

Tol shook his head. "Nazramin's followers wear black."

The politics of Ergoth, like its war-making, was brutal. Factions formed gangs to intimidate their rivals; by committing outrages, they made their opponents look and feel powerless.

Tol knew nothing about these Skylanders or their beliefs, but he wasn't going to allow vandals to wreak destruction. The square was crowded with more than enough people to subdue the criminals, if only the folk would band together and fight.

Tol drew his saber. "Are we going to stand here and let thugs ruin our city?" he shouted. "Fill your hands, and we'll send these dogs back to their masters whipped! Who's with me?"

He started forward a few steps but stopped, suddenly aware he was charging alone. Even the Dom-shu sisters seemed reluctant to mix in. The blue-masked gang continued to overturn carts and pummel helpless onlookers. Anyone slow to flee was dragged aside and beaten with cudgels, the gang's only weapon.

"What's the matter with you?" Tol raged, as traders and customers alike stood wide-eyed and unmoving. Those closest to him seemed more frightened of his bared blade than of the rampaging rioters fifty paces away.

Rabbits, he thought suddenly. They were like rabbits frozen in place by the baying of the hunting pack; they think they can hide simply by remaining immobile. Ordinary city folk, diligent and hardworking, they had grown dependent on the Riders of the Horde for protection.

Tol sheathed his sword. Going to a trestle laden with summer cabbages, he handed the seller two silver coins and yanked one of the folding legs loose from the table. Cabbages tumbled around Tol's feet, and he now had a stout stick. Tapping it against his palm, he started toward the trouble.

Their indifference broken, the Dom-shu yelled for him to wait. They grabbed the first things to hand which could be used as weapons—the wooden poles from their pushcart. Removed from the sockets, these made handy staves.

As the ruffians ploughed through the crowded square, a swell of panicked people rushed to get away. Tol found himself breasting this human tide. He grabbed an able-bodied young man as the fellow rushed by and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Listen to me!" he barked. He pressed a gold coin into the man's hand. "Find the City Guards! Have them send a detachment here to quell the riot!"

The terrified man jerked away from Tol and resumed his panicked dash. Two heartbeats later, the stampede thinned before the oncoming Skylanders, and Tol found himself facing seven toughs. More were working their way through the frightened crowd.

Surprised to see someone standing up to them, they halted in a body, but the lull lasted only a moment.

"Him!" exclaimed one of the masked men, pointing at Tol with his stick. "Pound him into the cobbles!"

Yelling, six men charged. Tol sidestepped the first, whacking him across the shoulders in passing. The man pitched onto his face. Tol parried an overhand blow from the second, dropped his shoulder to avoid a hit from the third, and thrust the end of his bludgeon into the face of the fourth attacker. He received a whack on his left thigh from the fifth man. He punched that one in the throat, cursing himself even as he struck home. He knew better than to hit someone with his fist. It was an instinctual reaction, but also a good way to break every bone in your hand.

Ducking a sideways swing from the sixth man, Tol now found himself ringed by masked enemies. He wasn't overly worried. Although they were rough and brutal, they weren't trained warriors. He had faced any number of more seasoned and dangerous foes than these street toughs.

Unconsciously, Tol smiled, giving a snort. The contemptuous sound caused the blue-masked gangsters to hesitate; this was not the reaction they usually encountered. Tol immediately used the advantage. He hurled himself at the farthest one, the fellow least expecting an attack. The borrowed table leg connected with the thug's jaw. Bone yielded, and the man went down.

Someone landed a terrific blow on the small of Tol's back. Pain seared through him, and he staggered forward. He stumbled against a fruit seller's stall, collapsing on a tray of ripe grapes. Half blind with pain, he still managed to get his stick up in time to ward off the next swing.

A full-fledged riot had broken out. Some opportunists in the square were trying to loot the stalls, but if the traders would not stand up to masked gangsters, they apparently had no qualms about

cracking the heads of common thieves.

The churning crowd had delayed Kiya and Miya, but at last they fought their way to Tol's side, screeching forester war cries that gave their blue-masked foes a start. Kiya fended off attackers while Miya boosted Tol to his feet.

"Where've you been?" he gasped.

"Buying beef," Miya quipped. "Prices dropped suddenly!"

Kiya battered down a Skylander, but more took his place. Blue-masked enemies were thick around them. The press of so many foes forced Kiya back to her sister and Tol.

"You two done resting?" she snapped.

Tol answered by laying out four opponents with as many blows. He got a nasty chop in the ribs and staggered back again, gasping. There were too many, too many attackers in too close quarters.

The gang leader who'd ordered his men to pound Tol appeared again. Now he personally went on the attack, holding his stave in two hands, like a quarterstaff. Tol fended him off, but this man was not like the other Skylanders. This man had warrior skills.

Tol used his shorter stick to deflect another attack from the leader. The fellow sidled left, seeking to cut Tol off from Kiya and Miya. Sliding on the crushed fruit underfoot, Tol drew off. He feigned confusion, dropping one end of his stick. The leader promptly swung his cudgel up in a powerful underhand stroke, aiming for Tol's unguarded chin. Tol hurled the table leg, which rapped his opponent across the nose. The gangster yelled and fell flat on his back amidst the purple pulp of a cartload of grapes.

Tol advanced quickly, snatching up the fellow's own staff. He stood over him. "Yield," he commanded, breathing hard. "Guardsmen are coming!"

"Liar!" the masked man hissed. He drew a long, thin knife from his boot and cut at Tol. The sharp tip snagged on Tol's pants leg. He sprang back out of the way.

Discarding the borrowed stave, Tol drew his saber. He hoped the lingering hiss of blade on scabbard would bring the gang leader to his senses. It did not. Undaunted, the masked man thrust at him again.

Tol presented his far longer blade, ordering his opponent to disarm.

"Mercy?" sneered the masked man. His face above the blue kerchief was young, but his dark eyes were those of a fanatic. "But I heard Lord Tolandruth was such a fierce warrior!"

Tol was surprised to be recognized, but easily knocked the man's knife back. "I don't know you," he said. "Why should I want your blood?"

"Because I'll have yours if I can!"

He slashed at Tol. Catching the point on his handguard, Tol drove the masked man back with a strong shove. He raked the tip of his sword down the man's chest. Homespun tweed split wide under Tol's blade. Metal gleamed beneath. His foe was wearing a scale shirt!

Taking advantage of Tol's brief surprise, the masked man lunged again, blade driving straight at Tol's heart. No armor protected him, but Tol stood his ground and at the last minute bound up the short blade with a twisting movement. He straightened his arm, and two decades of training and battle experience turned the knife aside. The point of Number Six drove inexorably through scale mail, into flesh, bone, and heart.

The attacker's eyes went wide in shock, his fingers opening.

The knife clattered to the pavement and a moment later his lifeless body joined it.

Tol planted a foot on the dead man's chest to pull his sword free. Around him the riot continued.

There was no time to reflect on this senseless death.

Kiya was down, one leg crumpled under her. Miya stood over her, ferociously fending off more enemies. Tol ran toward them, yelling. The sight of his bloody blade gave the Skylanders pause, and they fell back from the beleaguered Dom-shu.

Kiya's face was ashen with pain. Her knee was purpling, and she could not stand. Furious that she'd been hurt, Tol charged into the blue-masked gang, slashing right and left, curses flying uncharacteristically from his lips.

An oiled cudgel whisked by the tip of Tol's nose. His attacker recovered and raised the stick again. Tol let him swing, turning the edge of his sword to meet the blow. The end of the cudgel hit the dwarf-forged blade and split neatly along its entire length. Startled, the Skylander dropped the remnants of his stave and fled.

Tol was about to give chase when he heard a clattering noise. There was no mistaking the hoofbeats of iron-shod war-horses. The City Guards!

Over the heads of the struggling mob Tol saw a wedge of riders entering the square at the south end. They were soldiers all right, but not city guardsmen in white mourning mantles. This trailworn group sported muddied red capes.

Using their horses and the butt ends of their spears, the riders tried to part the crowd. The mob was so thick the horsemen could make little headway.

Tol and Miya stood over the injured Kiya. Common folk gave them a wide berth, and the masked troublemakers disappeared. The Skylander threat was gone, but waves of panic and rage flowed through the crowd, and Tol feared his little party would be trampled. He and Miya beat back anyone who ventured too close.

A horn blared over the chaos. Tol and Miya exchanged a disbelieving look. They knew that call.

"Juramona!" cried Kiya hoarsely.

In a final pell-mell rush, a troop of horsemen parted the mob. Tol at last beheld the banner on the tip of the trumpeter's spear: the Eagle Horde!

Hailing the riders, Tol slammed his sword back into its sheath. The officer in the midst of the troop removed his helmet.

"Egrin! It's Egrin!" Miya cried, slapping her sister happily on the shoulder. Kiya winced but looked pleased as well.

To Tol's glad eyes, his former mentor seemed unchanged by the years. His auburn hair and thick beard might be a bit more gray now than when they'd first met, but Egrin still sat tall in the saddle, his back straight as a tent stake.

Reining up before Tol, Egrin saluted. "My lord," he said. "It is good to see you."

"And you, my old friend! How did you find me?"

The elder warrior smiled slightly. "All of Daltigoth knows where Lord Tolandruth dwells. I merely asked the first soldier I came across." Dryly, he added, "Once in the area, I had but to follow the sounds of battle. I knew you would not be far away."

"Marketing in this town is rude business," Miya said, grinning. She'd helped her sister stand and now supported Kiya. "Try to strike a bargain and see what happens!"

Egrin dismounted, chuckling. After clasping arms with Tol he said to the Dom-shu women, "It's good to see you both. I rest easier every night knowing you guard Tol's back."

Kiya grunted. "He needs us," she said sourly. "Thirty-two years old and he still runs at danger like a young hothead."

Tol protested, "I am a temperate man!"

"Temperate as a bull," Miya said. She asked Egrin, "Has he always been so?"

"No more so than most young men. I would call him bold rather than hotheaded." The marshal regarded his renowned former comrade fondly. "Bold, with a knack for doing the unexpected."

"And lucky," Kiya said. "Lucky as the gods' favorite."

Tol gruffly put a stop to their discussion. A grimmer task needed doing. Kicking through the debris, he found the body of the gang leader he'd dueled. He squatted in the wreckage of the morning market and rolled the dead man over. He removed the fellow's blue mask.

To his astonishment the face of Pelladrom Tumult was revealed, the young noble Tol had seen standing at the new emperor's side. Why was a high-born, well-positioned young warrior leading a gang of thugs smashing up pushcarts?

"Who is he?" Egrin asked. Tol told him, and the marshal said urgently, "Cover his face!"

Sellers were returning to the square, collecting around the famous Lord Tolandruth. Tol let the blue kerchief fall, hiding the dead man's features. Egrin summoned two of his own men to remove the body.

"I offered him quarter, but he forced this conclusion," Tol said, as the scarf was tied in place over Pelladrom's face and his body thrown over a saddle.

Drawing near so only Tol could hear, Egrin whispered, "Lord Enkian is on his way to Daltigoth for Prince Amaltar's ascension."

Enkian was Warden of the Seascapes, the province farthest from Daltigoth. Summer rains had swollen the major streams between the northwest coast and the capital. It might be another three or four days before Enkian arrived.

Tol sighed. Enkian had never liked Tol and would be furious at the killing of his youngest son, but the fight had been a fair one. Tol said as much, but Egrin shook his head, insisting, "You don't understand. Enkian does not come alone! He brings five hordes!"

"Five thousand men?" Tol said, voice rising.

Although out of favor with the prince for his criticism during the war, a noble like Lord Enkian, coming to pay his respects to Pakin III and swear loyalty to his successor, was allowed to bring an entourage to the capital. For a modest man like Egrin, that meant twenty riders. A rich, prominent lord like Tremond of Thorngoth might bring a hundred, all dressed in his personal matching livery. Five hordes was not an honor guard but a warband.

Egrin's face and voice were grim. "We had word of this as we rode south. People thought the Tarsans were invading!"

"What does he think he can do with five hordes? Seize the city? The Daltigoth garrison numbers ten times that many."

"I don't know what he intends, but he will not take the death of his son kindly. If he has five thousand men at his back, you must be careful, Tol!"

"Let him seek me out," Tol said. "I'll not hide what I've done."

Unhappy, the marshal agreed. He returned to his waiting retainers and ordered two off their horses. With canvas and planks from a shattered stall, the soldiers made a litter for Kiya. She didn't like being carried but her knee was painful enough that she relented after only a few protests. Egrin had accepted Miya's enthusiastic offer to lodge with them in their hired villa, so Tol and Miya mounted the empty horses and led the Eagles home.

Despite the dark turn the day had taken, the journey to the villa was a happy one. Like the Dom-shu

sisters, Egrin was very dear to Tol. The elder warrior was his second father, a substitute for his real family, whom he had not seen in years.

Three years after leaving to live in Juramona, Tol had returned to visit his family. He'd intended to remain a week but had departed after only three days. Although pleased to see them again, and they to see him, it had been an awkward visit. They didn't know how to act around him, and he no longer seemed to have anything in common with them. His life in Juramona was utterly foreign to them. Where his mother, Ita, had cried for the changes in her boy, Bakal was gruff, yet obviously proud of Tol's position as shield bearer to Egrin, Warden of the Eastern Hundred. As his mother hugged him goodbye, Tol had surreptitiously pressed into her hand a little money he'd saved. After taking leave of his father, and enduring a quick, embarrassed kiss from middle sister Nira (eldest sister Zalay was preparing to deliver her second child), Tol had mounted his horse and ridden away.

That was the last time he'd seen them. Apart from everything else Egrin meant to him, he was the only one of Tol's old comrades to have known his family.

Once the party reached the Rumbold villa, a healer was sent for to tend Kiya's knee. Having been in the saddle since before dawn, Egrin and his men were famished. Tol took them down to the kitchen and they dined together at two big tables.

"You look very well, Egrin," Tol said, and he truly meant it. "Hardly a day older than when I first rode into Juramona with you on Old Acorn."

Egrin waved a dismissive hand. "You were a child then; all adults seem elderly to the young."

He pressed Tol for an account of his recent adventures. Tol told of the final battles before the walls of Tarsis (discreetly leaving out all mention of Hanira and the golems), and his subsequent hazardous journey through the hill country. He made the magical attacks on his party sound like natural storms. Without hard proof Mandes was responsible, Tol would not accuse him publicly.

Egrin was saddened to hear of Felryn's death.

"A good man, and a wise and gentle healer." He raised his wooden cup, brimming with beer. "May he stand forever at the right hand of Mishas!"

Tol and the sisters echoed the marshal's toast. When Tol related the tale of Xanka and the Blood Fleet, Egrin shook his head in disbelief.

"At the mercy of this bloody buccaneer and you bullied him into a duel? Then you slew him before his crew and fellow captains?"

Tol shrugged. "I could see Xanka was a coward at heart. If I challenged his courage in front of his men, I knew he'd fight me. To do anything else would have cost him too much prestige, maybe even command of the Fleet."

Egrin asked to see the blade Tol had used to defeat the pirate chief. Number Six was duly handed over. Egrin fingered the blade, pressing his thumbnail against the flat. Despite the use Tol had put it to, the curved blade was as bright and smooth as the day Mundur Embermore had given it to him.

"I've heard rumors of this metal for years," Egrin said, holding up the saber and running his gaze down the cutting edge. "Only a few in the dwarf clans know the secret of its making."

"Is it magic?" asked Miya.

"Not at all. The dwarves use a special forging process to temper ordinary iron into something far stronger—'steel' as the pirate captain said." He handed Number Six back, adding, "There's no armor in the empire could turn aside that blade. I wish I had one for every man in the Eagle Horde."

Tol had finished his recollections. Since he hadn't mentioned it, Miya told how he had been summoned to a vigil over the late emperor's remains. Egrin's bushy brows rose in surprise.

"That is an honor indeed!"

Miya smirked. "Husband thought so. Especially since he didn't keep watch alone."

"Take care!" Tol interrupted, raising his voice. Though among friends, he would not see Valaran compromised. Hearing his concern, Miya subsided and Egrin let the matter drop.

The healer arrived, a garrulous old woman named Truda. She examined Kiya's knee, gave the welcome pronouncement that it was bruised not broken, and wrapped it with linen bandages and a splint. Leaving the Dom-shu woman a bottle of medicine to ease the swelling and pain, Truda treated the rest of them to the latest street gossip.

"There was fighting in every square this morning," she said. Her purse clinked heavily with the money she'd earned treating the injured. "Skylanders, Nazramin's Wolves, the whole lot. They say you, my lord, quelled one of the riots all by yourself."

Tol sighed. People told such lies about him, even if they were complimentary lies. Miya and Kiya set the old healer straight. Truda was disappointed, but her black eyes narrowed with unpleasant mirth.

"Your Lordship did slay the chief of the Skylanders, did you not?"

Tol was astonished word had spread so quickly. Egrin's men had brought Pelladrom's covered body directly to the villa. He was lying in the cellar until Tol and the marshal could arrange an audience with Amaltar to tell him what had happened.

"People are talking," Truda went on. "They say the Skylanders' chief was of high birth. I'd be happy to quell that rumor, if I could."

Tol ignored the blatant plea for gossip. He paid her twice her normal fee and the healer was swiftly ushered out.

With Kiya taken care of and the Juramona men made welcome, the difficult visit to Amaltar could not be put off any longer. Tol and Egrin departed to make themselves more presentable for an audience with the future emperor.

Alone in his room, Tol poured cool water from a ewer into a shallow basin and raised a double handful to his face. Staring at his reflection in the mirror, he paused.

In the moment of his greatest triumph his enemies seemed to be multiplying. Could he best them all? Staunch friends, a strong arm, a blade of dwarf steel, and the Irda nullstone were among his assets; Were they enough?

What of Mandes? The sorcerer had defamed him, stolen his glory, and besmirched his honor for more than a decade. Was Mandes responsible for all the treachery that seemed to surround him? If he denounced Mandes, would Amaltar even believe him? Mandes had become a highly trusted advisor to the new emperor, while Tol had been absent a long time.

On the sea journey to Daltigoth, he had contemplated what should be done about the rogue wizard. Mandes was not merely a faithless liar, he was a murderer. Tol was more and more certain he had killed Tol's men at the Golden House in Tarsis and killed Felryn and Frez as well.

Tol dashed the water on his face. His resolution was firm. There could be only one solution to the problem of Mandes.

Whatever happened with Nazramin or Lord Enkian, the Mist-Maker could not be allowed to live.

* * * * *

Although they hadn't been summoned, Tol and Egrin had no trouble gaining admittance to the imperial palace. The guards, hailing Lord Tolandruth, ushered the hero of Tarsis through the Inner

City to the palace steps. Draymon, commander of the Palace Guard, appeared and sternly ordered his men back to their posts.

“My lord,” he said. “I had no word you were coming.”

“I come on my own. May I see the emperor?”

“He is in council now—”

Egrin said, “The matter is pressing.”

Draymon was not about to forestall two such formidable visitors. With a nod, he conducted them himself to the imperial council chamber.

Loud voices came to them through the closed doors. Egrin professed surprise. Emperor Pakin III would never have allowed such a contentious enclave.

Draymon looked grave. “Our new master, may the gods guide him, is not the man he once was.”

He left them while he entered the chamber to announce them. The heavy gilded doors did not allow them to hear his measured tones, but the chorus of loud denunciations his words engendered carried clearly to Tol and Egrin. They exchanged a look.

When Draymon finally returned, his face was red with embarrassment, but he said, “The emperor will see you at once.”

Tol surrendered his sword, and Egrin likewise removed his saber and dagger. Draymon took the weapons, but delayed Tol’s entry with a quick jerk of his head.

“They’re all there, including Prince Nazramin,” he muttered. “Beware, my lord.”

Tol nodded. “Thank you, Captain. A favor? Stay close to this door—with my sword.”

Another man might have smelled a nefarious purpose in such a request, but Draymon vowed he would remain outside the council chamber until Tol and Egrin returned.

Tol grasped the smooth, cold door handles and shoved the heavy portals apart. The sunlit chamber beyond was much as it had been when he’d last seen it, when he’d volunteered to lead three hundred foot soldiers to Hylo to find the unknown enemy threatening Ergothian hegemony over the kender kingdom. That quest had led to the death of the monster XimXim and the loss of many good comrades.

Amaltar’s assembled advisors ceased bickering as Tol and Egrin entered, but their expressions could hardly be termed welcoming. The crowd parted, revealing Amaltar seated at the head of the long table.

The soon-to-be emperor looked even less well than he had when Tol had seen him just days before. His skin was ashen, a sickly color only made more obvious by the deep scarlet of his robes. His dark eyes, once so intelligent and penetrating, stared out from deeply hollow sockets. High cheekbones, once the envy of many a noble lady, now stood out in such sharp relief his face resembled a skull.

Tol knelt, as he’d been told to do when last presented to Amaltar. Egrin’s astonishment at the action was plain. Warlords of the empire knelt to no one! But he too slowly went down on one knee.

“Your Imperial Highness,” Tol said. “Thank you for receiving us.”

“Lord Tolandruth, welcome. Egrin Raemel’s son, welcome. Come before me.” Though his chest rattled slightly with phlegm, Amaltar’s voice was still strong.

Tol rose. Egrin trailed him through the line of glaring councilors: Chamberlain Valdid; Oropash, head of the White Robes; Red Robe leader Helbin; Lord Rymont, commander of the imperial hordes in Lord Regobart’s absence; lesser lords of the hordes based in the capital; and Prince Nazramin.

Amaltar's younger brother sat at the end of the lengthy table. Turned partly away, Nazramin's posture was more proof of Amaltar's weakness. Such casual contempt would never have been dreamt of in the presence of Pakin III. The Prince Amaltar Tol remembered wouldn't have allowed it either.

Nazramin was dressed in impeccable white, but his attire was so stylishly cut and so lavishly sprinkled with pearls and sparkling diamonds it could hardly be called mourning dress. He ignored Tol's progress through the room, blithely studying his nails.

Mandes was there as well, hovering behind the emperor's chair. Though Amaltar's personal physician and seer, Mandes did not have the status to sit at the council table. Hands clasped across his belly, the sorcerer kept to the background, one of many aides, assistants, and servants of the great men gathered around the Emperor of Ergoth and his high councilors. Unlike Prince Nazramin, however, Mandes met Tol's gaze. The sight of his bland countenance filled Tol with unexpected fury; he clenched his jaw to keep the emotion from showing on his face.

Tol and Egrin halted by Amaltar's right hand. They saluted, warrior-fashion.

"Marshal," Amaltar said, smiling at Egrin, "it has been a long time. You look well."

"As well as a warrior half my age, Your Majesty," Egrin joked. "How fare's Your Majesty's health?"

Several courtiers gasped at the impudent question, but Amaltar said, "While I was regent, I ruled with the vigor of three men. Now they're about to put the crown on my head, I have the strength of less than one. Why is that, I wonder?"

"It's grief," Nazramin called out from the other end of the council table. "Grief for our noble father, isn't it, Your Majesty?"

This was obviously a jibe. Amaltar and his father had not been close. In fact, Pakin had cared little for any of his sons, preferring the gentler company of his wives and daughters.

Ignoring his disrespectful brother, Amaltar asked, "What weighty matter brings you here this day, Tolandruth? Surely you did not enter a closed council session to present Marshal Egrin, close though he is to our heart."

"No, Majesty." Tol looked to Egrin briefly. The older man urged him on with a slight nod. "There was a spree of riots in the city this morning."

"There have been many riots," Lord Rymont said haughtily. Tol's age but blond where he was dark, Rymont had never fought in a major battle. "Malcontents from all over the empire have come to Daltigoth to air their petty grievances. They will be found out and punished."

"One already has."

Rymont thrust out his broad, clean-shaven chin. "Indeed? Who?"

"The leader of the gang that wears blue kerchiefs over their faces," Tol replied.

"Skylanders," said Helbin, leader of the Red Robe wizards.

"Provincial scum!" exclaimed Rymont's aide.

"They're not scum," Oropash countered, mopping his round, sweaty face with a handkerchief. "The gentry have many legitimate grievances—"

The city-based warlords shouted him down. They rallied around Lord Rymont, denouncing the Skylanders and their sympathizers as traitors to the empire.

Before things grew too heated, Tol said, "This band of malcontents, as Lord Rymont calls them, attacked the market square near the Quarry district this morning. It so happened I was there with my Dom-shu companions. The chief of the Blue Masks sought me out." He folded his arms. "He now

lies dead in the cellar of my house.”

Tol watched those in the room carefully for any reaction. Mandes’s benign expression twitched as he turned away. Oropash seemed relieved, but Helbin looked alarmed. Nazramin picked up an apple from a tray on the table and bit into it loudly.

“We’ll find out who he was,” Rymont declared. “His confederates will be rounded up!”

“No need. We know who he was,” Egrin put in, “and he is familiar to everyone in this room.”

A heavy silence fell, broken only by the sound of Nazramin devouring his apple.

“Well, speak his name, Marshal, and be done with it!” Rymont prompted peevishly.

Egrin allowed another instant of silence to pass then complied. “His name was Pelladrom Tumult.”

All of them, including Prince Nazramin, were thunderstruck for the space of two heartbeats, then the council chamber exploded into noise. Rymont’s aides all but called Tol a liar and a murderer. They recalled the clash of wills between him and Pelladrom the day Tol had returned to Daltigoth. He had manufactured this story, they said, merely to get back at the proud young noble. Besides, no well-born Rider of the Great Horde would put on a mask and brawl in the streets, especially not on behalf of a band of ragtag bumpkins like the Skylanders.

Angry at their insinuations, Tol looked to the emperor for support. However, Amaltar was clutching his chest with one hand. His face had gone utterly white, and his lips were blue. He gasped for breath.

“Your Majesty!” Tol cried, effectively silencing the uproar.

Chamberlain Valdid hurried to his master. He summoned Mandes with a quick flick of his hand. The sorcerer came forward and laid white-gloved fingers on the great vein in Amaltar’s neck, checking his pulse. Snapping commands to two lackeys, Mandes had a potion compounded on the spot. He was about to administer it to Amaltar when Tol stayed his hand.

“My lord, the emperor needs his medicine,” Mandes protested.

“You drink it first,” Tol said.

Several courtiers gasped. The wizard tried to laugh off the demand, but Tol’s unflinching gaze and hard grip on his right wrist doomed that ploy. Shrugging, Mandes took the vial in his left hand, raised it to his lips, and sipped.

Tol stared. Two hands. Mandes now had two working hands. He’d somehow replaced his lost left arm. Was his healing magic that powerful? He watched Mandes intently for any adverse reaction to the brew he’d been forced to drink.

When nothing happened, Tol released him. Mandes held the remainder of the potion to Amaltar’s lips. Moments after he swallowed it, color flooded back into the emperor’s face. His chest heaved, and he drew a stronger breath.

“His Majesty suffers from asthma. The condition was brought on by too much work and too little rest,” Mandes explained, tucking his gloved hands into his sleeves. Though others whispered, he seemed in no wise upset by Tol’s rude treatment.

“When did you become his physician?” asked Tol coldly.

“I have tended His Majesty in many roles for the past eight years.” Mandes smiled, adding sweetly, “You haven’t been at court, my lord, so of course you wouldn’t know that.”

If Tol had possessed a blade at that moment, Mandes would have died. Egrin sensed this and pulled the infuriated warrior away.

Nazramin’s dry voice cut across the room. “If my brother is improved, can we return to the matter of young Tumult’s death? Is there any real proof he was the leader of the Skylanders in Daltigoth?”

“Only that he died leading his gang on a rampage,” Tol replied, forcing his straining limbs to relax. He related the story of the brawl in the marketplace, explaining that many people had seen Pelladrom Tumult directing the blue-masked thugs. Miya and Kiya could confirm this, he said, and Egrin had been present when Pelladrom was unmasked.

“Well,” Nazramin said cheerfully, “if it’s true, there’s one less troublemaker in Daltigoth!”

Egrin shook his head. “I fear the repercussions may mean trouble, Your Highness. Lord Enkian Tumult is on his way from the Seascapes to pledge his fealty to our new emperor.” Any sympathy for the sad news that would greet Enkian was quickly abandoned at Egrin’s next statement. “At his back are five hordes.”

Argument broke out anew. Bringing troops to Daltigoth was a serious breach of etiquette, yet Lord Rymont insisted, it was foolish to believe that Enkian might have designs against the dynasty. Five thousand men, though improperly large for an entourage, were far too few to overcome Daltigoth’s loyal garrison.

“Why then does he bring them?” asked Oropash, twisting the sleeves of his robe anxiously.

“Wait four days and ask him,” Nazramin replied. He stood up. “It seems to me the only one here with cause to fear is Lord Tol.” The curtailing of Tol’s name was a deliberate slight. “Enkian will certainly have a score to settle with the one who gutted his son, won’t he?”

Although he wasn’t smiling, Nazramin’s glee was obvious to all. At this juncture Amaltar managed to speak again.

“Lord Tolandruth is my personal champion,” he rasped. “If he slew young Tumult in the course of quelling a riot, then he has committed no crime. Lord Enkian must abide by my judgment.”

Amaltar then dismissed the council. With much unseemly grumbling, the emperor’s advisors withdrew. Amaltar asked Tol to linger.

Egrin departed for the villa. Once the last of the council filed out, Amaltar dismissed his personal servants. Mandes reluctantly went with them. Only four guards remained, one at each of the far corners of the large chamber.

Amaltar waved Tol closer. “Sit, sir, if you will. I find it taxing to look up these days,” he said. Tol took the chair recently vacated by Lord Rymont.

Amaltar went on. “You’ve done great things for us, Tolandruth. Whatever else happens, I want you to know I appreciate your deeds. My father did also.” Amaltar coughed a little. “There is much more to do, I fear. I must use you again.”

“I am at Your Majesty’s service.”

“Enemies gather around me, Tolandruth. Not enemies of the honorable kind, like you face in battle. These enemies smile and bow, swear their loyalty, yet all the while grasp hidden daggers and contemplate my death.”

Tol said nothing. After what he’d seen of the men closest to the throne, he could not dismiss his liege’s fears.

Amaltar squeezed his eyes shut. Sweat popped out on his waxen forehead. “I’m never free of them, Tolandruth. I hear them moving in every shadow. They’re like ants, black ants, swarming over me. They will pick my bones clean.” His eyelids sprang open. “You must stop them!”

Pity welled in Tol’s heart. He’d earlier wondered if the emperor was being poisoned, but Mandes had drunk some of the potion himself, with no ill effects. It was obvious, though, that the emperor was ill, and his illness was only made worse by the power struggles around him.

Amaltar took hold of Tol’s hands, gripping them so tightly his knuckles turned white, and repeated

his plea for help. Tol vowed he would do whatever it took to defend him.

At last, the emperor relaxed, sinking back into his chair. For a moment the old Amaltar returned, the shrewd plotter, the careful judge of men. His dark eyes cleared of some of the pain that clouded them.

“It is said you are impervious to magic,” he murmured.

The swift change of subject surprised Tol, but he denied the rumor, calling it idle gossip.

“If you were, if you had some protective spell or amulet, Tolandruth, you would give it to your emperor, would you not?”

There it was, plainly stated at last. Tol had considered this question many times: dare he admit owning the Irda millstone? Could he give it to someone else to save his life? To Amaltar? Egrin? Valaran?

If it became known that he possessed a nullstone, no one Tol knew would be safe. His friends would be captured and tortured to force him to yield the artifact. There was no telling what evil use the stone could be put to by an unscrupulous owner. Since he could not bring himself to destroy so fantastic and ancient a relic, the safest course was to keep its existence utterly secret.

Calmly Tol said, “Many stories are told about me, Your Majesty. Few are true. If the gods bestow favors on me, I cannot say why. I am a soldier of the empire, nothing more.”

Amaltar’s right cheek twitched. The slight clarity fled his eyes, leaving them even more haunted than before. He gave a rattling sigh.

“You are too honorable to lie to me,” he said. “So be it.”

The words pricked Tol’s conscience, but he knelt in obeisance to his liege. Before he could rise again, Amaltar’s dry, feverish hand came to rest on top of his head.

“Look after my wife, will you?” the emperor whispered.

Tol stiffened. Did Amaltar know? He and Valaran had faced terrible retribution if caught—burial alive for her and a slow, painful dismemberment for Tol. Had Amaltar known all along? Was he now giving his tacit approval?

“Poor Thura,” Amaltar sighed. “When I die, she’ll be too old to marry again. Look after her, Tolandruth.”

Tol was certain the emperor would be able to hear the thundering of his heart. Clearing his throat, managing to speak without the faintest quiver, Tol vowed he would see to Thura’s comfort and safety, should the need arise. By all accounts, the emperor’s eldest wife was a gentle, kindhearted woman.

Amaltar dismissed him, and Tol departed.

Alone at the massive council table, Amaltar reached for a goblet of wine. His fingers trembled as they closed around the golden stem. As he brought the goblet to his lips, dark objects darted around the edges of his vision.

He flung the cup down. Red droplets flew, and the golden goblet clattered loudly on the polished tabletop.

“Ants!” he cried, pushing himself up from the chair with his hands. “I see you there! Ants!”

Shiny black insects the size of his fist hurried out of the light, under the table. Their scissor-like jaws could take off a man’s finger or toe with one snip.

Amaltar let out a shriek and climbed onto the table. He poured forth obscenities at the vermin.

At the far corners of the chamber, the guards did not move to assist their master. No ants, giant or

otherwise, were visible to them. They had witnessed the emperor's bizarre behavior before. The imperial physician's orders were not to intervene unless the emperor was in peril of hurting himself.

"Ants! Ants!"

In the anteroom outside, Nazramin poured himself a glass of wine. He raised it in silent salute toward the closed doors of the room where his brother screamed at invisible tormentors then drained the glass. Setting it down with careful precision, Nazramin chuckled quietly.

Chapter 12

Foes Unmasked

The death of Pelladrom Tumult seemed to have a chilling effect on the gangs; the streets of Daltigoth were quiet in the following days. Word spread, however, that Lord Enkian was on his way with an army to avenge his son's death. Since the Tumult family was a distant offshoot of the Ackals, it was even said he planned to depose Amaltar and become emperor in his place. Whatever the gossip in the alleys and city squares, preparations for the complex coronation continued. On the day of the coronation, Amaltar would present himself at the great gate of Ackal Ergot, on the eastern side of Daltigoth, and demand to be let in. A high noble specially chosen for the task would pose several ritual questions to him. Once Amaltar provided the answers, the gate would be opened. Ackal Ergot had first surveyed the site of his future capital on foot, so the rising emperor was required to walk the two and half leagues from the gate to the Inner City, trailed by his entire household—wives, children, courtiers, servants, and guards.

At the Inner City Amaltar's way would be barred once more. He would demand admission as ruler of the Ergoth Empire, only to be told the emperor already resided within. Touching the gate with a bared sword, Amaltar would symbolically "capture" the Inner City. Within he would find the dead emperor lying enshrined in a great catafalque.

"What's that?" Kiya asked, interrupting Egrin's description of the coming ceremony.

"A catafalque is the raised, curtained bier on which the old emperor will lay. Very elaborate," he told her, then resumed his narrative.

It was because the empire was founded on force and conquest that Amaltar had to enter the catafalque and lightly strike the body of his father with his sword, thereby "defeating" the old emperor.

"Ah, that's why they turn the old one to stone," said Kiya, "so the blow won't damage him."

Egrin went on. "When the old emperor is ritually overcome, the new emperor emerges from the catafalque and is presented with his predecessor's crown, which he places on his own head. He is then Emperor of Ergoth, spiritually as well as temporally."

Tol's little household was gathered around the kitchen table, having a late supper. With only a trio of candles to hold back the gloom, it was an eerie scene, quite unlike the usual cheerful brightness of the room.

"What becomes of the dead emperor?" asked Kiya. Still hampered by her bad knee, she had her leg propped on a chair.

"He is interred in the vault of his ancestors, deep beneath the Inner City plaza. After the new emperor is crowned and enthroned, he receives the oaths of every warlord in the empire."

"That could take days!" Miya exclaimed.

The marshal shrugged. "Usually does."

She shook her head. "Poor old Amaltar! I hope he has good cushions in his chair!"

Tol yawned, and the others professed themselves also ready for rest. Egrin, who slept in the north

wing of the villa with his escort from Juramona, took one candle. Tol took one for himself and snuffed the last. Flanked by the Dom-shu sisters, he wished his mentor a good rest.

The villa was quiet. Miya's hare feet thumped loudly as they climbed the broad, slate-covered stairs to the second floor. For all her stealth in the forest, indoors the younger Dom-shu made far more noise than Kiya, who was limping.

The sisters were once again discussing this fact—rather heatedly—when Kiya suddenly broke off and grabbed the hem of Tol's jerkin, halting him.

“Something up there on the landing moved!”

Tol's candle was as thick as his wrist, but its light was too feeble to illuminate the whole of the great stairway. The landing at the top was covered by a large wine-colored carpet, woven with a golden pattern of circles, lines, and squares. Beyond it, they could see very little down the black corridor.

Tol asked, “What did you see?”

“Something near the floor. It flapped.” Kiya undulated her hand to illustrate what she meant.

Tol took her warning seriously. Kiya was not as imaginative as her sister and not at all prone to seeing things that weren't there. Handing the candle to Miya, he drew his sword and continued slowly up the stairs.

Miya accompanied him, and the glow of the candle flame flickered over chairs against the wall, side tables covered with dwarven bric-a-brac, and suits of armor. It was easy to imagine furtive movement in the heavy shadows, but Tol saw nothing tangible.

“Sister's imagining things!” Miya announced through a yawn. She stomped by Tol, handing him the candle as she passed. “G'night!”

The room the sisters shared was at right angles from the master bedchamber at the end of the hall. Miya vanished inside.

Kiya struggled along with her bandaged knee. She didn't ask for help and wouldn't have accepted it if offered. Many years out of her forest home, she still adhered to the code of a Dom-shu warrior: if you can breathe, stand; if you can see, walk; if you can move, fight.

“There was something here,” she insisted quietly.

“I believe you,” he told her.

Though the deadly attacks that had dogged their journey seemed to have ended with the storm at Thorngoth, Tol had no doubt they could resume at any time.

Once Kiya was in her room, Tol walked the length of the corridor twice, probing along the walls, peering into every corner. Aside from dust and a single desiccated mouse, he found nothing.

His own room was chilly, which was odd. Although summer was giving way to autumn, the day had been quite warm.

Shedding his outer garments, Tol hung his sword belt on the bedpost and crawled under the bedclothes. He settled into the mattress, which smelled of horsehair and pine shavings, and tried not to dwell on thoughts of Valaran, just a short gallop away in the palace. At last he surrendered to sleep.

The air in the room grew colder still. Tol burrowed more deeply under the covers for warmth, but did not wake.

The chill inspired dreams of childhood. As the youngest child, his place was farthest from the hearth, the coldest spot in the house. Some nights he couldn't sleep because his ears ached, or his feet were numb from the cold. His mother had taught him to place a small slab of fieldstone close to the fire before supper. At bedtime, he slipped the hot stone under his patchwork quilt. During one

particularly frigid night, when the icy wind howled outside his family's small hut, he lay on his side, hugging the stone to his chest. Rolling over in his sleep, he'd ended with the slab on top of him.

It was wonderfully warm beneath the stone, but the weight on his chest had made breathing difficult. The stone was too heavy. He might have slumbered on into death had not his father seen his face turning blue and wakened him.

Tension drained from Tol's tired limbs. He was warmer now. The heat was wonderful. If only he could draw breath....

No longer a naive child, Tol jerked awake, his warrior's sense telling him something was amiss. He wasn't dreaming: he really couldn't breathe. Something heavy and thick clung to his face, shutting out air. He tried to raise his hands, thinking to pull away the bedclothes, but his arms were locked to his sides. His legs too were held down by a heavy weight.

Ghostly flashes of light flickered across his vision as he struggled to take in air. He was suffocating! He needed air—now!

Twisting side to side, Tol managed to get his right shoulder up. He put all his strength behind moving one arm, and managed to jerk it awkwardly against the restraint. The smothering wall yielded just a bit.

Tol arched his back, clearing more breathing space, and twisted over onto his face. The darkness around him was close and hot. He wormed his hands out to either side but could find no edge to the terrific weight pressing him more and more strongly into the soft mattress.

The mattress!

Maddened by a growing sense of doom, he used his teeth to rend the sheet beneath him, then attacked the mattress cover itself. By the grace of Corij the ticking was old and tore readily under his frenzied assault. Inside, the stuffing of horsehair and wood shavings was crumbling from age. As he worked his way through, the crushing barrier on top of him clung to his back, pressing him deeper into the torn mattress.

Clawing his way through several spans of stuffing, he at last reach the slatted bottom of the bed. Blood roared in his ears. Sweat—or was it blood?—dripped from his elbows and fingertips. He slammed his fist into the pine slats again and again until they broke apart. With a thump, he fell through to the dusty floor.

Cool air swirled around him, and he inhaled greedily. His head cleared after a dozen breaths.

He crawled to the far side of the bed and peered out. His room was dark and silent. He groped until he felt his scabbard. Freeing it from the bedpost, he pulled it to himself. It was difficult to draw the saber while lying on his belly, but he managed.

Feeling better able to meet whatever might come, Tol rolled out from under the bed and sprang to his feet, blade held ready.

There was no stealthy, pillow-wielding assassin. The room was empty, but the door was open and the great carpet from the corridor outside was draped across the bed. Woven from three layers of wool and jute, the huge carpet was very heavy, easily capable of suffocating a sleeping man. Who had put it over him?

Tol circled around the end of the bed, intending to rouse the house to search for an intruder. As he passed the foot of the bed, the carpet suddenly shifted, rolling up and tripping him. He stumbled forward, and great folds of wine-colored wool flung themselves over him. The carpet was moving like a living thing!

He thrust his saber at it. The carpet undulated, rolling him over and over, trying to smother him in its folds. With both hands on his sword hilt, he impaled the wild rug. It flapped and shivered, hut he

sawed at the tough weave, rending a considerable hole.

The carpet bunched itself beneath him, rose up, and hurled him off. He flew through the air and hit the far wall with a crash. His sword remained buried in the carpet.

Shaking off the impact, Tol got to his knees in time to see the enormous rug dragging more of its bulk through the door. It filled his room, the intricate pattern of gold circles and squares looming higher and higher. Why wasn't the nullstone affecting the ensorcelled rug?

Tol brushed a hand over the hip of his smallclothes. With wide-eyed alarm, he felt more carefully. The Irda artifact was not in its pocket.

He turned the material over with frantic fingers. The threads had pulled loose, making a hole in the pocket. The nullstone had dropped out, somewhere.

Fear sizzled through Tol. Several hundredweight of living, murderous carpet might have seemed ridiculous had not the thing's lethal intent been so clear.

He climbed over upturned furniture and made his way toward the window. The drop was straight to the street below. If it came to it, he would jump and risk a broken leg over being suffocated by an enchanted rug.

The sound of splintering wood drew his eyes to the door. So much carpet was trying to force its way in that the doorframe had cracked. The carpet wrapped its folds around the bedposts, snapping the polished wood like twigs.

Voices from the hall heralded the arrival of the Dom-shu sisters.

"Get back!" Tol cried. "The carpet's been hexed! It's alive!"

Miya drew too near and the rug slapped her in the chest, throwing her to the bare stone floor of the corridor. She bounced up, nose bleeding, eyes wide.

Kiya, still slowed by her injury, ordered her sister to fetch Egrin. As Miya raced away, Kiya sized up the situation.

Tol was perched on a side table, clinging to a sconce as the carpet coiled beneath him like a monstrous snake. Another few folds of height and it would rise up and crush him against the wall.

Kiya disappeared briefly then returned with a poleaxe from one of the displays in the hall. Not bothering to chop at the rug, she used the sharp tip to spike several of its folds to the floor. The rug strained against the impediment but was prevented from reaching Tol.

"Good!" Tol shouted. "Get more spears—I don't think one will hold it!"

The carpet tugged and squirmed, working the poleaxe back and forth. By the time Kiya reappeared with an armload of ancient weapons, the carpet was almost free again.

Kiya hurled a spear toward Tol. It stuck, quivering, in the wall beside him. He worked it free and jammed it hard into the carpet writhing at his feet. Kiya added three more poleaxes.

"Look out!" Tol cried.

The rug surged toward the door. Like a purple-red tidal wave, the heavy fabric hit the cluster of pole arms restraining it, snapping their shafts.

A wall of rug knocked Kiya flat. When the carpet began flowing over her, she tried to struggle free, but her bad knee betrayed her. Wool covered her face.

"No!" Tol shouted.

Heedless of danger, he leaped from the table onto the rippling rug. It surged and twisted, trying to engulf him. He punched and kicked his way across the room, but the carpet finally managed to send him sprawling on hands and knees.

A broken bedpost lay nearby and he grabbed it. Using it like a quarterstaff, he fended off humps of carpet and reached Kiya at last.

Dropping the post, Tol clawed at the thick wool with his bare hands. He cleared Kiya's face but could not free her. Even bringing to bear all his considerable strength, he could do no more than hold the quivering fabric away from her head.

"Behind you!" Kiya sputtered. At Tol's back, the carpet was gathering itself high to crush them both.

Egrin, Miya, and the men of the marshal's retinue came thundering down the hall. When they saw the battle was not with assassins or thieves but with an ordinary hall carpet, the men halted and stared, transfixed.

"Sister! Help!"

Kiya's cry brought Miya forward, shoving men left and right. She snatched the lamp carried by the nearest Ergothian and hurled it over Tol's head. The oil spilled on the carpet and ignited. The carpet spasmed visibly Egrin followed suit with his own lamp, and the others did likewise. Soon, a smoky fire was burning on the thrashing carpet. The terrible pressure on Tol and Kiya slackened as the rug surged first to one wall then the other, blindly seeking escape from the flames. When it found the window, it smashed through the shutters and poured itself out. Paces of bulky fabric hissed over the sill to land with a loud crash in the street below.

Rescuers and rescued sorted themselves out. Egrin pulled Tol to his feet, and they went immediately to Kiya, who was sitting up with her sister's help.

"Filthy rug!" Kiya said, coughing and spitting dirt. "Didn't those dwarves ever beat it?"

Miya snorted. "Would you?"

They went to the broken window. The hall carpet, twenty paces long and eight wide, lay in a mound on the pavement, burning fitfully. Now and then an edge twitched feebly. The stench of burning wool was sickening.

Egrin sent his men to search the villa for further menaces. Kiya put a hand on Tol's shoulder and squeezed.

"Thank you," she said simply. Weaponless, he'd stormed across the room to save her. Tol patted her long, rawboned hand.

When he was alone again, Tol immediately searched for the millstone. To his vast relief, he found the precious artifact in his discarded clothing. It was undamaged. It must have fallen out of his pocket while he was undressing.

A simple accident, yet it had very nearly led to more deaths.

Tol lit a candle. By its meager light, he got to work with needle and thread to repair the worn pocket.

* * * * *

Dawn was not far off. A heavy dew had fallen on the sleeping city, silvering the worn cobblestones in the street. A taste of autumn was in the still air, hinting at the cold that would grow stronger with every passing day.

Wrapped in a brown cloak against the damp, Tol stood before the door of a sumptuous residence. The gates were barred and the door certainly bolted, but that wouldn't stop him.

He grasped the black iron chain securing the gate and drew it taut. Number Six flashed in the pre-

dawn light, and the links parted. He shoved and the gate swung inward without a sound.

The courtyard beyond was tidy, paving and granite benches scrubbed clean, but something about the scene bothered Tol. The answer struck him—nothing grew here. Every fine house in Daltigoth had a garden, with flowers or vines, a tree or two for shade. Even the poorer domiciles boasted a flowering bush or some sort of greenery to ease the harshness of endless stone. The courtyard of Mandes's grand mansion was as sterile as a quarry.

Approaching the bronze door, Tol felt a flicker of heat over his hands and face, a fleeting touch, like a baby's breath. Of course Mandes would have wards around his home to keep out unwanted visitors. For Tol, with the Irda artifact firmly in his possession again, these were no more of an impediment than a wisp of fog.

The door latch yielded to the keen edge of his steel blade as had the gate chain. Unlike the gate, though, these doors squeaked as they swung open, rousing the guard dozing on a stool just inside the door.

He was a hulking brute, not entirely human. When he spotted Tol striding in, saber in hand, he gave a surprised grunt and vaulted off his perch. He grabbed frantically for the halberd tucked beneath his arm.

Tol wasted no time. He lopped off the halberd's head with a single two-handed stroke, presented the tip of his blade to the guard's thick gullet, and hissed, "Get out."

The guard wisely wasted no time. He grunted once and went out the door. Tol heard his heavy footfalls crossing the courtyard and going out the gate.

A great house such as this would have a maze of additions and extra chambers, but Tol reasoned the layout of its core would be much like his villa in the Quarry district, built on the same pattern as most of the finer houses in Daltigoth.

So it proved. Beyond the foyer was an antechamber of moderate size, richly decorated with tapestries, gilded sconces, and a thick carpet.

Eyeing the milk-colored rug warily, Tol stamped it with one foot and poked it with his saber. It lay quietly, as a good carpet should.

A wide, doorless opening led to a hall with a broad staircase leading up. He dropped his cloak to the floor and strode into the hall. At once he came upon a gray-haired, stooped man, bearing a tray of brass cups and folded linens.

The sight of the grim-faced warrior, naked blade in hand, sent the blood draining from the old servant's lined face. The tray wobbled in his hands.

Tol put a hand on the tray to steady it. "Quiet," he said evenly. "Not a sound. You know who I am?"

A nervous nod. "Lord Tolandruth."

"I am here to kill your master."

The man's knees shook violently, setting the cups to rattling again. "I said no sound!" Tol hissed. The servant clenched his fingers hard on the edge of the tray to steady it.

"What is your name?" Tol asked.

"Yefferin, my lord. P-p-p-please don't kill my master!"

"Can't be helped. He owes me many years and many lives."

Tol ordered him to set the tray aside and lead the way to Mandes's bedchamber. Teeth chattering in fright, Yefferin did as he was bid, mounting the steps with a halting, shuffling gait. His obvious terror embarrassed Tol.

"Buck up, old man. You're in no danger," he said.

Yefferin's expression showed how little he believed that, but he mustered his courage and proceeded up the steps at a slightly faster clip.

At the landing they bore left down a side corridor brightly lit by wall lamps. It did not surprise Tol that Mandes would spend good money on oil to keep the hall illuminated all night. The sorcerer had reason to fear the dark. Miya, the indefatigable devotee of gossip, had collected many tales of his perfidy. Half the wealthy households in the city would like to slit Mandes's throat. The other half were equally determined to protect the rogue wizard, who performed so many illicit favors for them. Until now Mandes's life had been delicately-balanced. Tol's return upset everything.

Ornate double doors at the end of the passage plainly denoted the master's private suite. Yefferin halted several steps away. Tol brushed past him.

"My lord!" said the old servant. "Beware—there are spells—"

Tol shifted Number Six to his left hand and opened one of the doors. Nothing untoward occurred, and Yefferin gasped.

"Seems safe enough," Tol remarked.

Inside, the room was a shambles. Shelves had been swept clean of their contents, tables and chairs overturned, cabinets opened and ransacked. Ancient manuscripts, no doubt extremely rare, crackled under Tol's feet.

Yefferin gave a shocked cry. He fell to his knees and began picking up the rare scrolls, clutching them to his narrow chest.

There was no sign of Mandes, but Tol spotted a faint light coming from behind the far shelf. Lifting his sword, he advanced rapidly.

A door in the stone wall stood slightly ajar. It blended so perfectly with the wall that, had it been closed, Tol would've missed it completely. He kicked it open and stormed through.

One person was in the small room. He sat with a hip propped on the only piece of furniture, a small table. Light glinted on his red hair.

"Where's Mandes?" Tol demanded.

Prince Nazramin's expression was mocking. "Well, I see it's true—farmers do rise early." The prince slid off the table and faced Tol, adding, "That isn't a hoe in your hand, is it?"

Tol lowered his sword. "Don't worry: I'm not here to harvest you." He repeated his demand for Mandes.

"The churl has fled. Fortunately, I know where." Tol waited, blocking the only door, and Nazramin added, "He's gone to the palace to throw himself on my brother's mercy."

Tol ground his teeth in frustration. Mandes, knowing his latest attack had failed, feared Tol would do exactly what he had done, show up at his door with vengeance in mind. He had scuttled off to the imperial palace for protection.

Yefferin appeared like a ghost at Tol's elbow. Seeing the royal intruder occupying his master's secret sanctum, the elderly servant yelped in fright. He fell to his knees, keeping the armed warrior between himself and the capricious prince.

"Why are you here?" Tol asked suspiciously.

The prince's hand strayed to the hilt of the ornate saber at his hip. "It's not your place to question me," he replied, brown eyes narrowing.

"The question has been asked. Answer it."

Nazramin smiled—or rather, his mouth drew up in a nominally friendly way, but above it, his eyes were as cruel as ever.

“Are you giving me orders, farmer?”

Tol tensed for an attack. “Yes.”

The false smile didn’t waver. “By rights I should have you broken. Hung from the lowliest gibbet in the city. Your friends and retainers would hang beside you—those I didn’t sell into slavery, that is.”

He meant his ugly threats, but Nazramin did not dare harm Tol, not while Tol commanded his own army and bore the title of Emperor’s Champion. Neither could Tol presume to challenge an imperial prince. Still, he would not take the man’s insults any longer, not without giving some back.

“I’ll ask one more time,” he said, hard gaze and keen blade unwavering. “Why are you here?”

Keeping one hand on his sword hilt but not drawing the blade, Nazramin advanced until he was nose to nose with Tol. Being slightly taller, he sneered down at the fuming warrior.

“I am here to tell you that your day of reckoning is coming,” Nazramin said. “Everything you cherish will fall into my hands—treasure, titles, trinkets, and all your people. And the lady you love—I wonder what will happen to her on that day?”

He let the question hang in the narrow space between them. Tol felt as though he’d been dashed with icy water. Was it possible Nazramin knew of his love for Valaran? How could he have found out?

His chaotic thoughts showed plainly on his face, and Nazramin chuckled. “Yes, I know your little secret. She’s quite a prize, isn’t she? Who knew the little bookworm would become so delectable?”

If Tol had been hotly angry before, now cold fury washed over him, making it difficult to draw breath.

“Leave her out of this,” he whispered, emotion quivering in every syllable. “Defame her, even speak her name again, and I’ll kill you where you stand. I’ve shed royal blood before. It flows just as freely as common stock.”

It was Nazramin’s turn to believe the threat. The cold smile left his face and he glared at Tol. “I’ll keep your dirty secret because it suits me,” he said. “Now get out of my way!”

Tol remained rooted to the spot. The murderous fury in his heart made him bold.

“Why do you hate me so? I’ve never done you an injury, and I’ve always served the empire loyally.”

Nazramin stepped back, surveying Tol with amazement. “That I am forced to speak to you on anything near equal terms is a gross insult. To see you walk the halls of my ancestors’ palace as though you belonged there... is unforgivable!”

Seeing Tol still did not understand, Nazramin went back to the table and leaned on it. He drew a deep breath, mastering strong emotions of his own, then said, “Far from being a boon to the empire, I consider your successes one of the greatest threats ever to the state. You are common as dirt, yet you command armies, win battles, and walk with the high lords of Ergoth as though you were one of them.

“The empire, all of this”—the prince made a broad gesture—“was taken by force from lesser peoples. Weaker tribes and inferior races succumbed to the might of the Great Horde because it is the law of nature and the gods that those born to strength should rule those who have none. Invert that order, and you have chaos. For you, a farmer’s son, to show ability as a warrior, to lead men, win battles, even defeat well-born enemies like Morthur Dermount and Pelladrom Tumult is a travesty of nature.” He frowned deeply. “Your existence offends not only me, it offends the gods!”

Tol laughed, a short, harsh sound. “Now you speak for the gods as well as all Ergoth?” he mocked, sheathing his saber. “I knew you were a cruel man, Nazramin, but I never imagined you were mad!”

The prince came off the table, taut as a great cat smelling blood. Tol's hand flashed to his sword hilt, and Nazramin, mindful of Tol's fighting prowess, halted but did not back down.

"We'll see who's mad," he said slowly. "Whatever distortion of nature allowed your rise cannot endure forever. When you fall, little farmer, I shall be there. I am patient. I can wait for everything to fall into place, but I shall be there."

He pushed by Tol, who let him go. Passing Yeffrin still groveling on the floor, the furious prince vented his spleen by kicking the old man in the ribs. Whimpering, Yeffrin rolled into a ball amidst his master's scattered manuscripts.

Tol helped Yeffrin to a chair. As the old man held his ribs and gasped for breath, Tol considered the ransacked chamber. Why had the prince been here? Had he warned Mandes? Or was he seeking something? Documents that linked him to the nefarious sorcerer? It was a disquieting thought. If his two greatest enemies were allied, Tol's quest for justice would be all the harder.

He re-entered the small, secret room. On the floor next to the table lay a crumpled square of black linen. Judging by the creases it held, it had been a covering for the little table.

Something crunched under his feet. Bending down, Tol pressed his fingers to a smear of gray flakes on the floor. The weak light showed him they were soft metal shavings, perhaps lead. He had no idea what they might signify.

After making sure Yeffrin was all right, Tol departed. He left Mandes a token of his visit, to make his feelings plain to the elusive sorcerer. In the entry hall were several fine statues depicting famous spellcasters of the past. Among them Mandes had immodestly placed an image of himself. With two strokes of his steel blade, Tol hacked the head from the bronze statue. It hit the floor with a loud clang.

Outdoors, morning sunbathed Tol's face, soothing him like a balm. He had missed Mandes, but twice in one night he had dared death and twice survived.

Chapter 13

The Crown of Ackal Ergot

The villa was alive with activity when Tol returned. Egrin and his retinue, in full battle gear, were arrayed in the front court. The Dom-shu sisters had donned their best outfits and were pinning strips of white cloth to their sleeves.

“Where’ve you been, husband?” Miya demanded. “There’s much to do, and you go off wandering in the middle of the night!”

“What’s happening?” he asked.

“The funeral is today!” Kiya said. At the same time, Miya declared, “The coronation is today!”

A herald had come to the villa just after sunrise with a message for Lord Tolandruth. Egrin had accepted it in his stead. The message prompted the marshal to rouse everyone in the villa, ordering them to prepare for the grand dual ceremony.

Tol sought his old friend.

Egrin explained, “The emperor, in consultation with his privy council and the college of wizards, has declared this to be the day he will be crowned.” Looking somewhat embarrassed, he added in a lower voice, “It was felt the emperor would be safer if he is crowned before Enkian Tumult arrives.”

He handed Tol a flattened tube of parchment. “There was a personal message for you as well.”

By order of His Majesty Ackal IV, Tol read silently, Lord Tolandruth will present himself at the imperial palace at once.

Exhausted by the long and eventful night during which he’d slept only briefly, Tol stared blindly at the terse summons. What did it mean?

Egrin took the parchment from his slack fingers and said gently, “The women have prepared your gear. Go inside, my lord, and they will assist you.”

Miya and Kiya were in the entry hall, standing by neat piles of armor.

“Time to make ready, Husband!” Kiya boomed.

Wearily, he nodded. He started to undress, but was so listless and slow Miya clucked her tongue and took over the task herself.

She chided him for his gallivanting ways, then added more softly, “Did you do what you sought to do?”

Tol shook his head. “He wasn’t home.”

“Never mind. Justice will catch Master Mandes in time.”

Miya stripped him down to his breechnap, and Kiya took a wet sponge to his back. Tol felt like horse being groomed. He was so tired, his head swimming with thoughts of Mandes, Nazramin, and the coming coronation, that he bore the sisters’ ministrations in silence.

Soon they were buckling him into his newly polished armor. A kilt of mourning white was fastened

around his waist, and a snowy mantle of gilt-edged silk secured to rivets on his pauldrons. Lastly, Kiya passed his sword belt around his waist and fastened it so the dwarf-forged saber hung at his left hand.

The sisters stood back to admire their work.

“His eyes are red,” Miya remarked, frowning.

Kiya shrugged. “Can’t help that.” She limped in closer and adjusted the drape of Tol’s mantle. Still not satisfied, she grumbled, “What can you do—one shoulder is bigger than the other!”

“His sword arm,” Miya agreed sagely. “Husband, in the future try to use your left arm more.”

He had to smile at that. “I’ll try.”

Egrin had promised to send a replacement from Juramona for Tol’s beloved mount Shadow. In the meantime, the marshal’s men had groomed and saddled their best horse for Tol. The Juramona contingent was drawn up in formation, one man holding the horse’s reins. With a clash of iron, they saluted and cried in unison, “Long live the Emperor!”

Long live Amaltar indeed, Tol thought. So much depended on his continued existence—not merely Tol’s life, but the lives of all his friends and companions, not to mention the stability and welfare of the entire empire.

He swung into the saddle. Kiya whispered to her sister, and Miya hurried to Tol, one hand concealed behind her back.

“Husband, this is—” She reddened. “This is for you!”

She held out a large, splendidly formed white rose, cut from the villa’s roof garden. Tol was touched, and amused. The Dom-shu were not the types to give flowers. He was sure they had competed to see who would present him with the rose, and Miya had lost.

He took the beautiful flower from her and slipped its shortened stem under one of his cuirass straps. The flower’s head was nearly as broad as his hand, yet its aroma wasn’t overpowering.

With a wave, he led his honor guard out of the courtyard into the sunny morning.

Every street, every lane in the city was alive with activity. Windows and doors bore twin swatches of colored cloth, white for the late Pakin III, red for the new emperor, Ackal IV. Detachments of City Guards had taken up positions along the route Amaltar would traverse from outside the walls to the Inner City, keeping the way clear of onlookers. Already an army of pushcarts had appeared, their owners peddling tidbits and trinkets to the gathering crowd. The air was alive with excitement, half-anxious, half-festive. It was a contagious feeling. By the time Tol had ridden a quarter-league, his fatigue was gone, vanquished by the tonic of this great event.

The gate of the Inner City was closed and barred. A small postern gate beside it was open and manned by Imperial Horse Guards, dismounted for the moment. They hailed Tol.

“Go at once, my lord!” said the captain of the guard. “His Majesty awaits in the Tower of High Sorcery!”

Tol rode on. Egrin and his men remained outside.

The Imperial Plaza was a forest of alternating red and white standards. The banners hung limply in the still air. A wide lane led through them, from the great gate to the center of the plaza. There the path forked, one branch leading to the wizards’ enclave, the other to the steps of the imperial palace. Guards marched and countermarched from the palace to the Riders’ Hall on the far side of the plaza.

At the Riders’ Hall, warlords from every corner of the empire were collecting; red, rather than white, predominated in their attire. The tide of observance was turning from mourning for the dead ruler to celebration of the living one.

Tol rode to the Tower of High Sorcery at a measured pace. This was due in part to the solemnity of the occasion, but also because the plaza's mosaic pavement had been covered by white flower petals—not roses, as it happened, but narrow chrysanthemum and jasmine petals. The thick, soft layer made for uncertain footing for his horse. The heavy scent of jasmine, stirred up by his mount's hooves, was nearly overwhelming to both man and beast.

Upon reaching the boundary of the wizards' garden, Tol paused and looked back at the palace. The vast pile of marble and granite, surrounded by drifts of flower petals, resembled a mountain rising from a field of snow. A shadow moved slowly across the columned facade. Tol shaded his eyes, and looked up. A small grayish cloud was drifting over the Inner City.

Strange. The sorcerers always maintained tight control of the weather over the palace, banishing all fog, rain, snow, or clouds. A cloud over the imperial residence was like a smear of mud on a spotless mantle—it shouldn't be tolerated. Why weren't the wizards doing their duty?

Then Tol remembered. Mandes had sought sanctuary in the Inner City. The stray cloud could be his doing. He was certainly a blot on the coronation.

After the teeming bustle in the streets and the regimented pomp of the plaza, the garden surrounding the Tower of High Sorcery seemed still as a graveyard. The first hints of autumn color were beginning to paint some trees, and Tol caught fleeting glimpses of wizards, some in red robes, some in white. All gave him a wide berth.

By day, the tower was almost too bright to bear. At regular intervals along its height, small cupolas sprouted from the main spire like buds on an apple tree branch. Oval blocks of translucent alabaster were set in the thick walls to provide light to the interior.

A line of golden chariots stood by the entrance. Each was drawn by a pair of white or bone-gray horses. All the farms around Daltigoth must have been emptied to assemble so many pale animals. Young charioteers stood by their conveyances. They were the sons and daughters of favored courtiers. Among them Tol recognized Talmaz, one of Valaran's brothers.

A boy appeared to hold his reins, and Tol dismounted. At the door to the tower, a quartet of young wizards, arms folded over their chests, barred his way.

"No weapons within the tower," said one. Tol surrendered his saber, along with the dagger he'd bought to replace the one lost in the sea at Thorgoth.

The great hall in the base of the tower was a fog of floral incense, so thick it seemed to catch in his throat. He smothered a cough with one fist. The silent crowd inside looked up when he entered.

Temporary cloth walls hanging from head-high frames divided the normally open space into small rooms and narrow passages. Around the tower's interior were gathered the favored relatives and courtiers of the old and new emperors, easily identifiable by their distinctive colors. Chamberlain Valdid came forward.

"The Emperor awaits," he said solemnly, directing Tol to the entrance into the corridor of screens.

Tol wondered which emperor he meant. The inhabitants of the Inner City made no distinction between the living ruler and the dead one.

As he wound his way along the passage, Tol gradually became aware of low chanting. The galleries above the circular hall were lined with wizards. The sound of the deep, repetitive chanting caused the hair on the back of his neck to bristle. As a youth he'd seen an assemblage of mages levitate huge building blocks into place for the foundation of this tower. Benign though the chant likely was, he was glad he carried the millstone.

Small alcoves appeared at intervals along the spiral passage.

In each of these someone close to Pakin III or Amaltar knelt, meditating. The wives of the late emperor appeared first, in descending order of precedence. Amaltar's mother, who would have been

the dowager empress, had died several years before. Even the youngest of Pakin III's wives was old enough to be Tol's mother.

After the imperial widows came Amaltar's wives, from the newest, Lady Woriyan, to his first, Lady Thura. Tol's heart beat a little faster as his progress brought him closer to Valaran, but before he reached what would be her place in the series, strong hands seized his arm and dragged him through a slit in the curtains.

Startled at first, Tol recovered, and fumbled to grab the wrists of his attacker. To his astonishment, he saw it was Valaran who'd pulled him aside.

"What—?" he began, only to be silenced by a stinging slap on the face.

"Do you know what you put me through?" she demanded in a fierce whisper. She was so close that he felt her warm breath on his face.

"Me? What have I done?" he protested, utterly at sea.

Hissing at him to keep his voice down, she drew back a few steps, whirled, and glared at him silently.

She was stunning, wrapped in scarlet silk from head to toe. Her chestnut hair fell to her waist in a thick, intricate braid interlaced with crimson thread and golden beads. The starched red headdress accentuated the pallor of her face, a pallor further heightened by a thin layer of powder. Her lips were painted deep ruby. She resembled a spirit wrought in fire and ice.

There was a brief flash of something in her green eyes—pleasure?—before she folded her arms and spoke to him in a low tone that dripped venom.

"For more than ten years I've yearned for you every day and hated you in the same breath!"

"Hated me? Why? What did I do?"

Her beautiful face worked as she struggled with a deep conflict. Finally she snapped, "Nothing! That's the truth of it—you did nothing!"

Tersely, Valaran related the false tale told her: that Tol had asked to remain away from Daltigoth because he didn't want to come back. He didn't want to be her toy or Amaltar's lackey. He had fathered a child by Miya. This last almost caused Tol to shatter the solemn air in the tower with laughter. Child? Miya? If he'd tried such a thing, he wouldn't be alive before Valaran now!

The look on her face as much as the need for quiet stifled his amusement. The lie obviously had hurt Valaran deeply. He could only imagine her pain at hearing such things about him. He held out his arms. She shunned them, so he took her by the shoulders and demanded to know who had concocted the tales.

"Nazramin—and the sorcerer Mandes," she said, exactly as he had expected. "They concocted false letters, then prompted others to confirm the stories."

"When did you find out the truth? And how?"

"I have had you watched since you returned." Tol recoiled a bit at that, but she went on. "I hired agents to strike up conversations with your forest women, in the market, in shops." Valaran essayed a slight smile. "It became obvious they were devoted to you, but not as your lovers. There is no child, either."

"I could have told you that!" he said. "Why didn't you seek me out?"

She drew herself up. "I am a Princess Consort."

Her haughty expression collapsed in sorrow, and his heart went out to her. To have endured such a lie! He tried to draw her to him, but still she resisted. He would not overpower her by force, so she kept him at arms' length.

“Fool,” she called him, but her eyes were bright. “You did stay away too long. It’s too late for us.”

He denied it. She said, “Long ago, we were young and stupid. It’s one thing to deceive a prince, but I cannot betray the Emperor of Ergoth.”

“Instead you betray yourself? And me?”

Valaran’s whole body trembled. He tightened his grip on her shoulders. “It’s impossible,” she said flatly.

He let go. Since she didn’t move away, he did.

“I haven’t been a monk over the years, Val. I’ve known other women…”

Her eyes flashed. “Now you’re going to brag to me about your conquests?”

“No!” She could be so infuriating! “What I mean is, I never forgot you. Not one of them could ever make me do that.”

Silence ensued. All Tol could hear was her breathing, and the thudding of his own heart.

“What will become of us?” she asked softly.

The sound of heavy footfalls reached them. Tol took her hand and pressed it to his lips.

“The Rumbold villa, in the Quarry district,” he whispered, eyes boring into hers. “Come when you can!”

Immediately, he ducked back through the partition into the airy passage and resumed his approach. In moments he was overtaken by a band of Riders of the Horde clad as he was in armor and mourning cloth. He recognized most of them, including Hojan, an officer in the Army of the North. The warriors halted.

“My lord,” Hojan said, “I rejoice to see you! We heard many times you were killed on the journey here.”

“If people keep reporting my death,” Tol said wryly, “one day they’re bound to be right.”

They fell in behind him and resumed their march. In hushed tones Hojan described their own agonizing progress to Daltigoth. It had seemed as though the gods and nature were conspiring to keep them away. Every time the Riders approached a stream, a storm blew up, transforming the sleepy rivulet into a raging torrent. Once, the column wandered for three days, lost in a fog that refused to lift, even at high noon.

Mist-Maker. Tol kept the thought to himself.

They passed other alcoves and other wives. When they reached Valaran’s niche, she was there, kneeling in a properly reverent position. Eyes closed, in profile she resembled a fine ivory cameo.

Once past her, one of the Ergothians murmured, “A beauty, but cold, they say.”

Tol bit his lip to hold back a grin. The notion of Valaran, his Valaran, being cold was ludicrous.

The warriors finally reached the center of the domed hall. There, under the atrium where Pakin III had lain in state, stood Amaltar. Priests of Corij were arraying him in bits of ancient bronze armor. Tol and the Riders went to their knees.

“The arms of Ackal Ergot!” one warrior whispered.

Amaltar was being dressed in the very armor worn by the founder of the empire. It did not fit him well. Ackal Ergot had been a powerful man; the breadth of his cuirass as well as his infamous deeds testified to that fact. The priests would place a piece of armor on Amaltar’s lesser frame, then take it away and pad it with wads of linen. Ackal Ergot’s greaves stretched from his descendant’s ankles to well above his knees. The tasset, a skirt of bronze meant to hang to the tops of the thighs, nearly brushed the tops of the greaves.

Amaltar looked much better than he had the last time Tol had seen him, however. His skin was still sallow and his shoulders stooped, but some of the old firmness had returned to his expression. He beckoned the men forward and greeted each by name, saving Tol for last.

Tol replied, "Greetings, and best wishes on this mighty day, Your Majesty."

"A great deal of nonsense, isn't it?" said Amaltar, holding out his arms so the front half of Ackal Ergot's cuirass could be fitted to his chest. "Important nonsense, of course. Tradition matters so much in affairs like this."

Once he was strapped into his ancestor's bronze breastplate, Amaltar called for a stool. He sat down heavily, glad to take the weight off his feet. He seemed suddenly old to Tol, far more than his fifty-odd years.

"I summoned you men particularly to be my honor guard," he said. "The ceremony requires that no one walk ahead of me, but nothing prohibits an escort walking alongside."

"You, Lord Tolandruth, will walk behind me—bearing this." Amaltar snapped his fingers, and Valdid appeared from the curtained labyrinth. He carried a flat golden case in his arms. Red-faced with strain—the case was obviously quite heavy—the chamberlain hastened to the new emperor's side.

Amaltar pushed the face of his signet ring into a hole in the front of the box and twisted his hand. With a click, the lid of the box released.

Tol wasn't sure what he was expecting to see, perhaps a jeweled necklace or a ceremonial dagger. He wasn't prepared for what Amaltar lifted from the case. It was a simple circlet of white metal, darkly speckled with age. Neither gold nor silver, the circlet was innocent of jewels or engraving of any sort. It looked like very old iron.

"The crown of Ackal Ergot," said Amaltar, holding the head-sized ring reverently.

The warriors stared in awe. This was the most legendary artifact in the realm, the original crown worn by the first emperor on the day he proclaimed the Ergoth Empire. As befitted a conqueror, it was made from Ackal's own sword, edges blunted and hammered to fit his regal brow. The crown was kept in the vaults beneath the palace, seeing the light of day only during coronations. The usual imperial crown was a golden one, made at the order of Ackal Ergot's son, the second emperor, Ackal II Dermount.

Amaltar returned the iron crown to its red velvet bag and placed it carefully back in the case. He closed the lid, locked it, then bade Tol come forward and take the case from the sweating Valdid.

Tol bowed deeply. "I am honored beyond words, Majesty!"

Amaltar smiled thinly. "It's the only blade I'll allow in my presence. Do take care of it." A veil seemed to cover his countenance. "They say Ackal's sword was tempered by the fire of the captive dragon Blackwurm, and quenched in the blood of a hundred foes. Do you think that's true?"

Tol supported the heavy gold case with both arms as he answered, "Ackal Ergot was a mighty man, Your Majesty. Heroes of the past accomplished many tremendous deeds."

Amaltar took his ancestor's bronze helmet from a priest and perched it on his knee. "Ackal Ergot was no hero. He was a bloodthirsty savage."

The other warriors were shocked at hearing the founder disparaged, but Tol remembered being privy to similar opinions from old Pakin III.

Amaltar added, "But he did have vision."

Oropash appeared, trailed by the senior wizards of the two orders. The chief of the White Robes was pink-cheeked and well-scrubbed, and he wore a crisp robe of shining silk. His mostly bald pate was newly shaven for the day's ceremonies. He was already sweating.

Tol remembered his predecessor, Yoraly. She had been an altogether different sort, already ancient by the time he'd met her and tough as boot leather. A sharp, conniving rogue like Mandes could easily get the better of one like Oropash. He was a willow tree, bending before Mandes's storm. Yoraly had been an oak.

It was time to depart. To create the illusion Amaltar was outside the city prior to "storming" it, the imperial entourage would depart Daltigoth incognito, then form up on the road before the Great Ackal Gate. Lower ranking wizards handed out identical hooded gray robes that all, including the emperor, were to don.

Oropash and Amaltar led the group out of the tower. The imperial consorts and their offspring took to their chariots and were driven away. More chariots arrived for the imperial party.

As Tol climbed aboard with Hojan and the charioteer, he saw the white catafalque rising above the forest of banners in the plaza. Nearly journey's end for Amaltar, this was the beginning of a far longer voyage for the spirit of Pakin III.

One at a time, the chariots rattled through a narrow postern in the south wall of the Inner City, behind the wizards' enclave. The sun was well up by now and the day promised to be hot. The single cloud hovering over the palace had grown denser and darker. Tol wondered if there would be a storm. It seemed impossible, especially on this day.

The streets were thronged. A wedge of cavalry cleared the way for the chariots. People high and low from all over the empire had journeyed to Daltigoth for this day, this moment. City merchants and country gentry, laborers and craftsmen, farmers and their families, all passed in a blur.

Tol noticed a brown-haired man about his age leaning on his hay-fork, gripping it with large, work-worn hands. But for the hand of fate and the grace of the gods, that could have been Tol standing by the wayside watching the speeding chariots instead of riding in one.

A surprising number of other races were represented.

Tol saw gnomes and dwarves, as well as woodland elves in leather and face-paint. A quartet of Silvanesti elves, elegantly attired in silver and green, had hired human guards to keep the crowd back from them, but the hirelings couldn't stop the curious from gawking. The crowd found the mysterious Silvanesti as great a treat as the coming coronation.

Even rarer folk appeared: centaurs, wild and swarthy; even Tarsans, with their characteristic flat cloth hats and canvas sailors' trews. Tol wondered whether Hanira had come to the coronation. He sincerely hoped not. Life was complicated enough just now.

Foresters wearing animal skins jostled cheek by jowl with kender. Bare-chested herdsmen from the south jockeyed for a good view with stocky yeomen from the northland coast. Most remarkable of all, Tol spotted a few minotaurs in the crowd. Their bulls' heads towered above those around them; each carried an ax of heroic proportions resting on one massive shoulder. No one had bothered (or dared) to ask the minotaurs to put their lethal weapons away.

The chariot squadron bumped through the smaller Tanners' Port. Bearing off to the right, they soon caught sight of the rest of the imperial procession forming on the high road before the closed Ackal Gate.

In a swirl of crimson silk and satin, consorts and children fell into place, followed by a mass of courtiers and their families. Behind them was a far more formidable array of warlords and riders, all on foot today. Ritual demanded Amaltar enter the city on his own two feet, and no one could be allowed to upstage him by being mounted.

Everyone in the coronation party, even the children, was given a blunt wooden sword and tiny buckler. This made them the army of the "conqueror." In all the parade numbered almost two thousand souls.

The chariots drew up at the head of the line. Amaltar got down and discarded his gray robe. He was sweating already in Ackal Ergot's oversized armor, and the disguise only added to his discomfort. The rest of his honor guard followed his example, leaving gray robes piled along both sides of the road. The sun was at their backs, shining on the walls of Daltigoth.

Valdid went forward to consult with Amaltar. The assembly, already fairly quiet, hushed to silence as the chamberlain and emperor conversed. Valdid had been studying the coronation ritual since Pakin III died and was giving his liege a few final pointers. Although Valdid was a decade older, it was Amaltar who looked the elder.

With a final bow, Valdid withdrew, taking his place in line with his family. Amaltar went down on one knee and crossed his arms on his chest, making his prayer to Corij, patron deity of the House of Ackal. When he stood again, five of his eldest children came forward. The three boys and two girls were all in their teens and dressed as warriors. They bore simple instruments—two drums, a sistrum, and cymbals. The leader of the musicians was Amaltar's eldest son and heir, Prince Hatonar.

To Tol's eye, Hatonar looked soft and pampered—his hair elaborately curled and his scarlet raiment chased with layers of gilt. Most princes spent at least some time on campaign with a horde, but Hatonar had never been out of Daltigoth.

The five youths were the only people who would precede Amaltar. He gave them leave, and they set out to the beat of their drums. At an interval of ten paces came Amaltar. Tol counted to ten then followed his imperial master. The honor guard was close behind him, and the rest of the coronation party fell into place. All proceeded with stately, measured tread up the wide, paved ramp that led to the Ackal Gate.

The largest and most elaborate gate in the entire city, the Ackal actually comprised three gates, one monumental portal flanked by two smaller but still impressive ones. The pillars supporting the pediment over the triple entrance were colossal statues of the conqueror, Ackal the Great. The six statues, two per gate, were carved from living black granite, and each was twenty paces high. The curving pediment above them showed scenes from Ackal Ergot's life in high relief. The central relief depicted the warlord's hardest-fought battle, his duel with his own brother, Bazan Ergot. By defeating Bazan in personal combat, Ackal cleared the way for the forging of the plains riders into the Great Horde and the birth of the empire.

When the musician princes and princesses reached the top of the paved ramp, they stood aside, making way for their father to approach the closed gate.

"Who dares come before the city with arms and martial music?" called Lord Rymont from the gatehouse, playing the part of the city's defender.

"Amaltar Ergot, Prince of the House of Ackal!"

"Turnback, Mighty One! This place is your doom!"

With a sweep of his hand, Amaltar directed his children to storm the gate. The youths threw themselves at the closed portal with much shouting and shoving. The double doors parted. Having thus "captured" the gate, they reformed and resumed their music. Amaltar marched through. Tol, bearing the golden case containing the famed crown, kept pace behind.

The square and street beyond were jammed with people. Mounted warriors with blunt spears kept a lane clear through the mob. When Amaltar emerged from the deep shadow of the Ackal Gate, a roar went up from the multitude—not a roar of approbation, but a cry of fear and anger. Until the crown of Ackal Ergot rested on his brow, Amaltar was emperor in name only, and his role now was that of a foreign warlord storming the city.

The people played their part with gusto, as this was their only opportunity to vent any resentment to their master's face. Tol was taken aback as the good folk of Amaltar's capital screamed, cursed, and

shook fists at their ruler.

Prince Hatonar and his four siblings were intimidated by the fury of the mob and shrank together, slowing the pace. Their father overtook them and pushed them firmly along. His words were lost in the din, but his stern countenance and commanding gestures conveyed his meaning: This was no time for faint hearts.

The procession continued along the broad streets of the outer city. Through street and square, they marched inexorably toward the high walls and spires of the Inner City.

Tol sweated, the gold case in his outstretched arms seeming to grow heavier with every step. He watched the crowd for signs of trouble, a nearly impossible task as everyone was playing the part of hostile, subjugated citizens. The enormous mob could have charged at any time, overwhelming the cordon of warriors holding them back, but in spite of their seeming fury, the people of Daltigoth played their role fairly. None tried to get past the lines of warriors.

They rounded the corner into Empire Way, the broad boulevard leading directly to the plaza at the entrance to the Inner City. The long, hot walk was nearly over. Now facing east, Tol squinted into the sun's glare.

Midday was not far off, and against the dazzling blue sky the single dark gray cloud remained overhead, as motionless over the palace as when Tol had left that morning. As he watched, the cloud grew larger and more attenuated.

Tol increased his pace, gaining slowly on Amaltar until he was only four paces behind instead of the prescribed ten. He wanted to be within range to rush to Amaltar's side if anything unnatural occurred.

The cloud spread itself wider and wider. Though thin, it blocked the bold glare of the sun and the marchers felt a sudden chill. Would Mandes dare interfere with the coronation? Amaltar was his patron, after all.

Over the bang of the drums and clatter of sistrum and cymbal, through the mock rage of the crowd around them, Tol heard a rushing sound. He hustled forward to within two steps of Amaltar, still watching the sky. From every direction, black dots had appeared, moving swiftly toward them. Raucous cries rose above the tumult below. The dots soon resolved into ravens, a vast flock of them.

Amaltar looked up, slowing. Immediately Tol was at his side, whispering into his ear, "Whatever happens, Majesty, do not leave my side! I shall protect you!"

"They're only birds," said Amaltar, but his expression was uncertain.

Only birds, but thousands of them, black as coal and screeching like demons. The flock collected over the plaza, wheeling and darting a few hundred paces above the restive crowd. Every time the ravens tried to dive on the people, they entered the thin mist and were repulsed. The cloud was as airy as morning fog, but somehow it thoroughly repelled the army of ravens. This strange spectacle distracted the people below; and their rants against the "invader" Amaltar faded.

The spectacle in the sky did not last long. Stymied by the cloud, the flock of birds broke apart, flying to every horizon as suddenly as they had come. When the last one was gone, the cloud finally melted away, leaving only blazing sun and polished blue sky.

"What was that?" Amaltar wondered, along with every other soul in Daltigoth.

"An omen, Majesty," Tol said, trying to sound cheerful. "A good omen for the start of your reign!"

The emperor did not look convinced. "Stay by me, Champion." Tol vowed he would.

At the gate of the Inner City, Amaltar's children divided, flanking the entrance on either side. Tol halted while the emperor continued on. Standing before the closed gate, clad in white-girded armor,

was Draymon, commander of the Palace Guard.

“Stand off, invader! This is the sacred realm of His Majesty Pakin III!” Draymon intoned.

“Your ruler is lost and must yield,” Amaltar recited the ritual reply. “Death awaits any who resist!”

“Then fight, hated foreigner! The house of Ackal Ergot shall not fall!”

So saying, Draymon slipped inside the gate. Amaltar strode forward and struck the gate three times with his ceremonial sword. Each blow was punctuated by beats on the drums. On the third strike, a squad of palace guards hauled the gate open wide. Draymon and his men went to their knees. The mob in the plaza calmed.

“Spare us, O conqueror!” the commander exclaimed. “We did but serve our great lord!”

“Where is the noble Pakin III?”

“Yonder, on his bier.” Draymon pointed behind him. Through the forest of banners, the catafalque’s white curtains stirred in the breeze flowing through the open gate.

“I will pay homage to your defeated lord.”

Accompanied only by Tol and the golden case he bore, Amaltar entered the grounds of the place in which he’d grown up, no longer a prince, but as master. Pale and sweating inside the armor of his powerful ancestor, Amaltar did not resemble a conqueror but a worn and sickly man. More than once Tol had to pause as his imperial master faltered slightly, staggering under the weight of Ackal Ergot’s armor and the burden of his empire.

Oropash, Helbin, and the senior wizards stood waiting by the catafalque. Catching sight of Tol, Oropash paled and Helbin scowled. With Mistress Yoralyn gone, they were the only wizards who knew Tol possessed the nullstone, fatal to all their art. The two wizards mastered their emotions and lowered their eyes out of respect for their new emperor.

Amaltar and Tol climbed the steps to the veiled shrine. Within, Pakin III lay on a black basalt plinth. His loyal wizards had transformed him entirely to stone, even to his burial robes and single golden earring. Alive, he had been a sardonic, cynical man, brutally honest and strictly fair. Transmuted to alabaster, the old emperor looked wise enough to counsel the gods.

Amaltar laid his sword across his father’s chest. Instead of the ritual words, he said quietly, “Good-bye, Father. No man worked harder or understood me less.”

He knelt and a long silence ensued. Tol stood unmoving. He did not want to desecrate Amaltar’s silent prayers with any noise, no matter how slight.

At last, Amaltar rose and recovered his sword. “Come, Tolandruth.”

The banners had been cleared away, and the entire coronation procession had taken over the square. The monumental plaza could have easily accommodated even their number, but they were not alone. All the warlords of the empire had joined them, as had the wizards of the college and the servants, lackeys, cooks, and other lesser folk of the palace. The plaza was full of expectant faces and hushed voices. In the multitude Tol located Valaran, Nazramin, and Egrin. Far across the square, Mandes stood on the palace steps, surrounded by scribes and palace guards. The sorcerer was dressed in his best for the coronation, a blue-gray robe and spotless white gloves.

Tol descended two steps, turned to face Amaltar, and presented the heavy golden box. Amaltar unlocked it with his ring and raised the lid, letting it rest against Tol’s chest.

The ancient blade, bent into a circle, held within its tempered length the power and glory of an entire empire—the future of millions, contained in three spans of iron.

Amaltar lifted the iron crown from its resting place and seated it on his head. He turned to face the assembled throng.

In a loud voice slightly gruff with strain, he declared, "I am Ackal IV, Emperor of Ergoth! Who will bow down to me and serve me all my days?"

Noisily, with the clinking of armor and swish of silks, five thousand knelt as one.

"Hail, Ackal IV!" Tol shouted.

The crowd replied with a roar, "Hail Ackal IV! Long live the Emperor! Long Live Ackal IV!"

Chapter 14

Dinner and a Duel

By night the sky over Daltigoth was ablaze with light. The tremendous orange glow blotted out the gentle light of the stars. To an onlooker leagues away, the city might seem to be burning from end to end, but Daltigoth blazed only with revelry. From the Inner City to the scruffiest dive on the canal, everyone was honoring the memory of their past emperor or paying homage to the new one by feasting, drinking, and dancing.

So large was the throng of the elite—warlords, wizards, courtiers, and foreign dignitaries—the banquet in the Inner City was being held outdoors in the plaza. No hall in the palace was large enough to hold all the guests.

An army of trestle tables had been set up between the palace and the garden surrounding the Tower of High Sorcery. Torches stood at the ends of the tables, and masses of servants labored to keep the emperor's favored guests well supplied with food and drink. An entire herd of imperial cattle had been slaughtered for the feast, along with no fewer than ten thousand fowl.

The palace kitchens were not sufficient for the great quantity of food to be prepared, so firepits were built in the alley between the palace's north facade and the Inner City wall. There an army of cooks labored. Stripped to loincloths against the searing heat, they roasted whole steers, turned spits containing a hundred chickens, and stirred cauldrons of simmering vegetables. Wine tuns as tall as ogres were hauled up from the cellars and tapped on the palace steps, and hogsheads of beer were put at the end of each row of tables.

At the imperial table, Ackal IV dined with his wives, children, and royal siblings. Tol was favored with a seat at the table facing the imperial table. Miya and Kiya had joined him, as had Egrin and the other members of the morning's honor guard.

The night air was cooler now, as summer waned into autumn, but the heavy coronation finery worn by the diners, the great quantities of wine and beer they consumed, and the leaping flames of the torches combined to overheat the scene.

The gathering was earnestly merry, with a few notable exceptions. Chief among the melancholy was the new emperor himself.

Ackal IV sat in his oversized chair, listlessly taking in the fantastic scene. Gray-faced and sweating, his earlier vigor had faded under the great weight of his new position. As regent, Amaltar had ruled the empire for twelve years, but no matter how much power he'd held, it had always been wielded in his father's name. Now he was emperor in truth. There was no one above him, no other name to invoke to settle disputes. Everything rested on his own shoulders. The Ergoth Empire was a prodigious burden. Another man might have reveled in the glory, in the unbridled power that was now his to command. Ackal IV looked miserable.

The emperor's apparent gloom infected Tol's mood, or perhaps it was the quantity of beer he had drunk. Between toasts offered by the Dom-shu sisters on his left and salutes offered by the warlords on his right, Tol was imbibing much more than usual.

Valaran was seated only steps away from him, yet she might as well have been perched on the red

moon. Cool and regal amid the raucous celebration, she seemed totally unruffled by the loud talk and the oppressive heat of torches, braziers, and open hearths. Tol itched to stalk across the narrow gap separating them and take her for his own, as he had Tarsis or the Blood Fleet.

A stinging blow on his back snapped Tol out of his glum preoccupation. Hojan had come up behind him and given his commander a comradely whack.

“My lord!” Hojan said, weaving a little on his feet. “We’re having a friendly dispute. Give us the benefit of your wisdom!”

Tol grimaced. “If I can.”

“Which is more important to a commander: training or instinct? Bessian, Manacus, and Urbath say training is more important. Illando and I say instinct.”

“And Varnacoth?”

Hojan waved a dismissive hand. “He’s too drunk!”

Tol leaned forward and looked down the table. “What does Lord Egrin say?”

Disdaining to wait for an overworked servant, the marshal had gotten up to fetch himself a trencher of bread. “The most vital characteristic of a successful commander is luck,” Egrin tossed over his shoulder.

“I agree,” Tol said.

Hojan’s ally Illando said, “But, my lord, luck is so random. How can a conscientious leader count on it?”

“He can’t, but a wise commander fosters his own luck. You must be able to seize upon any sudden change in fortune or any weakness in the enemy.”

“Was your training of no consequence then, Lord Tolandruth?” asked the squat, muscular Bessian.

“No, he was just lucky,” Kiya said. The men laughed, and she raised her voice, expanding on her claim. “Lord Tolandruth is the most fortunate man I’ve ever known. If he’d stayed a farmer, he’d have the best crops in the Eastern Hundred. If he’d become a cobbler, he’d have sold more shoes than anyone in Ergoth. Because he took up the sword, he became a famous general.”

“That’s too simple,” Hojan protested. He steadied himself by planting a heavy hand on Miya’s shoulder. Fastidiously, she lifted it off. He wobbled a moment then firmed his knees again.

“Truth *is* simple,” said Kiya. “That’s what makes it hard to take.”

Egrin carried his bread back to his seat on Tol’s right. “What do you say, my lord?” the marshal asked.

“Kiya’s right. I’ve been very lucky.” Tol popped a hunk of rare beef in his mouth. “I was lucky to learn a great deal from Lord Egrin and all the warriors at Juramona, who were also my teachers. Some, like Marshal Odovar, taught by bad example, but I tried to learn from them all and to put what they taught me to the test in battle.”

He warmed to the topic. “Some common wisdom was invaluable. Some was arrant nonsense. For example, when deploying foot soldiers against cavalry, I—”

A commotion among the guests interrupted Tol. All heads turned in the direction of the disturbance to see Mandes, whom had been absent from the festivities up till now. He was advancing along the lane between the tables. Richly clad in deep blue velvet, he gazed straight ahead, ignoring the merry chaos around him. When he reached the imperial table, he bowed to Ackal IV.

Tol’s fingers closed into fists. By the emperor’s order, no knives or forks were allowed at the banquet (the meat was carved into bite-sized pieces by the cooks before it was served). The order was meant to protect him, but now it spared Mandes, who otherwise would have found Tol’s dinner

implements buried in his heart.

“Your Majesty sent for me?” the sorcerer said smoothly.

“I am weary, and my heart is heavy,” Ackal IV said, sighing.

“Your Majesty has had a trying day.” Mandes held out a gloved hand. A many-pointed star of flawless crystal appeared on his palm. “The stars of heaven descend this night to pay you homage, sire.”

Mandes set the ornament on the table before the emperor. It was pretty, but hardly remarkable amidst the splendor of jewels and ornate decor. Smiling slightly at Ackal’s lukewarm response, Mandes clapped his kid-covered hands. With each clap, the small star enlarged, growing to bushel-basket size. Empress Thura, seated next to her husband, gasped and applauded.

Mandes levitated the spiky ornament from the imperial table down to the pavement. He clapped his hands once more, and the glass star expanded again. The crowd around the imperial table exclaimed at the performance.

From their place far down the high table, Oropash and Helbin did not bother to hide their disapproval. Magic was high art to them, not meant for sideshow entertainment.

In addition to all his other violations of the wizards’ code, Mandes now was cheapening their craft merely to amuse the emperor and his guests.

The Mist-Maker spread his arms wide and mouthed silent words of power. The transparent star rose slowly into the air. With a tilt of his head, Mandes set it turning on one point. Catching the torchlight, the spinning star flashed and scintillated, throwing rainbows of light over the admiring crowd.

More than a little tipsy, Tol leaped to his feet. Miya clutched his arm, trying to stop him. Kiya broke her sister’s grip and cut off Miya’s protests.

Oblivious to the danger that threatened him, Mandes was embellishing his act. He put the tip of one finger to the bottommost point of the whirling star, as if balancing it there. Many in the crowd laughed. Ackal IV smiled.

All laughter died when Tol approached. The grim expression on his face spoke volumes, and someone in the crowd yelled, “Take him, Tolandruth!”

“Liar! Betrayer! Murderer!” Tol declared.

Suddenly, the star exploded. With a sound like discordant music, brilliant shards rained over the nearby tables. Mandes threw an arm over his face. Tol did not do so fast enough, and a shard cut his right cheek.

A hush fell over the plaza and all eyes went to the emperor. Far from being displeased, Ackal IV looked more alert and interested than he had all evening.

Mandes was livid. “How dare you interfere with the emperor’s diversion,” he said, drawing back from Tol. “You might have injured him, breaking the crystal orb!”

Tol wiped the line of blood from his cheek. He saw a dark object lying on the ground amid the broken slivers of glass. Mindful of the sharp shards, he bent down and picked it up. It was a lump of lead, formed into a plum-sized ball.

“Lord Tolandruth did not interfere,” called out a strong, clear voice. “I did!”

Striding down the lane between the tables came a dark-eyed young man with curly black hair. He was dressed like a foundryman in leather apron, gauntlets, and leggings. To his surprise Tol recognized Elicarno, engineer and builder of machines. He was trailed by eight young men similarly attired.

Elicarno carried a strange and complicated device. It had a heavy wooden stock, shaped for grasping at one end. At the other end, two pivoting arms stuck out nearly at right angles to the stock, their free ends connected by a thick cord, like a bowstring.

“Master Mechanician, what’s the meaning of this?” Despite the disruption, there was no anger in the emperor’s challenge. Plainly, he did not find Elicarno’s sudden arrival unwelcome.

Elicarno halted a few steps away and bowed with a wide sweep of his free arm.

“Your Majesty, my apprentices and I come to wish you a long and happy reign. I bring you this hand catapult, the latest project from my workshop.” He set the device on the imperial table.

“So it was you who shattered Mandes’s star?” Ackal IV asked.

Elicarno admitted it. He’d broken the glass star with a single lead missile loosed from his hand catapult. Mandes puffed out his chest, ready to bask in the emperor’s outrage.

“Remarkable,” was Ackal IV’s comment.

Mandes deflated visibly as the emperor fingered the tightly twisted skein of cords that powered the throwing arms. When the bowstring was drawn back, the skein was compressed further, imparting power to the arm.

“What is its range?”

“Aimed range is a hundred paces, Majesty, but it can loft projectiles up to two hundred paces.”

Tol asked, “Can it throw darts or arrows?”

“With some adjustments, yes.”

At Elicarno’s nod, Tol picked up the hand catapult. It was weighty but well balanced. The engineer explained he should tuck the butt end against his right shoulder and aim by holding the stock level with his eyes.

From his place below the emperor’s wives, Prince Nazramin remarked loudly, “Ingenious. Just the thing for knocking pigeons off the battlements. No more soiled statues!” Some in the crowd greeted this remark with titters.

Elicarno’s black brows knotted, and Tol could see the retort forming on his lips. Nazramin was not the sort to take sharp words from a commoner, so Tol forestalled any reply by quickly asking how the device worked. He grasped both sides of the cord, and pressing the butt into his hip, he tried to draw the bowstring back. However, the skeins were very strong, and he succeeded in pulling the bowstring only halfway toward the catch-hook set in the middle of the stock.

“Allow me, my lord.”

Elicarno looped the string over an iron hook attached to his broad leather belt. Bending forward, until the stirrup on the front of the catapult was resting on the floor, he put his foot in the stirrup. By straightening his back, he pulled the bowstring across the catch, where it held.

Mandes, furious at having lost the emperor’s notice, could remain silent no longer.

“How long are we to listen to this tradesman?” he protested. “Your Majesty, by rights he should not even be here—”

“I will listen as long as I like,” came the mild reply.

Mandes’s gaze flickered toward Nazramin, hoping to find an ally, but the prince was busy downing a large goblet of wine.

Fixing a bland smile on his face, the sorcerer smoothed his blue velvet robe. “As Your Majesty pleases, always,” he said. “We all know what interesting toys Master Elicarno makes.”

“Toys?” the engineer exclaimed. “I’ll show you a toy!”

He took the lead ball from Tol and loaded it into the catapult. Holding the device high, he turned swiftly, searching for a target. A bronze statue of Ackal Dermount II on the palace promenade caught his eye, and he squeezed the release bar under the catapult's stock. The bowstring hummed, and the small gray ball flashed away. A heartbeat later, the projectile hit the bronze torso with a metallic plunk. The statue rocked from the impact.

"That lead ball just penetrated bronze plate a finger's width thick," Elicarno announced. "The target was over sixty paces away. At forty paces, I can pierce iron armor. With the improved version of my hand catapult, projectiles will go through an iron cuirass at two hundred paces!"

"Sacrilege!" Mandes said, pointing dramatically to the ruined statue. "You desecrated an image of the emperor's ancestor!"

"It was a terrible likeness anyway," Ackal IV said.

During the polite laughter that greeted his sally, the emperor began to cough. He couldn't stop. Thura rubbed his back, her round face creasing with worry.

When he finally regained his breath and lifted his head, blood was trickling from the corner of his mouth. Those nearby gasped, the murmurs of concern rippling outward through the ranks of notables. Thura wiped the blood away with a linen napkin.

"Your Majesty!" Mandes said, taking advantage of the silence. "Permit me to say these claptrap machines are not worthy of your attention! Leave such mechanical trivialities to the gnomes. The Emperor of Ergoth can rely upon the swords of his brave warriors and the magic of his loyal sorcerer!"

If Mandes hoped to win the sympathy of the assembled warlords with his remarks, he failed. Even the dullest soldier present could see the value of Elicarno's invention, and many of them had been on the receiving end of Mandes's spells and potions. Not a word was spoken in his support. Mandes's eyes kept darting to Prince Nazramin, but he was engaged in a murmured flirtation with the ladies seated on either side of him.

Elicarno bristled. "Claptrap? Trivialities? Bold words from a weaver of mists and concocter of poisons!"

Pale blue eyes narrowing, Mandes raised a hand, fingers spread, a conjuration forming on his lips. Tol grasped the engineer's arm, as though to restrain him from further heated words, but in fact to grant him the secret protection of the millstone. However, the agitated expostulations of Chamberlain Valdid reminded Mandes where he was, and he ceased his spellcasting.

Instead, he drew himself up haughtily and stated, "You slander me, Master Elicarno. I demand an apology!"

Elicarno's reply was brief and pungent. Courtiers gasped to hear profanity spoken in the emperor's presence, but the warlords guffawed. More heated words would have followed, but Ackal IV, looking wan, called for silence. Although he shivered visibly, sweat had formed a sickly sheen on his forehead.

"Neither of you is a Rider," he said hoarsely. "Duelling is forbidden to the common born."

Sorcerer and engineer continued to exchange fulminating looks, but their anger turned to surprise with the emperor's next words.

"Still, I see no reason why your skills cannot be tested against each other. We shall have a contest, a match of magic versus mechanics."

Excited whispers buzzed through the assembly. Valdid, hovering at the emperor's elbow, asked, "Is that wise, sire?"

"Let them test their strength with their creations, not by shedding each other's blood. The empire

needs both magic and machines to be strong. Let the champion of each try conclusions against the other.”

Ackal IV pushed himself to his feet. The assemblage of courtiers and warriors likewise rose.

“The contest shall take place on the Field of Corij, two days hence, at five marks past dawn.”

Elicarno and Mandes bowed their heads, signifying their acceptance.

Leaning heavily on his chief wife, Ackal IV told Valdid the celebration should continue, though he was retiring. Everyone waited in respectful silence as they withdrew.

When Ackal IV reached the top of the palace steps after a slow, painful climb, Tol shouted, “Long live the emperor! Long live Ackal IV!”

Thousands of throats took up his cry. The emperor turned and acknowledged their salute with a brief lift of one hand, then he and Thura vanished into the palace. Tol had hoped to speak with Valaran at some point, but when their ailing husband withdrew, protocol demanded the imperial consorts retire as well. With a swirl of crimson silk, Valaran entered the shadowed palace.

Freed of the presence of imperial dignity, the feast immediately grew louder and more raucous.

Mandes slipped away as Egrin, the Dom-shu sisters, and Tol’s officers came forward to meet Elicarno. Miya in particular seemed quite taken with the hand catapult. She and Elicarno spent the rest of the party talking earnestly together. Tol remarked to Kiya that he’d not known Miya was so interested in machines. Kiya said it wasn’t engines that held Miya’s attention so much as the engineer.

Tol invited Elicarno to stay with them at the villa, citing Mandes’s treachery. He wouldn’t put it past the sorcerer to make an attempt on the engineer’s life before the contest.

Elicarno agreed. He’d long suspected Mandes had been behind the strange, crippling arthritis that had afflicted his old master practically overnight. The illness struck just after Master Wurdgell had argued with a prominent courtier over a fee the courtier refused to pay. The courtier, Elicarno explained, was known to be one of Mandes’s clients.

Midnight had come and gone when Tol and his party finally left the continuing celebration. They recovered their weapons at the Inner City gate while they waited for their horses to be brought. As he and his apprentices had no horses, Elicarno accepted Miya’s offer to ride double with her.

Elicarno told his apprentices to return to the workshop and prepare for the coming contest.

“What should we prepare, Master?” asked the eldest.

“Everything. Tools, timber, the portable forge, ingots of iron and bronze. I want to be on the Field of Corij one mark after dawn!”

The trip back to the Quarry District passed in silence, surrounded as they were by the celebrations ringing through the streets of Daltigoth.

* * * * *

Nazramin rose from the tangle of bedclothes. The chamber was stifling. His head swam from too much wine and his throat was dry as dust.

Pulling on a robe, he slipped out, stubbing his toe on a table leg before reaching the door. The resultant shower of curses did not wake the two women snoring softly on the bed behind him. He couldn’t remember their names. They were the sisters—daughters?—of an ambitious courtier and had sought him out at the feast, eager to curry favor.

He'd found them amusing enough at first but loathed the sight of them now. He'd have the servants throw them out at daybreak.

In the antechamber, he went to a small table that held a pitcher of cider, several cups, and a tray of breads and sweets. Servants replaced the food on the tray regularly, knowing better than to allow their master to discover anything stale or less than perfectly presented on the tray.

The tart cider stung his throat as he gulped it down. He was about to refill his cup when he noticed a strange shadow moving on the wall in front of him. Spinning, he flung the cup at the fireplace.

The brass cup clanged against the stone hearth. Mandes easily ducked the awkward throw.

"How dare you come here unbidden!" Nazramin snarled. "Get out!"

"Please, Your Highness! Be not hasty!" said the sorcerer, holding up his gloved hands in a placating gesture. "We have common cause against these upstarts, Tol and Elicarno! If you will lend me a few men, Highness, I could chastise them properly!"

"I'd sooner throw my men off a cliff. Master Tol has taken the engineer under his protection. He'll be vigilant. Armed assassins won't get within bowshot of either of them."

Nazramin drank greedily from the heavy brass pitcher, cider trickling down his cheeks. Sated at last, he slanted a dangerous glare at Mandes.

"You are not welcome here, Mist-Maker. Get out."

"We are allies," Mandes insisted.

"You are my hireling, not my equal!"

Hefting the brass pitcher in one hand, Nazramin advanced. The flickering firelight was the room's only illumination, but it plainly showed the violence in the prince's eyes. Mandes sidled out of reach, beseeching his former patron to listen to him.

Without warning, Nazramin relaxed. He dropped the pitcher carelessly to the floor. Cider dregs splashed onto the intricately woven wool and silk carpet.

"The peasant was at your house last night, did you know?" he said. "He came there to kill you."

Mandes nodded. He'd been told as much.

The prince snorted. "He would have slain you tonight, in front of the entire coronation party, had not Elicarno diverted him. You should be grateful to Master Soot-and-Gears. He saved your cowardly carcass."

"No one spoke up for me at all," Mandes muttered.

Another snort. "You're hardly well loved, sorcerer."

"After all I've done for those lords and ladies—the troubles I've handled for them—and they just sat there, gawking, while I was threatened! Even the emperor failed me."

Nazramin's eyes narrowed. "He seems to have recovered much of his will. What happened to your spells?"

Mandes explained that Ackal IV had been spending an unusual amount of time in the Tower of High Sorcery, which had helped to restore some of his equilibrium. "His recovery is only temporary, Highness," the sorcerer added.

From a squat vase in a corner of the room, Nazramin drew a hefty cloth bag. He tossed it at Mandes's feet, and the contents clinked loudly.

"The balance of your fee."

"Highness, your brother still lives and reigns. My task is not yet done."

“You’ve done enough. Amaltar won’t last long on the throne. Besides”—the prince smiled in a most unpleasant fashion—“something tells me you won’t be in Daltigoth much longer.”

Mandes, fingering the bag of money he’d picked up, froze. “What do you mean?” he stammered.

“You’re finished here, sorcerer. Surely you realized it yourself, tonight. You’ve gone too far. None of your wealthy ‘friends’ is willing to be your patron. Master Tol thirsts for your blood, and the engineer will do his best to shame you on the Field of Corij. When that happens—”

Mandes flinched hard, and Nazramin’s smile widened.

“When that happens,” he repeated, “your only recourse will be exile, unless you wish to face the tender mercies of the farmer or any of the several hundred other worthies in the city who hate you for what you’ve done to them.”

The cold words were like a judgment. Mandes shivered, but he was not finished yet. Drawing a deep breath, he straightened his back and declared, “That tinker will never beat me!”

“Care to wager on it? That villa of yours is quite handsome.

Want to hazard your house against my gold that Elicarno humiliates you?”

Mandes’s hard-won composure failed him, and his gaze dropped. Nazramin laughed harshly.

“No? Well, no matter. When you’re gone, I’ll claim it anyway.”

Mandes looked utterly bewildered. His empire was crumbling, and he couldn’t begin to understand why. The prince, his most powerful client, was exploring the food on the tray with a casual hand, ignoring him completely.

“I know many compromising things about this city’s nobles,” Mandes whispered desperately. “I will speak. I will tell all.”

Nazramin made a disgusted sound. “Open your mouth, and I’ll see your tongue cut out before you finish your first word.”

This was no idle threat. Nazramin would likely do the deed himself—and enjoy it.

The sorcerer pulled the shreds of his dignity around himself and backed away. His dark blue robe blended with the shadows by the wall.

“Don’t be too smug, cruel prince. I can see your future,” Mandes said. His form began to fade away. “You will gain what you most desire, only to have it taken from you, bit by bit. Your own blood will strike you down, and the last thing you see in this life will be the eyes of the one you have wronged most...”

Nazramin uttered a loud, vulgar exclamation, but Mandes was gone, dissolved into the shadows by the hearth.

The prince tied the belt of his robe with angry, abrupt gestures. The Mist-Maker was obviously flinging false prophecies in hopes of saving his waning prestige. When Nazramin wore the crown of Ackal Ergot, his enemies would know true fear. Already he had a list of those who would not long survive his coronation. The list grew longer with each passing day.

He returned to his bedchamber. The rasping female snores and tangle of pale limbs in his bed filled him with revulsion. He strode back across the antechamber and flung open the doors to the upstairs hall.

The walls rang as Nazramin bellowed for his servants. Soon the calm was shattered again by the shrieks and protests of his former guests, driven out into the night with whatever bedclothes they could grab.

* * * * *

An uneventful day and night passed at Rumbold Villa. A steady stream of Elicarno's apprentices came and went, bringing their master reports on the progress of the many projects underway at his workshop. The shop was in the New City, between the Old City and the canal district. A three-story barn-like structure housed Elicarno's workshops on the ground floor, storerooms and studies on the second, home quarters on the third. Forty-two apprentices worked under the engineer; most were young men from provincial cities like Caergoth and Juramona.

Tol had taken an immediate liking to the brash engineer. A few years younger than Tol, Elicarno bristled with energy and enthusiasm. Like Tol, he was of low birth and had gone far by hard work. In between visits from his assistants, he, Tol, Egrin, and the Dom-shu sisters talked about what they'd seen of the wider world. Elicarno examined Number Six with keen interest, having never seen steel before.

Although based on common iron, steel required a forging process said to be so laborious only a few such blades were made each year. The dwarves fashioned small quantities of the hard metal mainly for their chiefs or to trade to the Silvanesti.

The day after the coronation, they were all enjoying dinner in the villa's elevated garden. Late day sun washed the wooden table and benches in warm light as Elicarno described how his most successful invention, the rapid loading lever for catapults, had helped defeat a warlike clan of dwarves in the northern Harrow Sky Mountains. This brief campaign had occurred as the war with Tarsis raged. A small force of Riders under Lord Regobart's nephew Heinax, accompanied by a corps of catapulteers trained to use Elicarno's rapid loader, had caught the recalcitrant dwarf band in a high canyon and wiped them out.

"With my loading lever, a team can loose ten missiles where one used to go," Elicarno explained.

Egrin shook his head. "It's a sad thing for brave warriors to be slain by soulless machines."

"There's no honor in such a fight," Kiya agreed. "Not for the victors or the victims."

Elicarno's black brows drew down in a confused frown. "Honor? Bravery? I thought the purpose of warfare was to win, inflicting the most damage on the enemy, while preserving your own men."

Egrin was an old-fashioned warrior and proud of it. Kiya had been raised a warrior of her forest tribe, with all the sentiments of the primeval Dom-shu. Tol respected their beliefs, even if he thought them outmoded, and so made a diplomatic remark about progress. Miya, unburdened by considerations of subtlety, loudly proclaimed Elicarno's point of view the only correct one.

"Pah!" her sister retorted. "You favor the speaker, not his words!"

Tol smothered a smile. Whatever Miya's beliefs about the purpose of war, Kiya's shot had been a true one. The younger Dom-shu hadn't left Elicarno's side all morning. Her fascination with him was all the more striking since, in all the years she'd been with Tol, she'd never shown a particular interest in any man. Tol loved Miya like a big sister and wanted her to be happy. Kiya was plainly put out by the whole situation.

Talk turned to the coming contest.

"The test must be a problem both magic and machines can address," Elicarno mused. "Perhaps shifting a large boulder or erecting a length of wall."

"Nothing so constructive, I'd wager," Egrin remarked, tugging gently at his beard. "If I were you, Master Elicarno, I'd form my plans around destruction. His Majesty has always been taken with displays of power."

It was true. No matter how subtle his purpose, Ackal IV usually favored overwhelming force to

achieve his ends.

Taking their advice to heart, Elicarno decided not to bring a broad assembly of materials to the contest. Instead, he would have his men disassemble one of the larger catapults, outfitted with his famous rapid loading lever, and carry that to the duel, along with two wagonloads of missiles.

The character of Elicarno's opponent was the next topic of conversation. Mandes was a wily and powerful sorcerer, but his repertory was limited, Tol advised the engineer. His specialties were mist and weather spells and potions. No matter what form the contest took, Mandes would be determined to win at any cost.

"Will he try to harm Elicarno?" Miya asked. She appeared ready to take on the sorcerer herself should that happen.

"He won't try that in front of the emperor," Tol said, "but expect a low blow. Win or lose, Mandes will strike back, whether a day later or forty."

His sober warning cast a pall over the dinner. Elicarno withdrew to his room in the villa and spent the evening chalking calculations on a piece of slate. Miya stood watch over him at a distance, keeping interruptions to a minimum. As for Tol, he spent the night patrolling the grounds.

The sun set and night spread over the capital. A crispness flavored the air. Autumn was coming on cool wings, bringing with it the promise of many changes.

* * * * *

Despite the cool night, the day of the contest dawned sultry, with gray clouds clotting the morning sky. A heavy rain drenched the Field of Corij just before sunrise. Comprising several acres of flat meadow north of the city, the field served as a practice and training ground for the imperial army, and the heavy sod was much cut up by the hooves of thousands of horses.

True to his promise, Elicarno arrived one mark past dawn with his forty-two apprentices. They brought with them six wagonloads of material—timbers, metal brackets, and a league of cordage neatly wound in heavy hanks.

Under the master engineer's watchful eye, the apprentices fell to assembling a great catapult of the type Elicarno referred to as a "two-armed ballista." This proved to be a much larger version of the hand-held device he'd used to shatter Mandes's crystal star. Two throwing arms installed sideways were set on a cross-shaped frame. This in turn was placed on a pedestal of stout timbers, so finely balanced a single man could pivot the heavy ballista in any direction.

Although the catapult was of unusually high quality—the wood seasoned and smoothly planed, and with iron brackets on every joint—the true curiosity lay in Elicarno's loading device. Attached to the rear of the ballista were a pair of tall levers that pivoted on the frame itself. Hooks on the levers grabbed the thick bowstring, drawing it back when long ropes attached to the levers were pulled by a gang of apprentices. When the trigger was tripped, the bowstring sprang forward, propelling the missile (in this case an oversized arrow). Springs pulled the levers forward, and a wooden cam caused the hooks on them to lift and snap over the bowstring again. With a loading team hauling smartly on the lever ropes, the machine could be swiftly cocked again and a fresh dart laid in the launching trough. Operated by a strong and smart company, the ballista could throw a storm of missiles in a very short time.

At the appointed time the emperor arrived, accompanied by a large entourage of courtiers and warlords. A pavilion had been raised along the edge of the field, and the imperial party took their ease there while servants dispensed cider and sweetmeats.

Tol and Egrin rode over to pay their respects. They dismounted and surrendered their weapons to

the bodyguards. Striding through knee-high grass, general and marshal made their way to the pavilion.

As they saluted the emperor, Tol was surprised to see Valaran had come. Gone was her usual court attire of flowing gown and starched headdress. She was dressed from neck to heels in dark green huntsman's attire cunningly reworked for the female figure. A flat cap of velvet graced her head, with a single peacock feather raking back from the crown. The only imperial consort present, she stood at Ackal IV's right hand, sipping cider from a porcelain cup.

Inclining his head to her, Tol said, "Highness. I am surprised to see you at something as coarse as a duel."

Her green eyes blazed over the rim of her cup. "This is no ordinary combat, Lord Tolandruth," she said. "Magic versus machinery—there's a true contest!"

She was still the same Val, insatiably curious.

"Master Mandes has not shown himself," said the emperor, shifting in his wide canvas chair. His face was flushed, his eyes rimmed with red. "Will he cry craven, do you think?"

Valdid, standing at Ackal IV's left hand, did not think so. "He's waiting to make an entrance, Your Majesty," was the old chamberlain's opinion.

So it proved. Only moments later, a peal of thunder rumbled across the sky, though no lightning had been seen. All looked up. Over the distant forest of city rooftops was a streak of cloud. White against the mixed gray of the unsettled sky, the wisp expanded and came boiling directly toward the Field of Corij.

"Here he comes," muttered Valdid.

A thrill of concern raced through Tol. By rights this duel should be his—he had been gravely wronged by Mandes many times and should have dealt with him long ago. Did Elicarno realize what danger he was facing?

When eight legs appeared below the surging column of cloud, Tol wondered if any of them truly knew what Mandes was capable of. The legs churned as though galloping through the air. Strangely, the front pairs did not match the rear ones. The four legs in the front line were feathered in white and bore great talons. The rear four were covered in tawny fur.

Wings appeared, beating in unison, and two amazing beasts dropped from the clouds: griffins, harnessed to a white, egg-shaped coach.

The Ergothians gaped. Griffins were exceedingly rare, and this fine, fierce pair bore the markings of royal Silvanesti heritage. Only the Speaker of the Stars owned griffins with snow-white eagle plumage forward and golden lion hide behind.

The coach they drew had no wheels, only a pair of long skids on its underside. The fantastical conveyance swept overhead, turned, and came back, landing gently as an autumn leaf before the imperial pavilion.

Shaken by the spectacle, the guards were slow to muster on the plain between the aerial coach and their emperor. By the time they had, Mandes was emerging.

He looked as dazzling as his transport. Dressed entirely in cloth-of-gold, he wore a skullcap carved from a single piece of lapis lazuli. His gloves were of woven gold thread, and in his right hand he gripped a tall, black oaken staff, inlaid along its entire length with esoteric symbols in silver.

Walking through the flustered guards, Mandes spread his arms wide and halted before the emperor. He bowed his head.

"Your Majesty, your humble servant is here," he said in a manner neither humble nor servile.

“There’s no mistake about that,” Ackal IV replied dryly.

Valaran exclaimed, “Where in the world did you find a pair of matched griffins?”

“In Silvanost, Highness—a gift from the Speaker of the Stars.”

“For services rendered?” Tol said bluntly.

“Just so, my lord,” was the sorcerer’s cool reply. “I performed a bit of rare art for the Speaker, and in gratitude he presented me with Lightning and Thunderbolt.”

Valaran began to ask about the care and feeding of griffins, but her father cut her off. Valdid urged the emperor to commence the contest.

A runner was dispatched to bring Elicarno. The engineer soon arrived, flanked by Egrin and Miya. Kiya limped behind the trio, a dour expression on her face.

Elicarno had washed and donned clean clothes that morning, but his work assembling the ballista had left him grease-stained once more. The tousled engineer looked the very antithesis of Mandes’s gilded splendor.

When everyone was arrayed before him, Ackal IV charged the combatants.

“You are here to try your purposes against one another—Mandes’s magic against Elicarno’s machinery. As you are both valued vassals of the empire, I will tolerate no harm directed by either of you against the other. This is a contest of power, not a duel to the death. Is that clear?”

Each man assured the emperor of his understanding. Ackal gestured to Valdid.

The chamberlain directed everyone’s attention to two sturdy posts being raised on the field by gangs of soldiers. Each post was a freshly cut elm tree trunk, four steps tall and two handspans thick.

“Those are your targets,” Valdid declared loudly. “The first man to destroy his will be the winner. The deed must be accomplished from a distance—the greater the distance, the greater the merit earned.”

He paused dramatically, then cried, “Commence!”

Elicarno sprinted to his waiting men. “Jacks and levers! Move the beast around and bear on the target!”

His apprentices jammed long levers under the frame of the catapult and began heaving it around. The engine could swing on a pivot in any direction, but the lay of the land prevented Elicarno from using his loading device effectively unless he turned the machine.

While the engineers grunted and shouted, Mandes walked quietly away from the imperial pavilion, golden robe rippling out behind him. Softly, he intoned the words of a spell. A dark cloud began to form over his head.

The engineers had the catapult in position. Elicarno called for a quadrant and plumb line, to make sure the frame of the device was level and true. When he was satisfied, he chose a straight, sturdy dart from a pile of similar missiles and laid it in the launching tray. An assistant banged on the thick end of a wedge jammed under the ballista’s arm. With each blow, the plumb line swung more and more to the perpendicular.

“There!” Elicarno set the trigger mechanism. “Draw the weapon!”

Eighteen strong young men hauled back on the loading levers. With a loud clack, the hooks dropped over the bowstring, and the device began to ratchet back.

Meanwhile, Mandes stood alone in the trampled grass. The sorcerer’s hands were over his head, gloved fingers flexing ever so slightly. The steady drone of his voice carried to the pavilion. The black cloud that had formed over his head was now hovering above his target, growing larger and larger.

“Steady!” Elicarno shouted. His men quickly cleared away from the ballista, now poised and cocked. The power captive in the skeins could take off a man’s head if he got in the way of the bowstring.

The trigger line was a simple length of cord, surprisingly light to trip so large a device. Elicarno wrapped the line around his hand. After a heartbeat’s pause, he pulled the trigger.

Cords shrieked, timbers thrashed, and the bowstring sprang forward. Everyone in the pavilion felt the shock of the machine through the soles of their feet. The dart, two paces of turned hardwood with a solid bronze head, whistled through the air. It sailed over the target post.

“Down, three taps!”

Elicarno’s man pushed the elevation wedge out with three distinct blows of the mallet. The ballista was reloaded, a second missile thrown. This one landed half a step in front of the post, burying itself in the rain-softened soil up to its fletching.

“Up, one!”

A column of light, brighter than a sun, lanced down from the cloud Mandes had conjured. It struck the target post and exploded. The resulting thunderclap rocked the entire assembly, collapsing half the emperor’s pavilion and setting the tethered horses rearing and neighing in terror. Tol felt a glare of heat on the left side of his face. His skin crawled, and the muscles beneath surged of their own accord. Blinded, he flailed one hand and felt Kiya’s strong arm.

The flash faded and vision returned. A veil of smoke drifted across the Field of Corij. Mandes’s target was now only a charred, smoldering stump.

Looking a trifle singed, the sorcerer presented himself to the emperor. Valdid and assorted palace lackeys were struggling to erect the collapsed portion of tent, while Valaran brushed ash and bits of blasted turf from the emperor’s shoulders.

Mandes bowed, straightened, then declaimed, “My target is gone, Your Majesty. I have won!”

Ackal IV held up a hand. “Master Elicarno, can you continue?”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the engineer shouted, even as he rubbed the dazzle from his eyes.

With the ballista ready, Elicarno loosed another shot. The great arrow struck the center of the post, burying half its length through the elm trunk.

“Rapid, commence!”

The catapult’s arms threshed, hurling a second dart into the target. With a concerted shout, the loaders cocked the weapon again, and another missile was launched. More followed. In short order, Elicarno had deluged his target with forty darts. At times as many as a dozen missiles were in the air at the same time.

The whack of the catapult and the thrum of flying projectiles made a horrible menacing noise.

When Elicarno finally called a halt, no part of his target remained visible. The bronze heads of forty missiles had reduced the wooden post to a scattering of splinters.

Ackal IV rose from his seat, and Valaran braced him. Together, they inspected the targets, starting with Elicarno’s. Valdid, the imperial bodyguards, Tol, Egrin, and the Dom-shu sisters trailed behind.

When the emperor came to Mandes’s charred target, the sorcerer was standing proudly beside it. Ackal IV extended a pale, spotted hand to touch the still-smoking wood.

The silence lengthened, and the tension built. At last the emperor shattered the calm with two words.

“Elicarno wins.”

The engineer's apprentices let out a wild shout of victory, and the courtiers began to talk excitedly about what they'd seen. Above the din a plaintive cry soared.

"Why, Majesty?"

Mandes hurried after Ackal IV, who was returning to the shade of the pavilion.

"Sire, I struck first, and I destroyed my target before this—this—person managed his first hit!"

The emperor halted and regarded him with unsympathetic eyes. "Your target is not destroyed. Some of it remains. Strike again. Call down the lightning and remove the last vestige of your target."

Nonplussed, Mandes stammered, "As...as Your Majesty commands. We should remove to a safe distance, then I shall resume my invocation—"

Ackal IV looked beyond him to where Elicarno stood with his apprentices. "Master Engineer, destroy the wizard's target! Immediately!"

Without hesitation, Elicarno commanded his helpers to swing the ballista around. They aimed down the loading tray and let fly a fresh dart. Ten more followed, pulverizing the stump while Mandes was still gathering himself to begin his lightning spell.

The emperor and his party were only five paces from the target. The loud whir and thump of missiles drove Mandes, Valdid, and assorted courtiers and servants to the ground in terror. Ackal IV remained steadfastly on his feet, with Valaran holding his hand.

A few paces further away, Tol also kept his feet. He was proud of Valaran for standing in the face of Elicarno's missiles, but prouder still of his imperial patron. Prince Amaltar had never been the bravest of men, but he had apparently reached a limit with Mandes.

Echoes of the bombardment finally died away. Those on the ground picked themselves up.

Ackal IV said, "My forces must be ever ready to strike and must strike hard. No enemy will wait for his foe to make ready, and no battle is ended until the enemy has been completely destroyed. Do you see? Magic is a powerful art, Mandes, but on the battlefield, it must give way to machines—and the men who command them."

Elicarno's apprentices shouted and clapped each other on the back. Several seized their master and hoisted him onto their shoulders. The whole group paraded around the ballista, chanting, "Elicarno! Elicarno!"

The sorcerer stood up, his gloves and the front of his golden robe smeared with mud. His defeat, and the emperor's implacable logic, left him speechless.

"Go from my sight," Ackal said. "You are no longer our councilor."

As Mandes stood frozen in shock, Tol whirled and hurried to the pavilion. Justice had been delayed far too long. Mandes no longer enjoyed the protection of his imperial patron. Tol would retrieve his saber and kill the evil sorcerer at last.

"Don't!" said a breathless voice behind him.

He turned, fury gathering on his face. Valaran was running toward him, moving easily in her huntsman's togs.

"Don't," she repeated.

"I'll have his head!"

"Fool! Disgraced or no, he is not to be trifled with!"

He said nothing else, just turned away with a savage scowl and resumed his race to the tent. Long-legged Valaran passed him and planted herself squarely in his way.

"Stand aside, Val!"

She took a long stride forward, placing them nose to nose, and looked him squarely in the eye. “I love you, Tol,” she said, her voice barely audible. “I will not watch you die.”

He was so thunderstruck he forgot his thirst for vengeance. Surrounded as they were by servants, court functionaries, soldiers, and friends, her confession meant all the more to him, for the courage it had taken to make it.

Mandes had recovered from the shock of losing his royal patron and was hurrying to his griffin coach. Ackal had turned his back on the fleeing sorcerer, a last gesture of dismissal.

“Arrest him,” he told his guards then walked away, back toward the pavilion.

The guards tried to obey, but Mandes flung two silver vials on the ground in front of them. There was a silent flash, and every man fell to his knees, blinded. Mandes reached the door of his coach.

“Hear my prophecy, Emperor of Ergoth!” he shouted. “What you have will be divided among those closest to you! You will perish in poverty and shame!”

“You insult the throne of Ergoth!” Valdid said, “Tolan-druth, seize him!”

Tol had been working his way up behind the sorcerer, taking advantage of his distraction. However, the chamberlain’s cry alerted Mandes, and Tol abandoned stealth to rush the sorcerer.

Elicarno and his apprentices stormed in as well. Mandes flung up his hands, and a blast of wind drove them back. Two of the brawny young men crashed into Tol, knocking him flat.

While his foes were thus hampered, Mandes ducked inside the coach and slammed the door. The griffins reared on leonine legs and uttered strange cries, sounding neither feline nor avian. They galloped away, wings working hard. In only a few bounds, they were airborne.

Elicarno tried to elevate the ballista to send a dart at Mandes, but the machine could not follow such a swiftly moving target. Meanwhile, Tol was hurrying to the emperor and Valaran, worried Mandes might try to avenge himself on his former protector.

His fear proved well founded. In the coach’s wake a whirlwind arose, flinging men and horses aside like dead leaves. The imperial pavilion was yanked from its moorings and took wing, soaring into the sky like a great bird. Tent stakes and lines swept over Ackal IV and Valaran. Tol pushed the emperor out of harm’s way, then grabbed Valaran and pulled her to him, turning his broad back to the flailing lines. Tent poles whacked him between the shoulders. Falling, he twisted to keep Valaran out of the mud. They landed hard, and her weight drove the breath from his chest.

“Let me go,” Valaran hissed, struggling in his arms. “People will see!”

By the time Kiya and Egrin had pulled them to their feet, Mandes was rapidly receding into the northern sky. His impromptu tornado had swept the sky clean of clouds, and sunlight flooded the muddy field.

“Thank you for saving my consort, Tolandruth,” Ackal IV said, coming up to them. Valaran returned to her husband, surreptitiously lending him her strength.

Mandes was gone, but no one standing in the Field of Corij doubted that the danger he represented was still very real.

Chapter 15

Mission of Menace

There was no time to celebrate Mandes's exile. Word had begun to circulate through the city that Enkian Tumult and his army were coming. With the usual entourage, the Warden of the Seascapes would have been in Daltigoth far sooner, but maneuvering five hordes (and associated camp followers and hangers-on) through the provinces northwest of the city was a laborious undertaking. The terrain was cut by numerous small streams, larger rivers, and irrigation canals.

The city garrison mustered, preparing itself for an attack. Couriers were dispatched with orders for Enkian to halt his army and proceed to Daltigoth with the proper small escort. The messengers never returned.

Tol found his former lord's behavior puzzling. Lord Enkian was no hothead, bursting with fiery ambition. While Marshal of the Eastern Hundred, he'd seemed a cold man, a schemer and a plotter perhaps, but not the sort to mount a direct challenge to the succession.

News came that Enkian had halted his force five leagues from the city at a place called Verdant Isle. This "island" was in actuality a large triangular tract bounded on two sides by canals and on the third by Salamander Creek. It was a strong defensive position, and Enkian's occupation of it increased everyone's uncertainty. The warden could not storm the capital with only five thousand Riders, but he could raid the surrounding countryside from this stronghold, disrupting trade, terrorizing the population, and imposing a kind of long-range siege. Still, with the city supplied by the great canal, there was no way to starve Daltigoth into submission. What was in the warden's mind? Did he seek to force concessions from the new emperor—or more frightening, was he waiting for allies to gather to his standard?

Speculation reached such a fever pitch the emperor could no longer ignore it. Late one evening, nine days after the fall of Mandes, Ackal IV sent for Tol.

Egrin and Kiya accompanied him to the palace. Miya had not been much in evidence around the Rumbold villa lately. Her sister laid these absences squarely at the feet of "that engineer," Elicarno.

Arrayed in full battle gear (though weaponless, of course), Tol and Egrin knelt before the emperor. Kiya bowed her head briefly.

Most of the court had retired; only Chamberlain Valdid and a few guards were present. Valdid clucked his tongue at Kiya's impertinence, but the emperor ignored the breach of protocol.

"Arise, my friends," he said.

Ackal's pallor was notable even in the flattering golden glow of the many candles burning in the audience hall. Deep hollows surrounded his eyes, his breathing was labored and noisy. He spoke slowly, as though forming words took a great effort.

"I have a mission for you, Lord Tolandruth. Once more I must send you into the unknown on my behalf."

Jubilation surged through Tol, but he kept his voice respectfully low. "I will bring Mandes to justice, Majesty."

Ackal IV's brow furrowed. "No, there is a more pressing matter. I want you to search out Enkian Tumult and learn his intentions. It's said he built a fortified camp at Verdant Isle. Go there in my name and find out what he's up to."

Tol nodded, but his disappointment was obvious. Egrin said quickly, "We'll go at once, Majesty."

Valdid cleared his throat significantly, and Ackal said, "No, Marshal. You shall remain. I would not send every loyal commander I possess into the hands of a possible usurper."

"How many hordes shall I take?" Tol asked.

"None," was Valdid's surprising reply.

"That's crazy!" Kiya exclaimed.

The imperial bodyguards stirred, moving closer to the brawny forester woman. Tol signaled her to hold her tongue.

"You must go alone, my lord," Valdid said. "Yours is a mission of diplomacy, not combat. Enkian knows you, knows your fame and abilities. He will not dare deny you audience."

"And if he does?" Kiya blurted angrily.

The chamberlain rapped his gold-capped staff smartly on the floor and glared at her but directed his response to Tol. "Should there be any trouble, we will send Lord Egrin with ten hordes to crush the rebel!"

Kiya continued to grumble, but there was shrewdness in the plan. If Enkian intended violence against the throne or had some less overt scheme in mind, Tol's great popularity with the ordinary warriors of Ergoth made him the ideal candidate to persuade (or intimidate) the warden into abandoning his plans. The only problem was that Tol had slain Pelladrom Tumult, Enkian's son.

All eyes were on Tol. If he refused the mission, what could they do?

For a long while he didn't reply. The tension in the silent chamber had built to such a level that when Tol snapped his heels together the chamberlain and guards visibly flinched.

"I shall go at once, Your Majesty!" he said, saluting.

Ackal smiled at his champion. "I know the hazards you face," he said quietly. "In token of a great task, I will give you a great reward." He did not say what that reward would be.

The emperor asked Egrin to make ready ten hordes of the city garrison. Valdid rehearsed with Tol the exact questions the emperor wanted him to ask Enkian. When the finicky chamberlain was finally satisfied, Ackal dismissed the group.

No one spoke until they were outside the palace. On the broad steps, with the torchlit imperial plaza before them and stars above, Kiya could contain herself no longer.

"I'm going with you," she stated.

"A fine idea," said Egrin immediately. "Someone should guard your back. I am forbidden to go, but Kiya is a foreigner. She may do as she likes."

As he descended the steps a little ahead of the other two, Egrin added, "I shall rest easier knowing Tol doesn't enter this deathtrap alone."

Tough soldier that he was, Tol was pleased to know the marshal's affection hadn't dimmed with time and distance. Having Egrin standing by with ten thousand men ready to sweep into Verdant Isle was a great comfort—almost as much as the presence of Kiya at his side and the nullstone in his pocket.

* * * * *

Dawn was still far distant when Tol and Kiya mounted up outside Rumbold villa. The air was crisp with a presentiment of autumn. A tapestry of stars glittered overhead. The white moon, Solin, was just setting among the rooftops and towers of the New City.

Kiya was unhappy, not because of their potentially dangerous mission, but because Miya still had not returned home.

“She’s a grown woman,” Tol said gently. “She has the right to be happy with the man of her choice.”

Kiya shook her head stubbornly. “Our father would be angry if he knew. She dishonors you, Husband.” She lowered her chin to her chest and added, “I will not desert you.”

Tol blinked. After all this time, had he acquired a wife in Kiya without noticing it?

Now was not the time for such thoughts, so he set them aside. Egrin and a handful of men from the Eagle horde had come to see them off.

“Watch your back,” Egrin said.

“Ah, I have a pair of eyes back there,” Tol answered, smiling toward Kiya.

They mounted. When their farewells were said, Tol touched heels to his mount’s sides.

“What happens after?” Kiya asked suddenly.

He pulled back on the reins and regarded her in confusion. “After what?”

“After we come back. The emperor is crowned, the old emperor sleeps with his ancestors. What happens to us after that?”

It was a question none of them had considered yet. With the great coronation ceremony concluded, and Pakin III buried, the warlords gathered in Daltigoth would soon disperse. Tol had been on campaign for ten years. His home had been a tent, pitched in field or forest. If there was no war to fight, what would he do? What about Valaran? Could he bring himself to leave her again?

The more he thought about it, the more bereft he felt. Struggling for an answer, he said, “Maybe I’ll travel—visit Juramona or the Great Green. Would you like to see the forest again?”

Kiya only shrugged and looked away.

One of the Eagle horde men overheard them and said, “If I were you, my lord, I’d ask for a foreign posting. Tarsis, maybe. With you in command of the garrison there, I’m sure the syndics would behave themselves.”

“All but one,” Kiya replied dryly, still looking toward the horizon.

“Let’s go.” Tol spurred his horse forward before Kiya revealed anything more.

The two clattered through the sleeping city, leaving the Quarry district for the New City. Here they found the first stirrings for the new day—vendors rolled out pushcarts or opened stalls, servants and housewives scrubbed their stoops. Since the death of Pelladrom Tumult in the market square riot, there had been markedly fewer disturbances in the streets, and the coronation of Ackal IV had diminished tensions over the succession still further. Of course, the arrival of Enkian Tumult had created a new cause for worry.

They left the city by the north gate, called Kanira’s Door by most folk. The eccentric Empress Kanira had built an elaborate ceremonial gate as the starting point of the great paved road she envisioned reaching all the way to the empire’s northern territories. The gate and fifty leagues of road were completed, then a bankrupt treasury had halted the entire enterprise. Such wild extravagance had precipitated her fall at the hands of her stepson, Ergothas II, widely considered one of the empire’s greatest rulers.

Kanira's Door comprised columns of red granite, alternating with lofty cylinders of pink marble. The columns were placed so close together a sword blade could not fit between them. The line of columns curved outward from the city wall in a great half-circle to the gate proper: a massive slab of sculpted granite that hung over a deep pit in the road. The slab pivoted vertically, and when open, it rested flat on the ground, making a bridge over the pit. In the closed position, the vertical slab left a gaping chasm before it. Although a formidable defensive position, such a gate was so complex and expensive to build it had never been duplicated.

An ingenious mechanism lowered the ponderous stone platform while Tol and Kiya waited. Two ogres, legs shackled and bodies joined at the waists by another weighty chain, cranked furiously at a monstrous stone flywheel. The motion of the wheel turned pulleys and gears, and the gate swung down and open without the slightest scrape. Both horses cantered across the granite bridge, iron-shod hooves clattering loudly.

The land beyond Kanira's Door was more hilly than the southern or eastern approaches to the capital. In the final bloom of summer, the fields and orchards were heavy with fruit and sparkled with dew. The fecund smell of ripeness was strong in the still morning air.

Kiya remarked it was not the warrior hordes of Ergoth but its fields that had first impressed her with the empire's power.

"How so?" asked Tol.

"To clear and cultivate such vast amounts of land requires planning. Anyone can assemble a big army. Warriors can always be found when needed, but the effort required to feed an empire is a far surer gauge of a nation's strength."

As he stared out across the great fields, seeing the first workers come to tend the crops, Tol had to admit there was much truth in what she said.

Once they left the farm country near the city, the land became more wooded. The sun rose as they crossed and recrossed many small, winding streams.

The morning was glorious, bright and balmy, and they passed numerous farm carts laden with laborers. Tol was recognized frequently and hailed by the farmers. He always returned their greetings. No matter how far or how high he went, he would always be a farmer's son.

The carters he questioned said they'd seen no riders in the area, no strange warriors. Their very presence testified to the truth of that. Farmers did not linger where mounted soldiers rode.

When Tol and Kiya reached the banks of Salamander Creek at the edge of Verdant Isle, they had to ride along the bank looking for a fording place. Despite its name, the "creek" was twenty paces wide and as much as eight to ten feet deep in spots.

In the quiet rush of flowing water, Kiya spoke after a long silence.

"Do you ever think about death?"

Tol continued to scan the water for a likely crossing. "What warrior doesn't? "

"I mean, do you wonder how you will die?"

"Not really, no. Why?"

Kiya's buff-colored horse shifted slightly beneath her, and she slackened the reins so it could put its head down to drink. Water splashed over boulders half-submerged in the creek. In the silence, the sound of the water seemed very loud.

"I know how I'm going to die," she finally said. "I asked a shaman of the Riverside Tribe to divine it for me many years ago."

Again there was a pause, and again Tol said nothing, letting her tell it in her own time. She rode

slightly ahead of him and he could see only her profile. "He said I would die at the hands of my best friend, and it would be a great blessing that I did."

The words shook Tol, and he frowned. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Two events were foretold to precede my death. First, I would leave the forest to dwell in a land of stone and iron." She had certainly done that. "Second, my sister would leave me for a man of smoke and fire."

That description certainly suggested Elicarno. More often than not, his hands and clothes were stained with soot from his workshop forge.

"How much time is supposed to pass between these events and your death?"

"The wise one did not say."

"They seldom do!" he declared, moving his mount up alongside hers. "Don't dwell on it, Kiya. Prophecies are cheap entertainment. It will be years before the gods claim you."

"Or it might be today" She turned to him and said with sudden intensity, "When the time comes, will you end my life?"

Tol recoiled. "The friend the shaman mentioned may be someone you haven't even met yet!"

She didn't reply but continued to stare at him intently. Gently, he said, "We can cross there. Come, Kiya. Neither of us is going to die today."

Her sister would have had a sharp rejoinder to such a bold statement, but Kiya merely said, "How do you know, 'my lord'?"

"Maybe I'm a shaman, too."

When they were halfway across, four riders appeared on the other side of the creek. They were indeed part of Enkian Tumult's army, for they were dressed as men of the northwest coast in stiff canvas brigandines covered with bronze scales. Their helmets were bronze also and resembled cloth caps with the peaks pushed back. On the wild shore of the Seascapes, the omnipresent winds drove salt spray inland for leagues. The salt air ate iron the way moths consumed old cloth, so warriors there still wore bronze.

The riders did not seem hostile. They waited patiently for Tol and Kiya to reach shore. This end of Verdant Isle was a sea of lush marsh grass brushing the horses' bellies. Further from shore, the ground sloped up and was covered with vineyards and orchards. Verdant Isle apples were well known in Daltigoth.

As Tol and Kiya splashed ashore, the Seascapers surrounded them. The men were armed with long spears, but they kept these pointed in the air, not toward the newcomers.

A rider with a silver chevron welded to the brow of his helmet spoke. "Halt! Who are you and where are you bound?"

Tol was relieved not to be recognized. The northerners probably knew the name of Lord Tolandruth but not his face.

"We are couriers from Daltigoth," he replied. "We come with a message for Lord Enkian."

The corporal exchanged a significant look with his fellows then bade Tol to follow him.

The riders made no move to disarm Kiya or Tol but rode within spear reach on all four sides. Their manner was curious and cautious but not threatening.

The party crested the brow of the hill, and the greenish waters of the Hokun Canal on the north side of the isle came into view. More men appeared, some on foot, some mounted. Verdant Isle was not very large, and Enkian had quartered five thousand men here, plus an unknown number of camp followers and other noncombatants.

They zigzagged through a long line of sharpened stakes, set to impede a cavalry charge, and crossed a line of trenches being dug by impressed local farmers. It seemed Enkian was indeed preparing to resist a serious attack.

On the wider end of the isle was a small village. Here Enkian had made his camp, pitching tents between farmers' huts. Many eyes watched Tol and Kiya as they rode slowly toward the largest tent, sited in the center of the tiny village square. Spindly platforms of lashed poles had been erected among the leafy apple trees, and archers perched atop them. Guards with bared blades stood at the entrance to Enkian's tent. If trouble started, Tol and Kiya would not get away unscathed.

A boy came forward to hold their horses. They dismounted and followed the corporal into the tent. The enclosure was modest. Enkian's tent was divided by a canvas wall into two rooms. The larger front room was the warden's command post; the smaller space, his private quarters.

The warden sat at a table in the middle of the front room. The tabletop was covered by a scattering of maps. The corporal saluted and called the warden by name, for which Tol was grateful. It was hard to recognize his lean, dark-haired former commander in the stooped, gray-bearded old man before him. Enkian, however, knew him at once.

"Tolandruth! They told me another courier had come!"

"I am here as the emperor's personal emissary," Tol replied. He indicated Kiya. "You remember Kiya of the Dom-shu?"

The revelation of Tol's name brought the other warriors present to their feet. They were true frontier soldiers, baked by sun and burned by wind, lean and clear-eyed. The scene, though tense, did not feel dangerous—not yet at least.

Enkian dismissed the assembled officers, wanting to speak with Tol alone. When they were gone, he poured two brass cups of wine, handing one to Tol. He did not offer Kiya any.

Dropping into a chair he said wearily, "What news do you bring me?"

Puzzled, Tol said, "I am here at the command of His Majesty, Ackal IV, whom you once knew as Prince Amaltar. He wants to know your intentions, my lord."

Now it was Enkian's turn to look confused. "I have followed his instructions to the letter," he said with a frown. "Have the rebels made their move yet?"

"Rebels?"

"The Pakins—the plotters inside the city who seek to overthrow the emperor!"

The two men stared at each other. When Tol proclaimed ignorance of any plot, Enkian leaped to his feet and struck a small gong hanging by his chair. Guards entered, swords drawn.

"Send for Jarabee," Enkian snapped.

Jarabee proved to be a youngish man, with a mop of curly blond hair and downy cheeks. His homespun gray robe and silver medallion of faith proclaimed him a priest of Gilean.

"Test them," Enkian commanded.

Kiya and Tol tensed, but the armed guards closed in a step, forestalling any action.

Jarabee carried a large chunk of white crystal. Two of its sides had been ground flat and polished. Holding this before his eyes, the priest regarded Enkian's visitors through it. He chanted an incantation under his breath and surveyed Kiya from head to toe. Moving to Tol, he made two passes. After the second he flushed and muttered something distinctly un-magical under his breath.

"Well?" Enkian said sharply.

"The woman is who she says she is. She is under no compulsion." Jarabee's voice was high and

reedy. "The man is heavily warded. I cannot see inside him."

Enkian raised a single gray eyebrow and turned to Tol, obviously wanting an explanation.

Tol shrugged. "If I am so heavily warded, I can't be under a spell, can I?"

Jarabee agreed. After a moment's thought, Enkian demanded Tol's weapons.

Half a span of steel snapped out of the scabbard. The guards tensed. Kiya muttered, "Don't do it, husband."

Tol placed his sword and dagger in Enkian's outstretched hands.

"Take them away," the warden said, putting the weapons on the table.

"Why?" demanded Tol.

Enkian looked at him stonily.. "Put them under guard, but carefully! I must consider what this means."

Kiya was likewise disarmed, and she and Tol were marched out. In the village square they were separated. Tol was taken to a small, stoutly built shed. The interior was dark, and the air smelled strongly of savory meat. A smokehouse.

The typical sounds of an army camp did not provide Tol with any clues as to what was going on. He wondered where Kiya was and what had happened to the couriers Enkian said had come before them. Having no answers, he soon fell asleep, his back against the smokehouse wall.

He awoke when a squeak told him the peg barring the door was being withdrawn. Orange flame blossomed in the doorway, revealing two warriors. One bore a torch, the other a drawn sword.

Tol was led from the shed into the fading light of dusk. The glow of Daltigoth was visible on the southern horizon. There, Egrin and his hordes waited, not so far away, but no help at all for Tol if Enkian decided to kill him.

His destination proved to be a modest farmhouse on the west side of the village square. The interior was a single room, similar to the hut Tol had grown up in, but larger. A meal was laid on the only table, and two chairs faced each other across the dinner. Enkian Tumult arrived just behind Tol.

"My lord," he said. "You must be hungry. Sit."

"Where is Kiya?" Tol asked tersely.

"She is well. My word on that."

Tol studied the warden for a moment, then took the chair facing the door. Enkian tugged off his canvas gauntlets and sat opposite him.

"There are four guards outside. We won't be disturbed. It's time you knew what I know," he said, pouring dark red wine for them both. "Shortly after word reached the Seascapes of the old emperor's death, I received a second message, warning me of a plot by the Pakins to seize the throne. I was told to bring all the force I could muster to the capital. The plot was said to be deeply imbedded in the court, so I was to ignore all couriers and commands purporting to come from there and wait for the arrival of one trusted contact."

"Warden, there is no Pakin plot. At least, none that I know of."

Enkian's dark eyes darted to him and back to the farmer's clay pitcher. He set the pitcher down, his face a mask of doubt.

"The promised messenger has not come," he said. "I thought you might have been sent in his place."

"Who was supposed to meet you?"

“My son, Pelladrom.”

Tol set the wooden cup of wine down carefully and looked Enkian in the eye. “My lord, I have terrible news. Your son will not be coming. He is dead.”

Shock bloomed on the warden’s face, and Tol added, “Yes, dead—by my hand.”

Frigid silence. Enkian raised his own cup to his lips. His hand was shaking.

“Before—” His words came out hoarse, and he cleared his throat. “Before I summon the guards, tell me how it happened.”

Tol spoke of the riots, the unrest in the city, the various factions trying to influence the new emperor to favor their causes. He described the market square fight, and how he’d slain a masked rioter who later proved to be Pelladrom.

“I don’t understand. Why would my son embrace the Skylanders’ ridiculous cause?” Enkian demanded. “He lived his whole life in Daltigoth. Why should he care for the grievances of the provincial nobility?”

“I don’t think he did. I think he was using them for his own ends—or the ends of his unknown patron.” Tol chose his next words with care. “Your son was young, my lord, young and ardent. I believe he was part of a wider conspiracy to subvert the new emperor.”

He related the story of Ackal IV’s lingering illness and named Mandes as its likely source.

“My son would never submit to a sorcerer’s whim!” Enkian’s hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists.

Tol didn’t dare give voice to his idea that Prince Nazramin was the true head of the conspiracy. He said only that he didn’t think Mandes was the leader and then told of the sorcerer’s defeat by Elicarno, and Ackal’s order for his arrest, which resulted in Mandes fleeing the capital.

Enkian rose abruptly, sending his wooden chair toppling over backward. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Slowly he drew himself up, folding his arms across his chest.

“As the head of an ancient and noble family, I should challenge you to a duel to avenge the death of my son,” he said.

The idea was gallant, but ridiculous. Enkian was twice Tol’s age, and had never been known as a fighter. It had been thirty years or more since he’d wielded a sword.

“However,” he continued in a weary voice, “my first duty is to the throne of Ergoth, and the rightful emperor who sits upon it.” The warden’s proud, pained tone softened. “I am aware that life in the capital corrupted my son. You have carefully avoided blaming anyone for leading him astray, and I won’t ask who you suspect. I am not without influence in Daltigoth. I myself will discover who is responsible!”

The knot of tension in Tol’s stomach relaxed slightly. “Then you believe me?”

“I’ve known you many years, Tolandruth. You’re clever, like most peasants, but you’re painfully honest, too. I shall make inquiries about my son’s demise, but I accept your basic account.”

For the first time in their acquaintance, Tol pitied the haughty warlord. Enkian plainly cared about his wayward son, but his loyalty to the empire was greater than his desire for revenge. Sadness welled in Tol’s heart. He asked what Enkian intended to do.

“Eat dinner,” was the reply, as the warden seated himself. “Tomorrow I shall send the Army of the Seascapes home, but I shall remain. Those who used my son will have cause to regret my coming to Daltigoth.”

Knowing his welcome was at an end, Tol excused himself. He inquired where he might find Kiya. The warden gulped wine and told him to ask the captain of the guard.

With a stiff salute, Tol departed. Outside, in the cooling air of evening, he let out the breath he'd been holding. He couldn't believe he'd come out of this unscathed. Perhaps the Dom-shu sisters were right—maybe the gods did love him.

The captain of the guard detailed a man to lead him to Kiya. Enkian shouted for the captain as Tol and his guide departed.

Opening the door to the hut, the captain asked, "What do you require, my lord?"

"Wine. More wine."

A soldier was sent to fetch a fresh pitcher. Given the look on his warden's face, the captain knew it would be a long, sodden night. He wondered what ill news had arrived with Lord Tolandruth.

Alone, Enkian hacked at the capons on the trencher before him. They were underdone, flesh pink with blood. The sight sickened him, and he pushed the plate away. He drained his wine cup for the fifth time. Since his guest had left his own portion untouched, he drained Tol's cup, too.

The door creaked open behind him. "About time," he growled. "I hope you brought a cask!"

A hand clamped over his mouth, and a powerful arm encircled his neck. Startled, the warden tried to rise, but a dagger suddenly plunged into his side. The comfortable velvet tunic was no barrier to the keen point. Enkian's scream was muffled against the clutching hand.

Twice more the dagger struck, and with the last thrust, something gave way. Enkian went limp. His attacker released him. The door rasped open, then quietly shut again.

The warden was slumped on the table, eyes staring at the undercooked birds. A faint hiss of breath escaped his lips one last time.

The captain of the guard returned moments later with the farmer who owned the hut. The farmer bore a small cask of berry wine in his arms.

"My lord," the captain called, rapping his knuckles on the door. "Your wine is here."

There was no sound from inside. The captain called again, with the same result. He opened the door.

* * * * *

Tol found Kiya as well as the missing Daltigoth couriers. They were in a tent together, sitting cross-legged on the floor enjoying their simple rations. When he told them they were to be released, the couriers raised a cheer.

"You see?" he said, pulling Kiya to her feet. "We didn't get killed!"

She nearly smiled, but smothered it with her characteristic tribal stoicism.

He related Enkian's tale of having been duped into bringing his army to Daltigoth on the pretext of protecting the emperor. Although the warden hadn't said who he suspected as the author of the deception, Tol had an idea.

Before he could share it, however, shouts sounded outside. A band of soldiers burst into the tent, wild eyed and waving swords and knives. They swarmed over Tol with cries of "Murderer!" and "Hold him!"

The six couriers and Kiya grappled with the warriors, trying to protect Tol. Before anyone was seriously hurt, Tol roared for order in his best battlefield voice. The combatants drew apart reluctantly, each side glaring at the other.

"Our lord is killed!" one Seascaper cried.

“Lord Enkian, slain? When?” Tol asked, dumbfounded by the news.

“You should know, murderer! We found his body after you left him!”

“Don’t be stupid! Lord Enkian was alive when I left. Ask the captain of his guard!”

“We will!”

They seized him roughly, propelling him outside. Kiya and the couriers again tried to intervene, but they were held off by a hedge of sword points.

The whole camp was boiling. Swarms of angry soldiers stormed this way and that, blindly seeking the murderer of their commander. Unlucky peasants were pummeled and questioned. When Tol appeared, the Seascapers converged on him, howling for his head.

He was taken to the hut where he’d last seen the warden. Enkian was laid out on the ground and covered with a cloth. Tol recognized the captain of the guard, kneeling beside his fallen leader, as well as the gray-robed priest, Jarabee. The cleric looked deeply shocked and, to Tol’s eye, quite ill.

“We have the killer!” cried one of the men who held Tol’s arms.

The grieving captain paled visibly. “Release Lord Tolandruth!” he snapped. “I saw the warden after Lord Tolandruth left him. Lord Enkian ordered more wine. Someone stabbed him before I returned.”

The captain shouted for Corporal Thanehill, who’d guided Tol to Kiya. Thanehill, near the rear of the angry mob, came forward. When asked whether the general had ever left his sight, Thanehill admitted he had not.

The hands gripping Tol slowly let go. The mob of soldiers dispersed reluctantly, their thirst for revenge unslaked, their anger unresolved. Kiya shoved her way through to Tol’s side. Soon only Tol, Kiya, the six couriers, the captain of the guard, and Jarabee remained standing over the slain warden.

“Who is second-in-command?” Tol asked.

“I am,” said the captain. “Havoc is my name. Havoc Tumult, nephew to Lord Enkian.”

Tol clasped the captain’s arm. “I regret your uncle’s death. He was a loyal sword of the emperor.”

He explained that the supposed Pakin plot, which had caused Enkian to bring his forces, was all a fabrication.

“But why?” Havoc asked. “And what shall we do now, my lord?”

With no answer for the first question, Tol replied to the second. “You must lead the Army of the Seascapes home, Captain. I will see to it justice is done for your uncle.”

The word of the famous Lord Tolandruth was good enough for young Havoc. He saluted then departed to instruct the officers. Jarabee followed him. The young priest had been silent throughout the confrontation, his gaze fixed on his murdered lord.

Standing in the center of the agitated camp, Tol sighed. “I’m wrestling with enemies made of smoke!” he muttered to Kiya. “There’s nothing to grasp!”

She shrugged. “We survived, Husband. That’s victory enough for now.”

Tol sent the couriers to find horses. He wanted to be back in Daltigoth before dawn. This camp, where Enkian Tumult had died, was in no wise a safe place to remain.

* * * * *

By methods of his own, the assassin appeared before his master.

“It is done, Your Highness. Lord Enkian is dead,” he reported, bowing his head low.

“Good. Was the farmer blamed, as I wished?”

The assassin’s downy cheek twitched. “Not—ah, no, great prince.”

Nazramin leaned forward into the firelight. At his feet, his great wolfhounds sensed his anger and growled low in their throats.

“And why not?”

“It was Enkian’s own doing, Highness. He called for wine after Lord Tolandruth left, and so was seen alive. Still, I thought it best to slay him at once, for the good of Your Highness’s cause.”

For a heart-stopping moment, Nazramin regarded the assassin with a narrow-eyed gaze. Finally, he sank back into his deep chair and said dismissively, “It’s as well. Enkian would have revealed my part in the plot soon enough.”

Jarabee bowed, legs shaking slightly. He asked, “Shall I return to the Seascapes, Highness? Or may I remain in the city as your loyal servant?”

Though he tried to conceal it, his desire to take the disgraced Mandes’s position was apparent.

“Neither,” Nazramin told him, and yawned. The prince raised a finger. Both hounds leaped to their feet, fangs bared.

Jarabee’s heart skipped a beat. “No, great prince! Please!” he cried, voice shrill.

An expectant smile lifted Nazramin’s thin lips. His upraised finger twitched slightly.

Jarabee turned and ran, sandals flapping. Iron-limbed wolfhounds sprang. The terrified priest threw the one spell he had at the ready. The nearer dog dropped to the floor, paralyzed, but there was no time to cast again. The second dog tore out Jarabee’s throat before he could scream.

Chapter 16

Sunlight and Shadows

Lord Enkian's murder was never solved. The common assumption was that the young priest Jarabee had something to do with it, because Jarabee disappeared the same night Enkian died and was never seen again. No motive was ever discovered as to why he would want to harm his lord, but Enkian was notoriously close-fisted, and many assumed the two men had quarreled over Jarabee's pay.

With the problem of Enkian's army resolved, peace seemed to have returned at last. Mandes was gone, the succession was settled, and the first tribute from Tarsis did much to bolster the imperial coffers.

For the household at Villa Rumbold, life went on, even as great changes stirred the companions living there. First, Egrin and his retinue returned to Juramona. It was harvest time back home, and that meant taxes had to be collected. Ten days after Enkian's death, Tol gave the Juramona men a farewell banquet the night before they were scheduled to depart. It turned out to be a rather muted affair, but it ended with an eye-opening revelation for Tol.

The household was gathered around the long dining table. Egrin filled a mug with the best beer in Daltigoth and handed it to Tol. "To the victor over Tarsis," he declared.

Tol downed a hearty swallow. "That seems a hundred years ago."

"You're much too young to talk like that," Egrin replied genially. "Wait until you've outlived all your enemies, then you'll miss them."

Kiya said, "Why should anyone miss their enemies?" She'd grown morose since Miya had left the villa to become Elicarno's wife.

"For a warrior, life is measured by the enemies you best," Egrin swirled the remnants of beer in his own mug, watching the foam break on the glazed clay sides. "Or by those who best you."

Tol arched an eyebrow. "Oho! Are there any foes you've never defeated, Egrin?"

"Certainly I'm not invincible. No one is."

A fresh platter of ribs arrived from the kitchen. Egrin's men eagerly took the steaming platter from the servants hired for the banquet. Kiya growled a warning that some ribs had better make their way to her end of the table.

"Husband was won all his battles," she said, when the platter finally reached her. "Monsters, pirates, soldiers—it's all the same to him."

Tol insisted he had enemies still. He thought of Mandes, who had disappeared, but particularly of Prince Nazramin, an utterly untouchable foe.

Egrin brought up the question that had begun to dominate Tol's thoughts of late: What were his plans, now the war was over and the crown rested securely on the emperor's brow?

Tol had no idea and said so. Egrin spoke of the pirates still active in the southern and western seas, saying Tol might summon Darpo and the fleet and deal with the brigands. Kiya countered with the Silvanesti outposts making incursions into the South Plains, the sparsely populated territory east of

the Great Green.

Her comment ignited a long discussion about the elves and their capabilities. Since their plot to arm the forest tribes and block Ergoth's eastward expansion had been foiled a decade earlier, the Silvanesti had remained remarkably quiet. That alone was grounds to suspect mischief, Egrin intoned darkly. Long-lived and incredibly patient, the elves could wait decades to allow a plot to mature.

The banquet went late, and in true warrior fashion, most of the Juramona men eventually fell asleep at the table. Even Egrin dozed in his chair. Tol scrubbed the sleep from his eyes, rose, and draped a woolen mantle around his old friend's shoulders.

Egrin shifted slightly and began to mutter. "Killers... Silvanesti..." was all Tol made out before the marshal jerked awake with a gasp.

Tol put a hand on his shoulder.

It took Egrin a moment to recall his surroundings. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. You were talking in your sleep." Tol told what he'd heard, then said, "Reliving an old battle? I guess elves are the one enemy none of us can outlive."

To his surprise, Egrin stood abruptly and walked out of the room. Tol followed. In a room across the entry hall, on the villa's north side, Egrin stood before a large window, staring out at the cloudy night. Old Rumbold had been rich enough to afford real glass, and the window opening was filled with individual panes, each no bigger than the palm of Tol's hand, held together by narrow strips of lead.

Egrin was rubbing one ear absently, a sure sign he was lost in thought. Tol seated himself on the carved arm of a heavy wooden chair, and waited. The villa was so quiet he could hear the faint hiss of the misty rain collecting on the windowpanes, yet he nearly missed Egrin's first words, so softly were they spoken.

"The harder we run from the past, the closer it comes." After a moment, he added, "I haven't had that nightmare in a long time. I must be feeling my age, or perhaps it's a reminder of my mortality."

He turned to face Tol at last. "I'm very proud of you, you know. You've surpassed any dreams I ever had for you."

The old warrior had never spoken in such direct terms. Tol was deeply moved, but before he could reply, Egrin went on.

"And because I'm proud of you, because there should be no lies between us, I need to tell you something about myself."

Slowly, the marshal pushed his thick, gray-streaked auburn hair behind his left ear. Tol frowned. In the dim light it was difficult to make out, but there seemed to be something wrong with the ear. Its top was oddly flat, the skin puckered. A painful wound, Tol was certain, yet he had seen worse battle scars and said so.

"These came from no battle," Egrin said. Lifting his other hand, he revealed his right ear was identically scarred.

"Then what—?"

"I was born in the forest. When I was very young, my mother was killed. My father, unable or unwilling to care for a small child, left me with a couple in a nearby village. They were kind enough, in their own fashion. They told me this"—Egrin brushed an ear—"was for my own good, to protect me from the kind of people who had attacked our settlement and murdered my mother. It was necessary, they said. A necessary lie."

Tol sat frozen. Egrin rarely mentioned his past, and Tol was keen to learn whatever he might share.

However, the implication of his words suddenly struck like cold water on a chill morning. When Tol spoke, his voice was hoarse with shock.

“You’re a half-elf?”

Egrin’s hazel eyes were direct. “My mother was human; my father Silvanesti.”

Tol’s mind reeled. He had met only two or three half-elves over the years. Shunned and reviled by Silvanesti society, viewed with suspicion by their human families, they lived on society’s margins like the former pirate Wandervere, captain of *Quarrel*, who’d brought Tol to Daltigoth. For Egrin, a Rider of the Great Horde, discovery of his true roots would mean exile from the Empire, perhaps even death.

Tol had never suspected a thing.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed, his fists coming up to rest on his hips.

“I knew you didn’t look that much older!” Half-elves aged more slowly than humans, though they were not quite as long-lived as full-blooded Silvanesti.

Egrin blinked in surprise, and Tol grinned suddenly. “Did you honestly think it would matter to me?” he demanded.

Relief coursed through the marshal. He sat heavily on a low table. Tol gripped his shoulder, and Egrin rested his hand briefly on Tol’s.

As they walked back to the banquet room, Tol leaned close. “So,” he whispered, “exactly how old are you, *old* friend?”

* * * * *

From time to time Tol was summoned to the imperial palace to give advice to the emperor and his councilors. He greatly valued these visits, not only for the access it granted him, but for the chance to glimpse Valaran.

Valaran’s prestige had suffered since Amaltar ascended to the throne. As long she was married to a crown prince, her status depended only on her husband’s interest and goodwill. Now that she was an emperor’s wife what mattered most was child bearing—bringing forth sons and daughters to ensure the continuation of the imperial line. Amaltar had no special love of children, nor was he an especially ardent lover, but all his wives except Valaran had borne him children. She was ostracized by the household, now run with total authority by the emperor’s first wife, Thura. Likewise, Valaran found herself belittled in the Consorts’ Circle; her bookishness as a girl had made her the subject of gossip, but this situation was far more serious: the dire word “barren” was even being whispered.

Tol had thought this would be unimportant to Valaran. He learned the true state of her feelings during a brief conversation in an anteroom of the audience hall.

Seated in an ornately carved chair, she was splendidly attired in a midnight blue gown trimmed at neck and shoulders with lapis lazuli. She’d discarded her fashionable headdress and her chestnut hair was tied back from her face with a simple length of ribbon.

She looked up suddenly from the scroll she was reading to find him standing there, staring. A smile curved her lips, and Tol’s throat went dry at the sight. He crossed the room to her and bowed.

They exchanged bland public greetings. “What brings you here this day, Lord Tolandruth?” she said, letting the scroll she was reading coil shut.

“A consultation with your imperial husband, lady,” he replied. “There’s some dispute about how best to employ Admiral Darpo’s squadron of warships.”

The flare of interest on her face faded. “Sounds deathly dull. Like everything else around here.”

When he politely inquired what she meant, he got an earful of her long-held rancor over her treatment by the other consorts.

“And all because I haven’t given Amaltar a child,” she fumed. “Doesn’t he have enough brats as it is?”

“It’s only an excuse,” Tol said. “An easy stick to beat you with because you’re an outsider.”

“Me? Outsider? I’ve lived my whole life in the Inner City! Not one of those other nags can say as much!”

He reminded her to keep her voice down, then added, “That’s not what I meant. You’re not like them, Val. You never have been. You’re a thinker and scholar, not a flighty court decoration.” He smiled. “How many books have you written?”

Her eyes flashed. “No one’s supposed to know that!”

“How many?”

“Four, counting the critique of Silvanesti poetry I finished last spring.”

Her pride was evident and he nodded. “That was a good one,” he said. “I liked it better than the history of the gnomes, or your biography of Ergothas II.”

“You read my books?”

He shrugged. “I needed to hear your voice, even written on a roll of foolscap.”

Valaran looked away, blinking. She muttered something about deceitful men.

Before he could ask what she meant, a herald arrived, telling Tol the emperor would see him now.

Reluctantly Tol started to take his leave of her, but Valaran caught his hand. The unexpected contact startled him.

“Thank you, Lord Tolandruth.”

The urge to sweep her into his arms was frighteningly strong. He had to settle for a brief caress of her hand.

The emperor’s council was contentious. The former Blood Fleet, now reconstituted under Admiral Darpo as the first squadron of the Ergothian Navy, had chased most of its former piratical comrades out of the Gulf of Ergoth. Trade was flowing across the bay in startling strength, and bulging coffers of tax money arrived daily from Lord Tremond in Thorngoth. Excited by the flow of gold, Ackal IV’s advisors wanted to send the fleet west to suppress the pirates prowling the seas between Sancrist Isle and Hyllo.

“If I may speak, my lords!” Tol all but shouted over the wrangling warlords. It was poor manners, and a bad sign that he should have to shout at all. Ackal IV could not control these sessions. He sat in his father’s chair saying little, face gray, eyes squinted against his constant pain. Although propped up by his stiff court robes, he still leaned slightly to one side.

Tol repeated his request. Rymont, Valdid, and the rest slowly fell silent. “My thanks,” Tol said ironically. “I feel it would be a grave mistake to send the fleet out of the gulf.”

“Why?” Lord Rymont demanded.

Tol gestured to a heap of scrolls on the table. “From Tremond’s reports, it seems the pirates in the gulf have been suppressed, not wiped out. Send Admiral Darpo away, and they’ll fall upon the merchant shipping like a pack of starving wolves.”

“This fleet costs the imperial treasury 3,000 gold pieces a month,” Valdid complained.

“And how much in taxes did Lord Tremond send this last time?”

They knew the figure as well as he did. Twenty thousand crowns of gold and silver had just arrived in Daltigoth under heavy guard/Eight days earlier another twelve thousand had come, and before that, eight thousand. Tol admonished them not to endanger the stream of money by sending the fleet away.

Some were in favor of doing just that. The arguments went on until the light of the setting sun slanted into the council chamber at a sharp angle. Rymont, stubbornly insisting the fleet would secure even more money by making sea trade safe in the north and west, was arguing with Valdid, who'd come around to Tol's point of view. The chamberlain noticed Ackal IV was nodding and broke off in mid-sentence. Rapping on the polished tabletop, he announced the council session was over.

The noise woke the emperor. He sagged back wearily, breath rattling in his chest. Oropash quietly offered to summon healers from the temple of Mishas, but Ackal IV waved the suggestion aside.

“It is only a congestion of the lungs,” he said hoarsely. “It will pass.” No one believed that. The “congestion” had lasted half a year.

He dismissed his advisors without asking for a final decision on the dispensation of the fleet. As the warlords, wizards, and officials rose to go, Ackal IV asked Tol to stay. Lord Rymont and his faction departed slowly, unhappy to concede the emperor's ear to their rival.

When only Tol and Valdid remained, the emperor dismissed his chamberlain, too. Surprised, Valdid obeyed.

“Sit by me,” said Ackal IV, patting the arm of an adjacent chair. With a bow, Tol seated himself at the emperor's right hand.

“You are right about the fleet,” Ackal said, letting his head rest against the padded wing of his chair. “Tomorrow I will issue orders confirming Admiral Darpo's stay in the gulf.”

“I believe that to be the wisest course, Your Majesty.”

Tol waited. The emperor hadn't asked him to stay to tell him about the fleet.

“I think I must be dying, Tolandruth.”

The announcement was not wholly unexpected. “Your Majesty has his choice of the finest healers in the empire. Can they not find the root of your strange illness?”

Ackal shook his head. “There is a broken strain in the dynasty, a thread of madness and decay. I fear it has found me this time.”

“Surely not, Majesty! You always enjoyed good health as crown prince. Why—”

Tol stopped, but his expression plainly showed he had more to say. Ackal urged him to speak freely.

“Majesty, there are those who would like your reign to be a brief one. Some ... some are very close to the throne.”

Ackal laughed, provoking a fit of coughing. “Nazramin? He's been undermining me ever since we were children.”

There were many safeguards in place, the emperor explained, to protect him from poison, and the palace was heavily warded against malign magic, more so than any other place in Ergoth.

Still, it was possible that a subtle chink could exist in the emperor's magical armor, some tiny hole in his defenses that might allow a small spell to penetrate. Ackal IV admitted this himself.

Tol related how he'd found Nazramin at Mandes's mansion late one night. The prince and the sorcerer were in cahoots, he said.

“Mandes is gone,” the emperor replied, waving a thin hand. “His influence is over and his spells dispersed. Oropash has seen to that personally.”

Oropash was a wizard of wide experience, but overly trusting. Although he knew little enough about magic, Tol was certain that a cunning rogue like Mandes could evade his counter-spells.

Even as they talked, Tol was waging a silent battle with himself over one question: should he give the nullstone to Ackal IV? If the emperor was indeed the target of malign magic, the Irda artifact would soak it up like blotting paper drinking in spilled ink.

If he loaned it to the emperor, it might save him, but would Tol ever get it back? Years ago, Yoralya had warned him nullstones were so rare and so powerful that ruthless villains would raze entire cities to possess one. He had kept his secret a long time.

If Ackal IV took possession of it, knowledge of its existence would spread quickly. The emperor of Ergoth lived his life like a carp in a fishpond, under the eyes of hundreds every day. The secret would be a secret no longer.

Ackal IV might be saved from his sickness, but then what?

The nullstone was no defense against a knife in the back. By adding the Irda artifact to the equation, Tol might encourage outright assassination of the emperor. For the chance to capture such a prize, the ambitious and the greedy from every level of Daltigoth society would line up like buyers in the meat market. Blood would flow. It could mean civil war, and the end of the empire.

Tol asked himself if his reasoning was fair. Were his fears justified, or did he simply seek excuses to keep the nullstone to himself?

Ackal was still talking, but only when he coughed, spattering the front of his robe with tiny drops of blood was Tol jerked from his tangled thoughts.

“I am Your Majesty’s Champion. What can I do to help you?” he said earnestly.

Ackal dabbed at his lips with a swatch of white silk. “Was I not just saying?” Though not an old man, the emperor smiled like one, lips tight together, wrinkles piling up around his fevered eyes.

“Stay by me, Tolandruth. Take rooms in the palace. I feel that with you close by, my powers will soon return.”

Tol’s heart beat faster. Here was an admirable compromise. His presence might ward off dangers, magical and temporal. And he would be near Valaran—

The emperor’s next words shocked Tol to his very core.

“My wife would be glad of your company.”

Tol couldn’t speak, could barely control his expression. At last he said, “Wife, Majesty?”

“Yes, Valdid’s daughter. You two are old friends, are you not? She will be happy to have you about. My other wives are not kind to her, despite my admonitions.”

Tol could think of nothing at all to say, but fortunately the emperor was going on.

“You two have been friends a long time, I know. She taught you reading, yes?” Tol nodded dumbly. “Yes. In spite of what most people think, there is nothing that goes on in the Inner City about which I do not know. From charming secrets to vicious gossip, I hear it all.”

At that moment Tol realized Ackal must know about him and Valaran; he knew and was not outraged. Tol’s heart was pounding so hard, he felt it must be audible to the emperor.

“Sometimes I believe the gossip,” Ackal said quietly, “and sometimes I don’t. When I assumed the mantle of Ergoth, I learned a most important fact.”

Prompted, Tol said, “What is that, Majesty?”

“What the emperor wishes to be true is true.”

Their eyes met, and Tol understood. He'd always blamed his ten-year exile on Mandes's lies and Nazramin's treachery, but the truth, it seemed, was more complicated. The sorcerer had stolen his honor for the destruction of XimXim, and Nazramin had undermined his glory for winning the war in Hylo—but it had been Crown Prince Amaltar who kept him away from Daltigoth for a decade. Away from the city, and away from Valaran. He could have had them both punished for their infidelity, but he needed Tol, needed him the way a warrior needs a fine sword to battle his enemies, and Amaltar was genuinely fond of Valaran.

Now the stakes were higher than a husband's honor. Ackal IV needed Tol to keep him alive and on the throne of Ergoth. If that meant turning a blind eye to the fact his wife and his champion were lovers, so be it. It was cold-blooded reasoning, but Tol didn't care. A tremendous burden had been raised from his soul. He knelt before Ackal IV.

“I am your man, Majesty. Body, soul, flesh, and blood, I am yours,” he said, lowering his head.

“Your soul you may keep. The rest I can use.”

* * * * *

The Rumbold Villa was soon vacant again. Egrin and his men had departed for Juramona, and Tol and Kiya took a small suite in the palace's south wing.

The transition was not an easy one. Kiya's melancholy over her separation from Miya deepened. She took to drinking too much and sleeping too little, haunting the kitchens and servants' quarters, where she felt more at home than among the haughty courtiers. As for Tol, access to Valaran and the emperor's tacit approval did not guarantee a new blossoming of love. Resuming their affair, once a secret and dangerous passion, seemed somehow sordid and selfish. When they met, talk was difficult, the atmosphere awkward and strained.

“I'm not that impetuous girl any longer,” Valaran confessed. “I'm not seventeen and full of fire.”

She and Tol were seated on a marble bench in one of the many gardens, large and small, scattered throughout the imperial dwelling. This one was tiny, located on a narrow terrace, but a favorite of Valaran's for the autumn crocuses blooming there now.

Staring down at the purple flowers in her hand, she added, “For ten years I tried to purge you from my thoughts, to forget how it felt to love you, to touch you. I can't in the space of a few score days go back to the way I was long ago!”

Tol had never stopped loving her, but he understood her quandary. So much had happened while they were apart, they had become different people. They no longer knew each other.

“This feels like the end, not a new beginning,” she murmured.

He stood quickly, needing to move. The terrace allowed only ten steps from one side to the other. He paced back and forth several times, then halted in front of her.

“I can't give you up,” he said. “Any more than I can give up a hand or a leg!”

She flushed and looked away. “I never wanted to leave you.”

“Then don't!” He dropped beside her again and took her hand. “We can begin again,” he whispered. “There's been too much longing between us since I returned. That will stop.” Her expression was skeptical. “I shall court you.”

She almost laughed, but the serious glint in his eyes stopped her.

“Tol, we're not children any more.”

“No, and I won’t act like one.” He released her hand but the resolve in his face never faltered.

Her doubts began to waver. “We’d have to be careful. Even if my husband knows about us, we cannot flaunt his honor.”

“Of course not. We’ll be as discreet as owls.”

Now she did laugh. “Is that some rustic expression?”

The mirth was balm to the ache in his heart. “Just so. Owls pass their lives shielded by darkness. Stands to reason they’re discreet.”

The dimple he’d long missed reappeared when she smiled. “I’ll write that down.” Her light expression faded, replaced by a thoughtful frown. Her eyes grew distant. “I could collect an entire book’s worth of unknown and forgotten similes—”

“Later,” he said, and leaned closer.

She recoiled a little, unsure of his intentions, but he only reached into the leather case at her feet. She never went anywhere without her collection of books. He drew out a short, tightly wound scroll and held it out to her.

“Read to me?”

By such small steps they learned to know each other again. They met often, but to no set schedule, in out-of-the-way corners of the great, rambling palace. In time they even dared the ghosts of their past and met by the centaur fountain, in the grove below the Tower of High Sorcery—the place they’d first found love many years before. Valaran would read to Tol, or they would talk about the events that had transpired while they were apart. Tol described the campaign against Tarsis. He spared her nothing, from the bloodiest battles, to the final victory, to his dalliance with Hanira.

He feared she might be jealous of this last, but Valaran shrugged off such a notion.

“I’d be more worried if you professed celibacy,” she said. “This woman interests me. She wields power, you say?”

“She’s a syndic, one of the city’s leaders.”

“I see the Tarsans are ahead of us in some ways. I’d like to meet her someday.”

Tol found the prospect alarming. He felt equal to either woman separately; together, they would put him at a distinct disadvantage.

* * * * *

The golden phase of autumn was quickly over, yielding the land to the drying, dying days before winter. The harvest was good; for the first time in many years the empire basked in prosperity and peace.

However, all was not quiet beyond the borders of Ergoth. From the east came odd rumors of invasion and migration. Tribes of nomadic humans and centaurs moved west, displaced by other tribes, who in turn had been driven from their homes by distant, vaguely described invaders. Muddled tales of “foreigners” arriving on the northeast coast reached Daltigoth. Those in power weren’t worried. Such migrations did happen. Opinion in the capital was that dark-skinned seafarers had come down from the northern ocean, driven there by storms or migratory pressures of their own. Ridiculous stories of the invaders being “monsters” were not believed. Beaten people often claimed to have been overwhelmed by supernatural forces.

Miya formally wed Elicarno that fall, with Tol’s blessing and Kiya’s sulking acceptance. Their household, on the floor above Elicarno’s workshop, was the talk of the city’s working folk. Miya

took over the business side of her husband's work, procuring timber and metal with the same ruthless bargaining tactics she had so long used to keep Tol and her sister fed. Patrons who came to seek the engineer's expertise now found they had to deal with the formidable Dom-shu woman, half a head taller than her husband and fiercely protective of him. Far from diminishing Elicarno's trade, Miya's blunt and honest manner won him many new clients. Machines bearing Elicarno's stamp were soon in use all over Daltigoth. New buildings designed by him rose in every quarter save the Inner City.

Miya was soon with child. If Elicarno's suppliers thought this would slow the forester woman, they were soon sorely disappointed. Elicarno built her a sedan chair, and Miya rode forth on the arms of six sturdy yeomen, ready to do battle with skinflint quarrymen, forgemasters, and lumber factors.

Ackal IV's health took a surprising turn for the better, and he slowly recovered from the catarrh that had gripped him for so long. His cough eased, and he no longer awakened each morning with blood on his pillow. Some of the scheming glint returned to his eye, and he sat up straighter and stronger at the lengthy council sessions. Valaran, having more intimate access to the emperor than any warlord or courtier, told Tol her husband was sleeping through the night again for the first time in more than a year, though he did mutter and groan most of the time. It seemed he was emerging from the slow, strangling spell that had been sapping his life.

Tol thought the emperor's revived health might be linked to the fact that his scheming brother, Prince Nazramin, left the city not long after Enkian Tumult's army returned to the Seascapes. The prince went without fanfare, taking two hundred of his personal retainers, Nazramin's Wolves, with him. Retiring to a large estate eleven leagues from Daltigoth, the emperor's brother received a steady stream of visitors from the capital and outlying provinces. At first Nazramin's departure looked like the start of some new plot, but as the days stretched into months and nothing untoward happened, most of the imperial court relaxed.

Tol did not believe that Nazramin had given up his machinations. He was waiting for something, biding his time. Ackal IV had spies planted within the household and kept close watch on his brother's doings. Because of her discretion (and skill at reading), he chose Valaran to read the spies' lengthy reports to him.

Other strange things were afoot. Fierce storms scoured the western coastal provinces, destroying seaside towns and wrecking ships. A strong squadron of imperial warships, chasing the fleeing flotilla of pirate chief Morojin, entered the Sancrist Channel one evening and never emerged from the north end. Twenty-three warships and their crews vanished without a trace. The shoreline from Cape Zol to Dice Bay was scoured for traces. None were found. Word was sent to the gnomes of Sancrist Isle to search their beaches for jetsam from the missing fleet. The gnomes invented several new machines for the task but found nothing.

The litany of ominous disasters grew longer. A murrain broke out among the enormous cattle herds of central Ergoth. Frightened ranchers broke up their herds, dispersing them to halt the spread of the disease, but it didn't help. Fifty thousand head of cattle died that fall. The price of beef tripled in Daltigoth, and the leather market collapsed as thousands of fresh hides flooded in from tanners.

Forest fires ravaged the Ropunt district, destroying much valuable timber. Juramona was infested with a plague of bats. Thousands of the small, leathery creatures descended on the town, stopping up chimneys and fouling wells. Sickness followed.

A drought gripped the Eastern Hundred. Landslides blocked the southern pass through the Thel Mountains, cutting off trade between Hylo and the sparsely settled lands east of the kender kingdom.

Rumors of unnatural invaders persisted. They weren't human... they were on the borders of Thoradin... the dwarves were arming themselves to resist...

Like a drumbeat, the pulse of disaster grew steadily louder in the halls of power in Daltigoth, until

one day Tol was summoned from bed to the imperial council chambers.

It was cold that morning. He threw back the fur blankets and drew on a thick, quilted robe. Eyes bleary with sleep, he went to the basin by the door, where the lackey who'd summoned him waited. When he dipped his hands in the bowl, they bounced back. The basin had a crust of ice on it.

"Make haste, my lord!" said the servant. "The emperor expects you!"

Wordlessly, Tol broke the ice with an elbow and splashed the water on his face. The frigid water instantly cut through the soft, heavy layers of sleep still clinging to him.

"What's it about?" he asked, blotting his face.

"I know not, my lord."

Tol eyed the fellow skeptically. Palace servants were renowned for their eagle eyes, bloodhound noses, and cat-like hearing.

Under Lord Tolandruth's iron gaze, the man shifted uncomfortably. "Visitors arrived early this morning," he finally admitted. "From the north. With ill tidings."

"Visitors?"

"Kender, my lord, with an escort of Riders from the Marshal of the Eastern Hundred."

Something serious must be afoot if Egrin deemed it important enough to pass the kender along to Daltigoth. Tol hastily combed his hair and beard and propelled the servant out the door before him.

As they passed through an open breezeway between wings of the palace, Tol saw it was a brilliant morning. The sky was as bright and clear as only an early winter morning could make it. Bold blue stood out against the shaded white walls of the Inner City. In another month the gray season of snow would settle over the city, but for now the sky was as clear as the eyes of the gods.

A smaller than usual collection of councilors was waiting when Tol arrived. Lord Rymont and his aides, Valdid the chamberlain, Oropash (looking sleep-tousled), and his sleek counterpart Helbin were present. Four road-stained Riders flanked a single, carrot-haired kender, who was busily munching on a round loaf of brown bread. The council table was strewn with maps, some rolled, some anchored open with brass cups of mulled cider.

"My apologies," Tol said, tugging the sash of his robe tighter. "Am I the last to arrive?"

"We're awaiting the emperor," Rymont said. He was impeccably attired and must have been awakened first.

The doors to the emperor's private quarters opened, and Ackal IV appeared, looking pale and thin in a burgundy velvet robe made for his robust father. He was trailed by his personal healer, a priest of Mishas named Klaraf, and Empress Thura.

Valdid announced his entrance, and everyone knelt, except the kender, who blithely continued eating. Ackal eased himself into his great chair at the head of the table. A golden chalice of steaming cider was put in his hand.

"Well?" he said.

Lord Rymont stepped forward, and all eyes went to him. He paused, briefly enjoying the attention then said, "Your Majesty, this fellow arrived a short time ago." He gestured at the kender. "He was sent to us by Marshal Egrin with a guard of ten Riders."

One of the soldiers saluted. "Begging your pardon, Your Majesty, my lord, but we were twenty strong when we left Lord Egrin. The others were killed on the way here."

In clipped words the Juramona man explained that a contingent of six kender had arrived, seeking help from Marshal Egrin. They'd been sent by the King of Hylo, Lucklyn the First. The kender realm, a protectorate of the empire, was beset. A strange, thick fog had filled Hylo Bay from end to

end, stopping all traffic in and out of its busy ports. Worse, plague had broken out in all the port towns.

“Let me guess,” Tol said grimly. “The Red Wrack?”

The kender paused in his eating and drinking long enough to say, “Funny, that’s just how ol’ Egrin put it when we told him.”

“We’ve seen this before, he and I. We know who the author is!”

The kender rubbed a butter-smearred palm against his jerkin, then extended the hand to Tol.

“Stumpwater’s the name, your generalship. Early Stumpwater.”

“Hold your tongue!” Rymont said irritably. “You’re in the presence of the Emperor of Ergoth!”

The Rider from Juramona continued his tale. Lord Egrin had indeed immediately recognized the hand of the rogue Mandes. Scouts were dispatched to locate his hideout. Nothing was found in the north, west, or south, but those sent to explore east of Hylo, in the foothills of the Thel Mountains, never returned.

Kender wanderers crossing the mountains from east to west reported finding a solid wall of white mist around the highest peaks in the range, some thirty leagues east of Old Port. Fog in the mountains wasn’t abnormal, but this mist was. It clung to the slopes of Mount Axas in the very teeth of a strong south wind. Kender being kender, some of them entered the mist. They passed into the whiteness easily enough, but none came back out again.

“The marshal believes Mandes is responsible for the fog and plague in Hylo, and that he has taken refuge on Mount Axas,” the Rider finished.

Leaning over a spread map, Valdid squinted and placed a fingertip on one spot. “There’s a ruined keep on the escarpment below the peak,” he said. “Very ancient—from before the days of Ackal Ergot.”

“Mandes must be stopped, Majesty. He’s daring us to come get him!”

The emperor regarded Tol curiously. “Why do you say that, my lord?”

“Because his attack is so obvious! Years ago, Mandes lent his mist-making skills to a band of marauding bakali in the same region. The numbing fog carried a disease within it, the same Red Wrack that is now gripping Hylo. You remember how it scourged the army of Lord Urakan in the campaign against Tylocost?” There were nods all around. “Mandes is repeating his method deliberately, I believe, as a direct challenge to us.” A direct challenge to me, he thought, but did not say.

Helbin, chief of the Red Robes in Ergoth, spoke up. “I fear Lord Tolandruth is correct, Majesty. Our order has been watching Mandes closely since he fled. At first he was quiet, shunning notoriety. Lately he’s become bolder. We have reason to think he’s responsible for many of the misfortunes currently afflicting the empire.”

“The murrain? Fires and avalanches?”

Helbin nodded gravely. “Perhaps the disappearance of the imperial squadron off Sancrist, too.”

“Impudent wretch! Say the word, Your Majesty, and I will dispatch two hordes to the Thel and bring back this wizard’s head!” Lord Rymont declared.

Oropash took umbrage with Rymont’s characterization of Mandes. “He is no wizard, my lord,” he said.

His mild voice was all but drowned out by Rymont’s anger. “Insults cannot be tolerated!” Rymont cried. “The emperor’s honor has been besmirched!”

“More than honor is at stake,” Ackal IV said slowly. “We hear whispers of invaders coming from

the east. The tribes they displace come west to escape. Soon our borders will feel the first waves of this migration. There will be war, not for conquest or glory, but to defend our homes and lands against hordes of frightened, desperate immigrants—and all that before the main invasion from the east arrives.”

Everyone regarded the emperor with respect. He was surprisingly lucid these days.

He added, “Mandes could have made trouble for us at any time since his exile. Why now? It’s obvious, my lords. He’s seen the trouble coming, and he’s using it to compound the difficulties we face.”

“What could he want?” Empress Thura asked.

“Revenge?” The emperor smiled wanly. “Maybe he simply wants his old position in Daltigoth back.”

“That could never happen!” Oropash said, voice quavering.

Rymont repeated his demand that two hordes of the imperial army be sent to the mountains to root out the troublesome sorcerer. Helbin countered that Mandes’s befuddling mists, coupled with the treacherous paths in the high mountains, made such a venture suicidal.

Two camps slowly took shape. On one side were Lord Rymont, Valdid, and Thura, who favored a direct attack on Mandes. On the other side were the wizards, who proposed magical measures to isolate and contain Mandes.

“What say you, Master Stumpwater?” asked the emperor.

The kender had finished his eating and was resting his chin on his crossed arms on the table. His green eyes had flicked back and forth, following the heated discussion with interest. When Ackal spoke, the others’ eyes now went to him.

“A boil’s gotta be lanced, Your Mightiness,” the kender piped. “Leave one too long, and you get a fever.”

“I agree,” Tol said, but Helbin and Oropash immediately objected. An assault would be costly in lives and would surely fail, they said.

“I agree,” Tol repeated, “and under the circumstances, every Rider will be needed to guard the frontier if invaders do come.”

Rymont’s face was eloquent of disgust. “Lord Tolandruth is speaking in riddles,” he said. “We can’t do both—attack Mandes and keep the army out of the mountains.”

“Yes, we can. I will go myself. Alone.”

Silence greeted this startling statement, yet Tol noted that no one objected.

“What makes you think you can succeed?” asked the emperor at last.

“I know Mandes, Majesty. I know his tricks, his vanity, and how to reach him.” Tol’s hands closed into fists. “And I have a heavy score to settle with him. Give me leave, and I pledge upon my life that I will not fail!”

Helbin and Oropash, knowing Tol possessed the millstone, did not challenge him, but Rymont asked Tol how he expected to evade Mandes’s stupefying mist.

“I’m certain the masters of the Tower can provide me with protection—protection not available to two entire hordes,” Tol said blandly. Oropash looked confused for a heartbeat then slowly nodded agreement.

Debate began over the size of the escort that should accompany him, but Tol cut it off. “No, I must go alone. An escort will only draw unwanted attention.”

“You’ll need a guide,” Ackal IV said. “Will you undertake that task, Master Stumpwater?”

The kender tugged absently on his long carrot-colored topknot, thinking. “I suppose I could take Lord Tolandruth to the foot of the misty pass,” he opined, “but my skill don’t come cheap. Will you pay me in gold?”

Payment was promised, and Early accepted the job. Nods of satisfaction along with more than a few raised eyebrows greeted this proposed arrangement.

The emperor rose stiffly, pushing himself up with both hands until he was standing, then issued his orders. Lord Tolandruth would go forth to the Thel Mountains and investigate the fog-filled peak. If he found Mandes there, he would administer imperial high justice.

“What’s that?” asked Early.

“Bring back the sorcerer’s head,” said Rymont coldly.

Having ruled, the emperor sank back into his chair. He dismissed all present, asking only Tol to remain behind. Thura and the healer, Klaraf, wanted to stay, but Ackal irritably ordered them both out.

With only a quartet of bodyguards at the far doors of the chamber, Ackal beckoned Tol to him.

“When will you leave?” he asked.

“Whenever Your Majesty requires.”

“Tomorrow morning then. Draw whatever supplies you need from imperial stores. Get a pony for Master Stumpwater, too,” Ackal said. “You’ll need a map of the high Thel.” Tol glanced at the array scattered across the table, but the emperor shook his head. “There are better charts in the library. I’ll send Lady Valaran to you. She knows the library better than the chief archivist.”

Tol tried to gauge the emperor’s purpose. Ackal IV provided the answer.

“You know how dangerous this mission will be, don’t you?” he said. “Mandes won’t be sitting on that mountain-top unprotected. He had considerable treasure, and none was found in his house after he fled. He’ll have hired guards, so you’ll be contending with swords as well as sorcery.”

Tol nodded. He had surmised as much on his own. The emperor said, “This may be the single most important deed you’ll ever do for your country, Tolandruth. No other man in the empire would have a hope of success.”

“Thank you, Majesty. I shall not fail.”

Ackal extended his hand. Surprised, Tol reached out uncertainly. Ackal’s hand was dry and feverishly hot.

“Go with the gods, my lord.”

Once Tol was gone, Ackal IV let his head loll against the wing of the great padded chair. So weary... he was so weary, yet he was filled with hope, too. If anyone, Tolandruth could do it. He was a great warrior, and a loyal Hade. His strength would carry the day against any foe—

The itching began again. All over his fingers and toes, the maddening sensation of tiny, spiked feet and glistening pincers began.

“Ants!”

Ackal IV clutched at his fingers, trying to scrape off insects only he could see. His feet burned with their bites. Drawing one leg up, he tore off the velvet slipper and flung it across the room. Already his pale feet were scored with long scratches, crusted with dried blood.

“Ants! Ants!” he gasped, clawing at his feet anew.

At the doors, the guards heard the emperor’s hoarse exclamations and witnessed his mad gyrations.

They did nothing. They saw this spectacle less often nowadays, but when it came it was fiercer and wilder than before; anyway they had been warned not to interfere. Gold in their pockets assured their compliance. Prince Nazramin could be very generous when he chose.

Ackal's voice rose to a shriek as the burning, stinging pain increased. "Can no one stop the ants?" he cried.

In this lonely struggle, the Emperor of Ergoth had no champion.

* * * * *

It took all afternoon and most of the evening for Tol and Valaran to find the best map of the Thel Mountains. According to the catalog, the particular map they needed had been made one hundred fifty years earlier by surveyors working for Empress Kanira, as part of her mad dream of building a road from Daltigoth to Hylo. However, finding the terse entry in the catalog was one thing; finding the actual map on the dusty, ill-maintained, seemingly endless shelves was quite another.

"Look at this!" Valaran said, drawing out an unusually large roll of parchment.

She was crouched at the foot of a tall shelf, surrounded by loose scrolls. Hair looped behind her ears, she'd hitched up the hem of her fine silk gown without hesitation to search among the dusty books on the bottommost shelves.

Sitting on the floor close by, and moving the four-flame oil lamp as she commanded, Tol watched her with frank affection. They were alone; the ancient librarian, an old friend of Valaran's, had long since abandoned them to their quest and was snoring in his cubicle.

"I've heard of this!" she said, shaking the scroll excitedly. "Scholars claimed it was a myth, but here it is!"

"The map?"

"No, Kanira's plan for a new capital city!"

They unrolled the heavy parchment. In fantastic detail, the vainglorious empress's plans for her new capital were laid out. The city was circular and was to have been built at the end of Hylo Bay, approximately where Old Port was located. Kanira's palace would have occupied a flat-topped artificial mountain in its center. The terraced mound would have been almost as big as the entire Inner City of Daltigoth now was.

"Merciful gods," Tol breathed. "No wonder they deposed her!"

Valaran pointed. "Look here—a canal encircling the city's outer wall, both banks paved with granite... twelve temples, evenly spaced around the circumference of the city... and the gardens! The gardens are tremendous, built on the terraced sides of the palace mountain!"

Tol sat back, shaking his head. "She was mad."

"But what vision!"

Her profile, gilded by the warm lamplight, was vision enough for Tol. He never wanted to look away.

She felt his gaze, and a faint blush colored her cheeks.

"You know the dangers I'm facing, don't you?" he said quietly.

Valaran concentrated on rolling up the large scroll. "All I know is that you are going away again," she said ruefully. "You love danger more than—more than anything."

"All the days since I returned, we've been so chaste," Tol said, catching her wrist.

“I’ve told you. We’re not love-addled youths any longer.”

“No, we’re not, but I can’t go to my possible death like this, hollowed out and empty of you.” He tugged on her wrist, drawing her to him. She did not resist. “Will you let me go again, perhaps never to return, without a single embrace?”

“Can we stop at one?”

Tol fervently hoped not. He put his arm around her waist. Valaran touched her cheek to his.

Chapter 17

The Wall of Mist

The next morning, after a whirlwind of preparations, Tol rode out with Early Stumpwater as his only companion. It was brilliantly cold, the sky clear as a dome of polished sapphire. All around them the land glittered under a heavy frost, every weed, every tree limb, and every sheaf of grain silvered with frozen dew. Tol was astride a tall black war-horse chosen from the imperial stables for his formidable strength and stamina, and in spite of the prickly temper that had earned him the nickname Tetchy. He led a pack horse laden with gear and provisions. Early was mounted on a white-maned sorrel pony he'd christened Longhound, after a dog, he'd ridden as a child.

After the fashion of his race, the kender's name seemed a slippery issue. When, at the Inner City gate, guards asked his name for the daily log; he told them, "Early Thistledown." A short time later, after regaling Tol with a wild tale about his adventures in the eastern lands beyond the Thel Mountains, the kender declared, "And that's the true story of how I rescued the chief of the Karadshu tribe, or my name isn't Early Foxfire!"

Kiya was still asleep as Tol prepared to depart, after haranguing him late into the evening about risking this mission without her; he didn't wake her. He left her a goodly purse of gold to live on in his absence, as well as two scrolls. The one sealed with red wax was a legal document, giving Kiya her freedom and absolving her of all obligations to him. Under Ergothian law a widow was liable for her spouse's debts, monetary and social. It was not unheard of for a surviving wife to be forced into marriage with a man to whom her late husband owed money. Tol had no such debts, but he wanted to be certain Kiya would be unencumbered.

The second document was closed with white wax, as was customary with wills. Over the years Tol had amassed quite a fortune in war bounties and imperial largesse. In the will, drawn up by Felryn over a year ago while they were still fighting the Tarsans, he left everything to Miya, Kiya, and Egrin, and made bequests of gold to certain old comrades like Darpo. The millstone, listed among his possessions as "a decorative metal-and-glass artifact of ancient origin," he left to Valaran. The night before he departed, he had revealed its power to her.

"This is the means by which you've always escaped enchantments?" she'd said, staring at the trinket resting in her palm. "It looks like a brooch, and a rather dull one at that!"

He took it back. "Yoralyn told me many lives could be lost if word of its existence got out."

"She's right." Valaran the historian put a hand to her chin, thinking hard. "Pakin Zan himself once owned a nullstone. He sacked the city of Ulladu on the western coast to obtain it from its owner, the priest Gomian."

"Ulladu? I've never heard of it."

"That's because Pakin Zan razed it to the ground. Sixty hordes breeched the defenses. Those inhabitants not slain in the battle—men and women, young and old—were forced to sift the wreckage of their city with sieves until Gomian's treasure was found, then they were executed. Burned alive, if I recall correctly."

Once again, he was struck by the calmness with which she could relate the most horrific

information. He didn't know if this was due to her scholarly detachment or to her upbringing in the imperial palace, where plots, assassinations, and massacres were common occurrences. Perhaps it was a little of both.

"What became of Pakin Zan's nullstone?" he asked.

She looped a stray strand of hair behind her left ear, and for a moment was again the bookish girl hiding in an alcove, reading dusty tomes.

"A rook stole it from him."

As Pakin Zan lay on his deathbed in the palace, a large Mack rook had flown in a window and plucked the millstone from the dying emperor's neck. Onlookers could only watch helplessly; Pakin Zan's strictest edict decreed death to anyone who touched his amulet. The rook flew away with the ancient artifact, never to be seen again.

Some authorities, Valaran said, held the bird was simply attracted by the shiny metal. Others believed the rook was the familiar of a sorcerer or rogue spellcaster, perhaps even the Silvanesti mage Vedvedsica himself. In the intervening twelve decades, no millstones had surfaced. Until Tol's.

Tol gripped her hands tightly and stared into her green eyes. "You will keep this secret?"

She did not wince or shrink away. "I have forgotten it already," she replied calmly.

As he and Early clopped through the frozen farmland in the cold light of morning, Tol was melancholy. Departing without saying good-bye to Kiya had left him with an odd, unfinished feeling. Through strange turns of fate, she was the only companion of his youth still with him. Miya was married and soon would bear Elicarno's child. Egrin ruled in the emperor's name back in Juramona. Darpo scoured the seas in command of the imperial fleet. And so many of his other brothers in arms were dead—Narren, Felryn, Frez—

For the first time in his life, Tol felt old. Though wrapped in fur, his knees ached and old wounds pained him. The deep stab wound in his side, courtesy of his one-time friend Crake, was particularly troublesome when the air was this chilly. More than that, he felt lonely. He'd survived so many of his friends, and so many enemies, too. Surprising how much a fellow could miss his enemies.

"—until the whole house collapsed!"

Tol's wandering attention returned. "What?"

"That's how I became chief food taster for King Lucklyn. Weren't you listening?" Early said, a little exasperated. Tufts of hair, stiff as broomstraw, protruded from his fur hood, framing his face with an orange fringe.

"Remarkable," Tol replied, though he'd heard none of the tale. "How fares Lucklyn's queen, Casberry? I met her once."

He'd made the acquaintance of the wizened kender queen when he and his men had gone to Hylo to find XimXim. Upon learning they had vanquished the monster, Queen Casberry fined Tol for hunting out of season.

"Oh, Cas is gone."

"Gone? You mean dead?"

"No, no. She left on a tour of Balifor the same day Lucklyn returned from his long walkabout."

"Was it affairs of state that separated them again, after they'd been apart so long?"

Early gave him a disbelieving look. "I thought you said you'd met Queen Casberry?" Tol laughed.

Putting aside his own worries, Tol found the kender a diverting companion. Early had an endless

supply of droll, bizarre, and amusing stories, including one explaining the origin of the topknot hairstyle so many of his people wore. Tol blushed like a new bride when he heard that one.

They rode northeast all day, through empty orchards and harvested fields. Tol stayed off the main road, wanting to make it more difficult for spies to track their progress. Well after sunset, Tol finally called a halt, and they camped in a windbreak of pines. The woods were silent. All sensible creatures were either hibernating or had shifted to warmer climes. Early settled on the other side of the small campfire, making a tent of his blanket. Only the tip of his nose and frosty puffs of breath betrayed his presence. Frost formed on the horsehair blanket Tol draped over his head.

Hypnotized by the flickering flames, Tol slept sitting up, Number Six lying across his lap. In the oblique, abrupt way of dreams, he found himself sharing the fire with two robed figures, one seated on each side of him.

At first the two seemed identical, cowed in dark gray fabric, their faces invisible. Tol tried to speak but could make no sound. Even so, he was not afraid. There was no telltale flicker of heat, so magic wasn't at work. This was only a dream.

The figure on his left slowly leaned forward, hands extending from the sleeves of his heavy gray robe. The right hand was white, with short fingers, the left dark and lean. A memory of the apparition on the bowsprit of the galleot *Quarrel* flashed into Tol's mind; it too had had mismatched hands. After a slight hesitation, the phantom on the right made the same motion; his hands were both dark.

The fire hissed and popped. Sparks lofted skyward, winking out against a background of brilliant stars. Rising above the sputter of burning wood came other sounds—indistinct, rapid whispers. Gradually, the scratchy sounds resolved into words.

Go back! Go back!

The words came from the specter on his left, the one with mismatched hands.

Tol tried again to speak, and this time he could. "I will not go back!" he stated.

There is grave danger. This came from the apparition on the right, yet its voice seemed identical to the first.

"I will not turn back," Tol repeated. "Many wrongs must be righted."

From his left: *Go back, or all you love will suffer.*

"Who are you?"

The figure with two dark hands pointed through the leaping flames at the other phantom: *He is the one you seek.*

Tol gripped his sword hilt, and glared at the phantom with mismatched hands. Mandes, of course! The sorcerer must have replaced his lost arm with a limb belonging to someone else.

The shade with mismatched hands gestured sharply. *Pay no attention to him. He is dead!*

Tol's heart raced. A name surfaced in his mind, the name of one cherished and lost, one who had dark skin. "Felryn? Felryn, is that you?"

Go back, or all you love will suffer!

The words came from the Mandes figure, and this time there was no doubt they were not a warning, but a threat. Although his limbs felt oddly leaden, Tol shifted the heavy saber off his lap.

Mandes spoke again. *Go back, Tol of Juramona. Give up this quest, or each night someone you care about will die!*

"No! This matter is between us, Mandes! Leave everyone else out of it!"

He's afraid, whispered the Felryn shade. *You are his doom.*

“Protect them, Felryn! Protect Valaran and the rest!”

He can do nothing! He is dead! Mandes said.

With a mighty effort, Tol swung the saber up, laying the blade flat on his right shoulder.

“Nothing short of my own death will keep me from seeing justice done. You will submit to the emperor’s judgment. If you harm anyone else, nothing will prevent me from taking your life—and it won’t be easily done! You’ll die by moments, traitor! I promise you!”

With that, he managed a wild swing of his sword. It swept through the campfire and into the figure with the mismatched hands. There was no sensation of striking cloth or flesh. The blade passed through the specter as through smoke.

Tol lost his balance and pitched headfirst into the fire. He clenched his eyes shut, expecting to feel searing flame.

With a jerk, he came awake. He was sitting upright under his blanket, Number Six cold across his legs. The fire had died to a few glowing embers. By this feeble light he saw his kender companion curled up across from him, frost heavy on his blanket. The horses drowsed nearby, standing so close together their sides touched.

The quiescent horses as much as the undisturbed dirt around the fire told Tol that no one had been present. The millstone was safe in its pouch in the waistband of his smallclothes. Had it been only an ordinary dream, or was Felryn truly warning him?

He stood and stretched his stiffened limbs. With the constellations as his guide, he looked back in the direction of Daltigoth, out of sight below the horizon. Did Valaran sleep peacefully tonight? Were Kiya and Miya well? Would Egrin be safe?

Early shifted in his sleep, snorting as he settled back into deeper slumber. Tol added wood to the fire and listened to his companion’s steady breathing.

Ah, to be a kender and never fret about anything.

* * * * *

As dawn began to brighten the eastern sky, they broke camp and reached the Dalti River just as the sun was clearing the tops of the trees. The simple dirt track they followed, used by cattle herders and itinerant peddlers, ended at the broad, slow-flowing Dalti. There was no bridge, only an anchored ferry. The ferryman’s hut stood on a knoll overlooking the waterway. It was surrounded by empty cattle pens and a ramshackle stable. Smoke seeped from the hut’s chimney. Tol rode up, dismounted, and knocked on the door.

The ferryman was a centaur. Gray-bearded, with a seamed, leathery face, he emerged from the snug house pulling a blanket over his shoulders. His horse’s body was a brown roan color.

“Early,” he grumbled, wiping sleep from his dark eyes.

“That’s me,” replied the kender.

The centaur looked confused. “Early to be travelin’,” he clarified.

Early nodded vigorously, “I am, and this is my partner, Lor—”

“Name’s Loric,” Tol said loudly, not wanting to announce his identity to all and sundry. “My kender friend’s Early.”

“You both are,” the centaur answered, stamping a hoof.

Tol let it drop. They followed the centaur into the ferry station.

The station had been built for a human operator, but the centaur, whose name was Edzar, had long occupied it. The house now resembled a horse barn, devoid of any furniture, its packed dirt floor covered with hay. A fire burned on the hearth, and two iron kettles bubbled there. Edzar offered them oat porridge and sweet cider. Tol gladly accepted the cider. Early had both.

The centaur clamped a gnarled hand around the handle and lifted the cider pot off the fire to fill Tol's clay cup. Tol was amazed. The twisted iron bale was hot enough to raise blisters on a human hand.

"Where you headed?" asked Edzar.

Fortunately, Early was spooning gray porridge in his mouth and couldn't answer. "Caergoth," Tol said.

"Soldier, eh?"

An obvious assumption, what with his war-horse and sword, so he nodded. "Reporting back to my horde in Caergoth." Edzar's meager curiosity was satisfied.

He told them they couldn't depart right away but must wait to see whether others might come wanting to cross the river. As it was winter and traffic was light, no one else had arrived by midmorning, so the centaur agreed to ferry them alone.

The ferry was ten paces square, worn from many years of use, but a sturdy craft. Still, Tetchy snorted and shook his black head, nervous about leaving solid ground. Early's mount moved closer to him, and Tetchy quieted instantly. Tol was amused to see the muscular war-horse walk docilely aboard beside the much smaller pony. Longhound obviously had a calming effect.

Edzar watched them from the cupola of the station. Thick cables linked a treadmill on which he stood to pulleys on the far shore. The cables were also attached to the ferry, so as the centaur walked, the craft was drawn across the river.

During the crossing, Early pointed ahead to a thin rim of clouds on the eastern horizon.

"Gonna snow," he said.

"Are you a weather seer as well as an official taster?" Tol asked.

"Nope. Just know snow clouds when I see 'em. Gonna snow."

So it did. The plain west of Caergoth was largely empty, as crops had been harvested and herds driven in for the winter, and they made good progress all day. However, the low line of clouds grew steadily until the sky was uniformly gray and furrowed like a farmer's field. Snow began to fall in late afternoon. Darkness came early, hastened by the heavy pall of clouds.

They camped on the lee side of an outcropping of boulders. Tol rigged a canvas fly to keep the snow off. They built a fire and pooled their simple rations: salt beef from Tol and "go-far" from Early. This was a concoction of potatoes, carrots, onions, peas, and other things which had been lightly cooked, then pounded into a lumpy paste. It could be fried in a pan, or simply eaten as it was. Tol found the kender rations surprisingly tasty.

As they ate, Early talked about his forebears (whether these were Stumpwaters or Thistledowns or Foxfires, Tol wasn't sure). They hailed from Balifor originally, he said. His great-great-grandfather had been the right-hand kender to the famed Balif.

"So what was the truth about Balif—was he kender or elf?" Tol asked, biting seared beef from a skewer.

"We do not speak of that awful tragedy."

Tol blinked at the uncharacteristically laconic response. A subject kender would not speak of? He

was intrigued and tried to wheedle the tale out of Early. Surprisingly, the kender would not be persuaded.

Early soon succumbed to slumber, leaving Tol to watch the soft flakes of snow falling in the still air. The blanket of white was already ankle-deep. At this rate it would be knee-high by morning.

Tol found himself reluctant to sleep. His dream of the night before (if dream it was) filled him with a dread of closing his eyes. Stupid and illogical, of course. If Mandes meant mischief, he could do it whether Tol was asleep or awake.

Still, he kept his eyes off the fire, the dance of flames being notoriously hypnotic. Leaning back, with Number Six resting across his lap, he propped his head on the cold boulder behind him, the canvas fly keeping the snow off his face. His eyes were gritty with fatigue, so he blinked to clear them.

A gray-wrapped figure appeared between one blink and the next. It stood a little ways off in the snow, at the very edge of the campfire's circle of light.

Not taking his eyes from the gray figure, Tol called out to rouse Early. The kender snored on. Tol pushed himself to his feet, pulling his saber from its sheath, and presenting the point to the phantom.

"Name yourself, stranger!" he said hoarsely.

I have stopped his mouth.

Tol whirled. The words had come from behind him. Much closer to him, directly over the sleeping kender in fact, stood an identically garbed phantom.

Go back to Daltigoth.

"Go to your grave, trickster!" Tol shouted.

He leaped over the fire and slashed through the Mandes phantom with his saber. His blade passed harmlessly through the specter. Tol kept moving forward, arms spread wide, intending to let the millstone's influence disperse the spell. Sure enough, as he passed through it, the image disappeared.

Stumbling in the snow, Tol turned back toward the fire. The second ghost—Felryn?—was still there, immobile as a statue. Early was curled up as close to the fire as he could get. He'd not stirred a muscle through all the alarums. Mandes must've used a soporific spell on him. Of the Mandes phantom there was no sign.

Something flickered in the smoke rising from the fire. At first Tol thought it was a trick of the flames, but the amorphous shape resolved itself into the facade of a building, translucent to the smoke rising around it. The building was a familiar one. It was Elicarno's workshop in Daltigoth.

The image shifted, as though the magical eyes through which Tol was seeing the scene were rushing toward the front door. No guards stood watch, but the heavy portal was secured by one of Elicarno's sturdy iron locks. It proved no barrier. The scene changed to the inner room beyond.

The great room was only dimly lit, filled with Elicarno's many machines. Unerringly the image tracked through the gears, pulleys, and standing frames until it found the stairs leading to the living quarters. With dizzying effect, the scene swung up, rising into the pitch-black stairwell.

"Stop!" Tol cried.

He raised his sword but made no other move. Whatever Mandes was doing, he was doing it from his lair. This image was intended as a mirror of what was happening in far-off Daltigoth. He could do nothing but stand and watch.

The magical invader moved along the second story, passing several open doorways and peering into

each as it ghosted by. Elicarno's crew, apprentices and journeymen alike, were sleeping four to six to a room. Although he could plainly see mouths gaping from snores, no sound came to Tol's ears.

At the end of the upstairs hall was a closed door. Again the phantom pierced the locked panel effortlessly. This room was lit by the soft blue glow of a lamp atop a shelf near the door; the lamp's chimney was a polished, hollowed out lump of lapis. A curtained bed stood by the far wall.

The scene halted for a moment, and for the first time Tol glimpsed the intruder—a heavy, hairy paw, tipped with ivory claws like a bear's, came into his field of view. No longer an incorporeal wraith, the thing moved forward with deadly deliberation, reached out a claw, and parted the velvet curtains surrounding the bed.

Tol shouted with frustrated rage, advancing a step toward the fire. Plainly visible by the azure light were the sleeping forms of Miya and Elicarno. Heavy with child, Miya slept on her side, facing the intruder. Her husband lay close behind, one arm draped around the curve of her swelling belly.

Claws reached for Miya's throat.

Tol clenched his eyes shut, praying to the gods this was not a real occurrence. It must be an illusion, designed to frighten him into giving up his mission. Mandes was a powerful sorcerer, but even he couldn't send murderous phantoms to do his bidding from so far away, could he? Yet the golems had been sent to Tarsis to kill Tol—

Something brushed Tol's shoulder, and he threw himself away from the odd, feathery contact. To his surprise, he saw the second gray-robed phantom had come forward out of the snow and now was standing beside him. Even at close range, he couldn't make out the phantom's face, but he felt a presence behind the cowl, a presence he somehow knew was both benign and terribly angry.

"Felryn, help them!" he cried, gesturing to the smoky vision.

As he continued to watch, Elicarno awakened just before the monstrous claws reached Miya's neck. He shouted soundlessly as he grappled with the hairy paws. Miya awoke, thrashing, her throat taut with unheard cries. She rolled aside and fell out of bed. Elicarno, clad only in a breechcloth, braced a foot against his attacker's chest. Ivory claws raked down his arms. Blood flowed.

Miya snatched up a stool from beside the bed and pounded the invader with it. The image jounced and shook with every blow she landed.

Tol cheered, but what she really needed was a blade—a table knife, a pointed tool, anything! He called upon every god he could name to send her assistance.

The monster dragged Elicarno off the bed and held him up. The engineer's feet dangled above the floor. After raking his face and chest with its claws, the intruder hurled him against the wall. Elicarno slid down and did not move. Miya was next.

The view shifted suddenly from Miya's horrified face to the doorway. Wild-eyed apprentices were spilling into the room, armed with whatever came to hand—staves, hammers, a carpenter's square. When they beheld the monster attacking their master and his mate, their faces went pale as candle wax.

"Don't stare—fight!" Tol bellowed. He edged forward.

The terrified workmen mustered their courage and attacked. Forming a protective line between the monster and Miya, they held off the nightmare beast as best they could. Lightning-fast claws tore into them time and again, and the brave engineers went down bleeding, battered, eyeless. Only one still stood when more help arrived. These were older men, Elicarno's journeymen, armed with halberds. They jabbed and hacked at the beast, its blood spattering their spearpoints.

Now the image began to shimmer, like a view distorted by heat. Miya snatched a halberd from one man and swung the thick blade at the monster's head.

The monster drew away. The bloody paws it held up were no longer solid; Tol could see the carpet through them. It retreated from the valiant Dom-shu woman.

Leaving the remaining men to fend off the injured beast, Miya knelt awkwardly by her husband. Tears coursed down her cheeks. She lifted her face and let out a long shriek of grief.

A log in the fire broke, and the image dissolved in a tide of sparks.

Tol turned. “Felryn! Is Elicarno alive—?”

He woke up. He wasn’t standing by the fire, sword in hand, but sitting with his back to the chill boulder. His weapon, still sheathed, lay across his lap. The fire was only a pile of dimly glowing embers. Tol’s hands and legs were numb with cold.

“Early! Early, get up!”

A brief mumble was the kender’s only reply.

Tol forced himself to his feet, willing his icy limbs to move.

“The fire’s going out!” he said. “If it dies, we die!”

He stirred the coals, adding more deadfall wood. The embers blazed into life.

“What’s the matter?” Early asked, sitting up and blinking at Tol who was wildly circling the snowy clearing. “We bein’ attacked?”

Tol related the experience—dream?—he’d just had. He mentioned the one of the night before as well.

“There’s no sign anyone else was here,” he finished. “I don’t even know if what I’m seeing is real!”

The kender drew his fur collar up close to his eyes. “Oh, it’s real enough. If the Mist-Maker was throwing illusions at you, they’d be a lot worse. You say your woman friend lived, but her husband, this builder-fella, seemed bad hurt, maybe dead? Probably true, I say. If it was only an illusion, everything would’ve gone Mandes’s way, wouldn’t it?”

Early’s logic made horrible sense. On the other hand, Mandes was wily and might not overplay his hand. He knew Tol well enough to tailor his phantasms.

Tol drove a fist into the palm of his hand; This uncertainty was maddening! How could he know for sure?

Early was regarding him with surprising sobriety. “You’re going to have to kill him, you know,” the kender said. “Taking him back to your emperor ain’t gonna be enough.”

Snow hissed down around them, and the fire crackled with renewed life. Early was right. They couldn’t possibly take the rogue wizard all the way back to Daltigoth safely. No one Tol cared for would be safe until Mandes had drawn his last breath.

“I’ll stand by you,” Early added solemnly. “All the way.”

Now Tol was truly taken aback. While kender could be foolishly brave in the face of terrible peril, they weren’t noted for selflessness, or for sticking to a plainly dangerous course.

In Early’s green eyes Tol saw something he hadn’t before: determination. Moreover, the kender’s face seemed different somehow, its lines subtly altered.

“I’d like to finish this with you.”

“I’d welcome your company,” Tol said even as the odd phrasing, the tone of the words, stirred something within him.

Before Tol could say more, Early’s chin dropped to his chest and he muttered, “The passes’ll be treacherous. What we need are snowshoes...”

The words trailed off into raspy breathing. The kender had fallen asleep.

Tol slept no more that night. The cold was merciless, held at bay only by the little fire he tended. Conditions promised to be even harsher in the higher elevations ahead.

* * * * *

They skirted Caergoth the next day, keeping well clear of the flow of travelers drawn to the city. They saw smoke rising from myriad chimneys and knew snug hostels and a hot meal waited within the city's walls, but also within were potential informers and assassins. The wizard's gold could buy a great deal of trouble in Caergoth, so they were forced to pass it by, keeping to the gray shadows in the snowy woods.

The cold and lack of sleep wore on Tol, but he pushed onward even harder. Echo Pass, the gateway to Mount Axas, was eighty-odd leagues from Daltigoth, an eight-day journey under the best conditions. The deep snow would make the going even slower, but Tol was determined to make the pass in five days. Mandes's dreams tormented him only by night, when he slept. If night and slumber were required for the attacks on his friends, Tol wanted to reduce the number of opportunities Mandes had to strike at them.

They turned north, following the west bank of the Caer River. Once they were through the Forest of Aposh, north of Caergoth, the snow eased. By late afternoon they had reached the fork of the Caer, where Tol had found the millstone in the Irda ruins half a lifetime ago.

The sky north and east was a band of bright blue, shining under the woolly mantle of clouds behind them. Across the fork was the Eastern Hundred, Tol's old homeland. The high plain was dry, only lightly dusted with snow, but a bitter wind scoured down from the north, bringing tears to their eyes and cracking their parched lips. Early taught Tol an old kender trick: he smeared butter on their faces. The grease would protect them from the desiccating wind.

They camped on the bluff overlooking the confluence of the east and west branches of the Caer. Their short day ended, with Early laying the night's campfire as Tol gazed down at the Irda ruins, almost invisible beneath the vines and brambles. He would like to visit the ruins but feared Mandes might be watching from afar. He didn't dare betray any knowledge of the Irda. Mandes might connect that with Tol's puzzling immunity to magic and infer the existence of the millstone.

The horses, tethered in the lee of the icy wind, huddled together for warmth. Tol fed and watered them, noting how they trembled with cold and fatigue, even his stalwart Tetchy. Tol felt as miserable as they looked.

Early, lying in his bedroll, groaned loudly. Though a seasoned wanderer, he'd never ridden so hard or so long in a single day before. He claimed to be too tired to sleep.

Tol, loath to fall asleep and leave himself open to Mandes's manipulations, kept himself awake by regaling Early about his past, relating his adventures in the Great Green as a youth, how he had defeated the Dom-shu chief in single combat and thus earned his two "wives," Miya and Kiya. He'd just begun to speak of XimXim and the Tarsis war when the kender interrupted him with a piping snore.

Tol sighed. He drained the last of the broth from his cup and hunkered down, facing the fire. His eyelids slowly closed.

Instead of the dreaded sound of Mandes's voice, instead of the bitter, icy wind, Tol dreamt of warmth. He was on the Bay of Ergoth, the Blood Fleet under his command. The thumping of oars, the salt breeze, the hot sun were balm to his soul. He leaned against the mast of the quinquireme *Thunderer* and let the wonderful heat penetrate his bones.

“Ship to starboard, two points off the beam! A merchantman!”

Tol shifted his gaze. Though he'd given no order, the helm was put over, and the galley churned toward the tubby merchant ship. Sailors spilled out on deck, distributing cutlasses and pikes. A springald catapult on the poop was winched around and quickly cleared for action.

“Stand down!” Tol said. “We're not attacking.”

No one paid him the slightest heed. Indeed, the pirates rushed past him as if he wasn't even there. He tried to grab the nearest fellow and found he couldn't. His reaching hands passed through the pirate's sun-browned arms without hindrance.

The merchant ship piled on more sail and turned, trying to run from the powerful galley. The pirates unfurled a sail of their own, adding the wind's power to their oars. Inexorably, *Thunderer* overhauled the clumsy trader. Soon Tol could see men stirring on its deck. Bronze glinted in the ship's waist. They were preparing to resist.

The galley could have rammed the fleeing ship easily, but that would've destroyed the pirates' plunder. They had to board her. Pulling parallel to the merchant, separated by only the length of the portside oars, the pirates trained the catapult on their prey and let fly.

Instead of a wooden javelin or stone ball, they flung a bronze-tipped arrow tied to a long line. It buried itself deeply in the merchant's hull. The galley's portside oars were run in, and a dozen pirates hauled away on the line, drawing the two ships together.

A horn blared. Pirates swarmed over the galley's side and onto the merchant ship's deck. Iron clashed, blood flowed, and men toppled into the sea. Tol dashed back and forth, shouting for the pirates to cease, but he was a phantom to them, unseen and unheard.

—and then he was on the deck of the merchant ship. The ship's waist was a busy battlefield, with sailors from both ships locked in fierce combat. On the sterncastle, men in Ergothian armor fended off twice their number in pirates. In the midst of the frantic throng, Tol spotted a familiar face.

“Darpo!”

Tol tried to go to his comrade, but his feet were sluggish, as though mired in mud. He could barely make any headway.

Bowstrings twanged. Pirates had gained the rigging of the merchant ship. Holding on with their legs, they drew and loosed arrows into the defenders. Tol watched in horror as one archer took deliberate aim at Darpo, unaccountably the only Ergothian warrior who wasn't sporting a helmet.

“Darpo! Look out!”

With awful clarity, Tol saw the archer release. The arrow hummed forward, twisting through the air as the fletching caught the wind.

Darpo cut down a bare-chested pirate and stood back to draw a breath. At that instant he must have heard the arrow's thrum, because he turned toward it—

—and received the broadhead in one eye.

Tol bolted upright, shouting hoarsely. Early sat, legs folded, staring across the small fire at him.

Uncharacteristically, Tol began to curse. Disheveled, the sweat rapidly cooling on him in the frigid night air, he clenched his hands into fists and cursed.

“What did you see this time?” Early asked. His voice was strange, low and deep.

“Darpo—my old friend Darpo, commanding the imperial fleet. I was on a pirate ship that attacked him.” Tol swallowed hard. “He was shot by an arrow—”

He shivered, then was struck by several thoughts. It was winter now, yet in his vision the weather had been warm. That could not be. Besides, Darpo was in command of *Thunderer*, not plying the

seas on a merchant vessel being attacked by *Thunderer*.

“It must’ve been only a bad dream,” he said, forcing himself to breathe deeply, forcing himself to believe his own words. “Only a dream!”

“I fear not. What you saw was truth, disguised as memory and dream. Something grave may have befallen Darpo.”

The kender sounded so unlike his usual breezy self Tol said sharply, “How do you know all this, little one?”

“Sometimes I see far.”

Early’s face had taken on a completely different cast, more serious, more powerful—and was his skin darker than before?

Tol shook off the strange impression. Lack of sleep and raw nerves were affecting his judgment. Wasn’t that just what Mandes wanted?

He had intended to avoid all towns, but his peace of mind demanded otherwise.

“We’ll stop in Juramona tomorrow,” he told Early. “I want to warn Egrin myself of the danger he faces.”

It could be only a matter of time before Mandes turned his malign attentions to the marshal.

* * * * *

The high plain had turned from summer green to harvest gold and thence to winter brown. Beneath a leaden sky, an ocean of grass spread out before them, dry and stiff. Here and there, copses of trees lifted bare limbs sharp as talons to the sky.

As they rode briskly toward Tol’s old home, they spoke little. The wind of their passage was bitter on their faces. Gloved, caped, and hooded with furs, eyes squinted against the icy breeze, they cantered across the silent plain.

Late afternoon had come on the short winter day when they finally beheld Juramona. Tol hadn’t been back since leaving for Daltigoth with Enkian Tumult when he was but eighteen years old. The provincial town had grown steadily in his absence. The old wooden wall now sported stone towers, and the spans of timbered bulwark in between were slowly acquiring a thick skin of cut stone blocks. The marshal’s High House, on its mound overlooking the town, had been whitewashed. It stood out starkly against the slate roofs and unpainted houses below it.

Footmen were closing the western gate for the night when Tol hailed them. Shading their eyes against the rays of the setting sun, the soldiers delayed until Tol and the kender rode through the gate.

Riding down the dusty lane, Tol was assailed by a deluge of odors, some sweet, some foul, but all with meaning from the past. Frying meat and local beer, livestock and garbage mingled with vigorous, unwashed humanity. Tol drifted in a nostalgic haze. Only when he saw Early had halted ahead and was waiting for him to catch up did he snap out of it. This wasn’t the time to reminisce.

Guards challenged them at the foot of the ramp leading up to High House. They were young, local boys, cold and bored with guard duty, but they crossed poleaxes in front of Tol’s horse and recited the required challenge: Who was he? What business did he have in the High House?

Tol pushed back his fur hood. “I am Lord Tolandruth of Juramona. This is my companion, Early Stumpwater.”

The young soldiers gaped. If the emperor himself had appeared before them, they couldn’t have

been more surprised.

“My lord!” stammered one, a stoutish fellow. “We didn’t know you!”

“I have business with Marshal Egrin.”

The soldiers hastily backed away, and Tol spurred Tetchy forward. Early followed close behind. They galloped up the spiral ramp, drawing curious stares.

At the door of the marshal’s residence, Tol leaped from his horse before the beast had stopped. He dashed inside, ignoring the challenges of the soldiers on the door.

No one tried to stop him as he stormed through the halls, shedding gloves and heavy fur cape. Within High House there were many who knew him.

The sight of an elderly healer standing before the marshal’s quarters finally brought him up short. He recognized Ossant, a priestess of Mishas. She was an old acquaintance and a woman of conviction. Years ago, the then marshal, Odovar, had ordered Egrin to behead the Pakin rebel, Vakka Zan. Odovar intended the headless corpse be put on display as a warning to all Pakin sympathizers, but Ossant used her status as priestess and healer to have the body removed—“to prevent disease,” she had said.

His arrival obviously startled her. “I must speak with the marshal,” he said. “Where is he?”

Ossant’s pale blue eyes and the nimbus of white hair framing her round face gave her a deceptively gentle appearance: she was not one to mince words.

“Lord Egrin has withdrawn for the evening. A man his age needs rest.”

“My business is important. You come too, lady. There may be need for your services.”

“Is someone ill, my lord?” she asked, but Tol moved past her to push open the door and did not answer.

The marshal’s bedchamber was close and warm, the effect of an oversized fireplace blazing in the room. Egrin, dressed in a heavy brocade robe, sat before the fire in a large chair.

Head resting against the chair’s high back, he snored gently.

Tol paused. He suddenly thought of his father—his real father—and wondered where he slept this night. It was a bad son who let his parent fall into old age unsupported.

Ossant approached Egrin but did not touch him. “My lord marshal, Lord Tolandruth is here.”

Egrin jerked awake with a snort. He looked past the priestess and saw Tol. Immediately he sat up, and Ossant stepped back. The marshal cleared his throat, face reddening slightly at being caught napping.

“This can’t be good news,” he muttered, voice rough with sleep.

“No.” Tol’s smile was fleeting. “There are grave matters stirring, my friend.”

Egrin arose to greet Tol properly, his movements stiff. He drew up a chair before the fire, facing the marshal. Ossant stood at Egrin’s back and Early at Tol’s. The kender had sidled in unnoticed. Though he’d never been in High House, he’d somehow found his way to the marshal’s bedchamber unescorted.

After Tol explained his mission, Egrin said gravely, “So it has-come at last. You mean to slay the sorcerer.”

“I do.”

“I have reports from the mountains of his activities.” Egrin poured milky liquid from a brass pitcher into two clay cups. Tol was surprised to find it was barley water, a tippie associated with the old.

After downing a large swallow, Egrin said, "Mandes is on Mount Axas. He has hired between two hundred and four hundred mercenaries, mostly nomads from the east side of the mountains. His recruiters tried to enlist men from the Juramona garrison."

Tol's task suddenly seemed much harder, but he put on a bold face, saying, "Good. At least I won't have to chase him around the country!"

"Not good," Egrin countered. "He knows you're coming. You're walking into a trap."

The fire snapped and popped, bits of glowing bark falling into the dark bed of ashes. Egrin refilled their cups, and Tol rested his chin on his fist.

"What I need is cover, like the Mist-Maker's clouds," he mused.

"Diversions," said Early.

Everyone turned to the kender. He been so silent and still and unkenderlike, they'd nearly forgotten he was present.

"Why not a cloud of Tolandruths to befuddle the Mist-Maker?" he suggested.

A number of Tol impersonators, he explained, men from the Juramona garrison, could lead phony expeditions toward Mount Axas along different routes. Mandes and his hired army wouldn't know which threat was real.

"A man of his talent won't be fooled long," Ossant cautioned.

"I don't need long," Tol said. "Three days, maybe four."

Egrin rose. "I'll give the order."

While he was gone, Tol said to Ossant, "Mandes will do anything to stop me. So far he's sent terrifying dreams which seem to show my friends and comrades being killed. He's bound to try and harm Lord Egrin. Can you protect him?"

"I am only a humble priestess of Mishas," she answered. "No one in Juramona can contend with the Mist-Maker."

"You don't have to trade blows with him, just do your best to protect the marshal!"

The anxiety in his voice caused her to relent. "The wards of the temple of Mishas are the strongest in town. I will convince the lord marshal to spend each night there until you return."

Tol smiled. He clasped her hands and wrung them gratefully. "You're the best rear guard I've got, lady. I love Egrin like a father. Keep him safe and I'll build you a new temple of Mishas, as fine as any in Daltigoth!"

Egrin returned, and he and Tol walked out together.

As she followed them, Ossant caught Early's eye. Although the two had never met, a curious recognition flowed between them.

No one noticed when the elderly, revered priestess of Mishas bowed her head respectfully to King Lucklyn's royal food taster.

* * * * *

Smoke curled around ancient beams, coating the heavy slate roof slabs with soot. Far below, by the open hearth, Mandes sat in a canvas chair. A tripod supporting a brazen pan of clear oil stood before him. He gazed into the still surface of the oil. The silence was absolute.

A door flew open, thudding against the wall, and a fur-clad man stomped in. Wind howled through

the open portal, nearly extinguishing the fire and sending ripples across the oil.

“What word, Wadag?” Mandes grunted.

The nomad warrior closed the door and shook out his wild, tangled hair. “We got word of your man Tolandruth, Chief. He’s leading forty men up Wildcat Creek, coming this way!”

“Is he? Yesterday you told me he was coming from the west, through Anvil Pass, with twenty-two riders.”

“Some of the men still think that, but this is fresh information, Chief.” The young warrior waited, expecting praise and new orders.

Mandes pondered the new information for a long interval.

“You must investigate, I know,” he said at last. “I leave it to you, Wadag. Trouble me no more about it. Whatever you hear about Lord Tolandruth’s movements, you handle it. Yes?”

Wadag thumped his chest with one fist. “Yes, Chief! I’ll bring you the head of that fancy flatlander!”

Plainly excited by the prospect, Wadag departed as loudly as he’d entered.

Mandes sat back in his chair. Not every bird in the sky was an eagle, the saying went. Not every Tolandruth in the mountains was the real one. None of his stratagems to rid himself of the vengeful warlord had worked so far—not the death of the engineer Elicarno nor of the sailor in the far-off sea. Perhaps he had miscalculated. Maybe Tolandruth was not the sort of man who could be diverted by threats.

Now what? What could he do?

Violent trembling seized him. Tolandruth intended his death. If he, the Mist-Maker, who’d once held the great and mighty of Daltigoth in his thrall, could not defeat this one man, all his plots and plans would come to nothing. He would surely die.

Old Yoraly, leader of the White Robes when Mandes first arrived in the capital, had prophesied on her deathbed that a silent man would seek to slay Mandes, and even if forestalled, his coming would mean the Mist-Maker’s end.

The sorcerer reached out with quaking hands to the oil-filled pan. So great was his trembling he knocked the tripod over, sending rivulets of golden oil across the worn stone floor.

Chapter 18

Steel or Stone

The night passed without incident. Performing magic at great distances had to be incredibly draining, but if Mandes had overtaxed himself in striking at Miya and Darpo on successive nights, if those things actually had happened (and Tol prayed they had not), Tol knew the rogue wizard would strike again as soon as he was able.

During the night, eight different Lord Tolandruths, leading bands of Riders from the Juramona garrison, set out for Mandes's lair along different routes. At each village and every river crossing the bands would openly proclaim themselves Lord Tolandruth's men out to bring Mandes to justice. Tol was amused at just how easy it was to handpick a few soldiers, and disguise them to resemble himself.

With renewed provisions, Tol and Early left Juramona just after dawn. A marble vault of clouds still hid the sky, a bitter wind from the north playing on their faces. They were only twenty leagues from the Thel Mountains, thirty from Mount Axas proper—two days' hard riding there, and two days back to the safety of Juramona.

Once they crossed the border into Hylo Early perked up as of old, becoming talkative again. There were gaps in the kender's memories of the past few days, and Tol had an inkling why. Felryn's spirit must have taken possession of Early the night Darpo was attacked then stayed with him until they left Juramona. Mandes said he'd stopped Felryn's mouth, preventing him from speaking to Tol, but the sorcerer couldn't prevent Felryn from entering another body.

In spite of his grief, Tol found the notion of the orderly, precise Felryn sharing the untidy mind of a kender as amusing as his many counterfeits roaming the countryside. Yet it was enormously comforting to know a part of his friend survived, and that Felryn was going to such lengths to aid him.

The easiest route to Mandes's stronghold, according to Valaran's map, was to ride along the western edge of the Thel range, paralleling the mountains, until they came abreast of Mount Axas. Remaining in the lower elevations for as long as possible ensured a more comfortable journey.

As they rode through patches of scrub pine, they heard other horses nearby, quite a few horses in fact. Reining up, they sat quietly and listened.

"Ten riders," Tol finally murmured.

"Twelve," countered Early. "Humans."

"Egrin's decoys?"

The kender shook his head.

Tol eyed him skeptically. Early was well traveled, but no scout. "How do you know?"

"I can see them," he said, flicking his eyes.

Turning in the saddle, Tol saw them, too.

Twelve mounted men wearing furs and leather were approaching. They galloped by, forty paces

away and heading in the same direction that Early and Tol were taking. They rode in good order, keeping a formation of twos, marking them as professionals. The plains nomads had been hiring out as fighters to Tarsis for generations; they knew how to ride and fight.

Such patrols grew more frequent as they rode north. Several times Tol and Early had to hide to avoid columns of riders. They counted several hundred armed men crisscrossing the western approaches. Their grim presence appeared to have cleared the countryside of local kender, depriving Tol of friendly eyes and ears.

The winter day was almost over when they first beheld Mount Axas. It rose in the gap between two lesser mountains, Kembra to the north and Bluetooth to the south. Compared to the rocky peaks around it, Axas looked earthy and dark, as if the stones of its slopes were stained. The lower reaches were completely enshrouded by a wall of white mist. There could be no more certain sign the Mist-Maker had indeed taken up residence there.

“According to the maps I saw in Daltigoth, the fortress stands on a plateau on the southwest side of the peak,” Tol said, squinting into the distance. The mountains were highlighted by the setting sun, but he couldn’t make out any structures from so far away. “With luck, we’ll reach it tomorrow night.”

In a shallow ravine, they crossed a trail showing signs of recent, heavy travel. The earth had been ground to powder by the hooves of many horses.

Ten steps into the scattered pines on the east side of the ravine, an arrow whistled out of the trees and lodged in a tree by Tol’s face.

Out came his saber. “Here we go!”

Four axe-wielding riders burst through the underbrush and rode at them, shouting.

“Keep close to me!” Tol said. Though he looked unhappy doing it, Early pulled his stubby sword and followed.

Tol impaled the first man he came to, the point of his saber punching through the man’s heavy furs. His axe blade whisked by Tol’s ear, but the mercenary toppled from his horse, dead. Tol fended off an overhand chop from a second rider. Using his longer reach, he kept clear of the man’s axe and landed several cuts on his chest and shoulders. Number Six scored bloody gouges in the man’s leather vest.

The clang of iron behind him showed Early was likewise engaged. Confident his back was secure, Tol plunged in.

Axes were not good weapons to use from horseback, so Tol forced a third man back, whirled, and lopped the hands off the rider behind him. The fourth enemy had a strung bow over his head, but Early’s intervention kept him from losing an arrow. As Early now traded cuts with the third rider, Tol took on the axe-wielding bowman.

The blond-bearded mercenary tried to catch Tol’s saber with the hooks curling from each end of his broadhead axe. Realizing the danger, Tol drew back. The bowman immediately raised a ram’s horn to his lips.

Tol drove straight at him. The ram’s horn was on a lanyard, so the mercenary let it fall from his fingers and took his axe in both hands to ward off Tol’s attack. Moving the axe in a tight loop, he caught Number Six with his upper hook. He swung the thick blade in a tight circle, grinning. Bent like this, an iron saber would quickly snap, leaving Tol at his mercy.

However, the dwarf-forged blade wasn’t iron. The steel flexed further and further as the broad-shouldered nomad swung his axe in another tight circle. Tol exerted all his strength against the hilt, driving the long curved blade forward. It scraped over the axe handle and took the mercenary in the throat, just below his chin. His blue eyes widened in disbelief, and the axe fell from his fingers.

Freed from the binding hook, Tol's saber twanged like a plucked lyre string. The blade now had a slight but distinct bend in it.

The last mercenary tried to flee when he saw his comrade fall. He broke off fighting Early and spurred for the ravine trail. Tol's Ergothian war-horse easily overhauled the northerner's stubbier animal. A single stroke laid open the man's unprotected back. He slid off his horse and was dead when he hit the ground.

Breathing hard, Tol turned his mount around and rode back to Early. The kender was sweating in his furs.

"You did well," Tol said. "My thanks."

Early was pale. "I've never seen such quick deaths!"

"Had to be done. They would have killed us if we hadn't fought to the finish."

Far away, a horn sounded. More horns answered on every side. As Early scattered the mercenaries' horses, Tol took the ram's horn from the dead man's neck and blew a flat, booming note. It echoed across the valley to the slopes of the mountains.

"Why'd you do that?" Early demanded.

"They'll know there's trouble as soon as they find any of the horses. Hearing the horn might make them think some of their people are still alive. Maybe it'll buy us some time."

He tossed the horn into the brush and they hurried on. The white bulwark of mist waited ahead.

* * * * *

Twilight had come. The last rays of the setting sun clung to the wall of unnatural mist. This pallid glow washed the land in eerie, shadowless light. The strange illumination affected life in the valley below. Birds, normally at roost this time of day, circled overhead in confusion, unable to settle and rest. Nocturnal beasts came out to prowl although their daytime brethren still had not retired.

Tol and Early found themselves riding under a huge flock of screeching starlings. The noise was unnerving, not only for its own sake, but because it kept them from hearing anything else—like the warning signs of approaching horsemen.

When darkness finally claimed the valley and the birds and beasts settled into normal patterns, Tol and Early took shelter beneath a canopy of snow-covered cedars. Since morning, they'd been ascending the western slopes of the mountains, entering the frostier climate of the uplands. With their backs against a stout old tree, they ate cold rations and shared a gourd of cider.

Talk was kept to a minimum. As soon as he'd eaten, Early rested his head back against the shaggy bark. His breathing slowed into a shallow, steady rhythm.

Tol meant to resume their trek and reach the wall of mist by dawn, but he too felt the leaden weight of sleep. He struggled against it. Getting to one knee, he breathed deeply of the chill air. The cold was bracing and burned away his fatigue like a tonic. He stood.

Stars winked in and out of the black branches overhead. To the northeast, Mandes's veil of fog stood out starkly against the black night. The starlight showed imperfections in its surface, ripples and whorls where the wind at higher altitudes tried to tear the mist away.

Maintaining such a Spell must take constant energy. When did Mandes rest? Perhaps he couldn't. Perhaps that was why his soul wandered the night, tormenting others.

Solin appeared above the trees. Its pearly sheen warmed the dead color of the cloud-wall, and washed the woods in soft light. Shadows appeared among the widely spaced cedars.

The shadows moved.

“Early,” Tol whispered sharply. The kender did not respond, not even when Tol kicked his foot. Blast it if he wasn’t a heavy sleeper.

Brightness filled the woods behind Tol. He turned, shading his night-adapted eyes from the intense light.

In a heartbeat, his surroundings were transformed. Cedar trees became stone columns, rusty brown needles became a lush woolen carpet. Tol knew this place. This was the audience hall of the imperial palace, in Daltigoth.

A humming sound drew Tol’s attention to the ancient throne of Ackal Ergot. Ackal IV sat in the ornate gilded chair, his hair unkempt and tangled, his robes dirty. He held an odd-looking doll—not a child’s toy, sewn of soft cloth and stuffed with rags, but a stiff gray statuette.

Tol tried to speak, but no sound escaped his lips. He could see and hear perfectly, but Ackal seemed not to realize he was there.

The emperor continued to croon tunelessly to himself as he ran his fingers over the statuette’s face. His vacant eyes revealed the truth: Ackal IV wasn’t ill, he was mad. His mind was lost in some secret, distant vale.

At the far end of the dimly lit room, one of the tall doors opened, and a man entered. With a swirl of his floor-sweeping cape, the man traversed the long hall briskly. When he entered the wash of light from a pair of flickering braziers, the features of Prince Nazramin were revealed.

Instinctively, Tol’s hand went to his sword hilt, but the emperor’s brother strode past him, not seeing him at all.

Beneath his long cape, Nazramin wore a black leather riding habit, as though he’d just arrived from his country estate. He paused at the foot of the throne. The jeweled pommel of a large dagger glittered in his belt. Ackal IV would never have tolerated a weapon in his presence, had he been in his right mind.

“Brother?” Nazramin said.

The emperor continued to sing softly to himself, scraping a thumbnail over the dull gray statuette.

Nazramin took the statuette from him. Ackal whimpered slightly, reaching for it, but Nazramin pulled it away.

“A passable likeness,” said the red-haired prince, smiling unpleasantly at the figure’s face. “Not a striking one, but still, it served its purpose.”

Drawing closer, Tol realized the statuette bore the emperor’s face.

“Not the best medium, either,” continued Nazramin, “but lead is traditional.”

He dropped the statuette. It landed on its head with a fiat thud. Immediately, Ackal cringed and grasped his temples with both hands.

Tol felt sick. Image magic! Ackal was the victim of the lowest, vilest form of sorcery. It was Nazramin all along, pulling Mandes’s strings.

Nazramin paced slowly before the throne, still talking. Ackal’s clouded gaze tracked him with obvious difficulty.

“It’s taken a long time, but I’ve finally gotten everything in place. I bided my time. I endured your regency, brother, but I do not intend to suffer your reign any longer than necessary.”

The prince halted in front of the throne. “A coup would have been risky. Too many idiots in this city are loyal to that chair you sit on.” He drove a gauntleted fist into his palm. “Imbeciles! The throne of Ergoth is not a piece of furniture for any fool to occupy! Why should I risk myself to seize what

rightfully belongs to me? I watched those idiot Pakins try to take the crown from our uncle and our father, and what did it get them? Pointless warfare and their heads on spikes decorating the city wall! There was no need to bloody myself. I could get what I wanted without such risk.”

Without preamble, Nazramin brought his booted heel down hard on the statuette’s middle. Ackal screamed piteously, grasping his ribs and writhing on the throne. Tol took a step forward, furious at his inability to intervene or even to vent his anger in words.

“Your wandering mind has been well recorded,” the prince went on more calmly. “I left the city so no one could connect me with your growing madness. In many way you cooperated splendidly. Banishing Mandes was timely—it removed any suspicion that magic was being used against you.”

He picked up the statuette. “He made this for me, you know. Sixty-six days of continual spellcasting it required, and Mandes was so weakened that another ten days passed before he could attach the first clamp. It was well worth the trouble, don’t you think, brother?”

The hair on Tol’s neck prickled as he listened to Nazramin’s recitation of the horrors he’d visited upon his own flesh and blood.

“I summoned Enkian Tumult here with a false tale about an insurrection. I thought you would take fright and send the hordes to destroy him, creating an impression in the people’s mind of cruelty and ruthlessness, but instead”—Nazramin’s brows drew down in anger—“you sent that peasant to talk to him. You forced me to have Enkian killed, so my plot would not be exposed.”

Ackal’s attention was wandering. He began to croon again. Nazramin closed the distance between them in two long strides and slapped him hard. Ackal’s head snapped back, and Tol could have sworn that, for a moment, awareness came to his eyes. It quickly faded.

“Listen to me, fool!” Nazramin snarled. “I want you to know who brought about your downfall!”

After a pause to collect himself, he continued. “You obliged me by sending Farmer Tol to settle accounts with Mandes. That was perfect. I’ve been freer to act with the peasant away, and Mandes knows too much. It would have been necessary to silence him eventually, so why not let Lord Pigsty do it? If by chance the wizard prevails, that will save me having the farmer’s throat cut in the future.”

Nazramin moved to the table next to the throne. It held an ornate golden goblet, bearing the arms of Ackal Ergot. The prince lifted it and drank deeply of the cider it contained.

While Nazramin quenched his thirst, Tol pondered the reality of what he was seeing. It could be an illusion, but he doubted it. Now that he stood on the sorcerer’s very doorstep, Mandes was pulling out all the stops, revealing to him the true instigator of the evil that had befallen him. Tol was the Emperor’s Champion, sworn to defend Ackal IV, and Mandes hoped to send him racing back to Daltigoth to save the emperor.

Tol knew the first step in saving Ackal IV was putting a halt to Mandes’s depredations. Once the treacherous sorcerer was gone, Tol would settle accounts with Nazramin for once and all.

The red-haired prince was talking again. He certainly enjoyed the sound of his own voice.

“—invited a few senior lords of the empire to see you. Reports of your aberrant behavior have been spreading. The situation has become so dire, your chamberlain summoned me from my estate.” Nazramin smiled, and Tol went cold. “I’ve come to protect you, dear brother, you and the empire.”

Nazramin walked to the rear of the throne. He pressed one of the many ornamental studs on the chair’s back and a small section of wood swung open at the base. After inserting the gray statuette into the ingenious niche, Nazramin closed it up again.

He left the room, only to return moments later with a somber delegation. Valaran was among them, as were Empress Thura and Ackal IV’s other wives, Chamberlain Valdid, Lord Rymont, and the heads of the magical orders, Oropash and Helbin. The rest were mainly local horde commanders

and representatives of the city's guilds. Nazramin was taking no chances. He wanted as broad an audience as he could get.

Nazramin's face was a study in grave concern. "I've talked with my brother at some length," he said somberly.

"How fares the emperor?" Rymont asked.

"I fear his illness has taken his mind. See for yourselves."

The delegation moved forward cautiously. Ackal IV, belatedly becoming aware of them, lifted his head. Spittle ran down his chin, his eyes were bloodshot and unfocused. Gentle Thura gasped and rushed forward.

"Amaltar!" she said, grasping his slack hand. "Amaltar, do you know me? Why did you send me away?"

Smiling weakly, the emperor raised a gaunt hand to caress her face. His smile rapidly changed to a contorted grimace of pain. His nails dug into his consort's soft cheek. Thura screamed.

Lord Rymont and Prince Nazramin struggled to restrain the emperor. Thura reeled away, blood dripping down her chin. Oropash, deeply shocked, tried to comfort the weeping empress.

"Ants!" Ackal cried, struggling against the two men. "Can't you see? Her flesh is infested with ants!"

Valaran said sharply to Helbin, "Do something!"

"I'm not a healer," *he* protested.

"Where is the emperor's physician?"

In a stricken voice, Valdid reported that His Majesty had dismissed Klaraf two days earlier.

Ackal continued to howl about ants. He raved they were crawling over him, in his clothing, going into his ears, nose, and eyes. He could feel their hot pincers tearing at his flesh.

He struggled to his feet, seeming to throw off Nazramin's hold on his left arm. In fact, the prince released his brother intentionally. Ackal clawed at his own face, scoring bloody lines across his cheek before Lord Rymont locked both arms behind his back. Ackal screamed and wept uncontrollably.

Tol had seen men die in a hundred unpleasant ways, but he had never seen anything like the torment Prince Nazramin was inflicting on his own brother. He had to try and stop it.

Instantly, the palace scene vanished. Once again, Tol was sitting with his back against the cedar tree. Early lay sleeping beside him. The two of them were no longer alone.

Ringling them round were twelve mounted nomads, spears leveled.

Mandes's vision had distracted him from his watch, but there was no help for it now. He shook Early awake. The sight of the dozen intruders caused the kender to sigh.

"Oh. And here I was dreaming of the hills of Balifor."

A warrior with a heavy northern accent ordered them to stand. Four nomads dismounted, stripping them of their weapons. Then, under the iron gaze of the mercenaries' chief, Tol and Early were soundly beaten.

When he thought they'd had enough, the leader ordered their hands bound. A length of rope attached their wrists to a ring on a mercenary's saddle. The troop formed up and put spurs to their mounts, forcing the captives to jog to keep up.

Although they were in considerable pain, neither of them suffered any broken bones. Both had expected the beating to end only with their deaths, but obviously Mandes wanted them alive for his

own reasons—and none of the reasons that came to Tol’s mind were pleasant.

Still, they were alive. He still might be able to save Ackal IV. He knew where the lead image was hidden. Once its hold was broken, surely Helbin, Oropash, and the combined wisdom of the College of Wizards could repair the damage that had been done to the emperor’s mind.

A tree root snagged his foot and he fell. Early instantly dug in his heels, but he couldn’t stop the moving horse and was yanked off his feet. The two of them were thus dragged over rough ground several hundred feet, the mercenaries laughing all the while, until the leader halted.

Nose to nose with the kender in the dirt, Tol muttered, “Four legs may be faster, but two legs are nimbler. Follow my lead!”

The chief cursed and ordered them to stand. Early got to his knees. Tol gestured with a jerk of his head toward the chief’s horse. Early’s left eye was swollen shut; his right widened as Tol mouthed the word *Go!*

Before the chief could snatch at the leashes, Early scrambled forward. The nomad’s horse had short, thick legs, but there was ample room for a kender underneath. Since their hands had been bound together in front of them, Early had no problem getting his nimble fingers on the cinch of the chief’s saddle girth.

The nomad calmed his unnerved horse and shouted for a man to haul Early out. The kender was dragged out by his ankles and kicked a few times.

“I’m supposed to bring you in alive,” the chief growled, “but nobody said you had to have eyes when you get there! Any more trouble and I’ll have them out, both pair!”

The ride resumed with Tol trotting on the chief’s left, and Early on the right. After a league, when both thought they would expire from the effort of keeping up the pace, the chief reined up.

“You men without talismans continue the patrol.” Half the band turned and rode away. The chief tugged the leash connected to Tol’s bound wrists. “Come ’ere!”

Tol shuffled forward. A loop of string was placed around his neck. Dangling from it was a square of parchment; on the square were drawn arcane symbols in an elaborate design. Tol asked its purpose.

“Gets you through the mist,” was the brusque reply. The chief and the five remaining riders wore identical talismans, as did their horses. Talismans were placed around the necks of Tol’s war-horse and Early’s pony.

Tol didn’t need the talisman, since he had the nullstone, but the mercenaries didn’t know that. When the time was right, he would act.

Ahead, the grade steepened as the trees thinned out. The stony slope was divided down the center by a well-worn path. This was the foot of the Axas Pass. The mountain itself loomed above, walled off by bulwarks of white fog. The mist rose to a great height, at least a thousand paces. Although made of vapor, it was an impressive barrier, pearlescent by starlight.

They headed up the trail in single file. The chief, leading Tol and Early, was second in line. Barbarian though he was, the man was not a fool. As they neared the mist wall, he ordered the men following to level their spears at the captives’ backs.

“Don’t try to bolt in the fog,” he said. “Make trouble, and you’ll be spitted like partridges.”

“Doesn’t your master want us alive?”

The chief sniffed. “If I bring you in lifeless, Ergoth, I’ll lose a large part of the bounty, but you’ll be dead!”

They rounded a bend and the trail steepened dramatically. The mercenaries’ stocky horses picked their way carefully along a path never meant for four-legged beasts. The going was awkward for Tol

and Early, too, not only because their hands were tied, but because dampness from the fog had frozen on the slate floor of the high pass. Captives and horses alike slipped and stumbled on the frosty stones.

The line of mercenaries halted as the lead rider reached the sharply delineated wall of mist and reined up. The stuff looked impenetrable. He checked his talisman, and his horse's, then drew a deep breath and thumped heels against his horse's flanks. He entered the white void and vanished.

"Move," said the chief, jerking at their ropes.

Early caught Tol's eye, brows rising: *Now?*

Tol's head shake was barely perceptible.

They moved slowly into the mist. Tol closed his eyes, expecting a chill or dampness like fog. Instead, he felt a caress of warmth. He opened his eyes.

Inside the barrier, the air was clear. More, it was warm and bright, like daylight. No sun was visible (it was night after all), yet neither were there stars. The vault above was white, illuminated by a soft glow with no obvious origin. Strange magic indeed!

The mercenary chief laughed at their reactions. "Never fails!" he said, looking up at the oddly colored sky.

Tol seized the moment. There was some slack in his leash. He grasped the loose rope in both hands. Early did likewise. They planted their feet and hauled back on the ropes with all their strength. The loosed girth cinch did the rest.

The chief was sliding backward over his horse's rump, saddle and all, before he could react. He hit the ground hard. In a flash his captives were on him, wrapping the rope around his thick neck.

The next rider came through the mist wall and saw his leader's predicament. He lowered his spear to charge, but Tol tightened the rope around his hostage's throat.

"Keep off!" he shouted. "Make a move and I'll wring his neck!"

All the mercenaries hesitated. Blades for hire knew little of loyalty, but Tol counted on them caring about their commander.

"Early, get their talismans."

Grinning, the kender tore the parchment wards first from the horses' necks. The beasts were instantly blinded by the unnatural fog. They stood stock still, afraid to move, and Early quickly deprived their riders' of the protection as well. As the remaining nomads entered, he collected more talismans.

The formerly fierce mercenaries were so thrown off balance, they could do nothing but grip their animals' manes tightly. Their terror rendered them as immobile as their mounts.

Tol dropped the chief to the ground, yanked off his talisman, and planted a boot on his back.

"You men, listen!" he shouted. "You've seen this pass. Go too far and you'll fall to your deaths!"

The captured chief would say nothing about the defenses that lay ahead. There was no time to question him properly, so Tol and Early retrieved their weapons and mounted their own horses, which were still protected by talismans. They left behind a bizarre tableau: unhorsed soldiers, mounted men, and their animals frozen in place. The horses were shaking, the men cursing, all too frightened to move.

The peculiar half-light cast no shadows, as if the air itself was the source of the illumination. Riding cautiously up the steep slope, they still could not see their destination. The escarpment frowned above them, but the fortress itself was set back so far it wasn't yet visible.

"That wasn't so hard," said the kender cheerfully. "Getting away from the soldiers and through the

wall of fog. Not so hard at all.”

Tol stared at him in disbelief. Blotchy purple bruises covered Early’s face. He had only one good eye and had lost two front teeth. Tol knew he himself must look at least as bad.

“Not hard at all,” he agreed, grinning back.

The path abruptly leveled out. Brown granite, deeply fluted by years of wind and rain, rose like a wall in front of them. Flanking the path were two huge statues. Each was more than twice the height of a man. They appeared to be lions, sitting on their haunches, but their features were so eroded it was hard to know for certain. Something about the statues nagged at Tol; they seemed oddly familiar.

As he came abreast of the two figures, he felt a sharp sensation of warmth. The nullstone was hot against his belly. He reined up, realizing why the statues looked familiar. They were carved from the same bluestone as the ruins he’d explored at the confluence of the Caer River, the ruins where he’d found the nullstone. These statues must be Irda-made as well. Why else would the nullstone react this way?

Early doubled back, asking why Tol had stopped.

“This place is very old,” Tol murmured, staring up at the colossal lions. The nullstone was pulsing now, first hot, then cooler, then hot again. It had never behaved this way before.

“Trust in the gods and your sword of steel.”

Tol gave Early a sharp look. The kender’s voice sounded deeper than usual. Beneath the bruises, his usual carefree expression was gone. He seemed calm, composed—and not himself.

“Felryn?”

“You’re not alone,” was the reply, “nor is the kinder, but do not speak any names. The stones have ears.”

A surge of confidence filled Tol. With the gallant healer at his side, even in spirit form, he felt he could handle anything Mandes threw at him. They rode on. Once they’d left the lions behind, the millstone’s pulsations ended.

The trail became more and more narrow until they were forced to proceed single file. Walls of stone closed in on either side. The clomp of the horses’ iron shoes echoed loudly against the stark stone surroundings.

The path ended at stairs cut into the living rock. Wide, shallow steps ascended, curving to the left and disappearing into a cleft in the escarpment.

There was nothing on which to tether their horses, and Tol wondered how they could be certain the animals would remain, in case they needed to make a fast departure.

Possessed by Felryn’s soul or no, Early shrugged in typical kender fashion and plucked the paper talismans from both animals’ necks. Immediately stricken by the blinding mist, Tetchy and Longhound stood rooted to the spot. Unless led away, they would be there when Tol and Early returned.

Tol drew his saber. The hiss of steel against the scabbard’s brass throat seemed terribly loud in the silence. Early didn’t draw his weapon but started, unconcerned, up the steps. Was it Felryn’s courage or kender impetuosity that was guiding him?

Mist flowed down the steps, curling around their ankles. They ignored it until Tol noticed the kender was flagging. A few steps more, and Early sat down hard on a stair.

“Sleepy,” he muttered. “Need sleep—”

This new mist must be some of Mandes’s sleeping fog. Tol grabbed the front of Early’s vest and

dragged him to his feet, trying to rouse him with the nullstone's influence. The kender began to snore.

Tol cursed silently. Sighing, he boosted the limp Early over his shoulder. It was an absurd way to enter a hostile fortress, but he wouldn't abandon a comrade. He started up the steps again.

The staircase seemed endless. There seemed to be thousands of steps. Valaran could probably tell him the exact number. As a girl she'd calculated the number of stone blocks in the Inner City wall. Her computations had filled a scroll five paces long.

Thoughts of Valaran ignited a shameful notion in his mind: with the emperor stricken, perhaps dying, would Val be free to marry him? Could they at last live honorably as husband and wife?

The selfish dream helped him ignore the fatigue in his burning limbs. For all his small size, Early was surprisingly heavy.

Unexpectedly, it grew brighter as he climbed. Warmer, too. By the time he reached a broad landing, Tol was sweating inside his furs. Above him, the ancient castle appeared clearly for the first time.

Made of the same brown granite as the mountain, the fortress looked as though it had been carved from the living rock. It was terraced in three levels, one above the other, the sides merging into the face of Mount Axas. The style was unfamiliar to Tol, and judging by the weathering, the castle was very old. No curtain wall encircled it, but the citadel was studded with towers and turrets. Recent work by Mandes was evident—new battens on the tower windows, a freshly painted gate.

Tol lowered Early to the ground and removed his own furs and the kender's. Sweat was beaded on the slumbering kender's face.

The landing was fifty paces square, paved with alternating slabs of obsidian and white granite. Many were cracked with age, and tufts of stiff, brown grass sprouted through the gaps. A path had been worn across the landing; it led from where Tol stood to another set of ascending stairs. Another pair of eroded statues flanked the path. Winged creatures of indistinct form, they reminded Tol of the griffins Mandes had used to flee Daltigoth. The bluestone colossi were of an age with the lions he'd seen earlier. It was clear the ancient Irda had walked this way.

Hoisting Early to his shoulder again, he followed the well-worn path across the landing. He'd made it only halfway before a rapid flicker of heat on his face warned him that magic was at work. Fearing an ambush, he spun in half-circle, searching for the source.

A blur at the edge of his vision caught his eye. Tremors echoed through the ancient stone pavement. Something was moving around him—something big.

Unceremoniously, he dropped Early, and drew Number Six. There were two blurs, moving fast on his extreme left and right. Rather than attempt to follow their preternaturally quick movements, Tol stood still, both hands on his sword, facing forward. What horrors had Mandes conjured for him now?

—and then he saw it, huge and powerful, on his left. An ogre! Moving so quickly, it was invisible until just before attacking. Tol brought his sword up and received a crushing blow from the creature's stone mace. He staggered backward.

The blur on his right resolved into a second ogre, armed with a saw-toothed sword as long as Tol was tall. Tol ducked the wicked blade and swung low. His saber caught the creature at the elbow. A man would have lost his arm, but the ogre wore slabs of nephrite sewn onto a crude leather jerkin. The pale green stone turned aside the dwarf-forged steel. Alarmed, Tol leaped back, dodging another blow from the first ogre's mace. His massive opponents blurred into motion and disappeared.

No ogre was so fast! Mandes must have cast a spell on them.

Tol swept the air with his blade, backing rapidly away from the center of the open square. He was

too slow. The sword-wielding ogre flashed into sight just behind him. His saw-toothed weapon raked down Tol's back, tearing open his tunic. The mail shirt he wore underneath saved his life, but his right shoulder was badly cut. He staggered and fell.

The second ogre's mace passed through the space Tol's head had just occupied. Tol felt the wind of its passing tug at his hair.

He rolled, thrusting awkwardly at the mace-bearer. The saber found a gap in the ogre's stone armor, below his waist, and plunged in deep. The ogre bellowed and swatted at his tormentor.

Blood running down his shoulder, Tol recovered and got to his feet in one motion. He held his sword, stained with blood, straight out in front of him.

The mace-wielder howled in fury and launched himself at his smaller foe. The wound in his gut scarcely slowed him as he blurred to a gray shadow. Tol moved to meet him. They collided, and Tol found his face buried in stinking ogre hide. He gasped with the impact. The hulk grunted as well, in astonishment. Number Six had penetrated his torso front to back, piercing his heart along the way. The ogre teetered, then collapsed, taking Tol down with it.

He levered the enormous corpse off even as the second monster attacked. Tol rolled left and right as the saw-toothed sword came down again and again, gouging chips from the paving with every blow. Tol slashed hard at the creature's blunt, hideous face, destroying an eye and laying open the flesh to the bone.

The ogre screamed with pain and fury. He thrust his weapon at Tol. It had a blunt tip, but backed by the muscle of the enraged ogre, made a powerful bludgeon. The thrust caught Tol square in the chest. The impact was terrific. He flew backward several paces, landed flat on his back, and slid across the pavers.

Tol tried to rise but couldn't. Nor could he breathe; the blow had driven all the breath from his body. Gasping frantically, he heard the heavy tread of the ogre's approach.

Get up, get up! Do you want to die?

In his mind Tol heard the disgusted voice of Egrin exhorting him, back when he was a raw recruit. He managed to roll onto his side, but that was all he could do. The dark bulk of the ogre blotted out the weird white light of the cloud-veiled sky. Instead of delivering the killing blow, the creature let out a surprisingly high-pitched shriek and reeled away, clawing at its back. It spun wildly in a circle, howling like a demon.

Clinging to the ogre's back was Early Stumpwater, who had awoken with a vengeance. The kender gripped the ogre's stiff gray hair with one hand; with the other, he drove his short saber repeatedly into the monster's neck.

Tol recovered his sword and charged, roaring defiance. He had to parry several ferocious swipes of the saw-toothed sword, but succeeded in getting on the ogre's blind side, and thrust home. His point took the monster under the arm. The ogre shuddered violently and collapsed face down on the ancient pavement.

Panting in the thin mountain air, chest deeply bruised from the blow he'd taken, Tol pulled Early off the ogre's carcass. Only then did he see the awful wound across the kender's back made by a desperate swipe of the ogre's sword.

"Early!" he said frantically. "Can you speak?"

"Whatcha want to talk about?" Early's voice was weak and blood flecked his lips.

"Hold on! I'll bind your wound—"

"Don't bother. He cannot survive."

The voice came from Early's mouth but it was Felryn's deep, rich tones. Tol regarded the kender

with anguish.

“I’m sorry!” he said. “I meant to protect you—both of you!”

“Don’t be foolish,” his old friend replied. “You can’t protect the entire world.” The kender’s back arched in a flash of sudden agony, and Felryn added, “I must go. He hasn’t long... you’ll be on your own soon, my friend. Farewell!”

“Wait, don’t go! I need you!”

Early’s eyes closed. When they opened again, Tol knew Felryn’s spirit had departed and Early was himself again.

“Ain’t that a pain?” Early muttered. “All messed up, and I don’t remember how I got this way.”

“You saved my life.”

“I did?” The kender uttered a cheerful obscenity. “What a story that’ll make. Tell everyone...”

His voice trailed away.

“I will,” Tol vowed and closed Early’s lifeless eyes.

The wound on his shoulder was burning and his ribs ached, but Tol got stiffly to his feet. Sword firmly in hand, he started up the last set of steps. Mist flowed around his ankles. A profound stillness covered the plateau. All he could hear was his own labored breathing and the hollow echo of his booted feet striking stone. This set of steps seemed as long as the first, but they ended at last on a landing smaller than the one before. The fortress loomed just across the landing.

The main gate stood open.

Bright steel flashed to and fro as Tol swept his blade ahead of him in search of unseen enemies. He found only empty air.

Beyond the darkened doorway was a narrow courtyard.

Tall, rounded doorways were cut from the native stone on both sides of the passage. Along the walls were sconces, empty of torches. The sconces seemed of a piece with the walls. The entire fortress had that look, and Tol recalled legends that said the Irda were able to soften stone, mold it to any shape, then harden it again.

A low, indistinct sound from behind one of the doors on his right drew his attention. He kicked open the door. A quartet of shabbily dressed humans, servants by the look of them, were cowering on the floor of the small room. The sight of the bloodstained swordsman set them all to screaming and wailing.

Tol asked them about Mandes but couldn’t make himself heard over their distress. He grabbed the nearest fellow, a man about his own age, shook him hard and repeated his demand for information.

The man ceased his cries but only stared at Tol in mute horror. One of the elder women spoke.

“The aerie, sir! The aerie!” She pointed behind Tol at a collection of towers sprouting from the highest tier of the fortress.

He released his grip, and the hapless servant crumpled bonelessly to the floor. To them all, Tol said, “If you want to live, get out.”

The woman whimpered something about ogres, and Tol told her the two guards were dead. He turned to go as she began organizing her compatriots to flee.

Tol crossed the courtyard and entered the center door in the middle tier of the fortress. Room after room he traversed, all filled with Mandes’s possessions. Rolls of tapestries and carpets, golden bowls, silver pitchers, richly appointed furniture—the ill-gotten gains extorted from the noblest families in Daltgoth piled in careless heaps, seemingly without plan.

Most of the rooms had magical globes to illuminate the way, but these darkened one by one as Tol passed by and the nullstone drained them of power. When he found a corridor lit with simple flaming torches, he took one.

The silence of the fortress wore on his nerves. No whisper of sound penetrated the thick walls; all he heard was his own breathing and the echo of his footsteps. He found himself alternately creeping quietly or stomping deliberately through the empty halls. At one point, he accidentally knocked over a marble statue. It crashed to the floor and broke into large pieces.

“Hear that, wizard? Tol of Juramona is here!” he shouted.

Smashing the figure was so satisfying, he attacked the rest of the statues lining the passage ahead of him. All were female figures, delicately draped or fully nude. He broke one after another, planting a booted foot on the pedestals and sending the alabaster bodies toppling. His destructive fury abated when he reached the final statue. Glancing up at the face of the lone statue standing in a sea of broken alabaster and drifting dust, he paused. Its features reminded him of Valaran, right down to the dimpled smile and the small notch at the top of its left ear.

He looked back over shattered statuary filling the passageway. The heads of two other figures lay nearby—they resembled Valaran as well. All the statues bore her features! Worse, the stumps of broken arms and headless necks were oozing beads of red liquid, exactly the color of blood.

Repulsed, Tol fought free of the debris. It must be an illusion. But the nullstone protected him against illusions, didn't it? Perhaps Mandes had caused the statues to be filled with real blood in a bizarre attempt to distract Tol from his purpose, but how could he have known that Tol would break them?

Ridding his mind of the distracting questions, Tol knocked the head from the last statue. “Next you, Mandes!”

At the end of the passage, a tightly curved stair rose through a hole cut in the floor above. A glimmer of red was visible beyond the rim of the opening. Tol drew his saber and climbed slowly, keeping the torch low.

The red glow was strange. It quivered like a reflection on a pool of water. A gust of air rushed by Tol's face and, wary, he halted halfway up the steep stair.

An oozing mass of gel came out of the darkness at the top of the stair. Translucent and thick like the white of an egg, the quaking mass poured down the steps straight at him.

He dropped the torch and fled, wounded shoulder and battered ribs screaming with every hasty footfall. A faint hissing told him the wall of gel was close on his heels. He had no idea whether it was poisonous or if Mandes simply intended to drown him in a gelatinous flood.

Two steps from the bottom, Tol hurled himself into space, landing on the only statue still standing. The heavy statue rocked with the force of the impact but remained upright. Tol wrapped his arms around the headless figure. Clear gelatin, as cold as the deep sea, surged around the pedestal. The level rose higher and higher, but there was no place for Tol to go. He could only watch as waves of cloudy albumen flowed beneath him.

Fortunately, the magical flood never rose above his knees, and soon the flow down the stairs ceased, and the frigid gel vanished entirely. Neither Tol's clothing nor the stones of the passageway around him showed any signs of dampness. It was as though the stuff had never existed at all.

Tol climbed down gingerly. He took another torch from a sconce and mounted the stairs again. This time the distant red light did not quiver; no murderous gel stood between it and him. He ascended cautiously.

The air in the chamber above was dank and chill. With his torch, he lit sconces along the near wall. Their light revealed a vast, low-ceilinged hall. In contrast to the cluttered rooms below, it was

empty. The floor was covered in native slate, and an elaborate design of circles and lines had been drawn in dark red paint on the bluish-gray stone. The red light emanated from the design. In its center, facing away from Tol, sat a high-backed chair. The top of a balding pate was visible over the chair's back.

Tol strode around the chair, eager to face his old foe, but with every step he took, the chair moved, always keeping its back to him. He picked up the pace until he was almost jogging, but he made no better headway. Halting abruptly, he realized it wasn't the chair that moved, but rather the design on the floor—the circles within circles were rotating the chair away from him.

Furious at the childish delaying ploy, Tol drove the point of his saber into a joint between two stone slabs. The floor shuddered briefly then was still.

He took a tentative step, then another. The floor did not move. He left Number Six where it was, anchoring the room, then, moving quickly around the high chair, he came face to face with Mandes.

The sorcerer sat stiffly upright in the high-backed chair. His eyes were closed. He wore a cloth-of-gold robe much like the one Tol had seen him in at the contest on the Field of Corij. His hair, now more gray than brown, hung loose past his shoulders. His ungloved hands rested on the chair's curving arms—the right hand was pale, the left dark.

Tol drew his dagger.

"In the name of the Emperor of Ergoth, I charge you, Mandes the Mist-Maker! Surrender at once and face the empire's justice!"

There was no response at all. Tol moved closer. Mandes's eyelids snapped open. In the reddish light, his pale blue eyes looked black.

"You're a fool, Tolandruth," he intoned. "You came despite my warnings. Even if you don't care for your friends' lives, I thought you did care about the empire you claim to serve!"

"I know my duty!"

Tol moved closer still, traversing the invisible protection Mandes had woven around himself. Time and again he felt the flicker of heat on his face, but the nullstone dispelled the magic as he pierced one sorcerous layer after another.

This easy, even contemptuous disregard of his spells left Mandes open-mouthed with shock. He began to tremble. Close to him now, Tol saw the whites of his eyes were completely covered with a web of fine, bloody lines. Tiny droplets of moisture gleamed on his high forehead, pinkish blood-sweat.

"This is impossible!" Mandes's voice cracked. "What are you? No man could do what you do!"

"I'm only a man, not even nobly born, remember?" Tol pointed his dagger at the sorcerer. "Stand up, Mandes, and face what's due you!"

When he didn't comply, Tol raised the blade high to strike. Mandes flung out his white hand, crying, "Wait! If I am to die, at least tell me how you can withstand every spell I cast, every supernatural creature I raise to stop you?"

Tol smiled. It was not an expression of happiness, but of savage pleasure, and Mandes flinched visibly.

"I have a millstone."

Mandes blinked, brow furrowing at the unfamiliar word. He palmed pink sweat from his face with a trembling hand.

"I've heard rumors... tall tales," Mandes finally said. "Waramanthus, the elf sage, tried his entire life to fashion such a thing and failed! The great Vedvedsica wrote of such devices, but he said none

had survived the Age of Dreams.”

Tol’s level gaze transfixed the shaken sorcerer. “He was wrong.”

Mandes’s chin dropped to his chest. Twisting his mismatched hands in his lap, he began to sob.

Before Tol could react, the sorcerer yanked his swarthy hand hard. The dark limb came out of its sleeve. As it rose in the air, Mandes snatched a saber from beside his chair and tossed it toward the disembodied limb. The dark hand caught the weapon deftly, fingers closing tightly on the hilt.

The muscular arm drove Tol back with viciously precise thrusts, and while he was engaged, Mandes escaped.

The levitating limb was far nimbler than any opponent Tol had ever fought, and its saber far outreached Tol’s dagger. He could do nothing but parry again and again. A precisely timed slash laid open Tol’s cheek, and the next came within a hair’s breadth of his eyes.

It required all Tol’s training and wit to hold his own. The ensorcelled arm was lightning-fast.

He had a desperate idea, and worked feverishly to retrieve the nullstone from its secret pocket while holding the arm at bay.

The limb beat him back all the way across the vast hall, to the very door through which Mandes had escaped. Tol’s ribs ached. Blood from his cheek was smeared across his face, mixing with sweat, stinging his eyes—

The arm made a simple but shockingly fast lunge at the spot between Tol’s eyes. Tol dropped, and the curved iron blade slid through his hair. The sword tip pierced the door panel behind and hung up there, just for a instant.

That was all the time Tol needed. From below, he rammed his dagger through the palm of the flying limb. There was a momentary tug of resistance, then the point passed through. He had the hand!

He continued the motion, driving his dagger into the door panel. The hand dropped its sword, and the arm hung, impaled, flailing, fingers flexing madly.

The severed limb did not bleed. To Tol’s horror, the fingers ceased their furious motion and closed on the blade. The hand drew itself forward, forcing more of the iron shaft through the flesh of its palm.

Keeping pressure on the hilt, Tol touched the millstone to the dagger blade. There was no effect on the writhing hand, but when he pressed the braided metal directly on the brown fingers, the grotesque parody of life was finally over; the limb went limp.

Instantly, the stench of putrefaction filled Tol’s nostrils. He freed his blade and stepped quickly back. The years of lifelessness, held at bay by Mandes’s magic, overwhelmed the limb, and it began to decay before Tol’s eyes. In moments it was little more than bones and stray bits of rotted flesh.

He flung open the door to follow the sorcerer.

Although Mandes had fled the hall, he couldn’t easily escape this isolated peak. The corridor beyond the door was dark, but Tol felt a faint breeze on his face. The air wasn’t musty or dank, but fresh, with the tang of the mountain in it. He followed the draft.

It led him to another spiral stair, narrower but longer than the one he’d climbed earlier. He ascended cautiously. The breeze grew steadily stronger as he rose.

The stair ended on a tiny landing where a plain wooden door barred his way. Fresh air blew in through a gap between the bottom of the door and the stone floor.

Tol’s booted foot lashed out. “Mandes! I have you!” Another kick. “You can’t escape me!” A third kick.

The fifth blow broke the iron latch, and the door swung open. Beyond was a turret room, the very

highest of the old fortress's many towers. A window opening gaped opposite the door. Mandes stood in the opening.

Wind whipped the magician's golden robe around his legs and flung his hair wildly about his head. Beholding the bloodstained avenging fury in the doorway, Mandes fairly convulsed with terror.

"You can't kill me!" he said shrilly. "I am the greatest sorcerer of this age!"

"You're nothing but a murderer many times over. Your head will decorate the wall of the Inner City!"

Beyond the rogue sorcerer, Tol could see the wizard's paired griffins circling, pulling their flying golden coach, trying to approach the tower. They were confounded by the mountain, which severely limited their room to maneuver, and by the howling wind, which alternately threatened to dash them against the fortress and lift them high above it.

Mandes rested his forehead against the stone. His shoulders shook. Tol thought he was weeping, but when the wizard lifted his head, Tol realized he was laughing.

Mandes declared, "With me dies your life as you know it, Tolandruth! Your emperor, your army, and all the things you love shall pass away!"

"Your threats are meaningless, betrayer!"

"No, it happens even now. A greater evil than anything I ever dreamt of will sit upon the throne of Ergoth!"

Tol hesitated. "Is it possible to undo what Nazramin has done?"

Mandes mastered himself again. "Only I could undo it, if I live."

Tol weighed the possibilities. Spare the evil he'd finally cornered to fight worse evil elsewhere?

Mandes was a conniving villain, and Tol's credo had always been a simple one: destroy the enemy when you find him; don't worry about one you may meet tomorrow.

Mandes saw the judgment in Tol's countenance. He knew his fate was sealed.

Only two paces separated them. Tol lunged just as Mandes leaped away, arms outspread, trying to catch the side rails as the flying coach whisked past. Tol felt golden fabric whisper through his fingers, but it was too late.

Mandes laughed. He was gone!

For the space of two heartbeats, he believed it. Then the shifting winds lifted the passing coach, his hands closed only on air, and the terror of his mistake struck home. Mouth stretched wide, Mandes shrieked all the way down to the craggy rocks far, far below.

The griffins, freed of Mandes's hold, broke their traces and flew off, trumpeting their freedom.

Moments later, the flying coach shattered to glittering fragments in the crevasse below the fortress.

Tol sagged to the floor, his rage spent.

He didn't know how long he sat, unmoving, his mind an exhausted blank, but it was the coldness of the wind that finally broke through his stupor.

With Mandes's death, the mist wall and the unnatural warmth protecting the summit had dissolved. Sundown was coming, and the normal cold was swiftly reclaiming the citadel. Soon ice would engulf everything. Tol's injured face and shoulder were stiffening. He needed to reclaim his furs and get down the mountain.

Before the daylight failed, he performed one last task. He scrounged enough rope from Mandes's jumble of possessions to lower himself into the ravine below the fort. On the rocky slope not far from the ruined coach, he found the sorcerer's mangled corpse. For once the letter of Ergothian law suited Tol's purpose. He had spared the Dom-shu chief Makaralonga this fate years ago. He would

not spare Mandes.

The rogue wizard's head would return with Tol to adorn the palace at Daltigoth. His body would feed the vultures of Mount Axas.

Epilogue

No Way Home

Snow was falling the day Tol began his journey back to Daltigoth. The snow had started the night Mandes died and continued without pause. It was not a blizzard, but a steady, soft accumulation that shrouded the world in stillness.

Mandes's hired mercenaries had vanished by the time Tol came down from the fortress. With winter settling quickly upon the heights, they'd wasted no time departing for warmer and more profitable climes.

Although Mandes's spells had dispersed with his death, strange occurrences continued on Mount Axas. When Tol reclaimed his and Early's horses, he found the winged Irda statues had vanished from their plinths. On the pedestals where they'd stood for countless centuries, all that remained were the imprints of two clawed feet. Likewise the crouching lion statues were gone. The snow around their bases was unmarked; there was no sign anyone had dragged the statues away, nor were there any paw prints.

Tol wrapped Early's body in a broad length of fine Tarsan linen taken from Mandes's hoard. Riding Tetchy and leading Longhound bearing the kender's body, he made a slow descent of Mount Axas. Halting in a high valley filled with aspen and birch trees, he buried his brave companion. Even in the gray light of a winter's morning, it was a beautiful spot; in spring, it would be spectacular.

Purged of his decade-long thirst for vengeance, Tol felt empty. He rode along the trail to Juramona, pondering the price of his revenge. The empire was free of an evil force, but many good people had given their lives to bring that about, and Tol had no idea what awaited him in Daltigoth. Had Mandes's vision been true? Was Ackal IV lost, mad, and his vicious brother now seated on the throne?

It took him two days to reach the Eastern Hundred, and two more to wade through the snow to Juramona. When he arrived, Tol discovered that many more days than he'd reckoned had passed since he and Early had departed for Mandes's mountain.

"I almost mourned you for lost!" Egrin declared, upon seeing Tol again. "It's been twenty days since you left us!"

Tol shook his head doggedly, dislodging the snow that had collected on his head and shoulders. "Can't be," he muttered. "Two days to the mountains, a day in the fortress, two days out, two to cross the Hundred—seven days. I've been gone seven days."

Egrin rested a hand on his shoulder. "You've been away twenty days."

Indeed, it transpired, much had happened in that time. A courier had arrived from the capital with a sealed missive for the marshal. The seal was unfamiliar, but the letter proved to be from Prince Nazramin. Now titled "provisional regent for the ailing emperor, Ackal IV," Nazramin wrote that the empire was in safe hands and the Marshal of the Eastern Hundred should stand ready for further orders.

"What will you do?" asked Tol, upset at this confirmation of Mandes's awful vision.

"Wait for my orders," Egrin replied. He could do nothing more—or less.

Tol tarried two days in the city of his childhood, soaking his tired body in casks of hot water and allowing Healer Ossant to attend his wounds. Although Egrin urged him to remain longer, Tol knew he needed to move on. He must learn the fates of those he'd left in the capital, and truth be told, he found Juramona too full of ghosts.

He left a substantial amount of gold in Egrin's care, courtesy of Mandes's treasury, with instructions to bestow it on the sorcerer's victims. With Egrin's stoic but heartfelt farewell in his ears, Tol rode off at midday.

The snow was gray mush in the streets. As Tetchy made his way through the town's bustling lanes, Tol saw again the faces of his youth: Lord Odovar, whose life he'd saved to begin his adventures; wise Felryn, who even in death had helped him defeat Mandes; Narren, killed years ago in the battle against XimXim; Fellen the engineer, Frez, Darpo, Tarthan, and the rest of his handpicked band of foot soldiers who had perished in the long war with Tarsis.

Just before passing through Juramona's wall, Tol's route took him by a tavern. The door swung open, and the piping of a flute came to his ears. The sound reminded him of Crake, the clever flutist and quick-witted archer. He had once been Tol's closest friend and later his bitterest foe. He, too, was dead.

Yes, Juramona teemed with ghosts.

Tol rode south, choosing an oblique course to the capital, one that would take him by his family's old farmplace in the hills southwest. He hadn't been there in six years, but he found the site readily enough.

It looked much as it had six years earlier, except that knee-deep snow now covered most of the ruined house and derelict pig pens. The walls of the root cellar where Tol's mother had stored vegetables against difficult winters had collapsed, leaving a shallow depression overlaid by snow.

He sat silently, looking over the barren scene. Snow flecked his beard and dappled Tetchy's sleek black hide.

A solitary figure caught his eye. Draped in many layers of fur, the fellow walked slowly up the path from the old onion field. Tol rode slowly toward him. He recognized the trappings of a fur hunter—a coil of rawhide snares, wicker basket carried on the back, the knobby club for dispatching trapped prey. The trapper crunched along atop the snow, his feet supported by woven willow snowshoes. Tol's father had worn such snowshoes. He hadn't seen their like in twenty years.

He greeted the trapper. The fellow halted, regarding the mounted warrior uncertainly.

"Greetings, m'lord."

For a moment Tol thought the stranger recognized him, then with a flash of memory, realized the peasant likely would address any mounted stranger that way.

"How fares the fur trade?"

"Well enough, m'lord, well enough." The trapper gestured to the lead-gray sky, adding, "Snow's good for business."

The fresh snow would make tracking the trapper's prey—rabbit, stoat, and fox—much easier.

"Are you a local man?" Tol asked.

"Lived here all my life, m'lord."

"Did you know the family who lived on that farm, over yonder?"

"That I did. Bakal and Ita, yes."

Tol's heart beat faster. "What became of them?"

The trapper rubbed his bearded chin with a mittened hand. "Lemme see, it's been a while. Bakal, he

took sick some winters back. Ita took him to the city to find a healer. Never come back.”

To his family and this trapper, “city” would likely mean Juramona. Was it possible his parents lived in the town he’d just left? He shook his head at the idea. Bakal would never have abandoned his holding, not as long as he drew breath.

The trapper was edging away, thinking the conversation at an end, but Tol asked, “What about the children? They had three, two girls and a boy.”

“Long wed and moved on. Don’t know about Nira, but I think the older girl, Zalay, lives over by Gooseneck Creek with her family.”

“And the son?”

“Oh, left a long time ago. Went into the army, I think.”

Tol was surprised. Had the local folk forgotten him, or did they not identify Bakal’s son Tol with the famous Lord Tolandruth?

He let the trapper go on his way. Snow flew from the man’s shoes as he hurried by, looking back now and then to make certain he wasn’t being followed. Tol wasn’t offended. The fellow must have had encounters with warriors before. No peasant craved the company of armed, mounted men.

Continuing south, Tol encountered hunters and herdsman, peddlers, itinerant healers, and vagabonds of every stripe. Their ranks were thin, it being the winter season, but the life of the Eastern Hundred endured regardless.

A day out from Caergoth he began to meet a steady stream of travelers making for the city. They were not tradesmen, but refugees. They moved in small caravans of four to eight ox-drawn wagons. More than a few wagons were being drawn by people, the oxen having died on the trek. By the cut of their clothes and the accents he heard, Tol figured them for easterners, from outside the empire. There were a lot of them, and as he drew closer to Caergoth, their numbers grew. By the time he reached the walls of the city, the snowy fields were black with a mob of miserable foreigners, all seeking the protection of the imperial governor.

The gates were closed, and Tol had to shout for admittance. A fur-clad guard answered him insolently until Tol delivered a few choice words.

“My lord!” the guard stammered. “Forgive me! I’ll admit you at once!”

The refugees huddled in the snow nearest the gate stirred when they heard the postern creak open. A squad of soldiers rushed out with spears leveled and held the people off.

Spotting an officer among them, Tol asked, “What goes on here, Captain? Who are these people?”

“Outlanders from the east, my lord. Folk from Thel, the plains of Duran, farthest Karth.”

“Why are they here?”

“They’re coming to every town and outpost on the eastern edge of the empire, my lord. They speak of invaders driving them off their land.”

When Tol entered, the captain’s men backed in after him, keeping wary eyes on the refugees. Several thousand souls clustered under the walls of Caergoth. Wagons had been turned into shanties, and crude hide tents covered both sides of the road.

“Why do you deny them entrance?” he asked, indignant.

“Governor’s orders, my lord. He fears disorder.” The closing of the postern boomed a counterpoint to the captain’s words.

Tol fumed at the injustice of it but wasted no more time with the captain. He touched heels to Tetchy’s sides and they entered Caergoth at a brisk trot.

Although smaller than the capital, Caergoth considered itself a more sophisticated, cultured city. There were several schools within its walls, including the famed Silvanesti Academy, as well as the library of the Temple of Gilean, reputed to be the largest depository of books in the empire. It was also a clean city; twice a day in winter, laborers were paid to clear snow and refuse from the main streets.

Tol rode directly to the governor's palace and demanded an audience. In doing so, he bypassed a long line of favor-seekers waiting to see the governor. Much grumbling followed in his wake, but none dared gainsay the mighty warlord Tolandruth, especially considering his grim expression.

He expected to see Micantar, an old crony of the late emperor, Pakin III. Micantar had been governor of Caergoth since Tol was a lad. However, the tall, carved chair was occupied now by a much younger man unknown to Tol.

He saluted and gave his name. The governor looked up from the document he was reading.

"You broke the line," he said sternly. "Go back and wait your turn."

"I am Tolandruth of Juramona!"

A nod. "So you said. And I am Wornoth, governor of the province of Caer and the Great Green. Now that we've waved our titles at each other, try to behave in civilized fashion, won't you?"

Tol turned back the edge of his fur-lined cape and rested a hand on his saber hilt. The motion brought guards running.

Wornoth rested his chin on his hand. "You warlords are all the same. The slightest opposition, and you resort to violence."

"I haven't resorted to anything—yet."

"Very well. You've disrupted the orderly pageant of life here. What is it you want?" Wornoth asked, finally setting aside his scroll.

Tol answered as calmly as he was able. Shouting would get him nowhere with this bloodless functionary. "There are several thousand people outside your walls, dying of hunger and cold. What are you doing about it?"

Wornoth's straight brown hair was parted in the center. He brushed the long locks away from his shoulders and sat back, crossing his legs under his blue robe.

"The garrison is not sufficient to drive off so many," he said, shrugging.

"I wasn't suggesting you attack them!" Tol snapped. "Let them in the city. Feed them!"

"Impossible." Wornoth picked up his scroll again.

The casual dismissal was too much for Tol's tenuous self-control. He drew his sword and stalked forward. Several of the guards backed away a step, but a few stood firm.

"Governor Wornoth, I order you to assist those people!"

The governor opened his mouth to speak, but Tol's expression and the flashing point of his saber gave him pause.

Carefully, he asked, "Where am I supposed to find food for so many mouths?"

"The imperial storehouse."

The governor was genuinely shocked. "That belongs to the emperor!"

Tol sheathed his saber. "I am the Emperor's Champion. I'm certain he will approve of my request."

Wornoth lifted his brows at that, but gave the order. His wounded shoulder aching, Tol found a chair by a wall and sat, as the wheels were set into motion for distribution of the food.

When the last of the lackeys scurried away to carry out the governor's commands, Wornoth came to where Tol rested.

"I had no idea the emperor had a champion or required one," he said, looking down at Tol.

"Ackal IV is not a man of arms."

The suggestion of a smile twitched Wornoth's thin lips. "My sincerest regrets, my lord. You seem to be one emperor behind. His Majesty Ackal IV went to the gods five days ago. Prince Nazramin has claimed the throne."

Tol stood so quickly Wornoth backed away. "That's impossible! Ackal IV has a son, a legitimate heir—"

"Prince Hatonar ceded his right to the throne in favor of his uncle." The governor smiled. "Only Prince Nazramin has the strength and courage to lead the empire. It is not a task for the pampered son of our late, regrettably mad emperor."

Tol growled an oath and seized Wornoth by the front of his gown. The governor was a slight man, shorter even than Tol himself, and Tol easily hoisted him up on his toes.

"The empire has been delivered into the hands of a fiend!" he hissed. "I can't believe the Great Horde or the Imperial Council would accept Nazramin on the throne!"

"But they have, and without dissent! Unhand me, my lord. Please!"

Tol released him, thoughts racing ahead to Daltigoth. He had to go there quickly—to try to save the situation, or at the very least, to collect Valaran and the Dom-shu sisters. Anyone close to Tol was certain to feel Nazramin's wrath.

He took hold of Wornoth's arm, squeezing it painfully. "Listen to me," he said in a very low voice. "You will continue to feed and house as many of the refugees as you can. Is that clear? If I hear of you mistreating them or neglecting their needs, I'll come back and kill you myself. Nod if you understand me."

White-faced, Wornoth nodded.

"Say it."

"I will help the refugees with every resource at my command!"

Tol let him go. The governor drew back, massaging his abused arm.

Moving swiftly, Tol went to the governor's stable, to claim a fresh horse. There he spotted the same captain of the guard who'd admitted him to the city.

"Captain, these poor folk outside—what's driven them so far from home?"

"I've spoken to many of them, my lord, and their tales are as one. They say invaders have landed on the northeast coast and pushed inland, displacing everyone in their path."

"What sort of invaders?"

The soldier frowned. "That isn't clear. Some say black-skinned seafarers. Others blame the Silvanesti, though why elves would land by sea when they could march up from the south and do the same thing..." He shook his head. "A few claim the invaders are not men, but *arkudenala*."

The archaic word meant "sons of the dragon."

Tol scowled. "What in Corij's name do they mean by that?"

The captain didn't know. He asked if Tol wished to question the refugees, but Tol had no time. Instead he asked the captain to swear that if the governor stopped feeding and clothing the refugees, he would send word immediately to Tol in Daltigoth.

Flattered by the great Lord Tolandruth's trust, the guardsman readily agreed.

Tol departed for the capital with no fixed plan in mind. He knew only that Nazramin had to be confronted. There wasn't a moment to lose.

Streams of haggard people, shuffling in tight lines into the city, looked up as a war-horse passed by. One of the Ergothian soldiers helping to keep order said, "There goes Lord Tolandruth. He took the governor by the throat and forced him let you vagabonds into the city!"

Some of the refugees raised a ragged cheer, but Tol was so focused on his thoughts he did not hear them.

It would be the last cheer he would receive for many a day.

* * * * *

No admiring mob greeted Tol when he reached Daltigoth. The winter day was done, and the eerie blue twilight that comes to snow-covered land had fallen. Tol approached the Dragon Gate. This late, only the postern was open. Unlike most such gates, this postern was large enough to pass a coach-and-four. A crackling bonfire blazed outside the gate. Three soldiers huddled by it, trying to keep away the chill.

They didn't hear Tol until he was nearly on them. Deep snow muffled his horse's hooves, and the snap of burning wood blotted out the creak of harness. The fall of snow had stopped, and Luin played hide-and-seek behind the clouds; the land was alternately dark and washed in the moon's pale, scarlet light.

One of the soldiers reluctantly left the fire and asked his name. Tol replied, "Narren, Bakal's son. From the Fourth Company of the Red Hawk Horde."

The Red Hawks were quartered in the city. Between the uncertain light and his bulky fur hood, he counted on the guards not recognizing him.

The soldier didn't think very hard about it, only waved him along.

Tol looked up at the lofty walls. "How fares the city?"

"Quiet as a cemetery." The soldier hunched his shoulders and returned to the fire.

Tol rode slowly on, pondering the guard's choice of words. Had there been no resistance to Nazramin's coup? No fights in the street, or marketplace brawls? There were folk in Daltigoth who would riot over the rising price of a loaf of bread. Hadn't the usurpation of the throne stirred anyone enough to fight for their country?

Daltigoth seemed empty as Tol traversed the snow-choked streets. Unlike Caergoth, the capital's streets hadn't been cleared. As much as anything, the weather must have kept the city quiet. It was hard to work up enthusiasm for rioting when snow lay knee-deep on the ground.

He expected to find the Inner City locked down tight, with Nazramin's minions on the gates. Instead, all seemed as usual: the night gate was open, and dismounted members of the Horse Guards stood watch. Giving them a false name was out of the question, but if they now owed allegiance to Nazramin, there might be trouble. Number Six was under his fur cape, pommel turned out for easy drawing.

"My lord, welcome back!" one of the guards said. He saluted with his dagger and stood aside.

Tol shifted uneasily on his saddle.

"All is well?" he asked.

“As well as could be expected.”

“How fares the emperor?”

“Hale and hearty as always, my lord.”

That sounded strange, but Tol hadn't asked which emperor, so he rode on. After leaving his horse at the imperial stable, he climbed the south steps of the palace. Racks of torches blazed on either side of the door, and more soldiers stood watch. They passed Tol in without demur.

A servant in the antechamber took his outer furs. “The emperor expects you, my lord,” the servant said.

Again Tol wondered, which emperor? He made no reply, just stalked to the evening hall, where the master of the empire received his guests after sundown.

He ran straight into a sizable gang of armed men. They were not regular soldiers, and seeing their hard, unfriendly faces, Tol recognized Nazramin's Wolves, as the prince's private gang of thugs were known in the city.

His hand dropped to his sword hilt. There were twenty-six of them, he counted quickly. Twenty-six to one.

“My lord,” said a Wolf with black eyes and two parallel scars on his left cheek. “You are expected. Give over your sword, please.”

Tol weighed his chances. He might get seven or eight of them if he was lucky, but the rest would certainly hack him to pieces. Number Six was relinquished.

Two-Scars smiled unpleasantly, stood aside, and with a mocking sweep of his hand, bade Tol proceed.

The evening hall was brilliantly lit and stiflingly hot. Every available sconce held a burning torch, and a great heap of coals glowed in the massive fireplace at the rear of the room. Near the hearth, half a dozen robed figures clustered around the throne of Ergoth. As Tol approached, the group parted, revealing the occupant of the throne. Tol felt the breath go out of his chest.

Nazramin.

Though dressed in the deep scarlet emperor's robe, Nazramin did not yet wear the imperial circlet. “Ah, Lord Pig Farmer,” he said. “Good of you to come.”

“I came to see the emperor.”

“You see him now.”

The men flanking the throne were introduced as Nazramin's chamberlain, the commander of the city hordes, and so on. Tol knew none of them.

“Where is Ackal IV?” he asked coldly.

“With the gods. He perished in an apopleptic fit five days ago. Tragic.”

“What of his son, Crown Prince Hatonar?”

“The boy wisely ceded his claim to me. The empire must be ruled by men of strong will and hard purpose, not children.”

Tol's countenance was so eloquent of barely contained outrage that the councilors nearest him edged away.

“What you mean is, you seized the throne and no one opposed you!” he cried.

Nazramin shrugged. “No one of consequence.” He turned to the gold-bedecked officer on his left. “Lord Tathman, how many have we been forced to execute?”

Snapping his heels together, Tathman replied, “Sixteen so far, Your Majesty.”

“So few? Anyone Lord Tol would know?”

“Lord Rymont, Lord Valdid, the commanders of the Foot Guard and the Silver Dragon Horde—”

Nazramin waved a hand, halting the litany of the dead. “The rest have fallen into line and accepted the situation,” he said. “Now, my lord, what will you do?”

Tol could hardly believe it. Valaran’s father, most loyal of the loyal, executed! Rymont had been a pompous ass and no friend of Tol’s, but he was a good soldier. Did the high-ranking wizards, Helbin and Oropash, still live?

Nazramin was still awaiting an answer. “What is my choice?” Tol asked.

Nazramin dismissed his councilors. They bowed in unison and departed. As they went out, several Wolves came in. The men lounged by the door, hands on their sword hilts.

“I don’t want your life, peasant,” Nazramin said, getting to his feet. “Don’t look so surprised. Killing is easy. Living is hard. I could have you chopped to pieces or thrown in the cells below the palace, but neither seems quite right. It would be much too noble—‘Valiant Lord Tolandruth, who fell from grace when his patron died.’ No, pig farmer. I prefer that you continue to live in utter obscurity and for the empire to forget you ever existed.”

He stepped down from the throne and planted his fists on his hips. Quite a bit taller than Tol, Nazramin was lean and wolfish, like the sobriquet his men bore.

“As of this moment, your titles and properties are forfeit. I declare you’re no longer Lord Anyone, but merely Tol, son of a pig farmer.”

Nazramin circled Tol, looking him up and down. “You see, if you live I can torment you to my heart’s content. Consider this: before winter ends, I’ll be crowned and by my side will be a striking empress, one you’ll particularly appreciate.”

Tol felt a chill of horror. The self-proclaimed emperor’s eyes glowed with an unholy light. “Yes. The daughter of Valdid has consented to be my consort.”

His words went through Tol like a blade in the gut. What choice had he given Valaran? Did she know her father had been killed, regardless of her compliance? . In a flash Tol hurled himself at Nazramin. To his delight, he found his target, Nazramin’s throat, and bore the taller man to the floor. Tol’s big hands, hardened by years of campaigning, tightened on Nazramin’s neck like a vice.

His moment of triumph was brief. The Wolves dragged him away, kicking and punching him ruthlessly. Someone looped a rope around his neck and began to throttle him. His vision went red, and the curses of the Wolves melded into a single ugly roar. He began to lose consciousness.

Hoarsely Nazramin commanded, “Beat him again! If he resists, put out his eyes! Then drive him out of the city. If he ever returns, his head will decorate the palace wall!”

They dragged Tol out by his heels and thrashed him severely. The beating went on all night, with pauses to insure Tol didn’t die. The next morning, without warm furs, food, or water, he was dumped in the snow outside the Dragon Gate.

* * * * *

A gentle rocking motion shook Tol awake. For a moment he thought he was on a ship, but the creak of wheels spoiled that theory. He tried to open his eyelids, but only one would obey. The sight it beheld made him gasp.

“Miya!”

Her hair was longer than he remembered, caught in a golden-brown braid and pulled forward over one shoulder. She looked incredibly weary. A small bundle was slung across her breast. It moved and gurgled. A baby. Elicarno's child.

"You're awake. Good," she said. Turning, she rapped her knuckles against the canvas curtains separating them from the front of the wagon. "He's awake!"

The wagon slowed and halted. A hand parted the curtain and Kiya's face appeared.

"Husband," she said. "How do you feel?"

All movement was agony. Teeth clenched, he said, "Not as bad as Mandes felt falling down Mount Axas."

"The sorcerer is dead?" asked Kiya.

"Yes, it's my only good news. I brought his head back to the emperor, but the wrong man sits on the throne."

Miya put the leather spout of a wineskin to Tol's lips. He drank gratefully, as Kiya related the tale of the monster that had broken into Elicarno's shop and killed the engineer. Tol nodded. Everything fit with the vision Mandes had sent to him.

"It appeared that Ackal IV had finally gone mad," Kiya said. "A council of high lords was called. They were going to appoint a regent when Nazramin and his killers broke in, and took over. The crown prince gave up his claim to the throne, and Nazramin now keeps Amaltar's entire family prisoner in the palace^ Anyone who disagreed or put up a fight was killed on the spot or has vanished."

Kiya and Miya had received word from sympathetic guards at the gate that Tol was lying in the snow, beaten and bloody. The sisters had piled into the four-wheeled covered wagon which they'd prepared some time ago and went to collect him. Tol lay across bales of provisions that filled the wagon.

At the end of the explanations, Tol murmured, "He told me he's going to make Valaran his empress."

The sisters exchanged looks. "So that's why," Miya said, as Kiya told him, "Look out the back."

He got himself up on one elbow, with the assistance of Kiya's strong hands. Miya pulled back the canvas closing the rear of the wagon.

They were a short distance outside the city. Walls and towers were clearly visible behind them. The Ackal Path was filled from edge to edge by a column of warriors, several hundred strong, all on foot. At the head of the column rode two black-clad men flanking a woman in ermine robes.

The three riders approached. With his wounds screaming, Tol struggled to a sitting position. Cold air swirled in, making his single open eye water.

He said her name and held out his hand. Three of his fingers were bent and broken.

Valaran's face contorted when she saw his condition. "He allowed me one favor, to say good-bye," she said, choking.

"You agreed to be his empress? Why?"

"I had no choice," she said, lowering her eyes. "My family would have perished, root and branch."

Tol tried to lean forward. "You don't have to do it, Valaran! Break loose! The sisters and I will protect you!"

She wiped tears from her eyes. Her glance shifted to the column of warriors behind her. "You can't protect me. No one can, any more."

She urged her horse forward. When one of the black-clad riders tried to grab her mount's bridle, she lashed at his face with her riding crop. He let go, and a squad of men came running forward, nocking arrows in their short bows.

Valaran closed the short distance to the wagon and put a gloved hand to Tol's battered face.

"He'll not have me," she whispered. "I too have ambitions. I have a knife, and one of us will die!"

He caught her wrist, awkwardly because of his injuries. "You must not! Whatever happens, you must live—because I will return!"

She looked away. Not even the famed luck of Tol of Juramona could overcome the emperor of Ergoth.

"Believe it!" he urged. "If you believe nothing else in your life, know I will come back, Valaran. Nazramin will ruin the empire with his cruelty and greed, but I'll return. You must try to live for that day, Val. You must!"

Her minders interceded, pulling Valaran away. At the last moment she leaned down and kissed his forehead. Her lips were cold.

Straightening again, she lashed at her captors with her crop. "I am to be the empress of Ergoth, and you'd better keep your filthy hands off me!" she said, a fierce, aristocratic mask dropping over her features. "You know what happens to anyone who defiles the empress?"

They did indeed. The two men dropped back a full pace. Valaran brought the crop down against her horse's flank. The white gelding reared, but she kept her seat. She galloped back to the city, sending snow flying and scattering the ranks of the foot soldiers. Wind tore her hood back, releasing a cloud of chestnut hair to the brittle sun.

Tol stared after her until Miya closed the rear curtain. "Cold air isn't good for the baby," she said.

It was an effort to pull his mind away from Valaran, but there was genuine fondness in his tone when Tol asked, "Boy or girl?"

"Boy. Eli." Tol got a glimpse of dark hair, and two enormous brown eyes peeking out from the swaddling.

Kiya cracked her whip, and the team got moving. Tol didn't have to ask where they were going. Miya and Kiya were returning home, to the distant forest known as the Great Green. They would be welcomed by their own tribe, and Tol would find a haven to heal and rest.

"It's not done," he murmured, as fatigue and Miya's wine claimed him.

"I know," Miya said, but Tol was already asleep. Not even baby Eli's crying disturbed him.