

DRAGONLANCE TALES II

Volume 2

THE CATACLYSM

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Introduction

The world was forged upon three pillars: good, evil, neutrality. In order to progress, a balance between the three must be maintained. But there came a time in Krynn when the balance tilted. Believing himself to be the equal to the gods in knowledge and in wisdom, the Kingpriest of Istar sought the gods in arrogance and pride and demanded that they do his bidding.

Having viewed with sorrow the tilting of the scales of balance, resulting in hatred, prejudice, race divided against race, the gods determined to restore the balance of the world. They cast a fiery mountain upon Ansalon, then withdrew their power, hoping those intelligent races who dwelt upon Krynn would once again find their faith - in the gods, in themselves, and in each other.

This catastrophe became known as the Cataclysm.

Michael Williams tells a tale of vengeance in his epic poem, "The Word and the Silence." He and his wife, Teri, continue the tale and turn it into a mystery, as the accused murderer's son seeks to end the curse on his family in "Mark of the Flame, Mark of the Word."

Matya, a very cunning trader, stumbles onto the bargain of her life - literally - in Mark Anthony's "The Bargain Driver."

In Todd Fahnestock's story, "Seekers," a young orphan boy embarks on a perilous journey to ask the gods a question.

For most people, the Cataclysm meant sorrow, death, ruination. For the entrepreneurs in Nick O'Donohoe's story, "No Gods, No Heroes," the Cataclysm means opportunity.

Richard A. Knaak tells the tale of Rennard, known to readers of THE LEGEND OF HUMA. Now a ghost, doomed to torment in the Abyss, Rennard finds himself transported back to Ansalon during the Cataclysm. Is it an accident, or has he been brought back for a reason?

Dan Parkinson continues the adventures of the Bulp clan of gully dwarves. Led by their valiant leader, Gorge III, the Bulp leave Istar in search of the Promised Place. What they find instead is certainly not what they expected, in "Ogre Unaware."

Roger E. Moore reveals why Astinus never hires kender to be scribes, in his story, "The Cobbler's Son."

A ship bound for Istar may be making its final voyage, in Paul B. Thompson and Tonya R. Carter's story, "The Voyage of the SUNCHASER."

Doug Niles continues the adventures of his scribe, Foryth Teal, as that intrepid historian sets out to investigate a priest's claim that he can perform miracles, in "The High Priest of Halcyon."

In "True Knight," we continue the story of the cleric of Mishakal, Brother Michael, and Nikol, daughter of a Solamnic Knight. The two survive the Cataclysm, but now they want answers. Their search leads them to an encounter with the knight who, so rumor has it, could have prevented the Cataclysm.

MARGARET WEIS AND TRACY HICKMAN

THE WORD AND THE SILENCE

I

On Solamnia's castles
ravens alight,
dark and unnumbered
like a year of deaths,
and dreamt on the battlements,
fixed and holy,
are the signs of the Order
Kingfisher and Rose -
Kingfisher and Rose
and a sword that is bleeding forever
over the covering mountains,
the shires perpetually damaged,
and the blade itself
is an unhealed wound,
convergence of blood and memory,
its dark rain masking
the arrangement of stars,
and below it the ravens gather.

Below it forever
the woman is telling the story,
telling it softly
as the past collapses
into a breathing light,
and I am repeating her story
then and now in a willful dusk
at the turn of the year
in the flickering halls of the keep.
The story ascends and spirals,
descends on itself
and circles through time
through effacing event
and continuing vengeance
down to the time
I am telling her telling you this.

But bent by the fire
like a doubling memory,
the woman recounts and dwells
in a dead man's story,
harsh in the ears
of his fledgling son,
who nods, and listens again, and descends
to a dodging country
of tears and remembrance,
where the memories of others
fashion his bent recollections,
assemble his father
from mirrors and smoke
and history's hearsay
twines and repeats,
and the wavering country,
Solamnia, muses and listens.

OUT ON THE PLAINS, ORESTES,
the woman is saying, OUT AMONG FIRES
WHICH THE BARD'S VOICE IGNITED
IN RUMOR AND CALUMNY,
THERE THEY ARE BURNING YOUR FATHER,
HIS NAME AND OUR BLOOD
FOREVER FROM CAERGOTH
TO HARBORING KALAMAN
AND OUT IN THE DYING
BAYS OF THE NORTH:
ALL FOR A WORD, MY SON,
A WORD MASKED AS HISTORY
SHIELDING A NEST OF ADDERS.
WITH WORDS ARE WE POISONED,
ORESTES, MY SON, she repeats
in the fragmenting darkness,
the firelight fixed
on her hair, on the ivory
glove of her hand
and the tilted goblet.

And always Orestes listened
and practiced his harp
for the journey approaching,
and the world contracted,
fierce and impermeable,
caged in the wheeling words
of his mother, caged
in a custom of deaths.

II

Three things are lost
in the long night of words:
history's edge
the heart's long appeasement
the eye of the prophet.
But the story born

of impossible fragments
 is this: that Lord Pyrrhus Alecto
light of the coast
 arm of Caergoth
father to dreaming
 and to vengeful Orestes
fell to the peasants
 in the time of the Rending
fell in the vanguard
 of his glittering armies
and over his lapsing eye
 wheeled constellations
the scale of Hiddukel
 riding west to the garrisoned city.
It is there that the edge
 of history ends:
the rest is a song
 that followed on song
the story involved
 in its own devising
tied in devolving circles until
 truth was a word
in the bardic night
 and the husk of event
was a dim mathematics
 lost in the matrix of stars.

III

But this is the story
 as Arion told it,
 Arion Corvus, Branchala's bard
the singer of mysteries
 light on the wing
 string of the harp.
Unhoused by the Rending,
 traveling west, his map
 a memory of hearth and castle,
unhoused, he sounded forever
 the hymns of comet
 and fire perpetual
sounded the Time of the Rending,
 betrayals and uprisings
 spanning the breadth of the harper's hand,
and history rode
 on the harp incanting
 the implausible music of breath.
His was the song I remember,
 his song and my mother's retelling.
 O sing the ravens
perpetually wronged
 to the ears of my children,
 O sing to them, Arion Stormcrow:

DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE:
 PYRRHUS ALECTO, THE KNIGHT OF THE NIGHT OF BETRAYALS
FIREBRAND OF BURNING THAT CLOUDED THE STRAITS OF HYLO,

THE OIL AND ASH ON THE WATER, IGNITED COUNTRY.
FOREVER AND EVER THE VILLAGES BURN IN HIS PASSAGE,
AND THE GRAIN OF THE PEASANTRY, LIFE OF THE RAGGED ARMIES
THAT HARRIED HIM BACK TO THE KEEP OF THE CASTLE
WHERE PYRRHUS THE FIREBRINGER CANCELED THE WORLD
BENEATH THE DENIAL OF BATTLEMENTS,
WHERE HE DIED AMID STONE WITH HIS COVERING ARMIES.
FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS THE COUNTRY OF CAERGOOTH
HAS BURNED AND BURNED WITH HIS EFFACING HAND,
A BARREN OF SHIRES AND HAMLETS,
AND Firebringer HISTORY HANGS ON THE PATH OF HIS NAME.

IV

Look around you, my son
for the fire in Arion's singing:
For where in this country,
in forgotten Caergoth,
where does a single village burn?
Where does a peasant suffer
and starve by the fire of your father?
Somewhere to the east
before a white arras,
gilded with laurel
and gold adulation,
the bard sings a lie
in a listening house,
and Caergoth burns
in the world's imagining,
while the bard holds something
back from his singing,
something resembling the truth.
But let not the breath
of the fire touch your father,
Orestes, my son,
my arm in the dwindling world,
my own truth
my prophecy,
soothed the effacing mother,
and darkly and silently
Orestes listened, the deadly harp
poised in his hand circuitous.
And the word turned to deed
and the song to a journey by night,
and the listening years
to a cloak and a borrowed name,
as the boy matured
in his mother's word,
and the harp strings droned
in the facing wind
as he rode out alone, seeking Arion.

V

High on the battlements
of Vingaard Keep
as the wind plunged over

the snow-covered walls,
Orestes perched
in a dark cloak huddled,
the window below him
gabled in light,
and he muttered and listened,
his honored impatience
grown loud at the song
of the bard by the fire.

Melodiously, Arion sang
of the world's beginning,
the shape of us all
retrieved by the hands
of the gods from chaos,
the oceans inscribing
the dream of the plains,
the sun and the moons
appointing the country
with light and the passage
of summer to winter,
the bright land's corners
lovely with trees,
the leaves quick with life
 with nations of kestrel
 with immaculate navies of doves,
 with the first plainsong
 of the summer sparrow
and the song from the bard
sustaining it all,
breathing the phase
of the moon's awakening,
singing the births
and the deaths of the heroes,
all of it rising
to the ears of Orestes.
And rising beyond him
it peopled the winter stars
with a light that hovered
and stilled above him,
as nightly in song
the old constellations
resumed their imagined shapes,
breathing the fire
of the first creation
over the years to the time
that the song descends
in a rain of light
today on your shoulder
with a frail incandescence
of music and memory
and the last fading green
of a garden that never
and always invented itself.
For the bard's song
is a distant belief,
a belief in the shape of distance.

All the while as the singing
arose from the hearth and the hall,
alone in the suffering wind, Orestes
crouched and listened
slowly, reluctantly
beginning to sing,
his dreams of murder quiet
in the rapture of harp strings.

VI

HIERONYMO he called himself,
HIERONYMO when down from the battlements
he came, supplanted and nameless
entering the hall
in the wake of the wind and darkness.
Arion dreamt by the fire,
and his words were a low, shaping melody:
the tongue of the flame
inclined in the hall of his breath
and the heart of the burning
was a map in the eye of Orestes,
who crouched by the hearth
and offered his harp
to his father's slanderer,
smiling and smiling
his villainous rubric,
TEACH ME YOUR SINGING, ARION, he said,
adopting the voice and the eye
of imagined Hieronymo
deep in disguises,
and none in the court
knew Alecto's son -
TEACH ME YOUR SINGING, MEMORABLE BARD,
THE LIGHT IN THE HEART OF WINTER,
SINGER OF ORIGINS, FRAMER OF HISTORY,
DRIVE MY DEAD THOUGHTS OVER THE WINTER PLAINS
LIKE WITHERED LEAVES TO QUICKEN A NEW BIRTH!

Old Arion smiled
at the boy's supplication
at the fracture of coals,
at the bright hearth's flutter
at the nothing that swirled
at the heart of the fire:
for something had passed
in his distant imagining,
dark as a wing
on the snow-settled battlements,
a step on a grave
he could only imagine
there in the warmth of the keep
where the thoughts were of song
and of music and memory,
where something still darker
was enjoining the bard

to take on the lad
who knelt in the firelight.
SOME THINGS, he said,
THE POET BRINGS FORTH.
OTHERS THE POET HOLDS BACK:
FOR WORDS AND THE SILENCE
BETWEEN THEM COMMINGLE,
DEFINING EACH OTHER
IN SPACES OF HOLINESS.
Softly the old hand
rose and descended,
the harp-handling fingers
at rest on the brow
of the bold and mysterious boy.

The apprenticeship was sealed
in Orestes's bravado,
the name of HIERONYMO
fixed to the terms of indenture,
all in the luck of an hour,
and depth of a season,
but somewhere within it
a darker invention
that sprawled in the depths
of the heart and the dwindling earth.

VII

So masked in intention,
in a sacred name
for a year and a day
Orestes surrendered
his anger to music and wind,
apprenticeship honed
on the laddered wires
of a harp that the gods whispered over,
of a wandering in lore
and the cloudy geographies
tied to the fractured past,
and he dwelt by the poet
and traveled to Dargaard
to the heart of Solanthus,
to imperiled Thelgaard,
to nameless castles of memory
where the knights abided
in yearning for something
that moved in the channels of history,
redeeming the damaged blood of the rose,
while the story that Arion sang,
his back to the dream
and incredulous fire,
discovered the years
and the fading arm of the sword.

Seven songs of instruction
arose from the fire and the dreaming:
the spiral of Quen

love's first geometry
the wing of Habbakuk
brooding above the world
the circle of Solin
rash and recurrent heart
the arc of Jolith
dividing intention from deed
the white fire of Paladine
perfected song of the dragon
the prayer of Matheri
merciful grammar of thought
and the last one the high one
light of Branchala
that measures all song
in the shape of words

Alone in the margin
of darkness, Orestes
surrendered and listened
singing reluctantly, joyfully,
as the gods and the planets
and the cycle of years
devolved in a long dream of murder
and the cleansing of harp strings.

VIII

A year and a day the seasons encircled,
according to fable and ancient decrees of enchantment,
as the gnats' choir of autumn surrendered to ice
and the turn of the year approached like a death
and the listening castles mislaid under snow.
Orestes's apprenticeship led to a circle of fire,
where the harp he had mastered and the seven songs
and the fourteen modes of incalculable magic
circled him back to the night and the keep
and the wintry eyes of the bard singing memory
into flesh, into stone, into dreaming and wind,
and ARION, he said, and ARION, TELL ME OF TIME
OF THE RENDING OF KRYNN AND BETRAYALS.
The bard took the harp in the foreseen night:
for his memory darkened the edge of the past
when knowing devises the shape of creation,
and the Rending changed as he spoke of its birth
in the spiral of prophecy, the brush of its wing
on the glittering domes and spires of Istar
the swelling of moons and the stars' convergence
and voices and thunderings and lightnings and
earthquakes
and Arion told us that night by the hearth
that hail and fire in a downpour of blood
tumbled to earth, igniting the trees and the grass,
and the mountains were burning, and the sea became
blood
and above and below us the heavens were scattered,
and locusts and scorpions wandered the face of the
planet,

as Arion told us, and Orestes leaned closer
and ARION, he said, and ARION, TEACH ME OF
TIME

OF THE FAMINE AND PLAGUE AND PYRRHUS ALECTO.

Arion stroked the harp and began, his white hair
cascading across the gold arm of the harp
as though he were falling through song into sleep
and the winter stilled at the touch of the string,
and he sang the last verses as hidden Orestes
reclined and remembered and listened:

DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE:
PYRRHUS ALECTO, THE KNIGHT OF THE NIGHT OF BETRAYALS
FIREBRAND OF BURNING THAT CLOUDED THE STRAITS OF
HYLO,
THE OIL AND ASH ON THE WATER, IGNITED COUNTRY.
FOREVER AND EVER THE VILLAGES BURN IN HIS PASSAGE,
AND THE GRAIN OF THE PEASANTRY, LIFE OF THE RAGGED ARMIES
THAT HARRIED HIM BACK TO THE KEEP OF THE CASTLE
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Orestes listened, as honor and song,
as blood and adoption warred in the cell of his thoughts,
his father redeemed by poison, by blade
by the song of the harp string rendered a garrotte,
closing the eloquent throat of Arion
silencing song, reclaiming his father,
and transforming Caergoth from desert to garden:
yet the hand of Orestes stilled in the arc of reprisal,
and into the night he warred and remembered,
and as I tell you this, memory wars with him still.

IX

The mourning began when the doves circled Vingaard:
the poison had passed through the veins like imagined fires:
and alone in his quarters, the poet's apprentice
abided the funerals, settled accounts, awaited
the search of the Order through ravaged Solamnia
for rivals and villains, for the trails of assassins,
and late on the fifth night after the burning,
when the ashes had settled on Arion's pyre,
only then did Hieronymo bring forth the harp
(though some there were curious, who late in the night
had heard, or had thought they heard, the apprentice
weeping and playing the sonorous mode of the Rending),
and late on the fifth night after the burning
Hieronymo sang for the host at the Vingaard Keep
and the Rending changed as he spoke of its birth
in the spiral of prophecy, the brush of its wing
on the glittering domes and spires of Istar
the swelling of moons and the stars' convergence
and voices and thunderings and lightnings and

earthquakes
as Hieronymo told them that night by the hearth
that hail and fire in a downpour of blood
tumbled to earth, igniting the trees and the grass,
and the mountains were burning, and the sea became
blood
and above and below us the heavens were scattered,
and locusts and scorpions wandered the face of the
planet,
as Hieronymo told us, and then he leaned closer
and NOW, he said, NOW, I SHALL TEACH YOU
OF TIME
OF THE FAMINE AND PLAGUE AND PYRRHUS ALECTO.

DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE:
PYRRHUS ALECTO, THE KNIGHT ON THE NIGHT OF BETRAYALS.
WHEN A FIREBRAND OF BURNING HAD CLOUDED THE STRAITS OF
HYLO.
LIKE OIL ON WATER, HE SOOTHED THE IGNITED COUNTRY.
FOREVER AND EVER THE VILLAGES LEARN HIS PASSAGE
IN THE GRAIN OF THE PEASANTRY, LIFE OF THE RAGGED ARMIES.
THEY CARRIED HIM BACK TO THE KEEP OF THE CASTLE
WHERE PYRRHUS THE LIGHTBRINGER CANCELED THE WORLD
BENEATH THE DENIAL OF BATTLEMENTS,
WHERE HE DIED AMID STONE WITH HIS HOVERING ARMIES.
FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS THE COUNTRY OF CAERGOth
HAS TURNED AND TURNED IN HIS EMBRACING HAND,
A GARDEN OF SHIRES AND HAMLETS,
AND Lightbringer HISTORY HANGS ON THE PATH OF HIS NAME.

X

His duty dispatched
and the old bard murdered,
Orestes returned
toward rescued Caergoth,
skirting the foothills,
and long were his thoughts
as he passed over Southlund,
the Garnet Mountains
red like a memory
of blood in the distance:
THERE IS NO LAW,
Orestes murmured,
his hand on the harp strings,
NO RULE UNWRITTEN
THAT YOUR FATHER'S SLANDERER
CANNOT INSTRUCT YOU,
THAT THE MAN YOU MURDER
YOUR HEART CANNOT HONOR,
EVEN AS YOUR HAND
CONCOCTS THE POISON.
The landscape ahead
was diminished and natural,
no thing unforeseen
sprang from the heavens,
the waters were channeled

and empty of miracles.
SO THIS IS HISTORY,
Orestes considered,
SO THIS IS HISTORY
NOW I CAN UNDERSTAND
as the road lay before him
uninherited, heirless
cut off from its making
and silenced by blood.

At the borders of Southlund
the smoke was rising,
the Arm of Caergoth
harbored incessant fire:
Orestes rode swiftly
through billows of prophecy,
the stride of his horse
confirming the dead words of Arion.

The cavalry plundering
the burgeoning fields,
leveling villages,
approaching invulnerable Caergoth,
heeded little the ride
of a boy in their column
cloaked in the night
and in helpless mourning.

A bard, some said,
or a bard's apprentice
returned to his homeland
burning and desolate.
The captain of cavalry
turned to the weeping boy
and addressed him as soldier
as fellow and brother:
SOONER OR LATER, SING YOU THIS,
BARD OR BARD'S APPRENTICE.

FOR THE VOICE OF THE HARPER
THE MUSICIAN, THE PIPER
SHALL NO LONGER BE HEARD
IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth,
LONG KEPT FROM THE FIRE
BY THE SONG OF A POET
WHO SAID SHE WAS BURNING ALREADY:
FOR A FRESH FABLED COUNTRY
IS THE NEST OF INVASIONS,
THE QUARRY OF CAVALRY,
RIPE FOR THE SWORD AND THE FIRE.

Orestes rode forth
and the captain continued,
turning his pale horse
as a star tumbled down
from the fixed dream of heaven:
FOR THE BARD'S SONG, THEY TELL ME,
IS A DISTANT BELIEF
IN THE SHAPE OF DISTANCE.
FOR CAERGOth WAS BURNING

WHEN SHE SAID IN HER HEART,
 'I AM QUEEN, NOT A WIDOW
AND SORROW IS FAR FROM ME,
 ELUSIVE AS THOUGHT
OR THE CHANGES OF MEMORY.'
 SOONER OR LATER, SING YOU THIS.
And he vanished in histories
 of rumor and smoke,
and sooner or later,
 a bard will sing this,
in beleaguered castles
 abandoned to night
and the cough of the raven.
 Sooner or later,
someone will sing
 of Orestes the bard,
for some things the poet
 brings forth and fashions,
and others the poet holds back:
 for words and the silence
between them commingle,
 defining each other
in spaces of holiness.
 and through them the story
ascends and spirals,
 descends on itself
and circles through time
 through effacing event
and continuing vengeance
 down to the time
I am telling and telling you this.

MARK OF THE FLAME,
MARK OF THE WORD

Michael and Teri Williams

It began when I was fourteen, the burning, in the winter that the fires resurged on the peninsula.

I awoke with a whirling outcry, my face awash in fire, the blankets scattering from the bed. The dogs raced from the cottage, stumbling, howling in outrage. Mother was beside me in an instant, wrapped in her own blanket, her pale hair disheveled, her eyes terror stricken.

The burning spread down my neck and back, the pain brilliant and scoring, and I clutched at her hand, her shoulders, and shrieked again. Mother winced and fumbled silently, her thick fingers pressing hard, too hard, against my scarred lips.

And then we were racing through the forest night.

The freezing rain lanced like needles against the hissing scars on my neck and face. QUIET, MY DARLING, MY DOVE, LEST THEY HEAR YOU IN THE VILLAGE, her hands flashed.

We moved over slick and glittering snow, through juniper and AETERNA, and my breath misted and crystalized

on the heaped furs, and the dogs in the traces grumbled and yapped.

Then it was light, and I lay in a dry, vaulted cavern on a hard pallet.

Above me the druidess L'Indasha Yman rustled, draped in dried leaves and holly bobs like a pageant of late autumn. She was young for medicine, young even for divining, and I was struck by her dark eyes and auburn hair because I was fourteen years old and just becoming struck by such things.

She gave me the BEATHA to help with the pain, and it tasted of smoke and barley. The burning rushed from my scars to my throat, and then to the emptiness of my stomach.

"They've matured, the lad's scars," she said to my mother. "Ripened." Expectantly, she turned to me, her dark eyes riveting, awaiting our questions.

Mother's hands flickered and flashed.

"Mother wants to know . . . how long ..." I interpreted, my voice dry and rasping.

"Always," said the druidess, brushing away the question. "And you?" she asked. "Trugon. What would you ask of me this time?"

She should have known it. Several seasons ago, the scars had appeared overnight without cause, without warning. For a year they had thickened slowly, hard as the stone walls of our cottage, spreading until my entire body was covered with a network of calluses. I could no longer even tell my age. I was becoming more and more a monstrosity, and no one could say why.

"Why. I would know why, my lady." It was always my question. I had lost hope of her answering it.

Mother's gestures grew larger, wilder, and I would not look at her. But when L'Indasha spoke again, my heart rose and I listened fiercely.

"It's your father's doing," the lady said, a bunch of red berries bright as blood against the corona of her hair.

"I have heard that much," I said, wincing as Mother jostled me frantically. The pain drove into my shoulders, and still I turned my eyes from her gestures. "I want all the rest, Lady Yman. How it was his doing, and why."

The leaves crackled as the druidess stood and drifted to the mouth of the cave. There was a bucket sitting there, no doubt to catch rainwater, for it was half filled and glazed with a thin shell of ice. With the palm of her hand, the druidess broke the ice, lifted the container, and brought it back to me, her long fingers ruddy and dripping with frigid rain. She breathed and murmured over it for a moment.

I sat up, the heat flaring down my arms.

"Look into the cracked mirror, Trugon," she whispered, kneeling beside me.

I brushed Mother's desperate, restraining hand from my shoulder, and stared into the swirl of broken light.

There was a dead man. He was small. His shadow swayed back and forth in a room of wood and stone, dappling the floor below him with dark, then light, then dark. His fine clothing fluttered and his hood lifted slightly. I saw his face . . . his arms . . .

"The scars. Lady, they are like mine. Who is he?"

"Orestes," she replied, stirring the water. "Pyrrhus Orestes. Your father, hanged with a harp string."

"And . . . WHO?" I asked, my sudden urge for vengeance stabbing as hot as the BEATHA, as the burning.

"By his own hand, Dove," L'Indasha said. "When he thought he could neither redeem nor . . . continue the line."

REDEEM NOR CONTINUE. It was quite confusing and I was muddled from the potion and the hour.

L'Indasha's face reflected off the fractured ice in the bucket: it was older, wounded, a map of lost lands. "You weren't told. But Orestes got his desire and now the scars have ripened."

Mother clutched my shoulder. The pain relented a bit.

"Continue what? Lady, 'tis a riddle."

A riddle the druidess answered, there in the vaulted cave, as the weather outside turned colder still and colder, on a night like those on which the fisherman claim you could walk on ice from Caergoth across the waters to Eastport.

She told me that my father, Orestes, had ridden desperately westward as the peninsula burned at the hands of the invaders. He rode with freebooters - with Nerakans and the goblins from Throt, and they were rough customers, but he passed through Caergoth unharmed. None of them knew he was the son of Pyrrhus Alecto - "the Firebringer," as the songs called my grandfather.

"Why did he . . . why DIDN'T he . . ." I began to ask. I was only fourteen.

The druidess understood and lifted her hand. "He was just one, and young. And there is a harder reason. Orestes, NOT YOUR GRANDFATHER, had brought the fires to the peninsula. You see, he murdered his master. Your grandmother had fostered his apprenticeship with Anon of Coastlund. She taught him from childhood that he must recover his father's honor at any cost. Your grandfather's honor. So he killed Arion, that he should sing no longer of your grandfather's shame."

Mother's grip tightened on my shoulder. I shrugged her away yet again. Again the scars on my neck and face bit and nettled.

"Go on."

"Then the goblins came, when they heard the new song Orestes sang. . . ."

When Orestes saw what his words had wrought, he ran. It was at the last village seawards - Endaf, where the coast tumbles into the Cape of Caergoth - that Orestes could abide no more of the plunder and burning. Caergoth was in flames behind him, and Ebrill, where the bandits first camped, then Llun and Mercher, vanished forever in the goblin's torchlight.

He was just one man, and he was young, but even so, surely it shamed him as much as it angered him.

At Endaf he stopped and turned into the fray. He dismounted, broke through the goblins, and joined in a frantic attempt to rescue a woman from a burning inn. Orestes was sent to the rooftop, or he asked to go. The

beams gave way with him, and the goblins watched and laughed as Orestes fell into the attic, which fell around him in turn, crashing down and up again in a rapture of fire.

But he lived. He was fire-marked, hated of men, and they would know him by his scars henceforth. The burns had bitten deep and his face was forever changed into a stiffened mask of grief. A fugitive and a vagabond he was upon Krynn, and wherever he traveled, they turned him away. To Kaolin he went, and to Garnet, as far north as Thelgaard Keep and south to the coast of Abanasinia. In all places, his scars and his story arrived before him - the tale of a bard who, with a single verse of a song, had set his country to blaze and ruin.

He took to bride a woman from Mercher, orphaned by the invasion and struck mute by goblin atrocity as they passed through with their flames and long knives. Orestes spirited her away to the woods of Lemish, where in seclusion they lived a dozen years in narrow hope.

A dozen years, the druidess said, in which the child they awaited never came.

That part I knew. Mother had told me when I was very little, the soft arc of her hand assuring me how much they had waited and planned and imagined.

That part I knew. And Mother had shared his death with none but me. But I had never heard just how he had died.

"In despair," the Lady Yman told me, the cavern lapsing into shadow as her brown, leafy robes blocked out the firelight, the reflection on the ice. "Despair that his country was burning still, and that no children of his would extinguish the fires. He did not know about you. Your mother had come to me, and she knew, was returning to your cottage to tell him, joyous through the wide woods.

"She found what you've seen. Orestes could wait no longer. Your mother brought me his note to read to her: I HAVE KILLED ARION, AND THE BURNING WILL NEVER STOP, it said. THE LAND IS CURSED. I AM CURSED. MY LINE IS CURSED. I DIE."

L'Indasha reached for me as I reeled, as the room blurred through my hot tears.

"Trugon? Trugon!"

REDEEM NOR CONTINUE. I understood now, about his anger and guilt and the terrible, wicked thing he had done. The BEATHA raced through me, and the torchlight surged and quickened.

"Why did you finally tell me?" I asked.

"To save your life," the lady replied. She passed her hand above the broken water, and I saw a future where fires arose without cause and burned unnaturally hot, and my scars were afire, too, devouring my skin, my face, erasing all reason and memory until the pain vanished and my life as well.

"This ... this is what will be, Lady?"

"Perhaps." She crouched beside me, her touch cool on my neck, its relief coursing into my face, my limbs.

"Perhaps. But the future is changeable, as is the past."

"The past?" The pain was gone now, gone entirely.

"Oh, yes, the past is changeable, Trugon," L'Indasha

claimed, passing from firelight to shadow, "for the past is lies, and lies can always change." She was nearing the end of the answer and the beginning of another riddle.

"But concern yourself now with the present," she warned, and waved her hand above the troubled water.

I saw four men wading through an ice-baffled forest, on snowshoes, their footing unsteady, armed with sword and crossbow.

"Bandits," L'Indasha pronounced, "bound to the service of Finn of the Dark Hand"

I shivered. The bandit king in Endaf."

The druidess nodded. "They are looking for Pyrrhus Orestes. Remember that only your mother and you know he is dead. They seek him because of the renewed fires on the peninsula. They are bent on taking your father to the beast, for the legend now goes, and truly, I suppose, that no man can kill a bard without dire consequence, without a curse falling to him and to his children."

She looked at me with a sad, ironic smile.

"So the bandits are certain Orestes must die to stop the fires."

Mother helped me to my feet.

"I ... I don't understand," I said. "It's over. He's killed himself and brought down a curse on me."

L'Indasha waved her hand for silence. "It wasn't the killing that cursed you. It was the words - what he said before he died. Now you must go from here - anywhere, the farther, the better. But not to Finn's Ear, the bandit king's stronghold on the Caergoth shore."

"Why should I leave?" I asked. "They are after my father, not me. I STILL don't understand."

"Your scars," she replied, emphatically, impatiently. "The whole world will mistake you for your father, because of the scars."

"I'll tell them who I really am!" I protested, but the druidess only smiled.

"They won't believe you," she said. "They will see only what they expect. Hurry now. FIND the truth about Orestes. The finding will save your life and make the past . . . unchangeable."

I thanked her for her healing and her oracle, and she gave me one last gift - her knowledge.

"Although now you may regret your blood," she said, "remember that you are the son of a bard. There is power in all words, and in yours especially."

It was just more puzzlement.

We climbed, Mother and I, into the sled, moving quickly over thick ice on our way back to the cottage. Mother slept, and I guided the dogs and looked into the cloudless skies, where Solinari and Lunitari tilted across the heavens. Between them somewhere rode the black abscess of Nunitari, though I could not see it.

The black moon was like the past: an absence waiting to be filled. And looking on the skies, the four big dogs grumbling and snorting as they drew us within sight of the cottage, I began to understand my scars and my inheritance.

Frantically, as I gathered my clothing in the cottage, Mother told me more: that my grandfather, Pyrrhus Alecto was no villain. He had kept the Solamnic Oath, had fallen in the Seventh Rebellion of Caergoth, in the two hundred and fiftieth year since the Cataclysm. She showed me the oldest poem, the one that Arion had taken and transformed. The old parchment was eloquent. I read it aloud:

"Lord Pyrrhus Alecto
light of the coast
arm of Caergoth
father to dreaming
fell to the peasants
in the time of the Rending
fell in the vanguard
of his glittering armies
and over his lapsing eye
wheeled constellations
the scale of Hiddukel
riding west to the garrisoned city.

"And that was all?" I asked. "All of this trouble over a poem?" I hated poetry.

I gave voice to her answer as she held forth rapidly, as the words slipped from her fingers into my breath and voice. "No, Trugon, not over that, over the other one."

She did not know the words of the other poem. She had not even seen or heard it. It was the poem of trouble, she insisted, crouching nervously by the door of our cottage. It was the poem that Father . . .

"Changed?"

She nodded, moving toward Father's old strongbox.

"Then Father lied as well as betrayed?"

Mother shook her head, brushed her hair back. She opened the strongbox.

I knew what was inside. Three books, a penny whistle, a damaged harp. I had never asked to see them. I hated poetry.

Mother held up one of the books.

It was the story of the times since the Rending, since the world had opened under Istar. The work of the bard Arion, it was, but more. It was his words and the words of others before him: remote names like Gwion and Henricus and Naso, out of the time when Solamnia was in confusion.

The book was battered, its leather spine scratched and cracked. As Mother held it out to me, it opened by nature to a page near its end, as though use and care had trained it to fall at the same spot, to the same lines.

She gestured that the lines were in Father's hand. Indeed, the whole book was in Father's hand, for neither Arion nor any of the bards before him had written down their songs and tales, preferring to pass them on to a listening apprentice, storing their songs in the long dreaming vaults of their memories. But Father thought he was heirless and alone, and had written them all - every

poem and song and lay, from the edicts to the first shaking of the city, down through the dark years unto this time. A dozen lines or so of one verse he had worried over, scratched out, revised, and replaced, only to go back to the first version, to his first choice of wording.

I mouthed the lines, then read them aloud:

"DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE:
PYRRHUS ALECTO, THE KNIGHT ON THE NIGHT OF BETRAYALS.
WHEN A FIREBRAND OF BURNING HAD CLOUDED THE
STRAITS OF HYLO.
LIKE OIL ON WATER, HE SOOTHED THE IGNITED COUNTRY.
FOREVER AND EVER THE VILLAGES LEARN HIS PASSAGE
IN THE GRAIN OF THE PEASANTRY, LIFE OF THE RAGGED ARMIES.
THEY CARRIED HIM BACK TO THE KEEP OF THE CASTLE
WHERE PYRRHUS THE LIGHTBRINGER CANCELED THE WORLD
BENEATH THE DENIAL OF BATTLEMENTS,
WHERE HE DIED AMID STONE WITH HIS HOVERING ARMIES.
FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS THE COUNTRY OF CAERGOth
HAS TURNED AND TURNED IN HIS EMBRACING HAND,
A GARDEN OF SHIRES AND HAMLETS,
AND Lightbringer HISTORY HANGS ON THE PATH OF HIS NAME."

It was as though Father had never been satisfied. Something had drawn him to these lines again and again, as if changing them would . . .

Would straighten the past, make it true.

" 'Tis here, Mother," I announced, so softly that at first she did not hear, though she was staring directly at me as I read.

She cupped her ear, leaned forward.

" 'Tis in the poem. Or, rather, NOT in the poem."

Mother frowned. I knew she saw Orestes in me now-poetic and full of contradictions.

I tried to be more clear about it.

"These lines Father wrote and rewrote and worked over are... are the lie. Don't you see, Mother? The druidess said that THE PAST IS LIES, AND LIES CAN ALWAYS CHANGE. These are - " I thumbed through the book, looking early and late " - these are the only lines he has fretted over.

"It's as though ... he was trying to ..." I looked at Mother. "... change the lies back to the truth."

I did not know whether that was so or not. I stepped quietly to the strongbox and took out my father's harp, one thick string missing, and held it for a long moment. It fit my hand exactly and when I put it down, I could not shake away its memory from my grasp. When I looked at Mother again, her eyes had changed. We both knew what I would say next.

"Yes, I MUST go, but not because they seek me. I will go because I have to find the lost song," I announced.

"Father's words are still hiding something."

One of the dogs rumbled and rose from the shadows, stretching and sniffing lazily in the dwindling firelight. Then his ears perked and he gave a low, angry growl.

Mother scrambled to her feet and to the door, a

confusion of soundless sobs and flickering hands.

"I know. They're coming," I said. "I must hurry.
Finding the truth is saving my life. The druidess said so."

I stroked the ears of Mateo, the largest of the dogs, who looked up at me solemnly, his thick shoulders pressing against my legs until I staggered a little at the weight. I had no thought of how small I was - how things far greater would press against me when I stepped across the threshold into the early winter morning.

Mother moved slowly aside as I passed into the pale sunlight, her fingers brushing softly, mutely against my hair. I gave her a smile and a long hug, and she assured me of her own safety. In the sled lay an old hide bag, big enough for the harp and the book, a loaf of bread, and a wedge of cheese. I tossed everything in and moved off, as quickly and silently as I could.

One of the dogs barked as I lost the cottage behind a cluster of blue AETERNA branches, and the high wind shivered faintly at their icicles like the vanished notes of a song. Above the hillside nearest my home, four long shadows fell across the trackless snow.

There were other adventures that led me back to the peninsula - a wide arc of years and travels across the continent, Finn's men at first only hours behind me, then less constant, less menacing the farther south I traveled. I sent the dogs back to Mother soon and traveled alone, sometimes working for a while at jobs where nobody knew me or thought they knew me, where nobody cared that I never removed my hood.

It was a year, six seasons perhaps, before I realized exactly what it was about the song I was searching for.

It has long been practice that when a bard travels and sings, his songs are attended, remembered, and copied by those in the regions nearby. If a song is a new one, it carries to still farther regions by word of mouth, from bard to bard, from orator to folksinger to storyteller to bard again.

It is a tangled process, and the words change sometimes in the telling, no matter how we try to rightly remember. The old lines from Arion's song I heard in Solamnia as

THE PRAYER OF MATHERI
MERCIFUL GRAMMAR OF THOUGHT

I had heard in the small town of Solace as

THE PRAYERS OF MATHERI
MERCY, GRANDMOTHER OF THOUGHT

and the southern lines made me laugh, distorted like gossip in their passage across the straits.

For I had the book with me, and within it (he truth unchangeable. As I traveled, I knew I would come to a place when I would hear those scratched and worried lines of my father's - the lines about Pyrrhus Alecto, about

Lightbringer and history and glory - but I would hear them in a different version.

And I would know at last what Pyrrhus Orestes had altered.

Across the Straits of Schallsea I once stowed away on a ferry. The enraged ferryman discovered me under a pile of badger hides, and he threatened to throw me overboard for evading his fee. He relented when he pushed back my hood and saw the scars from the burning.

"Firebringer," he snarled. "Only my fear of Branchala, of the curse upon bard-slayers, stays my hand from your murder." I cherished his greeting. It was the first of many such conversations.

Over the grain fields of Abanasinia I wandered, in a journey from summer to summer and threat to threat. Three times I heard "Song of the Rending" - once from a minstrel in Solace, again in the city of Haven from a seedy, unraveled bard who had forgotten entire passages about the collapse of Istar, whereby his singing lost its sense, and finally from a blind juggler wandering the depths of the plains, whose version was wild and comical, a better story by far than Arion's.

The minstrel and the juggler repeated Father's altered lines word for word. But the juggler recited them with a curious look, as though he was remembering words contrary to those he was speaking. Although I asked him and asked him again about it, he would tell me nothing. Faced with his silence, I began to believe I had imagined his discomfort, that it was only my hope and dreaming that had expected to find the missing lines.

And so, back across the straits I sailed, in the summer of my sixteenth year, and again the ferryman called me Fire-bringer, cursing me and spitting at me as he took my money.

On Solamnic shores once more, I started for home, but discovered that no village would shelter me on the journey. "Firebringer," they called me, and "Orestes the Torch," meeting me on the outskirts of the hamlets with torches of their own, with stones and rakes and long peninsular knives.

Some even pursued me, shouting that the fires would die with the one who brought them. Like the ferryman, like Finn, they thought I was my father.

To the north lay the great Solamnic castles - Vingaard and Dargaard, Brightblade and Thelgaard and DiCaela. Each would take me in of a night for the sake of my grandfather. These families would nurse me on occasion, for my scars burned with growing intensity as the seasons turned and the fires to the west raged and the years passed by me. Sometimes the knights let me stay for a week, perhaps two, but the peasants would clamor, would talk of traitors and firebrands, and I would be asked to leave, would be

escorted from Solamnic holdings by a handful of armed cavalry.

The knights would apologize there at the borders, and tell me that their hearts were heavy for me ... that the welfare of the order and the people took precedence . . . that, had there been another way, they would have been glad to ...

In all those high places, I asked after Arion's song. Solamnia was, after all, the bard's sanctuary, the harp's haven. All of the schooled poets had retreated to these courts, and all knew the works of Arion of Coastlund.

I showed around the scratched and amended passage near the poem's end. All the bards remembered it, and remembered no other version. As I sat alone in the vaulted hall of Vingaard Keep, my thickened hands strumming Father's harp in the vast and echoing silence, it almost seemed to me that the walls shuddered with my clumsy music, the one string still and always missing.

In my seventeenth year, the peninsula had burned clear up to Finn's own holdings.

Out of the stronghold of his lair in the seaside caverns at Endaf, from which his horsemen could harry the trade routes north from Abanasinia and his notorious ships, the NUITARI and the VIPER, could find safe harbor, Finn terrorized the cape and covered the shore with the husks of schooners and brigantines, off course in the smoke from the mainland.

It was rumored by some that an ancient evil had returned, in those brief years before the War of the Lance. Finn was one of those who harbored them, the populace whispered. For in the depths of his seaside cavern lay an intricate web of still larger caverns, tunnel devolving on tunnel, the darkness slick and echoing. This was the legendary Finn's Ear, where it was supposed that all sounds muttered in shelter of stone eventually and eternally circled and spoke. At the heart of Finn's labyrinth was said to lay a monster, his black scales glittering with cold malice and devouring acid.

They said that the beast and the bandit had struck an uneasy truce: Finn soothed the monster with the music of well paid but exhausted bards, and, lulled by continual song, the great creature received in turn the company of the bandit king's uncooperative prisoners. And as to the fate of those poor wretches, even the rumormongers were silent.

In the rough border country between Lemish and Southlund, cooling myself in the high foothills of the Garnet Mountains, I pondered the looming necessity of actually going to Finn's Ear, where the bards were singing and the caverns echoing. It was the only place I had not searched for the song.

Hooded as always to hide my livid scars, I crossed that border and stalked through the burning peninsula, keeping the towers of Caergoth to the north as I traveled toward the little villages in the west. My route took me within Finn's

own sight, had he cared to leave his rocky throne and look west from the beetling cliffs.

For days I wandered through hot country and distant rising smoke. I would stand outside the village pubs, hooded and shrouded like a highwayman or a self-important mage, and through open windows I heard the nervous talk, the despair of farmer and villager alike.

Spontaneous fires arose in the dry grain fields, leaving the countryside a wasteland of ash and cinder. In droves the farmers were leaving, no longer able to fight the flames. All this disaster, they claimed, had enraged Finn to the point where, in the search for remedy, he had offered an extravagant bounty to any bard or enchanter who could extinguish the fires with song or incantation.

Hard words about a curse drifted through one of the windows. I heard the name of my father. It lightened my steps somehow, as I passed through the deserted village of Ebrill in the early morning, then over the ruins of Llun and Mercher, moving ever westward, believing now that my quest would at last be done. Endaf was the last place Finn would look for a far-flung quarry, and my father's name rode on the smoky air.

It was midmorning when I reached Endaf. I wandered the village for a while, weaving a path amid the deserted cottages and charred huts and lean-tos, all looking like a grim memory of a village. And it was odd walking there, passing the old flame-gutted ruins of the inn and knowing that somewhere in its vanished upper story my father had received the scars I had mysteriously inherited.

I turned abruptly from the ashes. I was eighteen and impatient, and had come very far for the truth. The old acrid smell of Endaf faded as I walked from the ruins on a rocky and shell-strewn path, and as I trudged west I caught the sharp smell of salt air and heard the faint cries of gulls and cormorants.

About a mile from the center of the village, Finn's Ear burrowed into a sheer limestone cliff overlooking the Cape of Caergoth. Black gulls perched at its edge, the gray rock white with their guano, loud with their wailing cries.

Steps had been chopped in the steep rock face, whether by the bandits or by a more ancient hand it was hard to tell, given the constant assault of storm and birds. I took my place in the middle of a rag-tag group of beggars, farmers, bards and would-be bandits, each awaiting an audience with King Finn of the Dark Hand.

As I waited, the bards talked around and over me in their language of rumor. The gold thread at the hems of cape and cloak was tattered, frayed; each wooden harp was chipped and warped, each bronze one dented and tarnished.

No famous poets these, no Quivalen Sath or Arion of Coastlund. They were courtiers with trained voices and a studied adequacy for the strings. Now, in single file on the rocky steps, each encouraged the other, thereby encouraging himself.

Being praise-singer to a bandit king was a thankless and shabby job, they said.

Well, generally.

But Finn, they said, was different. Of course.

It was hard to keep from laughing. In the rationale of such men, a bandit, a goblin, even a monster was DIFFERENT when coin and a warm hearth were offered.

Finn, they claimed, had joined resolutely in the search to lift a curse brought upon Caergoth and the surrounding peninsula years ago by the fire-bringing Solamnics, Pyrrhus Alecto and his son Pyrrhus Orestes. His search had entered its fourth year, his seers and shamans telling him that the curse would last "as long as Alecto's descendants lived," his hirelings telling him always that they had just missed catching Orestes. Desperate, Finn hoped that a transforming hymn would lift the curse with its beauty and magic.

The bards needled one another cynically, each asking when they would write that certain song, make their fortunes among the bandits. They all laughed the knowing laughter of bards, then fell silent.

I leaned against the cold rock face, awaiting uncertain audience. Pelicans and gulls wheeled over the breaking tide, diving into the ardent waters as the sun settled over the eastern spur of Ergoth, dark across the cape.

Carelessly, I touched the strings of the harp, felt in my pockets for the poet's pen and ink. I had traveled hundreds of miles to this stairwell, this audience. The pain of my scars rose suddenly to a new and staggering level.

The song of the bards around me was skillful and glittering and skeptical . . . and empty of the lines I sought. I would have to brave the echoing caverns below Finn's lair.

The druidess had told me that I could find the truth. AND THE FINDING WOULD SAVE MY LIFE AND MAKE THE PAST UNCHANGEABLE. The song had to be here, or there was no song. And could the final pain of the monster's acid be any worse than this perpetual burning?

"You'll have it, Father," I muttered into the dark of my hood. "REDEEMED AND CONTINUED. The past will be unchangeable. Whatever you have, it will be the truth. And whatever I have, it will be better."

Finn of the Dark Hand sat in a huge chair hewn from the cavern wall. He looked hewn from stone himself, a sleepless giant or a weathered monument set as a sign of warding along the rocky peninsular coast. His right hand was gloved in black, the reason known only to himself.

Around him milled his company of bandits, rough and scarred like burned villages. They bared their knives as they watched the singers, smiling wickedly one to another, as though keeping a dreadful secret unto a fast-approaching hour.

I hovered at the mouth of the cave, listening for an hour to the technically brilliant and lifeless songs of the bards.

They claimed to play the music for its own sake, for the sake of the glory of song, but they all knew otherwise, for always music serves some master.

Even Finn knew they were liars. Finn, who had held neither harp nor flute, whose poetry was ambush and plunder. He leaned into the eroded throne, dismissing the pearly singer from Kalamán, the pale lad from Palanthas and the merchant turned poet from Dargaard. Each gathered a heel of bread for his song and turned, grumbling, eastward toward Solamnic cities and the possibility of castles and shelter.

It was night. Bats rustled in the upper regions of the cavern, and I remembered an old time, a winter time, a cavern and a dry rustling sound. Two last supplicants stood between me and the bandit: a beggar whose leg had been damaged in a field accident, and another bard.

While the beggar begged and was given a loaf, and while the bard sang and received a crust, I waited in the shadow of the cave.

None of them had the song. None of them. Neither bard nor minstrel nor poet nor troubadour. Their songs rang thinly in the cave, echoing back to them and to us, throwing the music into a doubling confusion.

I had come this far, and for me there was still more to discover, more than thin music and mendicant rhymes. When summoned, I stepped to the light, and when the dulled eyes of the bandit king rested upon me, I threw back my hood.

"Firebringer," he rasped, and "Orestes the Torch."

As all the bandits hastened to be the one to slay me, to end the line and the curse before the approving eye of their leader, Finn raised his hand and stayed theirs.

"No," he rumbled. The blood of the line of Pyrrhus should not stain the floors of this cavern. For remember the curse. Remember the harm it might visit."

One shaman, seated by the stone foot of the throne, nodded in agreement, beads rattling as he fondled his bone necklace.

I followed the bandit guards into the throat of the cave, to a confusing depth where all light had vanished except the glow of candles wedged in rocks and later only the torch that guided us. In a great rotunda hundreds of feet below the surface they left me, the last of the guards covering their tracks, candle by extinguished candle, and their footsteps echoed over each other until the cavern resounded of a passing, vanished army.

I sat in a darkness most absolute. After only a moment, I heard a voice.

The language was quiet, insinuating, weaving with the fabric of my thoughts until I could no longer tell, especially in this darkness, what words lay outside me and what within.

OH, TO A WANDERING EYE ... it began, a fragment of song in the darkness.

I scrambled to my feet and lurched toward, I hoped, the passageway. Bones clattered beneath my feet, rattled against rotting wood and rusted strings, striking a hollow music. Spinning blindly in the dark, I realized I had left father's harp behind, and knew at once that I could not find my way back to it.

A second voice caught me standing stupidly in the same place, huddled in my cloak, expecting the fangs, the monster's fatal poisons. At the new sound, I jumped, flinging my pitiful knife away into the darkness, where it clattered much too loudly against the rock wall.

"EST SULARIS OTH MITHAS ..."

And then, behind me, or what I thought was behind me, another.

BUILD YE THE WESTERNMOST WALL IN THREE PARTS . . .

And, beyond that, another voice, and yet another, until I spun about dizzily, buffeted by voices, by echoes, by wandering sound from centuries before. For not only did the voices of Southlund and Coastlund mingle in the darkness with a chorus of High Solamnic, but the ancient ritual language seemed to change as I heard it, traveling from voice to voice, each time its pronouncements varying slightly until I realized that the last voices I had heard were another language entirely and that I had followed a passage of familiar words, familiar sounds, back to a voice that was entirely alien, speaking a tongue as remote as the Age of Might, as the distant and unattainable constellations.

I WOULD KNOW WHY, said a young man's tortured voice.

YOU CAN FIND THE TRUTH, another voice said - softer, more familiar.

AND THE FINDING WILL MAKE THE PAST. . . UNCHANGEABLE.

I followed the familiar voice of the druidess L'Indasha Yman, my shoulder brushing against stone and a cool liquid draft of air rushing into my face, telling me I had found a passage ... to somewhere else.

The voices were ahead of me now, ahead and behind, contained, I suppose, by the narrow corridor. Some shouted at me, some whispered, some vexed me with accents curious and thoughts fragmentary. . . .

. . . SE THE FOR DRYHTNES NAMAN DEATHES THOLDE . . .

. . . HERE ON THE PLAINS, WHERE THE WIND ERASES THOUGHT. . .

. . . OUR MEDSIYN IS A STON THAT IS NO STON, AND A THYNG IN KENDE AND NOT DIVERSE THYNGES, OF WHOM ALL METALLES BETH MADE . . .

. . . YOUR ONE TRUE LOVE'S A SAILING SHIP . . .

. . . DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE . . .

I stopped. In the last of the voices, somewhere behind me in the corridor, the old words had sounded. I forgot them all - the druidess, the erasing wind of the plains, the medicine and bawdy songs - and turned about.

In the midst of a long recounting of herb lore I discovered that voice again . . . the bard's intonation masking the accents of Coastlund. I followed the northern vowels, the rhythmic sound of the verse. . . .

And I was in another chamber, for the echo swirled around me and over me, and I felt cold air from all quarters, and a warmth at a great distance to my left. The voice

continued, louder and unbroken by noise and distraction,
and it finished and repeated itself as an echo resounds upon
echo.

I held my breath, fumbled for pen and ink, then
remembering the monster, sniffed the air for acid and heat.

It was indeed Arion's "Song of the Rending," echoing
over the years unto this cavern and unto my listening.

So I waited. Through the old narrations of the sins of
the Kingpriest, through the poet's account of the numerous
decrees of perfection and the Edict of Thought Control. I
waited as the song recounted the glittering domes and spires
of Istar, the swelling of moons and the stars' convergence,
and voices and thunderings and lightnings and earthquakes.
I listened as hail and fire tumbled to earth in a downpour of
blood, igniting the trees and the grass, and the mountains
were burning, and the sea became blood, and above and
below us the heavens were scattered, and locusts and
scorpions wandered the face of the planet. . . .

I waited as the voice echoed down the generations, from
one century to the next to the third since the Cataclysm,
awaiting those lines, not letting myself hope that they would
be different from the ones in the leather book in my pack, so
that when the lines came, they were like light itself.

DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE:

 PYRRHUS ALECTO, THE KNIGHT OF THE NIGHT OF BETRAYALS
FIREBRAND OF BURNING THAT CLOUDED THE STRAITS OF HYLO,
 THE OIL AND ASH ON THE WATER, IGNITED COUNTRY.
FOREVER AND EVER THE VILLAGES BUM IN HIS PASSAGE,
 AND THE GRAIN OF THE PEASANTRY, LIFE OF THE RAGGED
 ARMIES
THAT HARRIED HIM BACK TO THE KEEP OF THE CASTLE
 WHERE PYRRHUS THE FIREBRINGER CANCELED THE WORLD
BENEATH THE DENIAL OF BATTLEMENTS,
 WHERE HE DIED AMID STONE WITH HIS COVERING ARMIES.
FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS THE COUNTRY OF CAERGOth
 HAS BURNED AND BURNED WITH HIS EFFACING HAND,
A BARREN OF SHIRES AND HAMLETS,
 AND Firebringer HISTORY HANGS ON THE PATH OF HIS
 NAME.

I sat on the cold stone floor and laughed and cried
quietly, exultantly. I waited there an hour, perhaps two, as
the "Song of the Rending" ended and began again. I
wondered briefly if this were the echo of Arion himself, if I
was hearing not only the words but the voice of the bard
my father had killed a generation back.

I decided it did not matter. All that mattered was the
truth of the words and the truth of the telling. Arion's song
had marked my grandfather as a traitor, but it had preserved
the land, for what bandit or goblin would care to invade a
fire-blasted country? Orestes's song had rescued Alecto's
name, at the price of flame and ruin and his own life. So
when Arion's song returned again, I was ready to hear it, to
commit it to memory, to wander these caves until I
recovered the light, the fresh air, the vellum or hide on
which to write the lines that would save my father's line,

my line.

It did return, and I remembered each word, with a memory half trained in the listening, half inherited from a father with bardic gifts. For the first time in a long while, perhaps the first time ever, I was thankful for who he was, and I praised the gifts Orestes had passed on to me.

And then, with a whisper that drowned out all other voices, at once the beast spoke. It was a dragon!

So HE HAS SENT ANOTHER FROM UP IN THE LIGHT... O MOST WELCOME . . . THE STRUGGLE IS OVER IS OVER . . . REST THERE REST... NO CONTINUING ... NO ... NO ...

Oh. And it seemed not at all strange now to fall to the monster without struggle or issue, to rid myself of the shifting past and the curse of these scars and their burning, and to rid all above me of the land's torture . . .

So I stood there, ridiculously clutching pen and ink, and though it was already darker than I could imagine darkness to be, I closed my eyes, and the alien heat engulfed me, and with it the evil smell of rust and offal and old blood. The jaws closed quickly around me as I heard a man's voice, saying, I HAVE KILLED ARION, AND THE BURNING WILL NEVER STOP. THE LAND IS CURSED. I AM CURSED. MY LINE IS CURSED. I DIE.

And then, like a last sudden gift, a woman's whisper: THERE IS POWER IN ALL WORDS, AND IN YOURS ESPECIALLY.

It was the hot fetor that awakened me. I gasped and coughed and closed my eyes immediately to the fierce and caustic fumes.

I was sitting upright in very confined quarters.

Slowly I tested my surroundings, my eyes clasped tightly against the foul biting mist. I stretched my arms, and to each side I felt slippery leather walls.

It came to me slowly what had happened.

I sat in the dragon's stomach, like a hapless sailor at the end of an ancient tale.

I cried out in panic and kicked against the pulsing walls, flailing frantically, but it seemed that the great beast had settled and fallen asleep, assured by long experience that the dark corrosives of his stomach would do the rest.

I felt my scars hiss and bubble. The tissue was old and thick as hide, and it would take hours for the acid to eat through. There was a fair amount of air, though it was foul and painful to breathe. What was left to me was the waiting.

For a while, for the space, perhaps, of a dozen heartbeats, the absurdity of my quest rushed over me like a harsh, seething wave. Four years of wandering across two continents, hiding away in castles and marshes, under the abutments of bridges and in filthy, narrowing alleys, enduring searing pain in silence . . .

Only to come ignobly to the filthiest, narrowest end of all, and with me the line of Pyrrhus Alecto, dissolved and digested miles beneath our beloved peninsula. I had gone down to the depths of the mountains, and the earth with her

bars was about me forever.

I cried out again, certain no one would hear me.

Then it seemed almost foolishly simple. For after the weeping, the vain recollection of my hundred adventures, I recalled the last thing I had heard:

"There is power in all words, and in yours especially."

My first purpose, many seasons past and a hundred miles away, when I left my mother and home, had been to discover and make known the truth about Orestes and Grandfather.

I had discovered. Now I must make it known. I would salvage the truth in the last dissolving hour. And though I assumed the words would never see light or catch a willing eye, I brought forth quill and inkhorn, and said aloud, canceling my father's words as he had canceled Arion's, "The fires are extinguished. The land is free. I am alive."

Dipping the quill, I began to write blindly on the quivering stomach walls of the dragon.

DOWN IN THE ARM OF CAERGOth HE RODE . . .

Some men are saved by water, some by fire. I have heard stories of happy rock slides releasing trapped miners, of a ship and its crew passing safely through hurricanes because the helmsman nestled the boat in the eye of the storm, in sheer good fortune.

I am the rare one to be saved by nausea.

Credit it to the ink, perhaps, or the incessant, swift scratching on the walls of the dragon's stomach. Whatever it was, the fishermen skirting the coast of Endaf, the good folk of Ergoth who drew me sputtering from the water, said that they had never seen the likes of it on sea or land.

They said that the caverns of Finn of the Dark Hand had exploded, the rubble toppling down the cliff face and pouring into the circling waters of the cape, that they thought for certain it was an earthquake or some dwarven enchanter gone mad in the depths of the rock until they saw the black wings surge from the central cavern, bunched and muscled and webbed like the wings of a bat. And they told me how a huge creature pivoted gracefully, high above the coastal waters, plunged for the sea, and inelegantly disgorged above the Cape of Caergoth.

It seemed a clear, sweet grace to me, lying on the deck of their boat as they poured hot mulled wine down me and wrapped me in blankets, their little boat turning west toward the Ergoth shore and the safety of Eastport, a haven in that ravaged and forbidding land.

The fishermen's attentions seemed strange, though - as if, in some odd, indescribable way, I was one of their fellows. It was not until we reached the port itself and I looked into a barrel of still water that I noticed my scars had vanished.

But the memory of the burning returns, dull and heavy in my hands, especially at night, here in this lighthouse room overlooking the bay of Eastport. Across the water I can see the coast of my homeland, the ruins of the bandit stronghold

at Endaf. Finn, they tell me, dissolved with two dozen of his retainers when the dragon thundered through their chambers, shrieking and flailing and dripping the fatal acid that is the principal weapon of his kind.

And the creature may as well have dissolved himself. He has not been seen since that day on the Caergoth coast. But the same fishermen who rescued me claim that, only the other night, a dark shadow passed across the face of the red moon. Looking up, they saw nothing but Lunitari and a cloudless sky.

They saw an omen in this, and now carry talismans on board, but sailors always were a superstitious lot, fashioning monsters out of clouds and the wind on the waters.

At night I sit by the window, by lamplight, and watch the constellations switch and wink and vanish in this uncertain time, and I set before me a fresh page of vellum, the lines of each day stored in my memory. For a moment I dwell on the edges of remembrance, recalling my mother, L'Indasha Yman, the reluctant knights, and the fortunate fishermen. But, foremost, I recall my father, come down to me in an inheritance of verse and conflicting stories. It is for him, and for Grandfather before him, and for all those who have vanished and been wronged by the lies of the past, that I dip the quill into the inkwell, and the pain in my hand subsides as I begin to write . . .

On SOLAMNIA'S CASTLES
RAVENS ALIGHT.
DARK AND UNNUMBERED
LIKE A YEAR OF DEATHS,
AND DREAMT ON THE BATTLEMENTS,
FIXED AND HOLY,
ARE THE SIGNS OF THE ORDER
KINGFISHER AND ROSE -

THE BARGAIN DRIVER

MARK ANTHONY

I'll give you the two bronze knives, the string of elven beads, and the silver drinking horn, but that is my final offer."

"Are you mad, Matya?" the grizzled old trader said in exasperation. He gestured to the bolt of fine cloth that lay between them on the counter, in the center of the trading post's one dingy, cluttered room. "Why, this was woven for a noble lord in the city of Palanthas itself. It's worth twice what you're offering me. Nay, thrice!"

Matya watched the trader calculatingly with her bright brown eyes. She could always tell when she was about to best Belek in the driving of a bargain, for his nose invariably would begin to twitch.

"If the doth is so fine, why did the noble lord for whom it was made not buy it?" Matya asked pointedly.

Belek mumbled some excuse, but Matya waved it away with a ring-covered hand. "You may take my offer or leave it, Belek. You'll not get so much as a bent nail more."

The trader sighed, a look of dismay on his haggard face. "You're determined to drive me out of business, aren't you,

Matya?" His bulbous nose gave a violent twitch.

Matya smiled inwardly, though she did not let the trader see her satisfaction. "It's simply business, Belek, that's all."

The trader grunted. "Aye, so it is. But I'll warn you, Matya. One day you'll drive a bargain too cleverly for your own good. There are some bargains that aren't worth taking, no matter how profitable they seem."

Matya laughed at that. "You always were a sore loser, Belek." She pushed the goods she had offered across the counter. Belek sighed - his nose twitching furiously - and pushed the bolt of cloth toward her. Matya spat on her palm. Belek did likewise, and the two shook hands. The bargain had been struck.

Matya bade Belek farewell and loaded the bolt of cloth into her wagon outside the ramshackle trading post. The wagon was a colorful, if somewhat road-worn, affair - a wooden box on wheels, painted in countless bright but peeling hues. Hitched in front was a single dun-colored donkey with patient eyes and extraordinarily long ears.

Matya's wagon was filled nearly to overflowing with all manner of wares, both mundane and curious: pots and pans, cloaks and boots, arrows and axes, flints, knives, and even a sword or two, plus countless other objects she had bought, haggled for, or - most of the time - scavenged. Traveling from town to town, trading and striking bargains, was how Matya made her living. And it was not a bad one at that.

Like the wagon, Matya herself was a bit worn with the years. Her long hair, coiled in a thick braid atop her head, had been flaxen, but now was ash gray. Countless days of sun and wind had tanned and toughened her ruddy cheeks. Fine wrinkles touched the comers of her eyes and mouth, more from smiling than frowning, and so were attractive. And, like the wagon, Matya was clad in a motley collection of clothes representing all colors of the rainbow, from her ocean-blue skirt to her sunflower-yellow shirt and forest-green vest speckled with tiny red flowers. Her willowy, figure had plumped out, but there was still an air of beauty about her, of the simplest and most comforting kind - when her nut-brown eyes weren't flashing fire, that is.

"Let's be on our way, Rabbit," Matya told the donkey as she climbed onto the wagon's wooden bench. "If we hurry, we can reach Garnet by nightfall. There's a merchant there who's an even worse haggler than Belek." The donkey gave a snort that sounded uncannily like laughter.

Matya tied a bright red kerchief over her graying hair and grasped the wagon's reins in her strong, thick fingers. She whistled sharply, and Rabbit started off at a trot down the dusty highway, pulling the gaudily colored wagon behind.

It was midafternoon when she saw the ravens circling lazily against the azure sky not far in the distance. Matya knew well what the dark birds portended: Death ahead.

"Keep those ears up, Rabbit," she told the donkey as the wagon jounced down the heavily rutted road. "There's danger on the road these days."

Matya watched warily as the serene, rolling hills slipped by. Autumn had touched the land with its frosty hand, coloring the plains of southern Solamnia in a hundred shades of russet and gold. The honey-colored sunlight was warm and drowsy, but Matya resisted the temptation to doze, as she might have done otherwise. The land was beautiful, but beauty could conceal danger. She remained wide awake and alert.

The wagon crested a low rise. Below her, the road split, and it was here the ravens circled. The highway continued on to the north, and a second road led east, toward the dim purple range of mountains marching on the horizon. Scattered about the dusty crossroads were several queer, twisted objects. A raven dived down and pecked at one of the objects before flapping again into the air, and only then did Matya realize what the strange things were: corpses, lying still in the dirt of the road.

She counted five of them as Rabbit - eyeing the dead nervously - pulled the wagon to the crossroads. Matya climbed down and knelt to examine one of the bodies, an older man's, dressed in neat but threadbare attire. A crudely made arrow with black fletching protruded from its throat.

"Goblins," Matya said in disgust. She had heard rumors that the verminous creatures were creeping down from the high places of the mountains of late to waylay travelers. By her guess, these had been pilgrims, making for Caergoth, to the south, to visit the temples of the new gods there.

"They found their gods sooner than they thought," Matya muttered. She spoke a brief prayer to speed the dead on their journey, then began rummaging about the bodies, seeing if any of them carried something that might be worth trading. After all, the dead had no use for objects of value. Matya, on the other hand, did.

After several minutes, however, she gave up in disgust. Like most pilgrims, these owned little more than the clothes on their backs. She would not have scorned even these, but they were threadbare and stained with blood. All she had got for her trouble was a single copper coin, and a bent one at that.

"There's nothing for us here," Matya told Rabbit as she climbed back into the wagon. "Let's be on our way. Men riding out from Garnet will find these folk soon enough and lay them to rest - hopefully dead with the goblins."

Rabbit let out a low bray and started into a trot, anxious to be away from the crossroads and the smell of blood. Matya guided the donkey down the east road, but after a hundred paces or so she pulled hard on the reins, bringing the wagon again to a halt.

"Now what on the face of Krynn is that?" Matya asked herself. Something glinted brightly among the nettles and witchgrass to the side of the road. She started to ignore it, flick the reins, and continue on - the hour was growing late - but curiosity got the better of her. She slid from the wagon's bench, pushed through the weeds, and headed toward the glimmer she had seen. The nettles scratched at her ankles, but in a moment Matya forgot the sting.

"Why, 'tis a knight!" she gasped aloud, staring at the

man who lay, unmoving, in the weeds at her feet.

The man was clad in armor of beaten steel, but his visage was more that of a shiftless vagabond than a noble knight. His eyes were deeply set, his features thin and careworn, and the mouse-brown moustache that drooped over his mouth was coarse and scraggly.

Whether he was, in truth, a knight or a looter in stolen armor, it didn't much matter now, Matya thought. His hair was matted with blood, and his skin was ashen with the pallor of death. She said the familiar words to appease the spirit of the dead, then knelt beside the corpse.

The steel armor alone would be worth a fortune, but it was terribly heavy, and Matya was not entirely certain she would be able to remove it. However, the knight wore a leather purse at his belt, and that boded well for Matya's fortunes. Deftly, she undid the strings, peered inside, and gasped in wonder.

A woman's face gazed out of the purse at her. The tiny face was so lifelike that, for a moment, Matya almost fancied it was real - a small, perfect maiden hidden within the pouch.

"Why, it's a doll," she realized after a heartbeat had passed.

The doll was exquisitely made, fashioned of delicate bone-white porcelain. The young maiden's eyes were two glowing sapphires, and her cheeks and lips were touched with a blush of pink. It was a treasure fit for a lord's house, and Matya's eyes glimmered like gems themselves as she reached to lift it from the purse.

A hand gripped her arm, halting her. Matya froze, biting her lip to stifle a scream. It was the dead man. His fingers, sticky with dried blood, dug into the flesh of her arm, and he gazed at her with pale, fey eyes.

The knight was very much alive.

"Tambor . . ." the knight whispered. He lay slumped against the wheel of Matya's wagon, his eyes shut. "She sings . . . Tambor . . ." His mumbling faded, and he drifted deeper into a feverish sleep.

Matya sat near the small fire, sipping a cup of rose hip tea and watching the knight carefully. Twilight had descended on the grove of aspen trees where she had made camp, transforming all the colors of the world to muted shades of gray.

Tambor, Matya thought. There's that word again. She had heard it several times in the knight's fevered rambling, but she did not know what it meant, or even whether it was the name of a place or a person. Whatever it was, it was important to him. As important as that doll, she thought. Even now, in his sleep, the knight clutched tightly at the purse that held the small porcelain figurine. It had to be valuable indeed.

While Matya was not one to go out of her way to help others when it was unclear what - if any - reward she might gain from it, neither was she without a heart. The knight

would have died had she left him there by the road, and she would not have wanted that weighing on her conscience to the end of her days. Besides, she suspected there was a good chance the knight would die regardless of her aid, in which case the doll would be hers, free and clear. Either way, it was worth her while to help.

Getting the knight into her wagon had been no simple task. Fortunately, Matya was a strong woman, and the knight had roused himself enough to stumble most of the way with her help. She had hoped to make Garnet by nightfall, but she had tarried too long at the crossroads. Shadows were lengthening, and the town still lay many leagues ahead. Knowing night was not far off, fearful of Rabbit stumbling into a hole or missing the trail in the dark, she had made camp in the grove of aspen by the road.

She had tended to the knight's wounds as best she could. The cut on his scalp was shallow, but he had lost a good deal of blood from it. More troubling had been the wound in the knight's leg. She had found the broken shaft of an arrow embedded in the flesh behind his knee. Goblin arrows were wickedly barbed, Matya knew, and there was only one way for her to remove the arrow tip. Steeling her will, she had pushed the broken shaft completely through the flesh of his leg. Mercifully, the knight had not awakened. Blood flowed freely from the wound, which she had deftly bound with a dean cloth. The bleeding soon stopped.

The night deepened, and the stars came out, one by one, like tiny jewels in the sky above. Matya sat by the fire to eat a supper of dried fruit, nuts, and bread, regarding the knight's sleeping form thoughtfully through the back of the wagon.

If he still lived when she reached Garnet the next day, she would leave him at one of the monasteries dedicated to the new gods - if the brethren would accept a Solamnic Knight into their sanctuary, she amended. There were many who frowned upon the Knights of Solamnia these days. Matya had heard tales that told how, long ago, the knights had been men of greatness and honor, who had protected all Solamnia against creatures like goblins. Matya, however, was not certain she believed such tales.

Most Solamnic Knights she had ever heard of were little more than fools who expected others to be impressed simply because they wore ridiculous suits of rusting armor. Some folk even said it was the knights themselves who brought about the Cataclysm, the fiery destruction that had rained down upon the face of Krynn more than half a century ago, bringing an end to the Age of Might.

"Not that I think the Cataclysm was really such a terrible thing," Matya said to herself. "I daresay I wouldn't make as good a living as I do if these self-important knights still patrolled the highways. And while times may be hard, it only means that people will spend more dearly for the sort of things I can bring them in my wagon. If anything, the Cataclysm has been good for business, and that's all that matters to me."

With a start, Matya realized that the knight had heard

her talking, was watching her. His eyes were pale, almost colorless.

"To whom do I owe my life?" he asked her.

Matya stared at him in surprise. Despite his unlikely looks, the knight's voice was resonant, deep and almost musical, like the sound of a hunting horn.

"My name is Matya," she said briskly, recovering her wits. "And as for what you owe me, we can discuss that later."

The knight inclined his head politely. "I am Trevarre, of the House of Navarre," he said in his noble voice. "For your assistance, I thank you, but if it is a reward you seek, I fear we must discuss it now, not later." He gripped the wagon's side and tried to pull himself up, heedless of his injuries.

"What are you doing?" Matya cried.

"Leaving," Trevarre said. A crooked smile touched his lips, and determination shone in his deep-set eyes. "You have been more than kind, Matya, but I have traveled day and night to reach the end of my journey. I cannot stop, not yet."

"Why, you knights are greater fools than the tales say," Matya said angrily, hands on her hips. "You'll only kill yourself"

"So be it," Trevarre said, shrugging as if this prospect did not disturb him. He grimaced, breathing hard, as he slid from the wagon and balanced on his good leg. "I must go on" He took a step onto his injured leg. His face went white with pain. He groaned and slumped to the ground.

Matya clucked her tongue, helped him sit back up against the wagon wheel. "I don't think you're going anywhere, except to a monastery in Garnet - or the grave, if you try that again" She poured a cup of water from a goatskin and handed it to him. The knight nodded in thanks and drank it down.

"You do not understand, Matya," Trevarre said, an intent look on his weathered face. "I must journey to Tambor. I have received a plea for help. I cannot refuse it."

Matya scowled. "Why ever not?"

Trevarre sighed, stroking his scraggly moustache. "I do not know if I can make you understand this, but I will try. I am a Knight of the Sword, Matya." He rested his hand against his steel breastplate, decorated with the symbol of the sword. "This means I cannot live my life as other men do. Instead, I must live by another, higher standard - by the Oath and the Measure. It is written in the Measure that there is honor in aiding those who cry out in need. And, by the Oath, I swore that my honor is my life. I will fulfill my quest, Matya." A faint light glimmered in his pale eyes. "Or die trying."

"And what reward will you get for performing this 'honorable' task?" Matya asked with a scowl.

"My honor is reward enough."

Matya sniffed. "This 'Oath and Measure' hardly sounds practical. It's rather difficult to eat one's honor when one gets hungry." She paused a moment. Her real interest was in the doll, but she couldn't think of how to ask about it without rousing the knight's suspicion. Maybe, if she could

keep him talking about himself, he'd tell her what she wanted to know. "And how is it you came to hear this plea for help, Knight? How do you know it's not simply a trick to lure you into a den of robbers?"

"I know." The crooked smile touched Trevarre's lips once again. "By this, I know." He slipped the porcelain doll from the leather pouch.

Matya was thrilled. She had not thought to get another glimpse so easily. Seeing it closely now, Matya realized the doll was even more beautiful than she had thought. She clasped her hands behind her back so she would not be tempted to reach out and touch its smooth surface.

"Passing fair, would you not say?" Trevarre said softly. Matya could only nod. "It is a most remarkable thing. I came upon it some days ago, by the banks of a stream that flows from the mountains. It lay in a small boat woven of rushes, caught in a snag by the shore." He slipped the figurine back into its pouch. "By it, I learned of a maiden who lives in a village called Tambor. She is in dire need. The code of the Measure is most clear on this. I must go to her."

Matya raised an eyebrow. It was a peculiar tale. She guessed Trevarre had stolen the doll and simply was making up the story. After all, he looked more like a thief than a knight, despite his armor. If so, stolen goods were fair game. Ask any trader.

"How is it you learned of this maiden?" she asked, hoping to trip him in his lie. "Was there a message in the boat?"

"No," the knight replied, "not as you mean, at least. You see, the doll is magical. Each night, when Solinari rises, the doll speaks with the maiden's voice. That is how I heard her call for help."

Matya laughed aloud, slapping her knee. "A wondrous tale indeed, Trevarre, but I believe you have taken up the wrong vocation. You should be a storyteller, not a knight."

Trevarre's expression became grave, serious. "You must know, Matya, that on his life a Knight of Solamnia cannot speak falsehood. I can understand why you do not trust in magic. We knights do not think much of sorcerous powers either. But wait until Solinari is on the rise. Perhaps you will change your mind."

Matya studied the knight attentively. His was not exactly a trustworthy face, despite his pretty voice. Still, there was something about the intentness of his pale eyes.

"Perhaps I won't," she said.

It was nearly midnight. The knight had slipped into a doze, less fitfully this time, and Matya rummaged through a wooden box in the back of her wagon. The light of a single candle illuminated scrolls and parchments. Finally, she found what she was searching for - a bundle of yellowed sheets of vellum.

Matya untied the bundle's silken ribbon and unrolled the sheets, spreading them out on the lid of the box. They

were maps, rendered in fading ink. A kender had given them to Matya some years ago in exchange for a silver knife. It had proved to be one of the few unprofitable trades Matya had ever made. She soon had learned that the maps contained many mistakes. They showed land where there were seas, mountains where there were deserts, and populous cities in which no one lived. She should have known better than to trust a kender. They were little tricksters, all of them. Still, poor as the maps were, they were the only maps she had, and she was curious about something.

She shuffled through the maps until she found one that had SOLAMNIA written on the top. The mountains were missing, and the map showed Caergoth to be an inland city, while Matya knew very well that it stood on the coast. Some features had been added to the map in a bold, scrawling hand, and Matya suspected these were the kender's own additions. Among other things, the kender's scrawls showed the highways leading to Garnet and Caergoth, and the crossroads as well.

"Now where is it?" Matya muttered, running a finger over the yellowed, cracking vellum. "It has to be here." Then she found what she sought. Written in small, faded letters was the word TAMBOR. By the markings on the map, the village of Tambor was no more than ten miles north and east of the crossroads. "But that would put it in the foothills of the mountains, though this map shows southern Solamnia to be nothing but plains," she added in disgust.

The kender had written something beside the spot marked TAMBOR. She had to squint to make out the scrawling words. They read, DEESTROYD IN KATAKLISM. Matya mumbled an oath under her breath.

If this was true, then the village the knight sought had been destroyed more than fifty years ago. So much for his plea for help! A liar, as she'd suspected. She didn't know why that hurt her.

Trevarre called out. Matya hastily put away the maps. She found the knight still sitting by the wagon wheel. The porcelain doll stood on the ground before him.

"It is almost time," he said, nodding toward the west. A pearly glow had touched the distant horizon. Solinari, the largest of Krynn's three moons, soon would rise.

Matya sat on a fallen log near the knight, eyes on the doll. While she did not believe Trevarre's story, she was curious to see what he would do when the doll failed to speak.

"Wait," Trevarre said softly. "Just wait."

Matya sighed, resting her chin on a hand, and waited. This was rapidly growing tedious. Finally, a thin, silvery sliver of Solinari lifted above the far-off horizon.

The doll began to sing.

Matya stared at the porcelain statuette in shock. The maiden's lips moved. A sweet, wordless song drifted upon the night air. There was no doubt but that the song came from the doll.

Matya shot a look at Trevarre. The knight's pale eyes were triumphant. The song continued, a sad melody that

tugged at Matya's heart. Finally the sweet music ended, and the doll spoke.

"Please, come to me, whoever finds me," it said, its voice cool and lilting but filled with sorrow as well. "I beg you. Come to the village of Tambor. I need help desperately. Please"

Solinari lifted full above the horizon, and the doll fell silent. Matya's eyes glimmered as she stared at it calculatingly.

"An enchanted doll!" she said to herself. "Why, it is worth a king's ransom."

"Do you believe my tale now?" Trevarre asked, a slight smile beneath his mousy moustache.

Matya nodded. "I believe you." She was glad to believe in him, too, but she didn't tell him that.

"I have something to ask of you," the knight said. "It appears my legs are set on betraying me. I cannot journey to Tambor on foot, but your wagon could carry me. Take me there, Matya. Take me to Tambor, please."

"And what would I gain for my trouble?" Matya asked coolly.

Trevarre reached inside the collar of his woolen cloak and undid the clasp. He held it out to her. "Will this do?" The clasp was fashioned of finely wrought silver, inlaid with pearl and lapis lazuli. Matya appraised it with a practiced eye. The jewel obviously was quite valuable. By any measure, the trade would be a good one, but it was not enough.

"Give me the doll as well," Matya said crisply, "then I will take you to Tambor."

Trevarre gazed at her for a long moment, but Matya did not so much as blink. Finally he laughed. "You drive a hard bargain, I see. It appears I have little choice but to accept. Very well, I will give you the doll - but only after we reach Tambor."

"Agreed," Matya said, her eyes flashing. She took the jeweled clasp from his outstretched hand and spirited it away to a pocket in her dress. I will keep this as assurance." She knew that Trevarre likely would be distressed when he found Tambor in ruins and his quest proved a folly. However, if he was a man of honor, he would keep his word. The doll would be Matya's. I'll take you to Tambor, Knight."

She spat in her hand and held it out. Trevarre looked at her in puzzlement for a moment, then nodded solemnly and did the same. They shook hands firmly. The bargain had been struck.

Matya and the knight set out with the dawn, traveling east down the road to Garnet. The mountains loomed high before them, like great gray giants. Their summits were already dusted with a coating of snow, bespeaking the winter that soon would blanket the rest of Solamnia.

Matya studied the kender's map as Rabbit plodded on, pulling the wagon along the jouncing road. The map was terribly faded and crumbled a bit each time she touched it,

but Matya could make out the line of a faint road leading south from the place marked Tambor. If the kender had drawn in the highway to Garnet at all accurately, they ought to reach the road to Tambor sometime around midmorning.

"Two giants point the way," Trevarre said. Matya looked questioningly at the knight, who was propped up on the bench beside her. "That was the sign the doll spoke of that would guide me to the village," he explained. "I imagine it means two mountains, or some such thing."

"You were going to try to find the village with directions like that?" Matya asked.

Trevarre only shrugged.

"Humph!" Matya snorted. "If this maiden of yours was going to all this trouble to get rescued, she might have given you dearer instructions."

Before Trevarre could reply, one of the wheels hit a deep rut, and he winced as the wagon lurched roughly. He was in better shape today than he'd been the night before, but his face was still pale, and the roughness of the wagon's ride obviously was causing him pain. He did not complain, however.

Midmorning passed and noon approached, and still Matya saw no sign of a road leading north from the highway. Finally she pulled on the reins, and Rabbit came to a halt. "It's time for a rest," she said.

She fastened a feedbag over Rabbit's muzzle, then found food for herself and Trevarre. A jumble of massive, oddly shaped granite boulders, warmed by the sun, lay next to the road. The two sat on these as they ate a meal of cheese, bread, and dried fruit. When they had finished, Matya checked Trevarre's bandages. "Your hands are gentle, though your tongue is sharp," said the knight, smiling at her. Matya blushed, but ignored him and nodded in satisfaction. The knight's wounds had closed, and none of them showed signs of festering.

"We had best be on our way," she said, eyeing the sun, which now shone directly overhead. She helped Trevarre stand, offered him her shoulder to lean on. He smelled of oiled steel and leather, not an unpleasant scent, she thought, as the two started making their way back to the wagon. Suddenly Matya froze.

"What is it?" Trevarre asked, looking quickly about in alarm. "Goblins?"

"No," Matya whispered. "No, it's a face."

She pointed to the boulder Trevarre had been sitting on. They had not noticed it earlier, because the shadows had obscured it, but with the sun directly overhead, Matya now saw it as plain as day. The boulder was carved in the face of a man.

The carving was weathered and cracked - it must have been ancient - but Matya still could make out the proud, kingly features, the aquiline nose, and deep, moss-filled eyes. Looking around, she saw that other overgrown boulders were parts of a man - one shaped like a hand, another like a shoulder, still another like a boot.

"It is a statue," Trevarre said in amazement, "a gigantic statue. It must have fallen over years ago, by the looks of it,

probably in the Cataclysm."

"Wait, there are two of them," Matya said, pointing to another broken boulder, which was carved in the form of a regal-looking woman.

"The two giants," Trevarre said. "It seems the maiden's directions were not so inadequate after all."

The road beyond the ruined statues was all but hidden by a tangle of willows and brambles. Matya doubted that anyone had come this way in a long time. The way was passable but overgrown and rutted. Trevarre winced each time the wagon's wheel hit a bump, but he said nothing.

"He has courage, if not sense," Matya told herself. She glanced at him, and for a brief moment her hard expression softened. She found herself wondering just how old Trevarre was. He was not a young man, she suspected, despite his foolhardiness.

The narrow road wound across the rolling foothills, over grassy knolls and through groves of aspen and fir. In places the trail was so faint Matya could hardly see it, and several times it ended abruptly, only to be found continuing a hundred paces to the left or right. It was almost as if the land itself had shifted beneath the road, breaking it into pieces.

As the hills slipped away to either side, Matya began to feel a growing sense of unease. The land around them was strangely silent. There are no birds here, she realized with a start, here where the meadows should have been filled with birds.

It was late in the afternoon, and the amber sunlight had grown heavy and dull, when the wagon crested a low ridge. Below lay a small, grassy dell, and in its center stood -

"Tambor," Trevarre said triumphantly.

Matya shook her head in astonishment. She had expected to see a pile of ruins in the dell, the burned-out husks of a few cottages perhaps, and some crumbling stone walls. Instead she saw a prosperous village. More than a score of well-tended cottages lined a main street, busy with people, horses, chickens, and dogs. Smoke rose from a low stone building - probably a smithy - and a mill's waterwheel turned slowly in a small stream.

"You have kept your end of the bargain, Matya," Trevarre said solemnly. "Now it is my turn." He handed her the leather pouch that contained the doll. Matya gripped the purse with numb hands.

The kender had been wrong, she told herself, that was all. Tambor had NOT been destroyed in the Cataclysm. Matya didn't know why she was surprised. Still, there was something about this that did not seem entirely right.

"What is such a prosperous village doing at the end of such an overgrown road?" she asked herself, but she had no answer. Not that it mattered. She had the doll now. That was all she cared about.

"I can walk the rest of the way," Trevarre said, starting to climb down from the wagon, but Matya stayed him with

a hand on his arm.

"I know it's hard, but try not to be a fool, Knight. I'll take you into the village. I'll need to stay here anyway. It's growing late. I'll set out again in the morning."

Matya guided the wagon to the banks of the stream. A small stone bridge arched over the clear, flowing water. A young woman stood on the far side of the stream. She was clad in a gown of flowing white, and her hair was as dark as jet. She was beautiful, as beautiful as the porcelain doll.

"My knight, you have come to me!" the woman cried out. Her voice was the doll's sweet voice. Matya thought this odd, disconcerting, but it didn't bother Trevarre. His pale eyes shining, he slipped from the wagon and limped across the stone bridge, ignoring the pain of his injury. He knelt before the young woman and kissed her fine-boned hand.

Matya scowled. He never kissed my hand, she thought sourly.

"I am Ciri," said the sweet voice. "Welcome, Sir Knight. My deliverance is at hand."

Ciri led Trevarre and Matya around the edge of the village. "Quickly," she said softly. "The fewer the folk who see us, the better."

Matya wondered why, but it wasn't HER place to ask. Trevarre tried to walk faster, but it was clear his wounded leg was causing him great pain. Ciri laid a fine hand on his elbow, and the grimace eased from the knight's face. He walked more easily with her hand on his arm. Matya noticed that Trevarre seemed to have taken more than a passing interest in Ciri's lovely face. "I'll warrant he's more interested in her looks than his honor," she muttered, suddenly annoyed for no particular reason.

As they walked, Matya looked at the village in the ruddy light of the setting sun. Nothing appeared out of order, but something was not right. You're tired, Matya, that's all, she told herself. Tomorrow you'll ride into Garnet and leave this knight and his foolishness behind. That thought should have made her feel better, but it didn't.

Ciri led them to a small, thatch-roofed cottage standing slightly apart from the others. She looked about to make certain no one was watching, then opened the door, gesturing for Trevarre and Matya to enter.

The cottage was warm and neatly kept. A fire burned on the fieldstone hearth, and the wooden floor had been scrubbed clean. Ciri bade them sit down. She filled a wooden cup with crimson wine for each of them. Matya raised the cup of wine, then set it down without drinking it. It had a funny smell to it. Trevarre, however, drank deeply, thanking the woman for her hospitality - all politeness, as his Measure called for, Matya supposed with a frown.

"And now, my lady, you must tell me why you have called to me," Trevarre said. Ciri smiled at him, a sweet, sorrowful smile. "And I hope your reason is a good one," Matya noted, crossing her arms. "It was no mean feat

getting this knight here, I'll tell you"

Ciri turned her gaze toward Matya for a moment, and suddenly her smile was neither sweet nor sorrowful. "Tor that, I do thank you, my good woman," Ciri said. Matya could not mistake the coldness in Ciri's otherwise lovely voice. It was clear that Matya's presence had not been expected; neither was it wanted.

Ciri's gaze turned soft again as she regarded the knight. Matya scowled, but she said nothing. If the young woman feared competition for the knight's attention, then she was as much a fool as Trevarre. There was little room in a bargain driver's life for love. Such fancies dulled the sharp edge Matya depended on for her livelihood. Besides, there was nothing about the knight she liked, even if his pale eyes were strangely attractive and his voice DID remind her of a trumpet's call.

The gloom of twilight descended outside the cottage's window. Ciri began her tale. "I fear the fate that lies before me is dark, my knight. A terrible wizard - my uncle - means to force me to marry him, against all propriety and my own wishes. He is a mage of great power, feared by all the folk of Tambor, and even beyond. He is away now, gathering components for his magecraft, but when he returns, he will compel me to wed. You have arrived none too soon, my knight."

"Well, why don't you simply run away?" Matya asked. Ciri gave her another chill look. "I fear it is not so simple. You see, my uncle dabbles in the BLACK ARTS, heedless of the peril to his soul. He has cast an enchantment upon me. I am unable to leave the village. The banks of the stream are as far as I may tread. Should I take but one step beyond, I would perish."

"But what of your father?" Trevarre asked. "Will he not protect you from your barbarous uncle?"

Ciri shook her head sadly. "My father and mother both died many years ago. There is no one here to protect me. That was why I wove the boat of rushes and sent the doll down the waters of the stream, hoping someone might find it and hear my plea"

"How does the doll speak with your voice?" Matya asked, not caring if she aroused more of Ciri's displeasure.

"It was but the echo of my voice," Ciri explained, her eyes on the knight. "The doll is a magical thing. My rather brought it all the way from Palanthas for me when I was a child. If you speak to it, or sing it a song, it will echo your words back to you with the rising moon, exactly as you spoke them."

Matya's eyes glittered brightly. This was better and better. The doll would be almost beyond price. ALMOST, that is. Matya always had a price.

"And how can I break this grievous enchantment?" Trevarre asked earnestly. He was good at this knightly business, Matya had to admit, despite his sorry looks. Ciri stood and walked to the window, gazed through it sadly a moment, then turned to the knight.

"There, in the center of the village, stands a shrine. In that shrine is an altar carved of marble. The altar is the focus of

all my uncle's dark powers. I know, for I have seen him work his wicked spells there. From it, he draws his strength. But the magic of the doll has the power to counter it. If one who is strong of heart sets the doll upon the altar of his own free will, the enchantment will be broken."

"And what will happen to the doll?" Matya asked suspiciously.

"Its magic will be dissipated," Ciri answered. "It will become an ordinary doll and nothing more."

She walked to Trevarre then, and he rose to meet her. She laid a hand gently upon his breastplate. Matya could see the pulse beating rapidly in the man's throat. It was clear Trevarre was not immune to Ciri's bewitching beauty. Another weakness of knights, Matya thought acidly. Not that she cared one way or the other, she reminded herself.

"Will you do this task for me, my knight?" Ciri pleaded. "I cannot break the enchantment with my own hand, and there is none in the village brave enough to defy my uncle. Will you help me?"

Trevarre sighed and glanced at Matya. "I would, with all my heart, that I could do this thing, my lady, but I fear I cannot. You see, I have given Matya the doll in payment for bringing me to this place. On my honor, I cannot ask her for it back"

Ciri's face twitched. She shot Matya a look so filled with malice that Matya shivered. Then, aware of the knight's eyes on her, Ciri's sweet, sorrowful look had returned to her lovely face. She bowed her head.

"Then I am doomed, my knight."

"No," he said, with a fierce smile. "No, I cannot think that. I am no sorcerer, but I expect there is another - albeit cruder - way to free you." His hand moved to the hilt of the sword at his hip. "I will stand before your uncle when he returns, and I will demand a duel. The enchantment will be broken when your uncle lies dead at my feet. Won't that solve your problem, my lady?"

Ciri sighed. "My knight, you are indeed brave," she murmured. "So very brave."

Matya noticed, however, that Ciri did not answer Trevarre's question.

Matya awoke in the gray light before dawn. Ciri had provided her a bed. Trevarre slept soundly on a bed of furs before the cottage's hearth. Matya looked around the cottage, but Ciri was nowhere to be seen.

Just as well, Matya thought. This way she would not have to bid the strange young woman good-bye.

Matya knelt beside the sleeping knight before she left. His careworn face was peaceful in slumber, his brow untroubled.

"I hope you find your honor truly reward enough, Knight," she whispered softly. She hesitated a moment, then reached out a hand, as if to smooth his mouse-brown hair over the bandage on his head. He stirred, and she pulled her hand back. Quietly, Matya slipped from the cottage.

"Trevarre has what he wants," she reminded herself, "and so do I."

The ruddy orb of the sun crested the dim purple mountains to the east as Matya made her way through the village. A few folk already were up at this hour, but they paid her no heed as they went about their business. Once again, Matya had the feeling there was something peculiar about this village, but she could not quite fathom what it was. She hurried on toward her wagon and the restless Rabbit.

Then it struck her.

"The shadows are all wrong!" she said aloud.

Her own shadow stretched long before her in the low morning sunlight, but hers was the only shadow that looked like it was supposed to look. The shadow cast by a two-story cottage to her left was short and lumpy - much shorter than she would have expected for a building so high. She looked all around the village and saw more examples of the same. Nowhere did the outline of a shadow match that of the object that cast it. Even more disturbing were the villagers themselves. None of them cast shadows at all!

Her sense of unease growing, Matya gathered up her skirts and hurried onto the stone bridge. She suddenly wanted to be away from this troubling place. She was nearly across the bridge when something - she was unsure exactly what - compelled her to cast one last glance over her shoulder. Abruptly she froze, clapping a hand over her mouth to stifle a cry.

The village had changed.

Well-tended cottages were nothing more than broken, burned stone foundations. The smithy was a pile of rubble, and there was no trace of the mill except for the rotted remains of the waterwheel, slumped by the bank of the stream, looking like the twisted web of some enormous spider. There were no people, no horses, no dogs, no chickens. The dell was bare. The dark ground was hard and cracked, as if it had been baked in a furnace.

Matya's heart lurched. She ran a few, hesitant steps back across the bridge, toward the village, and she gasped again. Tambor looked as it had before, the villagers going about their business. Blue smoke rose from a score of stone chimneys.

Perhaps I imagined it, she thought, but she knew that wasn't true. Slowly, she turned her back to the village once more and walked across the bridge. She looked out of the corner of her eye and again saw the jumbled ruins and blackened earth behind her. Slowly, she began to understand.

Tambor HAD been destroyed in the Cataclysm. The people, the bustling village, were images of what had been long ago. It was all illusion. Except the illusion was imperfect, Matya realized. It appeared only when she traveled TOWARD the village, not AWAY from it. But how did the illusion come to exist in the first place?

Resolutely, Matya walked back across the bridge. She found that, if she concentrated, the illusion of the bustling village would waver and grow transparent before her eyes,

and she could see the blackened ruins beneath. She walked to the center of the village, toward the single standing stone of pitted black basalt. This was the shrine of which Ciri had spoken. At the base of the standing stone was an altar, but it was not hewn of marble, as Ciri had claimed. The altar was built of human skulls, cemented together with mud. They grinned at Matya, staring at her with their dark, hollow eyes.

"Did you really think I would allow you to leave with the doll?" Ciri spoke behind her in a voice cool and sweet.

Startled, Matya turned around. She half expected to see that Ciri had changed like the rest of the village. The woman was as lovely as ever, but there was a hard, deadly light in her sapphire-blue eyes.

Ciri gazed at Matya, then understanding flickered across her face. "Ah, you see the village for what it is, don't you?"

Matya nodded silently, unable to speak.

Ciri shrugged. "It is just as well. It makes things easier. I'm glad you know, in fact."

"What do you want from me?" Matya asked.

"To strike a bargain with you, Matya. Isn't that what you like to do above all things?"

Matya's eyes narrowed, but she said nothing.

"You have something I want very much," Ciri said softly.

"The doll," Matya said, eyeing the woman.

"You see, Matya, despite the illusions I have used to mask the appearance of the village, much of what I told you last night was the truth. An enchantment does prevent me from leaving the village, and only the doll can break it."

"How is it you came to be here in the first place?" Matya asked.

"I have always been here," Ciri said in her crystalline voice. "I am old, Matya, far older than you. You see me now as I was the day the Cataclysm struck the face of Krynn, more than half a century ago."

Matya stared at her in shock and disbelief, but Ciri did not pause.

"By my magic, I saw the coming of the Cataclysm. I prepared an enchantment to protect myself from it." A distant look touched her cold eyes, and her smile grew as sharp and cruel as a knife. "Oh, the others begged at my door for me to protect them as well. The same wretches who had mocked my magic before wanted me to save them, but I turned my back on them. I wove my magic about myself, and I watched all of them perish in agony as the rain of fire began." Ciri's face was exultant, her fine hands clenched into fists.

Matya watched her with calculating eyes. "Something went wrong, didn't it?"

"Yes," Ciri hissed angrily. "Yes, something went wrong!" She paused, recovered her composure. "I could not have foreseen it. The power of the Cataclysm twisted my magic. The enchantment protected me, as I commanded, but it also cursed me to remain here alone in this ruined town, not aging, not changing, and never able to leave."

Matya shuddered. Despite herself, she could not help but pity this evil woman.

"I want to be free of this place - I WILL be free of this place," Ciri said, "and for that I need the doll."

Matya was no longer afraid. Magic was Ciri's element, but bargaining was Matya's own. "And what would you give me in exchange for the doll?" she asked. "It is worth a lot to me."

"I made that one, and once I am free I will have the power to make more," Ciri replied. "I will fashion you a dozen such dolls, Matya. No one in Ansalon will be wealthier than you. All you have to do is give the doll to Trevarre. HE wants more than anything to rescue me, to preserve his precious HONOR". She said this last word with a sneer. "He will place the doll upon the altar, and I will be free. And so will you. I swear it, by Nuitari."

"And what will happen to Trevarre?" Matya asked, as if she didn't much care.

Ciri shrugged. "What does it matter? You and I will have what we want."

"I'm curious, that's all," Matya said, shrugging.

"You'll find out anyway, I suppose," Ciri replied. "He will take my place in the enchantment. He will be imprisoned within Tambor even as I am now. He will not suffer, however. I will see to it that HIS soul is destroyed. The empty husk of his body will dwell here until the end of all days." Ciri arched her eyebrow. "Are you satisfied?"

Matya nodded, her expression unchanging. "I'll need to think this bargain over."

"Very well," Ciri said, annoyed, "but be swift about it. I grow tired of waiting. Oh, and if you are thinking of warning the knight, go ahead. He won't believe you." The enchantress turned and stalked away, vanishing among the ruins of the village.

Matya retrieved the leather pouch with the doll from its hiding place in her wagon and tied it to her belt. She sat for a time on the wagon's bench, alone with her thoughts, then finally made her way back to Ciri's cottage. Like all the others, this building was in ruins. The roof was gone, and two of the walls had fallen into a jumble of broken stone.

Trevarre had risen and was in the process of adjusting the straps of his ornate armor. He looked up in surprise.

"Matya. I did not hear you open the door."

Matya bit her tongue to keep from telling him there WAS no door.

"Have you seen Ciri this morning?" he asked. He ran a hand through his lank brown hair.

"I saw her out in the village," Matya said, afraid to say more.

"Is something wrong, Matya?" Trevarre asked her, frowning.

Matya's hand crept to the leather purse. She could have everything she had ever wanted, if she just gave Trevarre the doll. He would take it. She knew he would. As unlikely

as Trevarre looked on the outside, the heart that beat in his chest was a knight's, true and pure. He would break the enchantment, and Ciri would be free. She had sworn her oath by Nuitari - a vow no sorcerer could break. Matya would be rich beyond her dreams. It would be the greatest bargain Matya had ever struck.

Her hand reached into the pouch, brushing the smooth porcelain. "I wanted to tell you . . ." She swallowed and started over. "I just wanted to tell you, Trevarre . . ."

"Go on," he said in his resonant voice, his pale eyes regarding her seriously.

Matya saw kindness in his gaze, and, for one brief moment, she almost imagined she saw something more - admiration, affection.

Matya sighed. She could not do it. How could she live with herself, knowing it was she who had silenced Trevarre's noble voice forever? She could strike a bargain for anything - anything but another's life. Belek had been right. There were some bargains that weren't worth making.

"There IS something wrong," Matya blurted. "Something terribly wrong." She told Trevarre of her conversation with Ciri. "You see, we must leave - now!"

The knight shook his head.

"She is evil!" Matya protested.

"I cannot believe it, Matya."

"What?" she said in shock. Although Ciri had warned her, Matya still was shocked. She had given up the greatest bargain of her life, and now he claimed that he didn't believe her? "But what reason would I have to lie to you, Trevarre? Has her loveliness made a slave of you already?" Her voice was bitter.

He held up a hand. "I did not say that I do not believe you, Matya. I said that I cannot. I cannot believe evil of another without proof." He sighed and paced about the ruined cottage, which to his eyes still looked warm and hospitable. "How can I explain it to you, Matya? It has to do with the Measure I swore to uphold. Ciri sent out a plea for help, and I have answered it. Yes, she is lovely, but that is hardly the reason I cannot heed your warnings, Matya. She has shown me nothing but courtesy. To leave without aiding her would be a grave dishonor. And you know - "

"Yes, I know," Matya said harshly. " 'Your honor is your life.' But what if she tried to harm you?"

"That would be different. Then I would know she is evil. But she has not. Nothing has changed. I will help her break the enchantment that keeps her here in this village if it is at all in my power to do so."

Trevarre fastened his sword belt about his waist and walked to the door of the ruined cottage. Before he stepped outside, he laid a gentle hand upon Matya's arm. "I doubt that it matters to you," he said hesitantly in his clear voice, "but, to my eyes, you are every bit as lovely."

Before Matya could so much as open her mouth in surprise, Trevarre was gone.

Matya stood in silence for a long moment, then muttered angrily under her breath, "The Solamnic Knights aren't fools. They're idiots!" She stamped out of the open doorway

after Trevarre.

Ciri was waiting for her.

"Do you have an answer for me, Matya?" Ciri asked in her lilting voice.

Trevarre stood before the enchantress, the wind blowing his cloak out behind him. He would not raise a hand against her, Matya knew. What happened next was going to have to be up to her.

"The answer is no, Ciri," Matya said calmly. "I won't accept your bargain."

Ciri's eyes flashed, and the wind caught her dark hair, flinging it wildly about her head. Anger touched her lovely face. Trevarre, startled, fell back before her fury.

"That is a foolish decision, Matya," Ciri said, all pretext of sweetness gone from her voice. "I will find another who will break the enchantment for me. I'll have the doll back! You both will die!"

The enchantress spread her arms wide, and the wind whipped about. Dry dust stung Matya's face. Trevarre looked around, shock on his face. The illusion had vanished. The evil-looking ruins were laid bare and undisguised.

Ciri spoke several strange, guttural words. Instantly the swirling wind was filled with dead tree limbs and dry, brown leaves. As Matya watched, the broken branches and leaves began to clump together, growing denser, taking shape.

"Trevarre, look out!" Matya cried out in terror.

The dead, brittle branches and dumps of rotting leaves had taken the shape of a man. The tree creature was huge, towering over the knight. It reached out a bark-covered arm that ended in splintery claws. Its gigantic maw displayed row upon row of jagged, thorny teeth.

Trevarre drew his sword, barely in time to block the creature's swing. Branches and splinters flew in all directions, but the knight stumbled beneath the blow. His face blanched with pain; his wounded leg buckled beneath him. He was too weak to fight such a monster, Matya realized. One more blow and he would fall. Ciri watched the battle with a look of cruel pleasure on her face. The tree monster roared again, drawing back its arm for another bone-crushing blow.

Matya drew the doll from the leather pouch and stared at it. She hesitated for a moment, but the sight of Trevarre - standing before the monster, his face grim and unafraid - steeled her resolve. Regretfully, she bade her dreams of wealth farewell. . . and hurled the doll at the altar.

Too late Ciri saw Matya's intent. The enchantress shrieked in rage and reached out to catch the doll. Her fingers closed on thin air.

The figurine struck the altar and shattered into a thousand pale shards - dirty, broken bones. The wind died as suddenly as it had started. The tree monster shuddered and collapsed into a pile of inanimate wood and leaves. Trevarre stumbled backward, leaning on his sword to keep from falling. His face was ashen, his breathing hard.

"What have you done?" Ciri shrieked, her sapphire-blue

eyes wide with astonishment and horror.

"I've given you what you wanted," Matya cried.

"You're free now, Ciri. Just let Trevarre go. That's all I ask."

Ciri shook her head, but her lips moved wordlessly now. She took a few steps toward Matya, each one slower than the last. Her movements had become strangely halting, as if she were walking through water, not air. The enchantress reached out a hand, but whether the gesture was one of fury or supplication, Matya did not know. Suddenly, Ciri shuddered and stood motionless. For a moment, the figure of the enchantress stood there among the ruins, as pale and perfect as a porcelain doll. Her eyes glimmered like clear, soulless gems.

Then, even as Matya watched, a fine crack traced its way across the smooth surface of Ciri's lovely face. More cracks spread from it, snaking their way across Ciri's cheeks, her throat, her arms. As if she had been fashioned of porcelain herself, Ciri crumbled into a mound of countless fragments, a heap of yellowed bones - all that was left of the enchantress.

The doves were singing their evening song when the gaudily painted wagon bounced past the fallen remains of the gigantic statues and turned eastward down the road, heading toward the town of Garnet. Matya and Trevarre had traveled in silence most of the way from the ruined village of Tambor. The knight, still recovering from his wounds, had slept the better part of the day. Matya was content to occupy herself with her thoughts.

"You gave up your dreams to help me, didn't you, Matya?" Trevarre asked.

Matya turned her head to see that the knight was awake, stroking his mousy brown moustache thoughtfully. "And what reward do you have to show for it?"

"Why, I have this," Matya said, gesturing to the jeweled clasp she had pinned to her collar. "Besides, I can always find new dreams. And I am certainly not ready to give up bargaining. I'll make my fortune yet, you'll see."

Trevarre laughed, a sound like music. "I have no doubt of that"

They were silent for a time, but then Matya spoke softly. "You would do the same again, wouldn't you, if you heard a call for help?"

Trevarre shrugged. "The Measure is not something I can follow only when it suits me. It is my life, Matya, for good or ill. It is what I am."

Matya nodded, as if this confirmed something for her. "The tales are right then. The Knights of Solamnia ARE little better than fools." She smiled mischievously. "But there's one more bargain that must be struck."

"Which is?" Trevarre asked, raising an eyebrow.

"What are you going to give me in return for taking you to Garnet?" Matya asked slyly.

"I'll give you five gold pieces," Trevarre said flatly.

"I'll not take less than fifty!" Matya replied, indignant.
"Fifty? Why, that's highway robbery," Trevarre growled.

"All right," Matya said briskly. "I'm in a kindly mood, so I'll make it twenty, but not one copper less."

Trevarre stroked his moustache thoughtfully. "Very well. I will accept your offer, Matya, but on one condition."

"Which is?" Matya asked, skeptical.

A smile touched Trevarre's lips. "You must allow me this." He took Matya's hand, brought it to his lips, and kissed it.

The bargain had been struck.

SEEKERS

TODD FAHNESTOCK

Gylar Radilan, of Lader's Knoll, set his mother's hand back onto her chest, over the rumpled blanket. It was done then. Gylar wasn't sure whether to be relieved or to crumple into the corner and cry. Finally, though, it was done. Stepping back, he fell into the chair he'd put by her bed, the chair he'd sat upon all night while holding her hand.

His head bowed for a moment as he thought about the past few days. The Silent Death had swept through the entire village, killing everyone. It had been impossible to detect its coming. There were no early symptoms. One minute, people were laughing and playing - like Lutha, the girl he had known - and the next, they were in bed, complaining weakly of the icy cold they felt, but burning to the touch. Their skin darkened to a ghastly purple as they coughed up thicker and thicker phlegm, and in a few hours their bodies locked up as with rigor mortis.

Poor Lutha. Gylar swallowed and sniffed back tears. She'd been the first one, the one who had brought about the downfall of the village. Gylar could remember going with her into the new marsh, the marsh that hadn't been there before the world shook. People had told their children repeatedly not to go in. They said it had all sorts of evils in it, but that had never stopped Lutha. She'd never listened to her parents much, and once she got something into her head, there was no balking her. She'd had to know about their tree, his and her tree.

Now she was dead. Now everyone was dead. Everyone, of course, except Gylar. For some reason, he hadn't been affected, or at least not yet. His parents had seemed to be immune as well, until the day they collapsed in their beds, shivering.

Gylar rose and crossed the room. He looked out the window to the new day that was shining its light across the hazy horizon and sifting down over the trees skirting the new marsh. He clenched his teeth as a tear finally fell from his eye. If it hadn't been for the marsh, none of this would have happened! Lutha never would have brought the evil back with her, and everyone would be okay. But, no, the gods had thrown the fiery mountain. They'd cracked the earth, and the warm water had come up from below, and

with it whatever had killed the town.

Gylar banged his small hand on the windowsill. Why did they do it? The villagers all had been good people. Paladine had been their patron; Gylar's mother had been meticulously devoted to her god, teaching Gylar to be the same. She had loved Paladine, more than anyone in the village. Even after the Cataclysm, when everyone else turned from the gods in scorn and hatred, Gylar's mother continued her evening prayers with increasing earnestness. What did she, of all people, do to deserve such punishment? What did any of them do to deserve it? Was everyone on Krynn going to die, then? Was that it?

Gylar was young, but he wasn't stupid. He'd heard his parents talking about all the other awful things now happening to people who'd survived the tremors and floods. Didn't the gods care about mortals anymore?

Caught up in a slam of emotions, Gylar turned and ran from the house. He ran to the edge of the new bog and yelled up at the sky in his rage.

"Why? If you hate us so much, why'd you even make us in the first place?"

Gylar collapsed to his knees with a sob. Why? It was the only thing he could really think of to ask. It all hinged on that. Why the Cataclysm? How could humans have been evil enough to deserve this? How could anyone?

For a long moment he just slumped there, as though some unseen chain were dragging at his neck, joining the one already pulling at his heart. Gylar sniffled a little and ran his forearm quickly across his nose.

Stumbling to his feet, he looked at the sky again. Clouds were rolling in to obscure the sun, threatening a storm. Gylar sighed. Although he had nowhere else to go, he didn't want to stay in this place of death. His eyes swept over Mount Phineous. The towering mountain still looked over-poweringly out of place, like a sentinel sent by the gods to watch over the low, hilly country. The top fourth of it was swept by clouds. Another result of the Cataclysm, the mountain seemed a counterpart of the new swamp. Brutal and imposing, powerful, the towering rock was the opposite of the silent, sneaky swamp of death.

His fatigue overcame his sadness and revulsion, at least for the moment. Slowly, he made his way back to the house, back to the dead house. Stopping in the doorway, Gylar turned around to look at the land that was growing cold with winter. It was likely going to snow today.

He turned and slammed the door shut behind him. It didn't matter. Nothing much mattered anymore. His limbs dragged at him heavily. Sleep, he thought, that's all. Sleep, then, when I wake up - if I wake up - I'll figure out what to do.

So, for the first time in three days, Gylar slept.

Eyes focused on his prey, Marakion stilled his breathing, though a haze of white drifted slowly from his mouth. The scruffy man before him leaned heavily against

the tree, huffing frosty air as he tried to recover from the run. Although exhausted, the man never once turned his fearful eyes from Marakion.

"A merry chase, my friend," Marakion said in a voice that was anything but merry. "Tell me what I wish to know. This will end."

The man stared in disbelief. Marakion was barely winded. The man gulped another breath and answered frantically, "I told you! I never heard of no 'Knight-killer Marauders!'"

Marakion hovered over the thief, his eyes black and impenetrable, his lip twitching, barely holding his rage in check. The bare blade of his sword glimmered dully.

"Knightsbane Marauders," he rumbled in a low voice. The scruffy man quivered under the smoldering anger. "You are a brigand, just like them. You must know of them. Tell me where they are."

"I told you!" The thief cringed against the tree. "I don't know!"

In brutal silence, Marakion let loose his pent up rage. One instant his sword, Glint, was at his side, and the next, the flat of it smashed into the man's neck. The thief was so surprised by the attack that he barely had time to blink. The strike sent him reeling. Two more clubbing strokes dropped him to the frosty earth, unconscious.

"Then you live," Marakion said, breathing a bit harder. Leaning down, he searched the body thoroughly for the insignia that gave his life burning purpose.

There was none to be found.

Furiously disappointed, he left the useless thug where he lay and headed for the road.

The town that had been his destination before the small band of ruffians had attacked him lay ahead. He had searched all of the towns and outlying areas east of here, only to come up empty-handed, forever empty-handed. But this desolate area showed promise. Marakion was sure the marauders were here. They had to be. During the last few days, he'd come across numerous wretches like the one he'd just felled. None of them belonged to the Knightsbane, but their presence might be a sign that he was getting close to their hideout.

It wasn't long before sparse trees gave way to a huge, rolling meadow. On its edge stood a squat, dirty little town. Marakion didn't even look twice at the ramshackle buildings, the muddy, unkempt road, the muck-choked stream. The sight of people living in such squalor was not unusual to him, not unusual at all. In fact, this place was better than some he'd seen.

The few people he saw as he followed the road to town gave him quick, furtive glances from beneath ragged, threadbare cowls. Marakion ignored them, made his way to the first tavern he could spot.

He didn't even read the name as he entered. It didn't matter to him where he was, and the names only depressed him - new names, cynically indicative of the time, such as "The Cataclysm's Hope," or old names, which the owners hadn't bothered to change. Those were even worse, sporting a cheerful concept of a world gone forever, their signs

dangling crookedly from broken chains or loose nails.

Marakion opened the door; it sagged on its hinges once freed of the doorjamb. He pushed it shut, blocking out the inner voice that continued to remind him how worthless life was if everything was like this.

Marakion turned and surveyed the room, walked forward to the bar that lined the far wall.

The innkeeper had smiled as Marakion had entered, but now blanched nervously at sight of the hunter's stony face, the dark, deliberate gaze.

"Uh, what can I do for you, stranger?"

"What do you have to eat this day, innkeep?"

"Fairly thick stew tonight. Mutton, if you've the wealth."

"Bread?"

"Sure, stranger, fairly fresh, if you've the wealth."

Marakion did not return the man's feeble attempts to be friendly. "A chunk of fresh bread and the stew." He tossed a few coins on the bar. "I'll be at that table over there."

The innkeeper scooped the coins off the counter in one movement. "I'm Griffort. You need anything, I'm the man to talk to. I don't suppose you'll be staying for the night. Got a couple of rooms open - "

"One room," Marakion interrupted, "for the night." He left a stark pause in the air and waited.

"Uh, um, another of those coins'll do it," the unnerved innkeeper stuttered.

Marakion paid the man and made his way to the table he'd indicated. As he sat down, he touched his money pouch. Not much left. A filthy inn, rotten food, a room likely crawling with rats, and costing him as much as a night in Palanthas - that was the type of world he was living in now.

The type of world he lived in now . . . Marakion put his fingers to his face and massaged his eyes gently. He couldn't make the memories go away. Even if he blocked the images, the essence of them still came to him. He couldn't seem to shut that out. It infected his every thought, his every action.

He relaxed, and his muscles began to unknot from the day's exercise. He could feel the pull of exhaustion on him. His fingers continued to massage closed eyelids, and the inn slowly drifted from his attention.

WHERE IS SHE, MARAKION? A familiar voice asked the question again inside his head.

"I don't know. Nearby somewhere. I don't know," he muttered.

THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH, MARAKION.

WHERE IS SHE? WHERE?

"I'm looking, trying to find her!"

NOT GOOD ENOUGH, MARAKION. THERE CAN BE NO EXCUSES. THEY'LL KILL HER, YOU KNOW. EVERY DAY YOU FAIL TO FIND THEM IS ANOTHER DAY THEY COULD KILL HER, OR USE HER.

"I know. I'll find them. If I have to rip apart this entire continent. I will."

YOU'D BETTER.

The accusing voice drifted away, to be replaced by the

vision that haunted his nights when he slept and his waking hours whenever he lost the concentration that kept it at bay.

FIRE. FIRE AND SMOKE. THE FLAMES LICKED THE TOP OF THE TOWER WINDOWS. THE SMOKE SPIRALED UP FROM EVERY PART OF THE CASTLE, BLACKENING THE SKY. DESPAIR WRENCHED AT MARAKION'S HEART. HE HAD RETURNED HOME IN TIME TO SEE IT FALL TO THE HANDS OF A PILLAGING GROUP OF BRIGANDS.

HIS HORSE SLIPPED ON THE COBBLESTONES THAT LED INTO THE CASTLE. HE YANKED BRUTALLY ON THE REINS, PULLING THE GALLOPING ANIMAL TO A STOP. THE HORSE ALMOST STUMBLED TO ITS KNEES. MARAKION LEAPT FROM ITS BACK AND RACED INTO THE CASTLE GARDENS. THEY WERE TRAMPLED, DESTROYED, BURNED.

"MARISSA!" HE SHOUTED ABOVE THE CRACKLING FLAMES AND TEARING, RENDING SOUNDS OF DESTRUCTION THAT CAME FROM WITHIN THE CASTLE PROPER. "TAGOR! BESS!" HE WAS ACROSS THE GARDEN IN A HEARTBEAT AND RAN THROUGH THE ENTRYWAY. THE GREAT DOUBLE DOORS LAY BROKEN AND SCATTERED ON THE FLOOR. THE HUGE FOYER WAS DESTROYED, A SHAMBLES, A MOCKERY OF ITS ORIGINAL GRANDEUR. ONE SCRUFFY-BEARDED RUFFIAN STOOD GUARD AT THE ENTRANCE.

THE MARAUDER CHARGED. HE HAD DETERMINATION AND PURPOSE IN HIS EYES; MARAKION HAD MURDER. RAGE FUELED MARAKION'S SWORD ARM, FEAR FOR HIS FAMILY INFUSING HIS BODY WITH UNCANNY SPEED. HE SMASHED THE INVADER'S SWORD ASIDE AND DELIVERED A VICIOUS RETURN STROKE AT THE HEAD.

THE MARAUDER DUCKED UNDER THE POWERFUL ATTACK AND SLIPPED A CUT AT MARAKION'S MIDRIF. MARAKION PARRIED, STEPPED INSIDE THE INVADER'S GUARD, AND RAN HIM THROUGH.

THE INVADER FELL AND GASPED AS HIS LIFE SEEPED AWAY. MARAKION PUT HIS FOOT ON THE MAN'S CHEST AND KICKED VIOLENTLY, FREEING HIS BLADE. THE DYING MAN'S SCREAMS ENDED BY THE TIME MARAKION REACHED THE TOP OF THE LEFT-HAND STAIRS.

"MARISSA!"

MARAKION RACED TO HIS YOUNGER SISTER'S ROOM, THE FIRST ROOM ON THE SECOND LEVEL. SHE WAS NOT THERE, BUT, AS WITH THE FOYER, HER ROOM WAS CAST INTO DISARRAY - BOOKS THROWN ON THE FLOOR, THE BED A SMOLDERING PILE OF BURNED SHEETS, STRAW, AND WOOD. NEXT TO THE BURNING MASS LAY A PIECE OF CLOTH. HE

RECOGNIZED IT, GRABBED IT: A SCRAP OF HER DRESS, THE LAVENDER DRESS SHE ALWAYS WORE FOR HIS HOMECOMING. A SPATTERING OF BLOOD TAINTED THE REMNANT.

"MARISSA!" HE YELLED IN IMPOTENT RAGE. HIS SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD SISTER, HIS BEST FRIEND, SO BRIGHT, SO ALIVE . . . MARAKION UTTERED A STRANGLERED CRY, CLUTCHED THE CLOTH IN HIS FIST. . . .

"Sir?"

Sir . . . ?

"Sir, are you asleep?"

Marakion started awake as the hand touched him. He was disoriented, thought he was still there, still back at his burned and devastated home. His hand reacted to the touch with the quickness of a snake. Snatching the thin wrist, he held it tightly. There was a gasp of pain. Marakion stared hard, trying to focus his eyes.

Marissa?

The eyes of the woman were wide, and she was frozen where she stood.

Marakion's harsh stare did not relent, but his grip lost some of its steel. No, not Marissa, a barmaid, just a barmaid.

"What?" he asked shortly, releasing the woman's wrist. Her hair was a dirty red, and as unkempt as the plain, rumpled brown dress she wore.

She appraised him coolly with shrewish eyes. "Griffort wants to know if you want pepper in your stew."

"Fine," Marakion said, "that's fine."

"I'll tell him," she said curtly, and left.

Marakion slowly withdrew something from his tunic. Unfolding it, he laid the piece of lavender cloth out in front of him. It was worn, faded; dark brown spots stained it.

Closing his eyes, Marakion pressed the cloth against his cheek.

"Marissa. . . ."

The following morning dawned cold and unpleasant. It was snowing. As Marakion shouldered his pack and tied on his cloak, he stared out the window in his room and thought that today would be the day he found the marauders. Today would be the day he found where the scum holed up.

Griffort was wiping down the bar, looked up to see him.

"Morning, sir," he said. "Breakfast for you today? I might be able to scrape together some eggs, if you've the wealth for 'em."

"No. I'm leaving."

Griffort nodded. "Which way you headed?"

"West."

Griffort's face darkened, and he motioned Marakion closer. The innkeeper spoke in a low voice, "You want a

copper's worth of free advice?"

Marakion nodded for him to continue.

"Don't go west, at least not straight west. Skirt Mount Phineous if you can. Evil things going on up there."

Marakion was interested. "How so?"

"Lader's Knoll." The innkeeper shook his head. "We used to have an arrangement with a farmer up there in Lader's Knoll. Taters don't grow down here, as well as other stuff Bartus likes for his cooking, so we'd swap bread and the like for vegetables and such - but I can see you're not into long stories, so I'll cut it short. One day, the farmer stopped bringing his wagon down. I sent one of the town boys to Lader's Knoll to see what had happened. The kid never came back. Something bad's going on up there, stranger - " Griffort stopped at the sight of Marakion's smile.

"Perfect," Marakion said. "Does the name 'Knightsbane Marauders' mean anything to you? Have you heard of them?"

The disconcerted innkeeper shook his head slowly.

"No."

Marakion stared at him hard, then turned and left the inn. Behind him he heard the innkeeper's comment to the barmaid: "Must'a got his noggin cracked somewhere. World's full of crazies nowadays."

Gylar awoke the next morning in a better mood. He'd slept all the previous day and all night. His confusion and fear were replaced by purpose. He wanted to know why the gods killed everyone, why they allowed people like his mother, and like Lutha, to die needlessly. Well, he would ask them.

The question turned over again and again in his head as he buried his mother next to the rest of his family. The snow fell lightly on him and the ground at which he worked. It was almost as though the skies knew Gylar didn't want to look at the village anymore.

When his mother was resting with his little brother and father, Gylar went back inside the house.

He closed the door on the storm outside, went to his father's room, and pulled down the pack he'd kept on the wall, the pack Gylar had seen his father use countless times when they'd gone hunting together. A brief wash of memories splashed over Gylar. He sniffled and ran a sleeve across his nose.

Turning his thoughts to more immediate tasks, Gylar took the pack into the kitchen. He collected some food suited to traveling, a good kitchen knife, a spoon, and a small pot. Gylar looked about for anything else he might need. A bedroll, he thought. He went to his room, stripped the woolen blanket off the bed, and rolled it up, tied it onto his father's already laden pack.

He put on a thick cloak and pulled the pack to the door. The snowfall had sheathed the ground in white. Mount Phineous was hidden in the distance, but its presence still

loomed in Gylar's mind. What better place to contact the gods than from the top of their latest creation?

He adjusted his cloak more snugly, threw the heavy pack over his shoulder. It unsteadied him for a moment, but he regained his balance and thrust an arm through the remaining strap, securing the burden. He turned and looked one last time at what once had been his home. Gylar said nothing, bowed his head, and began walking toward the great mountain.

Marakion watched as the young boy, bundled to the teeth, left Lader's Knoll.

"Off on a journey, are we?" he said quietly from the shadow of a wall. "And just where are you going, little looter?"

Marakion had been in the small village for about half an hour, and he hadn't seen a living being. His disappointment was acute. He'd assumed that Lader's Knoll was the marauders' camp. It was perfect, a desolate place; all those within traveling distance were scared to visit.

But instead of seedy shacks full of murderers and cutthroats, he'd found fresh graves or, sometimes, a few bodies, sleeping the slumber of the dead. The gaunt faces were a faint purple, and dried blood covered their lips.

Another false trail. His frustration was painful almost beyond bearing. He wandered the town in search of some sign, any sign that this had been the hideout of the marauders, but it appeared that the only curse to take up residence in this town was a plague.

"There's your evil, Griffort," he'd muttered.

He'd been about to start off from the devastated village when he'd seen a door to one of the houses open. He slid from view behind one of the nearby buildings.

With a quick-beating heart and silenced breathing, Marakion watched the boy leave the village. "Well, well. Looting the dead, eh? Where are your cohorts, Marauder? Or did they just send you to scout the area?"

Marakion exulted in his discovery. The boy was headed toward Mount Phineous! Marakion berated himself for not thinking of it before. What better place for a band of brigands than a Cataclysm-spawned, uninhabited mountain?

Marakion detached himself from the shadow of the house and followed. He was not about to reveal himself to his guide, at least not until the sanctuary was found.

"I'm coming, Marissa," he whispered as he fell into a loping stride behind his prey.

Occasionally during the trek up the mountain, the boy turned to look at the sky, or at how far he'd separated himself from the village. The ever alert Marakion moved skillfully into a nearby copse of trees, ducked behind an outcropping of rock or shrubbery. It wasn't difficult for Marakion to remain hidden from the youngster's view. The

cloud cover made the terrain gloomy, and the falling snow decreased visibility dramatically.

It was afternoon when the boy first stopped. After extracting a few things from his pack, he dumped it on the ground, sat on it, and began eating.

Marakion watched from just over a small hillock, built up by a tremendous snowdrift, then settled down to a meal of his own, consisting of some strips of dried rabbit.

The snow stopped falling sometime before noon, and the afternoon opened up clear and bright, making Marakion's stalking much more difficult, but not impossible. He smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

While tearing at the rough meat with his teeth, Marakion studied the youngling with interest. The boy was not very large; Marakion guessed him at about eleven or twelve years old. He looked innocent enough, sitting there, chomping on his lunch, not much like a sneak-thief. But, no, he was one of them - a messenger, maybe, or a pickpocket. He had to be.

Marakion's teeth fought the dried meat for another bite. He gauged the size of the mountain. It was not the biggest he'd seen, but impressive in its own right.

Marakion turned his attention back to the boy. He wasn't going anywhere for the moment. Obviously he'd settled down for a long rest. Marakion set his excellent hearing to guard and hunkered down comfortably.

Relaxing, he slipped into a light drowse, waiting for the boy to make the next move. He was startled back to wakefulness. His ears caught a crunching sound from up the mountain. Rolling to his feet, he peered over the drift.

The boy had heard the sound, too. He scrambled upright. The bramble-breaking noise grew louder. Marakion tensed his body, relaxed his mind, letting it disappear, allowing the energy to flow. This was it. This must be some rendezvous point. The entire band, maybe! He was ready.

But the boy did not run into the trees to welcome a gang of murderers. He did not call a greeting to comrades. Instead, he let out a fearful yell and, stumbling over himself, began running down the hill. Marakion stared curiously into the trees to see what was following.

A huge ogre burst from the foliage. Sallow and crusty-skinned, the ogre charged forward with long, quick strides. Wet brambles and a few stragglng pine needles showered off the creature as it ran, sending snow flying in a blinding flurry.

Marakion cursed as he watched the ogre closing on the boy. The damned ogre was ruining everything! Scaring off Marakion's guide, the ogre might kill the boy before Marakion could question him!

Gylar's heart beat against his rib cage like a woodpecker. The snow impeded every step of his short legs, while the ogre's strides cleared the terrain as though it were midsummer ground. It was just a matter of time. Gylar gulped for air as he struggled onward. His mind had

gone numb, and all he could think of was escape. He'd heard stories about what ogres did to children. . . .

Just at the height of his despair, when the ogre loomed over him, casting a nightlike shadow that engulfed Gylar, the strap of his pack slipped off his shoulder.

If Gylar had been thinking straight, he'd have abandoned his pack and kept going, but he reflexively hung onto it as it scraped the snow. Too late, he realized his error. The momentum of his flight sent him sprawling, then tumbling down the hill. He careened into a snowbank in a fluff of white.

The massive arm of the ogre plunged into the snow, groped around, then plucked out a struggling Gylar. The ogre's craggy mouth split like a crack in a tree's bark, revealing a fairly complete row of sharp teeth as dingy yellow as the ogre's mottled skin.

Twenty feet away, Marakion leaned against a tree, listening. A shimmer ran the length of Glint.

The ogre chuckled at the boy as it began to walk home. "Glad came," the ogre said, with a thick, grating accent. "Hungry, me. We eat, I and you." The ogre chuckled again, sounded like someone scraping rough rocks together. "Take home you to me. Dinner, we have - "

"Not today." Marakion said clearly in the frosty air as the two walked past the tree he stood behind. The ogre took one look at Marakion and dropped the boy into the snow with a snarl.

But Marakion was on the ogre before it could even raise its arms in defense. Marakion kicked out, struck the ogre in the knee, swung the Hat end of Glint into the side of the ogre's head.

The creature went down in a tumble of arms and snow. Marakion stood ready as the ogre surged onto its feet. It was calm, imposing.

"Leave, friend. The boy is under my protection. If you have any wits at all, you'll seek food elsewhere. Surely catching a deer could not be as much trouble as this little one will cost you."

The ogre growled, flexing its muscles under its rough yellow skin, but it did not take a step forward. It was accustomed to fearful enemies, not one facing it with confidence. The ogre showed its teeth viciously. "Hungry. Food mine. You leave."

"Not on your life." Marakion smiled, his stance immobile. It felt good to fight, for whatever reason. The despair, the frustration, the hopelessness - all disappeared when Marakion went into combat. "You leave, or we fight. If you insist, I must say I'm really in the mood for the battle. Is it worth it?"

The ogre stood swaying back and forth, wondering, perhaps, what it was that made this human brave enough to challenge it. It showed its teeth again. "Hungry!" it growled, clenching and unclenching its clawed fists anxiously.

Marakion's eyes narrowed. "Times are hard for all of us, friend. Everyone's got - "

Marakion didn't have time to finish his sentence. The ogre - a madness in its eyes, daws extended - charged the knight.

Having thought he was actually having some effect with his words, Marakion was surprised by the sudden onslaught. Quick reflexes moved him to the side of the hulking swing that cracked a tree trunk behind him.

Marakion slid under the ogre's arm and dodged behind the yellow giant. His sword flashed out, slashing once, twice on the ogre's back. Blood welled from cuts, a muted crack sounded. Broken bone, Marakion realized. The ogre roared in pain, struck out with its huge fist. Yellow-fleshed arm bone and steel whacked together harshly, and the ogre howled again.

Another huge yellow hand came down. Marakion didn't have enough leverage to sidestep. The jagged claws raked his left side. He grabbed hold of the forearm and slammed Glint's pommel into the ogre's left eye. A follow-up strike cracked into the side of the bark-skinned head. The ogre reeled backward, stunned. Marakion hit it again and again.

Snow exploded outward as the huge body fell heavily to the ground. Jumping forward, Marakion hovered over the ogre like a dark angel, clenching Glint tightly in his fist. His breathing was hard and quick. He stared down at the ogre, waiting for it to rise again, waiting for it to attack.

The ogre didn't rise, though the eyes fluttered open. Marakion raised his finely honed arm, preparing to end the creature's life, then he paused. The rough yellow hide was pulled tight over the protrusion of the creature's ribs; the bloody, bruised face was gaunt. The ogre's muscles were thin, hunger-wasted.

Marakion lowered Glint. The ogre struggled sluggishly to get up, only to fail and plunge back into the snow. It raised its arms a bit in a feeble attempt to ward off another blow - one that never descended.

This wasn't a monster, Marakion thought, just another creature devastated by the Cataclysm, whose life had been turned upside down, ruined, like his own. The ogre was just trying to survive. Marakion wondered what lengths he would go to if he were starving. Definitely he wouldn't be above eating ogre flesh.

Marakion noticed the young boy watching his deliberation.

"Go on," the man said harshly to the ogre. "I gave you one chance. This is your second. You won't get a third."

The emaciated ogre finally made it to its feet. Its unswollen eye gave one final, hungry look at Gylar, then it turned and limped slowly into the woods from which it had come, blood drops dotting its tracks.

Marakion's brow furrowed. Sheathing Glint, he turned to face the boy.

"What's your name?" Marakion asked harshly.

The boy looked dazed, still recovering from shock and fright. "Uh, Gylar, sir. I... Thanks," he tacked on lamely.

"You shouldn't be out here alone. Ogres might not be

the worst you'll find. I hear there's a dangerous band of brigands in these hills."

Marakion watched for some reaction. Gylar's face gave no telltale signs of anything but relief.

"I - I'm on a quest, and . . . Who are you?" Gylar couldn't contain his curiosity any longer. "What are you doing up on the mountain here? My village is the only one for miles."

Marakion noted the honest innocence in the boy's face, and he cursed again, silently.

"I do a bit of traveling. Just passing through, really." He paused and looked at Gylar closely once more. He began to doubt again. The boy might be a cunning liar.

"Tell you what, kid. Looks like we both need to rest a little." He touched his raked side gingerly. "What do you say to putting your quest on hold and setting up camp? I saw a cave, over there a ways.... When we get a good fire going, you can tell me all about it."

Gylar smiled and nodded.

"I went with Lutha. I knew she wasn't supposed to go in there. Mom had told me about the evil in the new marsh, and Lutha's parents had told the same thing to her. But Lutha wasn't afraid. You see, there was something we'd put in an old tree before the marsh came, before the Cataclysm and Mount Phineous. A couple of necklaces we made out of leather and wooden disks." Gylar's mouth became a straight line, and his brow furrowed.

The warm fire popped and crackled, illuminating Marakion's intent face and the makeshift bandages that he was wrapping slowly around his middle.

Gylar sighed and continued, "She was always doing stuff like that. Anyway, the marsh wasn't really scary, just wet and mucky. The only thing that happened was that Lutha fell down in the water once.

"But Mom was real mad when I got back. She knew where we'd been. I guess the smell of the marsh and my wet boots gave us away. Anyway, I snuck out of the house later, when Mom was down at the stream washing and Dad was chopping wood. I went to see Lutha.

"I didn't knock at the door, because her parents were probably just as mad at her as mine were at me. Instead, I went around back and looked in the bedroom window. Lutha was in there and she was shivering real bad. And her face was real red. That was the first time I saw the sickness on somebody. Lutha was the first. . . ."

Gylar tossed a twig into the fire. "I didn't see Lutha again." He wiped his nose. "The day after that, it was the talk of the village. Lutha had died of a strange sickness. Then her parents died. No one knew how to stop the sickness. Everybody went into their houses and didn't come out, but it didn't matter. I'm not sure who died after that, because Dad closed us up in our house, too. When Rahf died, my little brother, Mom said it didn't matter anymore that we stayed in the house."

Gylar sighed again. "It was awful. Hardly anyone was alive in the village when we came out. We went from door to door, looking for people. Everyone was in their beds, shaking with the fever or already dead. I wanted to leave. Since we hadn't caught it yet, I told Mom we should run away from it. She shook her head and didn't answer me. We helped those who had it. We took care of them, but it didn't matter, just like staying in the house didn't matter anymore. They were going to die, but Mom said we could help them. I know now she didn't mean help them live, but help them to die better. I guess . . ."

"Then Dad died." Gylar's voice was subdued. He shook his head; his cheeks were wet. "He went just like everyone else, shivering but so hot. I didn't want. . ."

His eyes focused again on Marakion. "He was one of the last ones to go, then it was my mother. When she died, I felt so alone, so alone and numb. I could touch something, like the blanket, or - or her hand, and I wouldn't really feel it. I had to go. I had to get out."

Gylar looked intently at Marakion. "Why did the gods do it, sir? I just don't understand. Why did they have to kill so many people? It doesn't make sense. We didn't do anything! We just lived. We worshiped Paladine. But Krynn was still cracked, and then the new marsh rose and Lutha caught the sickness and now everyone . . . everyone I ever knew is dead." He bowed his head.

Then his mouth set defiantly and his brows came together in anger. "And so I'm going to ask them. I want them to answer just one question. Why? Why did they do it to everyone? What did we do wrong?"

Marakion smiled. "Supposing the gods even respond, they might drop another mountain on you."

"I don't care," Gylar said petulantly, gathering his blanket around him and resting his head on his pack. "I don't care if they do. If they do, they don't care about us and it won't matter. But. . . but I will ask." He yawned. "I will ask HIM . . . Paladine."

Gylar fell asleep. Marakion gazed at the young face. The flame's light played off the round, boyish features that would not fade for several years yet. Marakion sighed aloud this time. Watching the boy tell his story, the knight had realized Gylar was indeed no marauder's lackey. He actually was what he claimed: a simple country boy in search of divine answers.

Gylar's story made Marakion think of all the things he'd lost because of the Cataclysm. If the gods had not dropped the fiery mountain, his home would not have been attacked.

"You're right, Gylar," he said to the sleeping boy. "Paladine should be confronted, asked . . ." Marakion's iron doors creaked open. "So much like Tagor," he said to himself. "A victim, like Tagor. I wonder what will happen to you?"

Flames and smoke danced in the fire inside his head. Very much like Tagor. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU?

SCREAMS. CLANGING STEEL. THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE.
THE CRY OF HIS YOUNGER BROTHER.

"I'M COMING, TAGOR!" MARAKION SHOUTED FROM
MARISSA'S DESTROYED BEDROOM.

THE YELL HAD SOUNDED FROM DOWN THE HALL.
MARAKION PROPELLED HIMSELF TOWARD IT. THE LIBRARY!
TAGOR WAS TRAPPED IN THE LIBRARY.

MARAKION SLAMMED THROUGH THE DOOR WITH THE
FORCE OF A BATTERING RAM. HE KNOCKED ONE OF THE
INVADERS TO THE FLOOR. HIS SWORD TOOK OUT ANOTHER.

FIVE MORE WAITED. TAGOR STOOD ON TOP OF A TABLE
IN THE CORNER, FIGHTING OFF THE MEN WHO WERE
HARASSING HIM. THE TEASING GRINS THEY WORE TURNED
TO SCOWLS WHEN MARAKION ENTERED.

"THE KNIGHT! KEEP HIM THERE!" A THICK-BEARDED
MAN YELLED. "I'LL FINISH THIS YOUNG ONE OFF."

MARAKION SHOVED HIS FALLEN FOE AWAY AND
SLAMMED INTO THE NEXT, TRYING DESPERATELY TO COME
TO THE AID OF HIS YOUNGER BROTHER, BUT HIS NEW
OPPONENT WAS A SKILLED SWORDSMAN, NOT A BRAWLER.
MARAKION SLASHED INSANELY AT THE MAN'S GUARD,
TRYING AT THE SAME TIME TO SEE TAGOR.

PERCHED ON THE STUDYING TABLE, WIELDING THEIR
FATHER'S SWORD, TAGOR DELIVERED A WICKED SLASH TO
THE BEARDED MAN, OPENING UP HIS FOREHEAD. HE WAS
HOLDING HIS OWN MOMENTARILY, BUT THAT WOULDN'T
LAST LONG. ALTHOUGH TAGOR WAS A FINE SWORDSMAN
FOR FIFTEEN, HE WAS NO MATCH FOR THE BRIGANDS'
STRENGTH, OR THEIR NUMBERS.

MARAKION LET OUT A ROAR. "BASTARDS! LEAVE HIM
ALONE! FIGHT ME!"

TAGOR TWISTED SIDeways, SCREAMED. A SWORD
SLASHED THROUGH HIS LEG. HE STUMBLED TO THE EDGE
OF THE TABLE AND LOST HIS FOOTING, CRASHED TO THE
FLOOR BELOW.

MARAKION BASHED THROUGH THE SWORDSMAN'S
GUARD, SENT THE MAN'S HAND SPINNING FROM HIS WRIST
IN A TRAIL OF BLOOD.

MARAKION RAN FORWARD. THERE WERE THREE LEFT.
TWO CHARGED HIM AND KEPT HIM FROM HIS BROTHER.
THE THIRD . . . THE THIRD WAS CLUBBING . . . CLUBBING A
BODY ON THE FLOOR.

"TAGOR!"

Marakion started, beat the vision down into the recesses
of his memory. Breathing hard, he closed his eyes. Think of
NOW, only of NOW. Forget Tagor. Forget all of it.

He sat still for long moments, trying to forget, holding
his breath with gritted teeth, but the pent up air hissed out
slowly in a shudder. Marakion crumpled and sobbed. "Tagor ..."

MARAKION BEAT HIS WAY THROUGH THOSE THREE
MARAUDERS, KILLED THEM ALL. HE KNELT AT TAGOR'S SIDE.

"THEY CAME . . . FROM THE NORTH. . . . THEY TOOK
MARISSA. THEY CALLED THEMSELVES THE KNIGHTSBANE,
MARAKION. . . . THE KNIGHTS - KNIGHTSBANE. WHY,
MARAKION? . . . WHY?"

IT WAS HIS LAST WORD, THEN HE DIED.

Marakion's cheeks were wet with tears. He turned and
gazed down at another brave youth.

Yes, why?

"I hope you get your answer, kid. I really do. There's
quite a few questions I'd like to ask Paladine myself."
Marakion turned his face heavenward and focused on the
constellation of the platinum dragon, high above. "At least a
few."

Marakion came out of a reverie that had slipped into a
doze. The fire was dwindling. Blinking his eyes, he picked
up a couple of sticks and tossed them on, poking at the
embers to stir the flames up again. After he'd tended the fire
and stoked it for the night, he turned to adjust his bedding
for sleep when he heard Gylar give a low moan. Marakion
hurried to the young boy's side.

Gylar shuddered a little, his eyes moving under shut lids,
as he huddled deeper into his blanket. He shivered again,
turned over, pulled the covers closer about him. Marakion
pulled his cloak off and draped it over the boy.

Beneath the double cover, Gylar still quaked. Marakion
moved his hand to the boy's forehead.

It was as hot as fire to the touch.

Marakion closed his eyes. "What will happen to you?"
He repeated his thought of earlier in the evening. "Yeah,
that's what, same as everyone else. It doesn't matter what
you've already suffered. It's not enough yet, is it? It's never
enough."

Marakion lay awake, staring silently at the cave's
ceiling, for a long, long time. He could not sleep with the
anger that burned through him as hotly as the fever now
burned through Gylar's body. The brutal injustice galled
him.

"I'm going to take you to the top, kid. It's not going to
end like this, not without a fight. No, not without an answer.
By my dead brother, I swear you'll get to ask your
question."

He turned over and tried to go to sleep, but it wasn't
until morning that exhaustion closed those eyes that were
very tired of looking at the world.

The morning broke, warm and sunny. A few clouds
drifted through the sky, but gave no threat of any type of
storm. Snow gathered on tree limbs, slipped heavily from
leaves, as the warmth of the day melted it. Pine needles

shrugged off sheets of snow and rustled as they adjusted to their newfound freedom from winter's blanket.

Marakion stood at the cave's entrance. Nature was adapting to the freak warmth of the winter's day. The snow on the ground was glazed with a sheen of wet sparkles. Everything was adapting - everything except Gylar.

The sickness moved fast once the fever started. Gylar had slept late into the morning without knowing it, and Marakion had not come to a decision about waking him yet. As he stood there, though, he could hear the boy coming to.

He scuffed a groove into the wet snow. Casting a scathing glance heavenward, he turned and made his way back into the small cave.

Marakion stopped a half-dozen paces from the boy. Gylar knew what was happening to him. Maybe he'd realized it in the middle of the night - the fear was on his face - but the fear was held at bay by determination.

Gylar looked up. The boy tried to manage a smile, but failed. Tears stood in his eyes. Marakion wanted to say something, some word of comfort, but he knew if he tried to talk, it would come out choked.

"I have it, Marakion."

I know, Marakion spoke in a voice with no sound. Clearing his throat, he said again, "I know."

"I'm going to die." The boy's eyes were wide. They blinked once, twice.

Marakion nodded and lowered his gaze, his boots again scuffing a trench in the dirt floor. "Yeah," he said.

A different kind of fear entered Gylar's voice. "Marakion, you have to leave me, now. You have to go." His teeth chattered. Closing his mouth, he tried again. "You might have it already, but. . . but maybe not. You have to go."

Marakion knelt beside Gylar. The man smiled. "You want to try to make me, kid?"

Gylar was puzzled. "No . . ." His brows furrowed in confusion. "Make you? No, but, Marakion, if you don't leave - "

"I'm staying."

"But, sir, I told you what happened to - "

Marakion shrugged. "Do you want to make it to the top of this mountain?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm staying."

Gylar started to protest, but Marakion cut him off with a motion of his hand. "You've got heart, I'll give you that, but you aren't going to make the summit without me." He smiled expansively. "Even if you try."

Gylar nodded, wanned by the smile. Marakion suddenly reached out, held the small boy close.

"I'm afraid, Marakion," Gylar whispered, his shaking hands clinging tenaciously.

"I know" The man patted the small back. "I know."

"But it's all right." Gylar sniffed and let go. Running a sleeve across his nose, he smiled with effort and looked up at Marakion. "I just want to make it to the top, before . . ."

well, before . . ." He gulped. "I just want to make it there, that's all."

"Yeah." Marakion took a deep breath. "You will, I promise." Standing, he extended his hand. "Let's go, kid."

Gylar grabbed it, and they began again.

The cave they'd spent the night in was near a natural groove - almost like a trail - worn in the side of the mountain. Once the groove ended, the terrain became exceedingly precarious. More than once, Gylar slipped, and only Marakion's quick reflexes and strength saved the boy.

About three hours after midday, Gylar stumbled and had a hard time getting to his feet again.

"I'm sorry, Marakion," he said, shivering as he tried to stand up once more. "It's - It's just so cold. I can't seem to make my legs work right."

Marakion helped him to his feet. "You sure you want to keep going, kid?"

"Yes. I - I have to." Shakily, Gylar moved forward again.

By evening, Marakion had to carry him.

A few hours after nightfall, Marakion gently set the boy down in the snow at the summit of Mount Phineous. Lunitari was a thin crimson slash in the sky. Solinari was full and bright; it bathed them in a sparkling wash. The untouched snow looked like flawless, molten silver that had been poured over the top of the mountain and had hardened there. The only thing that marred the icy, detached beauty was a straggling trail gouged up the mountainside, a trail that led to the two solitary figures who had reached their destination.

The stars shone brightly from all around. Marakion's cloak, wrapped around the boy, furred and straightened softly in the breeze. His heavy breathing plumed out white in front of his face.

"Here . . ." Gylar said in a whisper. He nodded, with a smile. "Yes, this is perfect, so perfect."

Marakion swallowed hard and knelt next to Gylar. He spread a blanket and moved the boy onto it, then covered him with his own bedroll, trying to make him as warm as possible.

"Let me be alone now, Marakion." Gylar whispered, "I want to call Paladine. It's time for me to call him."

Marakion nodded, slowly rose from his kneeling position, and walked a distance away. He scuffed the snow with his boot, wondering again about this whole thing.

For an hour, Marakion walked about in the cold. He turned to watch Gylar from time to time. He could see the boy's mouth move, hear him talking to the skies.

Another hour passed, this time in silence. Nothing answered Gylar's feeble summons. Marakion tromped about, fuming. He knew he shouldn't have expected an answer, but suddenly he was furious that none was coming.

After a time, Marakion realized the boy was beckoning weakly to him. The man was instantly at the boy's side.

Gylar's flesh was almost completely wasted away. The effect of the fever over such a short time was astounding. But there was a smile on the boy's face. "Marakion ..." He could barely speak.

Marakion leaned forward. "Yes, Gylar."

Gylar shook his head. "Paladine's not coming. He's not even going to - " The boy was cut off by a coughing fit. "He's not even going to drop a mountain on me, Marakion."

Gylar set a shaky hand on Marakion's forearm.

"Remember the ogre, Marakion? I was s-so scared. It was going to eat me. You remember?"

Marakion nodded.

"You let it go, Marakion," Gylar whispered. "You said for it to choose something else, a deer or something. You said it had made the wrong choice. It didn't believe you, and you beat it up, but you let it go. You forgave it, Marakion. You forgave it for being itself. It didn't realize what it was doing."

Marakion swallowed a lump in this throat. Gylar closed his eyes. His hand still gripped the warrior's arm.

"Maybe Paladine didn't either, Marakion. Maybe he still doesn't. B - But that's okay. I forgive him. It's okay. I forgive them all. . . ."

Gylar's grip went slack on Marakion's arm. Marakion grappled for the hand and caught hold as it started to slip off. Squeezing his eyes shut, he bowed his head.

"Damn!" was all he said.

Hours later, Marakion stood next to a grave he'd had to fight the cold earth and snow to dig. His hands were blistered; Gylar was caked in dirt.

Marakion did not speak a eulogy. Everything had already been said. Who would he speak words of comfort to, anyway? The only ones able to hear on this distant, isolated mountaintop were the gods, and they hadn't listened. This boy, alone, beneath the frosted, snow-swept ground, could pardon a god for his mistake, though that one mistake had destroyed everything Gylar had held dear.

Marakion adjusted the clasp at the neck of his cloak and pulled the edges together. He took a last look at the sky from the summit of Mount Phineous.

"Somebody learned something from your show of godly power. HE forgives you."

Marakion slowly began his descent down the mountain, continuing on his own hopeless quest.

"Revel in it, Paladine, because, by the Abyss, I don't."

NO GODS, NO HEROES

NICK O'DONOHUE

The road was blocked just over the crest of the hill. The ambush was nicely planned. Graym, leading the horses, hadn't seen the warriors until his group was headed downhill, and there was no room to turn the cart around on the narrow, wheel-rutted path that served as a road.

Graym looked at their scarred faces, their battered, mismatched, scavenged armor, and their swords. He smiled at them. "You lot are good thinkers, I can tell. You can't protect yourselves too well these days." He gestured at the cart and its cargo. "Would you like a drink of ale?"

The armored man looked them over carefully. Graym said, "I'll do the honors, sir. That skinny, gawking teenager - that's Jarek. The man behind him, in manacles and a chain, is our prisoner, name of Darll. Behind him - those two fierce-looking ones, are Fenris and Fanris, the Wolf brothers. Myself, I'm Graym. I'm the leader - being the oldest and" - he patted his middle-aged belly, chuckling - "the heaviest." He bowed as much as his belly would let him.

The lead man nodded. "It's them."

His companions stepped forward, spreading out. The right wing man, flanking Graym, swung his sword.

Darll pulled his hands apart and caught the sword on his chain. Sparks flew, but the chain held. Claspings his hands back together, he swung the looped chain like a club. It thunked into an armored helmet, and the wearer dropped straight to the ground soundlessly.

Jarek raised his fist, gave a battle cry. The Wolf brothers, with their own battle cry - which sounded suspiciously like yelps of panic - dived under the ale cart, both trying unsuccessfully to wedge themselves behind the same wheel.

The cart tipped, toppling the heavy barrels. The horses broke their harnesses and charged through the fight. A cascade of barrels thundered into the midst of the fray. One attacker lay still, moaning.

That left four. Darll kicked one still-rolling barrel, sent it smashing into two of the attackers, then leapt at a third, who was groping for his dropped sword. Darll kicked the sword away, lifted one of the barrel hoops over the man's head. The attacker raised his arms to defend himself, neatly catching them in the hoop. Darll slammed him in the face with his fist.

Jarek yelled, "Yaaa!" and threw a rock at the leader. The rock struck the man, knocked him into Darll's reach.

Darll whipped his chain around the man's throat, throttling him. Hearing a noise behind him, Darll let the man drop and spun around.

Two of the others were crawling to their knees. Darll kicked one and faced the other, prepared to fight.

A hoarse voice cried, "No!"

The leader was gasping and massaging his throat. "Leave them. Let Skorm Bonelover get them," he told his men.

The attackers limped away, carrying their two unconscious comrades.

It was suddenly very quiet. The Wolf brothers, still under the cart, were staring at Darll in awe. Jarek - a second rock cradled in his hand - was gazing at the fighter with open-mouthed admiration. Graym took a step toward Darll, glanced at the fleeing attackers, and stepped away again.

"Six men," Graym said. "Six trained men-at-arms,

beaten by a man in chains."

"It'll make one helluva song," Darll said acidly. "I suppose I'm still your prisoner?"

After a moment's thought, Graym nodded. "Right, then. Let's reload the barrels."

Graym and Jarek tipped the cart back upright and propped a barrel behind the rear wheel. The first barrel was easy to load. Too easy. Graym handled it by himself. He stared at it in surprise, then worked to load the second.

The third barrel was on, then suddenly and inexplicably it was rolling off.

The Wolf brothers, working on top, grabbed frantically and missed. The barrel slid down the tilted cart. Darll fell back. Jarek, standing in the barrel's path, stared up at it with his mouth open.

For a fat middle-aged man, Graym could move quickly. He slammed into Jarek, and both went sprawling. The barrel crashed onto a rock and bounced off, spraying foam sideways before it came to rest, punctured end up.

Graym, unfortunately, came to rest on top of Jarek.

Darll, manacles clanging, pulled Graym to his feet. "You all right?"

"Fine, sir, fine." Graym felt his ribs and arms for breakage.

"Pity," Darll grunted. "What about you, boy?" He bent down and helped Jarek up. "If you only hurt your head, we're in luck."

Jarek wheezed and gasped.

"He'll be fine," Graym said, slapping Jarek's shoulder. Jarek collapsed again, and Graym helped him up again. "Probably do us both good. Exercise new muscles."

"Try thinking. That should exercise a new muscle for you." Darll looked down at their feet. Foam was seeping quickly into the ground. The smell of ale was overpowering.

Graym followed his glance. "Only another loss," he said cheerfully. "Crisis of transport, sir. Part of business." He and Jarek limped over to the broken barrel.

Jarek, still wheezing, managed to say, "I'm sorry, Graym. You said 'Stop pushing when I say now,' and that was when you said 'now,' so then I thought you meant 'now.' "

"Don't you feel bad at all, boy." Graym looked at the damp rock and the damp soil below it. "This'll drive the price up when we reach Krinneor. Supply and demand."

He added, struck by it, "Makes the other kegs worth more."

He finished, convinced, "Best thing that could happen, really."

Graym shook Jarek's limp hand. "Thank you for upping profits. A bold move - not one I'd have made - but worth it in the long run."

Jarek smiled proudly. Darll snorted.

The Wolf brothers looked down from the perch on top of the cart. "Want us to roll another off?" Fenris asked eagerly.

"Say when," Fanris added.

Graym shook his head. "Let's take inventory first."

The Wolf brothers slid cautiously off the wagon. They looked (and claimed) to be several years older than Jarek, but no one would ever know their real age until one of them washed, which was hardly likely. From their narrow beetle-browed eyes to their black boots, they looked wickedly dangerous.

A songbird whistled, and the two jumped and crouched low behind the wagon wheel.

"Don't crawl underneath," Graym pleaded. "That's how you tipped it the last time. It's all right now. The bad men are gone. And they weren't that bad, once we got their weapons away from them."

"We? WE?" Darll demanded.

"I helped," Jarek said proudly. "I threw a rock at one. You did most of it," he added honestly. "But you should have. You're supposed to be a great mercenary."

"I'm SUPPOSED to be your prisoner" Darll said bitingly.

Graym put a hand on Darll's shoulder. "Don't take it so hard, sir. You're the Bailey of Sarem's prisoner. We're just transporting you to Krinneor." He patted Darll. "Think of us as company."

"I think of you," Darll said bitterly, "the way I'd think of the underside of an owlbear's -"

"I'm going to be a mercenary like you someday," Jarek broke in.

Fenris came out from behind the wagon wheel. He looked worried. "Did you hear what that man said just before running off?"

"You mean the part about 'Let Skorm Bonelover take them'?" Fanris finished nervously. "I heard it. What does it mean? Who's Skorm Bonelover?"

Graym was checking the fallen barrel. "An idle threat. Poor man, I don't think he was happy." He examined the sprung staves.

"You may be a cooper," Darll said, "but you can't mend that."

Graym felt along the keg sides, skilled hands finding the sprung barrel stave. "Not on the road," he said reluctantly. "And it's over half full still."

The Wolf brothers edged forward hopefully. "Be a shame to let it go to waste, Fan."

"Right again, Fen."

Jarek, rubbing his head, looked meaningfully at the bung-puller stored inside the cart.

"Half a keg of Skull-Splitter Premium. Well . . ."

Graym sighed loudly, then smiled. "Not a bad place to camp."

They waited until nightfall to light the fire, so no one would see the smoke. They hung a shield of blankets around the fire to hide the light. Both were Darll's idea. Graym saw no need for such precautions, but was willing to humor him.

The sunset was blood red, like every one had been since

the Cataclysm.

Graym sipped at the bowl of Skull-Splitter and said, to no one in particular, "Life is attitude - good or bad." He waved an arm at the desolate landscape. "What do you see?"

Darll grunted. "What else? Disaster. Broken trees, clogged streams, fallen buildings, and a godsforsaken broken road rougher than a troll's - "

"That's your problem, sir." Graym thumped Darll's back. "You see disaster. I see opportunity. Look here." He traced a map in the dirt. "See this road?"

He looked up and realized that Darll - ale rolling in his mouth, eyes shut to savor the flavor - wasn't seeing anything. "Excuse me, sir, but do you see the road?"

"The road from Goodlund to Krinneor," Jarek breathed reverently.

"Right. And do you know what's ahead?"

Darll opened his eyes. "Nothing. The end of the world."

Graym downed an entire bowl of Skull-Splitter, wiped his lips on his sleeve, and smiled genially. "Maybe it is, sir, but I say" - he waved the empty dipper for emphasis - "if I'm going to see the end of the world, I should see it with a positive attitude." He gazed up at the sky. "I mean, look at the world now. No gods, no heroes." He sighed loudly and happily. "It makes a man feel fresh."

"We were heroes this afternoon," Jarek objected, "me and Darll. We whipped those bastards."

"Now, now," Graym said admonishingly. "You hardly knew them, Jarek. Don't speak ill of people just because they tried to kill you."

Darll agreed. "Other than being the usual low, sorry sort of lowlifes you find in these parts, they weren't bad at all. They were bounty hunters." He eyed Graym suspiciously.

"Seems an unfriendly way to make a living," Graym said. He scratched his head, belched, and settled back. "Inventory," he announced.

The others suddenly looked nervous. "Will we have to sign for things?" Jarek asked. "I hate that."

Graym shook his head. "Nah, nah. This is just counting, and remembering" - he took another sip of ale - "and history. We started with nine barrels. Remember the loading? We pushed them on from all sides, and they shifted when we started rolling."

Fenris nudged his brother. "And one rolled away and smashed on Dog Street."

Fenris kicked him. "I couldn't hold it. It was hard to see, it being dark and all."

Darll's eyes opened. "You loaded in the dark? For the love of Paladine, why?"

Jarek said reasonably, "We didn't want to be seen."

Darll laughed, a short bark. "No wonder the horses ran off. They didn't even know you, did they? You stole them! AND the cart, I'll wager."

"Jem and Renny, poor flighty nags. They never liked us," Graym said sadly. "Well, that's one barrel. Eight left."

"There was the barrel on the bridge," Jarek offered, "out

side of town."

"We'd picked up Darll, and he was putting up a fight - "

"That's right, blame me." Darll glared at them all. "I only wanted to leap off at the bridge."

"And hit us," Fenris said.

"And kill us," Fanris added, hurt.

"And hit and kill you," Darll agreed. "I did fairly well, for being hung over."

"You might have drowned, sir," Graym said. "That wouldn't do when you're in our charge, would it?"

"He hit me," Jarek said, rubbing his head.

"And me," Fen said.

"And me," Fan added.

Darll settled back. "Stop whining. I didn't kill you." His scowl, fierce under his salt-and-pepper beard, seemed to add an unspoken "yet."

After a short silence, Graym continued. "One of the barrels dropped into Mirk River, leaving seven. After that, we didn't lose a one - not in the Black Rain, not in the Dry Lands, not in the swamps. We can be proud of that."

Jarek squared his shoulders. The Wolf brothers grinned, exposing teeth best left hidden.

Graym went on. "And today we beat back a better-trained force - "

"Any force would be better trained," Darll muttered.

"That's harsh, sir. We won through strategy - "

"Luck."

"Or luck, but not," Graym said sadly, "without casualties. We smashed two barrels, a major loss." He stared, brooding, into the fire.

Jarek counted on his fingers twice, then said proudly. "I know! I know! That leaves six barrels - "

"Yes. Five full barrels," Graym said. He walked unsteadily to the wagon. "And one other" He thumped it three times, pausing to let it echo. "One . . . empty . . . barrel."

The others ducked their heads, avoided his eyes. "It leaked," Darll said, shrugging.

Graym rocked the barrel back and forth and ran his hands around it. "Bone dry. No water marks, no foam flecks."

"Ghosts." Jarek looked solemn.

Graym snorted. "Ever seen a drunk ghost?"

Since none of them had seen a ghost of any sort, drunk or sober, they all shook their heads reluctantly.

"Might have been magic," Fenris said.

"True enough," Fanris said quickly.

Graym wiped the mud off the barrel end to expose a second, cleverly hidden bung-hole. He felt in the corner of the wagon and pulled out a second tap. "And which one of you," he said firmly, "was the mage?"

He folded his arms. "Now, I know it's been a long, hard, dusty trip. A man gets thirsty. And you've all known me as long as you've worn dry pants. I'm not a hard man."

"You're a soft man," Darll said, but wouldn't look him in the eye.

"I'm a forgiving man."

"Hah! If you were, you'd let me go, but no - "

"It's a matter of principle, sir," Graym said firmly.

"And the money," Jarek reminded him.

"And the money, of course."

"Tenpiece," Darll said bitterly. "Took me straight from the Bailey of Sarem with a promise and a bag of tenpiece."

"Plus twenty when we get to Krinneor," Fen said.

"When we hand you up," Fan said.

"Thirtypiece." Darll shook his head. "The best fighter in Goodlund, second or third best in Istar, carted off to prison for thirtypiece."

"But enough prologuizing." Graym was swaying on his feet. "I can't stand a fella who prologuizes all the time. Let's say I'm forgiving and let it go at that. And, now, I'm going to ask who's been sneaking ale while I wasn't looking. I expect an honest answer. Who was it?"

Jarek raised one hand.

The Wolf brothers each raised a hand.

Graym looked at them in silence.

Darll raised a hand, his chains pulling the other after it.

After a long pause, Graym sighed. "Good to have it out in the open at last. Better to be honest with each other, I say."

" 'True thieves best rob false owners,' " Darll muttered.

"I've always thought that a fine saying, sir," Graym said.

"Witty, yet simple. But I don't see it applying here."

Darll shook his head.

"Still and all," Graym continued, "we've done well.

Three months on the road, and we've four barrels left." He shook a finger at the others. "No sneaking drinks from here. We'll need it all at the end of the road in Krinneor."

Jarek said eagerly, "Tell us about Krinneor, Graym."

"What? Again?"

"Please!"

Jarek wasn't alone. Fen and Fan begged to hear the story, and even Darll settled, resignedly, to listen.

Graym picked up a bowl and took a deep swig of Skull-Splitter. "I've told you this night after night, day after day - in the Black Rains, when the dust clouds came through, and in the afterquakes, and when we'd spent a long day dragging this wagon over flood-boils, potholes, and heaved-up rock on the road. And now you say you're not tired of it." He looked at them fondly. "I'm not either."

"Back in Sarem, I was nobody. Every town needs a cooper, but they don't care about him. They buy his barrels and leave. And I'd watch them, and I'd know they were off - to fill the barrels, travel up roads, and sell their stock."

Jarek leaned forward. "The city, tell us about the city!"

"I'm coming to that." Graym loved this part. "Every time a stranger came down the road, I'd ask him where he'd been. And he'd talk about Tarsis by the sea, or the temples of Xak Tsaroth, and one even showed me a machine from Mount Nevermind, where the gnomes live. The machine didn't work, of course, but it was a lovely little thing, all gears and sprockets and wires."

"But one and all, dusty from the road and tired from travel, told me about Krinneor, and the more I heard, the

more I wanted to see it." Graym's eyes shone. "Golden towers! Marble doors! And excellent drains." He looked at them all earnestly. "I hear that's very important for a city."

They nodded. Graym went on. "After the Claychasm - " "Cataclysm," Darll snapped.

"Cataclysm, thank you, sir. I keep forgetting. After that night, when the ground shook and the western sky was all fire, people were frightened. They quit buying barrels, saying that trade was too risky. That's when I realized that no one was coming down the road from Krinneor, and no one was going there."

He tapped the bowl of Skull-Splitter, which he had emptied again. "And that's when I realized there was no more good Sarem ale going from Sarem to Krinneor. The poor beggars there would be as dry as a sand pit in no time.

"So I made these." He thumped the broken barrel, refilled the bowl from it. "Extra thick staves, double-caulked, double-banded. Bunges four fingers deep. Heads of the last vallenwoods in stock this far west. Harder than any man has seen. I spent everything I had making them, then borrowed from you all to finish them. And when the bailey heard we were going, he asked me to take you, sir, to the Bailey of Krinneor for safekeeping." He nodded respectfully to Darll.

"For prison, you fat fool," Darll said. "I can't believe I let a man like that capture me, especially after I beat the town soldiery. A scrawny, bald-headed, weak-armed man with no more strength in him than in a dead dwarf's left - "

"You wouldn't have if you hadn't been drunk," Jarek pointed out. He looked at Darll admiringly. "Single-handed, and you beat them all. If you hadn't been drunk - "

Graym interrupted. "And I hope it serves to remind you, sir, that ale is not only a blessing, but can also be a curse, and not to be taken lightly." He downed the bowl of Skull-Splitter. "Back to my story. I took you, sir, and the tenpiece from the bailey - "

"Then we got the ale," Jarek said. "And the horses," Fen and Fan said together. "Without paying for them," Darll finished. "And I gathered victuals and water and spare clothes and knapsacks, and off we set" - Graym pointed to the east - "down the long, dangerous road! Facing hardship! Facing hunger and thirst..." He broke off. "Not as much thirst as I thought, apparently, but some thirst. Facing the unknown! Facing a ruined world! And for what?" He looked around at the watching faces. "I ask you, for what?"

Jarek blinked. "For Krinneor."

"True enough. For the golden spires, the marble towers, the excellent drains, and the fortunes that made them. Think of it!" Graym waved an arm unsteadily. "A city with all the gold you can dream of, and nothing to drink. And us with a cart full." He glanced to one side. "A cart HALF full of the best ale left in the world!"

"Our fortunes are made. We can ask what we want for it, and they'll pay twice what we ask. One barrel of Sarem ale will be worth the world to them, and five barrels leaves us one apiece."

Darll looked up, startled. "You're counting me?"

"You did your share on the road, sir," Graym said.
"Each of us gets profits from one barrel of ale. And, if we're all clever - " he looked at Jarek and amended hastily, " - or at least if we stick together, we get exclusive Sarem trade rights to Krinneor. We'll have all the food we want, and houses."

"And a sword?" Jarek asked eagerly. "I've always wanted a sword. My mother wouldn't let me have anything sharp."

Graym smiled at him. "And a sword. And maybe a quick parole for friend Darll, and a tavern for me to run - "

"And a woman for me," Fenris said firmly.

"And me," Fanris echoed.

Graym scratched his head, looked dubious.

"Right," Darll said. "I'm sure that somewhere in Krinneor there's a pair of dirty, nearsighted women with no self-respect left."

The Wolf brothers brightened considerably.

By late night, the blanket screens were down and they'd piled wood on to make a man-high flame. The Wolf brothers were singing a duet about a bald woman who'd broken the heart of a barber, and Darll was weeping.

"You 'member," he said, his arm around Graym, "'member when the bounty hunters attacked, and I saved us?"

"You did well, sir," said Graym.

Darll snuffled. "I was going to run off, but then I remembered you had the keys to the manacles."

Graym patted his pocket. "Still do, sir."

Darll, tears running down both cheeks, wiped his nose. "You know that when you free me, I'm going to kill you."

Graym patted Darll's shoulder. "Anybody would, sir"

Darll nodded, wept, belched, tried to say something more, and fell asleep sitting up.

Graym lay down, rolled over on his back, and stared at the stars. They were faint in the dusty air, but to Graym they shone a little clearer every night. "I used to be afraid of them," he said comfortably to himself. "They used to be gods. Now they're just stars."

When the sun came up the next morning, it rose with what Graym heard as an ear-splitting crack.

He opened one eye as little as possible, then struggled to his feet. "Isn't life an amazing thing?" he said shakily to himself. "If you'd told me yesterday that every hair on my head could hurt, I wouldn't have believed you."

Fenris stared out at the dusty field nearby and quavered, "What's that terrible noise?"

Graym looked where Fenris was pointing and found the source. "Butterflies."

Fenris nodded - a mistake. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell over with a thud. Fanris, beside him,

whimpered at the sound of the impact.

Graym, moving as silently as possible, crept over to Darll, shook him by the shoulder. Darll's manacles rattled.

Darll flinched and opened two remarkably red eyes. "If I live," he murmured fuzzily, "I'm going to kill you."

Graym sighed and rubbed his own head. "I thought you already had, sir."

By midmorning, they were back on the road and near the first rank of western hills. Graym, pulling the cart along with Darll, was almost glad they had lost so many barrels. The wagon lurched to a stop at every rock in the road . . . and there were many rocks.

At least the companions were feeling better. Skull-Splitter's effect, though true to its name, wore off quickly. Jarek was humming to himself, trying to remember the Wolf brothers' song of the night before. Darll, after swearing at him in strained tones for some time, was now correcting him on the melody and humming along.

Fenris, perched on the cart, yelled, "Trouble ahead!"

Fanris gazed, quivered. "Are they dangerous?"

Darll grated his teeth. "Kender! I hate the nasty little things. Kill 'em all. Keep 'em away. They'll rob you blind and giggle the whole time."

Graym looked up from watching the rutted road. Before he knew what was happening, he was surrounded by kender: eager, energetic, and pawing through their belongings. The kender had a sizable bundle of their own, pulled on a travois, but the bundle changed shape ominously.

"Ho! Ha!" Darll swung two-handed at them, trying to make good on his threat to kill them all. They skipped and ducked, ignoring the length of chain that whistled murderously over their heads.

"Here now, little fellers," Graym said, holding his pack above his head. "Stay down! Good morning!" He smiled at them and skipped back and forth to keep his pack out of reach, and he seemed like a giant kender himself.

One of the kender, taller than the others and dressed in a brown robe with the hood clipped off, smiled back. "Good morning. Where are we?"

"You're in Goodlund, halfway to Sarem if you started from just west of Kendermore." Graym snatched a forked stick from the hands of the tall kender - who didn't seem to mind - and hung his pack from it, lifted it over his head.

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, around." The tall kender took a forked stick from one of the others, who didn't seem to mind either. "East, mostly." He spun the stick, making a loud whistle. "Do you know, the gods told me that the world's greatest disaster would happen in a land to the west? Only it didn't."

"What are you talking about?" Graym looked openly astonished. "The Catcollision?"

"Cataclysm!" Darll snarled.

"Cataclysm, thank you, sir. I keep forgetting." Graym

turned back to the kender. "All that happened in the east, you know."

"I know," the kender said, and sighed. "The gods lied to me. They did it to save our lives - we were going west to see the run - but still, a lie's a lie." He fingered the torn collar of his cleric's robe. "So we don't believe in the gods anymore."

"Good enough," Graym said, brightening. "Smashed the world, didn't they? We're well rid of that lot."

"But they did save our lives," Fenris pointed out.

"From horrible deaths," Fanris added, "like being smashed."

"Or squished, Fan."

The tall kender shrugged. "You miss a lot, worrying about things like that. Say, what's that smell?" His nose wrinkled.

"Dirt, mostly," Jarek said.

The Wolf brothers scowled. "It's a perfectly natural smell," Graym said. "Strong, but natural." He smiled down at the kender. "My name's Graym."

The kender smiled back. "Tarli Half-kender. Half man, half kender."

Graym looked startled, then shrugged. "Well, I'm liberal-minded."

He offered his hand, taking care to keep his pack and pockets out of reach. But at a shout from Jarek, Graym whipped his head around.

"Here now! Off the cart. Mind the barrels." His knapsack fell from the stick.

Tarli caught the pack nimbly, flipped it over once in his deft fingers, and passed it to Graym, who was surprised that a kender would return anything. "Thank you," he said to Tarli, but his mind was on the kender falling and climbing all over the cart. The barrels, three times their size, wobbled dangerously. "Don't they know they could be killed?"

Tarli looked puzzled. "I don't think it would make much difference. Like I said, you can't worry about things like that, like Skorm Bonelover, coming from the east."

"Who?" The name sounded vaguely familiar to Graym's still-fuddled mind.

"Skorm," Tarli said helpfully, "the Fearmaker, the Crusher of Joy."

"Oh, THAT Skorm. You know him, do you?"

"Only by reputation. Everyone's talking about him." Tarli looked to the east. "Well, we'd better keep going if we want to meet up with him." He put two fingers into his mouth and whistled.

The crowd of kender scrambled off the cart and scampered down the road again, pulling the travois behind them. To Graym's watchful eyes, their pockets seemed fuller, and their bundle of supplies seemed larger, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"Cunning little things." Graym watched the kender running happily away. "Good attitudes, the lot of them. You can't keep them down."

"I'll try," Darll grated, "if you'll let me go." He held out his manacled hands.

"Ah!" Graym reached into his pack. "Can't do that, sir, but I could give your arms a rest while we're dragging the cart. You promise not to run off, sir?"

He vaguely remembered Darll's saying something last night that should make Graym nervous, but dragging the cart was hard work, and Darll deserved a reward.

Darll looked sly. "Word of honor." He braced his feet for a quick start and smiled at Graym.

The Wolf brothers ducked under the cart. Even Jarek looked suspicious.

"Right, then." Graym fumbled in the pack, then reached into his left pocket. . .

Then checked his right breeches pocket, his hood, and his jacket.. .

Then stared at the departing kender. He looked back at Darll's impatient face. "Life," he said thoughtfully, "can be funny, sir . . ."

When Darll understood, he shook both fists at the kender and swore until he was panting like a runner.

Darll and Graym started off again. They grabbed the crosspiece of the wagon tongue, braced their feet in the dirt, and pulled. The wagon rolled forward quickly. Graym dropped the crosspiece.

"That was too easy. Jarek?"

Jarek hopped into the cart and counted loudly. "One, two, three, four - "

After a pause, Graym said, "And?"

"That's all," Jarek said.

Graym stared, disbelieving, at the distant dust cloud of the departing kender. "They walked off with a BARREL?"

"Cunning little things," Fenris said.

"Industrious, too," Fanris said.

Jarek finished the inventory. Finally he hopped down and announced, "They got the barrel of Throat's Ease lager, our spare clothes - "

Graym laughed. "Picture one of those little fellows trying to wear my canvas breeches 1"

"And most of the food."

Graym fell silent.

"So we make it to Krinneor in one night or go hungry," Darll said.

"We can do it," Graym said confidently. Landmarks weren't hard to read, but he had often discussed the road - wistfully - with merchants buying barrels and casks.

"There's this hill, and one little town, and a valley, then, and a downhill run from there to Krinneor."

"And prison for me. and a forced march to get there," Darll said gruffly. "I'd be running away free, and you'd be - " He looked at Graym sharply. "I'd be gone if it weren't for those nasty, little, pointy-eared thieves."

Graym said gruffly, "You ought not to criticize others, sir. Not to drag up the past, but you've done worse."

Darll glared at him. "That wasn't a fair trial. The bailey wanted blood, and he got it."

"Of course, he wanted blood. You hurt his dignity. You had only a sword, and you half-killed ten soldiers armed with spears, maces, and swords."

Darll objected. "When I half-kill ten men, I leave only five left alive. I beat them badly, but that wasn't the charge against me, anyway, unless you count resisting arrest."

"True enough, sir," Graym said agreeably. "You scarpered the town treasury and then nicked a hay wagon."

"Nice way to put it. A real sophisticate, you are."

"Assault, theft, intoxication, breaking and entering, reckless endangerment, incitement to stampede, vandalism, arson." He paused. "That's the lot, isn't it, sir?"

"Still and all," Darll said stubbornly, "it WAS a first offense."

"First offense?" Graym gaped. "From you, sir?"

"Well, for this sort of crime."

Graym shook his head. "You tell your side of it well, sir, but I have a contract."

"It's the money, then."

"No, sir." Graym shook his head violently. "I gave a promise. Even if I persuaded the others to agree to forfeit the twentypiece we have coming, I'd still be unable - outstanding warrant and all - to go back to Sarem and return the ten - " He felt in his pocket. . . .

He sighed, didn't bother feeling in his other pockets.

Darll, watching his face, smiled. "Cunning little things."

"Thrifty, too," Graym muttered.

By midday, they had reached the top of the first large hill - low and rocky, with a fault crack running across it. Jarek, scouting ahead for the easiest route for the cart on the broken road, returned, announcing, "People coming." Fen said fearfully, "What if they're robbers?" Fan added, "Or maybe they're the bounty hunters." The Wolf brothers edged toward the back of the cart. Graym grabbed their shirts, pulled them back. He then wiped his hands on his own shirt. "Wait till we've seen them, at least."

He edged to the top of the hill and peered over the top. A group of humans was walking toward them - townsfolk, seemingly, coming from the small knot of cottages standing on the road.

Graym retreated below the crest of the hill, reported what he'd seen. "We can't run, and there's no place to hide. Best we go forward and be friendly. Folks like that."

Jarek looked dubious. "They might rob us."

"Not of much."

"Or we might rob them. Are they rich?"

"I didn't grow up with 'em," Graym retorted. "How should I know?"

Jarek dug in the dirt with his boot. "Well, if they are, and we robbed them, then we'd be better off, right?"

Graym considered. "Now that's an idea. We rob from the rich. And then . . ."

"And then what?" Jarek asked.

"Can't rob from the poor," Fenris said.

"No future in it," Fanris agreed.

Jarek objected, "There's more poor people than rich people. Easier to find."

"Ah, but they don't have as much, do they?"

"Now that's telling him what, Fen."

"Thank you, Fan."

Darll said firmly, "You're not robbing these people."

Graym wasn't too keen on robbing, but he thought Darll was being a bit bossy, for a prisoner, even if he was a mercenary. "And why not, sir?"

Darll shook his head wearily. "Because they have us surrounded."

While they had been talking, the townspeople had encircled the hill and closed ranks. They approached silently. There were thirty or forty of them, dressed in ragged, ill-fitting clothes. Several wore robes.

Graym looked around at the circle of men and women. "Good to see so many of you here to greet us." He waved an arm. "I'd offer a drink, but we're running short."

A robed and hooded figure came forward. The robe was too long, clearly borrowed, and had been dyed a neutral color. "I am Rhael," said the person. "I am the elder."

The voice was strong and dear, strangely high. Graym said dubiously, "Are you sure? You sound kinda young for an elder."

"Quite sure." The woman pulled back her hood and shook her hair free of it.

Darll snorted. "Who are you all?"

"I am Rhael. These are my people. We come from the village of Graveside."

Darll asked, "A law-abiding village?"

She nodded.

"Good." He raised his manacled hands. "Arrest these fools and free me."

"Arrest them? Why?"

"Because they're crooks."

"What have they done?"

"What haven't they? Theft, resisting arrest, drunk and disorderly plenty of times, drunk but not disorderly at least once, sober and disorderly a few times - "

Rhael seemed impressed. "What are they like as fighters?"

Terrible," Darll said truthfully. "Awful to watch. You can't imagine."

"Brutal?"

"That man - " Darll pointed to Graym - "drove off a band of bounty hunters, with only me in chains to help him."

"That one . . ." He pointed to Jarek. "He nearly killed a man with one blow." More or less true, counting a thrown rock as a blow.

"And those two . . . ?"

Darll glanced at the Wolf brothers, who waited eagerly to hear what he could say about them.

"Well, just look at them," Darll said.

The folk of Graveside looked them up and down. The Wolf brothers did look dangerous, both as criminals and as

a health risk.

Darll held out his arms, waiting for his release.

Rhael walked straight up to Graym. "Would you be willing to lead an army?"

Darll choked. Graym's mouth sagged open.

"We need brave men like you," Rhael said. "We're facing a scourge."

One of the elders quavered, "A terrible scourge!"

"I didn't think it would be a nice scourge," Darll muttered.

"His name," Rhael lowered her voice, "is Skorm Bone-lover."

"Not his given name, I take it, Miss?" Graym said.

"He is also called the Sorrow of Huma, the Dark Lady's Liege Man, the Teeth of Death, the Grave of Hope - "

"I've always wanted a nickname," Fen said wistfully.

"We've had some," Fan reminded him.

"Not ones we've always wanted, Fan."

"True enough, Fen." He sighed.

Darll said, suddenly interested, "Don't you people have any fighters, or a bailey or something?"

They all looked sorrowful. "Gone, gone," one said.

"Killed?" Graym said sympathetically.

Rhael shook her head. "The Protector came to me one morning and warned me about the coming of Skorm. A stranger had come in the night and told him, said that he had already fled before Skorm's army. The Protector said the only sensible thing to do was flee, leaving all our things behind, so that Skorm would stay and plunder instead of pursuing us."

Graym frowned. "This Protector wasn't much of an optimist."

"He was terrified," Rhael said. "He said that Skorm would drink the blood of one victim, only to spit it in the face of another. He said Skorm once bit through the arm of a warrior and stood chewing on it in front of him. He said - "

"Never mind," Graym said hastily. His stomach had been wobbly all day. "Where is this scourge?" He looked around fearfully. "Not with you, I take it."

"He and his troops are camped in the bone yard - "

"Picturesque," Graym murmured, approving.

"In the Valley of Death, beyond Graveside. There are more than a hundred of them now. Every dawn," Rhael said with a voice like death, "we see more warriors standing by Skorm's tents. Every day his troops increase."

Graym turned to his companions. "And you all told me no one was hiring. It was nothing but a necessary market downturn, and you call it a Catechism."

"Cataclysm," Darll hissed.

"Right you are, sir." Graym turned to Rhael. "And, now, young elder ... I can't get used to that, by the way. Why are you an elder, Miss?"

"Elders aren't chosen because they are old," a man next to her, quite old himself, explained. "We are chosen because each of us represents one of the elder virtues."

"And what," Graym asked, feeling his ears turning red, "is Miss Rhael's virtue?"

"Elder Rhael embodies fearlessness."

"No wonder she's so young," Darll said dryly. "Fearlessness never reaches old age. What about you?" He pointed with both chained hands at the elder who had spoken. "Who are you?"

The old man stepped back from Darll. "I am Werlow," he said. "I embody caution."

"Good for you," said Darll. "And what did you do about Skorm?"

"I convinced the rest of the people to evacuate," Werlow said. "We elders have stayed, to pray for the coming of heroes."

"We're here," Jarek said happily. "We're heroes, aren't we?" He looked to Graym for support.

Graym cleared his throat. "I don't like to boast. We're desperate men . . . and bold warriors, but we've left our robbing ways behind us. We have trade goods" - he didn't want to say 'ale,' though the barrels made it obvious - "that we're taking all the way to Krinneor, where our fortunes will be made and our lives will be good, in the richest city in the world." His voice went husky. "The golden towers, the marble doors, the excellent drains."

The elders exchanged glances. They were silent.

Finally Rhael said, "The road to Krinneor winds around the Valley of Tombs. There is no way there, except through Skorm's army."

The Wolf brothers made most unwarlike whimpering sounds. Darll edged over and kicked them each, hard.

Graym frowned. "Don't they ever move out of the cemetery, Miss? Parade, or bivouac, or do any of those nice martial things that make armies so popular with politicians?"

Rhael shook her head. "They have no need to," she said sadly. "They just grow strong and plan to attack us."

"How much, to fight them?" Darll asked suddenly.

The elders looked at each other.

"Nothing," a reed-slender old woman said. "We heard of your fight with the bounty hunters. That is why we sought you. If you refuse to fight, we'll inform every hunter we can find, and you'll be taken or killed."

"That seems harsh, Ma'am," Graym said. "Fight or die? For nothing?"

"And what elder virtue are you?" Darll asked.

The old woman smiled thinly. "Thrift."

Graym made up his mind, turned, and addressed his companions. "These pick-me-up armies are all bluff. Farm boys and fishermen, not one real soldier in twenty."

Jarek was counting on his fingers. "How many real soldiers does that make against each of us?"

"One," Fenris said flatly.

"Maybe even two," Farms added.

Graym waved his hand. "What's that to us? Nothing at all. They're just trainees. We're road-tested. Months of hardship, baking sun, blinding rain - "

"Great ale - " Jarek said, caught up in the enthusiasm.

Graym interrupted hurriedly. "And there you are. We'll frighten off this lot in no time and be back on the road." He

raised a fist and shouted, "To Krinneor!"

"To Krinneor!" Jarek shouted. Darll said nothing. The Wolf brothers looked worried.

The elders had tears in their eyes. Graym was pleased to think he had moved them. He held out his hands. "As long as we're fighting the good fight for you, so to speak, can you lend us your swords?"

The elders stared at him.

"We didn't bring any," he added.

"It's not as if we needed them," Jarek said.

The elders were suitably impressed.

"The Protector fled with most of our good weapons. We still have a few." Rhael lifted a rag-wrapped bundle and gave it to Graym. "This is Galeanor, the Axe of the Just."

"Just what?" Jarek asked.

Graym took the axe, eyed it dubiously. "Just kidding."

Darll muttered in his ear. "Perfect. The fat man fights and dies with the Axe of the Just Kidding."

Rhael handed the others dented weapons, the few the Protector had left behind. Darll examined his sword with distaste. Jarek looked at his with delight. The Wolf brothers picked up two badly corroded maces, after touching them gingerly to be sure they weren't dangerous. They stood there, then, staring at one another.

"Don't you think you'd better take up positions opposite the enemy?" Rhael suggested.

"You're absolutely right, Miss," Graym said firmly.

"Move out." With only a small twinge of guilt, he added,

"And we'll take the cart with us - for supplies . . . and . . . strategy."

They traipsed down the hill, walked through Graveside. It was, Graym noted, a pleasant enough place, not much bigger than Sarem. There were cart tracks in front of the homes and manure piles in the tilled fields. It obviously was a farm-to-market town for a larger city. "Krinneor isn't far now," Graym said to the others. "We're closer to the city itself. I know it. Now, if we can just shake this lot. . ."

Graym glanced behind him. Werlow began organizing the elders for a safe retreat down the road. Rhael had gone into one of the cottages.

Graym smiled; they continued on.

At the crest of the hill, Darll raised his hand in silent warning. The others obediently stopped the cart.

"Keep low!" he ordered. They dropped to the ground and peered into the valley below.

Tombstones and open graves, white tents and a great many ropes stippled the valley and spread up the opposite hill. A hundred helmeted, armored warriors stood in line, ready for inspection. Graym looked shocked.

"These scum robbed the graves," said Darll. "And they're wearing the corpses!"

"Odd taste in armor, made out of bones. What for, d'you think, sir?" Graym asked.

"Wolves love bones," Darll said bitterly. "Sheep shy away from them. No use in shying, though. The wolves always win." He smiled grimly. "I know. I'm a wolf."

He pointed downhill cautiously. "The two in front with

the swords are drillmasters, showing close-quarter thrusts. The ones checking the lines are lower-rank officers."

A man dashed up to a soldier, who was twisting this way and that, cuffed him, and yelled in his face. The shouting carried all the way to the hilltop.

"That," Darll said dryly, "would be the sergeant."

"Which one is Skorm?" Graym whispered.

"My guess would be the big guy, wearing the sawed-off skull."

They watched as Skorm paced calmly and evenly, inspecting the troops. The warlord, stepping over a skeleton, kicked the skull. It shattered on a tombstone.

Graym peered down at him. "Now there's a man who knows the value of appearances."

"Don't you ever say anything bad about anybody?"

Graym shrugged. "There's more than enough of that around, sir, if you want it."

"What if we split them down the middle?" a voice said.

They rolled and turned around, Graym snatching the axe from his belt. Rhael, a battered spear with a mended haft in her hands, was standing behind them. She was dressed in leather armor that probably had been trimmed from a butcher's apron.

"I've always heard that was how to deal with a larger force," she said.

"Young Elder Rhael," said Graym, "why don't you go back to town and keep bad folk from climbing the hill to surround us?"

Rhael looked at Graym admiringly. "You have the mind of a warrior." She stood stiffly. "I won't let you down. I promise."

They watched her run back over the hill crest. "I wish I could move like that," Graym said, envious.

"Wouldn't look good on you," Darll muttered.

Graym rubbed his rotund middle. "True enough, sir."

"Now," Darll said, "what's your battle plan?"

"Battle plan, sir?"

"You left Rhael to guard our rear - and an ugly rear at that. What's your plan of attack?"

Graym shuddered. "Attack? Don't even think it, sir. My plan is to run around Skorm and go on to Krinneor. Why do you think we brought the cart?"

The Wolf brothers looked vastly relieved. Darll stared at him, then began to laugh. "I like your style, fat man."

Graym hefted the axe. "Right. The chains, sir."

Darll was suspicious. "You're setting me free?"

"On good behavior." Graym glanced sideways down the hill at the soldiers. "I can't send you running past that lot in chains. They'd hear the rattle for sure."

Darll dropped to one knee and laid the chain on a boulder, turning his head away and shutting his eyes tightly.

Graym swung the broadaxe overhead, brought it down. Sparks shot in all directions. The Axe of the Just Kidding sliced through the chain and gouged the rock. Shards Hew, grazing Darll.

He raised his right hand to wipe his cheek. His left hand automatically followed, a chain's length behind, then

dropped. He looked with wonder at his hands, then looked longingly at the horizon ahead of them, beyond the army. "Right. Ready to run for it?"

He pulled a thong from his pocket, wrapped it around the sleeve of his right arm. Then he bent, tightened his boots, and stood straight.

Graym stared. With only a few tucks and touches, Darll had gone from prisoner to razor-sharp man of war. Graym stared down the hill, where an army was blocking their way. "Just think, sir," he said, "earlier today, the world was sweet, and I wanted it to last forever. Isn't life amazing?"

"While you've got it," Darll said. He poked at Jarek, who was playing mumblety-peg with his sword. "Tighten everything, boy. You want free limbs. Loosen for marches, tighten for fights or retreats."

Jarek tightened his belt hurriedly. Groaning with the effort, Graym bent and tucked his breeches down into his boot tops. He stood puffing and stared down the hill.

Jarek said eagerly, "Are we going to fight now?"

Graym shook his head. "That, my boy, would be the worst disaster since the Cattle-Kissing."

"Cataclysm!" Darll said automatically. "I think we can run around the end of the valley there and be safely on our way to Krinneor before they know what happened."

"We'll be the first traders through Skorm's blockade," said Graym suddenly. "They'll call us heroes and pay triple the value on every glass of ale."

He raised the Axe of the Just Kidding. "To Krinneor!"

Skorm turned around, looked in their general direction.

The Wolf brothers shrieked and dived for the cart.

"No!" Graym shouted.

It was too late. In the struggle to fit underneath the cart, Fanris's foot dislodged the chuck block. The cart started rolling downhill.

The ale!" Graym ran forward. Darll followed, swearing. Jarek whooped and charged alongside him. The Wolf brothers, terrified at being left alone, jumped up and ran after them.

Cart and barrels hurtled down the hill, bouncing over rocks, heading straight for Skorm and his officers.

The officers took one look and ran.

Astonishingly, none of the rank-and-file warriors budged. "Training's training," Darll panted, "but that's not possible."

The lead barrel, now thundering down faster than a man could run, bounced off a dirt pile and into the first row of warriors, who didn't even look up.

The second barrel hit the second row. The third barrel tangled the ropes that had strung the soldiers together. The bodies fell apart.

Darll gripped Graym's shoulder. "They're fake! Nothing but armor on sticks and bones!"

He ran toward the "officers," apparently the only living men on the field. Skorm shouted a command in a harsh voice.

Two of the men sidled around Darll, keeping out of range of his sword. One of them raised a throwing mace

and swung it with a deadly whir.

Graym, desperate, flung the axe end-over-end. It thunked handle-first into the mace-swinger, knocked him senseless.

Darll leapt over the fallen man, stepping on his back. "Officer material," he grunted, and wrapped his dangling manacle chain around the other man's sword and pulled. The sword flew out of the man's hand.

Darll shouted back to Jarek. "Pick up his sword!"

Jarek picked it up, dropping his own sword. Graym punched an opponent in the stomach and doubled him over, sent him stumbling into two men behind him.

The men staggered back and raised their swords, jumping at the Wolf brothers, who were closest.

Fanris and Fenris looked at the armored, bone-covered sword-carrying men. Panic-stricken, the brothers both shrieked, "We surrender!" and tossed their maces in the air.

The maces hit each man squarely in the head. Fenris and Fanris looked at each other in relief and turned to run away.

The remaining men, daunted by five berserkers crazed enough to charge an entire army, fled.

Skorm turned his skull face toward Graym. The grave-robber charged, aiming a vicious two-handed sword straight for Graym's heart.

Darll yelled, "The axe!" picked it up, and threw it.

Graym caught the axe by the thong, just as it struck Skorm's sword and shattered the blade. Graym grabbed the axe handle clumsily, and smacked Skorm on the head.

Skorm Bonelover, the Sorrow of Huma, the Dark Lady's Liege Man, the legendary Eater of Enemies, dropped to the ground with a whimper.

The fat cooper, axe in hand, stood panting over him. Rhael ran down the hill, spear in hand.

"We won!" she cried exultantly.

Halting, she looked down at Skorm's shattered sword and frowned. "That looks familiar," she said. "That's the Protector's Sword of Office!"

Graym bent and pulled the skull off Skorm's face. He was conscious again and looked pinched and scared, but fairly ordinary beyond that.

"Protector!" Rhael gasped.

Darll kicked the Protector's sword hilt away from him and stood watching over him.

Rhael was staring admiringly at an embarrassed Graym. "I heard the noise. I saw the whole thing. You charged an army by yourselves!"

Darll opened his mouth to explain, but Jarek trod on his foot. "We toppled our barrels on them. Then Graym was the first one down. Not even Darll could outrun him."

Rhael sighed. "What a wonderful idea. But your trade goods - your ale - you sacrificed them for us?"

"One barrel made it," Jarek told her. "It rolled off to one side and didn't hit anybody." He shook his head. "But I bet all those other soldiers are drinking it now."

"There are no other soldiers, rock-brain!" Darll growled. "This Protector and his friends built them out of

corpses, tugged on ropes to make them move, pretended to train them. They wanted to scare everyone out of town, then loot it, and it nearly worked."

Jarek scratched his head. "Why didn't the town set up a bunch of fake soldiers to fight back?" he asked.

Darll looked at Graym, at Jarek, and at the Wolf brothers, who, seeing the fight was over, had returned. Darll grinned.

"They did set up fake soldiers. Sort of."

Graym cleared his throat. "Well, we'd best get on the road." He handed the Axe of Just Kidding back to Rhael. "Business calls, Miss. Glad we could help, and all."

She brushed his cheek with her finger. "You knew," she said wonderingly. "Even before you attacked, you knew Skorm was a fraud."

Graym looked uncomfortable. "Well, I had an idea. Couldn't be sure, of course."

Darll rolled his eyes.

Graym, feeling awkward, said simply, "Nice meeting you, Miss." He turned and walked through the graves and the shattered mock soldiers.

They collected the cart and the single surviving barrel. Graym tried, briefly, to find the barrel taps and the rest of their belongings, then said, "Give it up." They dragged the cart through the scattered armor, framework, and bones of the open graves.

The cart rolled freely. Jarek looked at the single barrel in it and said happily, "The price of ale must be way up now."

"Best thing that could happen, really," Graym said, but he sounded troubled. He and the Wolf brothers drew the cart alone. Darll and Jarek walked alongside as they moved up the last hill before Krinneor. Darll was trying to learn the second verse of "The Bald Maid and the Barber."

Fenris, beside Graym, said, "I hate to turn him in."

Graym nodded. "He's not a bad lot. Wanted to kill us or jail us, but face it. Who wouldn't?"

Fanris, on his other side, said, "Can't we just let him go?"

Graym stared at the road. "He's expected. We were paid half in advance. We can't just two-step into Krinneor - "

"Do we need to go there so bad?" Fenris asked softly.

Graym looked back at the cart, bouncing easily with one barrel of ale and no supplies. "It's all we've got left."

They walked in silence, watching Darll try to teach Jarek to juggle. The mercenary, even while mocking Jarek's efforts, had a hand affectionately on the man's shoulder.

The road cut through a pass and angled to the left.

Jarek sniffed the air. "I smell something funny."

"That's the sea, boy," said Graym.

But Darll looked troubled. "I didn't know there was an arm of the sea here."

"A port city," Graym explained. "Not just rich, but a trade center. We're nearly here. Beyond this curve, we'll see the road on the shore, probably a lovely seaside view, all the way to Krinneor - "

They rounded the corner.

The hill plunged down to a sandy beach strewn with rocks. The road ended, half-covered with sand, sloping down into the water and disappearing. Ahead was water, all the way to the horizon, a new sea, still gray with the silt and mud of the land collapsing and the waters rushing in.

A half mile out from shore, a group of battered golden spires stuck upright, barely a man's height above the waves. Gulls were nesting on them.

The men rolled the cart to the beach and stood.

"The golden towers," Fenris said.

"The marble doors," Fanris said.

"And excellent drains," said Darll.

Graym, staring at the spires in shock, murmured, "I hear that's very important for a city."

The others laughed for quite a while. Graym sat on a rock by the shore, staring.

Jarek moved down the beach, picking up stones to skip. The Wolf brothers, once they were over their fear of gulls, took off their boots and went wading. Darll walked up to Graym. "Where to from here?"

"Nowhere." Graym stared, unseeing, over the open water. "No horses, no food, no money. No Krinneor." He blinked his eyes rapidly. "All gone."

Darll was shocked. "There's a world out there. You can start over."

Behind them, a voice said, "You can stay here."

Rhael came forward, holding some sort of medallion and twisting it in her fingers. Her determination was gone; she looked unsure of herself.

Graym stared at her a moment. "You knew the truth about Krinneor, didn't you?"

"We all knew. No one wanted to tell you before you helped us."

"I don't suppose you did, Miss," Graym said heavily.

"And after?"

"Afterward, Elder Werlow was afraid of you. You're fierce warriors."

Darll had the grace not to laugh.

"So you let us go. Good joke." Graym sighed.

She twisted the medallion chain almost into a knot. "I argued with them and said I'd follow you and apologize, and - and give you this."

She held up the medallion, realized how twisted it was. "Sorry." She untwisted the chain nimbly, then dropped it over Graym's neck. "There."

The medallion was a small shield with a single piece of black opal in the shape of an axe. Graym looked down at it.

"It was brave, your coming here when you were embarrassed. Thank you, Miss. I'll keep this."

"Until he gets hungry," Darll said bluntly, "then he'll sell it. He'll have to."

Rhael ignored the mercenary. "Why not stay in Graveside?" she asked. She touched the medallion. "To fill the office that goes with this."

"Office?" Graym said blankly, opening his eyes.

"Of Protector," Rhael said. On impulse, she kissed his cheek. "Please take it. Your men, too. You'll have food and

lodging, and we know we can trust you."

Graym stared bemusedly at her. "Me, a law officer?" He turned to Darll. "Would I be any good, sir?"

"Unless you rob them, you can't do worse than the last one they had." He looked at the dangling chain. "I suppose you'll put me in jail there?"

Graym sighed. "Can't do it, now that I'm their Protector. Wouldn't be right, would it, sir? I mean, you're their war hero and all."

He frowned, concentrating, then smiled and slapped Darll on the back. "You can go, sir. It's all right. You're pardoned."

Darll's jaw fell and he goggled at Graym. "You're pardoning me?"

"First offense, like you said, sir. You've matured since then. Probably be an upstanding citizen of Graveside." He puckered his brow, thinking, and suddenly brightened. "You could stay and be my military advisor."

"You lead? Me advise?" It was too much. Darll shook his head and walked away, swearing, laughing, and muttering.

"What's he upset about?" Jarek asked. "He fought all right."

"You all fought wonderfully," Rhael said firmly.

"You're our heroes." She kissed Graym again, then walked swiftly back through the pass toward Graveside.

"Heroes?" the Wolf brothers said at once, and laughed.

Graym said gruffly, "There've been worse."

Darll looked back up the road toward Graveside, at the retreating Rhael. "Lucky for them they found us, in fact."

Graym grinned at the others. "Best thing that could have happened, really."

Suddenly he was back at the cart, tugging on one of the shafts. Darll joined him. "Right, then. Let's get back."

Graym pointed at the remaining barrel of ale. "Skull-Splitter all around, when we get there, on the house."

It was a surprisingly fast trip.

INTO SHADOW, INTO LIGHT

RICHARD A. KNAAK

The knight stalked across the hellish landscape, sword in hand. The fog failed to conceal the desolation around him. Gnarled trees and churned dirt were sights all too familiar after so long. His world, his cursed world, was always much the same: dry, crackling soil, no sun, no shadows, no refuge, no life, just endless devastation . . . and somewhere in the fog, those who ever hunted him.

The fever burned, but, as always, he forced himself to withstand the pain. Sweat poured down his face, trickling into his armor. The plague that coursed through him never rested. Oddly, it had been a part of him so long that he probably would have felt lost without it.

The rusted armor creaked as the knight stumbled up a small hill. Beneath the rust on his breastplate there could still be seen a ravaged insignia marking him as a knight of the Solamnic orders. He rarely looked down at the fading

mark, for it was a mockery of his life, a reminder of why he had been condemned to this existence.

The price of being a traitor had been heavier than he had ever thought possible.

As he started down the other side of the ravaged hill, the knight caught sight of something odd, something out of place in this wasteland. It seemed to glitter, despite the lack of sunlight, and to the weary knight it was worth more than a mountain of gold. A stream of clear, cool water flowed no more than a few yards from where he stood.

He smiled - a rare smile of hope. The knight staggered forward, moving as fast as he could manage, ignoring pain, fatigue, fear. How long since his last drink of water? The memory escaped him.

Kneeling before the stream, he closed his eyes. "My Lord Paladine, I beseech you! Hear this simple prayer! Let me partake this once! A single sip of water, that is all I ask!"

The knight leaned forward, reached out toward the stream . . . and fell back in horror as he stared into its reflective surface.

"Paladine preserve me," he muttered. Slowly leaning forward again, he stared at his image in the stream.

Pale as a corpse, his face was gaunt, almost skull-like. Lank, wispy hair - what could be seen beneath his helm