

Glen Cook - Dread Empire 03 - Shadow Of All Night Falling

PROLOGUE: Summer, 994 AFE

A blue-lighted room hollowed from living rock. Four men waiting. A fifth entered. "I was right." The wear and dust of a savage journey still marked him. "The Star Rider was in it up to his ears." He tumbled into a chair.

The others waited.

"It cost the lives of twelve good men, but they were profitably spent. I questioned three men who accompanied the Disciple to Malik Taus. Their testimony convinced me. The Disciple's angel was the Star Rider."

"Fine," said the one who made decisions. "But where is he now? And where's Jerrad?"

"Two questions. One answer. Thunder Mountain."

Denied a response, the newcomer continued, "More of my best agents spent. But word came: a small old man and a winged horse have been seen near the Caverns of the Old Ones. Jerrad took pigeons. Birdman brought one in just when I got home. Jerrad's found him, camped below the mountain. He's got the Horn with him." His final remark was almost hysterically excited.

"We'll leave in the morning."

This Horn, the Horn of the Star Rider, the Wind-mjirnerhorn, was reputed to be a horn of plenty. The man who could wrest it from its owner and master it would want for nothing, could create the wealth to buy anything.

These five had fantasies of restoring an empire raped away from their ancestors.

Time had passed that imperium by. There was no more niche it could fill. The fantasies were nothing more. And that most of these men realized. Yet they persisted, motivated by tradition, the challenge, and the fervor of the two doing the talking.

"Down there," said Jerrad, pointing into a dusk-filled, deep, pine-greened canyon. "Beside the waterfall."

The others could barely discern the distance-diminished smoke of the campfire.

"What's he up to?"

Jerrad shrugged. "Just sitting there. All month. Except one night last week he flew the horse somewhere back east. He was back before dark next day."

"You know the way down?"

"I haven't been any closer. Didn't want to spook him."

"Okay. We'd better start now. Make use of what light's left."

"Spread out and come at him from every direction. Jerrad, whatever you do, don't let him get to the

Horn. Kill him if you have to."

It was past midnight when they attacked the old man, and could have been later still had there been no moon.

The Star Rider wakened to a footfall, bolted toward the Horn with stunning speed.

Jerrad got there first, gutting knife in hand. The old man changed course in midstride, made an astounding leap onto the back of his winged horse. The beast climbed the sky with a sound like that of beating dragon's pinions.

"Got away!" the leader cursed. "Damned! Damned! Damned!"

"Lightfooted old geezer," someone observed.

And Jerrad, "What matter? We got what we came for."

The leader raised the bulky Horn. "Yes. We have it now. The keystone of the New Empire. And the Werewind will be the cornerstone."

With varying enthusiasm, as their ancestors had, the others said, "Hail the Empire."

From high above, distance-attenuated, came a sound that might have been laughter.

ONE: He Is Entered in the Lists of the World

While hooded executioners lifted and set the ornately carved stake, a child wept at their feet. When they brought the woman, her eyes red from crying and her hair disheveled, he tried to run to her. Gently, an executioner scooped him up and set him in the arms of a surprised old peasant. While the hooded men piled faggots around her calves, the woman stared at child and man, seeing nothing else, her expression pleading. A priest gave her the sacraments because she had committed no sin in the eyes of his religion. Before withdrawing to his station of ceremony, he shook brightly dyed, belled horsehair flails over her tousled head, showering her with the pain-killing pollen of the dreaming lotus. He began singing a prayer for her soul. The master executioner signaled an apprentice. The youth brought a brand. The master touched it to the faggots. The woman stared at her feet as if without comprehending what was happening. And the child kept crying.

The farmer, with a peasant's rough kindness, carried the boy away, comforting him, taking him where he wouldn't hear. Soon he stopped moaning and seemed to have resigned himself to this cruel whim of Fate. The old man dropped him to the cobbled street, but didn't release his hand. He had known his own sorrows, and knew loss must be soothed lest it become festering hatred. This child would someday be a man.

Man and boy pushed through crowds of revelers- Execution Day was always a holiday in Ilkazar-the youngster skipping to keep pace with the farmer's long strides. He rubbed tears away with the back of a grimy hand. Leaving the Palace district, they entered slums, followed noisome alleys running beneath jungles of laundry, to the square called Farmer's Market. The old man led the boy to a stall where an elderly woman squatted behind melons, tomatoes, cucumbers, and braids of hanging maize.

"So," she said, voice rattling. "What's this you've found, Royal?"

"Ah, Mama, a sad one," he replied. "See the tearstreaks? Come, come, find a sweet." Lifting the boy before him, he entered the stall.

The woman rifled a small package and found a piece of sugar candy. "Here, little man. For you. Sit down, Royal. It's too hot to tramp around town." Over the boy's shoulder she asked a question with a lifted eyebrow.

"A hot day, yes," said Royal. "The King's men were witch-burning again. She was young. A black-hood had me take her child away."

From the shade beside the old woman the boy watched with big, sad eyes. His left fist mashed the rock candy against his lips. His right rubbed the few tears still escaping his eyes. But he was silent now, watching like a small idol.

"I was thinking we might foster him." Royal spoke softly, uncertainly. The suggestion closely skirted a matter painful for both of them.

"It's a grave responsibility, Royal."

"Yes, Mama. But we have none of our own. And, if we passed on, he'd have the farm to keep him." He didn't say, but she understood, that he preferred passing his property to anyone but the King, who would inherit if there were no heirs.

"Will you take in all the orphans you find?"

"No. But this one is a charge Death put on us. Can we ignore Her? Moreover, haven't we hopped through our springs and summers, into our autumns, hopelessly, when the tree couldn't bear? Should I slave on the land, and you here selling its produce, merely to bury silver beneath the woodshed floor? Or to buy a peasant's grave?"

"All right. But you're too kind for your own good. For example, your marrying me, knowing me barren."

"I haven't regretted it."

"Then it's settled by me."

The child took it all in in silence. When the old woman finished, he took his hand from his eyes and set it on hers in her lap.

Royal's farmhouse, on the bank of the Aeos two leagues above Ilkazar, blossomed. Where once it had been dusty within and weathered, tumble-down without, it began to sparkle. The couple took coin from hidden places and bought paint, nails, and cloth for curtains. A month after the child's arrival, the house seemed newly built. Once-crusty pots and pans glistened over the hearth. Accumulated dirt got swept away and the hardwood floor reappeared. New thatch begoldened the roof. A small room to the rear of the house became a fairy realm, with a small bed, handmade cabinet, and a single child-sized chair.

The change was marked enough to be noticed. The King's bailiffs came, reassessed the taxes. Royal and the old woman scarcely noticed.

But, though they gave him all love and kindness, the child never uttered a "thank you." He was polite enough, never a bother, and loving in a doleful way, but he never spoke-though sometimes, late at night,

Royal heard him crying in his room. They grew accustomed to his silence, and, in time, stopped trying to get him to talk. Perhaps, they reasoned, he had never obtained the faculty. Such afflictions weren't uncommon in a city as harsh as Ilkazar.

In winter, with snows on the ground, the family remained indoors. Royal taught the boy rustic skills: whittling, the husking and shelling of maize, how bacon is cured and hung, the use of hammer and saw. And chess, at which he soon excelled. Royal often marveled at his brightness, forgetting that children are no more retarded than their elders, just more innocent of knowledge.

Winter passed. The child grew in stature and knowledge, but never spoke. They named him Varth, "the Silent One" in their language. Spring came and Royal began working the fields. Varth went with him, walking behind the plow, breaking clods with his bare feet. Soon shoots sprouted. Varth helped with the weeding, planted stakes for the tomatoes, and threw stones at birds threatening the melons. The old woman thought he would make a fine farmer some day. He seemed to have a love for tending life.

When summer came and the melons fattened, the tomatoes reddened, and the squash grew into green clubs, Varth helped with the harvesting, packing, and the loading of Royal's wagon. The old woman opposed his return to Ilkazar, but Royal thought he had forgotten. So he went with them to market, and a good day they had there. Their crop was one of the earliest in, their produce was exceptional, and Ilkazar was out in force, seeking fresh vegetables. Later, when tomatoes and squash were common, they would be spurned in favor of meat.

The old woman, from her usual place in the shade, said, "If for nothing but luck, the adoption was wise. Look! When they can't get melons they take tomatoes or squash."

"It's early in the season. When the stalls are full and there's produce left for the hogs, things won't look so bright. Do you think we could get a tutor for Varth?"

"A tutor? Royal! We're peasants."

"Castes are castes, but there're ways to get around that. Silver is the best. And we've got some we'll never use otherwise. I just thought he might want to learn his letters. Seems a pity to waste a mind like his on farming. But I wouldn't get involved with anyone important. The village priest, maybe. He might take the job for fresh vegetables and a little money to tide his wine-cellar between collections."

"I see you've already decided, so what can I say? Let's tell him, then. Where's he off to now?"

"Across the square watching the boys play handball. I'll fetch him."

"No, no, let me. I'm getting stiff. Mind you watch the tomatoes. Some of these young things are dazzlers. They'll steal you blind while you're trying to get a peek down an open blouse. Those painted nipples..."

"Mama, Mama, I'm too old for that."

"Never too old to look." She stepped between empty tomato crates, past the remainder of the squash, started across the square.

Soon she returned, disturbed. "He wasn't there. Royal. The boys say he left an hour ago. And the donkey's gone."

Royal looked to the corrals. "Yes. Well, I've got a notion where he's gone then. You mind the sly young

'prentices from the wizards' kitchen."

She chuckled softly, then grew grave. "You think he went back where..."

"Uhm. I'd hoped he wouldn't remember, being so young. But the King's lessons aren't easily forgotten. A death at the stake is a haunt fit for a lifetime of nightmares. Have some candy ready when we get back."

Royal found Varth about where he expected, astride the donkey, before the King's gate. The plaza was less grim than usual, although, apparently, the boy hadn't come to see the leavings of executions. Looking small and fragile, he studied the Palace's fortifications. As Royal entered the square, Varth started for a postern gate. The sentry there was a gruff-looking, middle-aged veteran who stopped him and asked his business. He was still trying to coax Varth into answering when Royal arrived.

"Pardon, Sergeant. I was minding my stall too close. He wandered away."

"Oh, no trouble, no trouble. They'll do that. Got a flock of my own. What's in down to market? Woman was talking about going."

"She'd better hurry. The melons are gone already. The tomatoes and squash will be soon."

"Look for me this evening, then. Save a squash and a few tomatoes. I've a craving for goulash. And mind where that donkey wanders. He has a likely lad aboard." He offered Varth a warm parting smile, sincere in its concern.

Varth betrayed no emotion as Royal led the donkey away. But later, as they pushed through the twisty alleys and the old peasant asked, "Varth, would you like to learn the cleric arts?" he grew ecstatic. Royal was surprised by his intensity. For a moment, indeed, it seemed the boy might speak. But then he settled into his usual stolidity, revealing only a fraction of his inner joy.

So, after the last squash were sold and the three returned to the farm, Royal went to visit the parish priest.

Time passed and the boy grew until, at an age of about ten, he was as tall as Royal and nearly as strong. The old couple were pleased. They cared for him like a precious jewel, giving the best of everything. In a land where disease, hunger, and malnutrition were constant companions of the poor, he had the gift of an excellent diet. He grew tall in a land where tall men were rare.

His learning, under the tutelage of the priest, went well. He learned to write quickly, often used notes where another would have spoken. The priest was impressed with his ability. He refused all payment except the occasional gift of produce. He insisted that the teaching of an eager student was ample reward. He soon took Varth to the limits of his own knowledge.

As it must, sorrow one day entered the house by the river above Ilkazar. In the fall, after a last load had been sold at market, the old woman suffered a seizure. She cried out and went into a coma, never to waken. Royal grieved, as a husband of long-standing will, but accepted the loss in his stoic way. She had had a long, full life, except for her barrenness, and in the end had even had the pleasure of rearing a son. Moreover, Royal was pleased to see Varth equally stricken by her passing. While he had seldom been demonstratively affectionate, neither had he been disobedient or disrespectful. His mind simply dwelt away, as if in a shadow world where life couldn't reach him.

As farmers have always done, and will always do, Varth and Royal buried their dead, then returned to

working their fields. But the peasant was old, and his desire to live had failed with the death of his wife. Early in the spring, with the first crops planting, he joined her quietly in the night. Varth thought him sleeping till he shook him.

Varth wept again, for he had loved Royal as a son should love a father. He went to the village, found the priest, brought him to say the burial service. He worked the farm to the best of his ability and finished the season. At market he often sold cheaply because he refused to haggle. Then, having worked the summer in memory of his foster parents, he had the priest sell the farm and began a life of his own.

TWO: Down from the Mountains of Fear

Ravenkrak was an ancient castle built so deep within the Kratchnodian Mountains, on a high peak called the Candareen, that few people down in the settled lands knew that it existed. Yet seven people who followed a winding mountain trail would soon put the name on countless pairs of lips. Six were called Storm Kings by those who knew them not. Their destination was the capital city of the northernmost of the Cis-Kratchnodian kingdoms, Iwa Skolovda.

At their head rode Turran, Lord of Ravenkrak. Behind him, eldest, cruel-faced and graying, Ridyeh came, then Valther, the youngest brother, who was quite handsome. Next came stolid, quiet Brock and his twin, Luxos. Luxos was tall and lean as a whippet; Brock was short and heavily muscled. Jerrad came last. His sole interest in life was the hunt; be it for a mountain bear or a dangerous man. Six strange men then.

The seventh was their sister, Nepanthe, the last-born. Her hair was black and long, a family trait. She rode proudly, as befit her station, but hers was not a conquering, militant bearing. She rode not as the virgin mistress of Ravenkrak, but as a sad and lonely woman. She was uncommonly beautiful in her waning twenties, yet her heart was as cold as her mountain home. But her aloofness, here, was caused by opposition to her brothers' plans.

She was weary of their plots and maneuvers. A week earlier, braving eternal damnation, she had summoned the Werewind to seal the passes through which they now rode, in order to keep her brothers home. But she had failed, and now they no longer trusted her left behind.

The party approached Iwa Skolovda's North Gate nervously. They were dead if recognized. A feud as bitter as blood, as old as the forests, as enduring as death, existed between Ravenkrak and the city. But their entry went unchallenged. It was autumn, a time when northern trappers and traders were expected with summer pelts for Iwa Skolovda's furriers.

They rode to the heart of the town, through thick foreign sounds and smells, to the Inn of the Imperial Falcon, where they remained in hiding for several days. Only Turran, Valther, and Ridyeh dared the streets, and that only by night. Days they spent in their rooms, honing their plans.

Nepanthe, alone and lonely, stayed in her room and thought about things she'd like, or things she was afraid, to do. She slept a great deal and dreamed two repeated dreams, one beautiful, one dreadful. The bad one always grew out of the good.

In the first dream she rode out of the Kratchnodian Mountains, south, past Iwa Skolovda and Itaskia, to fabulous Dunno Scuttari, or the cradle of western culture, Hellin Daimiel, where a beautiful, intelligent woman could make herself a place in the sun. Then the dream would shift subtly till she was afoot in a city of a thousand crystal towers. She wanted one of those towers as her own. Warmth flooded her when her gaze touched one in particular-always emerald-and she was inexorably drawn. Both fear and

eagerness grew as she moved nearer. Then, at twenty paces, she laughed joyously and ran forward.

Always the same. Nightmare then came roaring from the dark dominions of her mind. Touch the spire-it was a spire no more. With a roar like a fall of jewels, the thing crumbled. From its ruins a terrible dragon rose.

Nepanthe fled into a dreamscape that had changed. The city of crystal towers became a forest of angry spears, striking. She knew those spears meant no harm, yet she feared them too much to question the cause of her fear.

Then she'd awaken, perspiration-wet, terrified, guilt-ridden without knowing why.

Though her nights, because of the dreams, were anything but dull, Nepanthe was bored by day. Then all she had to occupy her mind was the dreariness of her life at Ravenkrak. She was weary of gray mountains snow-shrouded and ribboned with rivers of ice, and of continually howling arctic winds. She was tired of being alone and unsought and a tool for her brothers' lunatic plan. She wanted to stop being a Storm King and get out in the world and just be.

Finally, there came a night, their fifth in Iwa Skolovda, when the Storm Kings set things in motion. Under a cloudy midnight sky, with intermittent moonlight, the brothers left the inn. Armed.

Valther and Ridyeh ran toward the North Gate. Turran and the others ambled to the Tower of the Moon, an architectural monstrosity of gray stone from which city and kingdom were ruled.

In cellars, in dark places, rough men met and sharpened swords. This would be a night for settling scores with Council and King.

Valther and Ridyeh neared the gate and its two sleepy guardsmen. One growled, "Who goes?"

"Death, maybe," Ridyeh replied. His sword whispered as he drew it from its scabbard. The tip stopped a hair's breadth from the watchman's throat.

The second guard swung a rusty pike, but Valther ducked under, pressed a dagger against his ribs. "Down on the pavement!" he ordered, and down the man went, pike clattering. The other followed quickly. Valther and Ridyeh bound them, dumped them in the guardhouse.

Ridyeh sighed. "When I saw that pike coming down..." He shrugged.

"The gate," Valther grumbled, embarrassed. Grunting, they heaved the bar aside, pushed the gate open. Ridyeh brought a torch from the gatehouse, carried it outside, wigwagged it above his head. Soon there came sounds of stealthily moving men.

A giant of a man with a red beard emerged from the darkness, followed by sixty soldiers in the livery of Ravenkrak.

"Ah, Captain Grimmason," Ridyeh chuckled. He embraced the shaggy giant. "You're right on time. Good."

"Yes, Milord. How're things going?"

"Perfectly, so far. But the end remains to be seen," Valther replied. "We've got the hardest part to do.

Follow me."

Arriving as Valther and Ridyeh were opening the city gate, Turran and the others found the door of the Tower of the Moon held by a single guard. Politely Turran said, "Bailiff, we're Itaskian merchants, fur traders, and would like an audience with the King."

The watchman inclined his head, said, "Tomorrow night, maybe. Not tonight. He's tied up in a Defense Council meeting. And isn't it a bit late?"

"Defense Council?"

"Yes." Lonely posts make men eager for company. This watchman was no exception. Leaning forward, whispering, he confided, "Ravenkrak is supposed to be stirring up the rabble. One of the men thought he saw Turran, the chief of the mad wizards. Old Seth Byranov, that was. Probably looking through bad wine. He's a souse. But the King listened to him. Huh? Well, maybe the old fool knows something we don't." He chuckled, clearly thinking that unlikely. "Anyway, no audiences tonight."

"Not even for the Storm Kings themselves?" Luxos asked. He laughed softly when the old man jerked in astonishment.

"Brock, Jerrad, take care of him," Turran ordered. They bound and gagged the man quickly. "Luxos,"

Turran called, holding a ragged piece of parchment to torchlight and squinting at it. "Which stair?" He held a plan of the tower that had been put together for Valther by those men sharpening swords in cellars.

"The main if it's speed we're after."

Turran led the way. They met no resistance till they reached the door of the council chamber at tower's top. There another bailiff tried to block their way. Leaning forward to look at their faces, he discovered the naked steel in their hands. "Assassins!" he cried. He scurried back, tried to close the door. But Brock and Turran used their shoulders, burst in over his sprawling form. Jerrad offered him a hand up after planting a boot on his sword.

Councilmen panicked. Fat burghers threatened to skewer one another as they scrambled for weapons while retreating to the farthest wall. Their ineffectual guardian joined them. The King alone didn't move. Fear kept him petrified.

"Good evening!" said Turran. "Heard you were talking about us. Come now! No need to be afraid. We're not after your lives-just your kingdom." He laughed.

His mirth died quickly. The Councilmen still kept their weapons presented for battle. "Ravenkrak must have this city!"

"Why?" one asked. "Are you reviving a feud so ancient that it's hardly a legend anymore? It's been centuries since your ancestors were exiled."

"It's more than that," Turran replied. "We're building an Empire. A new Empire, to beggar Ilkazar." He said it seriously, though he knew that to his brothers the business was more a game, chess with live players. For all their planning and preparation, he and his brothers hadn't devoted much thought to consequences or costs. Brock, Luxos, Jerrad, and Ridyeh were playing out Ravenkrak's age-old

fantasies more for the excitement than from devotion.

Nervous laughter. Someone said, "A world empire? Ravenkrak? With a handful of men? When Ilkazar failed with her millions? You're mad."

"Like a fox," Turran replied, pushing his dark hair back. "Like a fox. I've already taken Iwa Skolovda. And without blood lost."

"Not yet!" A Councilman shuffled forward, sword ready.

Turran shook his head sadly, said, "Take care of the fool, Luxos. Don't hurt him."

Luxos stepped up, smiling confidently. His opponent's certainty wavered. Then he made a lunge that should have slain. But Luxos brushed his blade aside, launched his own attack. Steel rang on steel three times. The Iwa Skolovdan stared at his empty hand.

The lesson wasn't lost on the others.

Turran chuckled. "Like I said, we're taking over. We'll do it without bloodshed if we can. But we can hold a festival for the Dark Lady if you want it that way. You there. Look out the window."

A sullen fat man did so. "Soldiers!" he growled. "What're you doing?"

"I told you, taking the city."

Deep-throated rage sounds came from the Councilmen. They started forward...

"Tower's secure, Milord," said a bass voice from beyond the doorway. The red-bearded captain led a squad into the chamber. He glanced at the bewildered Councilmen, laughed, asked, "What should I do with them?"

"Lock them in their own dungeon till Nepanthe's secure. Where's Valther?"

"You want me?" Valther entered, panting from the climb up the stair. His face was flushed with excitement.

"Yes. Collect your revolutionaries. I want to start organizing the new administration tonight. And get our troops out of sight as soon as we can."

Valther departed.

Turran continued, "Ridyeh, take a squad and get Nepanthe. I want her moved in here before sunup."

Ridyeh nodded, left.

Turran's captain led the Councilmen off to their cells. Then the Storm Kings sat down with the King of Iwa Skolovda and dictated his abdication announcement.

Nepanthe came. The men from the cellars brought their sharpened swords. She became their Princess and they her army and police-though no Storm King trusted them. They had proven treacherous already.

Nepanthe took to her role, played it better than her brothers expected. She didn't approve of the conquest, had risked much to prevent it, yet, when forced, plunged into the act with a will. This was a squalid, festering city unlike any in her dreams-she feared there were none that marvelous-but, at least, Iwa Skolovda provided a shadow of an answer to her needs. She would take what she could from her stolen moment of glory.

The deposed King announced his abdication formally at noon next day, though the city already knew and seemed disinclined to resist. People seemed to think nothing could be worse than the fallen government, so corrupt had it been.

Because he didn't want to flaunt his power, to aggravate historically based animosities, Turran led his soldiers back to Ravenkrak, leaving just one platoon, commanded by Grimmason's lieutenant, Rolf Preshka, to be Nepanthe's bodyguard. The other Storm Kings remained, to help their sister establish her administration, but they worked impatiently, looking forward to their next easy conquest.

Nepanthe stood at a window in a dark chamber of the Tower of the Moon, alone. She looked out on a garden bathed in moonlight. It was almost morning. Her black hair, flowing over her shoulders, shone from recent brushing. Her dark eyes danced, searching the garden. Her lips, full and red when she smiled (so rarely), were pulled into a tight, pale line as she pondered something unpleasant. An almost permanent frown-crease rose between her brows. Suddenly she drew out of her slouch, turned, began pacing. Her walk was graceful but asexual. Despite her beauty, she seemed unfeminine, perhaps because she had lived too long in the company of hard men, perhaps because she was always afraid. The evil dreams came to her every night now. But Ravenkrak, not her dreams, haunted her at the moment.

They were, she thought, making a game of conquest, just as they had during childhood. But they were grown up and it was a real world now, a world they hardly knew. They had lived too long in droll, dead Ravenkrak. It had done things to their minds. A mad castle, she thought, up there on the highest of the high peaks, brooding in a land of knife-backed ridges and permanent winter. It just sat there crumbling away, its inmates occasionally attacking Iwa Skolovda. Poor city! Yet there was the old score to be settled.... Their ancestors, the Empire's viceroys in Iwa Skolovda, had been driven into the Kratchnodians when the Empire fell apart, and nearly every generation since had taken its stab at reestablishing the family suzerainty over the former Imperial province of Cis-Kratchnodia. Fools' dreams took the longest to die.

Turran, as always, played the general. But what had he for armies? Ha! A few hundred men, of whom only Redbeard Grimmason's renegade Guildsmen were fit for combat. Yet she pitied the cities of the west. They would fight, and Turran would smash their ancient walls and venerable castles with the Werewind. Never before had there been such command of the Power in the family. A way of life would end. A microcosmic culture, Raven-krak's, would fall because its people had to play their game. She grew increasingly angry as she considered the yet-to-die.

Without realizing it, she was making the same arrogant assumptions she despised in her brothers. She hated their bold confidence, yet could not herself conceive of anything but victory on the battlefield of witchcraft.

"Will the idiocy never end?" she asked the night.

Certainly it would, someday, if only when Lady Death's couriers called her name. There would be an end: victory or defeat. Yet in either she could see no escape from the cramped, exclusive society of her home. Death seemed the only path to real freedom.

Oh, so terribly, she wanted done with this wearisome business of life. Her brothers didn't understand. They were little fishes happy in the waters of their little happenings. They didn't recognize the frightened child, the wondering, eager, world-curious child, hiding in Nepanthe's mind. But Nepanthe didn't understand Nepanthe either-least of all those fears that by day hid behind her fiery temper and by night ruled her dreams.

The dreams had changed during her stay in Iwa Skolovda. The pleasant part remained fixed, but, as she reached a tremulous hand for the emerald spire... Tower dissolves, dragon rises, she runs into strange land. Into the forest of spears, but no longer alone. On every hand, in graceful thousands, cats, twisting and dodging; spears leap from the earth and stab. Struck, cats accept the shafts with joy. Most make only token attempts to escape. Horrified, Nepanthe runs. To her sorrow, she always escapes alone.

Alone. She was always alone, even in the center of a city, at the heart of a kingdom.

Her dreams so troubled her that she fought sleep. Now, thinking of the horror, there was nothing she wanted more than to be able to cry. She couldn't. Ravenkrak had weathered her tenderer emotions; even anger and hatred were growing pale. Soon she'd have nothing but the terror of her lonely nights.

Slowly, methodically, she cursed. Across her lips passed every abomination, every blasphemy, every obscenity heard during a life spent in the company of hard men. The moon passed the western horizon. Stars faded. Dawn came before she finished. And when she was done she was left with nothing. Nothing but fear.

But, for just a moment, childhood memory stirred. The daydream about the strange knight who would come to rescue her from the Candareen.

That memory was as bad as the dreams. It made her question what that innocent child had become; almost a harlot, letting her brothers prostitute her for the advancement of their game. Daily she was forced to endure the indignity of being ravaged by the eyes of the human trash her brothers had given her to rule. A curse on them all, and especially on her brothers for being too lazy to handle their own administration.

When she finally surrendered herself to her bed, she whispered a formal prayer:

"May the Gods Above, or the Gods Below, or any Powers here present, cast down, disperse, and render unto destruction the agents of destruction, the Storm Kings of Ravenkrak."

One night, in the highest chamber of the Tower of the Moon, six people gathered, waiting for Turran. Five waited with disinterested patience, but Nepanthe...

"Blood!" she swore, her small fist striking the table in inelegant pique. "Will that sluggard never get here?"

"Patience, Nepanthe," Ridyeh pleaded. "What's the hurry? The weather's terrible since you abused the Werewind. We'll wait, no matter how long."

She bridled at the reference to her past failing, but said no more.

"Just a bit longer," Valther said. "He'll be here soon."

And Turran arrived within the hour. Head cocked, eyes appraising, a smile his only greeting, he stood a moment at the door, studying his family. He was the tallest of the seven and had a heavy, muscular body

massing almost two hundred pounds. His eyes and hair were those of the family, black and shining. There was something about him, a charisma, that made people, especially women, want to forward his plans. He was a dreamer, though he dreamed less complexly, more grandly than Nepanthe, of leading victorious armies. He was handsome, pleasant, lovable, potentially a great leader-and more than a little mad.

"How're things going?"

"Perfectly," Ridyeh replied. "Our victory is written in the stars. The earth should be shaking." Turran frowned. Subdued, Ridyeh continued, "You're late. What happened?"

"The weather." Turran settled into the one free chair. "There's a permanent storm over the Kratchnodians. Result of Nepanthe's experiment. It's getting more powerful, too. Had a hell of a time getting back. We've got to fix it."

Nepanthe didn't miss his sarcasm. "You damned men!" she sputtered. "Always so lordly... Now we're all here. let's get on with the foolery. What's your news, Turran?"

"Ah, always the same, aren't you Nepanthe? Always rush-rush-rush. Well, it seems the world could care less what we do in Iwa Skolovda. Brock," changing the subject, "is there any wine? It's been a hungry ride."

"Is that all you've got to say after keeping us waiting so long?" Nepanthe demanded. "Just: 'Give me something to eat.'"

Turran's reply expressed an anger long held in check. "We've put up with your pets too long, Nepanthe. What you did with the Werewind won't happen again. I'll warn you once: you'll be treated the way you behave."

She missed the danger-sound in his voice. "What can you do? Lock me in the Deep Dungeons so I don't spoil your idiot scheme?"

The unanimity of their nods bought her silence. Shocked, she listened as Luxos, who often defended her, said, "If it's the only way, I'll take you Downdeep myself."

"And throw away the key," Valther added, the only brother to whom she felt really close.

She was overwhelmed. Turran's madness had infected them all. And she knew they made no idle threats. She shut her mouth and kept it that way.

"Valther, what's happened here?" Turran asked. Intelligence was Valther's responsibility.

"We hold the Tower, the symbol of power. For the time being the people are satisfied. The shadow of Ilkazar doesn't disturb them as much as it did a few generations back."

Turran grew thoughtful. Finally, he asked, "Nepanthe, can we trust you if we leave you here alone?"

Not risking anything, she merely nodded. Anyway. Valther's men would be watching every minute. What could she do to ruin their game?

"Good. I want to go home, work with the troops. We'll leave in the morning, come back in time for a

spring campaign. You take care. If you get an urge to sabotage things, remember the Deep Dungeons. Think about living there till this's over. My patience will be short for a while."

Nepanthe shuddered. The Deep Dungeons were places of slime and stench and horror far beneath Ravenkrak, supposedly haunted, so long abandoned that no one living knew them in their entirety.

"Valther?"

"Yes?"

"Will you get the sending gear ready? I stopped by Dvar's embassy on the way. I don't like their attitude. They won't recognize our sovereignty. We'd better make an example of them. Show our power early."

An eager blush colored Nepanthe's cheeks. At last something interesting was going to happen. She enjoyed manipulating the Werewind.

(Aerial elementals haunted the high range, powers that ran with and sometimes controlled the Kratchnodian storms. Lowlanders, who thought in terms of ghosts and demons, called these the Wild Hunt, believing them to be malevolent spirits in search of souls to drag into their own special Hell. The Storm Kings knew better. During the generations following their flight after the Fall of the Empire, the family had learned to control the elementals, and thus the weather that followed them-especially raging wind. The Werewind.)

That evening, while people enjoyed a pleasant winter's evening in cities like Itaskia, Dunno Scuttari, and Hellin Daimiel, Iwa Skolovda's tributary Dvar groaned under the attentions of an unnatural storm. All night it raged and, when it passed on, Dvar lay under fifteen feet of snow. As her savaged people dug out, the Storm Kings rode north toward Ravenkrak.

THREE: Out of the Mouth of a Fool

A man called Saltimbanco, better known as Mocker elsewhere, sat by Prost Kamenets's Dragon Gate, his plot of muddy earth besieged by unwashed, half-clad children. They all giggled at him, or demanded a trick. The obese pseudo-philosopher, pretend-wizard, despairing of driving them away, tried to shout over their clamor while mopping floods of sweat from his dark face.

"Hai, Great Lord," he called to a passing traveler, "have your future told! Fare not forth from glorious Prost Kamenets without hearing what Fates hold in store. This unworthy obesity is known as great necromancer, your future to foretell. But a single korona only, Lord, and potent cantrips enfold your person. A single korona and your worthy self is made proof against every evil spell."

The traveler spat in the general direction of the fat man and passed on, out the Dragon Gate. His gaudy chariot rolled beneath smoking, putrid braziers of incense, past statues of winged lions and ugly gargoyles, between the two titanic green stone dragons, Fire-Eyes and Flame-Tongue.

Saltimbanco, casting his voice, cursed the traveler through the teeth of one of his collection of skulls. Ignoring his language, the children squealed with delight. They called their friends. The fat man continued, directing invective at himself for having attracted more of the rowdy brats. His large brown eyes, squinting angrily, were as baleful as those of Fire-Eyes at the gate.

He began a lengthy black invocation calling for thunder, lightning, fire from the sky to fall on the precocious urchins. Nothing happened. His magic was false, though impressive-and the children knew

him a fraud.

"Pshaw!" Saltimbanco snorted, fat lips tight in a brown face as round as a melon, "pshaw!" Speaking to himself, he muttered, "Mighty, generous, wealthy Prost Kamenets, my mother's prize carbuncle! Three cold, miserable, rainy days sitting by famous Dragon Gate, and no shekels. Not even one little, very corroded copper cast this humble, helpful soul. What kind of strange city this? No profit here, unless spittle and dung be measured in shekels and talents. Saltimbanco, O closest and flabby, friendliest friend of my heart, time comes to travel on, to seek great greener pasture on other side horizon. Maybe more superstitious realm where people believe in gods and ghosts and powers of mighty necromancer. Self, would travel to fabled kingdom of Iwa Skolovda.

"Woe!" cried the fraudulent wizard, his belly shaking as he answered himself. "So far! This corpulence is in no wise able to walk so far! Large, well-fed student philosophic should perish of over-exertion before marching of twentieth weary mile!"

Seeing his lazy nature would want convincing, his adventurous half marshalled its most potent-and least truthful-argument. "And, obese one, what dread future transpires should harridan wife of self discover recalcitrant husband returned to ungrateful Prost Kamenets? Reddest murder right in heart of filthy streets!" He paused for a moment of contemplation. Beneath his brows, he examined the watching children. They had fallen silent, hung on his words. They were ready.

"Moreover," said he to himself, "man of tender feet, it is not meant that self should walk many miles on long path to Iwa Skolovda. Cannot we, being of many talents and supported by this loyal band of younglings, perchance purloin some worthy transport?"

His face brightened at the suggestion of theft. He answered himself, "Hai! When stared in face by fangy-toothed necessity, this obesity is capable of all things. Wife? Hai! What a horrible thought!" He was silent for a long moment, then looked up, selected a half-dozen youngsters, motioned them closer.

Loungers by the Dragon Gate, of which there were ever hosts ready to fleece unwary travelers, were treated to an unusual spectacle the following morning. A fat brown man in an ornate racing chariot, emblazoned with the arms of a powerful noble family, hastily fled the city. Behind the chariot ran a pack of laughing, ragged children. Behind these, hotly pursuing the vehicle but hampered by the youngsters, were a dozen pikemen of the city watch. Then came a band of professional thief-takers, anticipating a considerable reward from the chariot's owner. Lastly, too late to have hopes of being in at the kill, came an aging beauty wailing like a Harpy deprived of prey (Mocker, too, had wailed at her price for playing his mythical wife).

The cavalcade thundered through the gate and north, the fat man laughing madly.

Presently, having lost the thief, the disgruntled pursuers returned. Out in the countryside, a laughing fat scoundrel trotted his new chariot up the road to Iwa Skolovda.

As soon as safety was apparent, Saltimbanco began vacillating. Each wayside spring was an excuse for loitering. The first inn he encountered had the pleasure of his windy custom for much of a week-till the landlord suspected devilry and threw him out. He didn't really want to go to Iwa Skolovda, though he wasn't consciously aware of it.

Later, Saltimbanco stopped in for a talk with the owner of a prosperous farm. The farmer thought him feeble-minded, but considered that an advantage in the business of horse-trading. He got Saltimbanco's chariot and horses for three pieces of silver and a bony, pathetically comic little donkey. This beast

appeared ridiculous beneath Saltimbanco's hugeness, but seemed not to notice the load. He plodded stolidly northward, unconcerned with his new master's foibles.

The farmer left the trade laughing behind his hand, but so did Saltimbanco. He had back the money spent in Prost Kamenets, and a donkey besides. And the donkey would be half what he needed to make his Iwa Skolovdan entrance both noteworthy and innocent. Looking the part, he began building a reputation as a mad, windy, harmless fool.

He started by giving scores of moronic answers to questions asked him in the villages he passed, then demanded payment for his advice. He became righteously indignant if that payment were not forthcoming. The common people of the valley of the Silverbind loved him. They paid just for the entertainment. He laughed often, to himself, as Iwa Skolovda drew nearer and nearer.

His movement north was so slow that his fame advanced before him-which was what he had in mind. Soon each village prepared improbable questions against his coming. (Usually dealing with cosmogony and cosmology: the Prime Cause, shape of the earth, nature of the sun, moon, and planets. Sometimes, though, serious requests for advice came, and those he answered more than usually madly.) When, almost two months after leaving Prost Kamenets, he at last passed Iwa Skolovda's South Gate, his reputation was made. Few thought him anything but the lunatic he pretended-and this was the foundation of his plan. Without it he couldn't succeed, would never see the pay for the job he had been hired to do.

A week after his auspicious and feted arrival, after he had taken suitably odd lodgings in a poor quarter of the town and had converted them into a weird temple, the fat man said to himself, "Self, should begin work." On a cold, blustery morning he entered Market Square on his donkey, searched the stalls till he found one belonging to a farmer met in the country. "Self," he said to the peasant, "would borrow empty box."

"Box?" the mystified farmer asked.

"Box, yes, for pulpit." He said it deadpan, but with enough intensity to convince the peasant some high madness was involved. The farmer grinned. Saltimbanco smiled back-secretly congratulating himself.

"Will this do?"

Saltimbanco accepted and examined an empty field lug. "Is good, but short. One more?"

"If you'll return them."

"Self, offer most sacred promise."

A low mound of rubble, remains of a fallen building, rose at one end of the square. There, precariously, Saltimbanco set up his boxes, mounted them, bellowed, "Repent! Sinners, end of world, mighty doom, is upon you! Repent! Hear, accept truth that leads to forgiveness, eternal life!" Nearby heads turned. Suddenly terrified, heart hammering, he forced himself to continue. "Doom comes. World nears time of killing fire! O sinners, yield to love offered by Holy Virgin Gudrun, Earth Mother, Immaculate, that would save you for love! 'Give me love!' she says, 'And life forever I return.'" He continued with a great deal of nonsense delineating the path of righteousness Gudrun demanded of her lovers if they were to achieve her grace and dwell with her in her place called Foreverness. He followed up with a little hellfire and brimstone, listing the fearsome tortures awaiting those who didn't enter Gudrun's love. A good deal of his adopted father's love-me-or-else, why-do-you-hurt-me-so, you-cruel-little-child went into his interpretation.

At one time this mythology had been widespread in the Lesser Kingdoms, especially Kavelin, but was centuries dead. Neither Saltimbanco, nor any who heard him, had the slightest notion of what it was really all about. Yet success attended him. His fiery oratory and threats of present doom attracted attention. Then a bit more. Soon a full-blown crowd had gathered. He grew increasingly cheerful and confident as, more and more, the curious came to see what was happening. Half an hour after beginning, he had three hundred enthralled listeners and had forgotten his fears completely. Once he hit his second wind, he played the mob's emotions with considerable skill.

The final result of the speech was what he desired. He saw it in their faces, in smiles hidden behind hands, in cautious, agreeing nods by those closest, people who didn't want to hurt his feelings by disagreeing with self-evident insanity. His own smile of joyous success he kept carefully internalized. They had decided him a harmless and lovable screwball, the sort who wanted watching lest he catch his death of forgetting to get in out of the rain.

He also achieved success by bringing himself to the attention of Authority. In the crowd there were men of a sort he had seen in other kingdoms, too average, too disinterested, too carefully attentive beneath that disinterest, to be anything but spies. Storm King spies, who would be very much interested in any large gathering. Nepanthe, their Princess, had proven cunning politically. She had made certain her followers, proven traitors once, couldn't escape suffering if she fell. Their names and deeds would be made painfully available to any successor government-and they would die. They had to support her, take deep interest in anything which might foreshadow a movement to bring their Princess to ruin.

They were the shadow men who backboned the government Valther had built for his sister. Attracting their attention lay at the root of Saltimbanco's plan. Everyone, especially they and their mistress, had to think him a harmless clown.

"What do you think?" one shadow man asked the other.

"A clown with a new act. I imagine he'll end up asking for money."

And at just that moment, Saltimbanco did so, proving himself less than wholly concerned with his listeners' souls. He smiled to himself on seeing the spies' knowing nods. He was safe for a while.

Day after day, week after week, he continued his idiot's speeches, moving about the city so the greatest numbers might hear him. He spoke on a different subject each day, parlaying the philosophical nonsense of centuries into a mad but innocent reputation. In time he gathered a following of young enthusiasts who appeared at all his harangues. Those he feared. Would they taint his political neutrality? The young being the political idiots they were, and denied any other place of meeting, might be using his speeches as cover for some clandestine activity. But time showed his fears groundless. These were no activists, just bored youngsters enjoying themselves.

Because he was enjoying himself hugely, and making a fortune from donations, the weeks slipped away rapidly. Spring was but a month distant when he decided the city was ready for his magnus opus, a long-winded and, to the people in the street, laughable oration praising the Princess Nepanthe-for the political weather was growing more treacherous daily, and the woman faced increasing popular opposition. Daringly, the speech was to be presented on the steps of the Tower of the Moon.

Because most Iwa Skolovdans thought the speech a new high in his career of idiocy, Saltimbanco felt certain they would place him where he wanted. Indeed, they turned out in record numbers. When he reached the Tower, astride his patient donkey, he found a vast crowd waiting. They cheered. A nervous,

redoubled Tower guard eyed them uncertainly.

The soldiers relaxed when they spied him. They now assumed nothing but storms of laughter would be raised. Saltimbanco prayed he would incite no insurrection.

Ponderously he mounted the steps leading to the Tower entrance, lifting the skirts of his monkish robe like an old woman about to go wading. His ears told him his audience would be warm before he spoke a word.

He stopped five steps below the soldiers, turned, launched upon flowery rivers of praise dedicated to Nepanthe. Soon the crowd were roaring delightedly.

Nepanthe sat in the shadows of her lonely chamber, mind in a stupor. A dark mood was on her. She cared not at all for the world, had but one foot in the realm of consciousness. The dreadful demons of her dreams now pursued her even by day. She could sleep only when she fell from exhaustion. This coming out of Ravenkrak had worsened things, not, as she had hoped, made them better.

Dimly, as through a sound-baffling curtain, the roaring reached her. The Werewind? was her first startled thought. Then: Those're human voices!

She went to a window overlooking the street, walking stiffly, not unlike a woman twice her age. From a shadow she looked down on the crowd, awed. She had never seen so many people in one place. A thrill of fear brought her fully awake. She backed from the window, hands at her throat, then turned, ran. She seized a bell-cord and rang for her guard captain.

He was awaiting her summons, knocked before she finished ringing.

"Enter!" she commanded, trying to mask her panic.

"Milady?"

She ignored the amenities. "Rolf, what're those people doing?" She waved an unsteady hand at the window.

"A fool's making a speech. Milady."

"Who?" she demanded. She was certain she sounded terrified. But, if she did, he gave no sign of having noticed. He waited with the merest hint of a curious expression. "Let's listen," she decided.

They went to the window and stood, but could hear little over the laughter of the crowd-though Nepanthe thought she heard her name spoken several times. Timidly, little-girlish, she asked, "Why do they laugh so?"

"Oh, they think him a great clown and fool, Milady." Rolf chuckled as he leaned on the windowsill.

"And you too, eh?"

He smiled. "Indeed. Iwa Skolovda's needed him for a long time. Too staid."

"Who is he? Where's he from?"

"There you've got me. Ladyship. Because he has the ear of the people, we've tried to find out. All we know is that he rode in some time ago, after preaching in the villages to the south. There's some evidence he was in Prost Kamenets before that.

"After arriving, he spent several days alone, then started the speeches. He's a folk-hero now. I'm sure he's harmless. Milady. The people just gather to laugh at him. He doesn't seem to mind. He makes a good deal off them."

So. He did see my fear, she thought. And now he's trying to reassure me. Aloud, "What's he talking about? Why such a huge crowd?"

The soldier suddenly seemed distressed. He tried to hedge.

"Come, come, Rolf. I heard him use my name. What's he saying about me?"

"As your Ladyship commands," he muttered. Plainly he feared losing his position as her captain. "His speech is in praise of yourself, Milady."

A spark blazed in Nepanthe's eyes, a mote of fire that could easily become anger. "And for that they call him a fool?" The anger waxed, spread from her eyes to her brow. "Why?"

Rolf's manner made it obvious he wanted to be elsewhere. He hemmed and hawed, shuffled, glanced at ceiling and floor, mumbled something inaudible.

"Captain!" Nepanthe snapped. "Your reticence displeases me!" Then, in a more kindly tone, "When was the last time I punished a soldier for expressing an opinion, or for carrying bad news?"

"I can't remember, Milady."

"If you think carefully," she whispered, looking toward the window, "you'll remember all punishments have been for breach of discipline, not for performing duties which discomfited me! Now, speak up! Why do the people laugh when this man praises me?"

"They despise you. Milady."

A cold wind seemed to blow through the room. Indeed, swift-coming clouds in the north promised a winter's storm.

"Despise me? But why?" There was a hint of hurt behind her quiet inquisition.

"Because you're whom you are," he replied gently. "Because you're a woman, because you're in power, because you overthrew the King. Why do men despise their rulers? For all those reasons, and maybe more, but mostly because you're from Ravenkrak, get of the old foe, and because the ousted Councilmen, that you foolishly freed, keep inciting them." The cold wind sighing round the Tower, down off the Kratchnodians, seemed as much spiritual as real. Chilling.

Would the reverberations of the Fall never cease? Ilkazar was dust, but echoes of the fury of her collapse still beat upon her scattered grandchildren. The shadowy wings of hatred still drifted across their lives like those of searching vultures.

The people still roared below.

"Tell me, Rolf-honestly-aren't the people better off since I came here? Aren't the taxes lower? Don't I care for the poor? Haven't I replaced a corrupt, lazy, indifferent government with an incorrupt, efficient, responsive one? Haven't I repressed the crime syndicates that were almost a second government before I arrived?" She shuddered, remembering ranks of heads on pikes above the city gates. "What about my subsidies for trade with Itaskia and Prost Kamenets?"

"All true, but such things don't mean much to fools, Milady. I know. I was raised here. Your reforms have won support among the small merchants, the artisans, especially the furriers, the guildsmen, and the more thoughtful laborers. All the worst victims of the old government and syndicates. But most of the people refuse to be fooled by your chicanery. And the rich, the crime-bosses, and the deposed Councilmen, keep telling them that's what it is. And, irregardless of programs, you're a foreigner and usurper." He grinned weakly, trying to make light of the matter.

But the cold still filled the room.

Nepanthe eased Rolf's nerves with one of her rare smiles. "Foreigner, ergo, tyrant, eh? Even if their ingrates' bellies are full for the first time in years? Well, no matter. Their opinions don't concern me-as long as they behave."

She thought for a moment. Rolf waited silently, ignoring the pain his remarks had caused. Finally, she said, "I remember the words of an ancient wise man, in one of the old scrolls at home. He wrote, 'Man is wise only when aware of his lack of wisdom,' and went on to point out that the masses are asses because they're ignorant to the point of knowing they already know everything worth knowing."

Rolf said nothing in response, seemed unusually thoughtful-perhaps because she was being unusually verbose... She jarred him back with a change of subject.

"Does this man make a habit of talking about me?"

"No, Milady. It's something different every day and, begging your pardon, always something idiotic. Far as I know, this's his first political venture, though it's hardly controversial."

The cold wind blew, gathering strength with time.

"Give me some examples."

Rolf, back on safe ground, relaxed, chuckled, imparted a bit of high nonsense. "Just yesterday he claimed the world is round."

Nepanthe, who knew, was startled into wary curiosity. "Another example!"

Without a chuckle, Rolf hurriedly said, "The other day he claimed the sun was just a star, only closer. Skaane, the philosopher, challenged his claim. They had a real madman's debate, with Skaane claiming the earth revolves around the sun..."

"What'd he say the day before that?"

Rolf could maintain only a minimal air of sobriety. "Something religious, something about every seventh

rebirth of the soul being into the animal with a nature most closely approximating the individual's. His donkey, he claims, is Vilis, the last King of Ilkazar."

A ghost of a smile played across Nepanthe's lips. "Go on."

Rolf grinned. He had remembered an excellent example. "Well, the earth's changed shape since last week. Then it was a big boat floating on a sea of Escalonian wine, the vessel being propelled by a giant duck paddling in the stern. He was drunk that day, which's maybe why he saw the universe as a sea of wine."

Another of those rare smiles broke across Nepanthe's face. "Bring him here!"

"Milady, they'd storm the Tower if we stopped him now!"

"Well, wait till he's done."

"Yes, Milady."

She crossed the chamber to a northern window. The snow-topped Kratchnodians loomed in the distance. The north wind muttered, threatening snow.

Saltimbanco recognized the importance of Rolf's appearance the moment he came out the Tower door. Five minutes later his mad speech rolled to a hilarious conclusion. In a quarter-hour the street before the Tower was empty, save for his donkey and collection box. The box was overflowing.

Rolf asked the fat man into the Tower. Inside all aquaver, Saltimbanco followed. He reached Nepanthe's chamber puffing and snorting like a dying dragon. His skin had reddened, his face was wet with perspiration.

Nepanthe's door stood open. Rolf entered without formality. "The man whose presence you requested, Milady."

Turning from the north window, Nepanthe replied, "Thank you, Captain. You may go."

"But..."

"You said he was harmless."

"Yes, but..."

"I shall scream most loudly if I need your help. Begone!" He went.

Nepanthe faced her visitor, said, "Well?" When he didn't respond, she said it again, louder.

Saltimbanco hauled himself out of the wonder the woman had loosed upon him. She was beautiful, with raven hair and ebony eyes, a fine oval face—did he detect a hint of loneliness and fear behind the frown-lines he had more or less expected? He was amazed. The woman wasn't the aging Harpy he had anticipated. Getting on thirtyish, maybe, but not old. His innocent eyes insolently examined her body. He suspected this might be an assignment less unpleasant than expected.

At that point her voice drew him back.

"Yes, woman?" Playing his role to the hilt, he bowed to no nobility, accorded no superiority.

"Teacher, who are you?" she asked, granting him the title of learned honor. "What are you?"

An unexpected sort of question, but practice on the street enabled him to provide an answer that said nothing at all while sounding expansive.

"Self, am Saltimbanco. Am humblest, poverty-stricken disciple of One Great Truth. Am wandering mendicant preaching Holy Word. Am One True Prophet. Also Savior of World. Am weary Purveyor of Cosmic Wisdom. Am Son of King of Occult Knowledge..."

"And the Prince of Liars!" Nepanthe laughed.

"Is one face of thousand-faceted jewel of Great Truth."

"And what's this great truth?"

"Great Truth! Hai! Is wonder of all ages unfolding before sparkle in great and beautiful lady's eyes..."

"Briefly, without the sales chatter."

"So. Great Truth is this: all is lies! All men are liars, all things of matter are lies. Universe, Time, Life, all are great cosmic jokes from which little everyday falsehoods are woven. Even Great Truth is untrustworthy."

Nepanthe hid her amusement behind a hand. "Not original-Ethrian of Ukazar, five centuries ago-but interesting nevertheless. Do you always follow your creed, tell nothing but lies?"

"Assuredly!" He reacted as though his honor were in question.

"And there's one of them." She laughed again, realized she was laughing. It stopped, was replaced by wonder.

How long since she had laughed for no better reason than because she was amused? Could this fat man, who was hardly as foolish as he pretended, also make her cry? "Why do you preach such strange things?" Saltimbanco, thoroughly frightened behind his mask of unconcern, thought carefully before replying. A little half-truthful misdirection would be appropriate now. "Numerous be numbers of men who think me no more than big-mouthed nonsense pedlar. Hai! The bigger fools they. They come, enjoy show, eh? Also, after show, many come to poor fat idiot, give him monies to help protect self from self. Great Lady, think! Many people in throng before Tower this day, eh? Maybe three, four, five thousand. Maybe one thousand take pity on moron. Each drops one groschen-one puny groschen, though some give more-into basket watched over by very sad and hungry-looking donkey belonging to cretinic purveyor of preachments. Self counts up swag. Have now ten kronen and more, one month's wages. Goes on thus, every day of year. Self, being frugal, suddenly am as wealthy as wealthiest laugher at imbecilic preacher. Hai! Then self is laugher! But silent, very silent. Men are easily angered to kill."

Saltimbanco chuckled at his fooling those who thought him a fool, then realized he was growing too relaxed. He was revealing his penchant for the accumulation of money. Fear-wolves howled in the back of his mind. He was a professional, yes, but never had learned to banish emotion in tight situations. He did hide it well, though.

"Do you like having people mock you?" "Hai! Self, am performer, no? Multitudes laugh at fat one, true. No joy. But this one is known to enjoy gold thuswise wrested from unwrestable purses. Crowd and Saltimbanco are even, for fools we have made of one another."

Nepanthe turned back to the north window, studied the storm brewing over the Kratchnodians. Then she whirled back, startling Saltimbanco from a moment of drowsiness.

"Will you take supper with me this evening?" she asked. Then she gasped at the temerity of her action, unsure of what she had done, or why. She only knew she enjoyed the company of this honestly roguish, outwardly jolly, inwardly frightened man. Perhaps there was a feeling of kinship.

While they stood staring at one another, the first snowy tendrils of the storm began whipping around the Tower. She ran to close her windows.

Saltimbanco did dine with the woman that evening, and accepted a further invitation to escape the storm by staying the night. He and she spoke at great length the following day, which eventually led to another dinner invitation, and that to another request that he stay the night. The day following that Nepanthe offered herself as his patron. Apparently prideless, Saltimbanco accepted instantly and quickly moved in-donkey and all. The chambers assigned him were next to Nepanthe's, which caused talk among her servants. Try as they might, however, even the most prying could discover nothing improper resulting from the arrangement.

FOUR: How Lonely Sits the City

Loves torn from him, Varth grew bitter. He decided to pursue a course that had long been in his mind. Once the harvest was in, he visited his priestly teacher, engaged the man as agent in the sale of the farm. The money, with that left him by Royal, he buried near the river. Then, carrying a few belongings in an old leather bag, he moved into Ilkazar.

Soon there was another beggar among the city's many, this one brighter, studying, studying-yet unseen, for no one spared an urchin more than a glance. He grew lean and ragged with time, and wiser.

Still he remained silent: and strange. Older persons grew uneasy in his presence-though they never knew why. Perhaps it was his cold stare, perhaps the way the corners of his mouth turned upward in a ghost-grin, revealing his canines, when the future was mentioned. There was something in his gaze which made adults look away. He seemed a hungry thing thinking of devouring them.

However, his strangeness attracted waifs like himself.

They treated him with respect and awe their elders reserved for the Master Wizards and King-and a king he soon became, of a shadow empire of beggars and thieves who found his mastery profitable. Looking like a small, skinny idol, he held court in a corner of Farmer's Market, by his directions gifted his followers with unprecedented wealth.

But those followers, no matter their admiration for his leadership, found Varth's nighttime undertakings disquieting. He often wandered the Palace District, studying the castle of the King, or the homes of certain powerful wizards. And he never missed a witch-burning, though his attentions were seldom for the condemned. His eyes were always on the black-hoods, and the wizards who came to see "justice" done.

What justice this? In a city made great by magic, ruled by magic-no matter the King's disclaimers, his

policies, and those of the Empire, were determined by manipulating sorcerers-why should there be witch-burnings? What power had the witch that so terrified the warlock?

There was an ancient divination-Ilkazar, from King to lowliest beggar, had rock-hard faith in necromancy- which promised city and Empire would fall because of a witch. The Master Wizards reasoned that a dead sorceress could do little to fulfill the prophecy. Therefore, summary execution was ordered for any woman even mildly suspect (or with some bit of property a wizard wanted-for all a witch's property went to her finder).

Varth, with earnings from his beggar empire, went to certain wizards and bought knowledge. In the guise of an eager, voiceless child, he wrested many secrets from many sorcerers. They found him an amusing anomaly among the young, having fallen, like men less wise, into the habit of classing children with other small pets, as sometimes amusing, sometimes bothersome, but never, never interested in matters of weight. They were old men, those wizards, and had forgotten what it was like to be young. Most men did. And so, during his visits, Varth became privy to secrets that would have been kept carefully hidden from older men.

From wizards, and from priests whose interest had been stimulated by the reports of his old tutor, Varth received an unusual education. He nearly laughed the day he learned of the divination that had caused his mother's death. He later learned that she had died to provide a covetous sorcerer with a ready-decorated home, and King Vilis with escape from problems personal, political, and financial.

Someone discovered him weeping one night. Thenceforth he wore a new name: Varth Lokkur, the Silent One Who Walks With Grief. He became an actor, this Varthlokkur. Using pity for his dumbness, he bent strong men to his will. Wizards taught him. Priests took him to their hearts. He made his followers want to aid his secret purpose. They were certain he had one. He became one of Ilkazar's best-known children, and one of its most intriguing mysteries.

One day some priests got together and, hating to see the boy's mind wasted, decided to sponsor his education. But when they went to tell him, he was gone. He had chosen twelve companions and departed the city. Where had he gone? Why? The priests were disturbed for a while, but soon forgot. There had been something unsettling about him, something they preferred not to remember.

Lao-Pa Sing Pass lay two thousand miles east of Ilkazar, the only means of crossing a huge double range of mountains, the Pillars of Ivory and the Pillars of Heaven. To the west lay city-states, small kingdoms, and the sprawling Empire of Ilkazar. To the east was Shinsan, a dread Empire feared for its sorcery and devotion to evil. Butting against the western slopes of those mountains lay the fertile plains of the Forcene Steppe, ideal for grazing. But the nomads shunned it. Too near Shinsan...

From Lao-Pa Sing, on a spring day many months after Varthlokkur had abandoned Ilkazar, a child of twelve came riding. He was no native of Shinsan. His skin was western white sun-browned, not the natural amber of the east. On his face expressions fought: horror of the past and hope for the future. Free of the pass, the boy halted to make certain he still bore his passport to freedom. He drew a scroll from his saddlebag and opened it, stared at words he couldn't read:

To King and Wizards of Ilkazar:

My wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

It was signed with a featureless oval sigil.

The message stirred little interest in Ilkazar. There was some grumbling about the audacity of the sender, but no fear. The messenger didn't name the country whence he came.

A year later, another youth, eyes haunted and riding as if fleeing a devil, bore:

The King and Wizards of Ilkazar, who falsely judged the woman Smyrena:

They have sown the wind and shall reap the whirlwind.

This was signed with both the null and a stylized mask of death. It caused more thought than had its predecessor, for the messenger admitted he came from Shinsan. The records were examined, the story of Smyrena exhumed. Her son hadn't shared her fate! There was apprehension, and talk about the old prophecy.

But nothing happened and all was soon forgotten-till the year ended and a third messenger came. Then others, year after year, until King and wizards believed. They bought assassins (even the power of the wizards of Ilkazar could not breach the necromantic shield about Shinsan), but the blades went astray. No man was fool enough to enter Shinsan.

Riches do not profit in the day of wrath.

There were twelve signs beneath the twelfth message, each a promise. King and wizards tried to convince one another that their powers were sufficient to the threat.

In the thirteenth year a young man departed Shinsan, eyes almost as haunted as those of his predecessors. He crossed the Forcene Steppe, paused at Necremnos on the River Roe. He found Ilkazar's legions in the city and on the Steppe to the East. The Empire had grown during his absence. Necremnos was a "protectorate," the protection accepted as an alternative to bloody, futile war. Ilkazar, with its combination of magic and military excellence, was irresistible.

Pthothor the Bald, King of Necremnos, was wiser than his subjects suspected. He knew of the weird of Ilkazar, and had divined that the Fates would strike during his reign.

Varthlokkur spoke with that King concerning the death of empires.

At Shemer Khan he found a ruined city, strongly occupied, starving as its people turned all their effort toward meeting the demands of Ilkazar. Varthlokkur spoke with the King, then rode to Gog-Ahlan.

He found another conquered city, worse than the last. For resisting too long, all honor had been raped away. Her once proud men were permitted no income save what their women could earn serving the lusts of occupying soldiers. Again Varthlokkur spoke with a fallen King, then rode on.

He crossed the passes west of Gog-Ahlan and turned south into Jebal al Alf Dhulquarneni, a black region, subject to no King. Eventually he reached the valley Sebil el Selib, Path of the Cross, where the first King-Emperor of Ilkazar had trapped and crucified a thousand rebellious nobles. There he, made camp and his preparations.

A few days later, he entered the city that had given him life, and so much pain. At the gate he was met by wizards awaiting the annual message, which he refused to hand over to anyone but the King. It demanded the death by burning of Vilis and seven times seven of Ilkazar's wizards as atonement for the

crime against Smyrena. The demand was refused, as expected. The message ended with promises of famine and pestilence, earthquakes and signs in the sky, the appearance of enemies countless as the stars, and was sealed 13.

The seal remained cryptic for a time. Once the mystic number was noted, however, the wizards concluded that their enemy had been among them. They searched the city, but he was gone. They searched the Empire and still found nothing. Fear haunted their councils. Yet nothing happened. Or so it seemed for a time.

The fall of Ilkazar, as recorded in *The Wizards of Ilkazar*, a dubious and doubtless exaggerated epic of King Vilis' end, which opens:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become that was great among the nations!

Barbarians harried the borders of the Empire. Unrest grumbled through the tributary states. The armies were decimated and demoralized by a strange plague. A star exploded and died. From Ilkazar itself a dragon was seen crossing the full moon. An unseasonable storm wrecked shipping in the Sea of Kotsum. Trolledyngjan pirates raided the western coasts.

And the song says:

She weeps bitterly in the night, tears on her cheeks; among all her lovers she has none to comfort her;

*****line lost*****they have become her enemies.

Tributary states rebelled. Entire armies were surprised and overwhelmed. Ilkazar's moneylenders grumbled because loans to the Empire were not being repaid. Those who dealt in booty murmured because there were no new conquests. The people muttered as supplies grew short.

The King, in the traditional manner of politicians, tried to stem gloom's tide with speeches. He promised impossible things that he apparently believed himself..

But he couldn't put the rebels down. They were too numerous, in too many places, and their numbers daily grew-and ill fortune invariably dogged armies sent against them: floods, spoiled rations, disease. And with each rebel victory, more conquered peoples rose.

A whisper, dark, disturbing, ran through Ilkazar. The city would be spared no agony when the foreign soldiers came. The people fled-until the King declared emigration a capital offense. Fool. He should have rid himself of their hunger.

There was no native crop that year. Rust, worms, weevils, and locusts destroyed everything. The only food available was that in storage and a dwindling trickle of tribute.

Though in dread of the wizards of Ilkazar, the rebel Kings, and barbarians after spoil, gathered and united against the Empire.

Says the poet:

Happier were the victims of the sword than the victims of hunger, who pined away, stricken by the want of the fruits of the field. The hands of compassionate women have boiled their own children; they became

their food in the destruction of her people.

There were armies before Ilkazar, well-fed armies high with the destruction of Imperial legions. They flaunted their fat herds before the watchers on the walls. Within the city, rats found dead sold for a silver shekel each, rats taken alive brought two. People feared the dead ones. They presaged plague.

The dogs and cats were gone, as were the horses of the King's cavalry and the animals of the Royal Zoo. Rumors fogged the air. Children had disappeared. Men in good health were fearful they would be accused of cannibalism.

Sometimes those who had fallen to disease were found with flesh torn away, perhaps by rats, perhaps not.

The siege progressed. One day a horseman came from the encircling camps, a grim young man, frightened of the city and the sorceries within-sorceries held at bay solely by the skill of one lone man trained by the mysterious Tervola and Princes Thaumaturge of Shinsan. He delivered a scroll. Someone observed that it came on the date of anniversary for previous messages. It restated Varthlokkur's prior demands, with one significant addition: appended was a list of names of persons to be sent out of the city, and before whom the King was to abase himself.

Vilis had become more amenable. Five days later there was activity on the city walls. The Kings and generals of the rebels, dressed in black, on black horses, with black banners flying, advanced upon the city, stopped just beyond bowshot.

As the sun reached zenith, seven groups of seven tall poles were raised atop the wall. To each was bound, soaked in naphtha, a Master Wizard. The King himself bore the torches that lighted the fires. There was a long period of silence. No cloud marked the sky. All things of earth seemed poised, waiting, uncertain. Then smoke wisped toward the watchers. The stench of burning flesh distressed their horses.

The Silent One betrayed no emotion. His victory was not yet complete.

Once the fires finished their work, the gate opened, and emaciated, wretched people stumbled out. In full view, the King knelt and kissed their dusty feet as they passed. They were few, all who remained of those who once had lent aid to, or had given kindness to, an unhappy orphan. One was a man in tattered executioner's black, another was an aged sergeant. There were priests, a handful of minor sorcerers, and a few withered prostitutes who had once provided a little mothering.

The gates closed. Varthlokkur waited. The sun moved west. He sent a rider. "Where is the third penance?" the rider demanded.

"You've taken all I can give," King Vilis replied. "My power and my Empire are dust. That is cruelty enough!" He seized a bow, shot at the messenger, missed.

"Then all Ilkazar will die!" The rider fled.

Varthlokkur sat silently for a long time, considering. He had made promises he had hoped needn't be kept. He didn't want anyone but Vilis. But there were Kings accompanying him who depended on his word.

Those Kings waited. The city waited. Varthlokkur reached his decision. He raised his right arm, his left, and invoked that which he had kept in waiting, the power no accidental sorcerer ever had mastered. So

imperceptibly that only the horses noticed at first, the earth began shaking. The Kings were awed by Varthlokkur's Power. An earth-marid, a King of earth-elementals, reputedly unmanageable save by supreme masters of the eastern sorcery, was answering his summons.

The trembling grew to an earthquake. The city gates collapsed. The poles with wizards toppled from the walls. Spires and minarets shuddered. And the shaking grew. Great buildings fell. The thick wall, Ilkazar's most solid construction, began to crumble. Varthlokkur's arms ached with the effort of holding them upward, motionless, and with the Power flowing through them. Yet he held them high. If they fell prematurely, the earth-marid would abandon work as yet incomplete, and Ilkazar would retain sufficient might to make the assault terribly costly. Fires appeared and spread. Dust from falling buildings joined their smoke, darkened the sky. A great government building slid into the Aeos (which entered Ilkazar through a huge, unbreachable grill), damming it, flooding part of the city.

Varthlokkur eventually, was satisfied and allowed the earthquake to die. He loosed his human hounds. The warriors met little opposition. He himself led the Kings to the Palace.

They found Vilis seated amidst the ruins of his citadel, rocking and drooling. He clutched a crown to his chest and sang a childhood song. Soldiers hastily cleared rubble from a corner of Execution Square. They recovered a carved stake, set it up, and bound the King to it. Brands arrived. Varthlokkur stood before Vilis, torch in hand.

His followers expected him to laugh, or brag about this fulfillment of vengeance, but he did not. They expected he would now speak, for the first time in decades, and say something like, "Remember my mother in Hell," but he did not. When at last he broke the long silence, he said only, "You have made me lonely, Royal Ilkazar," and cast the torch aside. Head bowed, he turned and walked from the city slowly, leaving mercy or its lack to his followers.

The poet, hardly impartial, ends with a bitter curse upon Ilkazar, damning her for all eternity. But, before he finishes, he does, briefly, indicate that he understands why Varthlokkur cast the torch aside. No one else then present, and few scholars since, did so. The destruction of Ilkazar and its King meant Varthlokkur had lost his only true companion of fourteen years' purpose. Behind the mask of victory had lain a defeat.

FIVE: By Every Hand Betrayed

Night in Iwa Skolovda, at the end of a savage storm-probably the last of winter. The Kratchnodian Mountains and the valley of the Silverbind were buried by sparkling snow, and temperatures were barely above melting. The Silverbind was high in the flatlands, a foot below flood outside the east wall. Ice jammed the river a few miles down, backing the flow. The wind sang a lonely dirge around the Tower of the Moon. It was a night for earthshaking events, a night for the Wind of Fate.

Nepanthe had slept better since the arrival of the fat man. He hadn't been able to banish the demons of her mind, but he had tamed them a bit. That night, however, she paced, though not from old terror. A premonition rode the wind whispering through the windows and curtains. Apprehension forbid all sleep. Occasionally the future touched her lightly, though seldom clearly. Something was terribly wrong in Iwa Skolovda. She had felt it for hours, yet could not discover what.

Glancing out the window facing north, she finally found a visible wrongness. The sky glowed away toward the north wall. The glow steadily brightened. She knew what it was. Fire. But what flames they must be! To cause such a widespread glow, the fire must be beyond all control. Her apprehension increased. She turned to the clothing set out for the morning.

She had just finished dressing-and was cursing a broken fingernail-when the knocker at her door sounded.

"Enter!" she called, certain she sounded terrified.

Rolf came in, face grim.

"Well?"

"Bad news, Milady."

"I've seen the fires. What's happening?"

"An attack. Hillmen bandits have crossed the wall. There must be a thousand of them, killing, plundering."

Nepanthe frowned. What the devil?

Rolf continued, "The troops are fighting well, under the circumstances."

"Rolf, I don't want to call you a liar, but... well, we both know none of the hill tribes are that big. Hardly any could muster a hundred warriors, counting cripples, old men, and boys. Fighting well under what circumstances?"

"Perhaps I exaggerate, but I'll swear there're more than five hundred. I saw at least a dozen tribal totems. They've got some kind of overall warchief.

"The circumstances are these: your enemies here have joined the bandits. They're attacking us from behind. Our partisans are attacking them. It's absolute chaos. I can't keep civil order and defend the city both."

"When did it start?"

"Three hours ago, Milady."

"Why wasn't I informed?"

"There seemed no need at first. Then I didn't have time."

Faintly, the roars of fighting and fire reached Nepanthe's ears. Furtive shadows raced through the streets below her window, some away from, some toward, the stricken quarter. "The hillman warchief, did you see him? What did he look like?" Unreasonably, she was certain what Rolf's answer would be.

"Tall, thin, dark of skin, face like a hawk's, eyes that look like you can see Hell's fires burning through them. He's not a hillman, northman, or Iwa Skolovdan, nor a westerner. A southerner, I'd guess. From the deserts. I heard his name, but can't remember it. They called him wizard."

"Varthlokkur!" Nepanthe spat, freighting the name with anger and fear.

"Milady?" Rolf frowned. He had heard the name before. Where? Ah. The old chanson, The Wizards of Ilkazar. But that made no sense. That Varthlokkur had lived hundreds of years ago.

"For years I've dreaded that name, Rolf." Her spirits sagged. She became a lost, frightened little girl, "What can I do? Why did Turran leave me alone? He'd know what to do." She wept. It had been a long time since she had. Then she grew hysterical, began raving.

Awed, distressed, and uncertain how he should react, Rolf ran to Saltimbanco's apartment.

The fat man awakened with a long-winded, flowery curse in which Rolf's hopefully illegitimate children were damned for generations.

"Mocker, shut your goddamned mouth and listen!" He drew back, ready to slap the fat man.

Saltimbanco considered the grim face above him, and the name that had been spoken. "What happens?"

"Haroun's here. Early. He's outnumbered, but I've confused things so much he can't help but win."

"Self, assume this is plan."

"Yes. But when I reported the attack and described Haroun, the woman got hysterical, started raving about Varthlokkurs, Fangdreds, El Kabars. You better quiet her down, or she'll blow the whole operation..."

"Self, am acknowledged master of hysterics-soothing. Am also one distressed by naming of secret names. Mocker is dead..."

Moments later, Saltimbanco burst into Nepanthe's apartment, seated himself with her in his ample lap, began comforting. He tried to discover what lay behind her collapse, but failed. She had regained control.

"Self," he declared suddenly, rising abruptly, catching her just before she hit the floor, "will brave barbed shafts of barbarian hordes to speechify rallyment to stouthearted troops!" He vanished before she could protest.

Nepanthe, while seated where Saltimbanco had deposited her, regained her Storm King turn of mind. Coolly, she shouted, "Rolf! Send a man to Ravenkrak with news of what's happened, and the name 'Varthlokkur.' Turran'll know what I mean. Oh, ask for reinforcements. Then muster my guard and horses. Secure a path of retreat. And see if you can catch Saltimbanco before he gets himself killed."

Asking reinforcement, she knew, was futile. The battle would be lost or won before Turran received her message. But he might bring enough men to retake the city.

Fast, faster than his bulk portended possible, Saltimbanco hurried to the north quarter. Here and there he demoralized the troops with stout patriotic speeches, promises of imminent victory, and exhortations to counterattack mightily. His perfect record for selecting the wrong convinced the men they were already defeated.

The fighting slopped over into the east quarter, which was populated primarily by small merchants and artisans-the bulk of them furriers whose products were internationally renowned-who were Nepanthe's ardent supporters. The attack bogged down as those supporters defended their homes vigorously. It was a pity there were no fresh formations available to take advantage of the situation.

Saltimbanco suddenly appeared near the North Gate, at the command post of the invaders. Shrieking

loudly, he alerted his accomplice before hillmen could spit him with spears. The man called Haroun hustled him into a captured house.

Saltimbanco faced the raider across a splintered oak table. "Self, am thinking Great General strikes early-though boldly, with success."

The thin dark man opposite him remained silent for a long moment before hissing, "I've got a talent. Its buyer paid well. I give value for money."

"Self, am doing same." Saltimbanco was disturbed.

Haroun was cold, remote. Had something gone sour? Then he sighed. The man was always this way at the crisis point in his cameo guerrilla wars. He had to be. Total detachment was necessary. "Is great operation, plan-perfect. Mad-blind, Storm Kings." He chuckled, thinking of the pot of gold at the end of this particular bloody rainbow. "Gold-lined old man, what of him?"

"Nothing. Not a word since last fall. I don't like it. Paid a few people to keep an eye on him. He's recruiting hire-swords in the Lesser Kingdoms."

"Self, am student philosophic of mighty mental thews, yet am unable to reason to end of twisty old man's twisty plan. Am not liking darkness. Am fearful, here, here, here." He smote himself on forehead, heart, purse.

"For the pay, I'll tolerate the mysteriousness. Look, I've got a battle to run. I haven't got time to chat, and nothing to tell. Give Rolf my congratulations. He's learning. Might make a full partner someday. And give my regards to Bragi and Elana. Now go away. We can talk after Ravenkrak falls."

"Hurry-hurry. Always hurry. Self, being keen of eye and keener of keeping head attached, spotted interesting list and copied same. Spies working for Valther. Same might prove handy."

Irritably, bin Yousif grabbed the list. He gestured at the door.

At sunrise Rolf's patrols found Saltimbanco wandering aimlessly near the South Gate. Vainly, the sun strove to drive its rays through the smoke over the city. The fat man, apparently in shock, was unceremoniously tied into a saddle and drafted into Nepanthe's retreat.

Turran was moving south with the vanguard of his little army, passing through one of those evergreen groves lying in the depths of a canyon of the high range. The wind moaned. Avalanches up the peaks made the canyon roar. Then messages began arriving from the south.

The first was, ostensibly, a report from Nepanthe, but in reality came from one of Valther's spies: Rolf. After reflection, Turran summoned his brother, who appeared quickly. By then a second message had arrived.

"I've got a couple of messages from your man Rolf. One says it looks like Nepanthe's found herself a lover."

"Should we kill him?"

"No. Not yet. Might settle her down."

With a grin, Valther suggested, "Let's help him, then. She's a little overdue, don't you think?"

Turran's laughter drowned the avalanches momentarily. "About fifteen years overdue." His expression soured. "Mother's fault." Valther knew his mother only by hearsay. She had died giving Nepanthe life, only a year after his own birth. The "mother" Turran meant, and to whom all often referred, was their father's second wife, a grimly antisexual woman, "She told Nepanthe about men, and no one's proven her wrong..."

"Wrong. What's wrong?"

"Eh?"

"You didn't call me here to talk about Nepanthe's sex life. Or lack of one."

"No, but that's part of it. This fellow she's falling for. Crackpot of some kind, supposedly harmless, with a knack for beating her moods. No, the problem's what your man tacked on the end of the report. And what he wrote later."

"What?" Valther was growing impatient.

"The night the first message was sent, hill bandits attacked Iwa Skolovda. The city, not outlying hamlets. They came down the Silverbind undetected, crossed the wall, opened the gate-all without being noticed."

"Treachery. Someone was paid."

"Of course. And you haven't heard the worst. Rolf says they were five or six hundred strong."

"No. Impossible. That'd mean someone's united the tribes."

"But they've been feuding for ages."

"Right. I watch these things. There hasn't been a rumor out of that country, except that a wizard took up residence near Gron last fall. I checked him out. An herbalist, a witch-doctor, no real magician."

"Yet somebody organized the tribes if they attacked? Right?"

"Yes."

"So that somebody has to be your witch-doctor if he's the only foreigner around. You accept that?"

"Again, yes. None of the chiefs would take orders from any of the others. But that still doesn't make sense."

"No. No charlatan would have the skill to lead an army. Unless he was something else entirely..."

"I still don't think it's possible..." Valther blanched. "Oh, what a fool! Haroun bin Yousif!"

"What?"

"It was right in front of me all the time. I should've done something six months ago. Gods, I'm blind. That witch-doctor was Haroun bin Yousif."

"What're you gibbering about?"

"Think! If you can't afford the Guild or ordinary mercenaries, want to make war and have a shot at winning, what do you do?"

After a minute, Turran sighed, nodded gloomily. "Hire Haroun bin Yousif, the King Without A Throne. The 'hero' of Libiannin and Hellin Daimiel. I'll buy it. It fits too neat. What's he doing here?"

Valther shook his head. "Last I heard he was supposed to be working with the staff of the Itaskian Army, developing tactics for the Coast Watch militia to use against Trolledyngjan raiders while they're waiting for the regulars to arrive."

"Find out!" Turran's command was as cold and sharp as the winter wind. "I want to know why he left a sinecure to lead savages. I want to know every word he spoke the month before he left, with whom, and why. And every move he made. I want it all, and I want it quick. Flood Itaskia with agents. Because the other message was nasty. Nepanthe couldn't hold Iwa Skolovda. The old King's supporters rebelled in concert with the bandit attack. She claims it was planned. I should've left Red beard with her. Preshka the pupil isn't Grimmason the master."

"Will we retake the city?"

"No..." A thoughtful gleam entered Turran's eye. "Nepanthe's retreating north with three hundred loyal Iwa Skolovdans. I'll bet the bandits are ahead of her. And we're here...Tell Redbeard to get ready for a forced march."

Chuckling, Valther went after Grimmason.

However, the jaws of the mercenary's trap snapped shut only on bandit rabble. Somehow sensing his peril, bin Yousif abandoned his savage allies and vanished.

SIX: At the Heart of the Mountains of Fear

Tall, cold, lonely was Ravenkrak, a vast, brooding fortress built of gray stone set without mortar. It had twelve tall towers, some square, some round, and crenellated battlements like massive lower jaws. Ice rimmed the walls in patchlets of white. Classless windows seemed empty eye sockets when seen from the outer slope. A huge tunnel of an entrance, with portcullis down - like fangs-put the finishing touch on the castle's appearance of a skull.

Cold and drafty the place appeared. Cold and drafty it was.

Nepanthe stood in the parapet of her Bell Tower, braving an arctic wind. Shivering, she took in forbidding visions of bald rock and fields of snow. Yes, the fortress seemed invincible, though she was certainly no expert. It was built triangular on a pointed upthrust. Only one wall, the tallest, could be reached by an enemy. The others blended into the sheer flanking cliffs of the upthrust. But she wasn't happy as she studied Ravenkrak's strength. She thought it was all for nothing, that the enemy they faced couldn't possibly be stopped by weapons and walls. The great dooms brushed defenses aside as a man did spiders' webs while walking through a forest; with scant cognizance, with but an instant's irritation.

The wind's moaning rose to a howl. It slid claws of ice through her garments.

From an open hatchway, a heavy, robed figure climbed into the wind: Saltimbanco. Glancing at him, Nepanthe whispered sadly, "I wish it were over."

The clown was in a rare good humor. "Ah, fair Princess!" he cried (he and her loyal Iwa Skolovdans insisted on the title), "Behold! Steel and silver-encladded knight comes across dangers of half world, scales mighty mountain, impregnates impregnable fortress, comes in knick to rescue fair maiden. 'But what's this?' cries stout knight-in guise of own stout self-'Where hides the bloody dragon?' Self, being warrior of mighty thews, shall smite him hip and thigh, thus... and thus... riposte... left to jaw... got 'im!"

Despite her abysmal mood, Nepanthe laughed at his antics, especially the improbable "left to jaw." Laugh she did, then, realizing that the dragon he meant was her mood, laughed a little louder, forcedly. She remembered a time when she couldn't laugh at all, and anticipated such a time for the future. The near future.

"Alas and alack, Sir Knight," she moaned in feigned despair (which nudged the borders of becoming real), " 'tis no dragon which holds me in thralldom bound, but ogres and trolls in number six cavorting through the castle below."

"Hai! Tusse-folk, say you? Woe!" Saltimbanco lamented. "Self, very much fear, maybe so, same left troll sword behind."

"And that's no way to talk about your brothers," said a third voice, good-naturedly.

Saltimbanco and Nepanthe peered at Valther, each with his or her suspicions, each wondering what machinations were behind his appearance. However, Valther was nothing more than he pretended-for the moment.

Seeing her first statement tolerated, Nepanthe spat, "No way to talk about my brothers? You, with the minds of weasels and hearts of vultures? If not ogres and trolls, pray tell what?"

"Careful, Nepanthe. In anger secrets all winged fly. And you're treading close to the drawn line, talking that way." He glanced downward, reminding her of the Deep Dungeons, then changed the subject. "But I didn't come up to argue. Just to view our frigid domain with my baby sister."

All three stared out over the stark, glacier-cleft mountains. The grasping talons of winter never completely released Ravenkrak, merely lightened their grip in summer's season.

"You seem poetically inclined today," Nepanthe observed.

Valther shrugged, pointed outward. "Isn't that a subject fit for a poem?"

"Yes. An ode to a Wind God, or Father Winter. Or maybe an epic concerning the odyssey of a glacier. Certainly nothing human or warm."

"Uhm, truth told," Saltimbanco muttered. Then, assuming Valther wanted to talk to Nepanthe privately, he headed for the hatchway.

"Hold on! Saltimbanco, you don't have to leave." Valther pretended horror at the notion. "There'll be no secrets discussed here. And Nepanthe's mood would fail if you left. If there was ever an elixir of the heart, a potation to buoy the spirit, then it'd be found in you. Proof? Nepanthe. Fair Nepanthe, sweet Nepanthe, once lost in her vapors, a stick of wood for all the heart she showed. And who's to blame for

the changes? Even Turran's remarked on in. Tis yourself, Knight Ponderous."

Nepanthe stared at Valther, amazed.

And Saltimbanco, who was wont to absorb the most outrageous praise as his due, was embarrassed by Valther's out-of-character speech-though not too embarrassed to remain.

"Harken, sister," Valther continued. "Harken, O wind like a dragon's dying groan. Who salvaged the spirits of a defeated clan? Who brought heart to the heartless? This man who so wisely plays the fool! I think he's no fool at all, but a most clever rogue of an actor and clown!"

Though Saltimbanco wore a slash of a self-conscious grin, his insides were a'boil with fear. Questions threw up sprouts of terror in the guilt-fertile fields of his mind. What did Valther know? Were these allegations? Was he being warned he was suspect?

Nepanthe broke his thought train by asking, "Valt, what's made you so prosey? Did?... "She bit her tongue with mock viciousness, pulled a face, continued, "I was going to say something nasty. I guess I'm pretty poor company. I mean, here're two gentlemen trying to entertain me, and all I do is howl like a Harpy."

Both men protested, but she silenced them with a wave. "Who knows better than me what I've become?" Then she broke out laughing. The mock horror on Saltimbanco's face was that extreme. Evidently, she had just violated some mad philosophical tenet.

When the fat man spoke, however, he had nothing philosophical to say. "Woe!" he cried. "Hear old Ice-Wind how! Self, am protected by wisely accumulated layers of guardian flesh. Am self-admitted obesity, yet am still to become frozen immobility before tramontane stream. Am pleading, Lord and Lady! May we move party to where great warm fires burn?"

One look at the granite sky, at the snow flurries around them, at the barrenness on every hand, assured the two of Saltimbanco's wisdom.

"Hai!" Valther cried, mimicking Saltimbanco. "The man's right again! Hot mead in the Great Hall, eh? A warm fire, hot wine, a joint of lamb, and friendly conversation. Let's go."

"I'm coming," Nepanthe said, with a little trill of laughter. "But I'll forego the mutton. Redbeard's wife, Astrid, told me too much meat is bad for the complexion."

Valther and Saltimbanco stared, poised on the borders of laughter-but checked themselves when they realized she was serious. It was laughter at the unexpected, anyway, for when had Nepanthe ever expressed such a feminine concern? Then Valther glanced at Saltimbanco, a new breed of laughter in his eyes.

A dozen huge fireplaces roared merrily around the Great Hall. Every time he entered, Saltimbanco marveled at the hominess of the place. Dogs and small children, without regard to sex or tribe or station, frolicked and fought, snarled, and chewed on discarded bones amidst the deep straw upon the floor, brawlingly thick. Yet seldom did the servants or men-at-arms tread on pup or child...

Turran's soldiers, and Nepanthe's Iwa Skolovdans, were seated at the countless tables, drinking, singing, telling lies, or suffering drunken dreams. Some paid half-hearted attention to their own or others' wives. Turran himself was there, at the head table, locked in a prodigious arm-wrestle with one of Redbeard's

brawny sergeants. The nether end of the hall rang metallically as men practiced with dulled and blunted weapons. Banners overhead swayed in an almost imperceptible draft, dancing a quiet, shadowy dance in the flickering light of fires and torches.

In another dance, women (wives and daughters of the soldiers) moved among the tables with wine and pitchers of ale, with huge trenchers heaped with roast lamb, with rare beef, or an occasional lonely fowl.

Nepanthe, Valther, and Saltimbanco wound through this shifting, noisy press, their goal the head table. Nepanthe and Saltimbanco acknowledged greetings from the crowd. Saltimbanco was popular with the troops because he was entertaining. Nepanthe was well-liked simply because, as a woman, she lent glamour to the crusty old castle and its bizarre ruling family. All the Storm Kings were popular, for that matter, being, probably, the best masters these mercenaries had ever known. A man serving their banner had little cause for complaint.

Truly, only an enemy could hate them, and that only because they were the foe. They had already proven themselves merciless toward adversaries, implacable in pursuit of their goals. They cared for their own with the same intensity. Mocker would gladly have thrown in with them, had his loyalties not been bought already.

They reached Turran's table. Turran still grunted in his struggle with Sergeant Blackfang. Glancing up, he smiled. His face was reddened by too much wine and the effort of the contest.

"Ho! Watch me put this bragging rogue down! Oof!" He had lost his concentration. Blackfang took him. He laughed thunderously, smote the sergeant on the shoulder, bellowed for servants.

Valther slipped into the seat beside his brother. Nepanthe and Saltimbanco settled in across the table. Several women appeared with knives and platters and mugs for ale and wine. More came, bearing the liquid refreshments, the mutton, the this and that which made up the staples of Ravenkrak's never-ending meal.

"Hai!" Valther said, pinching a girl at the same time. "Cabbage soup for my sister. No meat in it, mind! She'll ruin her fair skin."

Nepanthe was surprised by the tittering of the women. Why were they?... Because Valther was fondling everything in reach? Her regard fell heavily on the women. Their laughter died. But their silence persisted only till they reached the kitchens, which were soon a hum.

For there was a secret abroad amongst the women of Ravenkrak, a secret they found delicious, a secret that was no secret at all, save to Nepanthe. It was a secret known to the men as well. How could they avoid knowing it in a place where a man couldn't escape the wagging tongues of wives and daughters? It was known to all men save Saltimbanco himself, and he was getting suspicious. Everyone but Nepanthe knew that Nepanthe had fallen in love.

There were those who claimed that Saltimbanco shared the feeling, citing his steady weight loss as evidence. Others argued that that had been caused by the rigors of the retreat to Ravenkrak and the quality of life in the castle. Whatever the truth, though, Saltimbanco was indeed shedding the pounds.

The tittering of the serving girls caused Nepanthe to blush an attractive crimson. She scowled at Valther.

"Ha!" said Turran, after reflection on Valther's statement. "Well!" He burst into laughter.

Nepanthe glowered. She thought of a hundred vicious things to say-but her brothers, the serving girls, Saltimbanco, indeed, the entire hall, suddenly fell silent.

Birdman, the keeper of Ravenkrak's falcons and pigeons, a man so old and infirm he often needed help getting about, had come running into the Great Hall, howling as if his personal banshee were close behind. The silence deepened to that of a mausoleum. Only guttering torch-flames moved. Hundreds held their breaths, anticipating dreadful news. Birdman hadn't left his cotes for months.

The spell broke when a child wailed in fright. The exorcism complete, voices surged and rose like the rush of incoming tides. Birdman staggered the last few steps to the head table.

"Sir!" that ancient stick-figure of a man croaked, "Sir!" and again, "Sir!"

Turran, who had a deep affection for the old fellow, checked his impatience, initiated a friendly inquisition. "Now, then, Birdman," (no one remembered his real name anymore), "what's this? How come so much activity in a man your age?"

Birdman instantly forgot his mission, began arguing his haleness. His greatest fear was forced retirement.

"Your report, Birdman," Turran kept reminding. "The reason for all this excitement?"

The old man banished his fears long enough to say, "Your brother, sir. A message from your brother."

"Which one? Which one?"

"Why, the Lord Ridyeh, of course, sir. To be sure, yes, Ridyeh."

"And what does my brother say?"

"Oh! Why, of course, that's why I'm all the way up here in the Great Hall, isn't it? Uhn... oh? Yes!" He searched his rumpled, unchanged-for-a-week clothing. "Aha! And here he is, here the little devil be." Chortling, he clawed a crumpled, dirty piece of parchment from deep within his greasy tunic.

Turran accepted the ragged bit graciously, bade the old man to sit and sup a mug of wine, then leaned back and read by torchlight.

His face became a battlefield of emotion. His dark eyes radiated displeasure, unhappiness. His long, drooping mustachios seemed alive in the light dancing on his visage. Anger came and went, and something akin to sadness. His nostrils flared, relaxed, flared as he read and reread. At length, having convinced himself of its verity, he crushed the parchment in his fist, rose.

As if unaware of the hundreds of questioning eyes, he turned to his companions. "Valther, Nepanthe, come with me. You, too, fat man." He wheeled on the soldier he had been arm-wrestling. "Blackfang, find my brothers. Send them to the Lower Armories."

He strode toward the main exit like a king, ignoring the humming speculation of the Great Hall. His companions were hard-pressed to match his pace.

The Lower Armories were far beneath the roots of Ravenkrak. They were, with the exception of the Deep Dungeons, the deepest chambers of the fortress. It was there the Storm Kings practiced their sorceries. There their most potent theurgies lay hidden. There, also, lay the treasures of Ravenkrak, the

gems and monies that paid spies, bought traitors, hired assassins, and purchased arms. There too, perfectly protected, lay the Horn of the Star Rider. The Storm Kings had tamed it only to the point where it would provide food, clothing, occasional gold, and firewood. It hadn't become the keystone of power they had hoped.

They were dank places, the Lower Armories, filthy, smelling of old mold, dark and haunted by rats and spiders. Moisture oozed down the ancient walls, slime made the floor treacherous. The ceilings remained lost in shadow. Unlike the homely, lived in atmosphere of the upper fortress, those deep warrens smelled of something Saltimbanco believed vaguely unholy.

This was his first venture into those deep places. Slipping repeatedly in his futile effort to match Turran's pace, he plunged into a dreadful mood wherein he foresaw evil at every turn. He expected a sudden and ignominious end. He did, however, survive the journey, which ultimately led to a dimly lighted room. The cleanliness of the place was to him as water to a thirsty man. He marveled only a moment at the strange blue lighting and the weird thaumaturgical devices ranged about the walls. These Storm Kings had been called sorcerers: here he saw the proof.

They took seats at a round table surrounded by seven chairs, waited silently. No one questioned Turran. He would speak when the time came.

Brock arrived a few minutes later. His eyes widened when he saw Saltimbanco. "What's he doing here?"

"Nepanthe's eating cabbage now: mutton's bad for her complexion," Valther replied, as if that explained everything. It did, except to Saltimbanco and the woman.

"Oh!"

Time passed. Turran grew impatient. His fingers drummed the tabletop. Brock and Valther began fidgeting. Saltimbanco, as he often did in waiting situations, began snoring.

There was a nervous shuffling beyond the door.

"Well?" Turan snapped, irritated. Then, "Oh, it's you," less gruffly. "Come in, Blackfang. Where is he?"

The sergeant entered warily, as if walking on coals. He was awed and frightened and vainly trying to conceal it. "Sir, Jerrad has left the castle. A bear hunt. He may not return this week."

"This month, likely!" Turran grumbled. "I wish he'd tell somebody when he leaves. Thank you, Sergeant. You can go."

Blackfang bowed, took a last awed look at the chamber, made his retreat.

"Nepanthe, will you waken your friend?"

Fingernail in the ribs! Bane of pleasantly dreaming men since the dawn of time. Curses heartfelt and black, also an ancient custom. Saltimbanco erupted into reality.

"Ridyeh sent a message," Turran told them, scowling. "He says our friend bin Yousif turned up in Iwa Skolovda ten days ago. There were several killings afterwards. He vanished, reappeared in Prost Kamenets, and there were more murders there. Later, he was seen at the Red Hart Inn in Itaskia, where he passed out gold like it was water. How he managed to come by it so quick is something I'd like to

know. Then he disappeared. There were another dozen murders that night. And every victim, in Iwa Skolovda, Prost Kamenets, and Itaskia, was one of Valther's spies."

"What?" Valther jumped up, enraged. "How?..."

"I don't know," Turran growled. "He must've gotten a list. I'll figure it out if I have to put everybody in the castle to the question."

"I do keep records," Valther murmured. "Who's where."

"Oh? That's not very bright, is it? You're supposed to be the spy... What the hell did you think you were doing?"

Valther ignored his brother's ire. "Why would he be desperate to keep us from backtracking him? He's out free."

"Simple," said Nepanthe. "He's not. He's covering someone else. Whoever got him the list."

"Ah..."

Saltimbanco began sweating. The wolves were closing in. He had to distract them...

Turran asked, "Valt, who could've gotten to your papers?"

"Anybody. Anytime. I don't lock my door. Never thought there was any need to. Anybody who had the time could've made a duplicate list."

"Well, damn it, start locking your door."

"Famous case of locking barn door after horse is fled," Saltimbanco observed. "Great Lords, Lady, how many people in castle read and write?" He had found his diversion. He would set them to chasing shadows. "Start interviewing them huh? But we don't mention treachery. Maybe if not scared, traitor makes mistake. Maybe we plant new list. Not knowing everybody watching for him, he maybe does treasonous task again. Pounce! We get him! Hai! Big hanging party! Everybody turns out, much wine, much song, this humble one is hero for thinking of plan, has very good time..."

"Good idea," said Turran. "But no hanging. I'll want to question the man. Brock, tomorrow I want you to ask for men who can read and write. Say we've got some clerical work to do. Offer bonuses so they'll all turn out. We can watch whoever responds. Now, for the bad half of Ridyeh's message."

"You mean there's more, and worse?" Valther asked.

"Yes. Iwa Skolovda and Dvar have formed an alliance. They're raising a mercenary army to attack Ravenkrak. They raised standard two weeks ago, and already they've gathered five thousand men. Remarkable, don't you think? Especially considering that most of these mercenaries are southerners, up from Libiannin, Hellin Daimiel, and the Lesser Kingdoms. And their officers are Guildsmen."

"Sounds like High Crag knew something ahead of time," said Valther. "They'd actually march against Ravenkrak? How'll they find us?"

"Our friend Haroun again. He'll have command. Ridyeh says he visited the Kings when he was in Iwa

Skolovda and Dvar."

"But they can't hope to take Ravenkrak..."

"They don't know that. And we're terribly undermanned. But that doesn't worry me much. What does is why all that fuss is being made. Consider. Haroun bin Yousif is a man with a mission and a lot of talent. Between politicking, harassing El Murid, and advising the Itaskian General Staff, he's been living twenty-five-hour days. Though in luxury, to be sure."

"Why," Valther mused, "would a man give up doing exactly what he wants in order to organize hill tribesmen?"

"That's what I'm trying to get at. More, why, after he'd chased Nepanthe out of Iwa Skolovda, did he prematurely scatter them?" Fewer than fifty tribesmen had fallen into the trap Turran had set for bin Yousif.

"He'd finished his job."

"Check. Somebody wanted us out of Iwa Skolovda. Enough to meet the outrageous price bin Yousif would have demanded for the job. And it wasn't the Iwa Skolovdan Royalists. Remember, he was at work in the hills before we took over."

"Foreknowledge," Brock grumbled. "Necromancy." He looked like he had just bitten into a crabapple. "The Star Rider getting even?"

"Possibly. But to the main curiosity. His killing spies while his army fore-recruited gathers. Why?"

"Something big is going on," Valther averred.

"Brilliant. And it's something we didn't anticipate when we went to the flatlands. Something that started earlier and we didn't notice. What?"

Turran spoke in a manner suggesting that his discourse was rhetorical till that final, plaintive "What?" Then it was clear that he was mystified too.

"We'd better sit back and wait till we find out," Valther said. "We can hold out here as long as we have the Horn." Murmuring, he added, "It must be him. Trying to get it back."

"That's the plan. We're undermanned, but I doubt that they can get to us. If we can hold them off till winter, we'll whip them. They'll be trapped by the weather, at the end of precarious supply lines. I imagine they'll pull out with the first snow and fall apart as soon as they hit the flatlands. Neither Iwa Skolovda nor Dvar can afford to keep them together. They don't have the credit."

"And next summer can see us down in their territory again, against weaker opposition," Valther mused.

"Sounds good, anyway," Brock grumbled. "But I wish we had a better idea of what's going on."

"You," Turran told him, "I'm making siegemaster. Make this stonepile impregnable. Now, let's tell the others. Be cheerful, make it a joke. Laugh because somebody is fool enough to come after us."

Turran and his brothers went to the Great Hall, where they announced the forthcoming siege.

Saltimbanco and Nepanthe wandered through chilly hallways till they reached her quarters in the Bell Tower. Nepanthe settled onto a stool before a large frame and resumed work on her embroideries. Saltimbanco dumped his bulk into the comfort of a large, goosedown-stuffed chair facing the fireplace. Nepanthe's serving girl brought mulled wine, then disappeared.

Nepanthe's sitting room, perhaps the most comfortable in all Ravenkrak, was filled with womanly things. An abandoned summer frock hung in a corner, forgotten; a hastily discarded lace rebosa lay across one end of a vanity cluttered with cosmetics she seldom used. The rugs on the floors, the tapestries on the walls, the very scents in the air, all bespoke occupation by a woman.

It was a room of sleepy comfort, so peaceful and quiet that Saltimbanco couldn't remain awake. A scant five minutes after arriving, he lapsed into gentle snoring.

Leaving her embroidery to brush her hair, Nepanthe gave her guest a look which would have surprised her had she known she wore it, and wondered about him. He seemed to have sprung into existence fully grown, sometime shortly before having entered Iwa Skolovda.

Past? Did Saltimbanco have one? Indeed, though few men would have taken pride in it, had it been theirs.

His earliest memories were of a picaresque youth spent in company with a blind, alcoholic sadhu (source of much of the misinformation integral to his present act-that holy man had been a thorough fraud) wandering between Argon, Necremnos, and Throyes, with occasional forays into Matayanga. That sadhu early inspired in him a powerful loathing for honest work, and, from the blind man and others into whose company their travels had led them, he had obtained an intimate knowledge of pickpocketry, sleight-of-hand, ventriloquism, and all the mummery he now used to lend credence to his claims to magical powers.

After evening old scores with the sadhu, in finest picaro style (the old man had treated him cruelly, almost as a slave), and having stolen and gambled his way into the enmity of half the middle east, he had fled to the west. In Altea he had joined a carnival following a gypsy life through the occidental kingdoms. Sometimes he claimed his name, Mocker, came from that of a character he had portrayed in passion plays, though that wasn't true. When not on stage, or in his booth as "Magelin the Magician," he had mixed with the crowds, lifting purses. He had been quite proficient.

But once he had slashed the wrong pursestrings and found his wrists seized in a painful grasp. He had found himself looking at a dusky, aquiline face, into rapacious eyes... He had jerked free, jabbed in a fashion learned in the east. They had scuffled, to no conclusion.

Later Haroun had come to talk, and Mocker had soon found himself in bin Yousif's employ, as an agent to be insinuated into the camp of El Murid, leader of the horde of religious fanatics then besieging Hellin Daimiel.

Acting on inspiration, he had pulled off the coup of the El Murid Wars, successfully kidnapping The Disciple's daughter Yasmid. The confusion in El Murid's camp had allowed Haroun and his partisans the month or so necessary to break the siege of Hellin Daimiel and create a bloated bin Yousif reputation.

In later years he, Haroun, and their mutual "friend," Bragi Ragnarson, had spent several years getting into and out of hare-brained adventures. Then Haroun's conscience had nagged him into resuming his role of King Without A Throne, commander of the Royalists El Murid had driven from Hammad al Nakir when

taking over. Then Ragnarson, the fool, had gotten married, and the fat brown man, in his later twenties, had found himself drifting around alone again, tagging along the carnival circuit or undertaking an occasional minor espionage mission. The relationship between the three had faded from others' memories...

Then Haroun had materialized, accompanied by an old man filled with promises of vast wealth.

Mocker, a compulsive gambler, needed money desperately.

It had been a long road into the present, sometimes painful, usually dangerous, seldom happy. Here, in Ravenkrak, he was as at home and as near contentment as ever he had been. He liked these Storm Kings-yet the day would come when he would have to betray them...

SEVEN: Even the Sparrow Finds a Home

Fallen, fallen was Ilkazar, like ruin, like death. What more was there when that end had been accomplished?

Varthlokkur wandered away, depressed and lonely. His great work was complete. His goals had been fulfilled.

Already victory tasted of bile. Two decades he had paid for it, and now it seemed without point, possibly even an error. In destroying something he found vile he had also destroyed much that was good. For all its wickedness of heart, the corpus of the Empire had given common folk much for which to be thankful: peace throughout most of the west, a common law and language, relative social and physical security... Like maggots, Varthlokkur foresaw, a thousand petty lords would appear to devour the Imperial cadaver. The west would collapse into chaos.

His responsibility troubled him deeply.

Should he terminate his tale now? Be done with his past, with having to observe and endure the consequences of what he had done?

No, he thought not. There might be something he could do to justify his existence, to redeem the evil he had done, to ease the coming pain.

He looked up. His feet were headed north. As good a direction as any when you have nowhere specific to go. He retreated to his thoughts, harriving something he'd heard from Royal.

There was a time for everything, Royal had told him. A time for birth and death, for love and hatred, for planting and reaping, for mourning and laughter, for war and peace, for construction and destruction. And a time for the love of a woman. Only a man himself could judge when his times had come. As Ilkazar fell farther behind, he realized that, in his country way, Royal had been as wise as the priests and wizards who had taught him later. Loneliness inundated him. He missed Royal and the old woman. Hatred and purpose gone, he had receded to his point of origin, alone in a lonely world.

Loneliness had never been this absolute. Solitude he had known well during his years in Shinsan, but always the intolerable existence of Ilkazar had ameliorated that.

"Fallen, fallen is Ilkazar, that was mighty among the nations..."

The loss of his mother had left him desolate, yet that had been softened by the kindness of the executioner, and of Royal. Now Ilkazar's streets were the dwelling places of jackals. Nothing and no one needed him. His name was already legend, gothic with darkness and dread. It would grow with time and retelling. While he remained Varthlokkur, he would move in a vacuum created by fear that he would again use the Power he had revealed at Ilkazar.

And what of womankind? he asked himself. His ignorance of the other sex was as vast as his knowledge of the Power. Too many years, formative, learning years, had been squandered to purchase vengeance. Could any woman accept the Empire-Destroyer? He was sure he'd be ages finding one such. She'd have to be as alienated as he, and as unhappy, as unwise. Where could he find a female mirror of himself?

He took another name. Eldred the Wanderer became a face familiar along the roads connecting the western city-states. He became renowned as a man pursuing a dream, though no one knew its nature-least of all the Wanderer himself. He thought he had found a worthy project when he rediscovered the wretchedness of the poor. His sorcery could alleviate their misery. He raised a poor man to power in Hellin Daimiel, to aid his fellows, but the man proved more cruel and corrupt than any hereditary monarch. In Libiannin, a man raised less high tried torturing him to compel him to give more. Eldred became a man as despised as Varthlokkur had been feared, briefly wresting the title "Old Meddler" from the less obtrusive Star Rider.

Depressed, he fled east, to the steppes behind the Mountain of M'Hand. He found his thoughts trending darkly. Had he any real reason to live? He rehearsed all the old arguments. Then one night, in a gloomy ravine beside a small creek, with the steppe wind moaning through scrawny trees overhead, he took strange instruments from his saddlebags, drew pentagrams, burned incense, sang spells, and performed a powerful divination. Demons added their voices to the mourning of the wind. Familiars of devils came and went, smoke things half-seen. Before dawn, he had had a shadowy look down the river of time.

There were two women waiting somewhere, if he could but endure. It would be a wait of centuries, and the divination had been extraordinarily cloudy. One he would use, one he would love. His love waited in a time of flux, when extraordinary powers would be malignly dipping envenomed fingers into the affairs of men. The necromancy couldn't be clarified. Forces Varthlokkur thought of as the Fates and Norns would be squabbling amongst themselves.

Yet he elected to live, to pursue this love-destiny. The Fates, he felt, had commanded him.

Somehow, somewhere (perhaps from the Tervola or Princes Thaumaturge of the Dread Empire), he had acquired an unshakable conviction that the Fates controlled his destiny. A collateral portion of his divination troubled him deeply. Mourning Ilkazar, he had sworn never again to use the Power for destruction. The divination said that he would, during the coming age of confusion. That saddened him. Varthlokkur stared into his fire, lost in contemplation. He had gained command of all sorceries while in Shinsan. Spells had been put upon him. At what cost? He couldn't remember. His selective amnesia disturbed and frightened him.) He had become ageless, though not immortal. He would die someday, when the Fates willed, but he need never age. He could reverse his aging when he wanted, to the lower limit of the age he had been when the spells were cast.

He let himself grow old. The old were revered and well treated. Alone as few men had ever been alone, he cherished even such inconsequential kindnesses as he garnered this way.

He found the proverbs: "No man is an island," and "Man lives not by bread alone," uncomfortably true.

Alone. So alone. Could he not find just one friend?

For a time he played shaman to a nomad tribe on the steppe. It was a comedown, but a position for which he was grateful. He couldn't renounce the Power completely. Because he needed to be needed, he deluded himself with the belief that the tribesmen loved him. He still didn't understand human nature. The tribe went to war. Its chieftains became righteously indignant when he refused to use the Power on their behalf. Nor did he employ more than the minimum necessary to insure his survival when they turned upon him.

He wandered again, through the basin of the Roe, amongst the oldest cities of Man. He saw nothing to elevate his opinion of his own species. He wished the time-river would roll faster. She waited somewhere downstream.

There was an old road running east from Iwa Skolovda, one that seemed to lead nowhere. Periodically, the Kings of Iwa Skolovda sent colonists along it into East Heatherland and Shara, where they were supposed to supplant the savages through stubbornness and numbers, winning new territories for the Crown. Such movements were invariably devoured by the barbarians.

The road was wide and well-paved near the city, but after a dozen leagues, once it no longer served to bring produce from the countryside, it soon degenerated into a path. One spring day, two hundred years after the fall of Ilkazar, Varthlokkur followed that road, a sad old man who hadn't yet found a thing to make living worthwhile. But recently he'd encountered an interesting legend. It concerned a remote castle of unknown origins, and an immortal of equally nebulous background. Both waited at the end of this road, in that knot of tremendous mountains called the Dragon's Teeth. Both, Varthlokkur had divined, could become an inextricable part of his fate.

He had found a scrap of the legend in one city, a fragment of myth in another, and a piece of speculation in a third. Together, they had hinted of a castle called Fangdred, or the Castle of Wind, as old as The Place of A Thousand Iron Statues, and as feared, and as mysterious as that alleged stronghold of the Star Rider. In Fangdred dwelt an immortal known only as the Old Man of the Mountain, who supposedly had retreated there to escape the jealousy of shorter-lived men.

Maybe, Varthlokkur thought, he and this immortal were two of a kind. Maybe Fangdred could provide what he so desperately needed: a home and a friend.

Varthlokkur feared he was slowly going mad. In the midst of a raging, barbaric world where each man interacted with hundreds of others, living, loving, laughing, weeping, dying, and giving birth, he alone was outside, an observer totally alienated from human involvement. He didn't want to be outside, didn't want to be alone-yet he didn't know how to pass through the doorway of human intercourse. When he helped, he was cursed. When he didn't help, he was hated. Yet there was no way he could abandon the Power that damned him.

And Ilkazar had made him fear human relationships. A romanticized relationship with a mother whose face he couldn't remember had set his feet plodding a narrow, hard, joyless road cruel to the life-paths it had intersected. Relationships never worked the way they did in his dreams; dreams where love dwelt, and peace, without pain, became something real, while harsh, double-edged reality gradually became ghostly.

The sole dam holding the madness at bay was the woman waiting downtime.

He followed that road for weeks, across East Heatherland, into foothills, then up and down the flanks of tremendous, brooding mountains. His path tended ever upward. Each mountain rose taller than the last.

Soon he was higher than he had believed possible. The trail hung a half mile above the tops of the trees. Eagles planed below him. But the road continued upward over gray stone and snowy mountains, a barely discernable trail carved from living rock, following ridgetops, sometimes passing through tunnels, climbing, climbing. Finally, in a place so high he could hardly breathe, Varthlokkur paused. The road had taken a sharp turn around a knifelike corner of cliff, and ended.

Weary, cold, he wondered if he had come a thousand miles for nothing. Then, barely discernable through the ice and snow, he noticed steps cut into the flank of the mountain. Tracing their rise, he spied a tower with crenellated battlements peeping over a looming scarp above. With a groan, resigned, determined, he began that last thousand feet of travel.

The stairs ended on a narrow ledge fronting the fortress. The tower, that he had seen from below, perched on the very peak of the mountain, and, like a lighthouse, reached high into the wind. It had no visible doors or windows. The bulk of the stronghold rambled down to this ledge, which overlooked a thousand-foot precipice. So this was Fangdred, and Mount El Kabar. Briefly, before hammering on the sagging gate, Varthlokkur looked out across the Dragon's Teeth.

It was obvious how they had come by their name. Each peak was a giant gray-and-white fang ripping at the underbelly of the sky. Countless hungry fangs huddled deep, narrow, shadowed canyons all the way to a shadowed horizon.

Varthlokkur faced the gate.

An odd current stirred the musty air of the chamber atop Fangdred's Wind Tower. Dust moved nervously, as if suddenly charged with static electricity. Soft sounds, dust-dampened, whispers-a breath of movement. In a seat of ancient carven stone a gaunt figure, so covered with dust and enmeshed in cobwebs that it seemed a mummy, drew a tiny breath. It echoed through the sealed room. Eyes bright with life-pleasure opened in a wizened face. A long white beard tumbled down over a dusty blue smock which itself became dust the moment its wearer stirred.

The eyes, once open, were surprising. Though set in an ancient face, they seemed young and laughter-vibrant. Yet they weren't the eyes of a sane man. He had lived too long to have escaped the kiss of madness.

For a long time the old man remained motionless, his face drawn in concentration. He had been asleep a hundred years, waiting for something interesting to happen. What was it this time? he wondered. His glance halted at a mirror set into the wall. The mirror reflected not the dusty chamber, but a view of the trail to El Kabar. "Ah! A visitor." The sigh so soft barely stirred the dust in his whiskers. It had been ages since anyone had come looking for the Old Man of the Mountain. Life at Fangdred was lonely. He was pleased. A visitor. That was worth waking for.

He gathered strength for an hour before investing energy in anything more than breathing and moving his eyes. Those eyes aged quickly, the life-joy fading. Too old, too old. His wrinkled hand finally moved a tiny phial in a niche in the arm of his throne. He pushed it with a wrinkled finger. It fell. The sound of its breaking was a cymbal-crash in the empty chamber. Crimson vapor spread, rose. The Old Man inhaled deeply. Each breath of red mist sent a wave of life through his spare frame. Soon there was rosiness in his skin and strength in his long-unused muscles.

At last he rose and stumbled across the chamber, the dust of his smock falling from his otherwise naked body. His bare feet made muted, hollow slaps in the dust. He went to a cabinet of bottles, beakers, and urns, leaned against it while catching his breath. Then he took a small bottle down, unstopped it,

swallowed its contents. What was it? Certainly something bitter. He made a frightful face. Also, something of amazing potency. His body visibly livened.

So. This Old Man was a magician, a specialist in the life-magicks, a difficult field indeed. There were other magicks about that chamber, but, with the exception of the far-seeing mirror, none were beyond any sorcerer's apprentice.

Another hour passed. The Old Man grew stronger. When he felt truly ready, he went to a door-invisible till he pulled a lever disguised as ornamentation-which opened on a dark staircase leading downward. Rambling through the castle proper, he observed changes that time had wrought, noting what needed doing to put the place in order.

As he reached a door opening on the courtyard behind the castle gate, there came a sudden boom! boom! boom ! from the great bronze portal. His visitor had arrived. Hobbling slightly because he had twisted an ankle on the way, he hurried to a huge lever. He shook in the chill wind as he heaved against it. Creaks and groans bespoke a counterweight moving. Turning purple in the cold, he wondered if the gate would yield. Then a line of light appeared at one edge and slowly grew.

They stood a moment, staring at one another, considering. They were much alike, yet different. The Old Man's hair and beard were totally white. There was still a little color in Varthlokkur's. The wizard was taller, but loneliness had engraved similar lines on their faces. They knew one another immediately, not by name, but by their mutual needs. They were friends before words were spoken.

The Old Man indicated his nakedness, motioned Varthlokkur through the gate. The wizard inclined his head slightly, accepting. Still he did not speak.

The Old Man closed the gate, led Varthlokkur into the castle.

The wizard studied the dusty halls as he followed the Old Man, noting the age and gloom, and lack of life-signs in the pools of gray light cast by sunbeams stealing through high windows. Obviously, little happened here.

In a place deep within the fortress, carved from the rock of the mountain itself, the Old Man made passes before a large, dusty cabinet. Varthlokkur nodded, recognizing the counter to a spell of stasis. The cabinet front vanished. Dust cascaded.

The Old Man gestured while he considered the contents. Varthlokkur needed no orders. With a minimal spell of repulsion, he removed the dust from a stone table. The Old Man produced a time-shielded flask of wine. Varthlokkur set out plates, silverware, and pewter mugs. The Old Man brought forth a platter of hot, steaming ham, and another with fresh fruit. He produced new clothing, and hastily dressed. Once he stopped shivering, he joined Varthlokkur.

The wizard found the wine excellent, though it resurrected old sorrows. It was the golden, spiced wine of Ilkazar, as delicate as a virgin's kiss, and nearly unicorn-rare.

"I am Varthlokkur."

The Old Man considered that. Finally, he nodded. "The Silent One Who Walks With Grief. Of Ilkazar."

"And Eldred the Wanderer."

"A sad man. I watched him occasionally. He drank a bitter wine. Dogs can be more humane than men. They don't know the meaning of ingratitude. Nor of treachery."

"True. But I've abandoned anger and disappointment."

"As have I. They'll be what they'll be, and nothing will change them. You came seeking?"

"A place away from all places, and men, and loneliness. Two centuries among men... are enough."

"Any changes these past hundred years? I slept them out, being bored with repetitiveness."

"I thought so. Yes. Cities have fallen. Kingdoms have risen. But kings and men are the same in their hearts."

"And will always be. Fangdred is a refuge from that."

You're welcome. But there's a lot to do to make this place livable. Maybe servants and artisans should be engaged. Why here?"

"As I said, I need a place away, yet not lonely. To wait."

"For?"

"A woman, and destiny. I haven't performed the divination for decades. Would you like to watch? You'd understand better."

"Of course. How soon?"

"She's still two centuries down the river. The Fates hold a veil across the flow, concealing most of her age. Their hands will be in deep then, in a time of strife and true changes. Great powers will contest for empires. Wizards will war as never before. That's what I've divined so far. Seldom have I seen a divination so clouded."

"Ah? What's this about the Fates? Have they ranged themselves against you?" The Old Man's gray eyes flashed as though he were considering challenging the unchallengeable.

"They've taken sides, but I don't know how, nor the nature of my role. They're playing a complex game, apparently against the Norms, with incomprehensible rules and stakes. The players are uncertain, and their allegiances ephemeral."

"You've got a theory?" The Old Man tugged his beard thoughtfully.

"A tenuous one. That possibly the antagonists are systems of manipulation. Magic versus science. Romantic stasis versus clinical progress. The stakes could be the validity of magic and godhead. That puts us on the side of the gods. But I can't understand the Norms fighting us. If they are. They'd have no place in an orderly world either."

The Old Man ran a wrinkled hand through his hair. "I see. Ours is an enchanted world, with magical laws. That system has no room for newness or change. Which's why it hasn't changed much since the advent of the Star Rider." That event antedated even the Old Man's earliest memories-though he knew more than he would ever admit.

"And it'll stay that way unless the Power fails. I don't know if that's right. I have to stay with the magical system. My choices have been made for me, long ago, before I understood enough to choose intelligently.

"Consider a world without magic."

The Old Man closed his eyes, leaned back, imagined. He remained motionless and silent so long it seemed he had fallen asleep. A man less patient than Varthlokkur would have grown irritated. But, then, Varthlokkur had a concept of time unlike that of shorter-lived men.

"It wouldn't be a pleasant world," the Old Man finally replied. "There'd be no room for us. Sorcery would be a bad joke. Dragons and such would be the hardware of children's stories. Gods would be degraded till they had the substance of smoke. An unpleasant world, I'd say. I'd have to support magic, too. Are you tired?"

"In many ways, of many things, and life most of all. But I'm going to wait for her."

"Rest, then. Tomorrow we'll start rejuvenating Fangdred. And then we'll begin getting ready for this future contest."

Actually, Varthlokkur didn't much care about the coming struggle. He thought of it only as the price of finding his woman. "Where should I establish myself?"

"The Wind Tower would suit you best. You'll find the mirror especially useful. I'll show you how to get there."

Even the sparrow finds a home.

EIGHT: Her Strongholds Unvanquishable

The vanguard of the allied army, hurrying ahead of the main force, reached the Candareen days earlier than Turran expected. He had to lock his gate long before he wanted. Luxos and Ridyeh were still away, snuffling along Haroun's backtrail.

As expected, bin Yousif commanded the expedition. And, as Grimmason, Turran's leading mercenary officer, predicted, the man persisted in the unexpected.

Redbeard and Turran crouched in moonlight atop the tall tower over Ravenkrak's gate, watching the camp at the foot of the Candareen. "There!" said the mercenary, indicating a flash of silver on the slope.

"You win." Turran paid out a handful of silver. "I would've bet anything his men would be too tired and his numbers too few."

"That's why he's coming. He knows how people think."

Turran turned to peer over the rear of the parapet into an apparently deserted courtyard. Half the garrison were hidden down there, waiting. He signaled them to be ready.

Bin Yousif's commandos reached the foot of the wall.

"They could've made it," Turran observed. "They're good. Wish I'd hired him first. No offense. You've proven just as able."

Arrows with light lines attached arced over the battlements.

"Metal arrows," said Grimmason. "They'll hook one in the crenellations, then send up their lightest man."

So they did. A climber quickly reached the battlements, pulled up a heavier rope, made it fast, turned to watch the castle.

"Haroun himself!" Turran growled softly. "We've got him this time." He glanced at the camp down the mountain. Its fires burned bright, supporting the appearance of the attackers waiting there for the rest of their army. But here and there on the mountain, moonlight glinted off metal. Those flashes would have remained undetected had it not been for Redbeard's insistent warnings.

One by one, twelve men clambered onto the battlements. They whispered, then spread out. Four followed Haroun down to the courtyard, to the base of the tower, to the tunnel leading through the wall. The others divided equally between the two gatehouses. Haroun's four tried to raise the inner of the two stone blocks sealing the tunnel.

Raiders left the gatehouses.

"We should've left somebody down there," Turran whispered. "They're bound to suspect something."

"But it's too late," Grimmason replied, chuckling. "They're already in the trap." He leaned over the parapet, signaled soldiers hidden among the rocks outside the gate.

A moment later, from below, "Stop! Drop your weapons!"

A bugle sounded two notes. Soldiers rushed into the courtyard and to the wall.

There was an uproar at the gate. Men screamed. Crossbows twangled. Steel rang on steel. Haroun and four of his men broke out, raced downslope. Bin Yousif shouted, "Back! Trap! Get back!"

Torches flared along Ravenkrak's wall. Ready trebuchets hurled their missiles. Arrow engines discharged volleys. Bowmen commenced loosing. Naptha bombs from the trebuchets scarred the slope with fire. Soldiers with clothing aflame ran like beheaded chickens.

"That was easy," Turran observed. "But more serious assaults worry me. He's too damned crafty."

The others had gone inside. Nepanthe and Saltimbanco, with the wall to themselves, stared down the Candareen. Pools of naptha still sputtered here and there, painting the broken rocks with eerie lights and shadows. Some of those shadows walked. Haroun's men were collecting their dead.

They stood in silence. Saltimbanco thought about Redbeard-Rendel Grimmason-Bragi Ragnarson. Why on earth had the man warned Turran? Ravenkrak would have fallen, otherwise, and they would have finished the job they had been hired to do. And he would have been in the enviable position of a tool that had never needed to be taken off the shelf.

What the hell was the man up to?

Nepanthe worried too. She now understood the women's amusement-and didn't like it at all. She had fought herself since her first vague realization. Something deep inside her kept saying it would lead to something wicked.

But that dark corner of her mind relaxed her thralldom while she was with Saltimbanco. The romantic, light part of her soul stole mastery. Saltimbanco's very unconcern with it helped bring it forth.

A wounded man, not far downslope, screamed as his comrades lifted him. Nepanthe shuddered and moved nearer Saltimbanco. Her hand seized his. She was unaware of what she had done. He pretended not to notice.

A while later There was a sound from along the ramparts. Saltimbanco glanced up, expecting another of the sentries who passed regularly. Instead, his eyes met those of Grimmason and his wife. His narrowed.

Nepanthe would have been startled by his expression. He showed unwonted hardness and anger. It fled instantly, but wasn't overlooked by the other couple. The man flinched. His wife stared back defiantly.

"Ah," said Nepanthe. "Captain Grimmason. Astrid. Astrid, you look lovely tonight."

"Uhn," Grimmason grunted. "Took a while to talk her into it. What do you think of the dress?" He wouldn't meet Mocker's eye.

"Fantastic. Astrid, really, riding clothes don't become you. You'd be the envy of every woman here if you went to the Great Hall like that. Don't you think so, Saltimbanco?"

"Huh? Oh, verily." His gaze and that of the officer sparked like rapiers meeting. "Madame Grimmason will make very fine Colonel's lady."

Nepanthe's hand tightened on his. "Oh, now you've let the cat out. It was supposed to be a surprise." To the others, she said, "Turran's endorsing you for promotion. He said he'd file with the Guild as soon as we raise siege."

"I'm not with the Guild anymore, Milady."

"They still claim you."

The captain shrugged. "They don't want anybody to get out. But they don't make it worth your trouble to stay in."

"Well, try to look surprised when he announces it. He thinks a lot of you, Captain. How do you always know what Haroun's going to do?"

"Hai!" Saltimbanco cried. "Thank great stars in sky Redbeard knows mind of invidious enemy! Elsewise, where we be now, eh? Maybe all done for, eh? Whole war thing done, and Ravenkrak fallen, maybe so."

The mercenary caught his meaning, but ignored him. "Milady, my people have been soldiers for generations. Tricks get passed down. One is to study the outstanding commanders of our times in case we have a run-in with them. I think I know Haroun fairly well, although I don't think I'd be able to trap him again."

"Is very good general, this Haroun," said Saltimbanco. "Has conquered Iwa Skolovda with bandits, outnumbered. Self, am afraid this obesity will soon be prisoner of same. Great castle is this, but great general is out there. Many men he has, more than we. Is miracle absolute he does not sit in Great Hall tonight. Is miracle absolute all is not done for Ravenkrak." Again, anger edged his voice. Nepanthe mistook it for fright. The Captain understood.

As did his wife. "Lady," she said, "can I talk to you about something? Alone? I'd like to borrow some things, and another dress. But we can't talk about it in front of the men."

Nepanthe nodded. She withdrew her hand from Saltimbanco's, realized for the first time that it had been there. She was startled. She hadn't been hurt. Something tingled inside her. For a second she was flustered, but collected herself and followed Astrid. They strolled into the shadow of the gate tower.

Mocker hardly waited till they were out of earshot. "What is game, Bragi? Mess should be done, but big thickhead opens mouth! Goes tootling off on path of own. Playing treason? Self, am six months unpracticed with rapier, but still can kill fast as lightning..."

The soldier flinched. He didn't doubt that the smaller man could outface him. Few men alive could match Mocker with a blade. "I'm playing a hunch," he said. "There's something rotten in this set-up, but I can't figure what. I stopped Haroun so we'd have time to find out. And I wanted to catch him so I could talk to him. Last time I had a chance at it I had to use all my imagination to keep Turran from laying hands on him."

"Last time?"

"Coming back from Iwa Skolovda. Shhh!"

A sleepy sentry passed, muttering a greeting. He paid them no special heed. As usual, Saltimbanco was arguing the roundness of the earth.

The guard gone, Saltimbanco snapped, "Speak on. Am very curious about empty purse that should be full tonight."

"I said there's something wrong. These Storm Kings are just bored people playing chess with live soldiers. Except for Turran, and maybe Valther, they don't give a damn about resurrecting the Empire. There's no real reason anybody should go to so much trouble to destroy them. So why'd the old man hire us? I want to know. I'll keep stalling till I find out..."

"Conscience?" Saltimbanco snorted. "Large friend of self suddenly develops conscience after so many years?"

"No. Self-preservation. If I knew where we stood, and we were safe, I'd cut Turran's throat in a minute-even though I like the guy. No, it's not conscience. We're being used, and I want to know why before my throat gets cut. I'm not changing sides. I'm just getting temporarily uncommitted. You're the one, if any of us does, who's got a reason for selling out."

"Huh?"

"Nepanthe. You two are getting awful thick."

"Is job old man paid for, to divide Storm King family, in case. To be man on inside, in case. Shh!"

Women come. Is great orb, like ball childrens play with, only big-big."

"What happened to the boat and the giant duck?" Astrid asked, chuckling.

"Hai! Yes. Is great round ball in boat on sea of Escalonian wine, propelled by web-footed duck through stary universe."

Grimnason forced a laugh. His wife slipped under his arm, pulled him away. She slid her arm around his waist.

Nepanthe watched them go, staring at their arms.

Grimnason was a soldier of nebulous origins. Only his wife and a few intimates knew much more than his true name, Bragi Ragnarson, and his country of birth, which was Trolledyngja, north of the Kratchnodian Mountains. But most people he encountered didn't care. They were interested only in his military skills. What employers didn't know-and a couple had suffered for it-was that Ragnarson and bin Yousif were intimates. From opposite sides they engineered conflicts to their own profit, and with such finesse that even losing campaigns contributed to their reputations. Mocker usually played interlocutor.

They hadn't gotten caught yet, though serious analysts at High Crag and on the Itaskian General Staff (each of which had cause to watch both men) were growing suspicious. Their cooperation during the El Murid Wars, and for a few years thereafter, couldn't be concealed. Any serious background check would turn it up.

But they concentrated on minor employers, desperate men who hadn't the time or resources to do much digging.

Unlike the old man who was their ultimate paymaster now, who had approached them with evidence in hand and a solid Grimnason identity for Bragi to assume.

Ragnarson had been born the son of a minor Trolledyngjan under-chieftain, Ragnar of Draukenbring. He had come by war experience, at ten, by sailing with his father through the Tongues of Fire to harry the coasts of Freyland. Then had come a Trolledyngjan war of succession in which Ragnar had followed the losing banner. Bragi and his foster-brother, Haaken Blackfang, had fled across the Kratchnodians and at sixteen had entered the Mercenaries' Guild.

The El Murid Wars had broken immediately. Bragi had found employment aplenty, and opportunities to demonstrate his talent for command. And he had met Haroun bin Yousif, the King Without A Throne.

At twenty he had been confirmed Guild Captain. He might have, had he wished, risen high. But he suffered critical character defects: gold fever and an inability to accept peacetime discipline. He had felt he could prosper more outside Guild auspices, as Haroun's accomplice, than as a colonel, or even general. The Guild was a mystery order, spartan, almost monastic, providing little opportunity for personal enrichment.

After a period of consistent failure free-lancing, Ragnarson had assembled a cadre of like-minded former Guildsmen and had returned to hire-swording. He wasn't popular with High Crag, the Guild headquarters, where the old men of the Citadel viewed him as a renegade. They sometimes threatened to accept his resignation.

Nepanthe worked at her embroidery fitfully, thinking. Someone knocked on her door. She was grateful

for the interruption, but prayed it wouldn't be Saltimbanco. She didn't want to be alone with him right now. "Enter," she called, ringing for her maid.

Astrid came in timidly, daunted by the luxury of the sitting room. "I came about the clothes. Rendel wants me to wear them tonight."

"I had Anina set them out in the bedroom."

The maid arrived. "Milady?"

"Bring some wine please, then we'll help Astrid with the things we set out this morning."

"Yes, Milady." The maid curtsied, left. A deep and abiding silence, of brooding women, engulfed the room. Astrid (whose name was Elana), wanted to offer advice and comfort, but fought herself. This woman was the enemy. Yet she couldn't hate Nepanthe. She felt too much compassion for the woman, who had done her no harm. Damn the machinations of men! She would rather be friends than foes.

The silence grew unbounded, frightening, cold. It had to be broken. "I can't thank you enough for loaning the clothes. A soldier's wife doesn't get nice things very often." Her words were just noise to kill the fearful silence.

"Then why stay with Rendel?" Nepanthe asked. Her face revealed a fleeting moment of hope. Astrid sensed that their conversation would slide around to Nepanthe's problem. "You're beautiful and well-bred."

Elana smiled involuntarily. Her mother had been an Itaskian courtesan of considerable notoriety.

"You're mannered and capable of moving in elegant society. You'd have no trouble attracting a Lord of estate."

She had, occasionally, early on, when younger and taking a few tentative steps along the red trail her mother had broken. Another reminiscent smile. "I guess I could have, if I'd wanted one. But Rendel caught my eye." Being able to lower her guard a little and tell a part of the truth was infinitely relaxing. This castle contained no one she could call friend, no one with whom she could just sit and make idle woman-talk. Few of Bragi's staff were married. "I don't miss the luxuries-much-because I don't get time to worry about them." Her smile grew wan. She did miss things, things she deeply wanted. A home, children, a few luxuries... But Bragi wasn't ever able to grab enough money.... There was always that one more campaign before they could settle down. Maybe this one would really be the last, if that old man paid as well as he had promised, if Bragi decided to go ahead, if they weren't found out... The ifs, all these terrible ifs...

Nepanthe wore a shadow-frown of incomprehension.

"You don't understand," said Elana, voicing the obvious. She gathered her wits. Discussing Nepanthe's problems would help submerge her own. "When you meet the right man you'll know what I mean. They don't come in shining armor these days. And when you do find him, the silks and fancies won't mean much anymore. Fisherman, beggar, king, thief, it'll be all the same to you. A tent will be as good as a castle and straw as soft as down as long as you're together. But you've got to accept what comes. Look past the wrappings for the package's contents. Or you might spend the rest of your life wondering why you were such a fool."

"And I'm getting awfully preachy, aren't I?"

"You really love him, don't you?" Nepanthe asked. "Rendel, I mean." She grew flustered, feeling silly for saying the obvious.

Elana had spoken primarily to help Mocker, but, in retrospect, realized she was talking with her heart. "More than I knew, now that you ask. I'm surprised. The gods know it's been no honeymoon-we're both too too bullheaded-but I don't think there's anything that could make me run him off. Yes, I love him. Even though I did the proposing myself." She laughed.

"You asked him?"

"I certainly did. He was a real hard case. Took a lot of convincing."

The maid brought wine, served them, told Elana, "If you come to the bedroom, I'll help with the dresses."

Nepanthe's sitting room had been wonderful, but Elana found the woman's bedroom a veritable fairyland. There, riches were thick as fallen leaves in autumn, and as comfortable. "Rendel promised me a room like this when we got married. Till now I never thought I'd even see one."

"Just presents from my brothers," Nepanthe replied, shrugging them off. "Jerrad killed the rugs. They're bearskins, mostly. Ridyeh got the mirror in Escalon. It's supposed to be magic, but none of us can work it. It's awfully old. Luxos made the bed. Carved it by hand, after one he saw in Itaskia, he says."

The maid moved behind Elana, began unlacing her clothing.

Nepanthe continued, "Valther gave me the paintings. Did you ever see anything like them?"

"Only once. In Hellin Daimiel, at a museum."

"That's where he got them-Hellin Daimiel. And I think they were stolen from a museum, but Valther wouldn't do anything like that. I don't think. He never did say how he got them. Brock gave me the little figurines." Tiny little castles and warriors, perfectly shaped, stood on a board no bigger than Elana's hand. "They're hand-carved. The clear ones are diamonds. The red ones are rubies. They're pieces for a game. I think they're stolen too. Only a king could afford them."

By now, Elana was naked and shivering in Ravenkrak's unheated autumn air. As she joined the maid beside a pile of silken undergarments, she asked, "What did Turran give you?"

"Nothing!" Nepanthe snapped. "Not a thing."

"Milady!" said the maid, as though distressed. "Of course he did. There's the dress, that he said was the easy half of his gift." She giggled. She wasn't more than fourteen, an age when everything is laughter or despair.

Nepanthe bit her lip, frowned, turned away. "Anina, you talk too much."

The maid giggled again, went to a closet.

"Anina!"

Anina brought out a magnificent gown. Elana gasped. There was enough fine silk there to rig sails for a ship. "A wedding dress!" she exclaimed. "Nepanthe, that's the best gift of all."

Nepanthe's bitten lip turned white. Her small hands twisted within one another.

"It's just half the present," said Anina. "The rest's the man to go with it. See, the Lord does the marrying here."

"Enough!" Nepanthe spat. "Anina get out! I'll help Astrid. Maybe a turn scrubbing floors would teach you to watch your tongue."

The maid tried to look contrite. She failed abysmally, giving way to a fit of giggles.

"Servants!" Nepanthe muttered.

"She meant no harm, Milady."

"I have a name. Call me Nepanthe. Sure, she meant no harm. But she presumes too much."

"I think it's a beautiful present."

Nepanthe jerked the laces with which she was fumbling. Elana gasped. "Which?" Nepanthe demanded.

"The dress, of course. I wore rags when I got married. What a dress! What a wedding would go with it! Like a coronation in old Ilkazar."

"I do not plan to get married, ever," said Nepanthe, each word measured. "I want no man crawling over me and pawing me like... like an animal in a breeding stall!"

Her intensity was frightening. Elana grunted as Nepanthe jerked savagely on another set of laces. She wanted to say something, anything, in rebuttal, comforting, or apologetic, but intuited that silence was best. The subject was closed-unless Nepanthe reopened it.

Silence, interrupted only by the rustle of clothing, hung thick in the bedroom, remaining unbroken till Nepanthe began helping with the shoes.

Elana sat on the edge of the bed. Nepanthe knelt before her, hooking the shoes. Staring at Elana's feet, she stammered, "What's it like, having a man?"

"What?"

Nepanthe's neck colored where her hair had parted and exposed the skin beneath. "You know, like that."

Her answer, Elana knew, would be critical both to her own future and to that of this strange woman. She tried to come up with an instructive answer, couldn't. "What can I say? I can't tell you what it'd be like for you."

"Well, what do you think? Mother never liked it. She said it was wicked... that... well, I don't know."

"But she had seven children."

"I mean my stepmother. My real mother died when I was born."

"That's a face some women put on in company. I don't think very many take it to bed. It's not dirty or evil.."

"But what's it like?" Nepanthe asked plaintively.

Elana shrugged. She began with the basics.

"I know the mechanics..."

"Then what can I tell you? There's only one way to find out. The hard way."

Still looking down, Nepanthe whispered, "Does it hurt, the first time? I've heard..." She let it trail off.

"Some, for some women. You'll forget it quick enough. I hardly remember..."

Nepanthe rose suddenly, walked away. "You're done," she said. "Take a look in the mirror." Then, as Elana admired herself, "Astrid, I'm scared. I can't change! Sometimes, when he's here, I want to, but when I think about it... I don't. I don't want to change! I'm all mixed up. I wish I weren't a woman. Anyway, I wish I were a normal woman."

"Oh, not that abnormal, I think," said Elana, trying to calm her. "We're all afraid-deathly so-before, if we're expecting it to happen. It seems... well... Oh, hell! I can't explain! It's just different, afterward. The fears go. Slow, for some, but they go. I can't tell you anything except that it's not wrong. Come on, dinner's waiting. Rendel be worrying, and Turrans'll be holding everything up."

NINE: Behind Walls that Reach to the Sky

"I wish they'd stop beating those drums!" Turrans growled. Leaning on the battlements, he studied the enemy encampment. A dull throbbing echoed upward, like the heartbeat of a world. "They'll drive me mad!"

"That's the idea," said Ragnarson, leaning beside him. "War of nerves. An old bin Yousif trick. He heard they do it in Shinsan."

"It's working." The Storm King turned, glanced along the wall toward where Nepanthe and Saltimbanco strolled together. "Somebody's not bothered. Our windy friend's making headway."

Indeed. They walked hand in hand, and Nepanthe seemed unashamed of being seen.

"Ha!" said Redbeard. She's making headway. He's lost a good four stone. What do you think of the match?"

After considering, Turrans replied, "Nepanthe needs a man more than anything else in the world. A one-eyed, one-legged beggar from the blackest slum in Itaskia would suit me if she'd have him. But Saltimbanco pleases me. His origins seem humble, yet his heart's as noble as a king's. I wouldn't prevent a wedding, or even an affair. In fact, if I knew how I'd help him seduce her."

Grimnason nodded, offered, "If there's anything I can do..." Then, "Speaking of Itaskia, have you heard

anything about Haroun?"

"No. Gold and knives have sealed a lot of mouths. Ridyeh's having trouble. How long before they reach the wall?"

Ragnarson looked down at bin Yousif's earthworks, long, lazy zigzags advancing up the Candareen. The heavy weapons had been unable to damage them. "Not soon."

"Number three trebuchet!" Turran bellowed. "Fire one at the center approach."

A missile arced through the air, trailing smoke, but fell short. Naptha spewed and burned amongst broken rocks.

"Not quite," Ragnarson observed. "Another day or two."

"Can we hold till winter?"

Ragnarson was surprised. Turran with doubts about the invincibility of his fortress? Impossible! "They won't be ready to try the wall till autumn. And then they've got to get over it. I don't think they can. Not when they have to bring their gear up that slope under fire."

"Still, I'd like to delay them. Can't we make a sortie? To wreck their siegeworks?"

"I'll put Rolf on it. But it'd be risky. We can't afford casualties. We don't have enough men to defend the whole wall now. Maybe we could use Nepanthe's Iwa Skolovdans. They wouldn't be much loss. Blackfang and Kildragon have drilled them silly, and they're still not much better than recruits." ,

"What do you think of our chances?"

"Excellent. Standard assault procedure calls for a five-to-one advantage. They've got us by about three. Haroun knows that. But he's got something going, or he would've left. But I can't figure what." He glanced down. Saltimbanco and Nepanthe had left the wall. He saw them enter the Bell Tower. Mocker was certainly taking his time with her. But, from what Elana said, she was a stubborn case. Women. Remarkable creatures.

His thoughts turned to the old man who had hired them. Who was he? Why was the destruction of Ravenkrak so important to him?

Saltimbanco held the door for Nepanthe. She thanked him, walked to her embroidery frame, fidgeted with needles. There were always fires in Ravenkrak, even during the "summer." The chair wasn't as comfortable as when he had been heavier. He closed his eyes halfway and watched the flames through his lashes. They were curious iridescences.

Nepanthe toyed with her embroidery for fifteen minutes, then started pacing. Her gaze refused to leave Saltimbanco. They had been discussing the siege and Turran's plans, but their thoughts tended elsewhere.

Saltimbanco was frightened of himself, of his lusts, and that strange other feeling he had for Nepanthe. The latter he thought he could conquer, but the former... More than once, he had come near rape. And that would destroy everything.

Nepanthe, for her part, had finally admitted to herself that she loved this strangely frightened man. She

had admitted that she wanted to... well, that she wanted. But she was terrified. Her talks with Astrid calmed her intellectual fear, but dark emotional currents still surged under the surface of her mind, far too deep to be easily stilled. She was sure she would die a virgin.

She circled the chair where he sat sleepily studying the fire through his lashes, thinking of attacking his ear the way Astrid had described. But no, that was too much. And she was too frightened.

She went to the front, of the chair. He looked up with those strange brown eyes. She bit her lip. Her throat became tight and unresponsive. She couldn't say what she wanted. A flicker of emotion crossed his dusky face. What?

Trembling slightly, she took his hand, settled onto the arm of the chair. He squeezed gently, went back to studying the fire. She shifted, leaned toward him. Tightly, hoarsely, she said, "There's something you need..."

When he glanced up, she moved the last six inches and pressed her lips against his. It lasted just a second. Her jaw trembled. She shivered. She felt him quavering as he fought for control. She wanted him to drag her into his lap, but...The enchanted moment died. A door slammed somewhere in her mind. Fear struck. She backed away slowly, fighting herself, not wanting him hurt. She was running again, fleeing herself. She bit her lip painfully, returned to her embroidery.

Moments later, as she cursed a bad stitch and her own ineffectuality, he started snoring. It seemed a pointed sound, a mockery. It cut her to the heart of her being.

Why can't I be a normal woman? Why? Why? Why?

Nepanthe responded to the knock with a glum, "Enter." But when Elana came in, she brightened. "Astrid. What do you think about me? Why am I so mixed up?"

Elana paused just inside the door, wondering what had happened. "Company leave already?"

"I kissed him... but he didn't do anything... and I got scared and ruined it."

"So?"

"Well, I wanted..."

"Nepanthe, let it be. You're worrying too much. Don't force it. It won't work. Let it ride. Suddenly, you'll look up and find everything roses." She hoped.

"Maybe. It's just... well... I can't explain."

"Why try? Nepanthe, you're a natural worrier, you know that? You find problems where there aren't any. Do you like being miserable? I mean, sure, it's something to think about, but don't hinge your life on it. You need something to keep you busy, that's what. That's your trouble."

"What? What use am I here? I'm just another mouth, worthless to Ravenkrak."

"You make me mad when you're like this. Something to do? Last night Rendel said Brock hasn't made any hospital arrangements. We'll need a place to doctor the wounded. I hear there's plenty of space in the Deep Dungeons."

"But it's filthy down there. They haven't been used for ages."

"We could clean them up, couldn't we? Look, we've got a castle full of women that're bored silly. This would keep them out of trouble."

"It'd take a lot of time..."

"It'll be a month before they're ready outside. Longer, if Rendel raids them like he's thinking."

"We'd better get started then."

Elana smiled. Her ploy had been effective.

"Let me get my wrap," said Nepanthe. "We'll get the keys, then see what's got to be done."

Elana, with Nepanthe, Saltimbanco, and the male Storm Kings, stood in the parapet of the Black Tower, over Ravenkrak's gate, silent in a strong wind, watching the midnight sortie. Below, besiegers had been working by torchlight till the sortie reached them. Their first warning had been the cries of their fellows. Now flames, fed by naphtha, were devouring lumber and tools. Tents in the workers' camp went up.

The wounded began coming in. The fighting went on. Torches coming up the mountain showed reinforcements on the way. Elana and Nepanthe fled to their makeshift hospital and began the sad, bloody business of putting soldiers together again. Most of the wounded were prisoners. With the enemy advance camp destroyed and two weeks' labor on the earthworks ruined, Ragnarson withdrew. He and Rolf mustered their companies in the courtyard for roll call.

Suddenly, Elana came running, winded from the climb out of the Deep Dungeons. "Bragi," she gasped, almost collapsing. "It's Haaken. He's bad hurt... And he's got... something on the old man."

"Damn!" He turned and bellowed, "Rolf! Kildragon! Elana, stick with him and keep Nepanthe away. Don't let him give us away." Rolf and Kildragon arrived. Ragnarson explained. "Haaken's found what we want. I'll go down as soon as we get muster."

"How is he?" Rolf asked.

"Out cold," Elana replied. "But I can't find anything wrong, even though he looks like he's dying. I'll have to keep him alive before anything." She started off.

"Wait!" said Ragnarson. "There's a room in the Lower Armories no one uses. If we can shuffle him in there, he'd be out of the way. Damn! Damn!" He was scared Haaken would give them away, scared he might lose the only family he had...

High above, Saltimbanco watched the party break up. He glanced at the Storm Kings. They were enthralled by the flames below the walls. He looked back into the courtyard, wondering what the trouble was. Elana had brought the news, so she was the one to see. "Self," he said, "am going down to Deep Dungeons. Will gentle brave troops."

"Ha!" Valther snorted. "Need an excuse to see Nepanthe, eh? Been neglecting you?"

Saltimbanco bowed slightly, took his leave.

TEN: What Does a Man Profit?

Fangdred changed rapidly, as did its master. The times when he was warm and companionable grew fewer, when he was irritable, more frequent. Which suited Varthlokkur. Two hundred years made aloneness a habit. Too much friendship too fast might set his feet on the wanderer's road again.

Fangdred changed, and in changing caused the Old Man's moodiness. Servants came, poor people hired in Iwa Skolovda. Though frightened of it, they found service at Fangdred a better hope than any at home. They swept, scrubbed, repaired, replaced. They cooked, sewed, cared for the few horses that appeared in Fangdred's stables. Hogs came to the courtyards, with piglets, ducks, geese, chickens, goats, sheep, and cattle. There was a blacksmith and forge. His anvil rang through the day like a bell. A carpenter. His hammer and saw were busy from dawn till dusk. A miller. A weaver. A mason, a cobbler, a wainwright, a seamstress, a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker. And their children. Many, laughing, tagging through the castle, plaguing the softhearted cook and baker for something sweet, throwing stones off the wall just to watch them drop out of sight. Varthlokkur often watched them from the Wind Tower. He had never been a child. Oh, and a piper. What a piper! In his own way, he worked a magic as powerful as Varthlokkur's, as immortal as the Old Man's. His twinkling enchantments ran through the castle with the smith's hammering, the carpenter's sawing, and the children's laughter.

As the castle grew homelike and her people settled in, Varthlokkur and the Old Man withdrew from her life.

So. The Old Man enters a courtyard where carpenter and smith are arguing with the mason about the repair of an interior wall. Their argument, and all other sound, ceases. Except the piping: the piper fears nothing. They dread the man who never dies, though he has done nothing to inspire dread.

So. Varthlokkur visits a courtyard where four little girls skip rope to the piper's tune. He watches from a shadow, unseen, amused. But when he steps out to ask about the song, the girls flee. He's hurt. Only the piper remains. He dreads not the Slayer of Ilkazar.

Hurt, the two withdrew from their servants. The Old Man grew irascible, Varthlokkur quiet. But each comforted himself with the knowledge of an advantage over fear: time. Generations would go and come, but they would endure. One day's frightened children were the grandfathers of another. Fear, like salt in the earth, would leech away.

And, a century later, the people no longer held their masters in dread. The Old Man could speak to his carpenter without having to ignore shaking limbs. Varthlokkur could hold one end of the rope for the jumping girls, and they would thank him when done, calling him Uncle Varth.

There was always a piper who was fearless.

The century came and went, slowly, with its attendant changes. One day the wizard, over breakfast, said, "I've not performed a divination in an age. I wonder..."

"If the mists haven't cleared off your lifeline?" The Old Man brightened. A divination promised diversion. "Shall we go to the Wind Tower?"

"Absolutely," Varthlokkur replied, catching his excitement. "Had I a patron god, I'd pray."

"Shall I seal the door?" the Old Man asked as they entered the wizard's workroom.

"Yes. I don't want anybody stumbling in." The Old Man worked a quick, simple spell. The door became part of the wall.

Varthlokkur went to a table where dusty thaumaturgical and necromantic instruments had lain undisturbed since his last divination. He had done little but read and research magic the past century. But neither knowledge nor skill had deserted him. Soon the mirror on the wall was a-flash, giving rapid, still views of the future. He whispered, whispered, narrowed the mirror's attention till he saw only events in which he was interested.

A few clouds veiling the time river had faded. He stared downtime and saw something of the coming struggle. His theories seemed valid. The Norns and Fates would be at odds. He searched for his woman, caught a glimpse of her face.

"Ah!" the Old Man sighed. "She's beautiful." His eyes sparkled with appreciation. By the time the face faded, each knew it well.

Hair, black as a raven's wing, long, silken. Eyes, ebony and flecked with gold. Lips, full and red with a suggestion at their corners that she would seldom smile. There was also that, around her brows, which suggested she would be quick to anger. Spirited, but sad. A fine oval face with delicate features, marked by loneliness. Both men knew that look. All too often they had seen it in one another.

She was there and gone in an instant, but they recognized and knew her. And Varthlokkur loved her.

"How long?" the Old Man asked.

Varthlokkur shrugged. "Less than a century. A shorter wait than a century ago, but longer now that I've seen her. We'll look again in fifteen or twenty years."

"Was it my imagination?... Did you get the impression that this spat between the Fates and Norns is just plain jealousy? I got the impression that they will make the whole world a bloody chessboard-but out of plain old-fashioned covetousness. Settling whether science or sorcery rules will be a bastard son of the dispute. That the whole battle's over prerogatives."

"Maybe," Varthlokkur said after a minute of thought. "An analogy comes to mind. Something in Itaskia.

"The Itaskian King has two kinds of Royal monies and incomes: one belongs to him as an individual. The other belongs to the King personifying the state. The line of demarcation is vague. The time I mean, there were two fiscal officials, the Royal Treasurer and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, both jealous men with personal animosities. Each one tried to ruin the other with claims of infringement, incompetence, that kind of stuff. What both really wanted was complete control of the money. Fighting over it, in the name of the kingdom, they almost ruined the kingdom."

"I remember. I laughed when the King, when they demanded a judgment, took their heads. And I see the analogy. The Norns would be Treasurers, agents for the Gods. The Fates are Chancellors, responsible to the universe. Both want a hammerlock on dabbling in human affairs."

"About it. Makes you wonder what we're doing, taking sides."

"Uhm. Oh. There was something else. Something about Shinsan. Just a flicker there, that said Dread Empire. Did you catch it?"

After delaying, Varthlokkur replied, "No. I didn't see anything." He turned to a table stacked with magical texts.

The Old Man frowned, asked another question, again received an evasive answer. He decided to drop it. "What're you going to do now?"

"Back to research. I'm on the verge of a breakthrough. A chance to tap a new thaumaturgic Power, almost independent of what we know. Possibly even independent of the Poles."

The Old Man started. "The Poles of Power?"

Two Poles were believed to exist, one rumored to be in the hands of the Star Rider, the other totally lost. They were to the Power somewhat as the poles seen in the chemically generated "electricity" recently demonstrated at the Rebsamen University in Hellin Daimiel.

"Remember when Tennotini proposed his 'Uncertainty Principle'?"

"There was a lot of laughter."

"Looks like he was right. If we accept uncertainty, the sign of Delestin's Constant stops being fixed. That would destroy the concept of directionality." He grew excited. "Look what happens when I put a negative constant into my Winterstorm Functions. I think that, when I take the math to the next level, I'll show that I've opened a new frontier..."

"You lost me way back," said the Old Man. "I'm still wrestling with Yo Hsi's Prime Anchaics."

"Sorry. Before I go on, though, I think I'll take a little trip."

"Ilkazar?" The Old Man didn't look at his guest.

"Yes. A return to the scene of the crime, so to speak. Vengeance was a taste of bitter honey."

"A proverb. I'll add it to the book." Through the ages, the Old Man had been collecting pertinent sayings. "You could see the ruins from here."

"I'm after money. There's a little silver hidden where a tree once stood on a farm, and some gold in a place only I know. That's all wasteland now. Hammad al Nakir. The Desert of Death."

"The treasure?"

"Yes. There's a concealment spell on it."

"The treasure of an empire," the Old Man murmured. "Well, take care."

Varthlokkur returned some months later. He led a train of animals bearing the gold of Ilkazar. After the festivities attending his arrival, Fangdred returned to its customary quietness. That quiet lasted generations.

The Old Man strode Fangdred's windy, ice-rimmed wall, caught in the grayest of depressions, considering a return to his long sleep. He and Varthlokkur had been together a century and a half.

Nothing had happened. The intrigue was gone. Boredom threatened. His eyes no longer sparkled, no longer retained their reminiscences of youth. Yet he appeared much as he had the day of his awakening: of moderate height, thin, his beard streaming like a banner in the wind. He appeared eighty, had the agility of thirty. But his smiles had fled. Now his face often gathered in a frown. His servants had begun to avoid him. Though generations of closeness had eroded the terror of his name, he was still the Old Man of Fangdred, not to be antagonized when in a darkling mood. Those had been common of late.

Hair and beard whipping wildly, he abandoned the wall for the dubious comfort of the common room. That hall was nearly empty, but he took a seat at the head table without his curiosity being aroused. After a moment of staring into nothingness, he turned to those few servants who had had the courage to brave his mood.

"Steward, go to the Wind Tower. Ask Varthlokkur to come down."

The steward bobbed his head and left.

"Piper, play something."

This piper, like his ancestors, knew no fear. He cocked his eye at his master, assayed his mood, played the song that went:

Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said,

"A man-child is conceived." Let that day be darkness!...

The Old Man knew the lament. He surged up. "Piper!" he thundered. "Don't mock me! Your head's not set on a neck of stone." He pounded the table, fist flashing pinkly, and shouted, "I've had it with your games. The wizard has to have you here, you play something for him!" He plopped down, face burning.

The piper, mildly intimidated, bowed, played:

Awake, O North Wind, and come, O South Wind! Blow upon my garden, let its fragrance be wafted abroad. Let my beloved come to this garden, and eat of its choicest fruits.

A song for a woman calling a lover to her bed, but near enough the wizard's case to mock. He played only the ending, pointedly, as Varthlokkur strode into the hall. Usually the wizard was angered by it, but today he merely laughed and slapped the piper's back in passing.

The Old Man, interpreting Varthlokkur's cheer as evidence he bore good news, shook some of his depression.

"You wanted to see me?" Varthlokkur asked. He was obviously more excited than he had been for a long time.

"Yes. But it might not be important now. You've brought news. What's happening?"

"The Game has finally opened," Varthlokkur replied. "No more empty maneuvers, no more recruitments. Somewhere this fine morning-I don't know where or how, because they kept it damned well hidden-the Norms made their first concrete move."

The Old Man's depression retreated further. He grew excited himself. Battle had been joined. Armies

would march. There would be earthquakes, plagues, storms, and mighty works by magicians, as the Director used earthly pawns to cast a tragedy... And he would be in the middle of it for the first time since the Nawami Crusades. He had missed the Director's more recent epics. "Great! And a minute ago I was thinking about going back to sleep..."

The piper tootled a passage. The Old Man sprang up, raging. "Must we endure that fool? I've had too much of him and his ancestors' mockery!" His mood hadn't retreated far. The piper withdrew before anything more could be said. He was fearless, but not without sense.

"We need somebody to remind us we're only human," said Varthlokkur. He was pleased by the Old Man's reaction to the news. Despite the Old Man's rage, he broached a matter that had been bothering him. "There's something I want, if you'll allow it."

"What?" The Old Man continued staring after the dusky little piper.

Varthlokkur leaned, whispered.

The immortal countered, "You think she's willing?"

The wizard shrugged.

"Ask her after the ensorcelment, I'd say."

Varthlokkur nodded.

The Old Man clapped his hands. "Mika!" A servant came running. More returned from their hiding places. "Mika, go to the Wind Tower and bring us..." and he named a great many items. Varthlokkur nodded agreement to each. The Old Man knew his life-magicks.

"Marya, help him," Varthlokkur told a plump young woman standing nearby. "And tell your father that I want to talk to him."

She nodded quickly and hustled Mika toward the door.

Marya was Varthlokkur's personal servant, a position she thought the most important in the castle. Very much in awe of her master, she had, from that awe, conceived an emotional attachment. She worshipped him. Not a bright girl, she was, however, dedicated, and even that was more than Varthlokkur asked. She was a dark woman, short, heavy and rounded. She fought her weight with an implacable stubbornness. Her attractiveness came from within: warmth and a capacity for unshakable love. She was an ideal interim woman, the first of the two Varthlokkur's destiny had promised.

The wizard spoke with the girl's father. There was a moment of debate. A certain magic was mentioned. The father gave his assent.

Excitement rippled through the hall. The word spread: a sorcery was to be performed in the common room. The folk gathered for a unique treat. Their masters had never performed their wizardries openly.

Marya, Mika, and the equipment arrived. Varthlokkur and the Old Man set it up, established the preparatory runes, chanted the invocations, were ready. Varthlokkur quaffed a mug of bitter elixir, stepped to the focus of power for the magick. The Old Man, in a good tenor, sang the spell of initiation. Then, silently, he waited, as did the scores in the darkening hall.

Darkening? Yes. Soon all light had been banished save that of the cloud of gray silver forming about Varthlokkur. It grew increasingly dense, till he was totally concealed. Motes in the cloud sparkled, swept about the wizard like a tiny silver whirlwind. Sound came, increasing in pitch to a whine; colors swirled kaleidoscopically, mixed with animate shadow, splashing over floor and ceiling and walls; there were smells of lilac in spring, sour old age, boots wet in the rain, a thousand others quickly come and gone. Then, suddenly, the silver dust winked away, or fell. Light waxed. A murmur ran through the hall. In the power nexus, round which the dust had orbited, a youngster of twenty-five stood where an old man had taken his position.

Yet there was no mistaking his identity. This was Varthlokkur as he had appeared before the walls of Ilkazar, dark with dark hair, thin, hawklike of face, yet a handsome young man. He wore a winning smile as he asked Marya the question.

She fainted.

According to Varthlokkur's wishes, the Old Man, as Lord of Fangdred, married them later that day. Marya went through the ceremony in a daze, unable to grasp her good fortune. Varthlokkur, however, saw it all with a cynic's eye, in schoolmaster's terms. He needed training in dealing with women. Marya would serve.

Yet he treated her perfectly from that day forward. She, not bright, counted herself fortunate-though there were times he unwittingly caused her sadness.

Varthlokkur, a man despite the darkness upon his soul, did conceive an affection for her as time passed (rather as a man for a faithful pet), though never did it rival the feeling he had for she downtime. He permitted Marya no children for a long time, and then only when he saw that the lack was crippling her very soul. She bore him one child, a son.

They would grow old together, and eventually Marya would pass on. But during her lifetime Marya would witness the early moves in the Great Game begun the day of her marriage.

Seven years elapsed after the wedding. Early in the eighth the child was born, brown and round like his mother, with her quietness, and, from the sparkle of his eyes, blessed (or cursed) with his father's intelligence.

One cold winter's day, with a wind howling around the castle and snow blowing down from even higher country, with ice in places a foot thick in Fangdred's courts, Varthlokkur, the Old Man, and Marya took seats in the chill chamber atop the Wind Tower, watching the mirror. The wind rose with time, screaming like souls in torment. An unpleasant day for a birth. Another birth, overwhelmingly important to Varthlokkur.

The mirror presented a peek into a faraway room, deep in the heart of another wind-bound tower. In Ravenkrak, cold and stark as Fangdred, harsh as a weathered skull, home of the Storm Kings. A new member of that family was to arrive. A girl-child.

Marya didn't entirely understand. No one had bothered to explain. She felt distress at her husband's interest in the event. Why the interest? she wondered.

A bedridden woman lay centered in the mirror.

"She shouldn't have children," the Old Man observed. "Too slight. Yet this's her seventh, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Marya, to his initial remark. "She's in great pain."

Varthlokkur winced. He read accusation into her words, as though she were asking why she hadn't experienced that particular pain more often. She wanted more children. But the indictment existed only in his mind. She hadn't the guile or subtlety.

"The spasms are closer now," said the Old Man.

"It's time," Marya added, sympathetically.

Indeed. The woman's husband and a midwife moved to her bed. Servants sprang into action, bringing rags, hot and cold water, and spirits to ease the pain. In the background, a man with a falcon riding his shoulder fed wood to a huge fireplace, vainly trying to warm the room.

The woman brought forth a girl-child, as the divinations had promised. She was ugly, shriveled, red, and not the least remarkable. But Varthlokkur and the Old Man remembered another vision of her, as an adult, seen in the mirror earlier. Her father named her Nepanthe, after a magical potion which banished all cares from a man's heart. He placed her at her mother's breast, wrapped both against the angry chill, and resumed managing his castle. Unstaunchable hemorrhaging claimed the mother's life within the hour.

There was great joy in Fangdred when it was over. Varthlokkur and the Old Man declared a holiday and ordered a feast. A bull was slaughtered, wine brought forth, games taken out, contests held, and the piper driven to a frenzy of playing. The people danced, sang, and everyone had a wickedly good time.

Except Marya. She was more than ever confused, and her feelings had taken a battering.

And then the piper.

As day marched into evening and the wine-cask levels sank to the lees, as more than one reveler passed from happiness into drunkenness, more than one mood abjured gaiety. The Old Man grew reticent and testy, till he spoke only in monosyllabic growls and snarls. In his cups, time piled on him, millennia deep in weight. All the evil he had seen and done returned to haunt him. "Nawami," he muttered several times. "My guilt." All the boredom, that only his wickednesses had interrupted, returned to remind him how much more of both awaited his future. He grew increasingly depressed. Death, the specter he had never beheld, became a desirable, lovely, mocking lady, a will-o'-the-wisp forever an inch beyond his reaching fingers.

And Varthlokkur, too, found all his days returning as the lift of the wine began to fail and his temples began to throb. He remembered everything he wanted to drive from his mind: deaths in ancient times; his years in Shinsan and echoes of the bargains he had made there, that he might receive his education; and the hidden evils in his use of those who had become his allies in the destruction of Ilkazar. They were dead now, those people and those days-and many because of him. How many people had died with his name and a curse on their lips? He remembered the screams in dying Ilkazar... Till now they always had remained confined to his worst nightmares. But now, through the throbbing ache left by over-indulgence, they invaded his waking mind...

"Abomination!" the Old Man roared, hurling an empty flagon at the piper. He surged up, smashed a fist against the table. "I told you not to play that!"

The piper, too deep in his cups himself, bowed mockingly, repeated the passage. Silence enveloped the hall. All eyes turned to the Old Man, who had drawn a knife from the wreck of a roast. He began stalking the clown.

The piper, realizing he had gone too far, ran to Varthlokkur. The wizard calmed the Old Man.

Poor fool! No sooner was he safe from one Lord than he antagonized the other with passages from The Wizards of Ilkazar. Anything else Varthlokkur could have forgiven. His mood wouldn't permit this.

He gave no warning...

A stumbling, lengthy spell he chanted, often pausing to correct his wine-tied tongue. With a sudden handclap and shout, it was done. The piper drifted upward, weightless. With a growl, Varthlokkur kicked him, spinning him across the room. He shrieked, flailed the air, vomited, and spun into the Old Man's orbit.

It was a pity that Marya and the women had retired. A tempering feminine presence might have averted disaster.

The Old Man seized an arm, spun the piper, then hurled him into a mass of drunken retainers, few of whom had much love for the fool. The little guy habitually told truths nobody wanted to hear.

Pack instincts came to the fore. The piper became a shrieking ball bouncing about the room, with Varthlokkur and the Old Man leading the baiting. They were animals baying after defenseless prey, their cruelty feeding itself. Someone remembered the fool's fear of heights. In a whooping mass, the mob swept from the common room to the outer wall.

Hurled screaming outward, the piper hung over a thousand feet of nothing. He wailed for mercy. They laughed. The wind carried him away from the wall. Varthlokkur, smiling malevolently, drew the piper in until he clawed desperately at the battlements-then released him completely. Down with a wail he hurtled, crying his certainty of death, only to be stopped a dozen feet short of icy, jagged rocks.

The wind drove tendrils through tiny openings in Varthlokkur's clothing. The chill proved sobering. He realized where he was, what he was doing. Shame struck in a sticky gray wave, shattering his insanity. He pulled the piper in, prepared to defend him... And saw there wasn't any need. The cold had had its effect on everyone. Most were leaving, to be alone with their disgrace.

Varthlokkur and the Old Man apologized effusively, offering restitution.

The piper ignored them. He said not a word as he hurried off to nurse his rage and fear. His departing back was the last they saw of him.

A distraught Marya dragged Varthlokkur from dismal dreams. Groaning with hangover, he demanded, "What?"

"He's gone!"

"Uhn?" He sat up, rubbed his temples, found no relief. "Who?"

"The baby! Your son!" Without comprehending, he studied what tears had done to her dusky face. His son? "Aren't you going to do something?" she demanded.

His head began clearing, his mind working. Intuitively, he asked, "Where's the piper?"

Within fifteen minutes they knew. The fool, too, had disappeared, along with a mule, blankets, and food. "Such cruel revenge," Varthlokkur cried. He and the Old

Man spent days in the Wind Tower, hunting, hunting- but finally had to concede defeat. Man and child seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth.

"The Fates have used us evilly," said the Old Man. "Cruelly."

Indeed. They had taken a hostage to insure Varthlokkur's participation in the Great Game.

Marya was disconsolate for a time, but eventually made peace with herself. Women of her world often had to accept the loss of children.

ELEVEN: The Fires that Burn...

Again, Saltimbanco sat in the chair before Nepanthe's fireplace-but she was away, Downdeep, tending the wounded. She should be back soon. Her workload had eased as wounds healed. She now had time to spend with her man-for so she sometimes thought him, and so everyone named him. Only Saltimbanco himself was unsure he fit the part. With matters so nebulous between them, she seemed little closer than a friend. Away, as now, she disturbed him not at all. In her presence his soul turned chill. There was something about her, icy and strange, incomprehensible, that made him feel stark emotional nothingness when she was near. He went through the motions she permitted, but they somehow seemed directed toward someone else, an imaginary construct, not the genuine woman. An emotional vacuum separated them, one he couldn't fill while her fears persisted. Oh, he had found sex less important than he had earlier thought-but her unreasoning fear! It birthed an unnatural tension devouring the hope of their relationship. Seldom had he been so far at sea-almost as far out as she claimed to be herself.

As he sat thus thinking, examining the relationship, peering at the fire through half-closed eyes, there came a knock at the door. He rose, went, found Elana. "Woman is in Deep Dungeons."

"I know. Look, Haaken is out of his coma. They're going to talk to him. You want to come down?"

"Maybe later. Am needing report, though. Meanwhile, must talk with strange woman." He was silent a moment, then asked, "What is problem for same? Am unable to breach mental walls thicker than ramparts surrounding Ravenkrak."

"She's afraid..."

"Am making no such demands. Woman's body is her own. Am living without that. Is total aloofness and coldness which makes for sadness of this one."

"That's not her only fear. She's afraid she'll hurt you."

"Is stupid! Crazy."

"Foolish, anyway, but real enough for her. If we weren't besieged, she'd run away. She feels trapped. All her fears are closing in. She's uncomfortable. More than she's ever been. There's nowhere to run; she's afraid to accept; so she fights.

"There're cycles in her moods, you know. Sometimes she loves you and wants you-then the fear takes over. Then she can't fight. Or won't."

"What can this one do?"

"Be patient. What else?"

"Self, am being patient for many months. Love grows..." There! He had admitted it at last. "... but patience wears tinsel-thin. Is little finger of frustration-born wrath curling like serpent in back of mind. Is getting very difficult of control. Times are, self is tempted to scream, 'An end!', and go over wall, away, and damned be crazy woman with weird inside-of-head. Many pieces gold is not so tempting as surcease from mental mix-up. Wine and women soon make this one forget, is hoped. Soon, very soon, will do same. Beating head against wall is like for men outside castle. Gets nothing but sore spots. Ravenkrak wall is impossible of scaling: no booty for men outside. Nepanthe wall is impossible of scaling: no treasures for sad fool. Will leave very soon."

Elana started to say something, stopped as a door slammed below.

"Weird woman comes," said Saltimbanco. "Am no longer in mood for seeing. Will slip out back way. Come tell what Blackfang says."

Nepanthe arrived in time to witness his retreat. "What?..."

"He's unhappy."

"We're supposed to lunch together."

"He loves you, and you're not playing fair. He's thinking of going over the wall."

"He wants to desert?"

"Not desert. Escape. He feels trapped."

"Aren't we all? But it'll be over come winter."

"Don't be dense!" Elana snapped, harsher than she intended. "You're the reason he feels trapped. After getting nowhere for so long, he'd rather run and forget. Why should he beat his head against a wall?"

"But you know the trouble I have even talking about that..."

"That isn't the problem. It's the other barriers you put up."

"Like what?"

"So many things. Your opinion of yourself, for one thing. You think you're not good enough for him. So you put him off. And then there's the things you talk about doing when the war's over. They aren't very realistic. But you hang on to them to keep the real world from getting to you. Only ydu keep Saltimbanco out too. And being moody all the time doesn't help."

"You're harsh, Astrid."

"Now the hurt puppy look? What'll move you? Everybody's been patient so long. If a beating would help, I'd tell Rendel to give you one. For your own good. Nepanthe, we're talking about a man whose whole life revolves around you. You're killing him and you don't much seem to care. In fact, you're doing everything you can to make him more miserable. Yet you say you love him! Look, you're both twenty-nine. That's a lot of lost years. You can't make those up. And you want to throw the rest away? Grow up, Nepanthe! Wake up! You're wasting something precious."

"But..."

"You always have an excuse, don't you? Think about this. Ten years from now, when you're sitting here in your tower, what will your past be? A wasteland as barren as these mountains?"

"Astrid..."

"I don't want to hear it! I haven't got time. I'm going down to my husband. He's real. You're about to make a nail-biter out of me, too."

"Astrid..."

But Elana left, ignoring her plea. Nepanthe slumped, entered her sitting room, strode to her fireplace. After a moment, she snatched a figurine off the mantel, hurled it across the room.

The crash brought the maid. She found Nepanthe attacking her embroidery with a dagger.

Elana stamped across the courtyard, still fuming.

Valther burst from the tower where old Birdman kept his pigeons. He was pale, stricken.

"Is Nepanthe in the Bell Tower?"

She nodded. As he ran past, he shouted, "Get your husband, and Saltimbanco if you see him, down to the Lower Armories. Fast!" He vanished into the Bell Tower.

Something had happened. What? Then she remembered that Bragi was in the Lower Armories talking to Haaken. The game could be up if they were overheard.

Minutes later she hurtled through a door, gasped, "Something's happened. Valther's running around screaming, collecting everybody for a meeting in the sorcery chamber. Bragi, you're supposed to be there."

Ragnarson froze, thought. "Kildragon." He indicated his brother. "Gag him and hide him. Stick with him. Everybody else, down to the Deep Dungeons. Play 'visit the wounded.' Elana, where's Mocker?"

"I saw him a little while ago, but I don't know where he is now. He's got it bad. Nepanthe isn't helping."

"Sometimes he goes up where the back walls meet and just stares into the canyon," said Kildragon, knotting the gag behind Blacklang's head. "That's where he'll be if he wants to think. It's the loneliest place in Ravenkrak."

"All right, let's get," Ragnarson growled.

Ten minutes later, exhausted, Elana reached the top of one of the short rear walls. A few yards away, staring into the canyon behind the Candareen, were Jerrad and Saltimbanco. They passed a wineskin while grumbling to one another. Silence greeted her approach.

"Something's happened," she said. "Valther wants you in the Lower Armories."

"What is it now?" Jerrad demanded.

Saltimbanco said nothing. After a glance at Elana, he turned back to the canyon... What? What was that? Up the face of that impossible cliff? So! He turned, threw his arm across Jerrad's shoulder. "Come, old friend. We make them happy, eh? But we take this wine, too. Make us happy, too. Hai! We raise some hell at meeting, eh? Good! We go."

The others were waiting when they arrived. Jerrad took his usual seat. Saltimbanco assumed Ridyeh's, saying, "Old plan of fat rascal big failure, eh? New intrigue for finding spy? Maybe still chance for same to be here?"

"Don't sit there!" Valther snapped. "Take a chair off the wall."

Eyebrows rose. Valther hadn't yet divulged his secret. He did so once Saltimbanco settled himself.

"I just picked up a message from Luxos. He used his last pigeon to send it..." He paused. Sorrow and anger fought for control of his face. "Ridyeh's dead!" It was almost a scream.

"What?"

"How?"

"Are you sure?"

Ragnarson and Saltimbanco sat quietly, unsure what to say or do. The operation had just turned nasty. A member of the family had been killed. Their treachery could be pardoned no longer.

"Shut up!" Valther bellowed into the clamor. "All I know is that he was murdered two weeks ago by one of bin Yousif's assassins. Luxos says he was onto something. He went to buy information and never came back. They found him floating in the Silverbind, tied wrist to wrist with the informer. They'd both been knifed. Luxos says he's coming home before he gets the same."

Into the stillness that followed, Turran interjected, "All right, it's no game anymore. We've got a debt to repay now."

"When do we kill Itaskia?" Brock asked. He made it sound like a simple, unarguable balancing of the scales: a city for a brother.

"No, we can't do that," Valther growled. "We can't afford any more enemies. And it's not Itaskia's fault anyway. Bin Yousif did it."

"Bin Yousif is a damned Itaskian War Ministry client," Brock countered. "He's their hole card against El Murid and Lord Greyfells both. Anything he does, you can bet the Ministry is in it up to their necks."

"Damn it!" Nepanthe cried. "Can't we break this siege?"

"No," said Turran. "We don't have the strength. I can't ask Rendel to commit suicide. What's that got to do with it, anyhow?"

Nothing. She was looking for a path of escape from other problems.

One of Ragnarson's mercenaries burst in, put an abrupt end to the meeting. "Captain, they're comin'!"

"Sound the alarm, lithe."

"Been ringin' a couple minutes. The companies are on station. The cats and ballisters are firin'."

"Well, let's have a look." He rose.

"Get moving!" Turran thundered. "The walls!"

When Ragnarson reached the main courtyard he found it a-riot with hurrying men and women. There seemed no apparent purpose to their motion, yet it was without panic, and quickly sorted itself out. The hurry had, in fact, been drilled in during long training, as support for those on the walls. There, men plied bows and served heavy weapons with cool efficiency. The women handed up fresh ammunition. A storm of death fled the battlements.

Ragnarson reached the command post atop the gate tower, quickly surveyed bin Yousif's assault. Haroun had brought up ladders and grapnels, but his attack teams were retreating already. Just a probe. Had Haroun found a weak point? Would he exploit it before Turran finished doing his sums and cleansed his castle? Ragnarson knew he didn't have much time to get Haaken's information. His margin was getting damned narrow. Self-preservation demanded that he plant his feet firmly somewhere, soon.

"Congratulations," said Turran. "Your drills paid off."

"He wasn't serious, just probing. Will you excuse me?" Awaiting no answer, he hurried down to Haaken's hiding place. "The gag!" he snapped on entering. Kildragon removed it. "Well, Haaken, you remembered anything?"

"Yes," Blackfang grumbled. "There was this old codger who looked like he was in charge. I figured to put him in the ground when the odds looked right. So when he wanders off by himself, I go after him. I swear, I never made a sound, but when I'm ten feet away, he jumps around, points a finger, and the next thing I know for sure Elana's waking me up. Bragi, he was some sort of spook-pusher."

"That's it? That's all?" Bragi tried shaking his brother, but Haaken had lost consciousness again.

"Don't get excited," Elana told him. "He already told me most of it. He said the old man kept talking to himself. That he remembers him standing over him, looking sick, and muttering something like, 'Varth, you're doing it again. Should've stayed in Fangdred. Should've never left the Dragon's Teeth. This's all it gets. More blood on your hands.'"

"The Dragon's Teeth, eh? Ah! The Old Man of the Mountain? Sonofabitch!" His last word was a bellow.

"What?"

"I've got it. The Old Man of the Mountain. Gold of Ilkazar, paying us and Haroun. A sorcerer named Varthlokkur. The things Rolf said Nepanthe raved about in Iwa Skolovda. There's a Varthlokkur in The Wizards of Ilkazar. Legends are, he lives with the Old Man of the Mountain. Add it up. If this's the same one, we're in it big. He's supposed to be the greatest wizard ever."

"So what?" Kildragon asked, unimpressed. "So we know who he is. We don't know why he dragged us in."

"Power, probably. There're things here he'd want bad. The Horn of the Star Rider. The weather control things." Ragnarson shook his head. The theory seemed inadequate. Yet nothing else came to mind.

Slowly, in a dark mood, Saltimbanco stalked the icy corridors. The question of the old man occupied but a tiny portion of his attention. The remainder went to Nepanthe, to dark arguments and fierce recriminations. A bitter conflict was rehearsing in his head. He felt down, trapped, frustrated, and obliquely angry. He loved, and was continually thwarted. Nepanthe also loved, he knew, but her strange fears and little-girl dreams stood between them like a barrier as impenetrable as time.

It occurred to him that, if he permitted it, the nonsense could go on forever. Elana had described her argument with Nepanthe, which had done little good. Nepanthe remained the same distant, fearful, dreaming woman-child. Well, he had decided, there had to be an end. There would be an end. He was done being an emotional \ handball. Purpose hardened. His stride quickened.

Outside, the first white flecks of winter fell. Time, it seemed, had finally rallied to the Storm King banner. The snow was weeks early.

In the Bell Tower he learned that Nepanthe was in the Lower Armories. Through a window he saw the snow, suddenly realized how near the end had come. He hoped the old man held no grudges, and Nepanthe likewise. When Haroun came, when Ravenkrak fell, he would have to show his true colors-and might then be trapped between parties thinking him traitor. Would the old man pay as promised? He'd have trouble if he didn't. Haroun had an army, and was notoriously short on patience. And Nepanthe. Would she hate him? Would she reject him forever?

These thoughts, and a thousand as grim, stalked his soul as he awaited the woman. Settled in that fireside chair, engrossed in worry, he remained unaware of her entry till she spoke. He glanced up. "Hello."

Her face was colorless. She was suffering her own worries. He almost relented. But the hardness grew within him. It would permit no further vacillation. There must be resolution. A beginning or ending.

"Nepanthe," he said, voice edged with a steeliness previously unshown. "We are going where? Same nowhere? Or would you grow up?"

His hardness and obvious tension so startled Nepanthe that she could stammer only, "I... well..."

His determination hardened further. Through clenched teeth, he growled, "You must make big decision in day. By supper tomorrow. A set wedding day, or no. If no, despairing self is going over wall. Cannot endure off-again, on-again love. Ravenkrak falls before end of month."

"What?"

"Set wedding day, or no. Is ultimatum. No more games. Answer by tomorrow." He strode out, dark and angry.

"Wait! You've got to give me time!"

"Am!" He slammed the door behind him.

Nepanthe stared at it as if it were a dragon astride her road to freedom. Everything was falling apart. She couldn't marry! Couldn't he understand? She loved him, yes, but the truth was, she wasn't ready to accept him as more than someone to lean on when things got rough. She didn't want him to be a someone she owed a responsibility. Biting her lip, she turned toward her bedchamber.

Anina blocked the door. "Tough, ain't it?"

Nepanthe stared, surprised again.

"Ah, well." Anina laughed weakly. "You'll give him the gate now." She returned to the bedroom, came out shortly. She carried a bag.

"Where're you going?" Nepanthe demanded. "I need help dressing for supper."

"Find somebody else. My man doesn't want me around you anymore." That man was Rolf, maneuvering in Mocker's favor. Nepanthe was crushed. Even Rolf, her faithful commander and aide since those first days in Iwa Skolovda...

For the second time in minutes, her door slammed in her face. Another in her mind opened, releasing fears. She threw herself on her bed, wept and thought. She didn't go to supper. Nor did she sleep that night.

As dawn arrived grayly through falling snow, she stood at a window staring toward Haroun's camp, seeing nothing. Her eyes looked inward on rage at the world and people pushing her. What right had they?...

She began pacing. Slowly, as her anger grew, her face reddened. Long-forgotten tears dribbled from the corners of her eyes. "Damn-damn-damn! Why won't they leave me alone? I don't want anybody. I want to be myself!" And a little voice, mocking back in a corner of her mind which seldom allowed its denizens free of shadow, chuckled wickedly, You're a liar! "I don't want to be chained!" Ha! What're your dreams, if not chains that bind? What're the people and things with which you surround yourself, if not walls that keep you in? Run, and all life ahead will be a wasteland as desolate as the past. What'll you do when your bright tomorrows have all become the skeletons of yesterdays? Weep? Why? You won't know what you've missed, only that you were never complete.

It was a night worse than any from those nightmare-haunted years before Saltimbanco's coming. She wept till tears would come no more, destroyed things, screamed, raged-and could discover no escaping a decision.

Strange, that. She didn't worry the goods and bads of the decision Saltimbanco had thrust upon her, but whether or not it should be made. Decisions were anathema. Each became another brick in the wall of the cell of reality. Each committed her.

Next noon hunger finally drew Saltimbanco to the Great Hall. There he found Turran, Valther, and Brock, directing soldiers who were dismantling the plank-and-trestle tables. He seized a half-loaf and some wine before it could be spirited away, wandered over to the Storm Kings. "Self, am wondering

what is happening." All the excitement and anguish of the news of Ridyeh's death seemed banished. He was glad, but wondered why.

"You don't know?" Turran countered. "I guess not. That's her style. Well, I'll never tell."

Brock, usually undemonstrative, gave Saltimbanco a friendly punch on the shoulder, but also refused enlightenment.

Anxious to remain as anonymous as possible these last few days, Saltimbanco left the Great Hall. He intended to stroll to the fortress rear to check the canyon, but found himself straying toward the Bell Tower instead. He surrendered to the impulse.

How haggard Nepanthe appeared when she answered his knock! In silence she let him in. He saw she had been mending her damaged embroidery. Once comfortable in the overstuffed chair, he leaned back, closed his eyes, acted his usual self, waited. Nepanthe had too many woes to worry Ridyeh's death. Here he was safe.

She, biting her lip again (she had developed a sore from doing it so frequently), stared at him a long time. She was pale and more frightened than ever. Her decision troubled her deeply, tormenting the roots of her fear. But she was determined to stand by it.

She slowly moved toward his chair. Shaking. He pretended snores, through cracked eyelids watched anger cross her face. With that to impel her, it seemed she feared less.

He opened his eyes, looked up as she slipped her hand into his. Still biting her swollen lip, she gently tugged. He rose, followed her to her bedroom.

Drums echoed through Ravenkrak's shadowed halls. Trumpets proclaimed the occasion. Bright silk banners flew from every tower. The garrison was out in full dress. The Storm Kings had clothed themselves richly, in contrast to their usual spartan dress. Saltimbanco, no longer of remarkable girth, wore formal clothing borrowed from Brock: a black cape edged with silver, scarlet tunic and hose, and the polished weapons of a Lord. Bathed and combed and dressed, he seemed not at all the clown.

Following Turran's directions-the Storm King was as magnificent as any southern King-Saltimbanco positioned himself beside a dais a-head the Great Hall. The folk of Ravenkrak sat on benches athwart the hall, an ocean of restless white and brown and black faces. Suddenly he was terrified. As it was for Nepanthe, this was no day he had ever desired. Yet he needed her, had to be tied to her.

The drums took a new cadence. The trumpets sounded their final call. The bride had abandoned her tower. She would return alone nevermore.

Turran mounted the dais. His was the task of binding. Orange and gold, scarlet and purple, motionless, he loomed like a fire demon.

From the Bell Tower, proceeding along a dark, cleared aisle between banks of snow, though the continuing blizzard, the bride's party started toward the hall. Six women, clad in dark green embroidered with thread-of-gold, carried Nepanthe's train. Liveried pikemen marched at either hand. All moved with a slow, measured step despite the cold. Ravenkrak's weddings were performed with regal pomp and deliberation.

The bride's party reached the Great Hall. Valther and Jerrad drew their swords and assumed Nepanthe's

guardianship. They advanced on the dais slowly.

Saltimbanco experienced eternity during that approach. He stared, marveling anew at Nepanthe's beauty, her dark eyes and hair, her soft skin and delicate features. She seemed beatific this evening, unworldly, under some ecstatic enchantment. Her brothers, too, were under the spell. Briefly, he forgot his fears, hoped this would amply distract them. For the moment they might have thought Ridyeh still living.

Nepanthe reached the dais. The drums fell silent. The ceremony began...

As if bounced through time, Saltimbanco realized it was over, done. Was it true? Yes. The people were leaving for the parties. Where had time gone?

Nepanthe finally looked into his eyes. He took her hand, squeezing gently. At that moment, in that place, she showed neither fear nor doubt.

It was too late for either. She had become committed. She would fight for the commitment as bitterly as she had resisted it.

TWELVE: They Drink the Wine of Violence

Saltimbanco yawned and stretched, reaching the last leg of a long and lazy approach to wakefulness. He stretched again. He was as relaxed as a cat. His extended left arm came down on something soft and warm and swathed in a mass of silken hair. He yawned again, rolled so he could look into the smiling face of his new wife. He reached slowly, stalking a wisp of dark hair peeping from fold of coverlet, caught it between thumb and forefinger, curled and twirled it while watching her sleep. Then he drew a fingertip lightly over one soft, rosy cheek, following the line of her jaw, ended by tickling the dimple on her chin. The caress excited something at the corner of her mouth, a something seldom seen before last evening, a happy, demonic something that had spent years in hiding, a something now out and winking merrily. Her smile so lightly grew, drawing with its warmth. Those ruby cushions for his kiss parted slightly, permitting the flight of a sigh. She extended a small, delicate hand to cover his own, pressed it to her cheek. Slowly, so as not to disturb her slumber, he leaned and kissed that taunting quirk at the corner of her mouth.

"Uhm," she sighed, eyes still closed.

"Self, have something to confess."

She opened one sleepy eye.

"Self, am not Saltimbanco. Am not simple, wandering fool..."

"Shhh. I know."

"Hai! How? Am still breathing."

"Deduction. Valther's lists. You were the only one who could've gotten to them and have communicated with bin Yousif. In Iwa Skolovda."

Fear smote deeply. "Ridyeh?" he gasped, unable to articulate his question.

"I hated you then. But it wasn't your fault, really. I... uh... Why talk about it? It's over. Don't make me

remember. I don't want to. Kiss me. Touch me. Love me. Don't talk. Just make me forget."

"No hate? Ravenkrak will die, and self, in one guise, am prime killer."

"Ravenkrak's dead. Only Ravenkrak hasn't heard."

"You change so."

They were interrupted by a knock. Neither moved. It grew insistent. "You'd better go," Nepanthe said. "Probably one of my brothers."

It was. Valther eyed the gown of Nepanthe's Saltimbanco had donned, chuckled, said, "Turran wants Nepanthe in the Lower Armories. Luxos just got home. We got him through the gates three steps ahead of bin Yousif's men."

"Self, am dismayed by lack of respect..."

"My own thought exactly," Valther replied, cutting him short. "But Turran wants her, and what he wants, he gets. Got to run." He chucked Mocker under the chin. "The robe becomes you." Laughing, he ducked a spiritless punch and hurried away.

Mocker found Nepanthe dressing when he returned. Her face clouded. She was still afraid.

"Was Valther. Meeting in Lower Armories. Luxos came back."

"I heard. Will you help me?" She quavered when he touched her. A moment later, in a tremulous whisper, she asked, "What do your friends call you?"

"Many names. Hai! Not good for lady's ears, most. But mostly Mocker."

"Mocker, we have to leave."

"Why?"

"My brothers might find out. We should get out first."

"To where? How to live? Moneys from speechifying in Iwa Skolovda repose in secret place in Tower of Moon-lost forever!" This was a wail.

"I don't care where. And I've got lots of valuable things."

"How to escape?"

"There're ways. But you know bin Yousif, don't you?" There was no accusation in her voice.

"Long time."

"You're friends?"

"When gold is right."

"Anyone else?" She smiled, easing his tension. He understood.

"Red beard."

"What?" She was startled.

"Rendel Grimmason. True name is Bragi Ragnarson."

"And Astrid?"

"Name is Elana. And Blackfang, Kildragon, Rolf, also. And guess where loyalty of troops lies."

"Oh! Poor Turran. Surrounded by enemies. Even his sister, now. When's it supposed to end?"

Mocker shook his head. "Employer, closed-lip man of first class, tells nothing. Not even name. But we find out. Is magical Machiavelli."

"A magician?"

"Yes. Question still is, why so interested in Raven-krak?"

"What's his name?"

"Is Varthlokkur..."

"Varthlokkur!" She dropped to the bed. "I told Turran, but he wouldn't listen."

Her reaction startled Mocker. "What is trouble?"

"You know what he wants from Ravenkrak? Me! For years he's been after me to marry him. Probably for my power. Not the Werewind, but the power within. Storm King blood is strong with it. Our ancestors were nobles of Ilkazar. Matched, little could resist us. Controlling weather would be child's play. Which is why I always turned him down." She flushed. He knew that wasn't her primary reason. "I was afraid Ravenkrak would be first to feel his new strength. I guess he'll destroy us anyway. Sooner or later, destruction overtakes all the children of the Empire. Be ready to leave when I get back. See if your friends will go with us."

She settled her dress more comfortably, gave him a small kiss. "I love you." She struggled with words, but they came. "I'll be back soon."

As Nepanthe left the tower, shawl tightened about her neck and head against the worsening snow, she examined, and marveled at, the changed state of her mind. Though she still feared, her being, like a magnet being drawn, was orienting itself toward one lodestone. Saltimbanco. No, Mocker. But what was the difference? A rose is a rose. Funny. She could almost feel her fears evaporating. She wanted to sing. It was icy cold. A wind had begun driving the already fallen snow (escaping be a grim, miserable undertaking), but she didn't feel it, didn't care. Her sexual fears had already begun to appear foolish-it hadn't been bad at all-yet thoughts of future encounters still disturbed her.

Nepanthe was last to reach the Lower Armories. She found her brothers waiting impatiently. No one criticized her lateness. After offering belated well-wishes for her marriage, Luxos demanded everyone's attention.

"These are Ridyeh's things. What I could recover," he said, indicating a clutter on the table. "A gold coin bin Yousif spent after a meeting with an old man at an Itaskian tavern. Given him by that old man. The mercenaries outside are being paid in the same mintage. Turran?"

Turran examined the coin. "Ilkazar. Scarce these days."

"Thousands are being spent."

"Somebody found the Treasure of Ilkazar?"

"Don't forget, an old man's the source. What old man might know where to find that treasure?"

"Varthlokkur!" Turran snarled.

"Brilliant deduction!" said Nepanthe. "What'd I tell you six months ago?"

"Okay, I apologize. I didn't think he wanted you that bad. That means we've got real trouble. We'll have to fight sorcery and soldiers both."

"I have more," Luxos said. "Concerning who gave that spy list to bin Yousif. I found this paper in Ridyeh's pocket. The river water almost ruined it. But two names are clear: Bragi Ragnarson and Mocker. Meaningless? Rumor has it that bin Yousif operated with men of those names during the El Murid Wars. And one of them was in Itaskia at the time, and was seen talking with the same old man. Where are they now? What're they doing? I think they're here. In Ravenkrak."

Nepanthe racked her mind for a diversion.

Offering the paper, Luxos said, "There's another readable line."

Turran frowned over ink badly run, read, "'... short and fat. Ragnarson is blond, tall...' That's all?"

They were at the marches of discovery. Nepanthe knew she had to warn her husband.... The thought startled her. Her declaration to Mocker, a half hour earlier, of a shift of allegiance, had lacked conviction. In the meantime it had matured and grown firm. She rose. To Turran's inquiring glance, she replied, "Bathroom," and left them bent over Ridyeh's effects like ghouls over an open grave.

"Does this mean anything?" she heard Turran ask. And, as she drew almost beyond hearing, Valther replied.

"The only fat man here is Saltimbanco..."

Which precipitated a brief silence. Nepanthe started to run-and collided with a breathless soldier. "Milady!" he gasped. "They're striking camp. Looks like they're pulling out."

Turran's strategy had been vindicated. "Thank you. I'll tell my brothers. Return to your station." She pretended to return toward the blue glow of the meeting room. She stopped when the soldier passed out of sight. She had no intention of telling Turran that he had won. Let him stew awhile, arguing, while she and Mocker got away. Anyway, she had a feeling his victory might not be what it seemed.

Diminished by distance, she heard Turran's anguished, "But we couldn't have married our sister to an

enemy!"

"We did!" Valther retorted. "I'd swear, now that I think about, nobody else could've gotten to the lists. Not and have gotten them to bin Yousif. Maybe we can hold his merry hanging after all."

"Damn!" Turran roared. Metal rattled as he smote the table. "Well, that's one. What about the other?"

"Grimnason," Valther said sadly.

"What? No! He's been our best man."

"A hunch."

"Ridyeh said blond."

"Hair can be dyed. It doesn't matter anyway. We're inundated by enemies, inside and out. We've been outmaneuvered all the way down the line. Which figures with a fox like Varthlokkur. So, after four hundred years, Ravenkrak falls, unvanquished by arms. Treachery's victim, as we always knew she would be. Hail the Empire."

Nepanthe had heard all she wanted. She ran.

Nepanthe rushed into the courtyard, looked around wildly, through the blinding snow barely discerned Ragnarson atop the wall. In a moment she was at his side, breathless. "Bragi, my brothers..."

"I know." He didn't turn. His gaze was fixed in the direction of bin Yousif's encampment. His expression was one of weariness and sorrow. "Mocker told me you wanted to leave. I don't know if we can, now. By stalling I may have cut all our throats. Haroun won't be happy. He isn't a forgiving man."

"You don't understand," she said. "The game's over. They know. Luxos brought proof. You've got to get out right now."

Ragnarson's shoulders slumped. He sighed. Turning, he replied, "Thank you, Lady. You'd better get your things. Don't bring more than you can carry. Clothes and food. My men are packing already. Can you make it down the mountain in this?"

"I guess so," she replied. "Be careful. They'll do something pretty soon." She left for the Bell Tower.

Ragnarson stood there for a while, staring down the mountain. One by one, as they were ready, his staff came to him. Rolf Preshka, Reskird Kildragon, Haaken on a litter borne by those two, Elana, and a handful of favored soldiers. Finally, he asked, "Where're Mocker and Nepanthe?"

No one knew.

"I don't like leaving the men," Kildragon complained.

In his new, tired voice, Ragnarson replied, "I loathe it. But would you rather be dead?"

Preshka observed, "We're not leaving any of our old people. Lif. Haas. Chotty..." He did the roll of old accomplices.

"Nevertheless," Reskird protested, "there's our reputation..."

"Shut up!"

A figure plunged through the drifts in the court, shouted from the foot of the wall, "Captain, they're coming over the rear wall!"

Stunned, Ragnarson could ask only, "Who?"

"Bin Yousif's men, I think."

"How many?"

"Only a few so far, but more all the time."

"Right. Thank you. Rolf, send everybody back there. That'll distract them till we're out. Hurry."

Preshka departed.

"Elana, what about the costumes?"

"I hid them in the gatehouse."

"Good. Where the hell are Mocker and Nepanthe?"

"This must be them." Two dark shapes staggered from the direction of the Bell Tower. From beyond them came muted sounds of combat.

"May the Gods Above, or the Gods Below, or any

Powers here present, cast down, disperse, and render unto destruction the agents of destruction, the Storm Kings of Ravenkrak," Nepanthe said on arriving. "I prayed that at the beginning. Now it's being answered, and I wish I could take it back."

"All right, down to the gatehouse," Ragnarson ordered. Moments later, Kildragon held the guard at sword point while Elana recovered white robes sewn from bedsheets. Preshka returned and claimed his as Ragnarson ordered the gate opened.

A scream, above the growing clamor of battle (from the sound of it, the defense had the upper hand), echoed through the courtyard. Luxos burst from the door to the Lower Armories. "Move out!" Ragnarson growled. Though he had little doubt of the outcome of a duel with Luxos, having practiced with the man, he paused to engage while the others won free.

Ragnarson had learned his fencing in a less than chivalrous school. For him survival meant a lot more than fair play and an honorable death. As Luxos lunged, Bra-gi swept a hand through the icicles hanging from the tunnel-like gate, hurling them into his assailant's face. He followed up with a groin kick that propelled Luxos back amidst his brothers. Bragi fled only two steps behind his companions.

They took no more than a dozen steps. Then the slope came alive around them. Snowdrifts rose and became white-clad figures rushing the open gate. Ragnarson was hit, buffeted, knocked down, and trampled as bin Yousif's men swept past.

He fell cursing himself for believing that Haroun would go away without one last, cunning attack. He should have foreseen this...The first wave passed, ignoring his people. But the attackers cursing behind the falling snow, down the mountain, wouldn't be preoccupied with seizing a gate. Bragi knelt. He looked around, saw no one. His shout, drowned by the metallic racket behind him, brought no response. Wanting no attention, he kept his mouth shut from then on.

He stood, arranged his camouflage about him, continued down the mountain. Hopefully, the others would reach the place where they had agreed to meet if separated.

With a gasp of relief, Ragnarson dropped his end of the litter before Haroun's tent. His arms and shoulders ached. Beside him, wary, shivering spearmen relaxed only slightly as he dropped to his hams.

He had found Kildragon and Haaken in the lee of a snow-covered earthwork a quarter-mile below the gate. Kildragon had been trying to drag his friend down the mountain unaided, but had not been able to go further. The others had vanished, scattered by the charge.... Then Haroun's troops had appeared and, apparently under special orders, had brought them here.

The flap of the tent whipped back. Lean, brown, clad in black, bin Yousif looked like a caricature of Death. "Send them in," he ordered.

Grunting, frowning down the length of spearshafts, Ragnarson lifted his end of the litter. A moment later the tent flap closed behind him. Warmth from a dozen braziers assailed him.

"He all right?"

Bin Yousif bent over Blackfang. Haaken mumbled, "Ready to take my turn carrying Reskird."

A smile, half feral, flashed across bin Yousif's face. "Fine." Turning, "Bragi, you're lucky you've got a good-looking, fast-talking wife. And that my men caught her first. I might not have given you a chance to talk."

Ragnarson had just noticed Elana crouched in a far corner, being intimate with a brazier. She offered a weary smile.

Bin Yousif continued, "Can't blame you for holding off. My problem is that I don't have a conscience. Well, it came out all right. No hard feelings. The old man's going to pay us off in Itaskia. Ah. Must be some more."

Ragnarson stepped to the flap with Haroun. Another prisoner, Rolf, had indeed arrived-but Bragi's attention wasn't caught by his lieutenant. Beyond and above

Preshka, through a slackening snowfall, vermillion flared and fluttered.

"Ravenkrak's burning," Haroun said. "Come in Rolf."

Ragnarson smote palm with fist. He felt worse each time he betrayed an employer. He was evil, a maggot. A man's oath had meant something once-but he had been a pup then, a fool in the fool's paradise of Trolledyngja.

"If you have to stare, go outside," bin Yousif growled. "Don't leave the flap open."

Ragnarson let the flap fall, masking the outcome of his treason.

From the brazier he had surrounded, Preshka asked "How'd you know?"

Bin Yousif frowned questioningly, then smiled. "You mean that you'd break out today? I didn't, for sure. But it seemed like a good bet. We spotted Luxos a couple days ago. I thought he might know enough to start you running. So I let him get through."

"What now?" Preshka asked.

"We're supposed to wait at the Red Hart in Itaskia. The old man will pay us off there."

"I don't like it."

"It's the best I could get. He doesn't trust us anymore. Why should he? Blackfang head-bashed him. Bragi stalled forever. And I wouldn't attack."

Someone shouted outside. Haroun went to the flap. "Ah, all here now. Bring him in." Two soldiers, dragging an unconscious and gaudily bandaged Mocker, entered. "Put him on the bed. What happened?"

"Wouldn't surrender," one said. "Wanted to find somebody. His wife, he said."

"Wife? Mocker? Bragi, what's this blather?"

"It's true. Believe it or not. He's married. To Nepanthe. Since last night."

"Oh." A vacant sound, that. Bin Yousif plopped onto a stool, frowned. "That's not good. What's wrong with him? He was supposed to suborn her, that's all. Break up the family. Bad. Bad."

"Why?" Elana asked. "Is there a law says he can't get married?"

"There are a million women... Why'd he pick one the old man wants?"

"Don't you care what she wants?"

"No. Hell no! I want to get paid. She's merchandise." He smote his forehead theatrically. "Merchandise. Why? Why not somebody else? And why me? Why am I soft-hearted about that fathead? Should've cut his throat when he stole my purse. Nothing but trouble since. I've got the fool's weakness. Friendship." After a lot of like natter, he ordered Nepanthe found and brought to him. While waiting, he prepared for a hasty departure, to escape Varthlokur's shadow.

Nepanthe couldn't be found. Haroun and his allies searched three days. During that time they accounted for almost everyone, great and small, involved in the events at Ravenkrak. That fortress was now a smoke-stained ruin. Less than a score were missing, presumably buried in the snow-shrouded rubble. Among the missing, several Storm Kings were prominent.

Then Mocker, following the path he thought Nepanthe had taken after they had become disoriented and separated near the castle gate, happened on a curiosity. It was an area where snow had melted and refrozen. Others had seen it and thought it of no significance, and Mocker likewise-except that Haroun was with him and he had enough background in sorcery to recognize its tell-tales.

"A spell of concealment was worked here," he said, surprising his companion. "Good deal of heat involved in twisting light around."

"Witchery? What?..."

"I told you the old man wanted Nepanthe. Looks like he found her here, hid her with a spell, took her off down that way when the chance came." He pointed along a track of lesser melting.

"We follow, eh? Catch him quick. Old mans not walk so fast..."

"Fast enough." Knowing it vain, Haroun sent patrols in pursuit. They found neither wizard nor woman. Meanwhile, he disbanded his army, ruining his war chest in the process, and released his prisoners. He was desolate when the last trooper was paid off. Not a farthing remained as profit-because he had had to pay Bragi's men too.

The old man had to show in Itaskia.

Despite Mocker's protests, Haroun led his allies southwards in hopes of, if nothing else, salvaging their pay.

THIRTEEN: In His Shadow She Shall Live

Gloom hung like heavy cobwebs beneath the rafters of the room where Varthlokkur and the Old Man sat. Chill dominated the air. Dust scented it dryly. All colors were shades of gray. The only light came from the far-seeing mirror. The scene it examined lay deep in another place of shadow. They were watching sixteen-year-old Nepanthe at her daily business. The mirror presented golden voyeuristic opportunities, but both men meticulously refused to accept them. Nepanthe's routine was a dull one of meals, minor chores, studies, and hours spent over embroideries. When she needed solitude, she withdrew to the castle library and read. Books remained beyond the scope of any brother except Luxos. She learned a lot, and much of it was nonsense.

Varthlokkur and the Old Man watched for hours, the latter patently bored but enduring because something was bothering his friend. Varthlokkur finally articulated it. "Do you think it's time I went to see her?"

"Yes. You may have waited too long already. There's nothing to stop her from finding another lover."

"Not casually. The old dragon, her stepmother, seems determined to turn her into a career virgin." He rose, stalked across the chamber. Over his shoulder, he continued, "She's terrified of men. The woman's been that successful. Watch her when she's around male servants. Still, Nature can't be thwarted forever." He chuckled without feeling.

The Old Man swiveled, watched the wizard pursue some arcane handiwork. Tugging his beard, he asked, "What're you doing?"

"Picking out some gifts to impress Verloya. Her father."

"You're going to go right away?"

"As soon as I can. I'm nervous already, and it's only a couple seconds since I decided to do it."

"Should I ready a transfer spell?"

Varthlokkur grew ghastly pale. "No!" To cover his over-response, he added, "I want to look at the world firsthand. Anyway, the whole transfer business disturbs me. As long ago as Shinsan, when I was helping one of my teachers with transfer research, I noticed some odd perturbations in the transfer stream. I think something lives in there. And it might be something we shouldn't bother. It's a fact that people have transferred and simply vanished forever."

The Old Man had never heard Varthlokkur say a word about what he had done in Shinsan. He wanted to respect the wizard's privacy, yet suffered from curiosity. "You've never said much about Shinsan..."

"The less said, the better."

"What's it like there? I've never been there, at least since Tuan Hua established the Dread Empire. And the mirror can't see in."

"There's a barrier against far-seeing. Otherwise, it's a country like most. It has the regular natural furniture: hills, rivers, forests. Leaves are green there. The sky is blue. No matter what you hear, your senses won't see any difference from the rest of the world. Only with your soul can you sense the all-pervading evil.... Really, the less you know, the happier you'll be."

Nervously, finding Varthlokkur this expansive, the

Old Man hazarded the question that had been bothering him since the beginning. "What did they cost, the skills you used against the Empire?"

Crimson, visible even in that dark chamber, crept into Varthlokkur's neck. His face became grim. The Old Man feared the only result of his prying would be an angry outburst. He directed the conversation back toward safe waters. "You're going the way you are?"

"What's wrong with me?" A tiger with a broken tooth could have snarled no more fiercely.

"I kind of expected you'd make yourself young again, the way you did with Marya."

"And what would Marya think? No. And Nepanthe would be terrified. No, old's best for everyone." The red began draining from his face. "When I've gone, don't tell Marya where. No need to hurt her. She's been a good wife. I may not be able to give her love, or another son, but I can save her pain." Always after his anger fell and his conscience returned, he compensated with concern- though sometimes, as with Ilkazar and the piper (the new piper led the most pampered life of anyone in Fangdred), the concern came too late to prevent a terrible wrong.

"I'll tell her something."

Varthlokkur's journey lasted more than a month. He had to cross some of the most primeval mountains, the Dragon's Teeth and, after Shara and the plains of East Heatherland, the Kratchnodians. The weather was often miserable, with fogs, rains, snows, and winds that were never warm. The dangers of the forest seemed to have a special affinity for him, and bandits more than once dogged his trail. Farmers sometimes met him, a stranger, with weapons bare. The world had gone ragged since his youth. Anarchy had reigned after the fall of the stabilizing Empire of Ilkazar, but then local stability had set in-till the onset of the growing chaos of the present. Mighty forces were in contention, and complete chaos seemed

destined to become the ruling order. He despaired, knowing the future only promised worse.

One day, wearily, he passed the end of a long, narrow defile in gray rock and saw Ravenkrak for the first time. As he emerged, the howling mountain gale ripped the clouds from a peak ahead. The mirror did the stronghold no justice. There were twelve tall towers, and decaying walls patched with silver stains of ice. Cold, lonely, and dark it was, like an anciently weathered skull. He also pictured it as a battered pewter crown for the rugged Candareen. He shivered with the loneliness the place inspired. What great madness had inspired the Imperial engineers to build a fortress here?

A man passed the open gate as Varthlokkur approached. He stopped, stared, hurriedly disappeared. He returned before the wizard arrived. "The Master awaits in the Great Hall," he said, and, "Quiet, Demon," to the falcon on his shoulder. "I'll lead the way."

Varthlokkur followed the gateman through starkly empty corridors. Experienced, the fortress was even more forlorn than Fangdred. There were people in Fangdred now, creating illusions of hominess. Ravenkrak lacked the illusions.

The Great Hall proved vast, empty, awaiting events that would fill it. Just a corner of an end was in use. There, before a huge, roaring fireplace, sat Verloya, the Master of Ravenkrak. His children were with him. All seven seemed variations on a common theme. Thin or heavy, short or tall, all were distorted reflections of their father.

"Sit down. Make yourself comfortable," said Verloya. "I imagine it's been a rough trip, there to here." His eyebrows rose questioningly. Varthlokkur ignored the hint. Verloya continued, "I could hardly believe it when Birdman told me there was a stranger on the mountain. Ah!" A servant delivered mulled wine. Despite his determination to be a gentleman, Varthlokkur almost snatched his.

"Pardon me," he said after gulping it. "It was a rough trip."

"No apology necessary. I've been to Iwa Skolovda and back again several times. It's a harrowing journey at its easiest. Ah. The mutton."

Freshly baked trenchers arrived too. Verloya carved a huge roast while servants brought additional bowls and platters, vegetables and sweetmeats, pitchers of hot wine, and ale. Then they seated themselves too. All of Ravenkrak's inhabitants fit at that one table before the fire, and left plenty of elbow room for a visiting sorcerer.

During the meal Varthlokkur asked after the Lady of the castle. He was referred to Nepanthe, who stared into her plate at the far end of the table. Later he learned that the second wife had disappeared, while he was traveling, carrying off a fortune, and had become a taboo subject. She had gone chasing impossible dreams of the sort that would one day complicate Nepanthe's life.

Full, Varthlokkur pushed himself away from the table. Now he was ready to answer questions.

Verloya understood. He belched grandly, said, "Now, let's talk-if you don't mind. You'll pardon me if I seem inquisitive. We get visitors so seldomly." Without saying it, he gave the impression that visitors were seldom friendly. Reckless Iwa Skolovdans with a lust for making reputations considered Ravenkrak a prime challenge.

Tamil al Rahman, of the Inner Circle, Proconsul and Viceroy to Cis-Kratchnodia, the province that had included Iwa Skolovda when the Empire had held sway, had fled to Ravenkrak after the Fall. For

generations his descendants had striven to give the Empire new life by bringing forth the embryonic life-spark enwombed in Ravenkrak. They had succeeded only in creating an enduring hatred between the stronghold and Iwa Skolovda. That city bore the shock of every mad attempt to revive a body so far gone it no longer had bones.

That barren, bitter castle, Ravenkrak, was all that remained of a dream. Ravenkrak, a handful of people, and an abiding hatred of Iwa Skolovda.

"I understand. Ask away."

"Where are you from?"

Strange, his having asked that before a name. Varthlokkur shrugged. He had decided on complete honesty already. He replied, "Fangdred, in the Dragon's Teeth." His listeners shifted nervously. They knew the name.

"The Old Man of the Mountain?"

"No. A friend of his. You might say a partner."

Another stir. They seemed well aware of the other dark name associated with Fangdred. Nepanthe shook. Varthlokkur was disappointed. He would have a grim struggle winning this one. She was as timid as a unicorn. However, right now, she was just one amongst the frightened. None of her family could conceal their fear.

"Varthlokkur?" Verloya whispered.

Varthlokkur nodded. Nepanthe shook even more. A scratchiness entered Verloya's voice when he said, "You honor us." Varthlokkur involuntarily turned to Nepanthe. He had to tear his eyes away. He had waited so long.

His glance was too much. She uttered a frightened cry, fled with the grace of a gazelle.

"The honor is something best discussed privately... Your daughter... What's the matter?"

Verloya shook his head sadly. "Too much exposure to her stepmother. Excuse her, if you will."

"Of course, of course. I am Varthlokkur. There're legends about me. But there's not much fact in them. Consider: What do they say about Storm Kings in Iwa Skolovda? Please, if I've offended the young lady, send my apologies."

Verloya indicated one of his sons. "Tell Nepanthe to come beg pardon."

"No. Please don't. I'm sure it was my fault."

"As you will. Boys, leave us talk." Sons and servants alike moved to a distant table. "Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

"It's ticklish, being whom I am. Are you familiar with the Thelelazar Functional Form of Boroba Thring's Major Term Divination?"

"No. I'm almost' totally ignorant of the Eastern systems. A Clinger Trans-Temporal Survey is the best I can manage. We're rather minor wizards here, now, except for our ability with the Werewind."

"Yes, a Clinger would do. What I want you to see is close enough, time-wise."

"A divination brought you here?"

"In a sense. I'd rather demonstrate than explain. Do you mind?" He treated Verloya with all the politeness he could muster. The man was due for a shock.

"The best place would be the Lower Armories, then. Bring your things."

An hour later, having taken it better than Varthlokkur had anticipated, Verloya said, "I can't quite grasp this business of Fates and Norns. The whole mess looked like a chess game where the rules change after every move. It was crazy."

"Quite." Varthlokkur explained his theories once they had resumed seats before the fire in the Great Hall.

The wizard was uneasy and annoyed. There had been some new information this time. The divination had hinted that his old sins would catch him up.

Verloya, too, was troubled. He wasn't pleased by his children's role in the game.

Varthlokkur now suspected whither the thrust of his second great destruction would go. It hurt. And he knew it would change him again, perhaps as radically as had the destruction of Ilkazar.

They sat silently for ten minutes, each nursing his special disappointment. Finally, Varthlokkur remarked, "The divination hasn't changed in two centuries."

"I saw. I understood why you're here. I can't lie. I don't like it. Yet I couldn't change it if I wanted.

"You'll have difficulties with her," he continued. "Today's behavior wasn't untypical. In fact, I guess she must've been damned curious to stick around as long as she did. My fault, I guess. Should've put a lid on my wife's nonsense back when. But I was too busy trying to make men of my sons. I didn't take time to worry about Nepanthe... I'll give you a reluctant blessing for whatever good you might do her. But that's my limit. I just don't like the bigger picture. I'd hoped I could teach the boys better. The Empire is dead."

"Maybe if you used the Power..."

"I won't use magic. I swore never to force anybody to do anything again. This's no exception. It'll be done without, or not at all."

Having come to terms with the girl's father, Varthlokkur began his long and seldom-rewarding effort to light a love-spark in the heart of a unicorn-girl. Occasionally it looked like he was about to break through. More often he appeared destined to inevitable failure. But he had learned patience in his centuries. He had time. Like the eroding waters of a river, he gradually wore the rock of Nepanthe's fear. By the time she was nineteen she looked forward to his increasingly frequent visits, though she saw him more as a kindly philosophy teacher than as a potential lover. There would be no lovers for her, she believed.

He was sure she secretly wanted one. Sadly, she awaited a knight-charming from a jongleur's tale, and in

such men her world was painfully lacking.

Which was a pity. A world ought to have a few genuine good guys, and not just a spectrum of people running from bad to worse. Varthlokkur conceived of his world as being populated only by friends and enemies, without absolutes, with good and evil being strictly relative to his own position.

On Nepanthe's twentieth birthday Varthlokkur proposed. At first she thought he was joking. When he declared he was serious, she fled. He hadn't sown his seeds deeply enough. She refused to see him for a year. She hurt him terribly, but he refused to be daunted.

Though she eventually resumed speaking, she remained defensive and flighty, and tried to keep Valther nearby to protect the virtue she fancied threatened.

Verloya's death caused her to relent. It was Varthlokkur who best comforted her at her father's funeral. But the break in her defenses was in appearance only. She wasn't going to let him get too near.

Then Varthlokkur suffered a loss of his own. Marya passed away during one of his increasingly short stays at Fangdred. He began to suspect that she had known what he was doing and had kept her peace. He honestly grieved at her passing. A better wife a man couldn't have asked. Sometimes he wondered why he couldn't be satisfied with the good things that did touch his life. There was no absolute, compelling force, outside himself, making him pursue the destinies he foresaw in his divinations. If he wished, and wanted to employ the will, he could become a simple farmer or sailmaker... He didn't have the will. He believed that it was his duty to fulfill the destinies he had foreseen.

Nepanthe's resistance remained like steel or adamant, wearing but never breaking. Six years later, when her brothers' through-the-halls war games matured into plans for genuine conquests, she still hadn't surrendered. She accepted him as part of her life. Maybe she even expected an eventual pairing. She had learned to be at ease with him again. But she refused to help the relationship to develop an affectionate scope.

Impatience undid Varthlokkur. One evening he proposed. As usual, Nepanthe put him off. The first of their great angry arguments ensued. Afterwards, frustrated, he returned to Fangdred determined to pursue a course the Old Man had championed for years.

The Old Man. He might have been a mystery to himself. No man could keep in memory all the ages and events he had seen and heard and experienced. He barely felt he belonged to the realm of humankind. Lusts, loves, hatreds, agonies and joys, passions, what were those in the mill of time? Grist. Just grist for the grinding wheel. What remained of parents dead ten thousand years? Not even a memory, other than unspeakably archaic, alien names. Youth? He had never been young. Or so it seemed now. He had few memories of running joy, of a girl, and wildflowers and clover scents in spring (her name sometimes haunted his lonely dreams, and her face frequently came to him in his odd, brief, happy moments). His past was a corridor infinitely long, passing a million doors with memories shut up inside, all in old man's shades of gray. The color had faded from present and future. The past dwindled back to the dark point where he had first encountered the Director. He missed that most, the brights, the scarlets, the greens, the blues, of mighty loves and aches and passions. He was the oldest man in the world.

Except one, though he thought his friend, the Star Rider, the Director, might well be dead. He had heard nothing from the man since the Nawami Crusades, a thousand years ago, though his handiwork appeared, in hints, in the background of the epic tale of the Fall.

Once the Old Man had wanted to live forever. But then he and the world had been young and he had

loathed the thought of missing its future ages. Once when magic had been equally young and unbound, and he still had had the capacity for innovation, he had risked his soul and humanity to seize the immortality he owned. It was an irreversible Star Rider gift that exacted its cruel price in alienation and boredom and a debt he might never completely discharge.

There were times when he thought Death might be his own sweet angel of the morning (with a face like that of his love forgotten), a woman he would gladly embrace when She came. She would give him surcease from this world, where his days were undistinguished marchers in endless columns of sameness. Freedom She would be. Mother Night with a soft black womb wherein he could lie forever at peace...

But Her arms could be achieved easily. Why didn't he jump off Fangdred's wall? Because he also feared the Lady he desired. Nor could he yet tolerate the thought of a world without himself in it. That urge, that overwhelming compulsion, that had driven him to immortality, still burned undampened among the fires of his soul. He might miss something. But what, if he had lived all those ages and had become achingly bored by their historic march? If catastrophes and conquests and the finest artistic products of the human mind weren't enough, what would suffice? To what did he look forward?

When he was in a dark mood, snappish, such were the thoughts he thought. He had no idea what he wanted anymore, nor did he search. He was content to wait till it came to him. Meanwhile, the habits of ages swept him onward. He wished for oblivion, and bent every effort to escape it. Ten thousand years had he lived; perhaps he would see ten thousand more.

And he did have his debts and obligations. There was interest to pay on the long life he had been loaned.

A vast map lay on the table in the gloomy room atop the Wind Tower. On its eastern borders were fangy marks representing the Dragon's Teeth. At the top, more fangs: the Kratchnodians, and among them, the name Ravenkrak. Speckled across the middle, and tending south, were the names of cities and kingdoms: Iwa Skolovda, Dvar, Prost Kamenets, Itaskia, Greyfells, Mendalayas, Portsmouth, and a hundred more. Varth-lokkur and the Old Man bent over them, considering the possibilities.

"Here," said the Old Man, finger stabbing the Kratchnodians just above Iwa Skolovda. "The ideal base. The people, bandits all, have a grudge against the city. An able man, unswayed by tribal jealousies, could unite them into an army strong enough to take Iwa Skolovda by surprise, yet not strong enough to hold it. I think that's essentially what you've got in mind. And what you need if they do put Nepanthe on the throne there. We'll get her then, when they lose interest and turn to other conquests."

"Fine, if we can catch her. She's not stupid." Though she tried to hide it, Varthlokkur had discovered in Nepanthe a brilliant intuitive mind. Where she was dumbest she had, generally, intentionally blinded herself.

"Settled, then? We hire this bin Yousif and his people, and use them to isolate her at Iwa Skolovda?"

"I guess." A premonition weighed heavily on him. It wouldn't be as simple as the Old Man made it sound.

He ached with the approaching cruelty of his second great destruction. "Somehow, I don't think it'll work. I'll end up fighting her brothers."

The Old Man shrugged. "Blank shields are going begging. You could stomp up an army overnight."

Varthlokkur had no taste for the trend of the Old

Man's thoughts. He had had his fill of armies and wars centuries ago.

"Well, they've got the Horn of the Star Rider now," said the Old Man, his amazement barely under control.

Varthlokkur turned to the mirror, drawn more by his companion's tone than the event itself. Somehow, Nepanthe's brothers had managed to locate that elusive ancient, whose origins were more mystery-bound than those of the Old Man. Recently they had been stalking him through the westernmost reaches of the Kratchnodians. Now they had caught him unawares. It was an incredible coup. The Star Rider was far too old to be taken easily.

"They're fools. All fools." Bitterness. "One magical talisman won't make them invincible. Not even the Windmjimerhorn."

The Horn in question had cornucopian attributes, though it didn't much resemble the mythical horn of plenty. Properly manipulated, the Windmjimerhorn would provide almost anything asked of it. For ages power-hungry men had tried, and sometimes managed, to steal it. But the Star Rider always stole it back-after greed had destroyed the original thieves.

Turran wanted the Horn as a source of wealth and stores for raising and supplying armies-armies that would never materialize because Turran would never learn to manipulate the Horn correctly. None of the thieves ever had. They always brought their dooms upon them before they did. "They'll find out. Sticking their noses out in the world is just asking to get them bloodied. Ilkazar is still a bogeyman. Like me. And some Iwa Skolovdans still nurse bitter feelings about the Vice-Royalty."

"Which'll be useful to us."

"True. Well, I'd better get on with it. Make my arrangements with bin Yousif. You'll keep an eye on things?"

The Old Man followed events faithfully. He saw bin Yousif enter the foothills in the guise of a witch-doctor and begin his work. He saw Ragnarson enlist with and assume command of Turran's mercenaries. He saw Mocker begin his slow trek toward Iwa Skolovda in the Saltimbanco avatar. He watched Haroun, insufficiently informed of the aims of his employer, send an agent to make sure Iwa Skolovda's King was aware of Storm King intentions. Varthlokkur's plot survived only because Turran was moving already. Then came the changes of fortune, the worst of which was Haroun's failure to capture Nepanthe at Jwa Skolovda. But Varthlokkur had expected that. He already had an army gathering to move against Ravenkrak.

Then Ravenkrak didn't fall. Ragnarson wouldn't fulfill his contract. And bin Yousif refused to waste lives storming the place. Varthlokkur, impatiently directing the siege himself, angrily responded by taking a battalion around the Candareen to spend a month hacking a stairway up two thousand feet of cliff to attack the castle from behind...

Only to arrive and find that Haroun, by cunning, was getting his job done after all.

But the goal of it all, Nepanthe, was missing when the smoke cleared from the ruins of Varthlokkur's second great destruction. On a snowy morning, after frantically casting spells among the countless dead, the wizard found her halfway down the mountain. He caught her and concealed her, and when the way was clear he set out for Fangdred. A month later, with a still furious Nepanthe in tow, he returned home.

The affair had been a fiasco. Nothing had been gained but death. Varthlokkur's abandoned employees

were in an uproar both over not having been paid, and over the abduction of Mocker's wife. Several of Nepanthe's brothers, with the Windmjirnerhorn and their storm-sending equipment, had evaded destruction and were loose, and driven by a bitter thirst for revenge. The wizard had captured his prize, but the matter was far from closed.

And Varthlokkur knew it. He had hardly returned, gotten Nepanthe installed in her new apartment, and had made his presence known when he summoned the Old

Man to the Wind Tower. "The goal has been reached," he mumbled. "She's here. But I've left enough loose ends to tie into a rope to hang me."

"A patch in a shroud to bury me," said the Old Man. Varthlokkur didn't recognize the line immediately. It came from The Wizards of Ilkazar, from King Vilis' final lament, spoken while he watched the very heart of the Empire dying around him. He had complained of his ruined estate and of how things were hemming him in. Especially Varthlokkur, the patch.

"I have to prepare. Silver and ebony, moonlight and night, these were ever mine. Do we have a craftsman who can make me silver bells? Here, here," he said, digging a small, aged casket from clutter piled in a corner. Bits of dry earth fell to the floor when he opened it. Perhaps two dozen ancient silver coins lay within. "These. Make me bells of these, each marked with my thirteen signs."

The Old Man did not, for a time, respond. He hadn't ever seen Varthlokkur this way. His friend was overflowing with deeds and moods.

"And I'll make the arrow myself." He quickly scrounged a billet of ebony and a kit of small tools from the corner pile. He kept two silver coins from the old casket. "Go! Go! The bells. Get me the bells." Mystified, the Old Man went.

Days later, he returned with the casket of bells. Varthlokkur was fletching an arrow at the time. It had a shaft of ebony. Its head was a coin hammered to a point. Silver from another coin had been inlaid into the shaft finely, in runes and cabalistic signs. "Here. Help me rig this." The wizard had collected a strange pile of odds and ends on the table.

Following Varthlokkur's instructions, the Old Man assembled a mobile of tiny, clapperless bells. They would ring off one another. The arrow turned lazily beneath them.

"My warning device," Varthlokkur told him. "The bells will ring if someone comes after me, starting while he's still fifty leagues away. They'll ring louder when he gets closer. The arrow will point at him. And so it should be easy to find him and stop him." He smiled, proud of his little creation.

It was a pity, the Old Man thought, that Varthlokkur was so single-minded about Nepanthe. Marriage had radicalized her. From a rabbit she had grown into a tigress. She was having no man but the one who had liberated her. That actor. That thief. That professional traitor.

Varthlokkur's face, those days, often expressed his silent agony, over what he had done, over what he seemed to have lost. The Old Man tried to make Nepanthe understand when he wasn't around.

She did, a little, but she was a strong-minded woman. As it had taken her ages to accept a man, so might it cost another decade to swing her affections around.

He shook his head sadly. The Director played a cruel game.

The Old Man abhorred pity in all its forms, yet he was forced to pity his friend Varthlokkur.

FOURTEEN: While They Were Enemies They Were Reconciled

A month had passed. Ragnarson, bin Yousif, and their associates had become certain of what they had suspected for some time: Varthlokkur wouldn't appear for the payoff. For at least the hundredth time, Ragnarson asked, "Are you sure he said he'd meet us here?"

And bin Yousif, gazing out an open window at the morning sun, replied as always, "I'm sure. He said, 'The Red Hart Inn, Itaskia.' You think it's too early for ale?"

"Ask Yalmar. It's his tavern. Yalmar!"

An aging man limped from the kitchen, without speaking drew and delivered two mugs. As he left, though, he smote his forehead suddenly and said, "Oh. Meant to tell ye. There were a fellow here after ye last night..."

Both jerked to attention. "Dusky old man with a nose like mine?" bin Yousif demanded.

Yalmar considered Haroun's aquiline beak. "Nay, can't say so. Fortyish, black hair, heavy sort."

Bin Yousif frowned. Ragnarson was about to ask something when Elana descended the stair from the rooming floor, her step portentous. "He's gone," she said. "Sometime during the night."

"Mocker?"

"Who else?"

They had been keeping him tied for his own protection, to prevent his charging off after Varthlokkur and Nepanthe-which might also compromise their chances of getting paid.

Bin Yousif sighed. "Well, it's come. I was afraid it would. A mad stab at a hornet's nest, and us without legs to run on."

"What do you mean?" A vacant question. Ragnarson's interest was all in Elana, who had gone to stare out a side window. She seemed terribly distant of late.

"I mean that Mocker's making us help him, like it or not. He knows damned well that to Varthlokkur we're a team. So, whether or not we're involved, he'll take a shot at us when he finds out Mocker's after him. Just in case. Wouldn't you? What's Elana's problem?"

"I don't want anything to do with Fangdred. But, if we're going to get killed anyway, it might as well be facing the enemy. I guess she's worried about Nepanthe. They got pretty close."

Elana wasn't worrying about Nepanthe. Nepanthe's predicament had become secondary. Her problem was her newly discovered pregnancy. How could she tell Bragi and not get herself excluded from his plans? She did feel a little guilty, though, because she was concerned with herself when Nepanthe's problems were so much nastier.

Ragnarson called for more ale, asked the innkeeper, "The man who asked about us. What did he want?"

"Would'na say. Did say ye were friends."

Ragnarson scratched his beard, which had faded to its normal blondness, and asked, "What was his accent?"

"No need to go on about it. He's here."

Haroun glanced up from his drink. Ragnarson turned...

The latter dove to his left, stretched out like a man plunging into water. He rolled, tripped Yalmar intentionally, shouted, "Elana!" Bin Yousif rolled into cover behind a table Bragi was overturning, thundered, "Haaken! Reskird!"

Four men in monkish garb halted in the doorway, startled by the explosive reaction to their appearance. One suddenly fell to his knees, tripped from behind. Before he could rise, a hand was beneath his chin and a blade across his throat. Both were Elana's. In hard tones she told the others, "Turran's dead if anybody even twitches!"

They believed her. They might have been stone for all the life they showed.

Ragnarson, slipping from table to table in a crouch, reached a rack where swords hung, tossed one to bin Yousif, drew another for himself, and moved toward the door. A rapid clumping came from the stairs. Blackfang and Kildragon, half dressed, arrived. They took stations to either side of Elana.

Ragnarson and bin Yousif closed in.

Rolf Preshka appeared behind the Storm Kings, sword in hand. "Damn!" he grumbled. "Jumped out that window for nothing. Ah. Nothing like old friends dropping in." He stared at the four both with frank curiosity and wry amusement.

Elsewhere, the innkeeper made the safety of his serving counter, like a curious owl paused to watch from its cover. He had been schooled well by his long proprietorship. The Red Hart had the most unsavory reputation in all Itaskia.

"You react quickly," said Turran. "Might almost think you had guilty consciences." Though he spoke lightly, there was fear in his eyes. "No need for this. We're unarmed."

"Said the sorcerer, laughing," bin Yousif muttered. "Do you keep your lightning bolts in scabbards now?"

"Sorry," Ragnarson apologized, not meaning it at all. "We're expecting trouble." His eyes flicked over the four, assessing. "But not from you. Let's move to a table." A moment later the four were seated, surrounded by the six, and a pitcher was on its way. "What do you want?" Ragnarson growled.

"To talk to Saltimbanco," said Turran.

"Mocker," Kildragon interjected.

"Saltimbanco, Mocker, that's neither here nor there. He was Saltimbanco to us, but we'll call him Mocker if you want. We want to see him. About Nepanthe."

"She's a big girl. She knew what she was doing," said Elana, falsely sweet. "You won't interfere."

"No, of course not. We didn't plan on it. Even after Ravenkrak, we can't help but be happy for her... Though it hurts that she took sides against her own family." Turran wearily pushed his hair out of his eyes. The slump of his shoulders, the way he held his head, the manner in which he avoided their eyes, all bespoke a tired and defeated man, a man who had seen all his dreams become fuel for merciless flames. "We want her taken away from Varthlokkur, gotten out of Fangdred, so she can't be used in any of his schemes." Even after having known the wizard for years, Turran couldn't picture him as free of evil designs. "Once that's accomplished, she's free to go where she wants, do what she wants, with whomever she wants."

"Uhm!" Ragnarson grunted, his heavy brows pulling together thoughtfully, a small scar on his forehead whitening.

"Look," Turran said with a hint of desperation, "we don't hate you for what you did. Rendel, you were my friend. I think you still are. Astrid..."

"Make it Bragi and Elana," Elana said.

"Whatever, you're the only friend Nepanthe ever had. We'd be fools to hate you just because you were duped by a wizard..."

"Who never paid us," Blackfang growled.

"We'd like to discard the past, make friends, come to terms. With Nepanthe's rescue in mind."

Softly, bin Yousif interjected, "You'd forget real quarrels? Like Ridyeh?"

Four grimaces. Turran visibly struggled with his emotions. "Yes. He's dead now. Hatred won't help him. Nor revenge help the living. And Nepanthe is alive. She can be helped. We'll court devils if that's the cost of getting her away from Varthlokkur."

"I almost believe you," Ragnarson told him. "What do you want from us, anyway?"

"Mocker's help. She's his wife. And he has the know-how to pull this sort of thing off..."

"Too bad. The idiot's left already."

"For Fangdred? By himself?"

"Yes. Mad as a hatter, isn't he? Your sister's fault. He's in love. Thinks he should charge around like the fool knights in the stories she used to like. I don't know. I might be wrong. He never showed any symptoms of the disease before. He could be flat crazy. Hey! What happened to Luxos?"

Turran's face darkened again. He replied, "We couldn't get him to leave Ravenkrak. He fought to the end. Even after everybody else surrendered. He was my brother and I'm kind of proud. He was brave, but he was a fool too. A hundred lunatics like him could've stood off the world. In the end, bowmen shot him down." After a thoughtful moment, "Why do men give their utmost to a lost cause? Look at all the great heroes. None of them were winners in the end."

Ragnarson observed, "Fangdred supposedly would be an even tougher nut than Ravenkrak. We don't

have an army anymore. And no money to hire one. How do you figure we can pull this off?"

"Uhn. How?" Turran mumbled dully. He and his brothers, apparently, kept going only because they believed they had to do this one more thing. They were treading water amidst the broken timbers of shipwrecked dreams. "I don't know."

"Magic?"

"We'll do what we can. With swords or the Werewind. Minus Ridyeh, Nepanthe, and Luxos, our control won't be much good. We could manage rain or snow, but nothing like the blizzard we sent to Dvar."

"Even that could be helpful, properly timed," Haroun mused.

"My thought too," Turran agreed.

"Bragi, I don't like this," Blackfang observed.

"Neither do I, Haaken. But it's not really your fight anymore. You and Rolf and Reskird I'll give what's left of the pay accounts. Elana, find the drafts."

"What's to be done?" bin Yousif asked, posing. Then, "Having a storm in your pocket could be handy, but we'd have to know where and when to send it."

"A suggestion," Valther interjected. "Visigodred and Zindahjira. My agents tell me you have an understanding with them."

Those names silenced the table. They belonged to sorcerers. Powerful sorcerers, though they weren't in a class with Varthlokkur. "You dug deep if you found out about them," bin Yousif observed. "Those things were quietly done."

"Time is a problem," said Ragnarson. "Mocker has a good lead already. Chances are, he'd be dead before we could wrangle a deal with those two. I'm not sure I want to do business with Visigodred anyway. I owe him too much now."

Turran recovered some of his former spirit as he suggested, "We could adjust the time schedule. We could pin Mocker with foul weather till you were ready to help him."

"I suppose," Ragnarson grumbled. To Haroun, "Would Zindahjira work with Visigodred? Aren't they still feuding?"

"We'll give them the Horn of the Star Rider and our storm-sending equipment if they'll help," Turran said. "They can work out who gets what."

Haroun nodded. "Exactly the kind of thing that would convince Zindahjira. He thinks the world-machine only runs when it's oiled with bribes."

"I don't like it," Ragnarson grumped. "But, for lack of any other plan... Well, I'll head for Mendalayas today."

"We'll follow Mocker toward Fangdred," said Turran. "And keep the weather miserable. We don't have the range we used to. We'll set up camp in East Heatherland somewhere, close enough to Fangdred to

hit it with our best, if it comes to that."

Yalmar brought a last pitcher of ale. They toasted success, then plunged into their half-baked, precipitous plan.

Ragnarson and his wife reached a hilltop, paused to stare across a valley at gray, gothic Castle Mendalayas. Bragi's thoughts drifted from his wonder at Elana's recently revealed pregnancy to memories of past visits here. Though a sorcerer, Visigodred had proven a perfect host on each occasion. Ragnarson hoped that that state of affairs would persist.

"It's a weird-looking place," Elana said. She brushed a wisp of red hair from her eyes. Her hair color sometimes changed, in secret, piquing Ragnarson's curiosity about the special sorceries of women. Some were better illusionists than master wizards.

"Uhm He, too, was having trouble with his hair. A strong, chill wind was blowing down off the Kratchno-dians. The mountains lay just north of Mendalayas.

"Why're we waiting?"

"I'm nervous. Are you all right?"

"Don't be silly. Of course I am. It's months before you have to worry." She kicked her mare's flanks.

Soon they were climbing the far side of the valley, through the vineyards surrounding Mendalayas. Those slopes were stark, the vines skeletal brown hands reaching for a leaden sky. They were dismal now, but beauty would return with spring. Next summer fat blue-purple globes would cluster among the browning leaves, wine's parents...

A servant liveried in green awaited them at the castle gate. He bowed. "Good morning, Captain. Lady. Your mounts, if I may?" He led them inside. "I'll see that your things are transferred to your apartment after I stable your animals. His Lordship awaits your pleasure in his study. Alowa, the young lady at the door, will show you there."

Once beyond the servant's hearing, Elana whispered.

"This Visigodred is a wizard? He operates like a noble."

"He's that too. County Mendalayas is his demesne. He holds it in fief from Itaskia, through Duchy Greyfells. Sorcery is just his hobby. At least that's what he says. He's a real hobby nut."

"He knew we were coming."

"One of his affectations. He watches this county like a hawk so he can impress people with his foreknowledge."

The girl at the door, who also wore dark green, said, "My Lord sends greetings and asks if he might receive you in his study."

"By all means. Lead on."

As Ragnarson and Elana followed her through torchlit, richly decorated halls, the girl asked, "What are

your dinner preferences? My Lord asked us to make you feel at home."

"Whatever's convenient for the cook," Ragnarson replied.

"Thank you. He'll be pleased to hear that."

They reached Visigodred's study. It was as vast as the common hall of other castles. Its walls were concealed behind glazed cabinets containing collections of knives, swords, bows, crystalware, coins, books, almost everything else collectable. Shelves and shelves of scrolls and bound librams formed semi-partitions dividing the room, and among them stood a dozen tables piled high with as yet unclassified arcana. A carpet collection covered the floor. A hundred rare lamps struggled to overcome the gloom of the windowless hall. A pair of leopards dozed in the circle of warmth before a fireplace at the head of the room.

Something made a sound overhead. Bragi peered upward. A tiny, vaguely human face looked back, chittering. Its owner ran along an oaken beam. Ragnarson shuddered. Not having seen a monkey in years, he forgot the creatures and jumped to the conclusion that it was the wizard's demonic familiar.

The monkey scampered to the end of the beam and dropped into the arms of a tall, thin, gray-bearded gentleman in plain, worn green clothing embroidered with thread-of-silver. He was obviously a man fond of green in its darker shades. His steely eyes radiated strength of character. He smiled and disengaged a hand from the monkey's as Ragnarson approached.

"Welcome back, Bragi." They shook. "It's been a long time. What? Three years? Hush, Billy," he told the monkey, "It's all right." To Ragnarson, "He's frightened. Not many people come calling on a crusty old wizard. Go on, Billy. Go play with Tooth and Claw."

The monkey slipped down Visigodred's leg, carefully kept his master between himself and the strangers, ran toward the leopards. He glanced back to make sure all was well, then grabbed a spotted tail and yanked. The leopard, which had appeared to be sleeping, spun and boxed with a paw. But Billy wasn't there anymore. He scampered away, chittering with monkey laughter.

"Are you collecting animals now?"

"No, not really. They were presents from a friend. A woman called Mist. Dump the books off a couple of those chairs and make yourselves comfortable."

They recovered chairs while Visigodred cleared a small table near the fire. Soon they were comfortably seated, accepting wine from an attentive servant, and were ready to talk. Ragnarson produced a pair of heavy gold coins. Visigodred held them to the lamplight.

"Hmm. Ilkazar. Hammered. Reign of Valis the Red-Hand. Not the Imperial Mint. Mark of the Gog-Ahlan Occupational Mint on this one. I don't recognize the other. Quatrefoil and roses. Shmerkhan, do you think? Extremely rare, the provisional coinage. Ilkazar didn't hold the eastern cities long, and most of the Imperial strikings were remelted after the Fall. Any more where these came from?"

"Enough to ruin the market."

Visigodred's eyebrows rose. "The Treasure of Ilkazar?"

Ragnarson nodded.

"You've found it, then? Congratulations. I knew you'd make it someday. Any big plans?"

"It wasn't me. Somebody else found it. You know the name. Varthlokkur."

The wizard's eyes narrowed. "That's not a good name to throw around. What's the connection?"

"Besides gold, he's got another treasure-of sorts. My friend Mocker's wife. You heard about the fall of the Storm Kings?"

"Who hasn't? News travels fast in this business." Visigodred's eyes sparkled. There was a joke hidden somewhere in that remark.

"No doubt."

"And I know Varthlokkur was involved. It's been a long time since he's stirred any trouble. He's got the Brotherhood into a state you can't imagine. And all because of a woman, eh?"

Elana nodded.

Visigodred lent her a quick, warm smile, and continued, "One Nepanthe, I believe. She catches his fancy, but not vice versa. So he destroys Ravenkrak and carries her off. Traditional sort of thing for people who have the power to make it stick. My colleagues are chasing their tails because of it. A reemergence of the Empire Destroyer... To understate, it's disturbing.

"The thing is, see, he isn't part of the gang." Visigodred chuckled. "The boys in the Prime Circle don't like it when we have these disturbances by somebody who doesn't belong to the club. They can't control him." In a more serious tone, he added, "We don't like having that nasty a potential enemy roaming around out here right now. Too many strange things are happening in the east. We've held several emergency sessions of the Prime Circle. Nothing got decided, of course. Nothing ever will as long as we have to put up with that blowhard Zindahjira.

"But let's get back to the point. What's your connection with all this?"

"Nepanthe married Mocker the night before Ravenkrak fell. And now Mocker is headed for Fangdred. He thinks he's going to rescue her."

"Ah. So. I've overlooked your part in this, haven't I? Rendel Grimmason? You could've picked a more melodic name. So. You're scared the wolf won't bother distinguishing the sheep from the goats, eh?" Visigodred chuckled. "Our fat friend has put you and bin Yousif into a tight spot, eh? He's hung a sword over your heads, so to speak. Let me guess. You want my help."

Elana's head bobbed. Ragnarson nodded once, quickly.

"My Power is useless against his. That's the man who crushed the Empire, Bragi. He defeated the wizards of Ilkazar, whom even the Tervola held in respect. He trained in Shinsan, with Chin, Wu, Feng, and the Princes Thaumaturge themselves. That's something you shouldn't ever forget. The entity we call Varthlokkur was, in a way, created in Shinsan. The Dread Empire will always be part of his story."

"I know."

He didn't. To him the Dread Empire had the substance of a ghost. Shinsan was just a bogeyman supposedly hiding out somewhere in the far east. "We didn't expect you to go it alone. The surviving Storm Kings and..." He let it trail off. Presenting the other name would be tricky.

"And?"

"Zindahjira. Maybe. Haroun's trying to sign him up now."

"That stubborn fool? Bin Yousif will need a week just to get him to admit I'm alive. I have the audacity to survive everything he throws at me."

"There's a potent bribe. Turran is willing to give up the Horn of the Star Rider and his storm-sender if you'll help. One thing for each of you."

"The Windmjimerhorn, eh? Tempting tidbit, Bragi, but everybody, except the Star Rider, who has anything to do with it gets the dirty end. Still, the proposition has merit. If I could be sure that Zindahjira would get the Horn. He deserves it. What would you want me to do?"

"Nothing that overt, really. Just protect Mocker so he has a chance to get where he's going. And maybe give him a little help when he gets there."

"Hmm. Let's look at the Register." The wizard went to a table, dug deep into a pile of books. He found what he wanted, started back.

Billy the monkey, astride a leopard and wielding a wooden sword, galloped past, close behind a terrified rat. Visigodred dodged nimbly and continued to the table. "Billy's hell on rats. He thinks. Tooth does the real work, though. Watch. She'll bring the rat around to Claw."

She did. Claw, who seemed to be asleep, moved one paw as the rat shot past. End of chase.

"Remarkably intelligent animals," Visigodred noted. "So is Billy. Well, here we are. The Register. If Zindahjira and I compliment each other, I'll consider the job. Assuming he'll go along. But there'll be a price."

"I thought so. There always is. But it seems to me that you owe me a favor."

"And you owe me several. That more than cancels out, I'd say. I was thinking you could help me make sure the Horn goes where it's best deserved. Ah. Here we are. Zindahjira." He turned a page, peered at it closely. "Hmm. Uh-huh." One thin finger raced across the page as he read. Then he looked up, smiling. "We'd make a good team if the old windbag could keep his temper under control. But we still wouldn't be any match for Varthlokkur. Not in a heads-up fight. Really, the Princes Thaumaturge are the only men alive who could meet him one-on-one and have a chance."

A shriek interrupted Visigodred. He turned. Tooth and Claw had caught a dwarf between them. The fellow wasn't much bigger than Billy. "Tooth! Claw! Behave!" The cats let silent snarls relax into bored yawns, dropped onto their bellies. Their tails lashed slowly. Their eyes tracked the dwarf as he hurried past.

"My apprentice. What is it, Marco?" Visigodred asked. "And I do wish you'd stop teasing the cats."

The dwarf grinned lopsidedly, as if he had a lot to say about keeping leopards in the house but had to

keep it to himself because Visigodred had heard it all before. "There's an owl in the parlor. Wants to see a Captain Ragnarson. Says he's fagged and wants to deliver his message so he can get some sleep. Very polite, for an owl. But if you ask me, he's found Gert up in the tower and it ain't sleep he's got on his feeble mind."

Ragnarson's eyebrows rose. It wasn't every day you met a man who talked to owls. Visigodred smiled. "Show him in, Marco. No, go around the other way. I'll let the cats have you one of these days." To Ragnarson, "A message from Zindahjira, no doubt. But routed through you because of his pride."

"Then Haroun must've made good time. It's a bitch of a trip to the Seydar Sea."

The dwarf returned with a huge owl perched on his shoulder. The bird made sounds in his ear. "He don't like being out in the daytime."

The owl fluttered to the table and stalked over to Ragnarson. It lifted a tufted leg. Bragi tried to avoid its wise, darkness-filled eyes as he removed the message. Then the bird took wing and was gone. Ragnarson examined the parchment, passed it on to Visigodred.

The wizard scanned it. "Ah, he's willing. One small hurrah for greed, Bragi. It's just a matter of negotiation now. And here comes dinner. Make yourselves comfortable. You'll be here a while. Marco! Come back here! I've got a job for you." Visigodred smiled again.

Ragnarson groaned silently, understanding. He and Elana were going to be hostages against the chance that they were working another hoax like the one that had destroyed Ravenkrak.

Visigodred began giving instructions to a terribly unhappy dwarf.

Turran and his brothers gave Iwa Skolovda a wide berth in passing. That city's new masters would have liked nothing better than to have had Storm King heads to decorate pikes over its gates. A day and fifty miles east of Iwa Skolovda, riding hard and with a snowstorm running before them, they happened on an abandoned farmhouse.

"What should we send?" Brock asked as they settled in.

"All we can, here to Fangdred, till we find out where he is," Turran replied. "After we get help from those wizards, we can relax."

That night a heavy snow carpeted Shara and the western Dragon's Teeth. Next night there was another fall, and another the night following, and so on till the end of the week. Travel in East Heatherland, Shara, and the Dragon's Teeth became virtually impossible.

The eighth day brought a change in schedule. Toward sundown, with Turran readying the sending gear, taciturn Brock brewing tea, and Jerrad and Valther out collecting firewood, the air over the cottage was split by an echoing scream. Something hit the roof with a resounding thump, rolled off into the snowdrifts against the north wall. Muted, colorful invective followed, then there was a knock at the door. Turran answered it, found a shivering, grumbling dwarf awaiting his response.

"Damned roc!" the dwarf snarled as he pushed into the cottage. "Sense of humor like you never saw. Likes to watch things fall. Especially when they kick and scream on the way down. Marco's the name. Hey! You! How about some of that tea? I'm free/ing my ass off. You Turran?" he asked, of Turran. "Yeah? Like I said, I'm Marco. From Mendalayas. Visigodred sent me, and a pox on the old sumbitch.

All the way to the Seydar Sea, a week with that blowhard Zindahjira, and now the devil's own time finding you guys. Ah. Tea. Fit for the gods. I'll bitch about it in the morning, but it's ambrosia tonight. Look, Turran, the boss sent some junk for you. A map." He produced it. "And this thingee'll put you through to Visigodred and Zindahjira when you want. They're on twenty-four hour watch at Mendalayas. Must be one hell of a broad."

Marco talked and talked. Turran seldom slipped a word in. The dwarf anticipated all his questions. He pointed out the salient features of the land between the farmhouse and Fangdred. He located Mocker, astonishing Turran. The fat man had gotten a lot further than he had expected, having crossed Shara and made it well into the foothills of the Dragon's Teeth.

"This gimmick," said Marco, after taking a last item from his pack, "will give you a permanent view of what your friend is doing. Everything, so have a little respect." It seemed to be a stone, a crystal, a duplicate of the object meant to provide contact with Visigodred and Zindahjira. "The boss would've sent more, but they're all tied up. One for the woman, one for the wizard, one for the Old Man of the Mountain. And another to keep an eye on Zindahjira."

Turran smiled thoughtfully, said, "And one for myself and each of my brothers, no doubt. And still another for you."

The dwarf winked and said, "Let's get on it. It's cold out here, there ain't no girls, and I can't go home where there are till this crap's over. First order of business is a conference. Visigodred and Zindahjira are hanging around waiting for you."

FIFTEEN: The Light of Arrows as They Sped, the Flash of a Glittering Spear

Tooth and Claw nervously patrolled the reorganized study, in no mood for loafing by the fire. Billy lay curled in Visigodred's lap, sleeping fitfully, plagued by unhappy monkey dreams. Perhaps the leopards of his mind were closing on the running ghost of his monkey-imagination. Servants came and went, bringing refreshments and carrying away dirty mugs and dishes, or tending the roaring fire. They were as jittery as the pets. At the table where Visigodred and Ragnarson hunched over one of the wizard's seeing-stones, the tension was doubly thick. Mocker had moved to within fifty miles of Fangdred. And Varthlokkur had shown signs, finally, of getting ready to defend himself. An assassin had been sent out from the Castle of Wind. He and Mocker would meet in a matter of hours.

But hours there were, and worrying before the fact was useless. Ragnarson said as much.

"You're right," Visigodred replied softly, with a tremor. "But it's not the encounter that worries me. We'll get him past the ambush. Zindahjira's studying the terrain now, setting it up. The problem is, how do we do it without getting caught?" He paused, chuckled, continued, "That ham-hand Zindahjira wanted to use a smoke-demon. Might as well write our names in fire on a midnight sky."

Ragnarson, from beneath his brows as he watched the crystal ball, studied Visigodred's face. Behind the gray beard and nonchalance, the wizard was pale. Beads of perspiration glittered on his forehead. Was the dread attached to Varthlokkur really that well-founded? Varthlokkur hadn't done anything remarkable that he could see. He considered hints dropped during his conversation with Haroun the previous evening, via the crystals. Zindahjira was scared silly.

He jumped when he felt the touch on his shoulder. The hand slipped down his back. "Anything happening?" Elana whispered.

"No. We're waiting for the guy to pick his ambush. Then we'll decide what to do about it. It'll be hours yet."

She ran slim fingers through his hair, stepped behind him, massaged his neck and shoulders. "You've got to get some sleep," she said.

Bragi turned, smiled weakly, put his hands on her shoulders, gave her a peck on the forehead, said, "You're a regular mother hen. Practicing?"

"Pooh! Typical male reaction. I was just telling you what you're too numb to notice for yourself. Really, you're going to pass out if you don't get some rest."

"Uhm. Guess I am a little groggy. I'll rest after we get Mocker through this."

Visigodred leaned forward, peered into the globe. "I think this's what we're waiting for," he said, his voice more animated than earlier.

Ragnarson and Elana jostled behind him, trying to watch over his shoulder. Tooth and Claw stopped pacing, waited expectantly. Billy stirred in Visigodred's lap, uncurled, sat up, rubbed his eyes with his monkey fists. Visigodred caught him beneath the arms and sat him on the floor.

"Go over by Tooth, Billy. I've got work to do."

The leopards returned to the fire and stretched out, but didn't relax. They remained tense, as if about to spring. Billy sat between them, a hand on a shoulder of each. He remained unnaturally quiet.

A servant came in, asked Visigodred if he needed refreshments.

The wizard said, "Will, call everybody in. We're about to begin."

The servant's eyes widened. He set his pitcher on the nearest table, hurried out.

"Ah, yes, this's the place," the wizard murmured, after returning to the crystal. "Note the cover."

Ragnarson had. The assassin had chosen an am-bushcade where the road hung in the side of a steep mountain and was so narrow that a traveler could do litte to evade an attacker. The assassin, on the other hand, from the canyon's opposite wall, could operate from rocky cover perfect for his purpose. He had concealment, protective shelter, and a view of a mile of road.

After a time, Visigodred grunted, "Ah!" He had noticed the servants at the door. Waving a thin, blue-veined hand in the direction of another table, he said, "Over there. Each one watch a ball. Tell me if anything happens."

The servants shuffled to seats before balls similar to those before Visigodred. The wizard asked, "Where's Mocker?"

A man described Mocker's surroundings.

Visigodred nodded. "Less than an hour now. Well, what's happening in the Wind Tower?"

"Nothing I can hear. Lord. They're quiet, waiting."

"I don't like not being able to see into that place," Visigodred complained. "They could be doing anything, and I can only listen. Is Zindahjira ready?"

"Yes," a woman replied, fearfully. Zindahjira was no pleasant sight, even shrouded in darkness. Which he always was. He sought shadows as green plants seek the light. "He wants to talk to you."

"Bring the ball."

Ragnarson and Elana moved back, but watched as Visigodred murmured to the crystal. It murmured back, softly, like the susurrations of a gentle sea, or of a breeze in pines. Visigodred mumbled some more, then nodded. Turning, he told Ragnarson, "We can do it without getting caught. He had the same idea I did. Just a matter of waiting, and of casting a few spells. One to protect your friend from ordinary weapons. I'll tend to that now."

The couple withdrew to the table displaying the larger battery of crystals. Over a man's shoulder, Ragnarson watched Mocker labor up a steep trail toward his brush with the Dark Lady.

"Oh! Look!" Elana whispered excitedly. "Nepanthe!"

Bragi moved to her side, looked over another shoulder. Yes, there she was, Mocker's wife, seated in her room in Fangdred, perhaps praying. When he asked, the servant observing said she'd just been told about Varthlokur's intentions. From all appearances, she was steeling herself against the inevitable. Tiny in the crystal, she began pacing her chamber nervously. Her face was both frightened and hopeful.

After what seemed several hours, but was really just one, the wizard called, "Bring me Mocker's crystal, please." Bragi did so. Visigodred studied it, nodded, and whispered the final cantrip of a spell he had been casting. After another eternity of waiting, he said, "We're about to start."

Ragnarson's beard and head cast a strange shadow as he studied the crystals before the wizard. Elsewhere, the low talk of the servants died to a silence broken only by heavy breathing, leopards' claws on naked stone as the cats paced before the hearth, and Visigodred softly murmuring another spell. Tension grew as he finished the incantation. "What're Varthlokur and the Old Man doing?" he asked of the other table.

"Nothing I can hear, Lord."

Visigodred nodded. Another minute passed. Elana called, "Nepanthe's left her room. Looks like she's headed for the tower."

The wizard nodded again. In one crystal, Mocker strained up that last steep mile to the ambush. In another the assassin moved slightly, getting into position. "It's time," said Visigodred.

The assassin moved again. Visigodred leaned forward, the last cantrip of a powerful spell ready to roll over his lips. Ragnarson gripped the back of the sorcerer's chair so hard his knuckles cracked. Across the room, Elana bit her lower lip white.

There was a little flash of something in sunlight before the assassin's rocks. Ragnarson, eyes on Mocker's globe, saw his friend stagger, fall against the mountainside, slide down to his knees. Then the fat man scrambled for cover with the haste of a rat noticing an approaching terrier.

Another flash of crossbow bolt in the assassin's crystal. It hit rock near Mocker's head, scattering bits of stone, stinging him into greater effort.

"Ah," Visigodred sighed. "Here it comes."

Ragnarson saw motion on the mountain above and behind the killer. Ice and snow were moving there, drifting down majestically, like a waterfall in low gravity. The whole mountain seemed to be crumbling.

The avalanche swept toward the assassin, a flood of frozen death. It seemed to take forever to reach him. He had plenty of time to notice it and start running. And, once it arrived, it was another forever departing. But once the flow had passed, so had the immediate threat to Mocker. Who, in his crystal, resumed his journey grinning like a boy who knew a secret.

"That should do for a while," said Visigodred, sighing wearily. "You people can go back to work."

The servants fled.

"You suppose Varthlokkur'll believe it was accidental?" Ragnarson asked.

"Don't see why not."

"What'll he try next?"

"Who knows? But you needn't worry yet. Why not get some sleep?"

"Hey, Turran," Marco shouted from the cottage door. "The boss wants you. Got work to do. Varthlokkur tried to get your friend." The dwarf was the only one who paid the crystals much mind. As he was willing to do little else, the Storm Kings had left him that as his share of the work.

Turran swung his axe, burying its head deep in the chopping block. He gathered his coat. His dark eyes were piercing as he approached the dwarf. Marco was always as bold as his mouth. Unimpressed by anyone but himself, he returned the stare without flinching.

"Would you call my brothers?" Turran asked, pausing at the door.

"No need. Made a point of hollering loud enough the first time. They heard me. Look there. Running. Looks like Jerrad found us something to eat."

Indeed. Even at a distance, Turran easily recognized the wild goat draped across Jerrad's shoulders. He nodded.

"You talk to the boss," said the dwarf. "I'll start the tea. Damn! It's lousy stuff. Why didn't you bring something fit to drink? Wine. Ale." He turned to the fire, muttering and shaking his head.

Turran grinned, remembering Marco's promise to complain. Then his eyebrows rose. The dwarf was actually doing something. Never, since his arrival, had he done anything more helpful than watch the globes, or lounge around talking in endless streams. Mostly about women. His women. Idly, as he seated himself before a crystal, Turran wondered about Marco's oft-touted, very secret "system." Probably talked till they fell asleep from boredom, then made his move.

He touched the ball in the place Marco had shown him. Visigodred's thin face, like a strange, bearded

fish hurtling up from diamond deeps, swam into view.

"Marco says Varthlokkur's made his first move," he said. "We weren't watching. How'd it come out? All right, I suppose, since you're smiling."

The crystal shivered in Turran's fingers, made a soft sound like breezes in a field of ripe wheat. There were words in the whisper, words indistinguishable at more than a yard.

"It went well, with no reaction. They were unhappy at

Fangdred, but not suspicious. At least not that I could detect. Just now, Varthlokkur's railing at the Fates and Norns. The Old Man hasn't said anything. He's our real worry. He's not as emotionally involved. Nepanthe's still gloating, of course. Mocker'I be there soon."

"Excellent! Excellent!" said Turran. "My brothers will be pleased. Now then, what did you want?" He listened to the whisper-wind for several minutes, nodding occasionally. When Visigodred finished, he said, "Right away."

"Marco! Visigodred wants you." He placed the crystal before another chair. The dwarf bounded over, said, "Yeah, Chief?"

"You behaving?"

"Don't I always?"

"Not often, but I muddle through. Somebody wants to talk to you." The wizard disappeared, to be replaced by three young women. Turran's eyebrows rose. All three spoke at once. Marco gave Turran a look that said, "This's private." Chuckling, the Storm King joined his brothers, who had just arrived and were ready to clean the goat.

When finished with his conversation, Marco came to supervise. "Poor girls!" he told the room, his demoniac eyes sad. "They're so lonely without me. Poor dear things. What'd the boss want, Turran?"

"A storm around Fangdred, so Varthlokkur can't send out any more ambushers."

Midnight. Everyone was asleep, including Valther, who had the watch. From outside, spaced in a slow cadence, came the sounds of feet breaking crusted snow. The door, not locked, swung slowly inward; limned by moonlight off the snow, a stooped figure paused there, listened. Hearing nothing but heavy snores, the man stepped inside and closed the door.

Picking his way with a staff as though he were blind, this bent old man made a circuit of the room. He examined each sleeper by the glow of the stone on the table. Before leaving each he nodded his satisfaction-till he came to Marco. There he frowned puzzledly, but soon shrugged and moved on.

Across his back he carried a bulky bundle that he quickly, deftly exchanged for a similar bundle Turran had secreted beneath a trap in the cottage floor. Carefully, carefully, like a man with a fragile jar of precious oil, he carried the object out into the Storm Kings' winter's night.

Then, once his footfalls faded, a voice, as old as time, as distant as the first dawn, "Come, my beauty of the sky. We ride home with our treasure again." A peal of laughter echoed over the snowfields. And, after a lightning flash without thunder, hooves crunched snow, then a huge white horse beat vast wings

and scaled the night. Dwindling merriment trailed behind.

He always took it back once its damage had been done.

SIXTEEN: For Love Is Strong as Death, Jealousy Is Cruel as the Grave

"I don't understand," Varthlokkur muttered. "He just won't quit." Behind him, like wind chimes, tiny silver bells tinkled endlessly, much louder now than in their first tentative speech of a week ago. The silver-chaised arrow pointed unswervingly westward.

The Old Man, seated before the mirror, leaned forward. He felt totally alive as he studied the man crossing a glacier a hundred miles to their west. Off and on, since the first musical intimation of peril, he and Varthlokkur had come to watch the fool fight his way toward them. A strange, unswerving man, he, frightening in his tenacity. Nothing daunted him. Not foul weather, nor mountains, nor any of the small disasters with which Varthlokkur had tried to induce despair. Snowslides, landslides, fallen trees, washed-out roads, he made his way around or over them all with a patience that bespoke an absolute conviction of final victory. And, though he had traveled fewer than fifty miles this past week, he still rose each dawn and gamely challenged the Dragon's Teeth till sundown. He might win the match out of sheer stubbornness.

"He's mad," said the Old Man. "He'll keep on coming till he gets what he wants. Or dies. You should understand."

"How so?"

"How many years to ruin Ilkazar?" And, in the back of his mind, the question still, And at what cost to yourself.'

The wizard flinched, turned away. "Too many, all wasted. And it's been Hell's own hound on my trail ever since. Yes, I guess I understand. But for a woman?"

For what had he claimed vengeance on Ilkazar? A rhinoceros?

"He loves me!"

Both men turned. Nepanthe glared at them from the doorway, her face a mask of poorly controlled anger. Varthlokkur nodded. "Maybe so, though personally I'd bet on wounded pride."

Nepanthe's thoughts were obvious. Of course he was coming for love. Harsh events still hadn't broken the grip romanticism had on her mind, though its hold had begun slipping. "You suppose? You'll learn supposition when he gets here!"

But his remark had dampened her fire, Varthlokkur saw. "Nepanthe, Nepanthe, why can't you be rational? Whether he kills me, or, as is more likely, I..." He let it trail off, saying instead, "Well, we don't have to shout about it."

"You've kidnapped me, separated me from my husband, and you want me to be grateful? You think I should be reasonable about it? Why don't you be reasonable? Give me some winter clothes and let me go." She had tried to escape twice already. Twice she had been intercepted and gently returned to her room. "I promise to keep him from killing you."

Varthlokkur turned to hide his amusement. That was his due, wasn't it? The wicked wizards of the romances always ended up spitted on a hero's sword.

The Old Man, far from amused, assumed the argument. "You just won't understand, will you? This man, Varthlokkur, has spent four centuries waiting for you. Four centuries! Why? Because the Fates themselves say you should be his. Yet you'd defy them for so insignificant a thing as this... this actor and thief. What is he? What can he do?"

"He can love me."

"Can he? Does he? How much of that was for Varthlokkur's pay? And Varthlokkur himself, is he incapable of loving you?"

"Can he love at all?" she demanded, though weakly. Her certainties were being undermined. Wicked Doubt had begun to insinuate black tentacles through cracks in her bastions of faith. "The whole world knows what he is. The murderer of an entire city."

Angry himself, the Old Man smiled cruelly and snapped, "Dvar!"

Nepanthe's defiance wilted, folding in like a tulip blossom at nightfall. Ilkazar had been a city of antediluvian greed and wickedness. Any sense of justice had to agree that its doom hadn't been undeserved. That wasn't the case with Dvar, a little third-rate spear-carrier of a city, a mutual dependency of Iwa Skolovda and Prost Kamenets. Its single fame was a fierce, -always-doomed devotion to the cause of its right to be mistress of its own affairs. Nepanthe, who had been so exhilarated the night that tiny state had been crushed, now shut up and dropped into a chair. She turned her back on the men.

The Old Man stared at her. She was near tears. He had touched an emotional canker. And, once again, he saw why both her husband and Varthlokkur found her attractive. She was beautiful, though loneliness and fear were stains on her loveliness. She had been bravely defiant since her arrival, loudly certain of her impending rescue, never admitting a doubt that her husband would come. But now, he suspected, she had begun to realize that her Mocker was challenging Varthlokkur. She had cause to be frightened. Still, he had to admire her. Her fear was for her husband, not for herself. He watched her massage her right temple, caught a glimpse of the crystal tear she wanted hidden.

Varthlokkur left the room. Mocker's endless fight with the mountains had grown tedious.

The Old Man concentrated on the mirror, ignored the woman. Soon he heard the rustle of fabric. She stepped past him and stared into the mirror from close up. "Why're you so harsh?" he asked.

"I should be thankful that he wrecked my home and killed my brothers?"

"And dragged you through the mountains like a common slave," the Old Man interjected. "You made the point earlier. No, I don't expect you to be happy. But I would like you to keep an open mind about why. And to contradict you on one score. Your brothers are still alive, except Luxos, who more or less committed suicide."

"What? Why didn't he tell me?"

"Desperation, maybe. He's a great believer in destiny."

"Pardon?"

"Consider: assume you've loved someone for centuries..."

"Love?"

"Love. Let me continue. Suppose you've been waiting for someone you love for three or four hundred years. Your husband, for instance. And, when that person, who had been promised you for so long, finally arrives, you get nothing but pain from him. Wouldn't you try just about anything? Even a little cruelty? I'd bet that he hasn't mentioned your brothers because he wants you to feel dependent. Like there's no one else who cares. Why'd you reject him?"

"I'm married. And happy with the husband I have." It wasn't a considered answer. In fact, the Old Man had the feeling that her marriage was a miracle in which she still didn't entirely believe.

"He courted you for twelve years before you ever met this Mocker. I wanted to know why you rejected him then."

She shrugged. "I have to admit that he was a perfectly behaved suitor. And I liked him. As much as I could any man. He really did do a lot for me. He helped me understand myself. More than he'll ever know. I was grateful for that. But he was so old. And his name was Varthlokkur. I always thought he wanted to use me, for my Power."

"If he'd come to you young, with another name-what then? And, as to the Power, if he had wanted it, who was to stop him after his demonstration at Ilkazar? Have you no logic at all?"

"I don't know... If he'd come young, maybe. But I had other problems..." She shrugged. Then with a forced laugh, "No one ever accused me of being logical."

"Varthlokkur once had a servant who fell in love with him. For various reasons, he made himself young and married her. The point: he's old by choice, not by necessity. And, despite whatever you've heard, or even have seen, he's a kind, gentle man who abhors force and violence. Maybe it's a reaction against the excesses of his youth. Tell me, has he ever treated you with anything less than kindness and respect?"

"He kidnapped me!"

The Old Man sighed. Full circle and back to that again. "Ignore that. That was my idea, and he did it under protest, for want of any better idea. Otherwise, he'd've gone on for years, mooning over you and getting nowhere."

"You?"

"Yes."

"I guess he treats me all right, but that's a moot point now. I'm married." She indicated the man in the mirror.

"Let's discuss realities. Varthlokkur, for your sake, has held back. He hasn't done anything but block the road. Sooner or later, though, he'll have to do something. This creature you call a husband is going to be dead pretty soon-unless he gives up. Either way, that part of your life is over. I'll take care of it myself, if Varthlokkur doesn't have the will."

"If you kill him, I'll throw myself off the wall," she replied softly. "If he turns back, I'll cry a little before I jump. But he won't give up."

"Don't be melodramatic," the Old Man retorted. But the thing was, he thought her capable of keeping her promise. She was proving to be an incurable romantic.

Varthlokkur was tired. Tired of arguing with Nepan-the, tired of striving to maintain a grasp on Power that seemed to be waning, tired of battling the Fates or whatever malign forces were controlling his destiny. Most frustrating was the recent diminution of his control of the Power. Even his best-conceived experiments were sputtering. There were moments when he considered evading events by cocooning himself in the Old Man's deep sleep. He also considered suicide, but only in that brief and quickly rejected fashion which is a universal experience. Neither death, nor the long sleep, would serve his purpose. Only for Nepanthe had he lived so long; he would have what he wanted.

He often paced the quiet loneliness of the Wind Tower, stretching himself on a rack of thought while searching for ways to reach Nepanthe. And he found ways, but rejected them because they ignored her consent. He wanted her to be aware, understanding, and accepting.

Mocker also troubled him. He could be rid of the pest with a single, smashing magical blow, but, for the sake of peace with Nepanthe, he held back. Still, he had to do something soon. Defend himself he must.

One afternoon he sat before the mirror, chin on fist, watching his enemy climb a mountain. He was sleepy-thoughtful, paying the mirror little heed. He drifted on a cloud of laziness. There was a mood on him, lethargic, and he felt better than he had in a long time. It was as if some off-the-scenes diplomat had arranged a brief truce with the Fates.

A soft sound. The door opened behind him. Still he didn't turn. He would allow nothing to break his mood.

Light footsteps crossed the room, stopped behind him. Still he didn't turn. His eyelids, suddenly unbearably heavy, closed. The footsteps moved to the mirror. He knew that Nepanthe was watching her husband. Here was another opportunity to present his case, but he refused it. He had no desire to sacrifice his mood on an altar of fruitless argument.

He heard the rustle of her dress as she settled into the Old Man's chair, thought he could detect the faint whisper of her breathing. In a moment of euphoric wish-fulfillment, he tried to imagine that breath in his hair, against his shoulder, as he remembered Marya's. Memories stirred. The face of the imagined lover became that of his wife, and he drifted off on a pleasant daydream. Guilt nibbled at the edge of his mind. He should have allowed her another child. But no. What was that saying the Old Man had? "Children are hostages to Fate." Or to anyone able to lay hands on them.

Nepanthe's soft cough brought him back. He cracked an eyelid, looked her way. She stared back nervously. "I don't feel like arguing," he said, closing the eye.

"I don't want to either," she replied, her voice sending chills down his spine. "I just want to know why you can't let me go."

"You see?" Varthlokkur said with a sigh. "Here's one starting. I've told you why a hundred times, but you don't hear me. If I tell you again, you'll say it's not so, and still want a reason. What's the point? Go away and let me snooze, woman. Let me be a tired old man for a day."

Nepanthe shifted in her chair, frowned. Briefly, she remembered what the Old Man had said, wondered about Varthlokkur's looks as a young man. She suspected he would be quite handsome, hawkish, rather like that man bin Yousif. "All right," she said. "For the sake of argument-oh, what a miserable choice of words!-we'll say that you've told me the truth. What're you planning to do?"

He opened both eyes, fixed her with his stare. She stared back as defiantly as ever. "What am I going to do? Do you really care?" A little sharp, that. "Nothing. I'll just react. To you. To him." Pointing to the mirror, "If he keeps coming, I'll have to defend myself. Sometime soon now. As for you, time will decide."

Nepanthe stirred nervously, stared at her husband. Her face paled a little. Varthlokkur assumed she was thinking of his Power.

"I don't want to hurt anybody," he continued. "But you two, by defying the Fates, are forcing me to. For you, the Fates and Norns bend. For me they're inflexible."

"The Fates! The Norns! That's all I ever hear around here. Can't you be honest? Blame things on yourself? You're the one causing all the trouble."

"See? There you go, just like I said. I tell you, I'm following a foreordained course. I must do what I do because I'm a pawn of Destiny. The sooner you realize that you're one too, the sooner we'll finish this unpleasantness."

"There's no argument that can turn me away from him" she snapped. "He's my husband. Nothing can change that. I won't let it-and the Fates, or whatever, be damned."

"Not even death?" Varthlokkur asked. "He'll die in a day or two. For your sake I've given him time to think and back down. But pretty soon, if he's still coming, I'll stop him."

"I'll jump off the wall!"

"No you won't. The divinations say you'll live a long time yet."

"Divinations! Mummery!"

Though his skills were in question, Varthlokkur was too tired to fight. Quietly, he responded, "Nepanthe, I've performed divinations for centuries and I haven't yet seen one proven wrong. I've seen errors in interpretation, human errors, but never false predictions. Those old divinations are becoming reality today. You're living at the impact point of an arrow of destiny loosed four hundred years ago. Believe it or not, whichever you want, but be warned. Sometime in the next few days you'll make a decision the Fates have left to you alone. On it will hinge my future, yours, your husband's, and possibly that of empires. Really. I've seen. When you decide, please, and I'll beg on my knees if I have to to get you to do it, be cool and logical. For once, just this precious once, put emotion aside and think before you start talking."

Nepanthe shuddered. There was enough strength in his tone to convince her that he believed what he had said. "What decision?"

"On my proposal."

"How could that effect anybody but you and me and

Mocker? Don't give me any more of your smooth tongue. You already know my answer."

"Do I? Do you? Maybe. But things change. Moment by moment. You might think it's decided, but there're days yet before it becomes irrevocable. I beg you, when the time comes, consider with your mind, not your heart." That he hadn't as yet shown her his necromantic arguments didn't bother him. He had completely overlooked the fact that she didn't know as much as he.

"I won't be your woman."

"Why not?"

"I'm married."

Varthlokkur sighed. Round full circle and back to that pointless argument yet again. Piqued, he snapped, "You won't be when I get rid of that cretin..." He groaned. The destroying, hurting madness was threatening to claim him again. He was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop it.

"Touch him and I'll kill you!"

He was startled. This was a different Nepanthe. Anger gave way to curiosity. He studied her face, searching for the truth behind her threat. Ah. She didn't mean it. She was answering his spite with bluster of her own. "I doubt it." And yet, it wasn't impossible. Precautions would have to be taken. A sad business, this.

The Old Man, precariously supporting a silver tray on one hand, eased into the chamber. He frowned as sharp-as-sabers words sliced the air. They had started hurting one another again. "Does this have to go on all the time?" he asked. "The vitriol's beginning to bore me. My father-ah, yes, I did have one, and you needn't look so surprised-had a saying: 'If you can't say something nice, keep your damned mouth shut.'"

"It can stop anytime!" Nepanthe snapped. "Get this bearded lecher to let me go."

"There must be some invisible barrier between you two. No common concepts, or something. Or maybe you just won't listen to each other. I've got an idea." The Old Man's voice became like silk, like honey, like candy-covered daggers. "A way for him to get through to you,

Nepanthe. I'll work a spell on your mind. You'll have to do what's necessary."

Varthlokkur flashed him a hot, angry look. Unperturbed, he smiled back wickedly, and the more so when he saw that Nepanthe had been shocked into silence. Numbly, she took a cup of wine from the tray. She asked Varthlokkur. "Could he do that?"

"Easily. And your opinion of your husband would become lower than mine. His touch would, literally, make you ill."

She showed every evidence of terror. "What a wicked, horrible thing... Why haven't you done it, then?"

"I wonder, too," the Old Man growled. "It'd save a lot of trouble..."

"And I said that I don't want a slave," Varthlokkur snarled back. "I want a whole woman."

"But you haven't gotten the ghost of that, have you?" the Old Man asked with more false sweetness. "What you're getting is heartaches from a bitch with a brick head... Damn! Now you've got me doing it!"

Varthlokkur and Nepanthe stood open-mouthed, shocked. The Old Man shook his head. He had just shown Nepanthe that their unity was little more than a facade anymore, that there were tensions growing between them. She might make little of that now, but later... Right now his words hurt, he suspected, more than anything Varthlokkur could have said. She gulped her wine, then hurried out. Her shoulders were slumped.

"A beautiful woman," said the Old Man. "Loyal and spirited. I'm sorry. Frustration."

"I understand. How often have I forced myself not to say the same things?" He visibly controlled his own anger. This as yet unbroached dissension between them had to be held in abeyance. "The crisis was so close now.... He would need even half-hearted allies.

"It might do her some good. Start her thinking. Who knows? There's a proverb in my collection. It's one of the oldest: 'You can't make omelets without breaking eggs.' And speaking of eggs to crack, what're we going to do about her husband? He's getting too close." A change of subject might direct both their frustrations into useful work.

"I don't know. I don't want to hurt her anymore... But I don't have a hope while he's alive, do I? Any ideas?"

"Ideas, yes. You might not like them. Without your problems, I see him with more detachment. I like to think. I've been planning. We've got a fellow here who's magnificent with the crossbow. I talked to him yesterday. He's willing to go down and pick this Mocker off whenever you give the word."

"Well, it's simple and straightforward." Varthlokkur rubbed his forehead, thought for a long time, seeking alternatives. He seemed sadder, older, and wearier than the Old Man could remember. After a time he waved a hand and said, "All right, go ahead. Might as well get it over with."

Varthlokkur and the Old Man watched their assassin take his position among boulders fifty miles to the west. "Does Nepanthe know?" Varthlokkur asked.

"The servants do. They'll carry the tale. There aren't any secrets around here."

The wizard nodded tiredly, tried to concentrate on the mirror. The assassin, in camouflage white and gray, had disappeared amidst snow-speckled granite.

"Ah," said the Old Man. "He's coming."

Far, Mocker rounded a corner of mountain a mile from assassin and ambush...

The door slammed against the wall behind them. Eyes red from weeping, distraught (deja vu for Varthlokkur: he remembered another weeping woman, of long ago), Nepanthe rushed to the mirror. Her delicate hands folded over her mouth, fencing in a scream.

Varthlokkur turned to her, talons of emotion ripping his soul. She would hate him now. Tangled hair, tears in her eyes... How like the woman Smyrena...

"Now!" said the Old Man.

Varthlokkur's attention jerked back to the mirror. He saw a slight movement where the assassin hid. Mocker staggered, fell. Nepanthe screamed. Then the fat man scuttled for cover. There was more movement in the rocks. A bolt flashed, but Mocker remained unharmed. Nepanthe laughed hysterically.

"I'll be damned!" said the Old Man. "Well, he's dead when he comes out, and he'll have to sometime."

"I doubt it," Varthlokkur replied.

"Why?"

"Look up the mountain."

An avalanche swept toward the arbalester.

Varthlokkur rose, paced. His whole frame slumped in defeat. Nothing was going right anymore. Even the simplest, non-magical projects guttered out as if a dozen pairs of hands were, at cross-purposes, trying to sabotage his every deed. What a hatred the Fates must have for him!

Nepanthe laughed madly, on and on. The Old Man studied her momentarily, then turned to the mirror. He frowned thoughtfully. He grimaced when Mocker scooted out of hiding and resumed walking warily, bow now in hand. The fat man wore a wicked, confident smile.

There was snow that evening, heavy, unseasonal. The road scaling the flank of El Kabar quickly grew too icy for use. Both Nepanthe and Varthlokkur walked Fangdred's walls in the silence and peace of the snowfall, thinking, but didn't meet. The Old Man, when first he heard of the snow, frowned and returned to the Wind Tower.

Much later, Varthlokkur also went to the tower. He was tired, so tired, in heart and mind and body. "Vanity of vanities," he muttered repeatedly. "All is vanity and striving after wind."

"Here," said the Old Man as he entered the tower top chamber, offering a steaming mug exuding the foulest of odors. "This'll perk ye up."

"Phew! Or kill me!" Varthlokkur stared at the mug momentarily, then gulped its contents. After several sincere, horrible faces, and a minute, he did indeed feel better. "What was that?"

"You won't believe it, but I'll tell you anyway. Nepanthe. The drink. You know, I wonder just how much foresight her father had, naming her that. She surely is a bitter draught, isn't she?"

Varthlokkur smiled weakly. "What now? We can't send another man out because of this snow. It'll have to be sorcery. But I hate to try anything. My grasp of the Power has gotten so unreliable..."

"Another halfway measure? How about the thing called the Devil's Hawk then? There's a risk, though. The bird's mortal. He could kill it. Want to try something a little more potent?"

"No, no demons. No djinn, no spirits. Once I could manage the nastiest of them, but now I don't think I could handle an ordinary air or fire elemental. Don't ever let Nepanthe know, but the concealment spell I used to get us away from Ravenkrak almost killed us. I don't understand it. I've never had any trouble before. It's just been the past couple of months. Yes, I guess it's going to have to be something like the

Devil's Hawk."

Dawn had brightened the eastern horizon before Varthlokkur gained a firm control of that monster (the Power had grown so elusive that he now had trouble managing magicks even as simple as this) and had brought it flapping darkly to roost atop the Wind Tower. Its twenty-foot black wings spread like pinions of night. Its bright golden eyes burned like doors into Hell. Legend said that the creature was the bastard of a hawk and a black ifrit, and thus it had attributes of both the mortal and Outer worlds.

Later, after he had studied the bird, manipulated it, had decided that it would serve his purpose, and he was about to send it off, Nepanthe came to the tower and silently seated herself before the mirror. She was unusually quiet. Perhaps she feared a sharp comment would cause another of the Old Man's crushing outbursts. Varthlokkur took a moment to say, "I'd rather you weren't here when..."

"You won't stop him. I can feel it. I'll see him cut your heart out." Her voice was flinty. She seemed more self-certain, though no less frightened.

Varthlokkur frowned. "We'll see, then." He uttered the word that sent the hawk along. The tower shuddered as great wings beat the air overhead. The wizard dropped into his usual chair, watched Mocker walk a ridgetop thirty miles from Fangdred.

The bird quickly arrived and began circling. Mocker saw its shadow, sped a futile shaft upward. The Old Man chuckled, then fell silent at a glance from Varthlokkur. The bird dove. Mocker cast his bow aside, readied his sword, stood his ground. Varthlokkur found himself forced to admire the man's courage... The monster broke its plunge just short of the sword, glided away.

The bird dropped into a canyon, caught an updraft, climbed. Varthlokkur and the Old Man cursed softly. Nepanthe laughed like a delighted child.

Again the monster dove, this time from the sun. Mocker was momentarily blinded. Nepanthe's laugh became a whisper when her husband threw forearm across his eyes. But, when the hawk was almost upon him, he crouched, dove aside, hurled his sword.

The huge bird hit the ridgetop, bounced, rolled, flopped fantastically as it went. Mocker was after it in an instant. At first opportunity he darted in and severed the huge head from the neck with his dagger, then jerked his rapier from the dark-as-midnight breast. He cleaned it on wing feathers and grinned.

So it was over almost as soon as begun, and that easily for the man. The Devil's Hawk, with a reputation for murderous cunning almost equalling that of its namesake, had shown no resourcefulness at all. Indeed, it had acted with incredible stupidity, almost as if drugged... "Impossible!" Varthlokkur cried. His fears rose in a sudden flood. He jumped up, paced, muttered.

"Nepanthe, go somewhere else," the Old Man snapped. She left, silently except for a chuckle as she passed out the door.

The moment she was gone Varthlokkur wheeled, said, "He's going to make it! I won't be able to stop him!" Panic painted his features. He leaned forward, bent with the weight of his cares.

"You're right!" the Old Man growled. "He will make it, if you keep on like that. Come on. We haven't got time for defeatism. Let me show you why." He muttered a simple incantation and shifted the attention of the mirror. "Last night, while you walked the wall, I did some snooping. I thought it was just a little bit strange that Mocker had such fantastic luck with our ambush. That first shot was right on the mark, but

he wasn't hurt. And that avalanche stretched my credulity for coincidence to the breaking point. And then there was the storm that sealed the gates. Just too damned convenient for him if we were going to send out somebody else."

"What're you getting at?"

"Just this: look!" the Old Man snapped, pointing.

Varthlokkur looked. There were five men, one a dwarf, centered in the mirror. Somewhere, in a tumbledown farmhouse, they huddled over a gleaming ball. They seemed terribly excited. Varthlokkur's interest was instantly engaged. "Turran! Jerrad! And Valther and Brock. What?..."

"At a guess, I'd say they're watching Mocker. They're your answer to our remarkable weather."

"I see!"

"While you're at it, notice the little fellow."

"Who? Oh. Who. is he?"

The Old Man muttered another minor incantation. The scene vanished, was instantly replaced by another. ; "His name is Marco. He's the apprentice of this man." A thin, frightened person occupied the mirror. He bent over another crystal ball. Behind him stood a giant of a man. Varthlokkur recognized the latter immediately.

"Ragnarson."

"Yes. I told you to keep an eye on him. The game couldn't be played out with the fat man by himself. Picture their thoughts: point, you owe them money, in their opinions; point, they knew that you know they work with Mocker, and might assume this's a team effort on their part-so, in self-defense, they've made it that. The thin man is Visigodred, a wizard of the Brotherhood's Prime Circle. He caused the avalanche. And he provided the shield that kept the first quarrel from killing Mocker. "A long time ago I enchanted this room to keep his likes from peeking in, but I couldn't protect myself from eavesdroppers. I expect he's listening right now, and he's scared to death because we've found him out. Right, Visigodred?"

Visigodred nodded. The Old Man laughed, muttered another incantation. "Trapped him that time." The mirror's eye shifted to a dark, gloomy place.

"The other one," said Varthlokkur. "Bin Yousif." "Uhm. And a sorcerer who lives in a cave beside the Seydar Sea, several hundred miles south of here. Name's Zindahjira."

Varthlokkur shuddered as he thought of the fury of a wizards' war. "How powerful are they?"

"The Register lists both as Prime Circle. As good as they come in the west, excepting yourself. I hate to say I told you so..."

"Be my guest. I've earned it. Are they still listening?" "I expect so. If not, they can when they want. Those crystals..."

"Have a definite weakness. Hand me the Yu Chan book, please." He busied himself with his tools (with a sudden something definite to do, how much better, how much more real he felt), which included an

instrument like a large, two-tined fork. He accepted the required book, asked, "Will you get a crystal from the stone cabinet? The amethyst I think." He checked the book. "Yes, the amethyst. I thought I remembered this from my session with Lord Chin. There. All ready." He sang a long, complex incantation from the book, struck the fork, touched a vibrating tine to the gem, said, "That should take care of their eavesdropping. To their devices Fangdred has become a black hole. Now what?" "Hit back!"

"No. If they're. Prime Circle, they'll have powerful defenses."

"Not able to withstand you, though."

"Perhaps not. But for long enough, what with my grip on the Power being so unreliable. While I was crushing them. Mocker would arrive. He'd do his work and save them. Though they might not realize that yet."

"What do you plan?"

"Let me think, let me think. Oh, yes. First thing, we'll ready our own defenses. Those two are scared. They'll try hitting first and fast in hopes of catching us off guard. Once we have a solid shield, I'll set up the Winterstorm. The uncertainty version. It's still experimental, but I have a hunch I'll soon find a new source of Power useful."

"What do you want me to do?"

The two men, working in concert where the Old Man had the requisite knowledge, rapidly erected powerful shields around Fangdred. Just in time, too. The first attack came only moments after they finished.

The Old Man listened to the howl and groan and wondered just where he, and all this, fit into the Director's current scheme. He had been awake for centuries now, and had only begun to discern the ragged edges, to sense the master's butterfly touch in such probable preliminaries as the El Murid Wars.

Whatever, it would be bloody. They always were.

SEVENTEEN: And Thoughts from Visions of Night

Nepanthe paced her room, brooding about Mocker, Varthlokkur, and the Old Man. A riot of worry galloped through her mind, swept like a tide, crashed against barrier-rocks, chuckled along well-worn channels. She had decided, as she had watched Mocker evade and conquer the hawk that morning, that there was a real chance he would get through. She had begun to suspect it the previous evening, while walking the wall and smelling that strange, familiar smell in the night. Somewhere, somehow, her brothers were stirring. She had recognized the scent of the Werewind.

Where are they? How had they managed an alliance with her husband? What about Ragnarson and bin Yousif? Were they involved too? Was her husband's approach an attention-grabber covering the others as they came from another direction? Hope was a sad thing, she found. When she had had none she had been at peace, though spitting fire around Varthlokkur. But now, with a glimmer of a chance, she was tormented. Like a trapped animal she ran this way and that in search of an unnoticed gap in the bars of her cage. Her heart was a snare drum with a kettledrum's voice, beating fast and loud...

Did Varthlokkur know her brothers had sent weather against him? Frightening thought. They would be defenseless against him. She threw herself onto her featherbed, on her stomach, and, chin on folded

hands, stared onto infinity. How could she help her rescuers? If she could distract Varthlokkur till Mocker arrived... Thoughts of seduction whirled through her head, were rejected instantly because her attentions would be too transparent, even if desired.

"Mocker, I wish I knew what to do," she whispered. All the loneliness of her stay in Fangdred gathered like a sneering specter. This fortress and its people were all too like the Dragon's Teeth themselves: stark, harsh, and primitive. She rolled over, stared at the ceiling. A tear trickled from her eye. Bad to be alone. She remembered his arms... warm... secure...

Loneliness. Now she understood Varthlokkur a little better. Four centuries made a big loneliness. She thought about his visits to Ravenkrak. His look of loneliness was one reason she had given him the time she had. She saw the same look each time she passed a mirror. If Mocker hadn't come along, and Varthlokkur hadn't lost patience and gone militant, she might be married to him now. She had considered it, truly. He wasn't a bad man, really, though he was too controlled by his unyielding belief in Destiny.

Thoughts of Varthlokkur stirred a notion for distracting him. She wouldn't pretend to do anything else. Though he would know, his nature would force him into predictable paths. She bounced up, hurried to a closet filled with clothing he had given her. He had given her many things since they had come from Ravenkrak.

She hummed as she searched the closet, a delicious pleasure after so long. Ha! Nothing could go wrong now.

Nearby, as if he knew her mind, the current piper played a tune. It was as old as time. Nepanthe laughed when she heard it. So fitting!

The voice of my beloved!

Behold he comes, Leaping upon the mountain,

Bounding over the hills.

She laughed again, picturing Mocker dancing from mountaintop to mountaintop like the Star Rider in the story about the King of the Under-Mountain. She chose a frock of pale rose, held it to her breast. It looked a perfect fit, though she had seen nothing like it before. So short-just knee-length-and of such fine fabric. She remembered a woman saying that Varthlokkur had conjured the clothing from far empires. She laughed a third time, throatily, and shed the black shapeless thing she had worn since arriving.

She stood before the mirror for a moment, admired her reflected nakedness, then scented herself with lilac- lightly, lightly, so just the slightest hint hung about her. She had never trained in a woman's devices, but she had her intuitions.

"Beware, Varthlokkur," she chuckled, studying the clothing. She had seen nothing like it before, but functions seemed apparent. Soon she stood before her mirror again, adjusting her hem. She marveled at how nice she looked in the lewd apparel. Probably not lewd where Varthlokkur had obtained it, she thought. What a strange country that must be.

The hem hung at her knees. The skirt was full, but the rest clung close, accentuating her curves. Bawdy. She knew the people of Fangdred, though hardly prudish, would be shocked by the bareness of her legs, the obvious outthrust of her breasts. Every woman had a smidgeon of a need to be whorish. Ah! She felt so wonderfully optimistic.

But her optimism died as she left her room. Fangdred suddenly rocked on its foundations. Stone groaned against stone. Wind screamed about the castle like cries from the Pit. No, not wind. No wind, not even the

Werewind, made sounds like those. Those were Hell-creatures shrieking, hurling themselves against the fortress. Sorcery! She forgot about vamping Varthlokkur and, terrified, ran for the Wind Tower. Her raven hair streamed behind her, whipped by tongues of air. Frightened people surged through the halls, not a one noticing her dress. Even panicked, she felt disappointment. A woman needs to be noticed when she's behaving naughtily. But everyone else appeared more terrified than she, helter-skelter running nowhere away from the inescapable screaming anger beating at the fortress.

Except that idiot piper. He and she collided where corridors crossed. She could have avoided him had she been paying attention. The fool was playing the dirge from The Wizards of Ilkazar, loudly, perhaps mocking Varthlokkur, and she should have heard him. But fear blocked all sensitivity. The piper didn't exist till she bowled him over.

But he noticed her. With a leer, from the floor, he played an old tavern song, "Lady in A Red Dress." Nepanthe blushed and hurried on. The piping pursued her through the windy halls.

The shaking of the walls, and the pandemonium beyond them, was dying when she burst into Varth-lokkur's workshop.

The wizard stood at the heart of an elaborate multiple pentagram spangled with scores of swimming magical symbols. In the air, based on the sides of a pentagram on the floor, and each sharing sides with two of the others, outward leaning, were five pentagrams traced in blue fire. Above the wizard was a pentagram of red fire, from the sides of which depended five pentagrams in green. These had common sides with the blue below, so that Varthlokkur was completely enclosed by a twelve-faceted jewel of pentagrams. And swimming on the planes of the aerial pentagrams were fiery symbols in silver, gold, violet, and orange. The room was dark except for the light given off by this complex thaumaturgical-topological construct. The symbols in motion blazed when Varthlokkur stroked them with the tip of a short black wand, the room surged and swirled to ebbs and flows of weird color.

Nepanthe stopped a step inside the door. Had she asked her question immediately, all might have come tumbling down. Recovering, she eased the door shut and tiptoed to where the Old Man sat watching, enthralled. She, too, was soon engrossed. This was the first of Varthlokkur's magic she had actually seen. For a moment she felt the Power in her blood yearning toward him, felt the pull of its need for completeness.

The wizard made a magnificent picture there in the heart of his construct, with the varicolored lights teasing over his features. Wand in hand, he seemed a god caressing the stars of his universe.

Unconsciously, wanting to share, Nepanthe touched the Old Man's hand, held it lightly as she had her father's long years past, when frightened or awed. "It's magnificent, isn't it?" She nodded dumbly.

"It's a new thing, something he discovered while waiting for you. Never tried it before. A whole new field of magic is opening here. Amazing." "It's beautiful," she replied. "Uhm."

"But why? What's happened?" The Old Man glanced at her with a smirky smile. "Your husband's cohorts, Ragnarson and bin Yousif, found themselves a couple of wizards crazy enough to attack us. Competent men, Prime Circle, but no match for Varthlokkur. We caught them red-handed after they

killed the Devil's Hawk. Now they're trying to get us before we get them. But they haven't hurt us at all, and I doubt that there's any damage they can do."

She nodded while he spoke, too enthralled by light and color to be annoyed by his smugness. Suddenly, Varthlokkur relaxed and sighed. She leaned forward, excited, again feeling that pull. The wizard tucked his wand under his arm, wiped sweat from his brow with his sleeve, and stepped from the heart of his creation. Symbols swirled as his passage disturbed them.

Nepanthe gasped. Varthlokkur heard her. "No need for alarm," he said tiredly. "It's not your usual pentagram. It's not a protection against devils. You might call it a Power matrix. It concentrates the Power so I can project it. The symbols represent the demons outside. When I touch one I sting a soul..." He paused, rubbed his temples. "I'm tired."

The Old Man withdrew his hand from Nepanthe's. "I'll get something to fresh you up. Why don't you sit down for a while?" He left.

Varthlokkur massaged his temples for a full minute, then turned to the thing he had wrought. "I suppose I'd better get rid of that," he mumbled.

"Please don't," said Nepanthe. "Leave it for a while. It's beautiful. Like watching the universe from outside."

Varthlokkur glanced at it, then eased into the Old Man's chair. "Guess it is. Never thought of it as anything but a tool." He looked at her closely, watching the light patterns dancing on her face. He chuckled. "The dress becomes you. But aren't you a bit early? He won't be here till tomorrow."

Silence stretched. She could think of nothing to say. Moreover, she remembered that pull of a moment earlier and was distressed by the temptation.

He rose, said, "Come here," and took her hand, pulled her from her chair. "Go stand in the center of the pentagram."

Uncertainly, she did as she was directed, positioning herself at the heart of a gleaming gold star whose points lay in the angles of the pentagram on the floor. Varthlokkur spoke a few soft words, touched his wand to a silver symbol. It clung. He moved it to her left ear. She started, controlled the impulse, was surprised when she felt nothing. It had looked hot. Varthlokkur spoke again. The symbol attached itself to her.

He repeated the operation, caught her other ear, then filled her hair. And then he brought her out of his construct, to the mirror (which was just a mirror at the moment) and showed her herself with stars in her hair.

She smiled, said softly, "I feel like a goddess. It's fantastic."

"Fitting. You're my goddess. I'll give you the stars of the night."

Her smile became a frown. She shook her head, more to rid herself of the attraction she felt than as a negative. "I've made my choice. That's the end of it."

"Not quite. Let me show you something. The divination I've mentioned so often. That you've always refused to believe." He had finally realized that he had to offer her something more convincing than his

word as Varthlokkur, The Empire Destroyer.

Eyes wonder-wide and disturbed, Nepanthe followed him to a table. He selected several items and set them out in an order with meaning known only to himself. He began chanting...

The castle groaned. Screams surrounded it. Dust showered from the shaken ceiling. Varthlokkur slammed a fist into a palm as he looked up. He snapped, "I'd thought them sufficiently warned."

Claws of terror seized Nepanthe's soul. "The magick! You've taken it apart!"

"No, don't worry. We've got other defenses that'll hold till I get it fixed. Come over here, please." Back to the pentagrams they went, Nepanthe cooperating because she knew the attack could be as dangerous for her as for her captors. The Old Man arrived running with ale and sandwiches. He relaxed visibly when he saw the defense already under control.

An hour later, Varthlokkur said, "They were more determined this time." From the heart of his creation he touched symbol after symbol. Each wriggled away from the contact. He told Nepanthe, "This causes a great deal of pain for the demons. It breaks their will to attack. But they can't leave us while Visigodred and Zindahjira bind them. We're balanced just now. I break wills about as fast as they recover. I hope the fact that I'm not bothering to turn the demons around on their masters will scare hell out of those two. I hope they'll get to wondering what I'm cooking up instead."

Still another hour later it had become evident that the attack might not break down at all. Said the Old Man, "They may just try to keep it up till Mocker's at the gate."

"Might be what they're thinking. Let me see. Ah, yes. Get me a pair of tongs, please. Big ones. Thank you. Now, something silver and sharp. A needle-ah! The arrow... What?" He grew even more pallid.

All three stared at the arrow dangling beneath Varthlokkur's mobile of bells. Nepanthe saw nothing unusual. It just hung there, swinging slowly back and forth. The Old Man, wearing a puzzled frown, took it down and handed it to Varthlokkur. They didn't discuss whatever it was that had caused their consternation.

Nepanthe moved closer when the wizard seized a symbol with the tongs. The thing squirmed as if it were alive. It tried to escape. Nepanthe touched her ear fearfully.

Varthlokkur noticed. "No, they're like this only inside the pentagrams, when demons are near." With the care of a master tailor, he pushed the point and shaft of the arrow through the struggling thing in the tongs. It stopped wriggling. Its color quickly faded, and in a moment the tongs grasped nothing but naked air. "Good. This shouldn't take too long." And, within half an hour, he had done the same with all the symbols. "Better leave this up," he said when he finished. "They may try again." He made certain a dully glowing symbol was in place in every plane of his structure. "Now, about that divination." Though he was near collapse, he led Nepanthe to the table where his necromantic materials lay ready. Chants flowed across his tongue with the heavy fluidity of quicksilver. His wand danced over the objects. Time passed. A mist formed over the table. Soon things stirred in the mist, and a soft, fluting voice spoke therefrom. Nepanthe, despite herself, found that she couldn't tear her attention away.

Hours may have passed before it was over. And, when it was, Varthlokkur seemed to be as amazed as she. And the Old Man couldn't close his mouth, so stunned was he. Whole new vistas of perfidy and holocaust had opened to his more ancient, less ignorant mind. Varthlokkur had hardly recognized the tip of the iceberg of what must be going on.

After a long silence, Nepanthe asked, "That wasn't what you expected, was it?" Her throat was almost too tight for speech. She was terribly frightened again.

Varthlokkur shook his head slowly. "No, it wasn't. That I didn't expect at all. And yet you see the choices, yours and mine, and how soon they'll be forced upon us." And Nepanthe, who had lived all her life with magic, could no longer disbelieve. There was simply no defying such absolute revelations.

"And I have a choice of my own," said the Old Man. "But mine's already made." His role in the Director's drama remained fluid, and within his own control. "I'll stand by you, Varthlokkur. You'll do the same, Nepanthe, if you've got any sense at all. Destruction is the only alternative." He turned to Varthlokkur, his expression unreadable.

The wizard inclined his head slightly. "Thank you. It's unnecessary, you know. You can still get out."

"There was a slip. We've seen that your divinations were manipulated. That gives us a chance. You're still Varthlokkur, the wizard. / won't run just because you've found the board broader and of a shape different than you thought. You've already decided to fight. I can sense it. Even though you think it's useless. Because you think you owe it to those whom the puppet masters had you destroy. I can do no less. This is my world too." Pretty speech, he thought. Yet following its tenets would allow him to both pursue his private inclinations and what he saw as his greater purpose.

It hung in the balance now, and Nepanthe didn't like it. Futures rested on her shoulders. She had to decide where to fight: beside her husband, or beside Varthlokkur. And, as the wizard had promised, even love dared not influence her judgment. So many futures could fall with the end of the coming battle, a battle she could help win-if she chose Varthlokkur.

She had just realized that Varthlokkur's need wasn't just the love-sexual thing she had recently come to believe-though that was much of it, of course-but also the Power-need she had suspected in the beginning.

States of maybe. The Power would still be marshalled on the opposing side.

Choosing her husband could bring the world crashing down, and those betrayed would number in hundreds of thousands, or millions. The fates of nations were in her hands, more than ever they had been when she had been but a part of the imperialist dreams of Ravenkrak. That weight settled heavily on her soul. Going to a chair, she dropped in, pulled her feet up under her (the short dress permitted it), and put her chin on her fist as she thought.

Varthlokkur paced. His sins of yesteryear were closing in. He strode like a tiger caged, occasionally glancing at Nepanthe. or the nervous bells, wishing he understood her better, wishing he knew more about why his ward-spell carillion had gone insane. He had to have her help. There was nowhere he could run. The bill-collector was coming, and he was the kind who couldn't be evaded.

The Old Man called Varthlokkur aside, whispered, "There's only one choice we dare let her make-even if we can't force it. You've got to influence her somehow. She's a woman. Youth could be a potent bribe. Make yourself young again. See how she reacts. Drop a few hints. I've got the tools here and ready."

Varthlokkur studied Nepanthe. Finally, he nodded. "You're right. It couldn't hurt, bad as things are. Get it ready." He turned, gazed at his great work, his contribution to sorcery, his hope. For a moment he saw the art Nepanthe had seen, the beauty. That would all be dust soon, perhaps, or new weapons for his

enemies. "For the thing I fear comes upon me, and what I dread befalls me," he whispered. Nepanthe glanced up questioningly, smiled weakly, didn't really see him. He turned back to the Old Man.

"Ready?"

Varthlokkur took a deep -breath, shrugged, said, "I suppose."

Her attention attracted by the renewed chanting, Nepanthe turned as silver gray motes enveloped Varthlokkur. Resting her hands on the back of the chair and her chin atop them, enthralled, she listened and watched, and momentarily forgot her dilemma. Then the silver cloud died. And she gasped.

Varthlokkur took a step toward her, hand out. pleading, as young as he had been while calling the earth-marid tollka/ar. Gone were the wrinkles, gray hair, grizzled beard, and the blue-veined skin which had marred the backs of his hands. As she had expected, he looked a great deal like bin Yousif-though his character wasn't written as plainly on his face. Haroun had the look of a tormented, starving wolf.

She shook her head slowly, afraid to believe. The pull she had felt earlier became stronger than ever. "Can I see him? My husband?"

"In a minute," said the Old Man. "Varthlokkur, get some food inside you." He pointed to the long-forgotten supply of sandwiches and wine, then went to the mirror. After a mumbled incantation, it sprang to life-but showed only psychedelic madness.

"I blinded their eyes. Now they've blinded me." Varthlokkur mumbled through a mouthful. "No, wait. Probably my gimmick there. Yes, I think that's it. Interference."

"He'll be here tomorrow," Nepanthe said. "Yes," Varthlokkur replied.

"I don't want to hurt him."She was giving ground. She saw by their expressions that they were aware of it. "Damn! I love him."

"Uhn!" the Old Man grunted. He hoped he wouldn't muff his lines. "Varthlokkur! What you've done to yourself... Could you do it to Nepanthe? Could we put the primary spells on her?"

Varthlokkur's new young features expressed strong curiosity. He said, "She'd never be younger than she is now."

"Maybe not, but that's good enough, isn't it?" Nepanthe was hanging on his words already, certain of their importance though she didn't comprehend. "Nepanthe, if you could return to your husband after all, after supporting us in this thing tonight, and could also serve your destiny with Varthlokkur, would you?" "I don't understand."

"Say yes!" Varthlokkur cried. "I can fix it so you can change back to the age you are now any time you want."

You could live with your husband for the rest of his life, then come back to me. I can wait a few more years. Say you will. I know you want to. Your eyes say so. Oh, the Old Man's given me honey and honeycomb when I thought it had to be one or neither at all." He had become tremendously excited. Then a shadow of uncertainty crossed his face. "But you'd have to surrender completely, right now. You know what we have to do. Otherwise there'll be no future at all. For any of us."

"I know," she replied. Her burden had become a devouring dragon. Every argument before her seemed compellingly attractive, yet equally repulsive. Everywhere she turned she saw opportunities to seize things her soul craved, yet in each chance there existed the prospect of terrible pain for others. "And it's the crudest hurt I could do him. If he found out, it would be like I was driving burning knives into him. But if I don't do it, he won't live long enough to find out how much he could've been hurt. That's terribly cruel, to wound to give life, to betray to save."

"Think of yourself as a surgeon, then," said the Old Man. "Letting blood."

His suggestion didn't help. Nepanthe's sorrow-pain ran ocean deep. Would Mocker ever believe, no matter how true it was, that she had betrayed him because of her love? He would hate her... But he would be alive to hate. Damn! This was a cruel game in which to be a pawn. What she had so feared giving even her husband she must now willingly tender Varthlokkur so that her Power could join and feed his in the coming conflict. If she refused...

Fangdred rattled to its bones. "Damn fools!" the Old Man spat. "They just won't quit! Let me." He stepped into the Power matrix, which was brightly alive once more. With tongs and arrow he savagely banished the congregation of devils raging round the fortress.

Varthlokkur took Nepanthe aside (she shivered at his touch, for she hadn't permitted it in a long time) and ensorceled her so that she could be returned to her present age. That took a long time.

Afterwards, the wizard collapsed into a chair. The Old

Man, in little better shape, prepared draughts of the brew nepanthe. The three refreshed themselves. Revived, Varthlokkur asked, "Nepanthe, would you meet me back here in an hour?" In an oblique way, she realized, she was being asked to prepare herself for what had to be done. Shivering, she nodded. Varthlokkur told the Old Man, "I'll be walking the wall if you need me." He took Nepanthe's arm, walked her to the tower stairs. Behind them, the Old Man began preparing the room for her shame. She didn't look back.

In darkness Varthlokkur strolled Fangdred's wall, staring at the Dragon's Teeth. His young hair whipped in a hot southern wind. He saw neither stars nor mountains, nor did he notice the weather. He was lost in time.

In his past. He had fled back to Ilkazar, to his few warm memories of a woman who had died at the stake. She had been a fine woman, as loving as a mother could be... Each memory was a cherished, carefully tended heirloom. The anger, resentment, and cold determination which had guided him, silently and studiously, through his years with Royal, returned.

Royal had been another good person. He and the old woman: dust, dust; ashes, ashes. He hoped they had reached their peasants' heaven. Both deserved more than the cruelties life had offered them. There was no true justice for the living.

He stirred nervously in the hot wind, finally recognizing it as the Werewind of the Storm Kings. Had it become hot to melt the snow?

His thoughts turned to sorcery and dark eastern schools where he had learned the skills that had warped his soul. Evil schools, festers, cesspools of the knowledge of chaos iron-ruled by dread masters. Yo Hsi's wicked face returned to mind, only to be banished instantly by that of his twin brother, Nu Li Hsi. The Princes Thaumaturge of Shinsan. They were lords of evil virtually worshipped as gods in their respective

domains in Shinsan, deifically secure in the heart of the Dread Empire. Dread Empire Shinsan. It was as wicked as its reputation. The Tervola were emissaries of Darkness... Varthlokkur shuddered at his memories, vague as they were. But he couldn't forget completely, even though he had lost the specifics of what had happened there. The Old Man had asked him the price he had paid for his training. Nothing he tried could bring that back to mind. That frightened him. He was sure the cost had been grim. Of one thing he was absolutely convinced. He hadn't finished paying.

He thought of the future, so narrow now, and recoiled into the past again. The past had been bad, but contained no fear anymore. He lingered over his lonely days as Eldred the Wanderer and his early centuries at Fangdred, his studies, and the decades of research which had given him the matchless Power of the Winterstorm equations. And, finally, he thought of Nepanthe.

Nepanthe. His mind, sooner or later, always returned to her. Four centuries was a long love-and there were ages yet before them. There would be a pause, a wait for that man camped out there somewhere nearby, sleeping beneath that gibbous moon... He had to win this battle! Nepanthe had finally surrendered. He couldn't let that victory be devoured by another defeat, couldn't let heart's desire elude him now.

He turned his back to the wind, returned the way he had come. It was almost time. Maybe she was waiting already. His heart stumbled. He glanced toward the Wind Tower. At last...

He had to hurry. Before anything else, to hedge his bets, he had to teach the Old Man to handle the Winterstorm.

EIGHTEEN: Like a Shadow of All Night Falling

Fear had dissipated Visigodred's intellect. Ragnarson had never seen the man so irritable and unstable, though he had once been present during a battle in Visigodred's interminable feud with Zindahjira. The wizard had remained cool and intelligent then, like a trained soldier maintaining calm in the chaos of battle. "What now, Black Face?" the wizard shouted at the crystal providing communication with Zindahjira. "No, I can't think of anything else! We've already used the best we've got."

Pale, shaking, the old nobleman listened to his equally terrified confederate. Ragnarson, close enough to eavesdrop, heard Zindahjira whiningly repeat his demand that Visigodred think of something. That, too, was strange. Zindahjira was given to bluster and thunder, not this craven whimpering.

The mercenary was badly distressed himself, although he wasn't yet panicky. He had retained the presence of mind to tell Elana to get ready to sneak out.

"Bragi!" He turned to the whisper. Elana had come back. Their gear must be packed, their horses ready. He slowly left the wizard...

The leopard's growl, as it moved to block his path, was murderous, the chatter of the sword-wielding monkey wrathful. He considered clearing his way by blade -till Tooth joined her mate.

"Billy's hell on rats," said Visigodred. "Weren't deserting the ship, were you? Only fair that you go down with it. It's yours."

Turran heaved the trap open, seized the bundle beneath. From outside the cottage, his brothers called him to hurry. Their horses pranced nervously, sensing their masters' dread. Marco, contrary to his wont, remained stone silent. Turran hefted the Horn, ran-and tripped as he rushed through the door. His burden

fell, bounced, came unwrapped...

The four Storm Kings stared with open mouths, stunned at a block of wood which had been carved and stained to resemble the Windmjirnerhorn...

Haroun bin Yousif was lost in darkness, with Hell on his trail. Zindahjira, having failed to find salvation in Visigodred, bellowed and shrieked behind him, blaming him, cursing him with a fearful wrath. And he had made the mistake of thinking he remembered the way out of the sorcerer's cavern maze. But the cave mouth he could not find-and the vengeful Zindahjira, denied any other outlet for his fear, was drawing ever nearer...

The man was tired. To the roots of his hair and the marrow of his bones, he was tired. He had pushed himself beyond all reasonable endurance. Even his fingernails hurt, or so he would have claimed if asked. A hot wind helped not at all, stealing the moisture of his body as it did.

He shed his battered pack, knelt, leaned on his unstrung bow, stared up the shadowed mountain before him, haloed by the moon behind it. This was it. The last one. El Kabar. Were they waiting up there, knowing he was trying to steal a march by not stopping for the night? Had Bragi and Haroun, almost certainly at work somewhere with magicians (what other explanation for his improbable survival?), as he had planned, managed to shield him from Varthlokkur's eyes? Too late to wonder. His road ran but one direction and he had to accept the destiny waiting at its end. Though it was short now, it had been a long and harrowing road. Itaskia seemed as many centuries as miles behind. He had spent ages with weariness, hunger, and the miseries of rain, snow, and frostbite as his traveling companions, while constantly running at the stirrup of Death. Ravenkrak and the woman he had wed there seemed as remote as the dawn of time.

He was no longer a heavy man. The Dragon's Teeth, hunger, and emotional upheaval, all had gnawed at his flesh like ghouls. Skin hung in folds beneath his chin, about his waist, where fat had all too rapidly vanished... He shook off the siren call to sleep, ran a hand through his grimy hair, did a few fast jumping jacks to get his blood moving, then knelt and went through his pack, selecting things he might need. The pack he hid among boulders, then strung his bow, set an arrow to its string, made certain his knife and sword were loose in their scabbards. He started the last long league.

He was still an angry man. Months had rattled slowly by, lonely, dry, skeletons of days, since Varthlokkur had taken his wife, yet neither his anger nor his determination had waned. One more hour, he thought, or maybe two, and there would be a reckoning. Curse words and Varthlokkur's name died at his lips in the wind. He was a stubborn man.

The wind made him nervous and thirsty; nervous because it was unnatural, thirsty because he was sweating profusely. He eyed the stream foaming near the path, water from snow melting in the warmth. Dared he drink? No. Since meeting the assassin he had allowed himself no relaxation. Here at the enemy's gate he couldn't permit himself even this small lapse. Briefly, he wondered if Varthlokkur were toying with him, if he had been allowed to escape assassin and bird to meet a grimmer fate later. Maybe he would be permitted a glimpse of his goal before being cut down. Sorcerers were notorious for their subtle cruelties.

His mood grew darker with time. Once again his weariness, abetted by fear, tempted him to sleep before the final plunge. He fought free, wanting immediate death or victory. He searched the darkness for a hint of trap, then cursed softly as a rock cut through his ragged boot and scored his heel. He felt little pain, but did sense the moist stickiness of oozing blood.

El Kabar loomed as naked as a newborn babe, as silent as death. It revealed traces of silver as the moon eased from behind it. The wind murmured "doom!" while chasing through knifish rocks, carrying with it scents of land long buried by snow. Urged to ever-increasing caution, he picked a shadow upslope, dashed into it, knelt to catch his breath and wish for thicker air. This was nothing a man should breathe. He hoped there would be no prolonged fighting.

His hair fell across his eyes. Bad, if that happened at a critical moment. He tied it back with a strip torn from his ragged coat, stroked his spotty beard, wished he had time to shave. Nepanthe wouldn't be impressed by his appearance.

The roundness and brownness of his face had remained unchanged by hardship, though it had become a bit more leathery. He seemed a shag-encircled henna moon arising as he peeped over a boulder. Bow ready, he ran to another shadow.

He felt terribly foolish by the time he reached the thousand feet of stairs. All his caution had gone for nothing. There he paused to hyper-ventilate in hopes that he would make the top prepared to fight. In vain. He was still compelled to make frequent stops.

The south wind rose and moaned softly, then died. Its masters had forgotten it hours before, and the Werewind couldn't sustain itself for long. As it faded Mocker first sighted Fangdred, though crenellated ramparts and the turret of the Wind Tower were all he saw. Neither defender nor banner stood limned above the battlements.

Silence. The castle seemed crouched, waiting, a sphinx about to spring.

Of their own accord, it seemed, his feet resumed moving, carrying him toward his fate. Soon he slung his bow, drew his sword. He felt more comfortable with that old friend in hand.

Surely Varthlokkur must be aware of his approach...

His thoughts turned to Nepanthe, to her face, her dark eyes, the way she quivered when he held her. And his anger grew. What cruelties, what indignities had she been forced to endure here?

Collapse seemed inevitable-then he topped the stairs. Sheer willpower took him into the blackness at the foot of the castle wall. There he dropped to his knees, panting, leaning one shoulder against cold stone. Weariness ground his spirit, again tried to tempt him into sleep. He fought it. The fire in his lungs slowly died. He glanced up, southward, across moonlit mountains rolling away like mighty waves... Aptly named, he thought. Fangs hungry for the blood of man. But enough. He was ready. He swatted the string of spittle dangling from his lower lip, reached inside his coat.

Precious as pearl was the brandy flask he brought forth, a treasure he had hoarded since fleeing Itaskia. He spat, teased himself with thought of its fiery taste... Enough! Now. He downed it in a single lengthy draught. A long burning shaft drove toward his stomach. He coughed, gasped, rose.

His heart hammered, his veins burned. He remembered holding a frightened thrush as a child, remembered the light, warm flutter of its heartbeat against his fingers. He had tossed the bird high to its freedom... What a strange thing to remember at an enemy's gate. He crept forward, sword probing the darkness, found the gate open! Trap! cracked across his consciousness. How like the open-doored device that had taken the thrush. At least he knew, he thought, what he was walking into. Gripping his weapon so tightly that his hand hurt, he stepped through...

And nothing happened. He looked around in bafflement. He had expected anything but this. Varthlokkur himself waiting, a blast of fire, a demon, anything. But he had encountered absolutely nothing. Fangdred lay silent, to all appearances deserted. Evil thought. What if the wizard had moved on, taking Nepanthe with him, laughing behind his hand? A possibility, it seemed, but first he must explore.

He found light, and people, almost immediately, but again, anything but what he expected. The lights he spied first. They led him to Fangdred's common hall, where... where he found a baffling tableau. Servants stood as if frozen (whatever had happened, it had occurred recently, because the fires still burned high in the fireplaces), not reacting even when, once he found the nerve, he clapped his hands, pinched, and prodded. He felt no heartbeat when he tested a pulse. He heard no breathing even when only inches from a face. Yet, surely, they weren't dead. Their warmth remained, and their color. Fearful strange.

He carefully backed from the hall, blade ready, expecting a momentary return of life and a resounding alarm. But they did nothing, nor did the several living statues he encountered thereafter. The sorcery completely blanketed the castle.

He had almost convinced himself that this was Ragnarson's and bin Yousifs work when he heard soft laughter down a dark corridor. His imagination invested it with depthless evil. Moving closer, he heard a voice talking to itself in a liquid, unfamiliar tongue. He had seen many lands and learned many languages, and was disturbed by this unknown. But he shrugged it off after a moment. The speaker wasn't Varthlokkur, whom he had met once, briefly, on the day the wizard had hired him. He went on, searching.

Chance brought him to the tower stair. He went up with little thought to his line of retreat. (Throughout his approach to Fangdred he had uncharacteristically ignored his avenues of withdrawal, perhaps because subconsciously he knew he'd get no chance to run.) A tall tower it was, taller than it had seemed from outside the castle. But finally he came to a landing.

Wan light, in changing pastel shades, slipped round the edges of a door standing slightly ajar. There was a quality, a smell about the place, which evoked memories of the Storm Kings' sorcery chamber beneath Ravenkrak. Here, he sensed immediately, he would find his wizard. Ear to stone, he listened, heard little.

Wait! Was that labored breathing?

How should he enter? In a burst, hoping for surprise? Suppose the door was booby-trapped? Yet if he went in carefully the wizard might have time to defend himself. He decided on full speed and prayed that the wizard felt secure in his own den.

The door swung easily inward. He burst through following mighty figure-eight sword strokes, his gaze sweeping the chamber. There were no defenses.

A young man's face, red and damp, rose from furs piled-high beneath a large mirror. His questioning expression quickly changed to one of horror. Pleasure lightened through Mocker. Though Varthlokkur had changed, he still recognized the man. He altered the direction of his charge, raising his sword for a punishing overhand stroke.

A second face rose from the furs. Dread swept across it.

And the fight deserted Mocker. "Nepanthe!" he screamed. He became a stunned, limp thing moving on impetus alone, his sword arm wilting, his unsteady steps betraying the sudden return of his weariness. He no longer saw, did not want to see, the shame so obvious before him. Wearing the horns already...

Nepanthe and Varthlokkur both babbled explanations, she pleadingly, he in a voice of infuriatingly calm reason. Mocker dropped into a chair, shut them both out. Mad thoughts, and questions... Had he come so far, through so much, for such a bleak reward? He heard, again from afar, the earlier evil laughter. Taunting him? Truly, Varthlokkur had played wickedly. The clincher, now, would have to be an auto-da-fe, death by his own hand, to make the mockery complete.

His hatred flared. Varthlokkur's centuries of madness must end tonight! He leapt from the chair, refreshed by his hatred. He wheeled on the couple as they gathered their clothing. He moved in slowly, the tip of his sword drifting toward Varthlokkur's chest. This should be slow, agonizing, the deserved thrust through the bowels, but he would make it the heart. Not out of consideration, though. Gut wounds, tended by a life-magician of the Old Man's skill, might heal...

The evil laughter came from the doorway as he thrust, as he stared into Varthlokkur's wide, unfearing eyes. The wizard's face was filled with another emotion entirely. Sadness, perhaps?

It was a bad thrust, disturbed as it was by that laughter, but Mocker knew it would be fatal in the long run. Varthlokkur would take a little while dying, that was all-if the Old Man could be kept away.

Nepanthe screamed.

Mocker turned to see what new factor had to be considered.

An old man, surely the fabled Old Man of the Mountain, stood just within the door. He seemed stricken. Behind him stood someone else, clad all in black and cowed so deeply that his face remained invisible.

"Yo Hsi," Varthlokkur gasped. "You're a bit earlier than we expected."

The dark one jerked slightly, as if startled.

Mocker was startled. That name-like an ill wind, long ago, he had heard it come whispering down from the borderland mountains above Matayanga, wrapped in tales of horror and evil. It was the name of one of the Princes Thaumaturge, one of the two dread lords of Shinsan.

So this was why Varthlokkur had been unconcerned with his own approach. A small fish indeed was he beside this grim destroyer. Could Bragi and Haroun have possibly hired?... But no. Yo Hsi mastered half an empire. He would be no man's hireling. There must be a depth to recent events that he had never suspected. He glanced at Varthlokkur's complex magical construct. Was that elegant device fated to play a part in this drama?

"The curse of the Golmune pollutes even its bastard blood," said Yo Hsi. His laughter filled the room.

The Golmune had been the ruling family of Ilkazar.

"What?" Varthlokkur demanded. He was weakening.

Mocker examined faces quickly. Nepanthe's eyes still sought his own, pleadingly. Varthlokkur stared at Yo Hsi, obviously more distressed by the easterner's presence than by his own approaching death.

The Old Man stood still as stone, expression agonized. But his stillness wasn't the uncanny frozenness of the servants below. His eyes remained in motion. To him Yo Hsi was an enigma, an unfathomable black

hole in the fabric of the situation. His would be the direction to strike. Mocker was but a man with a sword.

"Vilis slew his father, Valis, by poison, for the crown, as ever it had been with the Imperial succession. Vilis took a mistress. On her he fathered a son she called Ethrian, after the philosopher. A time came when Imperial political pressures made disavowal of the son necessary. The mistress had become a liability in other affairs. Conveniently, a witchcraft charge was tendered by an intimate of the King."

"No!" Varthlokkur gasped. And yet, from his expression, Mocker saw that he wasn't surprised. There was nothing sudden about the guilt in the wizard's face.

"The woman was burned. Her possessions reverted to the Crown. The son disappeared. Years later he reappeared, to waste Ilkazar, to destroy his father in the family tradition. I was pleased." Yo Hsi laughed that evil laughter.

"Later, there came another Ethrian, born of a serving woman but with the Imperial blood, who was spirited off in revenge by a castle fool, under my protection. In time the child became a wanderer, a thief, an actor."

Mocker's gaze locked with Varthlokkur's. Not possible, he thought. Yet, if the wizard had suspected even a little, some of his strange reluctances would be answered.

"Tonight the father again dies by the hand of the son."

"Why?" The Old Man spoke for the first time.

"The curse of Sebil el Selib. And even now the woman carries in her womb the son that will be the death of this one." Laughter.

Nepanthe whimpered, looked to her husband, nodded slightly. She might indeed. She thought that she had conceived that wedding night on the Candareen.

"Not that," snapped the Old Man, his normal testiness returning. "Why are you here? Why have you, for centuries, fed false divinations to my friend?"

"You know that, do you?" Yo Hsi didn't seem pleased.

"Yes. An answer, if you please. You've offered nothing but nonsense and laughter since appearing." He didn't believe this encounter to be part of the Director's plan. The scripts had never thrust him into such deadly peril.

"A game? An old contest. A war, a struggle." Yo Hsi gestured sweepingly. For a moment the Old Man was puzzled. Then he identified the wrongness. The Prince Thaumaturge, called the Demon Prince in his home domain, was missing a hand. "My brother and I have been using the West as a board on which to play for mastery of Shinsan," said Yo Hsi. "Warfare and thaumaturgic dispute have proven pointless on our home grounds. We're too evenly matched. Yet one of us must be master. An empire divided against itself can't grow. The way to shift the balance of power may exist somewhere out here, where there're so many unknowns and unpredictables. Here one of us might find the knowledge or weapon to seize the day. So here we do battle, each to grab first or to deny the other.

"Varthlokkur was once my agent, once my most important tool, for which I made him powerful. My

Tervola trained him well. He began his service elegantly, by shattering the single power capable of keeping Nu Li Hsi and myself from using the West-the wizards of Ilkazar. And he demolished the Empire itself, a state with such iron control that nothing could be accomplished here while it endured. But he stopped with that. He ceased returning knowledge to me. Eventually, he hid himself here. I sent divinations meant to get him back in harness, but Nu Li Hsi interfered, subtly twisting them to his own ends. Varthlokkur continued to do nothing. In time I became angry. My Tervola have advised me to come west myself, to punish him for not fulfilling the contract he made with me. I have come, though, too late. Centuries too late. I see that Varthlokkur had forgotten that contract till just now."

"I cheated you," Varthlokkur gasped. "As you would've cheated me. I made that bargain knowing Nu Li Hsi would cleanse from my mind anything that didn't suit him. And now I've cheated you again," he declared, his words scarcely audible. "You destroyed my soul in Shinsan. Your machinations have robbed me of love, cursed me with the hatred of an unknown son, and killed me. But I've done the impossible. I've repaid my debt to Ilkazar. I've defied Yo Hsi, and won. Nu Li Hsi has won, and thus I fulfill one promise made in Shinsan, to the lesser of a pair of evils." He laughed weakly. "His Tervola taught me too, Yo Hsi."

"You're wrong," the easterner replied, but with little of his earlier certitude. "I win. I've found my victory. In this old man lies knowledge forgotten by all but himself and the Star Rider. Knowledge the like of which you can't even imagine. From him I will milk the weapons of a new, invincible arsenal." To the Old Man, "I've found you out. I know what you are. From now on you have a new master."

With a croaking chuckle, Varthlokkur died. His face seemed beatific. In his own mind, at least, he had redeemed himself.

Still stunned by the revelation of his paternity, Mocker stared down at that man younger than he, whose head lay cradled in Nepanthe's naked lap. Her eyes still pleaded forgiveness. His anger and hatred surged up again, but now they were directed elsewhere. In a fluid, lightning motion he threw himself at Yo Hsi. For an instant he saw startled, cadaverous features within the sorcerer's cowl- then something seized him, hurled him aside, turned him round, round, round. Colors whirled, mixed. He struck confusedly. A scream was his reward. He laughed insanely, was joined by Yo Hsi in his laughter.

Sense returned and, in horror, he stared down at the tiny line of redness where his blade had penetrated Nepanthe's chest inward of her left breast. And still she prayed with her eyes. And Yo Hsi kept on laughing. The madness returned. He flung himself at the easterner again.

Followed a clown's dance, futile as tilting at windmills. Nothing could reach the sorcerer. But the madness wouldn't set him free. Finally, apparently forgetting his earlier oracle (now, with Nepanthe's imminent demise, in doubt), Yo Hsi drew a bronze dagger, plunged it into Mocker's chest.

He fell slowly, his sanity returning, his eyes turning accusingly toward Nepanthe. So long, so far, for this. Briefly, he wondered if Varthlokkur were truly his father, and if he had judged Nepanthe wrongly. Then darkness closed in.

The Old Man, during Mocker's flailing at Yo Hsi, saw the opportunity he had been awaiting. He strode briskly across the chamber, seized Varthlokkur's wand, stepped into the heart of his friend's creation. Before the sham battle reached its inevitable climax, he had completed Varthlokkur's work.

"Come along," said Yo Hsi, when finished. "You have things to tell me. Dawn-time things. Secrets known only to yourself and the Star Rider."

"I have nothing to tell you save this: you're doomed. As he promised."

Laughter. "You're presumptuous. That'll change. My torturers have a way with wills."

"But they'll never see me. You won't leave this room. Varthlokkur told you that he had prepared for you. He was right when he said that you'd lost."

"He had no magic. Great he was, yes, but distracted. My Tervola and I have leeches his power for months. Tonight he couldn't control the weakest ghost. Come."

"Take me."

Irritated, Yo Hsi started toward the Old Man. After three steps, however, he encountered an impassable barrier.

"Varthlokkur may have lost his ability to fight you, but his researches gave him a means to contain you. This thing surrounding me draws on new sources of Power. No agency, no man alive, can free you now. Not even he whom you call my master. You can sustain yourself by your arts, but to the world you're dead. Your powers have been jailed. You'll never leave that cage alive, nor will your magicks. I only wish that Varthlokkur hadn't been distracted by the woman. He might have lived to see his greatest moment, the fall of the evil that made him. That would've finally soothed his torment."

Yo Hsi tried his cage with physical strength and magic. Intolerable fires burned therein. Shadows fought. But nothing yielded. So he tried bargaining.

"You're old, Yo Hsi, and cunning," the Old Man retorted after hearing mighty promises. "But I'm older. Only the Director could sway me now. So let it be. Go gracefully, silently. Or else..." He stroked a symbol in the plane of a pentagram, suspiciously liverish in shape. Yo Hsi groaned, clutched himself. "I have my tortures too, and my magic can pass the cage's walls."

"Go gracefully? No! I'll have something." Yo Hsi's good hand flashed out like the strike of a snake. Taking advantage of the cage's only weakness, that of passing inorganic matter, a dart, poisoned, shot from an apparatus attached to his wrist.

The Old Man dodged, but not quickly enough. He gasped, held his wound, presently staggered, fell slowly to his knees. He smiled once, mockingly, at Yo Hsi, then again, happily, at something invisible. "So long you've waited, Dark Lady." He toppled onto his face, half in, half out of Varthlokkur's magical structure.

Yo Hsi raged from wall to wall of his cage once more, blasting it with the most potent eastern magic, but there were, as he already knew, no exits.

NINETEEN: A March of a Domain of Shadows

"Varthlokkur?" Napanthe reached for his hand. She peered dazedly about the room. Yo Hsi stood stiffly silent a dozen feet away. The chamber was quiet. Nothing moved but the symbols in Varthlokkur's device. "What happened?"

There was a sound. Yo Hsi turned. In the door stood a shadowy someone who might have been the easterner's twin. "Nu Li Hsi." The shadow was his twin. Long ago, they had murdered their father, Tuan Hoa, for his throne, and had brought the Dread Empire to its present schizophrenic state.

The newcomer bowed slightly. "You've slain them all?" Varthlokkur stirred, groggily sat up beside Nepanthe. He didn't say anything.

"As you can see," said Yo Hsi. "We still have a draw."

"Even my Ethrian?" Nu Li Hsi, who was called the

Dragon Prince, took a step into the room, peered about warily. "There's something strange here. Something not quite right."

"The Old Man must've closed the cage for me," Varthlokkur grunted.

"You probably sense that." Yo Hsi indicated Varthlokkur's Winterstorm construct. "It's something new."

"Ah. No doubt." Nu Li Hsi regarded the Winterstorm with an, obvious professional admiration. He stepped closer.

"He doesn't know." Varthlokkur crowed. "Yo Hsi just might lure him in."

Yo Hsi stiffened momentarily. Varthlokkur could almost read his thoughts. Could something organic pass from outside the cage in? He couldn't let Shinsan go to his brother by default. He struck an exaggeratedly relaxed pose.

And Nu Li Hsi entered the cage, pausing only momentarily to bat the air before his face, as if brushing off a gnat.

"And I prayed that I could trap just one of them," Varthlokkur said. His face became beatific. "Haifa world liberated in minutes." He snapped his fingers. "That simply."

The wizard was kidding himself. He knew better. The Princes Thaumaturge would be replaced. The Dread Empire would endure. Impatient heirs already awaited the intercession of Fate.

Mad laughter assaulted the air. "It's the end, brother. You're doomed." Less maniacally, "We're doomed. It agonized me to think that I had to leave the Empire in your filthy hands."

"What the hell are you raving about? I'd heard rumors that you were losing your mind."

"It's a trap. Our pupil has undone his teachers. We can't leave." He laughed crazily again. "He's turned the tables on us, dear brqther."

Frowning, Nu Li Hsi tried going to the Winterstorm.

Something barred his way.

Nervously, he retreated toward the door.

Again, something stopped him.

Panicking, Nu Li Hsi made a thunderous trial of the cage's walls. Without effect.

Like animals, the brother-princes hurtled at one another, each shrieking out half a millennium's frustration. They fought with sorcery, blades of bronze, hands, feet, and teeth. All to no conclusion. Each retained his unbreachable defenses, his superb reflexes and combat skills.

They might enjoy one another's company forever.

Varthlokkur rose, approached the trap.

"Don't get too close," Nepanthe warned. "They'd love it if they could get you in there with them."

"Don't worry. I'll look out. Though they couldn't hurt me now. They'd have to be able to see and touch me first. Look there." He pointed.

She looked. And screamed.

"That's us? We're dead?" Nepanthe and Varthlokkur corpses lay in bloody, tumbled, sweat-wet furs. "I don't want to die!" Hysteria effervesced from the edges of her voice.

Varthlokkur pulled her toward him, tried to comfort her. But he was frightened, too, and she sensed it. She wanted to run, run, run, as badly as she had on that next-to-last night on the Candareen. But from this there was no escape. The swordstroke had fallen already.

How had she come to this? What evil Fate?... She stared at her corpse, morbidly fascinated. Her death-wound was scarcely visible, tricking the tiniest line of scarlet across one breast.

"What happens now?" She wasn't religious, and had never truly believed that death was something that could happen to her.

"We wait. Don't worry. Everything will be all right." But his quavering voice betrayed his lack of confidence.

"You're all right after all?" The Old Man had risen, was coming toward them. He sounded puzzled. His ashen face was frozen in startled ecstasy. That expression quickly transmogrified into confusion.

"All right?" Nepanthe responded to her panic. Feeling foolish, yet unable to stop herself, she snapped, "Wonderful. For a corpse."

The Old Man retreated before her intensity.

"Calm down," Varthlokkur pleaded. "Varth..." At that moment, when most people would have needed someone to hold and comfort them, all she wanted was to be left alone. She tried to explain. "It's just the way I am. It's the same when I'm sick, or have a headache."

"Nepanthe, we've got to face this together." He couldn't say / need you. "Picture waiting alone."

"Waiting?" the Old Man asked. He was more perplexed than ever. "Waiting for what? What's happening?"

"You don't remember?" The wizard pointed. The Old Man turned. He stared at his corpse. His eyes widened as the truth gradually dawned.

"Son of a bitch. After so long." He went to his clay, carefully avoiding the cage, and stared into his own dead face. Gently, he touched his body's cheek, ran fingertips over its ecstatic smile. "She came lovingly... Those two... Who's the other one? Are they trapped? Alive?" "Yes. Both of the Dread Empire's tyrants, caged in one fell passage of the shuttle across the loom of the Fates." The Old Man's expression called the price too dear. But when he spoke, he said, "This may cause more rejoicing than your destruction of Ilkazar. Maybe there'll be a holiday in our memory." That he said sourly. Transitory facial expressions reflected the war going on within him, the struggle which had driven him both to seek immortality and to long for the peace of death.

Nepanthe started crying. Everything had happened too quickly, unexpectedly, shockingly, for her to understand. And she still bore her gigantic burden of guilt. She looked at Mocker, who hadn't yet stirred. There lay the father of her son... The child who, now, would never be born. How could she explain? How could she make him understand that she had tried to buy his life?

How could she obtain his forgiveness? That she had to have, or her shame would be unbearable.

Varthlokkur drew her to him again, offering comfort. This time she entered his arms, drawing support from his embrace.

"So. Even death does not end high treachery."

Nepanthe and Varthlokkur jerked apart. Mocker faced them, hands on hips, lips snarled back over clenched teeth. His dark face had grown darker with rage. He had arisen suddenly, had assessed his situation, and apparently had accepted his own destruction.

Nepanthe forgot her death-terror as shame, and fear of and for her husband engulfed her.

"What is trouble?" Mocker asked. "Would simpleton self, being noted fool, easily manipulated by adultress wife, harm single hair on head of same? Woe! Am stricken to depth of depthless cretinic soul by very thought."

His remarks only made Nepanthe feel all the more the harlot.

"Who did the killing?" Varthlokkur demanded. "It was a matter of destiny," he tried to explain.

Mocker wouldn't listen. Nepanthe suspected that, though intellectually aware, he hadn't yet made an emotional accommodation to the despair of his situation, that the full, absolute truth hadn't yet dawned on him.

Humming, an elderly man, bent as if by the burden of millennia, entered the room. He skirted the invisible cage deftly, deposited a heavy bundle atop the table.

An absolute silence descended upon the room.

The easterners watched him hungrily, their eyes burning with the passion of wolves' when catching sudden sight of unexpected, especially delicious prey. Both quickly babbled pleas for aid.

The elderly visitor squinted, chuckled, glanced at the four corpses, nodded to himself, returned to his bundle.

"The Star Rider," Varthlokkur murmured. He was awed and surprised. "Of all people, why did he turn

up here?"

His question had occurred to everyone else. The easterners, having recognized the interloper, had fallen into a tense silence.

The Old Man muttered, "There is, after all, someone older and more cunning than I am." There was something in his tone that made Varthlokkur glance his way suspiciously.

The elderly gentleman spoke to his Horn. A flash blinded everyone watching. When sight returned, two tall, steely suits of baroque armor flanked the Star Rider. "His living statues," Varthlokkur said softly. There was a place of mystery east of the Mountains of M'Hand, near the Seydar Sea, called The Place of A Thousand Iron Statues. It was believed to have been created by the Star Rider as a place of refuge, a place where his secrets would remain inviolate. No sorcerer yet had been able to fathom the magic animating the living statues guarding The Place's secret heart.

"The bodies," said the Star Rider. "Lay them out here." He indicated the floor immediately before him. Working swiftly, the dark things moved the corpses. Then they moved back against a wall, becoming as motionless as dead metal.

"What's he doing?" Nepanthe asked. The Old Man and Mocker moved closer to her and Varthlokkur. They eyed one another warily.

"I think he's going to try to recall us," the Old Man replied. Hope had exploded into his voice. He eyed them uncertainly. "But why?"

Yo Hsi and Nu Li Hsi reached the same conclusion. "Forget the dead!" they demanded. "Take care of the living."

"Free us," Nu Lu Hsi concluded. The Star Rider murmured to his Horn, setting spells on each of the corpses before paying the slightest heed to the brothers. Finally, squinting, he faced them. "You know who I am? What I am? What you are to me? And you still want my help?" To his Horn, "They're greed and wickedness."

Greed and wickedness. Modern legend said that for twice the age of the Old Man this strange being had walked the earth, appearing randomly. No one knew the why of his name, nor his purpose, but it was certain that each of his appearances omened a startling shift in the course of history. Another of his names was Old Meddler. Who was he? Where had he sprung from? And why did he tamper?

The theory currently favored by the scholars of Hellin Daimiel was that he was a tool of Right, or Justice. The known historical indicators pointed that way.

He chose that role now, teasing the two dread easterners, whose crimes had been old when Ilkazar was young, into asking for justice. He taunted, questioned, played their fears, maneuvered them into making the plea.

"Justice?" he cackled gleefully. "Then justice I'll give you!"

His hand twitched. The suits of armor stepped forward. He tapped one, pointed. It strode into the trap, seized a startled Yo Hsi. In a workmanlike manner, despite the hideous defenses and sorceries at the Demon Prince's command, the living statue slowly strangled its victim. An unstriving Yo Hsi appeared on the level of reality in which Mocker, Nepanthe, Varthlokkur, and the Old Man already existed. He soon

recovered from his death-shock and tried his prison again. Again he had no success.

Meanwhile, the metal thing turned on Nu Li Hsi. The Dragon Prince fled round the trap like a rat caught in a box with a terrier.

No escape did he find. Nor did his command of the Power avail him. The metal monster shrugged off his attacks, caught him, strangled him, contemptuously tossed him aside.

Nepanthe watched unhappily, but wasn't greatly distressed. All emotion paled in this shadowland palatinate to final death.

Flash.

The iron men were no more.

"It left the cage!" said Varthlokkur. "Nothing can do that."

"No? Something can," the Old Man countered. "Things without life. Things immune to sorcery." He eyed the Star Rider, wearing an expression suggesting that he and the interloper shared secrets.

The Star Rider looked back. "I'll have to hurry. There's not much time." He turned to his Horn, murmured.

Mysterious devices appeared. These he quickly attached to the corpses over the vital organs. In a rush, then, he summoned an object resembling a massive, ornate coffin.

"I see what he's up to," the Old Man said excitedly. "Nobody's done it in ages. Full resurrection. A lost art. Only he and I, today, could manage, and I never had the tools. It's the box that's important. Everything else is gimcrackery meant to preserve the vitals." His excitement collapsed into gloom. "But he won't have time to revive all of us. Even he can't do much to slow brain deterioration."

"Quiet!" Mocker rumbled.

Nepanthe whirled. "Don't you talk..." Her rebuke died. The Old Man wasn't his target. He glared at the shades of the easterners. They had begun carping at one another again.

Her gaze traveled on, to her corpse, and she became aware of its nudity. "Cover me, please."

Varthlokkur, chuckling, said, "He can't hear you. Not that it would make any difference." He indicated her ghost-being, and those of the others. Each was mother-naked.

"But he looked at me. Or I could do it myself." She felt foolish, worrying about modesty now.

"A guess, facing our way. He knows we're here, but not where we are. Nor can you move material things. Best get used to being naked."

"Fitting," Mocker grumbled. "Shame of whore-wife made evident to all eyes."

"Be careful," Varthlokkur said angrily.

"Time," the Old Man interjected. "He's working too slow. He can't possibly save us all." A touch of

hysterical hope rode his voice as he added, "He'll get me, though. He owes me. I saved his life once."

"Smug millenarian!" Mocker snapped. His situation had begun to disturb him at last.

His testiness, further upset Nepanthe. "It's silly for us to fight now. So stop."

"Silence, shame of imbecilic believer in anythings!" His self-righteousness was thick enough to cut.

Nepanthe's spirit, the fire her brothers had wanted quenched, flared. She advanced on Mocker like a stalking medusa. He retreated, retreated till, suddenly, he found himself cornered.

Forcing his attention, with a white-hot intensity, she told him everything that had occurred during their separation. "Listen!" she snarled, whenever he tried to interrupt, and, "Look at me!" when his gaze wandered. She finished with, "And that's the absolute truth."

He remained dubious, but found himself inclined to withdraw judgment. "Time will demonstrate verity of same. Or no." Then, startling her with a sudden change of tack, "Is sorcerer truly father of self?"

"He seems convinced."

"Truth told, wife of self is with child? Child of self?"

"Yes. Your baby." She turned to watch the Star Rider, as much to mask her emotions as to watch him struggle to hoist a corpse into his life-giving coffin.

She suffered a surge of panic. What about the baby?

She had to live. So the child could be saved. She rushed round the cage so she could see who had been chosen.

Varthlokkur.

For a moment she hated him with a depth that astounded the rational part of her. She should go first. For the child's sake.

Her own mind mocked her. She wasn't worried about the baby. She just didn't want to die.

Varthlokkur's body flopped into the coffin. The Star Rider slammed its lid, growled at his Horn. As always, he did so in a language nobody understood. The Horn whistled. The coffin began humming.

Nepanthe ran at the Star Rider, shrieked, "Me first, you idiot! Me!" She pounded at him with the heels of her fists. He waved a hand before his face as if to brush away spiderwebs.

Mocker laughed. "More cosmic justice. Wicked woman forgotten. Likewise, self-important old geezer. Am much pleased. Am ecstatic, Star Rider."

"Shut up!" Nepanthe screamed. "Somebody make him shut up. Our son..."

"But is hilarious, Dear Heart, Diamond Eyes. On Candareen, after big wedding, new wife promised to follow fog-headed husband to gates of Hell. Might do same now, maybeso."

Even before he finished he was sorry that vindictive-ness had mastered his tongue again. He realized, intellectually, that his fear was taking creeping control of his emotions, his responses.

He couldn't push it back.

Varthlokkur wandered dazedly. His body was calling him back. Struggling to keep control, he paused by Nepanthe long enough to whisper, "Remember your promises once we've been returned to life."

Nepanthe nodded. How much pain would loving two men bring? Boundless, she feared.

It had seemed so elementary before Mocker's arrival.

Varthlokkur rambled toward the coffin, and there mumbled a childhood prayer.

The Star Rider was a slow old man no longer. He knelt among the corpses, swiftly manipulating the devices meant to preserve.

Mocker, yielding to his fear completely, harassed Varthlokkur mercilessly. "Old Devil, Death of Ilkazar, show decency for once. Do right instead of evil..."

The Old Man, too, succumbed to emotion, though he directed his bitterness at the Star Rider. "Ingrate," he said softly. "Have you forgotten Nawami? Who kept you from the tortures of the Odite?"

This Shadowland, Nepanthe reflected, though cooling the gentler emotions, certainly nurtured selfishness. Being dead, with time to anticipate a deeper death ahead, unleashed the black hounds of the soul.

A sudden thought startled Nepanthe. Maybe this was a trial period and otie's behavior during the waiting determined a final reward.

She was redeemed from terrifying speculations by a sudden stillness.

Varthlokkur had vanished.

The Star Rider opened the coffin.

The wizard was breathing shallowly. A rosiness had returned to his skin, which twitched and jerked. No blood leaked from his wound.

The Star Rider spoke, using a spell of healing which the Old Man recognized. Then he packed the area of damage with a malodorous unguent and applied bandages.

Nepanthe warily studied her companions-in-shadow from beside the coffin. Identical thoughts haunted their minds.

Who would be next?

The way the Old Man talked, one of them wouldn't make it. Maybe two. The next selected could well be the last to return with a whole mind.

Briefly, Nepanthe hated both men for infringing on her chances. Then she concluded that she would have to be chosen next. Even the Star Rider couldn't be so unchivalrous as to ignore a woman's plight. Could

he?

"I saved his life, you know," the Old Man said again. "We were partners. During the Nawami Crusade. The Director slipped up. Nahaman, the Odite, became suspicious..." He shut up, realizing at last that he needed to keep some things behind his teeth even here.

Nepanthe and Mocker exchanged blank glances.

They could be pardoned. Even the wisest of the historians at Hellin Daimiel's Rebsamen University were ignorant of the Nawami Crusades. Those had taken place long ago and far away, and had been so bitter that almost no one had survived to pass along their tale.

"Shut up!" Nepanthe snarled in sudden hatred. She was afraid he was telling the truth, that he did have some extraordinary claim on the Star Rider's mercy. "Do your bragging after he puts me in. I won't have to listen to it then."

Mocker remained unnaturally quiet, his lips forming soundless words. Nepanthe laughed a laugh attared with wormwood. The man who believed in nothing, who mocked everything, who was so soaked in cynicism that he reeked of it, was appealing to false gods.

Where had he learned to pray?

The Star Rider dragged Varthlokkur from the coffin, stretched him out for continued care. Already the wizard appeared healthier.

Nepanthe's potential savior bent over her corpse. She shriek-laughed victoriously.

But he merely moved a leg so he could get to Mocker.

Nepanthe shrieked again, though with less feeling. Resignation began to creep up on her.

The Old Man cursed. "You devil! You ungrateful fiend! I hope they roast your black soul..."

The easterners laughed. Having lost interest in bedeviling one another, they had begun baiting their captors.

"Murderer!" Nepanthe snarled, whirling on her husband. "Me. The child. Our blood's on your soul. Unless you make him stop." She started stalking him again, insane in her fear/ rage.

The Old Man, stricken by his betrayal, plopped into a chair. He retreated into his memories, which were far clearer now than while he had been alive.

The Director had brought him here, and had used him pitilessly throughout the ages. He was being used mercilessly now. The man would know no remorse at his loss. He was just another tool in the shaper's hands, caught in a situation where a choice of tools to be salvaged had to be made.

What epic of doom was he shaping now, that Varthlokkur and a fat criminal would be more valuable than he?

The Star Rider was an enigma even to he who knew him best, who knew how he had been condemned to this world and why, and with what mission. The man's plans were shadowed mysteries, though of one

thing the Old Man was sure. This night's events had been engineered very carefully, perhaps beginning at some point decades in the past.

And the Old Man had a suspicion, growing toward conviction with the ages, that the Star Rider was, subtly, trying to evade the sentence imposed upon him. The desolation of Nawami, of Ilkazar... Neither had been needful. They were irrational excesses-unless they were part of some impenetrable plan.

Nepanthe stalked. Mocker retreated completely round the room before she reached the point where she could no longer sustain her anger. It soon faded into a diluted terror. He then took her into his arms and whispered the same comforting nothings and little jokes that had revived her spirit during bin Yousif's raid on Iwa Skolovda. In the minutes that followed they made their peace, revived their love, forgave one another.

After a misty-voiced, "Doe's Eyes, Dove's Breast, will be better after second birth. Promise," he faded from her company.

The Star Rider worked over the remaining corpses, his hands darting feverishly. Occasionally he made a quick check on Varthlokkur. The Old Man sat in silence, remembering, waiting. The easterners turned on one another again, but with flagging devotion.

Nepanthe's feelings grew ever more pallid. She had little desire to do anything but wait. She seated herself beside the Old Man, took his hand.

The whistle and hum of the coffin stopped. The Old Man's grasp tightened. "He can manage one more. For sure." He said it with little force. He, as did she, wanted to live, but was drifting farther and farther from the shores of life. Before long, Nepanthe suspected, she wouldn't care at all, might not heed the call to resurrection.

Which one?, she wondered as the Star Rider tumbled Mocker onto the floor. Hope flared, but couldn't ignite any will to survive. She turned to the Old Man. He had closed his eyes. Maybe it should be better that way, not knowing... Squeezing his hand, she closed her eyes too.

The waiting went on forever.

A feeling of presence came toward the tower, lightly, as if some dread dark hunter of souls were snuffling an uncertain track.

Time awakened. Its plodding pace rapidly turned into a headlong plunge toward Hell. Faintly, Nepanthe heard the terror of the easterners. Maybe it wasn't imagination. Maybe something was coming...

She was fading. She could sense it. Her grasp on the fabric of her existence was weakening, weakening...

A pity that her son would never live...

Blackness.

Happiness, because she was no longer afraid.

TWENTY: Aftermath

"A man can work up a powerful thirst climbing El Kabar," Varthlokkur told Mocker. They faced one another over their first evening meal following their resurrection. "I've done it a dozen times."

Mocker peered at this man who might be the father he had never known. He banished a surge of filial feeling, condemning it as unfounded, saccharine. "And in Shadowland," he replied. "Self, having considered, believe same will be leading torture in Hell. Maybe after abstinence."

He avoided the wizard's glance by looking for the wine steward. They were far from comfortable with one another. But the steward wasn't there to rescue him. Like the rest of the staff, the night had left him in wild confusion. None of them could get themselves organized.

"Yes. The Shadowland."

The subject died there, with an unspoken agreement that words spoken then, and deeds done before, were best forgotten.

A child, bolder than his companions in a small party watching and giggling nearby, came over. He stared at Mocker for several seconds, then squealed and fled when the wanderer made an ugly face. "Am forever haunted by couthless, unwashed urchins," Mocker grumbled, recalling Prost Kamenets' Dragon Gate. That he accounted his point of no return, after which it had been too late to escape the strange, grim adventure that had led him to his father.

Surreptitiously, from beneath lowered brows, he studied Varthlokkur. Was some new evil growing in the nest of the wizard's mind? He was who he was, and had done the things he had done. He had his wicked reputation.

Mocker's hand strayed to the hilt of his sword. His gaze lanced about the hall in search of incipient treacheries.

His eyes met hers among unfamiliar faces. He froze. She seemed more beautiful than ever. More desirable, despite the pallor left by her trials. How sound was her mind? How bitter were her memories? Had she suffered any of the brain damage the Old Man had harped upon?

Could he and she abandon past anger and jealousy and salvage something from the wreckage others had made of their lives? Could they recover the happiness that had been theirs, so briefly, before Ravenkrak's fall?

She sat beside him, placed a hand on his. She smiled as if nothing had happened the night before.

Their truce was holding. She remained willing to forget. "What became of the Star Rider?" she asked.

"Gone," said Varthlokkur. "That's the way he is. He never waits around. Probably so he doesn't have to answer questions. He apparently tucked us in, took care of the Old Man, disenchanting the servants, then took off. That's his way. He may not be heard from again for a hundred years."

"Old Man. What of him?" Mocker asked.

"I'm not sure. The tower is sealed. I haven't the skill to bypass the spells warding it. But I suspect that means he's alive. Probably in his deep sleep."

The wizard guessed near the truth. Contrary to his own dire expectations, the Old Man hadn't been

allowed to die. But neither had he been permitted to return to life. His body, clad in ceremonial raiment, sat upon the stone throne in the chamber atop the Wind Tower. His eyes, if ever they opened, would gaze into the magical mirror. Beneath his blue-veined, wrinkled hands lay tiny, fragile globular phials. A fresh stock of drugs had gone into his cabinet. One day, if the need arose, the Director might once again cause his eyes to open.

He was completely a tool, unlike the other there. His usefulness was at an end, his edge dulled. But the Star Rider was frugal. He wasted nothing that might, someday, have value again. The chamber atop the Wind Tower became the tool's box, a place of peace and safety. Even Varthlokkur hadn't the power to rifle it. And the fullness of his Power had returned.

The Old Man's Dark Lady had, again, been left standing at the altar.

Sharing the Old Man's chamber, perhaps as memorials or mementos, were the seated cadavers of the Princes Thaumaturge.

The main course arrived. Mocker attacked his portion, willing to let someone else talk for once. He hadn't had a decent meal in months.

"I kind of hate to see the Old Man out of the game," Nepanthe said. Mocker thought he caught a whiff of better-he-than-me. "He was all right, even if he was a grouch."

"He's not gone, just waiting. On the will of the Star Rider. I think there might have been something between them that nobody ever suspected. But, yes, I'll miss him too. I just wonder how much he knew and never told. We had too many secrets from each other."

Slowly, thoughtfully, the wizard downed several mouthfuls. Then, "For all his crochets and grumbling, he was kind and a good friend. It's too bad he never had a goal. Other than to escape living out his role. Whatever it might be."

"Let's hope he's happier next time around."

"Child?" Mocker grunted around a mouthful of roast pork.

"Fine. And I'm glad you cleaned up and shaved. I never saw a hill bandit as dirty, smelly, and wild as you were." She and Varthlokkur resumed reminiscing and speculating about the Old Man.

Disturbingly, the wizard suggested, "You know, there're scholars who claim the Star Rider is some sort of avatar of Justice. Maybe he judged all of us, not just the Princes."

"You mean?..."

"Yes. The Old Man could've been the only one of us who really got rewarded. The rest of us got dumped right back into the middle of whatever's going on."

Mocker cocked a dubious eye his way, but didn't let up on the chicken he was gnawing.

Nepanthe looked sour. "Sometimes I have premonitions," she said. "And I've gotten one from this. There're hard times coming. A lot of pain and sorrow for my husband and I."

Varthlokkur hadn't yet performed a divination to see what the future looked like unobscured by the

interference of the Princes Thaumaturge. He had been putting it off, afraid of what he might foresee.

It would have done him no good. Other Powers were afoot, and had their eyes upon him.

"No doubt," he replied to Nepanthe. "I believe the real reason we're here is that we're expected to be useful again."

Behind the mindless glutton mask Mocker was critically alert, weighing every nuance both of what the wizard said and the way he said it. He was hunting the false note. Father or not, he just didn't trust Varth-lokkur's forgiveness.

It was time, he decided, to give the hornets' nest a gentle poke, to see what buzzed, time to cast a stone to see what rose from the turgid deeps of this falsely pacific pond. Hand on sword hilt, he belched grandly, leaned back in his chair. Eyes closed, conversationally, he observed, "If memory doesn't prevaricate, same being impossible in steel-trap brain of genius like self, time was, man once promised fat trickster and friends vast emoluments for doing small deeds for same. Being possessed of elephantine memory already noted, can say with certainty promissory was: gold double shekel pieces, mintage of Empire, one thousand four hundred. Same gentleman aforementioned advanced mere eighty. Self, considering distance to home of same, touch purse, and cry, 'Woe!' Fingers feel nothing. Not even bent green copper. Foresee great hunger..."

Nepanthe, understanding at last, gasped. "Why not add in what you lost in Iwa Skolovda?" she demanded, amazed by his nerve.

Mocker grinned. His eyes popped open, wide with innocence. "Silver: three hundred twelve kronen. Copper: two hundred thirty-four groschen, of Iwa Skolovda. No gold. Of other realms, various, maybe five silver nobles, of Itaskia, total. Conservative estimate, but self is renowned for generosity, for lack of pinch-penny heart, for interest only in minimal income accommodating subsistence of same. Am, at moment, considering same in new wife, newly impoverished."

He had a point there. The wealth of Ravenkrak had vanished utterly. Someday bits and pieces might begin surfacing when Haroun's soldiers began pawning plunder.

Nepanthe was as destitute as her husband.

Varthlokkur laughed till tears ran down his cheeks. "You've got to be the most brazen footpad since Rainheart, who slew the Kammengarn Dragon."

Mocker grinned again. Nepanthe kicked him beneath the table. He ignored her warning. "In coin of Ilkazar, please. With interest being ten percent from date due on wages, same being morning when soldiers of crafty associate impregnated impregnable fortress Ravenkrak."

"Well, why not?" Varthlokkur mused as he recovered his composure. "I've got buckets full. I do owe you, technically. And there's your friends, who may give me no peace... Nepanthe, you help yourself too. As a wedding present."

Mocker's eyes narrowed. Something was going on here. After all his trouble, Varthlokkur was backing down this easily? He didn't believe it. There was a catch somewhere. A trick or a trap...

But, "Buckets?" His eyes widened. Avarice banished any other consideration. "Am permitted to pick and choose?"

So greedy, this man. Properly marketed, the right coins, the rare ones, would bring a hundred times intrinsic value from rich collectors. He could parlay a moderate fortune into a huge one. He knew the men who would buy and which coins were in demand. He had once had a go at counterfeiting them-till he had found the necessary research and marketing too much work.

The point passed over Varthlokkur's head. "Of course." To the wizard one coin was like another. Puzzled, he said, "I'll show you the strongroom."

Mocker spent the day there, becoming intimately familiar with every gold piece. Varthlokkur soon lost interest and went about his business. Then Mocker set about filling every pocket he had in addition to putting aside what was "due" himself and his friends. They, Varthlokkur told him, were alive and well, though chastened by close brushes with doom.

After all, as Mocker asked Nepanthe later, what good was gall if he let it go to waste?

Four days ground away. Mocker eventually had to concede that Varthlokkur really meant to let Nepanthe go. He didn't understand why, and remained thoroughly suspicious till long after they made their departure, following friendly farewells.

While traveling, Nepanthe dwelt on her agreement with Varthlokkur. She couldn't quite put it into perspective. Doubts remained. Would the wizard maintain his end? Was it fair to Mocker? Had it placed him in jeopardy? Would he live with the unknown threat of a knife in the dark henceforth?

The gods knew she loved her husband. Shame overwhelmed her whenever she recalled her behavior in the Shadowland. Her heart hammered when she reflected on how close she had come to massacring his feeling for her...

But there was this newly recognized feeling for Varthlokkur to reconcile with that for Mocker, against the romantic schooling of twenty-nine years... / did it for you, she lied to herself, looking at her husband.

But it had all worked out, hadn't it? Everyone had-though compromised-approached his or her desire. The world was rid of several old evils. Maybe the future would bring the fulfillment of a few dreams.

Varthlokkur still hadn't performed a divination. Possibly some subliminal premonition compelled him to avoid looking whither bad news might lie. Whatever, Nepanthe rode westward armed with hope-however forlorn it might be.

"Mocker, I love you."

He flashed her the old Saltimbanco grin. But his mind was far away, haunting the labyrinths of schemes founded on his newly acquired wealth-however foredoomed they might be.

The End

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Publisher 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web at
www.overdrive.com/readerworks