

Those Who Walk in Darkness

by Elizabeth Moon

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Introduction

Real Weather, Small Towns, and Science Fiction

Lunar Activity suggests lunar exploration, colonization, mining or industrial or scientific endeavors. Space-suited figures adjusting telescopes on the far side of the Moon, sweating construction workers fitting together another section of habitat or workspace. The Moon is clearly Space, and Space, someone said, has no weather—an arguable thesis, but meant (in that case) to extoll the virtues of living in a planned, controllable environment. No sudden tornadoes, no wild floods, no killing frosts just when the peaches bloom or the oranges ripen.

Far from such a planned environment, this terrestrial Moon lives in a small town brimful of real weather. Hail this spring pitted the young fruit; a tornado ripped the guts out of a neighboring town; drought parches the grass and floods undermine the fence corners.

More than that, the mind has its own weather, as hard to predict and control as the planet's whirl of wind and water. Even in weatherless space, in the shuttle or space station, on the cloudless, rainless Moon, the human mind would have storms, whirlwinds, long cold frozen winters and sudden thaws, rising floods and barren droughts. Human societies form contentious factions that clash like warm Gulf air and a Canadian cold front, producing political upheavals, deadly fireworks... the exterior human weather that buffets all of us.

And on our world, the visible weather of atmospheric movement is partnered by the invisible contention of plate tectonics. As the meeting of atmospheric forces throws up great walls of cumulus, the meeting of plates sends mountain ranges surging up—and these in turn affect continental weather for centuries.

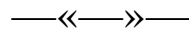
Living in a small town, in a true (if imperfect) community, all the layers of weather lie open to the eye. There are fewer grandly engineered edifices to hide the cloud patterns and individual motives, as skyscrapers and corporations do. Under our feet, the rock witnesses to ancient weathers, then erodes under present storms to form tomorrow's sediments... just as ancient grievances and alliances appear as fossilized relationships that send small replicas out into the world to replay the same games. Interfaces matter: where people touch, where atmosphere shapes geology, where science and technology meet human emotion and biology.

Science fiction is the logical result of letting a Moon loose in small town weather.

Those Who Walk In Darkness

Fantasy, unlike science fiction, is expected to have weather. It arises from the depths of the mind, those tectonic impacts when buried axioms clash and thrust new mountain ranges up to poke holes in the mind's atmosphere, to change climate into stormy chaos, star-crowned. Don't be surprised when the mountain ranges, explored, show ancient fossils around every corner. The mountains are new; the rock itself is not.

Those who have read The Deed of Paksenarrion will recognize instantly which night a frightened boy wanders the streets of Vérella. For the rest of you—be careful. Some of these fossils have undergone extensive metamorphosis.



He was feverish and shaky; they had made him stay to the end. Now he slipped away from his father in the crowd, swerving quickly into a side passage, and forced himself to hurry on the stairs. His back hurt still, four days after the beating.

It was already dark outside, and cold. Torches flickered in the light wind, sending crazy shadows along the street. He took a long breath of fresh air, grateful for it. The streets were strange again. Every time they stayed below too long, he had trouble adjusting to the movement and noise. He had tried to say that, but his father had

silenced him with threats. Just as the priests silenced his father with threats.

They had not silenced the paladin. He hunched his shoulders, remembering her last words. She had refused to acknowledge the Master; she had claimed the protection of the High Lord and Gird. The priests always said there was no High Lord, but when they unbound her legs the terrible burn wounds closed over as everyone stared. Even the priests; he could tell they were frightened too, by the way they screamed at the crowd and drove them away.

He slid behind Sim the baker, and flicked a roll from the tray while Sim bickered with a customer who wanted a discount this late in the day. Sim caught the movement and kicked at him, but the kick didn't land. Sim didn't mean it to. The roll was cold and hard, that morning's baking, but better than nothing. He sank his teeth in it, pulled off a mouthful. The paladin—they'd had to taste her blood. He hadn't wanted to, but after the other he knew better than to stand back. It tasted like anyone's blood, after all. Salty. The bread stuck in his throat; he choked. A hard hand pounded his back; another grabbed the roll. For an instant he flailed, off balance with the pain of his back; he heard the laugh, and knew it was Raki.

“Take a bite of my supper will you?” Raki lounged against the wall, inspecting the roll. He had years and height, and the assurance of them.

“Wasn't for you,” said Selis. He moved his shoulders, wondering if the welts had opened again.

“Should have been. You owe me.” Raki took a small bite, watching him. Selis shifted his feet, wondering which way to go.

“I couldn’t come,” he said.

“Couldn’t.” Raki chuckled, an unpleasant sound. “That’s what I heard. Jori said you squealed like a rabbit.”

“You knew—”

“Isn’t much I don’t know. Eh, dark of three nights I was there myself. Not as good sport as some, that fighter.”

“Paladin,” said Selis, before he thought. Rafe’s brows went up, changing the shape of his face in the torchlight.

“Paladin,” he said. “You say that like you meant it, Selis. Don’t you know there is no such thing?”

“I saw it,” said Selis stubbornly.

“Saw what?” Raki spat, just missing Selis’s foot. “I saw a fighter shaved naked and trussed like a market pig for everyone to sport with. That’s all I saw.”

“Did you see the end?”

“And me a prentice with an afternoon shift? Of course not—I’ve been on the street since midday, earning my share. Just you wait, Selis, until you’re on the street— then you’ll learn—”

“But Raki—”

Raki glared at him. “Have you forgotten, little boy? You’re nothing. That’s the rule—as far as you and I are concerned, and the Master is concerned, you’re nothing.” Selis looked down. Raki was right; he had street duty, he had rank in the Guild. And no Guild child could argue with him, however close he was to his own apprenticeship.

“That’s better,” he heard Raki say, then two quick strides and Raki

gripped his shoulders, hard, intending to hurt. “And you listen, Selis who squeals like a rabbit: you’ll always be nothing. I’ll always be ahead of you—I’ll always have the power, and you’ll always serve me—little boy.” He shoved Selis against the wall, until the smaller boy was gasping with pain, then released him with a hard push that sent him sprawling.

For a long moment Selis crouched there in the shadow, shaking with both fear and anger. Raki hated him—had always hated him. Raki’s father was dead, killed on Guild business; Raki had been reared by the Guild, a fosterchild. Selis’s father held rank enough: the richest fence in Vérella, with contacts from Valdaire to Rostvok. But Raki was bigger, older, and early skilled in those torments that give older boys dominance in any gang. Selis knew Raki was doing well as an apprentice thief; they all knew, when the lists were posted. And Selis, small even for his younger age—his stomach knotted when he thought of the years ahead.

That made him think of food; he looked back toward Sim’s stall, but the baker was already closed. He could not go home. The priests had forbidden it as part of his father’s punishment—the punishment that fell on him, because they knew that was worse for his father. They had also forbidden an inn. He dared not spend the coins his father had palmed him, with their spies everywhere. He had to scavenge, they had said. With a sigh, he pushed himself up and started toward the great market. Perhaps someone had left scraps there.

Selis had rarely been alone on the street after dark. Before Raki made apprentice, he had gone out with that group once or twice, and

his father had taken him along to a tavern from time to time, but this was different. The noise of booted feet seemed loud, and the men and women larger. He heard the crash of arms down one street, and darted across it to another. Here it was darker, with fewer people. Selis slid along the wall, half-feeling his way. It grew colder. He shivered, wishing for the cloak the priests had taken from him. They had told him where he could sleep warm, whispering in his ear as he hung on the frame, but he would never go there. For one night he could survive on the street; he had been out before with the others. He wondered about the paladin. He had heard the talk— she was being given to another, to be killed outside the walls later—but how much later? If he was cold, in wool pants and tunic, she must be colder, stripped and shaved like that. The wind ruffled his thick mat of hair, and he shivered again.

The great market, when he came to it, was a cold windy space lit spottily by windblown torches. No stalls showed, and the local brats had scavenged any dropped food long before. Selis sighed as he hunted along the edges, turning over bits of trash with his foot. His stomach growled, and his mouth felt dry. At the public fountain, a thin skim of ice slicked the stone margin. The icy water made his teeth ache. He looked up; nothing but thick darkness that smelled wet. The wind dropped again; he could hear footsteps in the distance, and a drunken voice singing. He moved around the fountain, looking for a place out of the moving air.

He could still see the paladin in his mind, and he could see himself. Why had he squealed like that, before they even hit him? Someone had laughed, and others had joined them; he should have been

silent. The paladin had been silent. When they first brought her in, everyone was: he had been breathless, waiting for the high gods to send a bolt of fire or something. And nothing had happened. He almost believed the priests, that nothing could happen, that only the Master had power. He believed it when they dragged him forward, and when they beat him, and nothing happened. He believed it when the paladin's torment went on and on, and nothing happened. He believed it until—he frowned, thinking of it—until he had gone forward himself, to spit on her and taste her blood, as the children must. Then he saw gentle gray eyes, a tired face drawn by pain but unafraid and—most strange to him—not angry. He had stared then, forgetting what to do, but the priest had tapped his sore back and reminded him. And so he had spit, and rubbed his finger along her bloody sides and tasted it, and she had looked at him, without anger or fear.

How could that be? They were all frightened, all the rest: he was, and his father, and all the others in the hall, and the guards. Even the priests. But she was not frightened. She had been hurt—had cried out with pain, as he had—but not frightened. Nothing changed her mind. She had said, again and again, that the High Lord was real. That Gird Strongarm was real. That the Master was nothing before them. That thought made him twitch. It was dangerous. If he defied the Master, if he didn't believe, then they would hurt him as they hurt her. He curled into a ball, the taste of that blood filling his mouth. He felt nausea burn his throat. He had to believe. He had to obey, or else— But when he screwed his eyes shut, he saw her face. He heard her voice, somehow steady and clear despite the torments.

Those gray eyes seemed to watch him.

A booted foot tapped him sharply in the ribs, and he uncurled with a gasp. A watch officer, with four guards behind him.

“What are you doing here, boy?”

Selis fumbled for explanations. “I—I was sitting—”

“You can’t sleep here. Who are you?”

“Selis Kemmrisson, sir.” It was permitted to be polite to the watch, if unwise to be stopped by them.

“Hmm. Your father’s business?”

“Merchant, sir.”

“And you’re—ah—out on business?”

“No, sir—I mean, yes—in a way—”

“Runaway?”

“No, sir.”

“Hmmp. It’s no night for a youngster like you to be out playing pranks. Go home and stay in.”

Selis wanted to ask why, but knew better; he started across the square as if he knew where he was going.

“And don’t let me catch you hiding in someone’s doorway, boy—” the man called after him. “—or I’ll think you a fairspoken thief, that I will.”

Selis could not laugh at that, as Raki would have—but Raki wouldn’t have been found curled up on the fountain step. Raki would have heard them coming and been hidden in shadow. He walked on, his legs aching now. He had gone out the west side,

where he rarely wandered. At the first crossing, he would have turned back, but heard another patrol. As his heart steadied again, he wondered what it would be like to be without fear, like the paladin. He tried to imagine her with Raki, but in his mind no pictures took life. Yet Raki was brave; he never showed fear. From behind or above— Selis thought of Raki dropping on her with his little dagger, the narrow blade allowed apprentices on duty. But again the picture caught no life; Raki was a shadow attacking a shadow, and both vanished in his mind.

Ahead on the right a wide door let out a bar of light that striped the width of the street. Selis slowed, walking as quietly as he could. He was fairly close when he recognized the place: a Gird's grange, the one called Old Vérella. He stopped short, suddenly drenched in sweat. A shadow crossed the light, and a man stepped into the street, to set a burning torch in a bracket by the open door. Selis could see little of him but the shape: massive, in glinting mail. He went inside, and returned with another torch, set on the other side of the door. Then he stood in the opening, and drew his sword, as if guarding the door against an invader. Selis looked around, and saw no one. When he glanced back, the man was looking his way; again Selis froze, looking down as he had been taught, lest his eyes catch the light. After a long moment he looked up. The doorway was empty, but a shadow marked the light as the man paced from side to side within.

Selis leaned on the wall beside him. His heart hammered. He could not cross that bar of light, and behind—he turned, to see a torchbearing squad of watchmen cross the street far behind him. He

tucked his cold hands into his armpits, and crouched. He wished he was at home, tucked in the warm bed with his brother, safe behind that locked door. He imagined his mother's arms around him, the soothing salve she would spread on his back, the sweet asar she would brew for him. Something clanged, down the street; his head jerked up. When he looked, the watchmen were closer, but they turned a corner down a side alley and disappeared. He closed his eyes, but the vision of home would not return. Not in comfort, at least. He seemed to see his mother, frightened, wringing her hands and staring wide-eyed at his father, who held a scrap of bloodied cloak. He remembered all too clearly the changes in the last few years, the new lines in his father's face, the silent glances from one elder to another, that began with the first of the red priests holding ceremony in the old Guildhall underground.

He looked up the street to see the grange door still pouring light onto the cobbles. It looked warm—but it couldn't be warm with the door open like that. He sighed, leaning back until his back hit the wall, then wincing. Blast that Raki—surely the welts had reopened! He couldn't feel his feet any more, and his teeth chattered. He thought of his uncle's tales of the north, of merchants dying in the snow when they fell asleep. With an effort he pushed himself upright, and stamped, nearly falling when one leg gave way. It was too cold to stay there, and he was hungry, and—he looked again at the grange door, with the shadow crossing and recross-ing that light. What had she been like in armor? he wondered suddenly. He had thought of paladins as shining, brilliant like stars. Once he had seen one—or thought he had—and from the crowd's murmur it might

have been. But in the priests' hands, she had been nothing much to see—except those eyes. And the steady voice, refusing them. And the wounds, at the end, healing without any aid he could see.

He had moved enough to shiver again, dancing in place, but his breath was giving out. How had she insisted that Gird would help her, when she was helpless in their hands? How had she been taken? Had she fought at all? He knew the Marshals by reputation; no thief would fight one openly. Paladins fought even better, by the stories—how had they captured her without a fight? He wished he could ask her. He wanted to know why she wasn't afraid, and why she hadn't been angry, fighting. He could not imagine that.

The light drew his eyes, a broad yellow stripe. Across and across the shadow marched. He would be unafraid, whoever that was, man grown and bearing a sword, but she had had no sword. Yet she had been Girdish—she had said so. Gird the protector, she had said. Selis found himself halfway to the light before he realized it; his teeth chattered harder than ever. Gird the protector. But Gird had not protected her, not even from a scared boy like himself. He felt another wave of nausea at the thought of her blood in his mouth. How could he turn to Gird, if Gird would not protect her? But she had not been afraid. Had Gird taken her fear, and left her the rest? It might be worth that pain not to be afraid, even for a night.

Quickly, giving himself no time to think, Selis threw himself forward, into the light, skidding to a halt just inside the door. Fear flooded his mind, clouding his eyes for a moment so that all he could discern was a huge shadowy shape looming over him, with light behind it. He opened his mouth to scream, but as in a

nightmare no sound came. The shadow bent over him; he felt strong arms around him, lifting him gently.

“Shhh,” said a voice. “It’s all right. You’re safe here.” He was shivering with cold and fright together; he felt tears burning his eyes, running hot on his cold cheeks. The man carried him easily, speaking to someone else, directions that Selis did not follow, being deaf to anything but his fear. Gradually it eased.

He was warm. He was cradled in someone’s lap, his legs dangling, and as his sobs died away, the man began to speak.

“There, little lad—were you the frightened rabbit crouched by the wall earlier? Don’t fear—what’s made you fear Gird, of all saints? Here, now—” A hiss followed, as the man touched his back. “Ah, you’re hurt. We’ll ease that; let me help you with your tunic.” Selis sat up, seeing blurrily through the last of his tears a freckled face under thinning red hair, pale blue eyes that met his steadily. He fumbled with the laces of his tunic; the man waited until he dragged it over his head, wincing at the pain.

“I—I’m sorry—” he mumbled, not knowing what else to say. The man’s face had stiffened, seeing his back. He saw the blue eyes turn cold.

“Gird’s arm, boy, who dealt those blows?” Selis shivered again, his fear returning. He could not answer, shaking his head helplessly when the man asked again. Then the man sighed. “I think I know— if that’s not the mark of a crooked lash, I’m no Marshal. And why are you sorry, boy, unless you dealt such blows to another?”

“I—” Selis bowed his head, fighting back another bout of sobs.

“I’m afraid—”

“I can see that.” The Marshal moved, turning to call. “Kevis! Bring me some water, and bandages.” He gathered Selis in his arms again. “We’ll get you to bed, boy, and get these cleaned out. When did you eat last?”

“I don’t know—” The motion from chair to bed made him dizzy; the Marshal rolled him neatly onto his belly.

“I expect you’ve more welts below—is it so?”

“Yes, Mast—Marshal,” said Selis.

“Don’t use that scum’s name here,” said the Marshal grimly. “I thought so—they weren’t content with *her*, they had to take a child as well. Here, lift your hips. Damn them. You’ll carry these marks for life, boy.” Selis heard footsteps, another man’s voice.

“Anything else, Marshal?”

“Food, Kevis. Who else is keeping vigil?”

“Arbad, Rahel, and Arñe.”

“Good. I’ll be with this boy awhile, until he’s settled—”

“That’s—”

“Liart’s work, yes. By Gird’s cudgel, we’ve a house-cleaning to do in this place, yeoman marshal, and no regency council fop will stop us this time.”

“Aye. That’s what I thought.” The other man went away. Selis dared to look around; he was lying face down on a narrow bed against the wall of a small cleanroom. A dark blue robe hung on one peg, a swordbelt and sword on another. A low table and broad chair

completed the furniture. On the table was a bowl of water and pile of cloth strips neatly rolled into bandages. The Marshal was dipping a cloth in water.

“This will sting,” he said, meeting Selis’s eye. “I’m sorry for it, but evil deeds last longer than the doing.” He began working on Selis’s back; it felt worse than stinging to Selis. He bit his lip, and thought of the paladin. “These are inflamed,” the Marshal went on. “How long ago were you beaten?”

“Four days,” said Selis, in a jerky voice. “I—I think it was four days.”

“Hmmp. And you’ve been lurking the streets since?”

“No—Marshal. I—ouch!” He clenched his fists; the Marshal seemed to be digging into one of the welts with his fingers.

“Sorry, lad. This one was going bad; full of pus. It has to come out.”

“It—didn’t—feel like—that before—” Selis had buried his face in the blanket.

“I know. The ones that go bad quit hurting for a time. Those damned hooks they use dig in and make a deep place for wound fever to grow.” By the time the Marshal finished, Selis was shaking again, trying not to cry aloud, with a mouth full of blanket. “That’s all,” the Marshal said finally. “They’re all clean—and plenty of salve on them—shouldn’t go bad now.” His hand on the back of Selis’s head was gentle and warm. “You’re a brave lad, to be so quiet—a beating is bad enough; I know this hurt.”

Selis looked up in surprise. “Me? I’m not brave—”

A chuckle surprised him further. “You’ve enough experience to

judge? I would hope you did not.” The other man reappeared, carrying a deep bowl and a pitcher. The Marshal nodded, and he withdrew. “Eat a little, if you can, and drink all of this. You may be fevered; don’t eat more than you want.” While Selis ate a few mouthfuls of beans, and sipped the bitter drink, the Marshal fingered his clothes. “These aren’t beggar’s clothes,” he said finally. “Are they yours?”

“Yes, Mas—Marshal.”

“Good cloth. Were you stolen away?”

“N-no, Marshal.”

“No?” The Marshal’s eyes glittered in the candlelight. “Your family consented to this?” His gesture included Selis’s wounds and his hiding in the streets.

“It—they—” Selis shook his head, near tears once more.

“They were afraid, too,” said the Marshal, without hint of question.

“Yes, sir,” said Selis.

“So they let this happen?”

“It couldn’t be helped,” whispered Selis to the blanket. “He couldn’t stop—”

“Ah. Does your family ask our aid? Is that why you came?”

“No.” Selis drew a long breath. “They don’t know I am here. I was not to go home until daylight, they said.”

“They—Liar’s priests?”

Selis nodded. “They said they’d do more if I did—”

“To your family?” At his nod, the Marshal frowned. “Your family

worships there, boy? Is that what you mean?”

He shook his head, unable to say; how could he explain? The Marshal sighed.

“I don’t understand, lad. You were afraid when you came—I thought from your face that you feared Gird himself. Your family let Liart’s priests beat you, and yet you say they don’t worship him. Why did you come, if not for that? Did you hope sanctuary for yourself?”

Selis closed his eyes, to see the paladin’s gray eyes watching him gravely. “She wasn’t afraid,” he whispered.

“*What!*” The Marshal went on in a quieter voice. “What do you mean, ‘she’? What have you seen?”

He clenched his hands on the blanket. “Sir, they had a—a lady. A fighter—”

“A paladin,” said the Marshal. His voice had chilled. Selis glanced at him and froze again; the Marshal’s face was hard as dry bone.

“Go on,” said the Marshal.

“A paladin,” he repeated. “They hurt her. And she wasn’t afraid. She looked at me.”

“Looked at you?” Selis could hear the effort of control; he shivered, feeling great anger near.

“Yes, sir. When—when they hurt me, and when I—” He stopped, shivering again. Surely the Marshal would kill him, if he told it. He had tasted her blood; the memory sickened him.

“What did you do?” asked the Marshal, in that remote quiet voice. Selis found himself answering as quietly.

“They called us up—the children—we had to spit on her and taste —” he faltered momentarily. “Taste her blood,” he finished. His head sank, waiting for the blow.

“Was that before or after they beat you?” asked the Marshal.

“After,” said Selis.

“And did you enjoy it?” asked the Marshal in the same level tone.

“Enjoy!” Selis’s head came up. “Marshal, no! How could anyone—it was terrible, but they would have killed me—my father was there —”

The Marshal’s pale eyebrows had risen. “No one enjoyed it?”

Selis felt a wave of heat flush his face. “Some,” he admitted. “Some did, but—”

“But you did not. And now do you think it was right, boy?”

Selis dropped his eyes again. “No, but I was afraid.”

“After that beating—” He heard the musing tone, a heavy sigh.

“It wasn’t only that,” he found himself saying. “My father—they had told him—I heard them threaten him—we were all afraid. Only she wasn’t. When I went forward, I forgot what to do; she looked at me, not frightened, not angry. Then the priest hit me again, and told me—and—and I did it. But sir, whatever they did, she was not afraid. At the end—”

“Stop.” The Marshal’s face was unreadable. After a long moment of silence, he went on. “Boy, you came to us frightened, cold, hungry and hurt: do you acknowledge that?”

“Yes, Marshal.”

“What’s your name?” He hesitated; what would happen to his family? The Marshal went on impatiently. “I need something to call you besides boy; if you don’t want to tell me your father’s name, that’s all right.”

“Selis,” he answered.

“Selis. You came here needing aid; Gird is the protector of those who cannot protect themselves, and as his followers we are bound to aid the helpless. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” He thought he did; they were oathbound, but unwilling.

“I doubt that.” The Marshal went on. “But we have our rules too, Selis. If you take our aid, we will expect payment from you—not these silvers in your pocket—” he jingled the coins in his hand.

“But the payment of an honest heart. Until now I have listened as I might to any frightened child needing help. Frightened children lie, to save themselves pain. I ask you now for the truth, Selis, and if you lie I will not scruple to throw you out. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Marshal.” Selis stared, confused.

“Now. You say you witnessed the priests of Liart tormenting a paladin, a woman. Is that true?”

“Yes—”

“And when was this?”

“It—began some days ago, sir.” Selis counted on his fingers, to be sure, backwards and forwards both. “Five days, after sunset.”

“And you spoke of an end: when?”

“This afternoon, near dark. It was dark when I came outside.”

“And what was the end you saw, Selis?”

“It—” Selis paused. In the confusion that had followed the healing of the stone burns, he was not sure just what had happened. “What I saw,” he began cautiously, “was the burns going away. But she did not wake, and the priests were angry and drove us all out. But I had heard she was to be killed outside the walls somewhere.”

“The burns went away?” The Marshal’s voice had warmed a trifle.

“Yes, Marshal. They had put hot stones to her legs, to cripple her, and when they unbound them, the burns healed, disappeared, even as they held her for everyone to see.”

“Gird’s grace.” Selis looked up at that, and saw the balding shiny top of the Marshal’s bowed head. Then the Marshal lifted his head slowly; his eyes glittered with unshed tears. “And so she lives?”

“I think so—then. The guards dropped her, and then they told us to leave, and began pushing at us. I looked back, and saw one of them tying her arms again. But she did not wake—”

“No. And you say she showed no fear—”

“No, sir. At first I wondered—I couldn’t believe the gods would let a paladin—if it was a paladin—” He floundered for a moment, catching an expression on the Marshal’s face that frightened him again. “I mean, sir, that I had heard about paladins—and she had no sword, even—and did not fight—”

“And you doubted she was a fighter at all?”

Selis shook his head. “No—I’ve seen fighters; she looked like that. But paladins—the priests said it was all a lie, and that she was no more than any other fighter. I thought if she was, the gods would do

something, and they didn't. The priests went on, and the others—”

“What others?”

“The—the ones there. Everyone, nearly. The priests require it.”

“That everyone join the torment?”

“Yes, sir.” Selis glanced quickly up and away, letting his eyes roam around the bare room.

“Were you there for all of it, Selis?” The Marshal's voice was curiously gentle; it surprised him enough to face that blue gaze.

“Yes, sir. They said I had to stay for it all. They wouldn't let my father even speak to me that day, or the day after—”

“How many times did they beat you?”

“Only the once, sir. But then—they made me sit on the other side, with the children, and they told me they would beat me again if I angered them.”

“I see.” The Marshal's lips folded in a tight line. Selis watched him, sure of anger when he spoke again. After a moment, the Marshal shook his head slightly. “Boy— Selis—if you had stayed on the streets until morning, in this cold, you'd have had wound-fever enough to keep you abed until spring. The priests knew that: wounds festering four days, hunger, a cold night. They must need a hold on your father. Remember that, Selis: they serve a bad master with bad service; there's enough pain in the world without causing more.”

He stretched, and went on more briskly. “Now—you need rest before anything else. Sleep here. Do not leave this room without permission; if you wake, you may eat and drink again, but do not

leave. There's a pot under the bed. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Marshal."

"And will you stay?"

"Yes, Marshal."

"Later I hope you will be free of the grange, but this night we are keeping a vigil it could be dangerous for you to witness. Sleep well, Selis, and fear no more."

But he did not sleep well. His back hurt, from shoulders to knees, a stinging pain almost as sharp as the first hours after the beating. His head ached, and spun strange unpleasant dreams when he dozed off. The bandages chafed; in a half-sleep he felt them as bonds holding him down, and fought himself awake. The bed was tumbled and damp around him; the room black dark, for the candle had burnt out. A line of light showed the door ajar. Selis pushed himself up. His mouth was dry and tasted foul. He lurched into the table and felt around for the pitcher and mug. After a drink his head felt clearer; he fumbled under the bed for the pot.

When he lay down again, he could not sleep at all. His back throbbed; the tangled bedding caught his feet as he shifted and turned. He thought of the coming day, of his father's fright, of the home that no longer seemed safe, since he could be dragged away at the red priests' whim. Rafe and the others waited for him in the streets, and the red priests underground. And even his father was not safe. He knew, now, that they might have hung his father on that frame, for all his wealth and position in the Guild. Even his mother—that thought was too terrible. He groaned aloud. No one was safe

anymore: not him, not his parents. If the red priests wanted, he did not doubt they could steal the prince, or any of the nobles. There was no safety for anyone, anywhere—

He was crouched in the bed, shaking with fear, his blood pounding in his ears. They would find him, even here; he must run. They were coming, they would always be coming, but if he ran fast enough they might not find him. He threw back the bedding, and felt around the room for his clothes. He stumbled over his shoes, and put them on. His pants were easy, but he could not squirm into his tunic with the bandages; he folded it on his arm and stole to the door.

It opened noiselessly to his touch, giving on a dimly lit passage with other doors. Beyond the passage was a larger space with more light. He tried each door in turn, without success. He had not Raki's skill with locks. He crept farther along the passage. It ended in the grange itself; he crouched near that opening and looked along the length of that large room. Ahead, the street wall, with its wide door open to the night outside. On the opposite wall, racked weapons: clubs, swords, spears, all neatly arrayed. On the near wall, coils of rope and a row of ladders: fire-fighting gear. Very cautiously he put his head out the opening, and looked to his left. A wooden platform centered the floor there. At each corner stood an armed figure: two men and two women, facing inward, swords drawn. In the center of the platform, a brilliant light, like a jewel on fire. Selis could not see the Marshal; he put his head out farther, craning his neck to see around the corner to his left.

“Selis!” That call came from beyond the open door, fanged with malice.

His head whipped around; he stared into the blackness, trying to see Raki. But the darkness beyond was featureless. He cowered back into the passage.

“We see you, Selis rabbit,” came the mocking call. “We’ll find you.”

He wanted to hear the armed Girdsmen chasing Raki; he wanted to hear something but the beat of his own heart. But the Girdsmen did not move; the Marshal did not appear. A wisp of fog stole into the grange by the door. Selis stared at it as if it were alive. After a time it seemed thicker. He looked around the grange from his hiding place: each torch was haloed now, and he could no longer see the spear-hafts clearly on the opposite wall. He jerked his gaze back to the main door. Fog and shadows clung about it, shifting in the hazy light. Was that a blacker shadow coming in? Selis backed a step. A light mocking laugh ran along the wall.

“Selis—I see you. It’s not so dark there.” Selis backed again, into the dark passage. Damp fog filled half the grange, reaching along the walls toward him. He remembered the Marshal’s warning. If he had stayed in that room, Raki could not have seen him. It was his fear—he shook his head. If he retreated to the dark room now, Raki could follow; Raki moved faster in the dark than he did. But in the light, he could be seen. Raki might throw a dart, or his dagger.

Or might not. Selis thought hard, choking on his fear. If he hid in the dark, Raki would surely come. If he came to the light, perhaps the Girdsmen would protect him. Perhaps Raki would wait for a better chance. He squeezed his eyes shut. What would she do, the paladin? He saw those gray eyes, unafraid, watching. She would never have left the room, perhaps. But it was too late for that. He

opened his eyes again. Fog had eaten half the light, slicking the walls with icy moisture. A shadow moved along the near wall, dark and silent. Selis pushed himself up, and took a step forward. The shadow halted. Another step, another. He came to the doorway again, and stepped free of the passage.

Raki's shadow had moved back, toward the outer door. Sells turned to the platform, where two broad backs faced him; across it, he could see the other watchers, their faces intent on the shining object in the center. That light seemed to hold the fog at bay. He took a cautious step into the open, looking around for the Marshal.

The Marshal stood facing a recess in the back wall of the grange. Light from it glittered on his mail. Selis crept nearer, casting nervous glances back over his shoulder at the shadowy end of the grange. But he saw nothing moving. From this angle, he still could not tell what it was that made the shining light on the platform. None of the Girdsmen looked at him; none of them moved at all. He wondered what would happen if he spoke, but feared to try. The Marshal, too, seemed unaware of him. He took another step, and another. Now he could see what lay in the recess: a rough club of wood, with a smoothly polished handle. Light filled the recess; he could see no source.

He heard a patter of sound, and turned to see Rafe standing near the platform, a dark figure slightly blurred by fog.

“They won't help you,” said Raki. “They're spelled— they can't move.” Selis felt his belly knot up; he shivered. “You might as well come with me, little boy,” Raki went on. “The red priests will want to know where you've been.”

“No—” Selis shook his head, shrinking back. He felt the Marshal’s sleeve brush his bare shoulder.

“You want me to drag you?” Raki extended his hand, as if in greeting, then flipped his wrist. His little dagger lay in his palm, lightly clasped. Selis had seen him do that before. Raki had flicked the buttons off his dress tunic with that dagger, made him scramble for them in the gutter. Selis swallowed hard, aware of the Marshal’s silent bulk behind him. Why didn’t the Marshal do something? Was he spelled? And by whom?

“I won’t come,” he managed to whisper.

“Oh, you’ll come,” said Raki. “And your father—he won’t be so proud, after this. And your mother—”

“No!” His voice startled himself; he could hardly believe it. “I won’t come.” Raki had stiffened at that tone. “You don’t have any right. This isn’t your place—”

“Little boy.” Raki’s voice was deadly. “All places are my Master’s places, and I go where I will; you have no rights here. You’re no Girdsman.”

“No, but—” Selis tried to hard to think. “Anybody— he’s the protector of the helpless—”

“Protector? And did he protect his paladin?”

“Yes. You didn’t see it; I did.”

“Selis, you’re a fool; you saw what I saw, and you know it.”

“No—I saw the wounds heal—”

“What!” Even in the fog he saw Raki’s eyes widen.

“I did. Raki, the burns healed, I tell you—”

“I don’t believe it.” But Raki’s voice was edged with doubt. “You were dreaming—you were wound-witless yourself—”

“No.” Selis shook his head stubbornly. “It’s true— that’s why they drove us all out. The priests were angry, Raki, and afraid.” He took a long breath. “And that’s why I’m staying. She wasn’t afraid, even after all they did, and then the wounds healed.”

Raki cocked his head. “Well—she was a paladin—”

“You said there weren’t any.”

Raki shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong on that. Say she was a paladin, and the gods help paladins. But you aren’t one. I’m not. For people like us, Selis, there’s reason to fear. I’ve never had any aid from these so-called saints, nor have you—but we know what stripes the Master will deal if we don’t obey. Gird won’t save you, and you know it.”

For a few moments Selis had forgotten to be afraid, as Raki seemed to listen, but now Raki was moving, coming toward him, and he felt the same choking fear as before. He tried to back, bumped into the Marshal, and felt that immobility as a wall.

“I can’t—” he gasped. “I won’t—”

“Come on, rabbit!” Raki had slipped the dagger back up his sleeve; he grabbed for Selis with both hands. Selis threw his tunic in Rafe’s face and lunged away. But there was no place to run. Beyond the platform was the foggy dark, cold and dangerous. Rafe followed him slowly, chuckling. Selis looked wildly for somewhere to go, something to fight with. The weapons on the wall were hung too

high, and he didn't know how to fight anyway. He edged around the platform, trying to keep it between them. Raki gave a contemptuous look at the Girdsmen posted at each corner, and stepped onto it.

The wood boomed like a giant drum. Before Raki could move, the Girdsmen had shifted, their heads coming up to focus on him. Selis froze. He saw the Marshal turn, saw the other swords come up, saw the flicker of movement along Raki's arm that became a dagger in his hand. Whatever had made the light let it fail, and it sank to a mere glimmer, a torchlit glint of metal on the platform. Then Raki leaped across the platform, his dagger before him, between the two Girdsmen on that side. Selis thought he had made it until he saw him stagger, saw the spatter of blood that marked the grange floor. The Girdsmen were quick; they had Raki safely bound almost before he caught his breath.

"You!" Raki glared at Selis. Two of the Girdsmen turned to look at him; he saw the Marshal already watching. "You'll pay for this, Selis," Raki went on. Selis shook his head, silent. He dared not look at the Marshal; he didn't want to watch Raki either. He stared at his feet.

"I thought I told you to stay in your room," said the Marshal. "I thought you agreed."

"I—yes, sir." Selis trembled. He saw a swirl of blue cloak; the Marshal's cloak, coming nearer.

"You brought trouble in your trail," said the Marshal. "Did you mean to?"

"No, sir." Selis felt the Marshal's hand on his head, slipping down

to cup his chin and force his face up. “I—I didn’t—” he faltered. “I—I was frightened, I knew they’d come for me, and I thought I would run. And then when I got to the light, Raki was waiting—”

“Hmm. Trouble is always waiting, lad; at least you had the sense to stay in the light.” He turned away, and left Selis standing alone.

Then he turned back. “This other boy—who is he?”

“He’s—”

“Selis, you’d better be quiet.” Raki sounded as dangerous as ever.

“Are you threatening our guest, thief?” asked one of the Girdsmen.

“Peace, Arñe,” said the Marshal. “Let the boy answer, if he will.”

“It’s—Raki,” said Selis. “He’s—someone I know.”

“I gathered that. Someone you know who is not a friend—who wants to hurt you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does he follow Liart?”

“Yes, sir.”

The Marshal walked over to Raki, and crouched beside him. “Let me see—not a bad wound. And so you think, Liart’s thief, that Liart has all the power! You think Gird does not protect his own?” Raki did not answer. “Well, then—do you wish to live, or not?”

“All wish to live,” said Raki. “Even that rabbit over there.”

“Rabbit or rat, eh? I tell you what, Raki, I will not let a Liart’s thief go free. Especially now. You entered a grange unasked, you violated the platform and the vigil, you attacked a yeoman of Gird: for any of these your life might be forfeit. Yet you are young.

“Would you prefer prison?”

“No!”

“Or will you forsake Liart, and swear your life to Gird’s service?”

“Forsake the Master? But he will—”

“Then you, too, are as afraid as that boy?”

Raki seemed to shake a moment before answering; his voice was lower and less scornful. “No—no, but I have seen—”

“Something you’re afraid of. All men are afraid, Raki. You call that child a rabbit—have you the courage to do what he has done?”

“Him? What?”

“He came here. He endured the treatment of his wounds without complaint. And he stayed in Gird’s light when you tried to frighten him away.” The Marshal paused; Raki said nothing that Selis could hear. Then the Marshal spoke in a different tone. “And where were you, Raki, when the paladin of Gird endured your god’s torment? Were you there?”

“Well, I— yes.”

“Did you taste her blood, as Selis did?” Raki nodded, unwillingly, Selis thought. “Did you do more?” After a long pause, Raki nodded again. “What?” Selis saw Raki shake his head, then his face worked. Whatever he said came to Selis only as an intelligible gasp.

The Marshal shook his head at the end. “Well, Raki — make your choice. Choose Gird’s service, and live; or Liart’s, and die.”

“You won’t really let me go — ”

“Not go, no. If you choose Gird’s service, we will tend that wound

and put you to bed, then find you a trade to learn — ”

“As someone’s slave,” snarled Raki.

“No. Girdsmen hold no slaves.”

“But how do you know I — ”

“You would swear your oath on the Relic of this grange,” said the Marshal. “I warn you that swearing falsely is a perilous thing. ”

“Has Selis sworn?” asked Raki.

“Selis is not your concern,” said the Marshal. “It is your life we speak of now. Will you choose Gird, or death?”

“I don’t want to die.” Raki’s voice trembled a little. Selis could not see his face for the others around him. He had never heard Raki sound frightened before.

“I — I’ll swear.”

“You will serve Gird, by the laws of our Fellowship?”

“Yes.”

“Bring him.” The Marshal turned back, moving around the platform to the recess; Selis flattened himself back into the corner. The Girdsmen untied Raki’s arms and hauled him up. He looked shaken, unlike the confident boy Selis had always known. They urged him forward, until he stood beside the Marshal. He glanced sideways and looked at Selis. Selis looked back, seeing Rafe for the first time as a boy — only a boy — older, but far from powerful. The Marshal reached into the recess and brought out the club. Selis could not see his face, as he spoke, but his voice was grim.

“Raki, I know you do not believe what I am saying, but I warn you:

if you intend dishonesty, if you swear falsely on this relic of Gird, you may die. This club, we think, was Gird's own. Others have died of false swearing; you must know this. Your choice is meager; you have lived with evil so long that we dare not trust anything but an oath like this; I wish it were otherwise. Now — take it in your hands. Yes, like that. Now — ”

“It isn't fair, five against one,” said Raki sullenly. Selis felt a pressure in the air, as if a listening crowd had formed.

“Oh?” The Marshal's voice held no emotion. “Was it fair, many against one paladin?”

“No—”

“Then swear, Raki, or do not; it is time.”

“I — I don't know what to say.”

“Say: I swear my life to the service of Gird, according to the rules of his Fellowship.” Selis could see the tension in Raki's face; it glistened with fog or fear. He saw Raki's hands clench on the club, and knew he was about to strike. But no one moved. Raki breathed fast, staring at the Marshal, then took a long breath.

“I — I swear — ” he began. His eyes dropped to the club, widening.

“I — swear my life — to the service of Gird — ” Now the club glowed slightly; Raki's brows went up and his tongue ran around his lips. “I mean it,” he breathed. “If — ”

“Finish,” said the Marshal.

“According to the rules of his Fellowship,” said Raki quickly. The club's glow brightened, then faded.

“Do you renounce your allegiance to Liart of the horned chain?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” The Marshal took back the club, and replaced it in the recess. “Kevis, you and Arñe tend his wound; one of you stay with him when he sleeps. Raki, you are oathbound to obey them, for now. When you wake, you and I will talk. For now, I have something to say to Selis.” Selis watched Raki move away between the two Girdsmen with a strange feeling of unreality. It simply could not be that Raki—daring Raki, wild Raki, dangerous Raki, the prize apprentice, the ringleader of the youngest thieves—was now sworn to the Fellowship of Gird.

“Selis.” The Marshal’s voice brought him back from that reverie. “Come here.” He was suddenly afraid again. What if he had to swear, and the relic proved him false? He didn’t know if he could be a Girdsman. But the Marshal was leading him to the platform. “Do you know what that is?” he asked, pointing at the object that lay glinting in the middle. Selis peered at it. A flat medallion on a chain, crescent-shaped.

“Yes, sir,” he said. “It’s a symbol of Gird.”

“That’s right. Pick it up.” Selis looked at him, surprised, and the Marshal nodded. He stepped onto the platform gingerly, expecting that hollow booming; instead, his feet scuffed lightly on the wood. His back twinged as he bent to pick the medallion off the broad planks. He wondered if it would be respectful to touch it, and lifted the chain instead. “Hold it in your hand,” directed the Marshal. Selis wrapped his hand around it, wondering. It felt like metal, chilled from the night air. The Marshal cocked his head. “Are you

frightened now, Selis?”

He thought a moment before answering. “No, sir.”

“Would you be frightened if I asked you to stay in the same room with Raki?”

“No—not now. Not if you were there.”

“Are you afraid of me?”

“No, sir. Not now. But if you were angry—”

“Selis, I have been angry since you came. If you do not fear me now, you need not fear me at all.”

“Angry—at me?”

“No. Should I be?”

“I did what they did.”

“Boy, we have all done evil in our time; I pray Gird’s grace that’s the worst evil, and the last evil, that you do. Listen, Selis. You are younger, and I judge less tainted with evil; you should not need binding with such a strong oath as holds Raki. But in this time, with so much evil loose in the world, you need protection. Do you wish ours, or would you find another patron?”

Selis looked at him. “You mean be a Girdsman?”

“Yes. Join the Fellowship, but as a child does, not as a man. Thus if you grew to be called by another worthy patron, it would be no oathbreaking for you to become a Falkian, say, or join a forge of Sertig. It would mean putting yourself under our authority, until you were grown; the Fellowship would be your family.”

“I—don’t know if I can ever be a fighter,” Selis said. “Raki’s right,

that I'm a rabbit. I—I cried, when they took me forward, even before they hit me.” Somehow it seemed important to say that; he did not know why.

“Not all Girdsmen are fighters, but the Fellowship helps all learn to face what dangers they must. We will not ask you for more strength than you have, Selis. You are a child, not a man.”

“Then I would like to stay. I would like to—to not be so frightened, like all the rest.”

“Good. Rahel, come hear Selis's oath. Say this after me, Selis: I ask protection of the Fellowship of Gird until I am grown, and swear to obey the Marshal of my grange as I would my own father, and accept his discipline if I am wrong.”

“Don't I have to hold that thing?” asked Selis nervously, looking at the recess.

The Marshal laughed softly. “No, lad. The medallion in your hand will do well enough for you.”

Selis repeated the oath without incident.

“Now,” said the Marshal. “Since you disobeyed earlier, and brought trouble it took two Girdsmen to handle, here is your punishment.”

But he was smiling. “You will stand in the grange with us, until the next shift of watchers comes to keep vigil; can you do that, or are you too weak?”

“I can stand,” said Selis, suddenly warm again.

“Lay the medallion where it was,” said the Marshal. “And then take your place here.” He pointed to one of the corners. “And here—” He had ducked into the passage and out again before Selis was quite

aware of it. “You cannot stand there clad in bandages, like a half-wrapped corpse. Here’s training armor, and a cloak. And hold this sword so. It won’t be long until the change of watch: just stand so.”

And Selis found himself blinking hard to stay awake, the padded canvas surcoat and long wool cloak warm against the fog. He could not believe it: he, the rabbit, with a sword in his hands, keeping vigil in a grange of Gird. When the watch changed, he fell asleep as soon as the Marshal laid him in a bed.

