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THE ISLE OF GLASS Copyright © 1985 by Judith Tarr

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For Meredith

"Quis est homo?"

"Mortuus est, transiens viator, loci hospes."

-Alcuin of York

"What is a 'The slave of death, the guest of an inn, a wayfarer passing.'"

-Helen Waddell

"Brother Alf! Brother Alfred!"

It was meant to be a whisper, but it echoed through the library. Brother Alfred looked up from his book, smiling a little as the novice halted panting within an inch of the table. "What is it now, Jehan?" he asked. "A rescue? The King himself come to drag you off to the wars?"

Jehan groaned. "Heaven help us! I just spent an hour explaining to Dom Morwin why I want to stay here and take vows. Father wrote to him, you see, and said that if I had to be a monk, I'd join the Knights Templar and not disgrace him completely."

Brother Alfred's smile widened. "And what said our good Abbot?"

"That I'm a waste of good muscle." Jehan sighed and hunched his shoulders. It did little good; they were still as broad as the front gate. "Brother Alf, can't anybody but you see what's under hall?"

"Brother Osric says that you will make a tolerable theologian."

"Did he? Well. He told me today that I was a blockhead, and that I'd got to the point where he'd have to turn me over to you."

"In the same breath?"

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"Almost. But I'm forgetting. Dom Morwin wants to see you." Brother Alfred closed his book. "And we've kept him waiting."

Someday, Jehan, we must both take vows of silence." "I could use it. But you? Never. How could you teach?" "There are ways." Just as Brother Alfred turned to go, he

paused. "Tomorrow, don't go to the schoolroom. Meet me here." Jehan's whoop made no pretense of restraint.

There was a fire in the Abbot's study, and the Abbot stood in front of it, warming his hands. He did not turn when Brother Alfred entered, but said, "The weather's wild today."

The other sat in a chair nearby. "Fitting," he remarked. "You know what the hill-folk say: On the Day of the Dead, demons ride."

The Abbot crossed himself quickly, with a wry smile. "Oh, it will be a night to conjure in." He sat stiffly and sighed. "My bones feel it. You know, Alf-suddenly I'm old."

There was a silence. Brother Alfred gazed into the fire, seeing a pair of young novices, one small and slight and red as a fox, the other tall and slender and very pale with hair like silver-gilt. They were very industriously stealing apples from the orchard. His lips twitched. "What are you thinking of?" asked the Abbot. "Apple-stealing."

"Is that all? I was thinking of the time we changed the labels on every bottle, jar, and box of medicine in the infirmary. We almost killed old Brother Ansetm when he took one of Brother Herbal's clandestine aphrodisiacs

instead of the medicine he needed for his indigestion."

Brother Alfred laughed. "I remember that very well indeed; after Dom Edwin's caning, \ couldn't sit for a fortnight. And we had to change the labels back again. In the end we knew Brother Herbal's stores better than he did himself." "I can still remember. First shelf: dittany, fennel, tansy, rue. . . . Was it really almost sixty years ago?" "Really."

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"Tempusjugtt, with a vengeance." Morwin ran his hands through his hair. A little red still remained; the rest was rusty white. "I've had my threescore years and ten, with three more for good measure. Time to think of what I should have thought of all along if I'd been as good a monk as I liked to think I was."

"Good enough, Morwin. Good enough."

"I could have been much better. I could have refused to let them make me Abbot. You did."

"You know why."

"Foolishness. You could have been a cardinal if you'd cared to try.<sup>71</sup>

"How could I have? You know what I am." "I know what you think you are. You've had the story of your advent drummed into your head so often, you've come to believe it."

"It's the truth. How it was the winter solstice, and a very storm out of Hell. And in the middle of it, at midnight indeed, a novice, keeping vigil in the chapel, heard a baby's cry. He had the courage to go out, even into that storm, which should have out-howled anything living, and he found a prodigy. A babe of about a season's growth, lying naked in the snow. And yet he was not cold; even as the novice opened the postern, what had been warming him took flight. Three white owls. Our brave lad took a long look, snatched up the child, and bolted for the chapel. When holy water seemed to make no impression, except what one would expect from a baby plunged headlong into an ice-cold bath, he baptized his discovery, named him Alt-Alfred for the Church's sake-and proceeded to make a monk of him. But the novice always swore that the brat had come out of the hollow hills." "Had he?"

"I don't know. I seem to remember, faint and far, like another's memory: fire and shouting, and a girl running with a baby in her arms. Then the girl, cold and dead, and a storm, and three white owls. No one ever found her." Brother Alfred breathed deep. "Maybe that's only a dream, and someone actually exposed Judith TOTT

me as a changeling. What better place for one? Here on Ynys Witrin, with all its legends and its old magic."

"Or else," said Morwin, "the Fair Folk have turned Christian. Though Fve never heard that any of them could bear either holy water or cold iron."

"This one can." Brother Alfred flexed his long fingers and folded them tightly in his lap. "But to take a high place in the Church or in the world . . . no. Anywhere but here, I would have gone to the stake long ago. Even here, not all the Brothers are sure that I'm not some sort of superior devil."

Morwin bristled. "Who dares to think that?"

"None so bold that he voices his doubts, or even thinks them, often."

"He had better not!"

Alf smiled and shook his head. "You were always too fierce in my defense."

"And a good thing too. I've pulled you out of many a broil, from the first time I saw the other novices make a butt of you."

"So much trouble for a few harmless words."

"Harmless! It was getting down to sticks and stones when I came by."

"They were only trying to frighten me," Alf said. "But that's years past. We must truly be old if we can care so much for what happened so long ago."

"Don't be so kind. It's me, and you know it. I've always been one to bear a grudge-the worse for my soul." Morwin rose and stood with his hands clasped behind his back. "Alf. Someday sooner or later, I'm going to face my Maker."

And when I do that, I want to be sure I've left St. Ruan's in good hands." Alf would have spoken, but he shook his head. "I know, Alf. You've refused every office anyone has tried to give you and turned down the abbacy three times. The more fool you; each time, the second choice has been far inferior. I don't want that to happen again."

"Morwin. You know it must."

"Why?"

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Brother Alfred stood, paler even than usual, and spread his arms. "Look at me!"

Morwin's jaw set. "I'm looking," he said grimly. "I've looked nearly every day for sixty years."

"What do you see?"

"The one man I'd trust to take the abbacy and to keep it as it should be kept."

"Man, Morwin? Do you think I am a man? Come. You alone can see me as I truly am. If you will."

The Abbot found that he could not look away. His friend stood in front of him, very tall and very pale, his eyes wide with something close to despair.

Strange eyes, palest gold like his hair and pupiled like a cat's.

"You see," said Alf. "Remember what else had the novices calling me devil and witch's get. My way with beasts and with men. My little conjuring tricks." He gathered a handful of fire and shadow, plaited it into a long strange-gleaming strand, and tossed it to Morwin. The other caught it reflexively, and it was solid, a length of cord at once shadow-cool and fire-hot. "And finally, Morwin, old friend, how old am I?"

"Two or three years younger than I."

"And how old do I look?"

Morwin scowled and twisted the cord in his hands, and said nothing.

"How old did Earl Rogier think I was when he brought Jehan to St. Ruan's? How old did Bishop Aylmer think I was, he who read my Gloria Dei thirty years ago and looked in vain for me all the while he guested here, only last year? How old did he think me, Morwin? And what was it he said to you? That lad has a great future, Dom Morwin. Send him along to me when he grows a little older, and I promise you'll not regret it.' He thought I was not eighteen!"

Still Morwin was silent, although the pain in his friend's face and voice had turned his scowl to an expression of old and bitter sorrow.

Alf dropped back into his seat and covered his face with his

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hands. "And you would make me swear to accept the election if it came to me again. Morwin, will you never understand that I cannot let myself take any title?"

The other's voice was rough. "There's a limit to humility, Alf. Even in a monk."

"It's not humility. Dear God, no! I have more pride than Lucifer. When I was as young as my body, I exulted in what I thought I was. There were Bishop Aylmers then, too, all too eager to flatter a young monk with a talent for both politics and theology. They told me I was brilliant, and I believed them. I knew I was an enchanter; I thought I might have been the son of an elven prince, or a lord at least, and I told myself tales of his love for my mortal mother and of her determination that I should be a Christian. And of three white owls." His head lifted. "I was even vain, God help me; the more so when I knew the world, and saw myself reflected in women's eyes. Not a one but sighed to see me a monk."

"And not a one managed to move you."

"Is that to my credit? I was proud that I never fell, nor ever even slipped. No, Morwin. What I have is not humility. It's fear. It was in me even when I was young, beneath the pride, fear that I was truly inhuman. It grew as the years passed. When I was thirty and was still mistaken for a boy, I turned my mind from it. At forty I began to recognize the fear. At fifty I knew it

fully. At sixty it was open terror. And now, I can hardly bear it.

Morwin-Morwin-what if I shall never die?"

Very gently Morwin said, "All things die, Alf."

Then why do I not grow old? Why am I still exactly as I was the day I took my vows? And-what is immortal-what is elvish-is soulless. To be what I am and to lack a soul ... it torments me even to think of it."

Morwin laid a light hand on his shoulder. "Alf. Whatever you are, whatever you become, I cannot believe that God would be so cruel, so unjust, so utterly vindictive, as to let you live without a soul and die with your body. Not after you've loved Him so long and so well."

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"Have I? Or is all my worship a mockery? I've even dared to serve at His altar, to say His Mass-1, a shadow, a thing of air and darkness. And you would make me Abbot. Oh, sweet Jesu!"

"Stop it, AhT Morwin rapped. That's the trouble with you. You bottle yourself up so well you get a name for serenity. And when you shatter, the whole world shakes. Spare us for once, will you?"

But Alf was beyond even that strong medicine. With a wordless cry he whirled and fled.

Morwin stared after him, paused, shook his head. Slowly, painfully, he lowered himself into his chair. The cord was still in his hand, fire and darkness, heat and cold. For a long while he sat staring at it, stroking it with trembling fingers. "Poor boy," he whispered. "Poor boy."

Jehan could not sleep. He lay on his hard pallet, listening to the night sounds of the novices' dormitory, snores and snuffles and an occasional dreamy murmur. It was cold under his thin blanket; wind worked its way through the shutters of the high narrow windows, and rain lashed against them, rattling them upon their iron hinges.

But he was used to that. The novices said that he could sleep soundly on an ice floe in the northern sea, with a smithy in full clamor beside him.

For the thousandth time he rolled into a new position, on his stomach with his head pillowed on his folded arms. He kept seeing Brother Alfred, now bent over a book in the library, now weaving upon his great loom, now singing in chapel with a voice like a tenor bell. All those serene faces flashed past and shattered, and he saw the tall slight form running from the Abbot's study, wearing such a look that even now Jehan trembled.

Stealthily he rose. No one seemed awake. He shook out the robe which had been his pillow; quickly he donned it. His heart was hammering. If anyone caught him, he would get a caning and a week of cleaning the privy.

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Big though his body was, he was as soft-footed as a cat. He crept past the sleeping novices, laid his hand upon die door-latch. A prayer had formed and escaped before he saw the irony in it.

With utmost care he opened the door. Brother Owein the novice-master snored in his cell, a rhythm unbroken even by the creak of hinges and the scrape of die latch. Jehan flowed past his doorway, hardly daring to breathe, wavered in a turning, and bolted.

Brother Alf s cell was empty. So too was the Lady Chapel, where he had been all through Compline, prostrate upon the stones. St. Ruan's was large and Alf familiar with every inch of it. He might even be in the garderobe.

Jehan left the chapel, down the passage which led to the gateway. Brother Kyriell, the porter, slept the sleep of the just.

As Jehan paused, a shadow flickered past. It reached the small gate, slid back the bolt without a sound, and eased the heavy panel open. Wind howled through, armed with knives of sleet. It tore back the cowl from a familiar pale head that bowed against it and plunged forward.

By the time Jehan reached the gate, Alf had vanished into the storm. Without thought Jehan went after him.

Wind tore at him. Rain blinded him. Cold sliced through the thick wool of his robe.

But it was not quite pitch-dark. As sometimes happens in winter storms, the clouds seemed to catch the light of the drowned moon and to scatter it, glowing with their own phantom light. Jehan's eyes, already adapted to the dark, could discern the wet glimmer of the road, and far down upon it a blur which might have been Alfs bare white head.

Folly had taken him so far, and folly drove him on. The wind fought him, tried to drive him back to the shelter of the abbey. Alf was gaining-Jehan could hardly see him now, even in the lulls between torrents of rain. Yet he struggled onward.

Something loomed over him so suddenly that he recoiled.

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It lived and breached, a monstrous shape that stank like Hell's own midden. A voice rose over the wind's howl, sounding almost in his ear. "Jehan-help me. Take the bridle."

Alf. And the shape was suddenly a soaked and trembling horse with its rider slumped over its neck. His numbed hands caught at the reins and gentled the long bony head that shied at first, then pushed against him. He hunted in his pocket and found the apple he had filched at supper, and there in the storm, with rain sluicing down the back of his neck, he fed it to the horse.

"Lead her up to the abbey," Alf said, again in his ear. The monk stood within reach, paying no heed to the wind or the rain. Warmth seemed to pour from him in delirious waves.

The wind that had fought Jehan now lent him all its aid, almost carrying him up the road to the gate.

In the lee of the wall, Alf took the reins. "Go in and open up."

Jehan did as he was told. Before he could heave the gate well open, Brother Kyriell peered out of his cell, rumped and unwontedly surly. "What goes on here?" he demanded sharply.

Jehan shot him a wild glance. The gate swung open; the horse clattered over the threshold. On seeing Alf, Brother Kyriell swallowed what more he would have said and hastened forward.

"Jehan," Alf said, "stable the mare and see that she's fed." Even as he spoke he eased the rider from her back. More than rain glistened in the light of Brother Kyriell's lamp: blood, lurid scarlet and rust-brown, both fresh and dried. "Kyriell-help me carry him."

They bore him on his own cloak through the court and down the passage to the infirmary. Even when they laid him in a cell, he did not move save for the rattle and catch of tormented breathing.

Brother Kyriell left with many glances over his shoulder. Alf paid him no heed. For a moment he paused, buffeted by wave on wave of pain. With an effort that made him gasp, he shielded his mind against it. His shaking hands folded back the cloak,

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caressing its rich dark fabric, drawing strength from the contact.

The body beneath was bare but for a coarse smock like a serf's, and terrible to see: brutally beaten and flogged; marked with deep oozing burns; crusted with mud and blood and other, less mentionable stains. Three ribs were cracked, the right leg broken in two places, and the left hand crushed; it looked as if it had been trampled. Sore wounds, roughly tied up with strips of the same cloth as the smock, torn and filthy and too long neglected.

Carefully he began to cleanse the battered flesh, catching his breath at the depth and raggedness of some of the wounds. They were filthy and far from fresh; yet they had suffered no infection at all.

Alf came last to the face. A long cut on the forehead had bled and dried and bled again, and made the damage seem worse than it was. One side was badly bruised and swollen, but nothing was broken; the rest had taken no more than a cut and a bruise or two.

Beneath it all, he was young, lean as a panther, with skin as white as Alf's own. A youth, just come to manhood and very good to look on. Almost too much

so. Even with all his hurts, that was plain to see.

Alf tore his eyes from that face. But the features haunted him. Eagle-proud, finely drawn beneath beard and bruises. The cast of them was uncanny: eldritch.

Resolutely Alf focused upon the tormented body. He closed his eyes, seeking in his mind for the stillness, the core of cool fire which made him what he was. There was peace there, and healing.

Nothing. Only turmoil and a roiling mass of pain. His own turmoil, the other's agony, together raised a barrier he could not cross. He tried. He beat upon it. He strained until the sweat ran scalding down his sides.

Nothing.

He must have groaned aloud. Jehan was standing beside him, eyes dark with anxiety. "Brother Alf? Are you all right?"

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The novice's presence bolstered him. He nodded and breathed deep, shuddering. Jehan was not convinced. "Brother Alf, you're sick. You ought to be in bed yourself."

"It's not that kind of sickness." He reached for a splint, a roll of bandages. His hands were almost steady. "You'll have to help me with this. Here; so."

There was peace of a sort in dial slow labor. Jehan had a feeling for it; his hands were big but gentle, and they needed little direction.

After a long while, it was done. Alf knelt by the bed, staring at his handiwork, calm at last—a blank calm.

Jehan set something on the bed. Wet leather, redolent of horses: a set of saddlebags. "These were on the mare's saddle," he said. "And the mare . . . she's splendid! She's no vagabond's nag. Unless," he added with a doubtful glance at the stranger, "he stole her."

"Does he look like a thief?"

"He looks as if he's been tortured."

"He has." Alf opened the saddlebags. They were full; one held a change of clothing, plain yet rich. The other bore a flask, empty but holding still a ghost of wine, and a crust of bread and an apple or two, and odds and ends of metal and leather.

Amid this was a leather pouch, heavy for its size. Alf poured its contents into his hand: a few coins and a ring, a signet of silver and sapphire. The stone bore a proud device: a seabird in flight surmounted by a crown.

Jehan leaned close to see, and looked up startled. "Rhiyana!"

"Yes. The coins are Rhiyanan, too." Alf turned the ring to catch the light.

"See how the stone's carved. Guidion rex et imperator. It's the King's own seal."

Jehan stared at the wounded man. "That's not Gwydion. Gwydion must be over eighty. And what's his ring doing here? Rhiyana is across the Narrow Sea, and we're the breadth of Anglia away from even that."

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"But we're only two days' ride from Gwynedd, whose King had his fostering at Gwydion's hands. Look here: a penny from Gwynedd."

"Is he a spy?"

"With his King's own seal to betray him?"

"An envoy, then." Jehan regarded him, as fascinated by his face as Alf had been. "He looks like the elf-folk. You know that story, don't you, Brother Alf? My nurse used to tell it to me. She was Rhiyanan, you see, like my mother. She called the King the Elvenking."

"I've heard the tales," Alf said. "Some of them. Pretty fancies for a nursery."

Jehan bridled. "Not all of them. Brother Alf! She said that the King was so fair of face, he looked like an elven lord. He used to ride through the kingdom, and he brought joy wherever he went; though he was no coward, he'd never fight if there was any way at all to win peace. That's why Rhiyana never

fight wars."

"But it never refuses to intervene in other kingdoms' troubles."

"Maybe that's what this man has been doing. There's been fighting on the border between Gwynedd and Anglia. He might have been trying to stop it."

"Little luck he's had, from the look of him."

"The King should have come himself. Nurse said no one could keep up a quarrel when he was about. Though maybe he's getting too feeble to travel. He's terribly old."

"There are the tales."

"Oh," Jehan snorted. "That's the pretty part. About how he has a court of elvish folk and never grows old. His court is passing fair by all I've ever heard, but I can't believe he isn't a creaking wreck. I'll wager he dyes his hair and keeps the ogles at a distance."

Alf smiled faintly. "I hope you aren't betting too high." He yawned and stretched. "I'll spend the night here. You, my lad, had better get back to your own bed before Brother Owein misses you."

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"Brother Owein sleeps like the dead. If the dead could snore." "We know they'll rise again. Quick, before Owein proves it."

Jehan had kindled a fire in the room's hearth; Alf lay in front of it, wrapped in his habit. Even yet the stranger had not moved, but he was alive, his pain gnawing at the edge of Alf's shield. But worse still was the knowledge that Alf could have healed what the other suffered, but for his own, inner confusion. How could he master another's bodily pain, if he could not master that of his own mind?

If I must be what I am, he cried into the darkness, then let me be so. Don't weigh me down with human weakness!

The walls remained, stronger than ever.

As Alf slept, he dreamed. He was no longer in St. Ruan's, no longer a cloistered monk, but a young knight with an eagle's face, riding through hills that rose black under the low sky. His gray mare ran lightly, with sure feet, along a steep stony track. Before them, tall on a crag, loomed a castle. After the long wild journey, broken by nights in hillmen's huts or under the open sky, it should have been a welcome sight. It was ominous.

But he had a man to meet there. He drew himself up and shortened the reins; the mare lifted her head and quickened her step.

The walls took them and wrapped them in darkness.

Within, torchlight was dim. Men met them, men-at-arms, seven of them. As the rider dismounted, they closed around him. The mare's ears flattened; she sidled, threatening.

He gentled her with a touch and said, "I'll stable her myself."

None of the men responded. The rider led the mare forward, and they parted, falling into step behind.

The stable was full, but a man led a horse out of its stall to make room for the mare. The rider unsaddled her and rubbed

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her down, and fed her with his own hands; when she had eaten her fill, he threw his cloak over her and left her with a few soft words.

Alone now, he walked within a circle of armed men, pacing easily as if it were an honor guard. But the back of his neck prickled. With an effort he kept his hand away from his sword. Fara was safe, warding his possessions, among them the precious signet. He could defend himself. There was no need to fear.

The shadows mocked his courage. Cold hostility walled him in.

It boded ill for his embassy. Yet Lord Rhydderch had summoned him, and although the baron had a name for capricious cruelty, the envoy had not expected to fail. He never had.

They ascended a steep narrow stair and gathered in a guardroom. There the men-at-arms halted. Without a word they turned on their captive.

His sword was out, a baleful glitter, but there was no room to wield it. Nor would he shed blood if he could help it. One contemptuous blow sent the blade flying.

Hands seized him. That touched his pride. His fist struck flesh, bone. Another blow met metal; a sixfold weight bore him to the floor, onto the body of the man he had felled.

Rare anger sparked, but he quenched it. They had not harmed him yet. He lay still, though they spat upon him and called him coward; though they stripped him and touched his body in ways that made his lips tighten and his eyes flicker dangerously; even though they bound him with chains, rusted iron, cruelly tight.

They hauled him to his feet, looped the end of the chain through a ring in the ceiling, stretched his arms taut above his head. His toes barely touched the floor; all his weight hung suspended from his wrists.

When he was well-secured, a stranger entered, a man in mail. He was not a tall man, but thickset, with the dark weathered features of a hillman, and eyes so pale they seemed to have no color at all. When he pushed back his mail-coif, his hair was as black as the bristle of his brows and shot with gray.

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He stood in front of the prisoner, hands on hips. "So," he said. "The rabbit came to the trap."

The other kept his head up, his voice quiet. "Lord Rhydderch, I presume? Alun of Caer Gwent, at your service."

"Pretty speech, in faith, and a fine mincing way he has about it." Rhydderch prodded him as if he had been a bullock at market. "And a long stretch of limb to add to it. Your King must be fond of outsize beauties."

"The King of Rhiyana," Alun said carefully, "has sent me as his personal envoy. Any harm done to me is as harm to the royal person. Will you not let me go?"

Rhydderch laughed, a harsh bark with no mirth in it. "The Dotard of Caer Gwent? What can he do if I mess up his fancy-boy a little?"

"I bear the royal favor. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Your King's no king of mine, boy."

"I came in good faith, seeking peace between Gwynedd and Anglia. Would you threaten that peace?"

"My King," said Rhydderch, "will pay well for word of Rhiyana's plotting with Gwynedd. And Anglia between, in the pincers."

"That has never been our intent."

Rhydderch looked him over slowly. "What will your old pander pay to have you back?"

"Peace," replied Alun, "and forgiveness of this insult."

Rhydderch sneered. "Richard pays in gold. How much will Gwydion give for his minion? Or maybe Kiihwch would be more forthcoming. Gwynedd is a little kingdom and Kiihwch is a little king, a morsel for our Lion's dinner."

"Let me go, and I will ask."

"Oh, no," said Rhydderch. "I'm not a fool. I'll set a price, and I'll demand it. And amuse myself with you while I wait for it."

There was no dealing with that mind. It was like a wild boar's, black, feral, and entirely intent upon its own course.

Alun pitched his voice low, level, and very, very calm. "Rhydderch, I know what you plan. You will break me beyond

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ail mending and cast me at my King's feet, a gauntlet for your war. And while you challenge Rhiyana, you prick Gwynedd to fury with your incessant driving of the hill-folk to raid beyond the border. Soon Angtia's great Lion must come, lured into the war you have made; you will set the kings upon one another and let them destroy themselves, while you take the spoils."

While he spoke, he watched the man's face. First Rhydderch reddened, then he



paled, and his eyes went deadly cold. Alun smiled. "So you plan, Rhydderch. You think, with your men-at-arms and your hill-folk and all your secret allies, that you are strong enough to take a throne and wise enough to keep it. Have you failed to consider the forces with which you play? Kilhwch is young, granted, and more than a bit of a hellion, but he is the son of Bran Dhu, and blood kin to Gwydion of Rhiyana. He may prove a stronger man than you reckon on. And Gwydion will support him."

"Gwydion!\* Rhydderch spat. The coward King, the royal fool. He wobbles on his throne, powdered and painted like an old whore, and brags of his miraculous youth. His so-called knights win their spurs on the dancing floor and their titles in bed. And not with women, either."

Alun's smile did not waver. "If that is so, then why do you waste time in provoking him to war?"

A vein was pulsing in Rhydderch's temple, but he grinned ferally. "Why not? It's the safest of all my bets."

"Is it? Then Richard must be the most perilous of all, for he is a lion in battle-quite unlike my poor Gwydion. How will he look on this plot of yours, Rhydderch? Rebellion in the north and a brother who would poison him at a word and the dregs of his Crusade, all these he has to face. And now you bring him this folly."

"Richard can never resist a good fight. He won't touch me. More likely hell reward me."

"Ah. A child, a warmonger, and a dotard. Three witless kings, and three kingdoms ripe for the plucking by a man with strength

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and skill." Alun shook his head. "Rhydderch, has it ever occurred to you that you are a fool?"

A mailed fist lashed out. Alun's head rocked with the force of the blow. "You vain young cockerel," Rhydderch snarled. "Strung up in my own castle, and you crow like a dunghill king. Ill teach you to sing a new song."

The fist struck again in the same place. Alun choked back a cry. Rhydderch laughed and held out his hand. One of his men placed a dark shape in it.

In spite of himself, Alun shrank. Rhydderch shook out a whip of thongs knotted with pellets of lead. Alun made one last, desperate effort to penetrate that opaque brain.

No use. It was mad. The worst kind of madness, which passes for sanity, because it knows itself and glories in its own twisted power. Alun's gentle strength was futile against it.

He felt as if he were tangled in the coils of a snake, its venom coursing through his veins, waking the passion which was as deep as his serenity. As many-headed pain lashed his body, his wrath stirred and kindled. He forgot even torment in his desperate struggle for control. He forgot the world itself. All his consciousness focused upon the single battle, the great tide of his calmness against the fire of rage.

The world within became the world without. All his body was a fiery agony, and his mind was a flame. Rhydderch stood before him, face glistening with sweat, whip slack in his hand. He sneered at his prisoner. "Beautiful as a girl, and weak as one besides. You're Rhiyanan to the core."

Alun drew a deep shuddering breath. The rage stood at bay, but it touched his face, his eyes. "If you release me now, I shall forgive this infamy, although I shall never forget it."

"Let you go?" Rhydderch laughed. "I've hardly begun."

"Do you count it honorable to flog a man in chains, captured by treachery?"

"A man, no. You, I hardly count as a villein's brat; and you'll be less when I'm done with you."

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"Whatever you do to me, I remain a Knight of the Crown of Rhiyana. Gwydion is far from the weakling you deem him; and he shall not forget what you have done

to him."

"From fainting lass to royal lord in two breaths. You awe me." Rhydderch tossed the whip aside. "Some of my lads here like to play a little before they get down to business. Maybe I should let them, while you're still able to enjoy it."

The rage lunged for the opening. Alun's eyes blazed green; he bared his teeth. But his voice was velvet-soft. "Let them try, Rhydderch. Let them boast of it afterward. They shall need die consolation, for they shall never touch another: man, woman, or boy." His eyes flashed round the half-circle of men. "Who ventures it? You, Huw? Owein? Dafydd, great bull and vaunter?"

Each one started at his name and crossed himself.

Rhydderch glared under his black brows. "You there, get him down and hold him. He can't do a thing to you."

"Can I not?" asked Alun. "Have you not heard of what befalls mortals who make shift to force elf-blood?"

The baron snarled. "Get him down, I say! He's trying to scare us off."

One man made bold to speak. "But-but-my lord, his eyes!"

"A trick of the light. Get him down!"

Alun lowered his arms. "No need. See. I am down."

Eyes rolled; voices muttered.

"Damn you sons of curs! You forgot to fasten the chain!" Rhydderch snatched at it. Alun dropped to his knees. He was still feral-eyed. A blow, aimed at his head, missed.

He tossed back his hair and said, "Nay, I was firm-bound. Think you that the Elvenking would risk a mortal on such a venture as this?"

"You're no less mortal than I am." Rhydderch hurled Alun full-length upon the floor. Swift as a striking snake, his boot came down.

Someone screamed.

Pain had roused wrath; pain slew it. In red-rimmed clarity, Alun saw all his pride and folly. He had come to lull Rhydderch

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into making peace, and fallen instead into his enemy's own madness. And now he paid.

That clarity was his undoing; for he did not move then to stop what he had begun. Even as he paused, they were upon him, fear turned to bitter scorn. After an eternity came blessed nothingness.

He woke in the midst of a choking stench. Oddly, he found that harder to bear than the agony of his body. Pain had some pretense to nobility, even such pain as this, but that monumental stink was beyond all endurance.

Gaspings, gagging, he lifted his head. He had lain face down in it. Walls of stone hemmed him in—a midden with but one barred exit. The iron bars were forged in the shape of a cross. Rhydderch was taking no chances.

A convulsion seized him, bringing new agony: the spasming of an empty stomach, the knife-sharp pain of cracked ribs. For a long while he had to lie as he was. Then, with infinite caution, he drew one knee under him. The right leg would not bear his weight; he swayed, threw out a hand, cried out in agony as the outraged flesh struck the wall. His other, the right hand, caught wildly at stone and held. Through a scarlet haze he saw what first he had extended. It no longer looked even remotely like a hand.

His sword hand.

He closed his eyes and sought inward for strength. It came slowly, driving back the pain until he could almost bear it. But the cost to his broken body was high. Swiftly, while he could still see, he swept his eyes about.

One corner was almost clean. Inch by inch, hating the sounds of pain his movements wrenched from him, he made his way to it. Two steps upright, the rest crawling upon his face.

Gradually his senses cleared. He hurt—oh, he hurt. And one pain, less than the rest, made him burn with shame. After all his threats—and empty, they had not been—still—still—

He found that he was weeping: he who had not wept even

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as a child. Helpless, child's tears, born of pain and shame and disgust at his own massive folly. All this horror was no one's fault but his own.

Even Kilhwch had warned him. Wild young Kilhwch, with his father's face but his mother's gray eyes, and a little of the family wisdom. "The border lords on both sides make a fine nest of adders, but Rhydderch is the worst of them. He'd flay his own mother if it would buy him an extra acre. Work your magic with the others as much as you like; I could use a little quiet there. But stay away from Rhydderch."

Kilhwch had not known of the baron's invitation to a parley. If he had, he would have flown into one of his rages. Yet that would not have stopped Alun. His shield was failing. One last effort; then he could rest. He arranged his body as best he might, broken as it was, and extended his mind.

The normal rhythm of a border castle flowed through him, overlaid with the blackness that was Rhydderch and with a tension born of men gathering for war. Rhydderch himself was gone; a steward's mind murmured of a rendezvous with a hill-chieftain.

Alun could do nothing until dark, and it was barely past noon. Thirst burned him; hunger was a dull ache. Yet nowhere in that heap of offal could he find food or drink.

He would not weaken again into tears. His mind withdrew fully into itself, a deep trance yet with a hint of awareness which marked the passing of time. Darkness roused him, and brought with it full awareness of agony. For a long blood-red while he could not move at all. By degrees he dragged himself up. As he had reached the comer, so he reached the gate. It opened before him.

How he came to the stable, unseen and unnoticed, he never knew. There was mist the color of torment, and grinding pain, and the tension of power stretched to the fullest; and at last, warm sweet breath upon his cheek and sleek horseflesh under

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his hand. With all the strength that remained to him, he saddled and bridled his mare, wrapping himself in the cloak which had covered her. She knelt for him; he half-climbed, half-fell into the saddle. She paced forward.

The courtyard was dark in starlight. The gate yawned open; the sentry stood like a shape of stone. Fara froze. He stirred upon her back. He could not speak through swollen lips, but his words rang in his brain: Now, while I can hold the man and the pain-run, my beauty. Run!

She sprang into a gallop, wind-smooth, wind-swift. Her rider clung to her, not caring where she went. She turned her head to the south and lengthened her stride.

Only when the castle was long gone, hidden in a fold of the hills, did she slow to a running walk. She kept that pace hour after hour, until Alun was like to fall from her back. At last she found a stream and knelt, so that he had but little distance to fall; he drank in long desperate gulps, dragged himself a foot or two from the water, and let darkness roll over him.

Voices sounded, low and lilting, speaking a tongue as odd as those dark hills. While they spoke he understood, but when they were done, he could not remember what they had said.

Hands touched him, waking pain. Through it he saw a black boar, ravening. He cried out against it. The hands started away and returned. There were tightnesses: bandages, roughly bound; visions of the herb-healer, who must see this tortured creature; Rhuawn's tunic to cover his nakedness. And again the black boar looming huge, every bristle distinct, an ember-light in its eyes and the scarlet of blood upon its tusks. He called the lightnings down upon it.

The voices cried out. One word held in his memory: Dewin, that was wizard. And then all the voices were gone. Only Fara remained, and the pain, and what healing and clothing the hill-folk had given.

Healing. He must have healing. Again he mounted, again he rode through the crowding shadows. At the far extremity of his

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inner sight, there was a light. He pursued it, and Fara bore him through the wild hills, over a broad and turbulent water, and on into darkness.

The fire burned low. Soon the bell would ring for Matins. Alf rose, stiff with the memory of torment, and looked down upon the wounded man. No human being could have endured what he had endured, not only torture but five full days after, without healing, without food, riding by day and by night.

Alf touched the white fine face. No, it was not human. Power throbbed behind it, low now and slow, but palpably present. It had brought the stranger here to ancient Ynys Witrin, and to the one being like him in all of Gwynedd or Anglia, the one alone who might have healed him.

Who could not, save as humans do, with splint and bandage and simple waiting. He had set each shattered bone with all the skill he had and tended the outraged flesh as best he knew how. The life that had ebbed low was rising slowly with tenacity that must be of elf-kind, that had kept death at bay throughout that grim ride.

He slept now, a sleep that healed. Alf envied him that despite its cost. His dreams were none of pain; only of peace, and of piercing sweetness.

Consciousness was like dawn, slow in growing, swift in its completion. Alun lay for a time, arranging his memories around his hurts. In all of it, he could not see himself upon a bed, his body tightly bandaged, warm and almost comfortable. Nor could he place that stillness, that scent of stone and coolness and something faint, sweet-apples, incense.

He opened his eyes. Stone, yes, all about: a small room, very plain yet with a hearth and a fire, burning applewood, and a single hanging which seemed woven of sunlight on leaves.

Near the fire was a chair, and in it a figure. Brown cowl, tonsure haloed by pale hair—a monk, intent upon a book. His face in profile was very young and very fair.

The monk looked up. Their gazes met, sea-gray and silver-gilt; warp and woof, and the shuttle flashing between. Alf's image; the flicker of amusement was the other's, whose knightly hands had never plied a loom.

As swiftly as fencers in a match, they disengaged. Alf was on his feet, holding white-knuckled to the back of his chair. With an effort he unclenched his fingers and advanced to the bed.

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Alun's eyes followed him. His face was quiet, betraying none of his pain. "How long since I came here?" he asked.

Three days," Alf answered, "and five before that of riding."

"Eight days." Alun closed his eyes. "I was an utter and unpardonable fool."

Alf poured well-watered mead from the beaker by the bed and held the cup to Alun's lips. The draught brought a ghost of color to the wan cheeks, but did not distract the mind behind them. "Is there news? Have you heard—"

Alf crumbled a bit of bread and fed it to him. "No news. Though there's a tale in the villages of a mighty wizard who rode over the hills in a trail of shooting stars and passed away into the West. Opinions are divided as to the meaning of the portent, whether it presages war or peace, feast or famine. Or maybe it was only one of the Fair Folk in a fire of haste."

A glint of mirth touched the gray eyes. "Maybe it was. You've heard no word of war?"

"Not hereabouts. I think you've put the fear of Annwn into too many people." That will never last," Alun murmured. The black boar will rise, and soon. And I..." His good hand moved down his body. "I pay for my folly. How soon before I ride?"

"Better to ask, 'How soon before I walk?'"

He shook his head slightly. "Ill ride before then. How soon?"

Alf touched his splinted leg, his bound hand. Shattered bone had begun to knit, torn muscle to mend itself, with inhuman speed, but slowly still. "A month," he said. "No sooner."

"Brother," Aiun said softly, "I am not human."

"If you were, I'd tell you to get used to your bed, for you'd never leave it."

Alun's lips thinned. "I'm not so badly hurt. Once my leg knits, I can ride."

"You rode with it broken for five days. It will take six times that, and a minor miracle, to undo the damage. Unless you'd prefer to live a cripple."

"I could live lame if there was peace in Gwynedd and Anglia"

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and Rhiyana, and three kings safe on their thrones, and Rhydderch rendered powerless."

"Lame and twisted and racked with pain, and bereft of your sword hand. A cause for war even if you put down Rhydderch, if knights in Rhiyana are as mindful of their honor as those in Anglia."

Alun drew a breath, ragged with pain. "Knights in Rhiyana pay heed to their King. Who will let no war begin over one man's folly. I will need a horse-litter, Brother, and perhaps an escort, for as soon as may be. Will you pass my request to your Abbot?"

"I can give you his answer now," Alf replied. "No. The Church frowns on suicide."

"I won't die. Tell your Abbot, Brother. The storm is about to break, i must go before it destroys us all."

Dom Morwin was in the orchard under a gray sky, among trees as old as the abbey itself. As Alf came to walk with him, he stooped stiffly, found two sound windfalls, and tossed one to his friend.

Alf caught it and polished it on his sleeve. As he bit into it, Morwin asked, "How is your nurseling?"

"Lively," Alf answered. "He came to this morning, looked about, and ordered a horse-litter."

The Abbot lifted an eyebrow. "I would have thought that he was on his deathbed. He certainly looked it yesterevening when I glanced in."

"He won't die. He won't be riding about for a while yet, either. Whatever he may think,"

"He sounds imperious for a foundling."

That, he's not. Look." Alf reached into the depths of his habit and drew out the signet in its pouch.

Morwin examined the ring for a long moment. "It's his?"

"He carried it. He wanted you to see it."

The other turned it in his hands. "So-he's one of Gwydion's elven-folk. I'd wondered if the tales were true."

Truer than you thought before, at least."

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Morwin's glance was sharp. "Doubts, Alf?"

"No." Alf sat on a fallen trunk. "We're alike. When he woke, we met, eye, mind. It was painful to draw back and to talk as humans talk. He was . . . very calm about it."

"How did he get here, as he was, with his King's signet in his pocket?"

"He rode. He was peacemaking for Gwydion, but he ran afoul of a lord he couldn't bewitch. He escaped toward the only help his mind could see. He wasn't looking for human help by then. I was the closest one of his kind. And St. Ruan's is . . . St. Ruan's."

"He's failed in his errand, then. Unless war will wait for the winter to end and for him to heal."

"He says it won't. I know it won't. That's why he ordered the horse-litter. I refused, in your name. He wanted something more direct."

"Imperious." The Abbot contemplated his half-eaten apple. The border of Gwynedd is dry tinder waiting for a spark. There are barons on both sides

who'd be delighted to strike one. And Richard would egg them on."

"Exactly. Gwydion, through Alun, was trying to prevent that."

"Was? Your Alun's lost, then?"

"For Gwydion's purposes. Though he'd have me think otherwise."

"Exactly how bad is it?"

"Bad," Alf answered. "Not deadly, but bad. If he's careful, he'll ride again, even walk. I don't know if hell ever wield a sword. And that is if he does exactly as I tell him. If he gets up and tries to run his King's errands, he'll end a cripple. I told him so. He told me to get a litter."

"Does he think he can do any better now than he did before?"

"I don't know what he thinks!" Alf took a deep breath. More quietly he said,

"Maybe you can talk to him. I'm only a monk. You're the Lord Abbot."

Morwin's eyes narrowed. "Alf. How urgent is this? Is it just

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a loyal man and a foster father looking out for his ward, and a general desire for peace? Or does it go deeper? What will happen if Alun does nothing?"

When they were boys together, they had played a game. Morwin would name a name, and Alf would look inside, and that name would appear as a thread weaving through the world-web; and he would tell his friend where it went. It had been a game then, with a touch of the forbidden in it, for it was witchery. As they grew older they had stopped it.

The tapestry was there. He could see it, feel it: the shape, the pattern. He lived in it and through it, a part of it and yet also an observer. Like a god, he had thought once; strangling the thought, for it was blasphemy.

Gwydion, he thought. Alun. Gwynedd. In his mind he stood before the vast loom with its edges lost in infinity, and his finger followed a skein of threads, deep blue and blood-red and fire-gold. Blood and fire, a wave of peace, a red tide of war. A pattern, shirting, elusive, yet clear enough. If this happened, and this did not; if. . .

Gray sky lowered over him; Morwin's face hovered close. Old-it was so old. He covered his eyes.

When he could bear to see again, Morwin was waiting, frowning. "What was it? What did you see?"

"War," Alf muttered. "Peace. Gwydion-Alun- He can't leave this place. Hell fail again, and this time hell die. And he knows it. I told him what the Church thinks of suicide."

"What will happen?"

"War," Alf said again. "As he saw it. Richard will ride to Gwynedd and Kilhwch will come to meet him; Rhiyana will join the war for Kilhwch's sake. Richard wounded, Kilhwch dead, Gwydion broken beyond all mending; and lords of three kingdoms tearing at each other like jackals when the lions have gone."

"There's no hope?"

Alf shivered. It was cold, and the effort of seeing left him weak. "There may be. I see the darkest colors because they're

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strongest. Maybe there can be peace. Another Alun ... Rhyd-derch's death ... a Crusade to divert Richard: who knows what can happen?"

"It will have to happen soon."

"Before spring."

Morwin began to walk aimlessly, head bent, hands clasped behind him. Alf followed. He did not slip into the other's mind. That pact they had made, long ago.

They came to the orchard's wall and walked along it, circling the enclosure.

"It's not for us to meddle in the affairs of kings," Morwin said at last. "Our part is to pray, and to let the world go as it will." His eyes upon Alf were bright and wicked. "But the world has gone its way into our abbey. I'm minded to heed it. Prayer won't avert a war."

"Won't it?"

The Lord often appreciates a helping hand," the Abbot said. "Our King is seldom without his loyal Bishop Aylmer, even on the battlefield. And the Bishop might be kindly disposed toward a messenger of mine bringing word of the troubles on the border."

"And?"

"Peace. Maybe. If an alliance could be made firm between Gwynedd and Anglia . . ."

"My lord Abbot! It's corrupted you to have a worldling in your infirmary."

"I was always corrupt. Tell Sir Alun that I'll speak to him tonight before Compline."

Alun would have none of it. "I will not place one of your Brothers in danger," he said. "For there is danger for a monk of Anglia on Rhiyana's errand.

Please, my lord, a litter is all I ask."

The Abbot regarded him as he lay propped up with pillows, haggard and hollow-eyed and lordly-proud. "We will not quarrel, sir. You may not leave until you are judged well enough to leave."

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Which will not be soon enough to complete your embassy. My messenger will go in your stead."

For a long moment Alun was silent. At length he asked, "Whom will you send?" Morwin glanced sidewise at the monk who knelt, tending the fire. "Brother Alfred," he answered.

The flames roared. Alf drew back from the blistering heat and turned.

"Yes," Morwin said as if he had not been there. "The Bishop asked for him. Ill send him, and give him your errand besides."

"Morwin," Alf whispered. "Domne."

Neither heeded him. Alun nodded slowly. "If it is he, then I cannot object. He shall have my mare. She frets in her stall; and no other horse is as swift or as tireless as she."

"That's a princely gift."

"He has need of all speed. How soon may he go?"

"Hell need a night to rest and prepare. Tomorrow."

Alf stood, trembling uncontrollably. They did not look at him. Alun's eyes were closed; Morwin stared at his sandaled feet. "Domne," he said. "Domne, you can't send me. You know what lam."

The Abbot raised his eyes. They were very bright and very sad. "Yes, I know what you are. That's why I'm sending you."

"Morwin--"

"You swore three vows, Brother. And one of them was obedience."

Alf bowed his head. "I will go because you command me to go, but not because I wish to. The world will not be kind to such a creature as I am."

"Maybe you need a little unktndness." Morwin turned his back on Alf, nodded to Alun, and left.

The Rhiyanan gazed quietly at the ceiling. "It hurts him to do this, but he thinks it is best."

"I know," Alf said. He had begun to tremble again. "I'm a coward. I haven't left St. Ruan's since-since-God help me! I can't remember. These walls have grown up round my bones."

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"Time then to hew your way out of them."

"It frightens me. Three kingdoms in the balance; and only my hand to steady them."

Alun turned his head toward Alf. "If you will let me go, you can stay here."

The other laughed without mirth. "Oh, no, my lord! Ill do as my Abbot bids me. You will do as I bid you, which is to stay here and heal, and pray for me."

"You ask a great deal, Brother."

"So does the Abbot," Alf said. "Good night, my lord of Rhiyana."

"'She'-that is, the Soul of the World-'woven throughout heaven from its center

to its outermost limits, and enfolding it without in a circle, and herself revolving within herself, began a divine beginning of ceaseless and rational life for all time.\* So, Plato. Now the Christian doctors say-" Jehan was not listening. He was not even trying to listen, who ordinarily was the best of students. Alf broke off and closed the book softly, and folded his hands upon it. "What's the trouble, Jehan?" The novice looked up from the precious vellum, on which he had been scribbling without heed or pattern. His eyes were wide and a little wild. "You look awful, Brother Alf. Brother Rowan says you were praying in the chapel all night." "I do that now and again," Alf said. "But-" Jehan said. "But they say you're leaving!" Alf sighed. He was tired, and his body ached from a night upon cold stones. Jehan's pain only added to the burden of his troubles. He answered shortly, flatly. "Yes. I'm leaving." "Why? What's happened?"

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"I've been here too long. Dom Morwin is sending me to Bishop Aylmer." "Just like that?" "Just like that," Alf replied. "Don't worry. You won't go back to Brother Osruc. You'll take care of Alun for me; and he has a rare store of learning. He'll keep on with your Greek, and if you behave, he'll let you try a little Arabic." The hurt in Jehan's eyes had turned to fire. "So I'm to turn paynim while you run at the Bishop's heel. It's not so easy to get rid of me, Brother Alf. Take me with you." "You know that's not my decision to make." "Take me with you." "No." It was curt, final. "With reference to Plato's doctrine, Chalcidius observes-" "Brother Alf!" "Chalcidius observes-" Jehan bit back what more he would have said. There was no opposing that quiet persistence. Yet he was ready to cry, and would not, for pride. It was the first lesson with Alf which had ever gone sour, and it was the last Jehan would ever have. When he was let go, having disgraced all his vaunted scholarship, he wanted to hide like a whipped pup. For pride and for anger, he went where his duties bade him go. Alun was awake and atone. Jehan stood over him. "Brother Alf is going away," he said. "He's been sent to Bishop Aylmer. Bishop Aylmer is with the King. And it's the King you want to get to. What did you make him go for?" Jehan's rude words did not seem to trouble Alun. "I didn't make him go. It was your Abbot's choice. A wise one in his reckoning, and well for your Brother. He was stifling here." "He doesn't want to go. He hates the thought of it." "Of course he does. He's afraid. But he has to go, Jehan. For his vows' sake and for his own." Jehan glared at him. "Alone, sir? Do his vows say he has to

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travel the length and breadth of Anglia by himself, a monk who looks like a boy, who doesn't even know how to hold a knife?" "His vows, no. But he will have my mare and such aid as I can give him, and he has more defenses than you know of." "Not enough." Jehan tossed his head, lion-fierce. "I came here for him. If he goes, I'll go." "And what of your Abbot? What of your God?" "My God knows that I can serve Him as well with the Bishop as at St. Ruan's. The Abbot can think what he likes."



"Proud words for one who would be a monk."

"I was a monk because Alf was!"

Jehan fell silent, startled by his own outburst. Slowly he sank down, drawing into a knot on the floor. "I was a monk because Alf was," he repeated. "I never meant to be one. I wanted to be a warrior-priest like Bishop Aylmer, but I wanted to be a scholar too. People laughed at me. 'A scholar!' my father yelled at me. 'God's teeth! you're not built for it.' Then I rode hell-for-leather down a road near St. Ruan's, with a hawk on my wrist and a wild colt under me and my men-at-arms long lost, and I nigh rode down a monk who was walking down the middle.

"I stopped to apologize, and we talked, and somehow we got onto Aristotle. I'd read what I could find, without really knowing what I was reading and with no one to tell me. And this person knew. More: he could read Greek. There in the middle of the road, we disputed like philosophers, though he really was one and I was a young cock-a-whoop who'd got into his tutor's books.

"Then and there, I decided I had to be what he was, or as close as I could come, since he was brilliant and I was only too clever for my own good. I fought and I pleaded and I threatened, and my father finally let me come here. And now Brother Alf is going away and taking the heart out of St. Ruan's." Alun shifted painfully, waving away Jehan's swift offer of help. "I think, were I your Abbot, I would question your vocation."

"It's there," Jehan said with certainty. "God is there, and my books. But not-not St. Ruan's. Not without Brother Alf."

"Jehan." Alun spoke slowly, gently. "You're startled and hurt.

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Think beyond yourself now. Alfred is much older than he looks, and much less placid. He has troubles which life here cannot heal. He has to leave."

"I know that. I'm not trying to stop him. I want to go with him."

"What can you do for him?"

"Love him," Jehan answered simply.

Alun's eyes closed. He looked exhausted and drawn with pain. His voice when he spoke was a sigh. "You can serve him best now by accepting what your Abbot says must be. Can you do that?"

"And leave him to go alone?"

"If such is the Abbot's will. Can you do it, Jehan?"\*

Very slowly the other responded, "I... for him. If it's right. And only if."

"Go then. Be strong for him. He needs that more than anything else you can do for him."

Alf regarded Alun with sternness overlying concern. "You've been overexerting yourself."

The Rhiyanan's eyes glinted. "In bed, Brother? Oh, come!"

"Staying awake," Alf said. "Moving about. Trying your muscles." He touched the bandaged mass of Alun's sword hand. "The setting of this is very delicate. If you jar it, you'll cripple it. Perhaps permanently."

"It is not so already?" There was a touch of bitterness in the quiet voice.

"Maybe not." Alf continued his examination, which was less of hand and eye than of the mind behind them. "Your ribs are healing well. Your leg, too, Dec grafias. If you behave yourself and trust to the care in which I leave you, you!! prosper."

He folded back the coverlet and began to bathe as much of the battered body as was bare of bandages. Alun's eyes followed his hands. When Alf would have turned him onto his face, there was no weight in him; he floated face down a palm's width above the bed.

The monk faltered only for a moment. "Thank you," he said.

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After a moment he added, "If you take care not to let yourself be caught at it, you might do this as much as you can. It will spare your flesh."

Alun was on his back again; Alf could have passed his palm between body and

sheet. "I've been this way a little. There's more comfort in it."

"My lord." Alf's compassion was as palpable as a touch. "I'll do all your errand for you as best I can. That I swear to you."

"I'll miss you, Brother." The way he said it, it was more than a title. "And I've had thoughts. It will look odd for a monk to ride abroad on what is patently a blooded horse. With her I give you all that I have. My clothing is plain enough for a cleric, but secular enough to avert suspicion. Come; fetch it, and try it for size."

"My lord," Alf said carefully, "you're most kind. But I have no dispensation. I can't--"

"You can if I say you can." Morwin shut the door behind him. "Do what he tells you, Alf."

Slowly, under their eyes, he brought out Alun's belongings. The ring in its pouch he laid in the lord's lap. The rest he kept. It had been cleaned where it needed to be and treated with care. Indeed the garments were plain, deep blue, snow white. When the others turned away to spare his modesty, he hesitated.

With a sudden movement he shed his coarse brown habit. There was nothing beneath but his body. He shivered as he covered it with Alun's fine linen. In all his life, he had never known such softness so close to his skin. It felt like a sin.

The outer clothes were easier to bear, though he fumbled with them, uncertain of their fastenings. Alun helped him with words and Morwin with hands, until he stood up in the riding clothes of a knight.

"It fits well," Alun said. "And looks most well, my brother."

He could see himself in the other's mind, a tall youth, sword-slender, with a light proud carriage that belied the brown habit crumpled at his feet.

As soon as he saw, he tried to kill the pride that rose in him.

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He looked like a prince. An elven-prince, swift and strong, and beautiful. Yes; he was that. The rest might be a sham, a creation of cloth and stance, but beauty he had.

It would be a hindrance, and perhaps a danger. His pride died with the thought. "I don't think this is wise. I look too ... rich. Better that I seem to be what I am, a monk without money or weapons."

Both the Abbot and the knight shook their heads. "No," Morwin said. "Not with the horse you'll be riding. This way, you fit her."

"I don't fit myself!"

Morwin's face twisted. A moment only; then he controlled it. "You'll learn. It isn't the clothes that make the monk, Alf."

"Isn't it?" Alf picked up his habit and held it to him. "Each move I make is another cord severed."

"If all you've ever been is a robe and a tonsure," snapped Morwin, "God help us both."

The other stiffened. "Maybe that is all I've been."

"Don't start that," Morwin said with weary annoyance. "You're not the first man of God who's ever set aside his habit for a while, and you won't be the last. Take what's left of the day to get used to your clothes, and spend tonight in bed. Asleep. That's an order, Brother Alfred."

"Yes, Domne."

"And don't look so sulky. One obeys with a glad heart, the Rule says. Or at least, one tries to. Start trying. That's an order, too."

"Yes, Domne." Alf was not quite able to keep his lips from twitching.

"Immediately, Domne. Gladly, Domne."

"Don't add lying to the rest of your sins." But Morwin's glare lacked force.

"See me tonight before you go to bed. There are messages I want to give to Aylmer."

In spite of his promise to Alun, Jehan dragged himself through that long day. No one seemed to know that Brother Alf was

leaving, nor to care. Monks came and went often enough in so large an abbey. But never so far alone, through unknown country, and against their will besides.

At last he could bear it no longer. He gathered his courage and sought the lion in his den.

By good fortune, Abbot Morwin was alone, bent over the rolls of the abbey. He straightened as Jehan entered. 'This is stiff work for old bones,' he said. Jehan drew a deep breath. The Abbot did not seem annoyed to see him. Nor did he look surprised. 'Domne,' he said, 'you're sending Brother Alf away.'

Morwin nodded neutrally. That, in the volatile Abbot, was ominous.

'Please, Domne. I know he has to go. But must he go alone?'

'What makes you think that?'

Jehan found that he could not breathe properly. 'Then-then-he'll have company?'

'I've been considering it.' Morwin indicated a chair. 'Here, boy. Stop shaking and sit down.' He leaned back himself, toying with the simple silver cross he always wore. Jehan stared, half-mesmerized by the glitter of it. 'It's as well you came when you did; I was about to send for you. I've been thinking about that last letter from your father.'

The novice almost groaned aloud. The last thing he wanted to hear now was his father's opinion of his life in St. Ruan's.

But Morwin had no mercy. 'Remember what Earl Rogier said. That your life was your own, and you could ruin it by taking vows here if that was what you wanted. But he asked you first to try something else. He suggested the Templars. That's extreme; still, the more I think, the better his advice seems to be. I've decided to take it in my own way. I'm sending you to Bishop Aylmer.'

Bishop Aylmer . . . Bishop Aylmer. 'I'm going with Brother Alf!' It was a strangled shout.

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'Well now,' Morwin said, 'that would make sense, wouldn't it?'

Jehan hardly heard him. 'I'm going with Brother Alf. He told me I couldn't. He's going to be surprised.'

'I doubt it. I told him a little while ago. He was angry.'

'Angry, Domne?'

Morwin smiled. 'He said I was hanging for the sheep instead of for the lamb-and brought you these to travel in.'

On the table among the heavy codices was a bundle. Jehan's fingers remembered the weight and the feel of it-leather, cloth, the long hardness of a sword.

'My old clothes . . . but I've grown!'

'Try them. And afterward, find Alf. He'll tell you what you need to do.'

Miraculously everything fit, though the garments had been made for him just before he met Brother Alf upon the road, over a year ago, and he had grown half a head since. But Alf's skill with the needle was legendary. The boots alone seemed new, of good leather, with room enough to grow in.

It felt strange to be dressed like a nobleman again. He wished there were a mirror in the dormitory, and said a prayer to banish vanity. 'Not,' he added, 'that my face is anything to brag of.'

'Amen.'

He whipped about, hand to sword hilt. A stranger stood there, a tall young fellow who carried himself like a prince. He smiled wryly as Jehan stared, and said, 'Good day, my iord.'

'Brother Alf!' Jehan took him in and laughed for wonder. 'You look splendid.'

'Vanitas vaaitafum' Alf intoned dolefully. \* 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!' Though you look as if you can use that sword.'

Jehan let his hand fall from the hilt. 'You know I've had practice with Brother Ulf. 'Ulf for the body and Alf for the brain; that's how a monk is

made.'"

"So you're the one who committed that bit of doggerel. I should have known."

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Although Alf's voice was light, Jehan frowned. "What's the matter, Brother AhT  
"Why, nothing. I'm perfectly content. After all, misery loves company."

"It won't be misery. It will be splendid. You'll see. Well take Bishop Aylmer  
by storm and astound the King; and then well conquer the world."

The hour after Compline found Alf in none of his usual places: not in his cell  
where he should have been sleeping; not in the chapel where he might have kept  
vigil even against Morwin's command; and certainly not in the study where the  
Abbot had gone to wait for him. He had sung the last Office-no one could miss  
that voice, man-deep yet heartrendingly clear, rising above the mere human  
beauty of the choir-and he had sung with gentle rebellion in his brown habit.  
But then he had gone, and no one knew where.

It was intuition more than either logic or a careful search that brought  
Morwin to a small courtyard near the chapel. There in a patch of sere and  
frostbitten grass grew a morn tree. Ancient, twisted, stripped of its leaves,  
it raised its branches to me moon. Under it crouched a still and shadowed  
figure.

With much creaking of bones, Morwin sat beside him. The ground was cold; frost  
crackled as the Abbot settled upon it.

"I've never liked this place," Alf said, "or this tree. Though they say it grew  
from the staff of a saint, of the Arimathean himself . . . when I was very  
small I used to be afraid of it. It always seemed to be reaching for me. As if  
St. Ruan's were not for the likes of me; as if I were alien and the Thorn knew  
it, and it would drag me away, back to my own people."

"The people under the Tor?" Morwin asked.

The cowed head shifted. From here one could see the Tor clearly, a steep  
rounded hill wreathed in frost, rising behind the abbey like a bulwark of  
stone. "The Tor," murmured Alf. "That never frightened me. There was power in  
it, and wonder, and

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mystery. But no danger. No beckoning; no rejection. It simply was. Do you  
remember when we climbed it, for bravado, to see if the tales were true?"

"Madness or great blessings to him who mounts the Tor of Ynys Witrin on the  
eve of Midsummer. I remember. I don't think either of us came down mad."

"Nor blessed." Alf's voice held the glimmer of a smile. "We did penance for a  
solid fortnight, and all we'd found was a broken chapel and beds even harder  
than the ones we'd slipped away from." His arm circled Morwin's shoulders,  
bringing warmth like an open fire. The Abbot leaned into it. "But no; that  
wasn't all we found. I felt as if I could see the whole world under the  
Midsummer moon, and below us Ynys Witrin, mystic as all the songs would have  
it, an island floating in a sea of glass. There was the mystery. Not on the  
windy hill. Below it, in the abbey, where by Christmas we'd be consecrated  
priests, servants of the Light that had come to rule the world.

"But the Thorn always knew. I was-I am-no mortal man."

"So now you come to make your peace with it."

"After a fashion. I wanted to see if it was glad to be rid of me."

"Is itr

Alf's free hand moved to touch the trunk, white fingers glimmering on  
shadow-black. "I think . . . It's never hated me. It's just known a painful  
truth. Maybe it even wishes me well."

"So do we all."

Alf shivered violently, but not with the air's cold. "I'm going away," he said  
as if he had only come to realize it. "And I can't . . . Even if I come back,  
it won't be the same. I'll have to grow, change-" His voice faded.

Morwin was silent.

"I know," Alf said with unwonted bitterness. "Everyone grows and changes. Even

the likes of me. Already I feel it beginning, with Alun's fine clothes waiting for me to put them on again and the memory of all the Brothers at supper, staring and wondering, and some not even knowing who I was. Even Jehan,  
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when he first saw me, took me for a stranger. What if I change so much I don't even recognize myself?"

"Better that sort of pain than the one that's been tearing you apart for so long."

"That was a familiar pain."

"Yes. Plain old shackle-gall. I'm chasing you out of your prison, Alfred-throwing you into the sky. Because even if you're blind and senseless, everyone else can see that you have wings."

The moon came down into the cup of Alf's hand, a globe of light, perfect, all its blemishes scoured away. Its white glow caressed his face; Morwin blinked and swallowed. Familiar as those features were, the shock of them blunted by long use; sometimes still, with deadly suddenness, their beauty could strike him to the heart.

Alf's hand closed. The light shrank with it, snuffing out like a candle flame; taking away Morwin's vision, but not his remembrance of it. Slowly, wearily, Alf said, "I won't fight you any longer, Morwin. Not on that account. But must you send Jehan with me?"

"He has no more place here than you do."

"I know that. I also know that I may be riding into danger. The message III carry is not precisely harmless. I could be killed for bearing it, Alun for passing it to me--"

"And St. Ruan's could suffer for taking him in. Don't you think I'm aware of all the consequences?"

"Jehan isn't. To him it's a lark, a chance to be free."

"Is it, Alf?"

"He's a child still for all his size. He doesn't know what this errand might mean or how he may be forced to pay for it. The game we play, the stakes we raise--"

"He knows," Morwin said with a touch of sharpness. "So he's glad enough about it to sing-that's not blissful ignorance, it's simply youth. When the time comes, if it comes, he'll be well able to take care of himself."

"And also of me," said Alf.

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"Why not?" the Abbot demanded. "He's only been cloistered for half a year; and he grew up in the world-in courts, in castles." His eyes sharpened to match his tone; he peered into the shadow of Aif's hood, at the hint of a face.

"Maybe you're not concerned for a young lad's welfare-pupil of yours though he is, and friend too. Maybe you don't want to be looked after by a mere boy."

Alf would not dignify that with an answer.

Nor would Morwin offer any apology. "I've done as I thought wisest," he said.

"I trust you to abide by it. In the end you may even be glad of it."

The voice in the shadow was soft, more inhumanly beautiful than ever, but its words were tinged with irony. "Morwin my oldest friend, sometimes I wonder if, after all, I'm the witch of us two."

"This isn't witchcraft. It's common sense. Now stop nattering and help me up. Didn't I give you strict orders to get some sleep tonight!"

Morwin could feel Alfs wry smile, distinct as the clasp of his hand.

"Yes, grin at the old fool, so long as you do what I tell you."

"I am always your servant, Domne."

Morwin cuffed him, not entirely in play, and thrust him away. "Go to bed, you, before I lose my temper!"

Alf bowed deeply, the picture of humility; evaded a second blow with supernatural ease; and left his Abbot alone with the moon and the Tor and the ancient Thorn, and an anger that dissipated as swiftly as it had risen.

It was a very long while before Morwin moved, and longer still before he took the way Alf had taken, back into the warmth of St. Ruan's. They left before dawn. Only Morwin was there to see them off. Morwin, and Alun's consciousness, a brightness in Alfs brain. They stood under the arch of the gate, Jehan holding the bridles of the two horses: Fara like a wraith in the gloom, and the abbey's old gelding standing black and solid beside her. He shivered, half with cold, half with excitement, and shifted from foot to foot. The others simply stood, Alf staring rigidly through the gate, Morwin frowning at his feet.

At last the Abbot spoke. "You'd best be going."

Swiftly Jehan sprang astride. Alf moved more slowly; as he gathered up the reins, Morwin touched his knee. "Here. Take this."

Light flashed between them, Morwin's silver cross. Ah\* hesitated as if to protest. But Morwin's eyes were fierce. He took the gift and slipped the chain over his head, concealing it under his tunic. It lay cold against his skin, warming slowly. He clasped the hand that had given it, met the eyes behind.

"Go with God," Morwin said.

The gate was open, the road clear before them, starlit, aglitter

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with frost. Only once did Alf glance back. Already they had come far enough to see the whole looming bulk of the Tor, and the abbey against the wall of it, and mist rising with the dawn, turning the Isle to an isle indeed. Small and dark upon it, nearly lost beneath the great arch, the Abbot stood alone.

A wind stirred the mist, raising it like a curtain. Gray glass and silver and a last, faint flicker of moonlight, and of St. Ruan's, nothing at all save the shadow of a tower.

Fara danced, eager to be gone. Alf bent over her neck and urged her onward. From St. Ruan's they rode northward, with the sun on their left hands and the morning brightening about them. Jehan sang, testing his voice that was settling into a strong baritone; when it cracked, he laughed. "I'm putting the ravens to shame," he said.

Alf did not respond. Here where the road was wide, they rode side by side; Jehan turned to look at him. His face was white and set. Part of that could be discomfort, for he had not ridden in a long while, yet he sat his mount with ease and grace.

Jehan opened his mouth and closed it again. For some time after, he rode as decorously as befit a novice of St. Ruan's, although he gazed about him with eager eyes.

At noon they halted. Alf would not have troubled, but Jehan's gelding was tiring. Already they were a good four leagues from the abbey, in a wide green country scattered with villages. People there looked without surprise on two lordly riders, squires from some noble house from the look of them, going about their business.

They had stopped on the edge of a field where a stream wound along the road. Jehan brought out bread and cheese, but Alf would have none.

The other frowned. "Dom Morwin told me you'd be like this. He also told me not to put up with it. So-will you eat, or do I have to make you?"

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Alf had been loosening Fara's girths. He turned at that. "I'm not hungry."

"I know you're not. Eat."

They faced each other stiffly. Alf was taller, but Jehan had easily twice his breadth, and no fear of him at all.

Atf yielded. He ate, and drank from the stream where it setded into a pool. When the water had calmed from his drinking, he paused, staring at the face reflected there. It looked even younger than he had thought.

A wind ruffled the water and shattered the image. He turned away from it.

Jehan was busy with the horses, yet Alf could feel his awareness. Jehan finished and said, "Brother Alf. I've been thinking. We're riding like

squires, but I'm the only one with a sword. I know you don't want one, but maybe you'd better know how to use it in case of trouble."

Alf tried to smile. "I'd probably cut off my own foot if I tried."

"You wouldn't either." He unhooked the scabbard from his belt. Try it."

"No," Alf said. "If it comes to a fight, you're the one who knows what to do with it. Best that you keep it by you. I can manage as I am."

"That's foolish, Brother Alf." Jehan drew the good steel blade and held it out.

Alf would not take it. "Jehan," he said. "It's enough for me now that I dress as a worldling. Don't try to make me more of one. If you do, God alone knows where it will end."

"In a safer journey for us, maybe."

"Maybe not. You don't know what I am, Jehan."

"Do your

"I know enough. Put up your sword and ride with me."

Jehan sheathed the weapon, but did not move to mount. "Dom Morwin talked to me last night. He told me about you."

"He didr

"Don't go cold on me, Brother Alf! I'd guessed most of it

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already. People talk, you know. And it was obvious early on that you had to be the one who wrote the Gloria Dei. You knew too much, and thought too much, to be as young as your face."

"How old am I, then?"

"As old as Dom Morwin," Jehan answered calmly.

"And you scoff at the tales of Gwydion of Rhiyana?"

That's hearsay. You're fact."

"Poor logic, student. I should send you back to Brother Osric."

"You can't," Jehan said. "Dom Morwin won't let you."

"Probably not." Alf rose into the high saddle, wincing at his muscles'

protest. Before Jehan was well mounted, he had touched the mare into a trot.

They rode at a soft pace to spare their aching bodies. After some little time

Jehan said, "You don't have to be afraid of me. I won't betray you."

"I know," Alf murmured as if to himself. "You and Morwin: fools of a feather.

I could be a devil, sent to tempt you both to your destruction."

"You, Brother Alf?" Jehan laughed. "You may be a changeling as people say, or an elf-man, but a devil? Never."

For the first time Jehan saw the other's eyes, direct and unblurred. It was more than a bit of a shock.

He faced that bright unhuman stare, firm and unafraid. "Never," he repeated.

"I'd stake my soul on that."

Alf clapped heels to Fara's sides. She sprang into a gallop.

They raced down a long level stretch. At the end, where the road bent round a barrow, Alf slowed to a canter and then to a walk. Jehan pounded to a halt beside him. "There," he panted. "Feel better?"

Alf bit his lip. "I'm being foolish, aren't I?" He essayed a smile. It was feeble, but it would do. "Yes, I do feel better. My body is glad to be under the open sky. HI train my mind to follow suit."

By night they had traversed close on eight leagues, fair going for riders out of training. They slept in an old byre, empty and

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musty but still sturdy, with ample space for themselves and their horses.

Tired though he was, Jehan did not go to sleep at once. He prayed for a while, then lay down with his cloak for a blanket. Alf knelt close by him, praying still. Moonlight seemed to have come through a chink in the walls, for though it was pitch-dark in the barn, Jehan could see Alf's face limned in light, his hair a silver halo about his head.

But there was no moon. Clouds had come with the sun's setting; even as Jehan

lay motionless, he heard the first drops of rain upon the roof. He swallowed hard. In daylight he could accept anything. But darkness bred fear. He was alone here with one who was not human, who shone where there was no light and stared into infinity with eyes that flared ember-red. They turned to him, set in a face he no longer knew, a moonlit mask white as death. But the soft voice was Alf's own. "Why are you afraid, Jehan?"

"I-" Jehan began. "You-"

Alf raised his hands that shone as did his face. The mask cracked a little into a frown. "This happens sometimes. I can't always control it. Though it's been years ..." He closed his eyes.

The light flickered and went out.

Jehan sat bolt upright. "Brother Alf!"

Hands touched him. He started violently and seized them. They were warm and solid. Keeping his grip on one, he reached into blackness, finding an arm, a shoulder. Like a blind man he searched upward, tracing the face, the smooth cheek, the flutter of lids over eyes, the fringe of hair round the tonsured crown.

"Bring back the light," he said.

It grew slowly, without heat. He stared into the strange eyes. "I'm not afraid anymore."

"Why?"

Jehan paused a moment. "You're still yourself. For a while I was afraid you weren't. You looked so different."

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Mi leaned close. They were almost nose to nose; their eyes met and locked. It seemed to Jehan that he could see through Alf's as if through glass, into an infinity the color of rubies.

"Jehan."

He rose to full awareness, as from water into air, and sat staring. He still held Alf's hand; it tightened, holding him fast.

He shivered convulsively. "How? How could I see like that? I've never--"

Alf looked away. "I did it. I'm sorry. I was looking at the mettle of you; you saw behind my looking."

"Has-has it ever happened before?"

Already Jehan had regained most of his self-possession. "Pure gold," Alf murmured. And, louder: "A few times. I think . . . some humans have in them the seeds of what I am."

Jehan's eyes went wide. "I? Brother Alf, I'm no enchanter!"

The other almost smiled. "Not as I am, no. But something in you responded to my touch. Don't worry; I won't wake it again."

"Of course you will. I said I wasn't afraid, and I'm not. Show me what you can do, Brother Alf!"

Most of it was bravado, and they both knew it. Yet enough was true desire that Alf said, "I can do many things, which probably will damn me, if I can die, and if I have a soul to give over to perdition."

"Dom Morwin said that you can do what saints do. That you can heal hurts, and walk on air, and talk to people far away."

"I can do those things. Though by them I may defy the Scripture which commands that you shall not suffer a witch to live."

"He also said that you could never use your powers for evil."

"Wouldst Jehan. Not amid, I can heat, but I can also kill."

There was a silence. Jehan searched the pale face, although the eyes would not meet his. "I can heal, Brother Alf. And I can kill." He lifted his hand. This can stitch up a wound or make one, wrap a bandage or wield a sword. Is it any different from your power?"

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"Other men have hands, Jehan."

"And others have power."



Alf cuffed Jehan lightly. "Out upon you, boy! You're death to my self-pity. Though it's true I'd no more threaten the powerless than you would attack a handless man. There'd be no fairness in it."

He drew back, and his light died. His voice was soft in the darkness. "Go to sleep now. We've talked enough for one night."

Jehan delayed for a moment. "Brother Alf?"

The other paused in lying down. "What?"

"I'm really not afraid of you."

"I know. I can feel it in you." . "So that's how you'd get around vows of silence."

"Good night, Jehan," Alf said firmly.

The novice wrapped his cloak about him and grinned into the night. "Good night, Brother Alf."

On the second day the travelers could barely move, let alone ride. Yet ride they did, for obstinacy; with time and determination, their bodies hardened. By the fourth day Jehan had remembered his old sturdiness. Even Alf was beginning to take a strange, painful joy in that ride, even to sing as he rode, to Jehan's delight. Hymns at first; then other songs, songs he had learned a lifetime ago, that rose to the surface of his memory and clung there. The first time or two, he stopped guiltily, as if he had been caught singing them in chapel; then, with Jehan's encouragement, he let his voice have its way.

Sometimes they met people on their road, peasants afoot or in wagons, who looked stolidly upon their passing. Once there was a pilgrim, who called for alms and blessed Alf for what he gave, not seeing the tonsure under the hood. And once there was a lord with his meinie, inviting the strangers to spend the night in his castle. Since it was early still, Alf refused, but courteously. Their camp that night seemed rough and cold, even with a fire; and it had begun to rain.

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Open land gave way to forest, dark and cheerless. More than ever Alf regretted his refusal of the lord's hospitality; though Jehan laughed and said, "Don't be sorry. If someone had known me there, there'd have been a huge to-do and we'd never have got away."

"Maybe," Alf said. "But our food is running low, and we won't find any here. More likely, what we have will be stolen."

"Do you want to go around?"

"It would add two days to our journey. But maybe we'd better."

"Not I!" Jehan cried. "I'm no coward. Come on; I'll race you to that tree."

He was already off. After an instant, Alf sent the mare after him.

It was quiet under the trees, all sounds muted, lost in the mist of rain.

Leaves lay thick upon the track; the horses' passing was almost silent to human ears. The travelers rode as swiftly as they might, yet warily, all their senses alert. Nothing menaced them, though once they started a deer, to Fara's dismay. Only the high saddle and Alf's own skill kept him astride then.

The farther they rode, the older the forest seemed. The trees were immense, heavy with the memory of old gods. Elf-country, Alf thought. But the cross on his breast made him alien.

Wild beasts moved within the reach of his perception, numerous small creatures, deer, a boar going about its dark business; even the flicker of consciousness that was a wolf. Nothing to fear.

Night fell, early and complete. They found a camp, a cluster of trees by a stream, that afforded water and shelter and fuel for a fire.

When they had tended the horses and eaten a little, they huddled together in the circle of light.

"I wonder how Alun is," Jehan said after a while.

Alf glanced at him, a flicker in firelight. "Well enough," he answered.

"Brother Herbal has had him up and hobbling about

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a little. And he's had Morwin bring him treasures from the library."

"You talk to him?"

"Yes."

Jehan tried to laugh. "What's he wearing? You've got his clothes!"

"He borrows mine. Though he says he looks a poor excuse for a monk."

"Does he fret?"

Alf shook his head. "Alun never frets. He simply follows me with his mind."

"Is he watching now?"

"No. He's asleep."

Jehan glanced about uneasily at the whispering dark. "Are you sure?"

"Fairly." Alf smiled. "Come, lad! He can't see any secrets. He's a man of honor."

"But he follows us!"

"Me, to be more precise. Sometimes he borrows my eyes."

Jehan's had gone wild. When Alf touched him, he started like a deer. Those were Alf's eyes upon him: Alf's own, strange, familiar eyes. No one else lived behind them.

They flicked aside before he could drown. He swayed; Alf held him. "Jehan. Alun is like me. My own kind. As you and I share speech, so we share our minds. It comforts him. He gave me all he had; should I refuse to let him be with me?"

The other battled for control. "It's not that. It's . . . it's . . . I can't see him!"

"Would you like me to tell you when he's here?"

"Please. I'd rather know."

"Then you will. Sleep, Jehan. Ill keep the first watch."

He would have argued, but suddenly he could not keep his eyes open. Even as suspicion stirred, he slid into oblivion.

The road wound deeper into the forest, growing narrower as it proceeded, and growing worse, until often the travelers

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were slowed to a walk. Jehan rode with hand close to sword hilt; Alf's every sense was alert, although he said once, "No robber, unless he's desperate, will touch us: two strong men, well-mounted, and one big enough for two."

Jehan laughed at that, but he did not relax his guard. Nor, he noticed, did Alf. Even as that disturbed him, it brought comfort.

The second night under the trees, they camped in a place they could defend, a clearing which rose into a low hill, and at the top a standing stone. Jehan would not have chosen to stop here; but he glanced at his companion and grimaced. Here he was, riding with an elf-man, a proven enchanter, and he was afraid to steep on an old barrow.

It did not seem to trouble Alf. He made camp quietly and ate as much as he would ever eat, and sat afterward, silent, fixing the fire with a blank, inward stare.

When he spoke, Jehan started. "Alun is here."

The novice shuddered and closed his eyes. For a moment in the fire he had seen a narrow hawk-face, a glint of gray eyes, staring full into his own.

Alf's voice murmured in his ear. "Alun sends greetings."

Jehan opened his eyes. There was no face in the fire. "Is he still . . ."

"No." Alf rose and stretched, arching his back, turning his face to the stars.

Below, in the clearing about the mound, the horses grazed quietly.

He laid his hand upon the standing stone. It was cold, yet in the core of it he sensed a strange warmth. So it was in certain parts of St. Ruan's: cold stone, warm heart, and power that sang in his blood. The power hummed here, faint yet steady. It had eased the contact with Alun, brought them mind to mind almost without their willing it.

Yet there was something . . .

Jehan; the horses; a hunting owl; a wotf.

He called in all the threads of his power, and looked into Jehan's wide eyes. The moon was very bright, turning toward  
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the full; even the novice could see almost as well as if it had been day. Alf cupped his hands. The cold light filled them and overflowed. Slowly he opened his fingers and let it drain away.

"What does it feel like?" Jehan's voice was very low.

He let his hands fill again and held them out to Jehan. The other reached out a hand that tried not to tremble. "It-I can feel it!"

Again Alf let the light go. It poured like water over Jehan's fingers, but he could not hold it. "I could make it solid, weave a fabric of it. I tried that once. Moonlight and snowlight for an altar cloth. It was beautiful. The Abbot wanted to send it to Rome. But then he realized that it was made with sorcery."

"What did he do with it?"

"Exactly what he did with me. Blessed it, consecrated it, and put it away."

Alf lay down, propped up on his elbow. "But now I'm out. I wonder what will happen to the cloth."

"Maybe," said Jehan, "Dom Morwin should send it to Rhiyana. The Pope wouldn't appreciate it, but the Elvenking would."

Alf considered that. "Maybe he would."

"He'd certainly appreciate you."

For answer Jehan received only a swift ember-glance. They did not speak again that night.

The third day in the forest dawned bleak and cold. They ate and broke camp in silence, shivering. Jehan's fingers were numb, his gelding's trappings stiff and unmanageable; he cursed softly.

Alf moved him gently aside and managed the recalcitrant straps with ease.

Jehan glanced at him. "You're never cold, are you?"

"Not often," Alf said. The task was done; he took Jehan's hands in both his own. His flesh felt burning hot.

Startled, Jehan tried to pull away. Alf held him easily. "You don't need to add frostbite to your ills."

Jehan submitted. The warmth no longer hurt; it was blissful. "You're a marvel, Brother Alf."

"Or a monster." Alf let him go. "Gome, mount up. We've a long way to go."

The cold did not grow less with the day's rising. Jehan thought the air smelled of snow.

Alf rode warily, eyes flicking from side to side. More than once he paused, every sense alert.

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"What is it?" Jehan asked. "Bandits?"

The other shook his head.

"Then why do you keep stopping?"

"I don't know," Alf said. "Nothing stalks us. But the pattern isn't... quite ... right. As if something were concealing itself." His eyes went strange, blind.

Jehan looked away. When he looked back, Alf was blinking, shaking his head. "I can't find anything." He shrugged as if to shake off a burden. "We're safe enough. I'd know if we weren't."

That was not particularly comforting. But they rode on in peace, disturbed only by a pair of ravens that followed them for a while, calling to them. Alf called back in a raven's voice.

"What did they say?" Jehan wondered aloud when they had flapped away.

"That we make enough noise to rouse every hunter but a human one." Alf bent under a low branch. The way was clear beyond; he touched the mare into a canter. Over his shoulder he added, "We should leave the trees by tomorrow. There's a village beyond; we'll sleep tomorrow night under a roof."

"Is that a solemn promise?"

"On my soul," Alf replied.

Which could be ironic, Jehan reflected darkly. His gelding stumbled over a tree root; he steadied it with legs and hands. Ahead of him, Alf rode lightly on a mount which never stumbled or even seemed to tire. Elf-man, elf-horse. Maybe this was all part of a spell, and he was doomed to ride under trees forever and never see the open fields again.

He was dreaming awake. His hands were numb; the sun hung low, and it was growing dark under the trees. He would be glad to stop.

Alf had begun to sing softly. "Nudam fovea Floram lectus; Caro candet tenera . . ."

He stopped, as he often did when he caught himself singing something secular. And that one, Jehan thought, was more secular than most. "Naked Flora lies a-sleeping; whitely shines her tender body . . ."

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When he began again, it was another melody altogether, a hymn to the Virgin. That night, as before, Alf took the first watch. The air was cold and still; no stars shone. Nothing moved save the flames of the fire.

He huddled into his cloak. He heard nothing, sensed nothing. Perhaps he was a fool; perhaps he was going mad, to watch so when no danger threatened.

Sleep stole over him. He had had little since he left St. Ruan's, and his body was beginning to rebel. He should wake Jehan, set him to watch. If anything came upon them-

Alf started out of a dim dream. It was dark, quiet.

Very close to him, something breathed. Not Jehan, across the long-dead fire.

Not the horses. A presence stood over him.

He blinked.

It remained. A white wolf, sitting on its haunches, glaring at him with burning bronze-gold eyes.

A white girl, all bare, glaring through a curtain of bronze-gold hair.

"What," she demanded in a cold clear voice, "are you doing here?"

He sat up, his hood falling back from a startled face. Her eyes ran over him; her thought was as clear as her voice, and as cold. Go to hell bones! a monk's cub. Who gave him leave to play at knights and squires?

His cheeks burned. Unclasping his cloak, he held it out to her.

She ignored it. "What are you doing here?" she repeated.

Suddenly he wanted to laugh. It was impossible, to be sitting here in the icy dark with a girl who wore nothing but her hair. And who was most certainly of his own kind.

"I was sleeping," he answered her, "until you woke me." Again he held out his cloak. "Will you please put this on?"

She took the garment blindly and flung it over her shoulders.

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It did not cover much of consequence. "This is his cloak. His mare. His very undertunic. Damn you, where is he?"

Alf stared at her. "Alun?"

"Alun," she repeated as if the name meant nothing to her. Her mind touched his, a swift stabbing probe. "Yes. Alun. Where is he?"

"Who are you?" he countered.

She looked as if she would strike him. "Thea," she snapped. "Where-"

"I'm called Alf."

She seized him. Her hands were slender and strong, not at all as he had thought a woman's must be. Her body-The night had been cold, but now he burned. Abruptly, fiercely, he pulled away. "Cover yourself," he commanded in his coldest voice.

His tone touched her beneath her anger. Somewhat more carefully, she wrapped the cloak about her. "Brother, if that indeed you are, I'll ask only once more. Then I'll force you to tell me. Where is my lord?"

"Safe," Alf replied, "and no prisoner."

Thea was not satisfied. "Where is he?"

"I can't tell you."

She sat on her heels. Without warning, without movement, she thrust at his mind.

Instinctively he parried. She paled and swayed. "You're strong!" she gasped. He did not answer. A third presence tugged at his consciousness, one for which he could let down his barriers. Slowly he retreated into a corner of his mind, as that new awareness flowed into him, filling him as water fills an empty cup.

Thea cried a name, but it was not Alun's.

Alf's voice spoke without his willing it in a tone deeper and quieter than his own. "Althea. Who gave you leave to come here?"

She lifted her chin, although she was very pale. "Prince Aidan," she answered.

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Alf sensed Alun's prick of alarm, although his response was quiet, unperturbed. "My brother? Is there trouble?"

"Of course there's trouble. He's not had an honest communication from you in almost a month. And I'm not getting one now. What's wrong? What are you hiding?"

"Why, nothing," Alun said without a tremor. "If he is so urgent, where is he?"

"Home, playing the part you set him and growing heartily sick of it. He would have come, but your lady put a binding on him. Which he will break, as well you know, unless you give him some satisfaction."

Tin safe and in comfort. So I've told him. So you can tell him."

Thea glowered at the man behind the stranger's face. "You're a good liar, but not good enough." Suddenly her face softened, and her voice with it. "My lord. Aidan is wild with worry. Maura has been ill, and—"

For an instant, Alun lost control of the borrowed body. It wavered; he steadied it. "Maura? 10?"

"Yes. For no visible cause. And speaking of it to no one. So Aidan rages in secret and Maura drifts like a ghost of herself; I follow your mare and your belongings, under shield lest you find me out, and come upon a stranger. Why? What's happened?"

Alf watched his own hands smooth her tousled hair and stroke her soft cheek.

"Thea, child, I'm in no danger. But what I do here is my own affair, and secret."

She did not yield to his gendeness. She was proud, Alf thought in his far corner, and wild. "Tell me where you are."

"Inside this body now," he answered her.

"And where is yours? What is this shaveling doing with all your belongings? Have you taken up his?"

He nodded.

"Why?" she cried.

"Hush, Thea. You'll wake Jehan."

She paid no heed to the oblivious hulk by the fire with its reek of humanity. Tell me why," she persisted.

"Someday." He touched her cheek again, this time in farewell,

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and kissed her brow. The bells are ringing for Matins. Good night, Althea. And good morning."

Alf reeled dizzily. His hands fell from Thea's shoulders; he gasped, battling sickness. For a brief, horrible moment, his body was not his: strange, ill-fitting, aprickle with sundry small pains.

She fixed him with a fierce, feral stare. But it was not he whom she saw. "You dare-even you, you dare, to bind me so ... Let me go!"

His eyes held no comprehension. She raised her hand as if to strike, and with a visible effort, lowered it. "He bound me. I cannot follow him or find him.

Oh, damn him!"

In a moment AJf was going to be ill. He had done-freely done-what he had never dreamed of, not even when he let Alun use his eyes. Given his body over to another consciousness. Possession . . .

He was lying on the ground, and Thea was bending over him. She had forgotten the cloak again. He groaned and turned his face away.

"Poor little Brother," she said. "I see he's bound you, too. I'd pity you if I could." Her warm fingers turned his head back toward her. His eyes would not open. Something very light brushed the lids. "I'm covered again," she told him.

She was. He looked at her, simply looked, without thought.

Thea stared back. She was the first person, apart from Alun, who had seen no strangeness in him at all. His own kind. Were they all so proud?

"Most of us," she said. "It's our besetting sin. We're also stubborn. Horribly so. As you'll come to know."

"Will I?" He was surprised that he could speak at all, let alone with such control. "Since you can't approach Alun, surely you want to go back to his brother."

She shook her head vehemently. "Go back to Aidan? Kyrie eleison! I'm not as mad as all that. No; I'm staying with you. Either Alun will slip and let his secret out, or at least I'll be safe out of reach of Aidan's wrath."

"You can't!" His voice cracked like a boy's.

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"I can," she shot back. "And will, whatever you say, little Brother."

He rose unsteadily. He was nearly a head taller than she. "You can't," he repeated, coldly now, as he would have spoken to an upstart novice. "I'm on an errand from my Abbot to the Bishop Aylmer. I cannot be encumbered with a woman."

To his utter discomfiture, she laughed. Her laughter was like shaken silver.

"What, little Brother! Do I threaten your vows?"

"You threaten my errand. Go back to Rhiyana and leave me to it."

For answer, she yawned and lay where he had lain. "It's late, don't you think? We'd best sleep while we can. We've a long way still to go."

No power of his could move her. She was not human, and her strength was trained and honed as his was not. Almost he regretted his reluctance to use power. She had no such scruples.

Like a fool, he tried to reason with her, "You can't come with us. You have no horse, no weapons, not even a garment for your body."

She smiled, and melted, and changed; and a white wolf lay at his feet. And again: a sleek black cat. And yet again: a white hound with red ears, laughing at him with bright elf-eyes.

He breathed deep, calming himself, remembering what he was. In the shock of her presence, he had forgotten. He picked up his cloak and stepped over her, setting Jehan and the fire between them, and lay down.

He did not sleep. He did not think that she did, either. With infinite slowness the sky paled into dawn.

Jehan had strange dreams, elf-voices speaking in the night, and shapes of light moving to and fro about the camp; and once a white woman-shape, born of Alf's song and his own waking manhood. When he woke, he burned to think of her. He sat up groggily and stared.

A hound stared back. Her eyes were level, more gold than brown, and utterly disconcerting.

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Alf came to stand beside her, brittle-calm as ever. "What-" Jehan began, his tongue still thick with sleep. "Whose hound is that?"

"Alun's," Alf answered.

The novice gaped at her. "But how-"

"Never mind," said Alf. "She's attached herself to us whether we will or no."

Jehan held out his hand. The hound sniffed it delicately, and permitted him to touch her head, then her sensitive ears. "She's very beautiful," he said.

Alf smiled tightly. "Her name is Thea."

"It fits her," Jehan said. Something in Alf's manner felt odd; he looked hard at the other, and then at the hound, and frowned. "Is she what's been following us?"

"Yes." Alf knelt to rekindle the fire.

Jehan fondled the soft ears. She was sleek, splendid, born for the hunt, yet she did not look dangerous. She looked what surely she was, a high lord's treasure, bred to run before kings.

He laughed suddenly. "You're almost a proper knight now, Brother Alf! AH you need is a sword."

"Thank you," Alf said, "but no." The fire had caught; he brought out what remained of their provisions, and sighed. "What will you have? Moldy bread, or half a crumb of cheese?"

The trees were thinning. Jehan was sure of it. The road had widened; he and Alf could ride side by side for short stretches with Thea running ahead. Like Fara, she seemed tireless, taking joy in her own swift strength.

By noon a gray drizzle had begun to fall. They pressed on as hard as they might, following the white shape of the elf-hound.

At last they surmounted a hill, and the trees dwindled away before them. Jehan whooped for delight, for there below them in a wide circle of fields stood a village.

It was splendid to ride under the sky again, with no dark ranks of trees to hem them in and the wind blowing free upon their faces. Jehan's gelding moved of its own accord into a heavy canter; the gray mare fretted against the bit. Alf let her have her head.

They did not run far. A few furlongs down the road, Alf eased Fara into a walk. He smiled as Jehan came up, and stroked the mare's damp neck. "We'll sleep warm tonight," he said.

The village was called Woodby Cross: a gathering of houses about an ancient church. Its priest took the travelers in, gave

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them dry clothes to wear after they had bathed, and fed them from his own larder. He was rough-spoken and he had little enough Latin, and the woman who cooked for him had at her skirts a child or two who bore him an uncanny resemblance. But he received his guests with as much courtesy as any lord in his hall.

"It's not often we see people of quality hereabouts," he told them after they had eaten and drunk. "Mostly those go castaway round Bowland, to one of the lords or Abbots there. Here we get the sweepings, woodsfolk and wanderers and the like."

"People don't go through the forest?" Jehan asked.

He shook his head. "It's a shorter way, if you don't lose yourself. But there's bad folk in it. They're known to go after anybody who goes by."

"They didn't bother us."

The priest scratched the stubble of his tonsure, "So they didn't. But you're two strong men, and you've got good horses and yon fine hound."

Thea raised her head from her paws and wagged her tail. Her amusement brushed the edges of Alf's mind.

He ignored her. He had been ignoring her since he had turned in his bathing and found her watching him with most unhound-like interest.

"The King," Father Wulfric was saying. "Now there's someone who could sweep the outlaws out of Bowland, if he'd take the trouble. But he's away north, chasing those rebels who broke out while he was on Crusade. You'll have a fine time finding him."

"Actually," said Jehan, "we're looking for Bishop Aylmer; but that means we have to look for the King. They're always together. Two of a kind, people say. Fighters."

"Thai's certain. But I think my lord Bishop ought to pay a little more attention to his Christian vows and a little less to unholy bloodletting." Jehan carefully avoided saying anything. The woman and the children had left, ostensibly to return to their own house. The children had looked surprised and fretful; one had started toward

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the curtain that hid the priest's bed from public view, before her mother dragged her away.

He shrugged a little. Alf had not spoken, either. He was gazing into the fire, eyes half-closed. Something in his face spoke to Jehan of Alun's presence.

The novice yawned. "Whoosh! I'm tired. It's a long ride from the Marches."

"And a fair way to go yet," said Father Wulfric. "Me, I'm a lazy man. I stay at home and mind my flock, and leave the traveling to you young folk." He rose from his seat by the hearth, opening his mouth to say more.

He never began. Alf stirred, drawing upright, taut as a bowstring. Firelight blazed upon his face; the flames filled his eyes. "Kilhwch," he whispered.

"Rhydderch." It was a serpent's hiss. "He rends the web and casts it to the winds of Heil."

Thea growled. His eyes blazed upon her. "War, that means. War. I can delay no longer. I must go to the King."

"Tomorrow." Jehan's voice was quiet, and trembled only a little.

Tonight." Alf reached for his cloak, his boots. "War comes. I must stop it."

Jehan held his cloak out of his reach. "Tomorrow," he repeated, "we ride like the wrath of God. Tonight we rest."

The wide eyes scarcely knew him. "I see, Jehan. I see."

"I know you do. But you're not leaving tonight. Go to bed now, Brother Alf. Sleep."

The priest backed away from them, crossing himself, muttering a prayer. He remembered tales, demons in monks' guise, servants of the Devil, elf-creatures who snatched men's souls and fled away before the sunrise. Even solidly human Jehan alarmed him: soul-snatched already, maybe, or a changeling mocking man's shape.

They signed themselves properly and prayed before they went to bed, Latin, a murmur of holy names. He was not comforted.

They slept to all appearances as men slept. He knew; he watched them. The novice did not move all night. The other,

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the pale one with the face like an elf-lord, dreamed nightlong, murmuring and tossing. But Wulfric could not understand his words, save that some of them were Latin and some might have been names: Morwin, Alun, Gwydion; and often, that name he seemed to hate. Rhydderch.

When they roused before dawn, he had their horses ready. They acted human enough; stumbling, blear-eyed, yawning and stretching and drawing water to wash in though they had bathed all over only the night before. They helped with breakfast, and ate hungrily, even Alf, who looked pale and ill. Nor did they vanish at cockcrow. In fact it was closer to sunrise when they left, with a blessing from the monk and a wave from the novice. Well before they were out of sight, the priest had turned his back on their strangeness and gone to his work.

Alf rode now for three kingdoms. Jehan had caught his urgency, but the old gelding, for all its valiant heart, could not sustain the pace they set. In a village with a name Jehan never knew, Alf exchanged the struggling beast for a rawboned rake of a horse with iron lungs and a startling gift of speed—a transaction that smacked of witchery. But it all smacked of witchery, that wild ride from the borders of Rowland, errand-riding for the Elvenking.

Three days past their guesting in Wulfric's house, they paused at the summit of a hill. Fara snorted, scarcely winded by the long climb, and tossed her proud head. Almost absently Alf quieted her.



This was a brutal country, empty even of the curlew's cry: a tumbled, trackless waste, where only armies would be mad enough to go. An army in rebellion and an army to break the rebellion-hunter and hunted pursued and fled under winter's shadow. Rumor told of a hidden stronghold, a fortress looming over a dark lake somewhere among the fells; the rebels sought it or fought in it or had been driven out of it, always with the

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King's troops pressing close behind them. Fifty on either side, people had whispered in the last village, no more; or Richard had a hundred, the enemy twice that; or the rebels fought with a staggering few against the King's full might.

Truth trod a narrow path through all the tales. The rebels had taken and held the town of Ellesmere, and the King had laid siege to them there; driven forth, they had fled away southward, pursued by four hundred of Richard's men. Neither force could have gone far, for this was no land to feed an army. The enemy were starved and desperate, ready to turn at bay, the King eager to bring the chase to its end.

Alf gazed over the sweep and tumble of the moor, casting his other-sight ahead even of his keen eyes. "They're close now," he said: "to us, and to each other."

Jehan's nostrils flared, scenting battle. "Do you think they'll fight before we get to them?"

"More likely well arrive in the middle of it."

The novice loosed a great shout. "Out! Out! Out! Out! He laughed and sent his mount careening down the steep slope.

Before he reached the bottom, Fara had passed him, bearing Alf as its wings bear the hawk, with Thea her white shadow. The rangy chestnut flattened its ears and plunged after.

In a fold of the hills lay a long lake, gray now under a gray sky. Steel clashed on steel there; men cried out in anger and in pain; voices sang a deep war chant.

A jut of crag hid the struggle until the riders were almost upon it. There where the lake sent an arm into a steep vale, men fought fiercely in the sedge, hand to hand. Those who were lean and ragged as wolves in winter would be the rebels, nearly all of them on foot. The King's men, well-fed and -armed, wore royal badges, and mailed knights led them, making short work of the enemy.

Alf found the King easily enough. Richard had adopted a new fashion of the Crusader knights, a long light surcoat over his mail; royal leopards ramped upon it, and on his helm he wore

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a crown. He of cross and keys in the King's company, wielding a mace, would be Bishop Aylmer.

A hiss of steel close by made Alf turn. Jehan had drawn his sword; there was a fierce light in his eyes.

Battle sang in his own blood, gentle monk though he was, with no skill in weapons. It was a poison; he fought it and quelled it. "No," he said. "No fighting, Jehan."

For a moment he thought Jehan would break free and gallop to his death. But the novice sighed and sheathed his sword. Reluctantly he followed Alf round the clash of armies, evading stray flights of arrows, seeking the King's camp. When they had almost reached it, a roar went up behind diem. The rebels' leader had fallen.

Alf crossed himself, prayed briefly, rode on.

Richard had camped on a low hill above the lake, open on all sides and most well-guarded. But no one stopped a pair of youths on hard-ridden horses, errand-riders surely, trotting purposefully toward the center of the camp.

They sought the horse-lines first and saw to their mounts. There again, no one questioned them.

Folly, Thea decreed, watching Alf rub Fara down. A thief could walk in, take every valuable object here, and walk out again as peaceful as you please.

Alf glanced at her. What thief would come out here?

Who knows? She inspected a bucket, found it full of water, drank delicately.

What are you going to do now?

Jehan asked the same question aloud at nearly the same time. "Wait for Bishop Aylmer," Alf answered them both. He shouldered his saddlebags, laden with books and with Morwin's letter to the Bishop, and slapped the mare's neck in farewell.

They walked through the camp. It was nearly deserted, except for a servant or two, but one large tent seemed occupied. As they neared it, they heard screams and cries, and Alf caught a scent that made his nose wrinkle. Pain stabbed at him, multiplied tenfold, the anguish of men wounded in battle.

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He had meant to wait by the Bishop's tent, but his body turned itself toward the field hospital. Even as he approached, a pair of battered and bloody men brought another on a cloak.

There were not so many wounded, he discovered later. Thirty in all, and only five dead. But thirty men in agony, with but a surgeon and two apprentices to tend them, tore at all his defenses.

"Jehan," he said. "Find water and bandages, and anything else you can." Even as he spoke, he knelt by a groaning man and set to work.

He was aware, once, of the master-surgeon's presence, of eyes that took him in from crown to toe, and marked his youth and his strangeness and his skillful hands. After a little the man left him alone. One did not question a godsend. Not when it was easing an arrow out of a man's lung.

The power that had forsaken him utterly with Alun rose in him now like a flood-tide. He fought to hold it back, for he dared work no miracles here. But some escaped in spite of his efforts, easing pain, stanching the flow of blood from an axe-hewn shoulder. He probed the wound with sensitive fingers, seeing in his mind the path of the axe through the flesh, knowing the way to mend it-so.

He raised his hands. Blood covered them and the man beneath them-young, no more than a boy, wide-eyed and white-faced. There was no wound upon him. Thea touched Alf's mind. You'd better make him forget, little Brother, or one of two things will happen. You'll be canonized, or you'll be burned at the stake.

"No," Alf said aloud. He forced himself to smile down at the stunned face.

"Rest a while. When you feel able, you can get up and go."

The boy did not answer. Alf left him there.

Little Brother-He slammed down all his barriers. Thea yelped in pain, but he did not look at her. The shield not only kept her out; it kept his power in. There were no more miracles.

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Somewhere in the long task of healing, word came. The battle was over. The last few men who came, grinned beneath blood and dust and told proud tales while their wounds were tended.

Alf caught Jehan's eye. The novice finished binding a sword-cut and joined Alf near the tent wall. They washed off the stains of their labors and slipped away.

Weary though the King's men were, they prepared to consume the night in wine and song and bragging of their victory. Even the King drank deep in his tent and listened as one of his knights sang his triumph: a mere hundred against a thousand rebels, and the King slew them by the ten thousands. Legends bred swiftly about Richard.

Bishop Aylmer did not join in the carousing. When he had seen to the dead and

dying, he sought his tent, close by the King's and but little smaller. His priest-esquire disarmed him and helped him to scour away the marks of battle, while his monks waited upon his pleasure. That was to pray and then to eat, and afterward, to rest alone.

Alf waited until the Bishop was comfortable, half-dreaming over his breviary but still awake, with the lamp flickering low. There was no guard in front of his tent, for trust or for arrogance. Alf raised the flap and walked in, with Jehan and Thea behind.

The Bishop looked up. They were a strange apparition in the gloom, two tall lads and a white hound, yet he showed no surprise at all. "Well?" he asked, cocking a shaggy brow. "What brings strangers here so late?"

Alf knelt and kissed his ring. "A message from the Abbot of St. Ruan's, my lord," he answered.

Aylmer looked him over carefully. "I know you. Brother . . . Alfred, was it? And you there, would you be a Sevigny?"

Jehan bowed. The second son, my lord."

"Ah. I'd heard you'd turned monk. Not to your father's liking, was it?"

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Something in the Bishop's eye made Jehan swallow a grin. "Not really, my lord."

"It doesn't seem to have hurt you," Aylmer observed.

Alf held out Morwin's letter. "From the Abbot, my lord," he said.

The Bishop took it and motioned them both to sit. "No, no, don't object. Humility's all very well, but it wears on the exalted."

As they obeyed, he broke the seal and began to read. "To my dear brother in Christ'-he's smoother on parchment than he is in the flesh, that's certain. Sent to me . . . plainly . . . What's this? You have urgent business with the King?"

Alf began to reply, but Aylmer held up a hand. "Never mind. Yet. I've inherited you two, it seems; I'm to treat you with all Christian kindness and further your cause with His Majesty, 'as much as my office and my conscience permit.'" He looked up sharply. His eyes were small, almost lost beneath the heavy brows, but piercingly bright. "Your Abbot plays interesting games, Brothers."

"Of necessity," said Alf. "He didn't dare write the full tale in case the letter fell into the wrong hands. But there's no treason in this. That I swear."

"By what, Brother? The hollows of the hills?"

"The cross on my breast will do, my lord."

Aylmer marked his coolness, but it did not abash him. "So-what couldn't be written that needs Morwin's best young minds and such haste that even a war can't interfere?"

For a moment Alf was silent. Jehan's tension was palpable. Aylmer sat unmoving, dark and strong and still as a standing stone.

Alf drew a breath, released it. "It's true that Jehan and I have been . . . given . . . to you. You asked for me. Jehan was never made to live in the cloister. But our haste rises from another cause. Some while ago, on All Hallows' Eve, a rider came to the Abbey. He was badly hurt; and we tended him, and discovered that he was the envoy of the King of Rhiyana."

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The Bishop's expression did not change, but Alf sensed his start of interest. This knight," Alf went on, "had been in Gwynedd with the young King, and had ridden into Anglia to speak with a lord there, seeking peace among the kingdoms. The lord with whom he spoke was preparing war; he meant to use our knight as a gauntlet to cast in Rhiyana's face. The knight escaped to us, though in such a state that even yet he can't leave his bed, and the Abbot took it on himself to send us with his messages to the King."

"What sort of messages?"

"Kilhwch has no desire to go to war with Anglia. But a lord of Anglia has

begun to raid in Gwynedd. If our King will refuse to join in the war and will take steps to punish his vassal, there can be peace between the kingdoms." Aylmer sat for a long while, pondering Alf's words. At last he spoke. "But your man is from Rhiyana. Why is this struggle any concern of his?"

"Gwydion of Rhiyana fostered Kilhwch in the White Keep; he still takes care for his foster son's well-being."

Again Aylmer considered, turning his ring on his hand, frowning at it. "I think you'd better talk to the King. But not tonight. He's celebrating his victory; he won't want to hear about anything else. Tomorrow, though, he'll be sober and in a mood to listen to you. Though peace is never a good sermon to preach to Coeur-de-Lion."

"I can try," Alf murmured.

"I was right about you, I think. You were wasted in the cloister."

"I was happy there. And I was serving God."

"And here you aren't?"

"I never said that, my lord."

"No. You just meant it."

"One may serve God wherever one is. Even in battle."

"Would you do that?"

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Alf shook his head, eyes lowered. "No. No, my lord. Today, I watched for a moment. That was enough."

The Bishop nodded. "It takes a strong stomach."

Jehan stirred beside Alf. "My lord," he said with some heat, "Brother Alf is no coward. He spent the whole day with the wounded. And it takes a good deal more courage to mend hurts than it does to make them."

Aylmer looked from one to the other, and his dark weathered face warmed into a smile. "I see that you two are somewhat more than traveling companions." He rose. "You'll sleep here tonight. Tomorrow you'll see His Majesty. I'll make sure of that. But I'm warning you now: Don't hope for too much. War is Richard's life's blood, and he's had his eye on Gwynedd for a long time. One man isn't going to sway him."

"Well see," said Alf. "My lord."

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Alf was up before the sun. The Bishop had not yet stirred; Jehan lay on the rug with Alf, curled about Thea's slumbering body. It was very cold.

He rose, gathered his cloak about him, and peered through the tent flap. The camp was silent, wrapped in an effluvium of wine and blood, the aftermath of battle. A mist lay like a gray curtain over the tents.

The horses were well content, with feed and water in plenty. Alf left them after a moment or two and went down to the lake.

The wide water stretched before him, half-veiled in fog. There was no one near to see him; he stripped and plunged in, gasping, for the water was icy. But he had bached in colder in the dead of winter in St. Ruan's.

When he was almost done, the water turned warm so suddenly that it burned.

He whipped about. Thea stood on the bank in her own shape, wearing his shirt.

It needed a washing, he noticed.

She walked toward him, her soles barely touching the surface of the lake. A yard or two away from him, she sat cross-legged

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on air. "What are you scowling for?" she asked him. "Hurry and finish your bath. I can't keep the water warm forever."

"If anyone sees you," he said, "there will be trouble."

"Don't worry. I'm not easily raped. Even by King Richard's soldiers."

Alf flushed. That was not what he had meant, and she knew it.

"You do blush prettily," Thea remarked. Still wearing his shirt, she let

herself sink. "Ah-wonderful. Somehow a bath feels much better on skin than on fur." She wriggled out of the shirt, inspected it critically, rolled it up and

tossed it shoreward before Alf could stop her. She was chest-deep, as he was; he averted his eyes and waded past her.

Between one step and the next, the water turned from blood-warm to icy cold. He ran to the bank and fumbled for his clothes. His shirt was warm, dry, and clean, as were the rest. Thea's gift.

Once safely clad, he should have returned to the camp. He stayed where he was, not looking at Thea but very much aware of her.

She emerged at length and accepted his cloak. "Thank you," she said, not entirely ironically. "I suppose I should turn into a hound again and give you some peace."

He glanced at her. She was very fair, wrapped in the dark blue cloak. He remembered what lay beneath; the memory burned. His body kindled in its fire. So this is what it is, he thought in the small part of him which could still think.

Thea stared. Beautiful eyes, golden bronze, burning. "You mean you've never-" He turned and fled.

Once he had left her, he cooled swiftly enough- But he could not still his trembling. So long, so long- Other novices had groaned and tossed in their beds or crept to secret shameful trysts with girls from the village, even with each other. Monks had confessed to daylight musings, to burning dreams, to outright sin; accepted their penances; and come back soon after with

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the same confessions. Alfred had lived untroubled, novice, monk, and priest; had pitied his brothers' frailty, but granted it no mercy. A man of God should master his body. Had not he himself done so?

He had been a fool. A child. A babe in arms.

Was he now to become a man?

He drew himself up. A man was his own master. He faced what he must face and overcame it boldly. Even this, torment that it was, but sweet

-honey-fire-sweet, like her eyes, like her-

"AW

His mind fell silent. His body stilled, conquered.

But he did not go back. Nor did she follow him, as a woman or as a hound.

He was calm when he returned to the Bishop's tent, to find Aylmer awake and dressed and surrounded by his monks. Jehan stood among them, conspicuous for his lordly clothes though not for his size; one or two of Aylmer's warrior-priests easily overtopped him.

There were curious glances as Alf entered. One man in particular fixed him with a hard stare, a small dark man in a strange habit, gray cowl over white robe. Something about him made Alf's skin prickle.

"Brother Alfred," Aylmer greeted him. "I'm getting ready to say Mass. Will you serve me?"

Alf forgot the stranger, forgot even the lingering shame of his encounter with Thea. He had not gone up to the altar in years. Ten years, nine months, four days. Not since he had found himself unable completely to reconcile his face with his years; when he had ceased to doubt that he would not grow old.

But Aylmer had not asked him to say Mass, did not know that he had taken priest's vows. Surely he could serve at the altar. That was no worse than singing in the choir.

Aylmer was waiting, growing impatient. Alf willed himself to speak. Til do it, my lord."

Aylmer nodded. "Brother Bernard, show Brother Alfred where everything is. Well start as soon as the King is ready."

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Dressed in alb and dalmatic and moving through the familiar ritual, Alf found that his fear had vanished. In its place had come a sort of exaltation. This, he was made for. Strange, half-human, elvish creature that he was, he belonged here at this altar, taking part in the shaping of the Mass.

He was preternaturally aware of everything, not only the priest and the rite, but the Bishop's tent about him, the high lords kneeling and standing as the ritual bade them, and the King.

Richard was difficult to pass by: a tall man, well-made, with a face he was proud of and a mane of gold-red hair. He heard the Mass with apparent devotion, but the swift fierce mind leaped from thought to thought, seldom pausing to meditate upon the Sacrament. His eyes kept returning to Alf, caught by the fair strange face, as Aylmer had known they would be.

When the Mass was ended, the celebrants disrobed swiftly. Alf paused with Alun's knightly garments in his hands. "My lord," he said to Aylmer, who watched him, "if you would allow me a moment to fetch my habit--"

The Bishop shook his head. "No. It's better this way." A monk settled his cloak about his shoulders; he fastened the clasp. "Alfred, Jehan, come with me."

Richard sat in his tent, attended by several squires and a knight or two. "Aylmer!" he called out as the Bishop entered. "Late for breakfast, as usual." "Of course, Sire," the Bishop said calmly. "Should I endanger my reputation by coming early?"

The King laughed and held out a cup. "Here, drink. You've taken unfair advantage already by going to bed sober last night."

As Aylmer took the cup and sat by the King, Richard noticed the two attendants. "What, sir, have you been recruiting squires in this wilderness?" "They've been recruiting me, Sire. Brother Alfred, Brother Jehan, late of St. Ruan's."

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One of the knights stirred. "Jehan de Sevigny! They've thrown you out of the cloister?"

"Alas," Jehan replied, "yes. I outgrew it, you see."

"Like Bran the Blessed," Alf said, "he grows so great that no house will hold him."

The King's golden lion-eyes had turned to him and held, as they had during Mass. The others laughed at the jest, Jehan among them; the King was silent, although he smiled. "And you, Sir Monk-in-knight's-clothing? Wouldn't the house hold you?"

"No, Sire," Alf responded.

They were all staring now, at him, at the King. Their thoughts made him clench his fists. Richard had found another pretty lad, the prettiest one yet.

That was not what Richard was thinking of. He had been trying since Mass to put a name to that cast of features, but none would come.

"Alfred," he said, "of St. Ruan's on Ynys Witrin. Are you a clerkr

"Of sorts, Sire."

"Pity. You look as if you'd make a swordsman in the Eastern fashion. Light and fast." With an abrupt gesture, Richard pointed to a seat. "Sit down, both of you. While we eat, you can tell us a tale or two we haven't heard before."

It was the first time Alf had sat at table with a King, though he had waited upon royalty once or twice, long ago. Those high feasts had been not at all like this breaking of bread upon the battlefield. Richard was at ease, standing little upon ceremony; no one paid much heed to rank.

Afterward, as they all rose to go, Richard gestured to Alf. "Sir monk. Stay." Aylmer's satisfaction was palpable; as was the sudden interest of the others. Jehan frowned and wavered. But the Bishop's cold eye held him; he retreated. One was not precisely alone with a King. Squires cleared away the table; another sat in a corner, polishing a helm. But those

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in Richard's mind were nonentities. He relaxed in his chair, eyes half-closed, saying nothing.

Alf was used to silence. He settled into it and wrapped himself in it.

The King's voice wove its way into the pattern of his thoughts. "Brother

Alfred. Alf. What are you?"

He regarded Richard calmly. His God, a white elf-woman, himself-those he feared. A King troubled him not at all. "I'm a monk of St. Ruan's Abbey, Sire."

"Noble born?"

He shrugged slightly. "I doubt it."

The King's eyes narrowed. "Don't you know?"

"I was a foundling, Sire."

"A changeling?"

"Some people think so."

"I can see why," Richard said. And, abruptly: "What does Aylmer want?"

"Aylmer, Sire?" Alf asked, puzzled.

"Aylmer. Why is he thrusting you at me? What's he up to?"

This King was no fool. Alf smiled without thinking. "The Bishop is up to nothing, Sire."

"So now he's corrupting his monks in the cradle."

Alf's smile widened. Richard's eyes were glinting. "Don't blame him for this, Sire. I asked him for an audience with you."

Richard frowned; then he laughed. "And he didn't even ask. He simply placed you where I'd fall over you. Well, Brother Obstacle, what do you want?"

The mirth faded from Alf's face. He spoke quietly, carefully. "I've been sent to serve the Bishop. But I've also been entrusted with another errand."

"By whom?"

"The King of Rhiyana, on behalf of Kilhwch of Gwynedd."

The drowsing lion tensed. "One monk, with only a boy for company. Are they trying to insult me?"

"No, Sire. They honor you with their trust."

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"Or taunt me with it. I know what Gwydion is like. He lairs in his White Keep and spins webs to trap kings in. How did I stumble into this one?"

"You didn't. One of your vassals did. A baron of the Marches, named Rhydderch."

The King stroked his beard and pretended a calm he did not feel. "Rhydderch. What has he done?"

"You know that there's been trouble on the Marches."

There was a dangerous glint in Richard's eye. "I know it," he said.

"Rhydderch is behind it. He's sent forces into Gwynedd and is ravaging the lands along the border."

"Are you implying that I don't keep my lords in hand?"

"I'm implying nothing, Majesty," Alf said.

If Richard had had a tail, it would have been lashing his sides. "You tell me that one of my barons foments a major war, and that the King of Rhiyana will concern himself with it. Gwydion's a meddler, but even so, in this he's going far afield."

"Of course he's concerned. Kilhwch is his foster son. A war with you would end in disaster."

"For one side. Kilhwch is a boy, and Gwydion's no soldier."

"For both sides, Sire. Kilhwch is nineteen, which isn't so very young, and he takes after his father. And Gwydion, I think, would surprise you. Isn't his brother said to be the best knight in the world?"

"His brother is as old as he is. Which is ancient."

Alf shook his head. "The Flame-bearer has no equal, nor ever shall have. Not even Coeur-de-Lion."

That barb had sunk deep. Richard's eyes blazed. His voice was too quiet, almost a purr. "You're very sure of that, little monk. Do you even know which end of a sword to hold onto?"

"I can guess, Sire."

"And you guess at the prince's prowess?"

"The world knows it. I believe it." Calmly, boldly, Alf sat on a stool near

the King, his long legs drawn up.

The other did not react to this small insolence in the face

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of the greater one. "Do you know how to convince me that I ought to go to war? Aylmer could have told you. Anyone could. It's ludicrously simple. Tell the brawn-brained fool the other man is a better fighter than he is."

To Richard's utter amazement, Alf laughed. It was a light free sound, with nothing in it but mirth. "You, Sire? Brawn-brained? Far from it. But you have an alarming passion for fighting, and you want Gwynedd. Unwise, that. You'd do better to send ambassadors to Kilhwch and tell him you want peace. Else you'll have Gwynedd on your left and Rhiyana on your right, and all Hell between."

"A small kingdom whose King is barely in control of his vassals, and a greater one which hasn't fought a war since before I was born. But Anglia is strong, tempered in the Crusade."

"And tired of fighting, though you may not be, Sire. Surely it will be adventure enough to quell Rhydderch."

Richard looked him over again, slowly this time, musing. "Why are you doing this? Are you Rhiyanan?"

"No, Sire. It was entrusted to me by someone else. A knight of Rhiyana who fell afoul of Rhydderch."

"Dead?"

"No, though not for Rhydderch's lack of trying."

"So Gwydion already has a reason to be my enemy."

"Rhiyana doesn't know yet. And won't, if you help us, Sire. Send word to Rhydderch. Order him to withdraw from Gwynedd on pain of death. And let Kilhwch know what you're doing."

The King was silent. Alf clasped his knees, doing his utmost not to reveal his tension. Richard hung in the balance, debating within himself. War, and winter coming, and troops to deal with who fretted already at campaigning so late in the year. To stop Rhydderch, to beg Kilhwch's kind pardon-no. But a truce now, and in the spring . . .

He nodded abruptly and stood. "I'm bound to ride now for Carlisle. By the time I get there I'll have an answer for you."

Alf rose as the King had and bowed, slightly, gracefully. "As you will, Sire." Judith Tarr

The lion-eyes glinted upon him. "But it's not as you will, is it?"

"I don't matter, Majesty."

Richard snorted. "Stop pretending to be so humble. You're as proud as Lucifer."

Alf nodded. "Yes, I am. But I try. That's worth something."

"A brass farthing." Richard tossed him something that glittered; reflexively he caught it. "I have work to do if we're to ride out of here by night. You'll wait on Aylmer. But I may steal you now and again. You're interesting, sir monk."

Alf bowed low without speaking. Metal warmed in his hand, the shape of a ring, the sense of silver, moonstone.

A simple monk had no business with such things. He knew he should return it with courtesy; half-raised his hand, opened his mouth to speak.

When he left, he had not spoken. The ring was still clenched in his fist.

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The King broke camp shortly after noon and turned his face toward Carlisle. His men, recovered from the ravages of battle and of drink, set forth in high spirits, singing as they went, songs that made no concessions to the small somber-clad party about the Bishop. The more pious of those pretended not to listen; the rest beat time on thigh or pommel and at length joined in. Alf rode in silence. He had been silent since he returned from the King's tent.

Jehan frowned. He had hoped that, once Alf had delivered his message and given himself over to Bishop Aylmer, he would be his old self again. But he seemed



more moody than ever. He did not even answer when Jehan, looking about, asked, "Where's Thea?"

A little after that, Alf left his place behind the Bishop. Others were riding apart from the line, young knights impatient with the slow pace, bidden by their commanders to patrol the army's edges. He did not belong with them, unarmed and unarmored as he was, but no one rebuked him. He had an air about him, Jehan thought, like a prince in exile.

"An interesting young man," a voice said.

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Someone had ridden up beside him, the man in the gray cowl on a bony mule. Jehan swallowed a sharp retort. He did not like this Brother Reynaud—not his face, not his eyes, and not at all his high nasal voice.

The monk did not seem to notice Jehan's silence. He was watching Alf with a peculiar, almost avid stare. "Very interesting," he repeated. "I understand that he's a churchman?"

Jehan had his temper in hand. "Yes, Brother," he said easily enough. "He has a dispensation to wear secular clothes. So do I. We thought it would be less dangerous to travel this way."

"Oh, yes. Yes. It might be. Certainly he looks most well in that guise. Though one so fair would look well even in sackcloth." Brother Reynaud smiled a narrow, ice-edged smile. "Does he come of a princely family?"

"Not that anyone knows of. But he doesn't need to be a lord's get. He's princely enough as he is."

"That," said the monk, "is clear to see. His parents must be very proud of such a son."

"He's an orphan. He was raised in the abbey."

"Oh? How sad." Brother Reynaud's eyes did not match his words; they glittered, eager. Like a hound on the scent, Jehan thought.

Hound. Gray cowl, white robe. Jehan remembered dimly a name he had overheard, a word or two describing a habit and an Order. Hounds. Canes. Canes Dei, Hounds of God.

He went cold. His fingers clenched upon the reins; the chestnut jibbed, protesting.

He made himself speak calmly. Tell me, Brother. I can't seem to place your habit. Is it a new Order?"

Reynaud glanced at him and smiled again. "New enough. The Order of Saint Paul."

The Paulines. They were the hunting-hounds of Rome, seekers and destroyers of aught that imperiled the Church. Heretics. Unbelievers. Witches and sorcerers. Alf rode unheeding, his white head bare, the gray mare dancing beneath him. Someone called out to him, admiring his mount;

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he replied, his voice clear and strong and inhumanly beautiful. No one could see his eyes as they were—those, he blurred, by subtle witchery—but that was a small thing to the totality of him. He looked what he was, elf-born, alien. The King had summoned him. The mare wheeled and fell in beside the red charger. They rode on so, horses and men matched in height, but the King heavier, slower, earthbound.

"The King has taken to him," Reynaud observed.

Jehan's heart hammered against his ribs. He could smell the danger in this man, a reek of blood and fire. "I'm not surprised," he said. "He was quite the most brilliant monk in our abbey. And the most saintly."

Reynaud did not react at all to that thrust. "Your Abbot must have been sorry to see him go."

"He was. But Bishop Aylmer asked for Brother Alfred, and it was best for him to leave. He needed to stretch his wings a little."

"Strong wings they must be to attain a King in their first flight."

"That's what the Abbot thought. And Dom Morwin's right about most things."

"Was it your Dom Morwin who admitted this paragon to the abbey?"

"Oh, no. Dom Morwin's only been Abbot for five years. Brother Alf came when he was a baby."

The gleam in Reynaud's eye had brightened. "Alf, you call him?"

Jehan swallowed and tried to smile. "There are a lot of Saxons in our abbey.

And of course there's the great scholar, the one who wrote the Gloria Dei.

With two Alfreds in the place, one had to have his name shortened."

"Ah, yes. Alfred of St. Ruan's. I hadn't noticed the coincidence. Is he still alive?"

"Still. Though he doesn't go out anymore, nor write much. He's getting quite old, and his health isn't very good."

"That's a pity. Your young Brother is named after him, then?"

Jehan nodded. "Takes after his scholarship, too. He hated

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to see Brother Alf go. But the Abbot insisted. There are other teachers, he said, and one of them is the world."

"True enough," Alf said.

Jehan dr