

The Call of the Sword

Book One of The Chronicles of Hawklan

Roger Taylor

Mushroom eBooks

“The time of Hawklan is so far in the past that it could be the distant future”

Prologue

In the ninth hour of the Last Battle, Sumeral, warring with Ethriss in ways beyond the knowledge of men, gazed upon the pitiless slaughter being wrought by the two great armies and, wearying of it, was overwhelmed with a desire to seize at one stroke His final victory.

Then He left the high vantage where His Uhriel held at bay the Guardians, and with silver sword and golden axe cut a shining path of gore to the heart of the fray where stood the mortal frame of His enemy.

For Ethriss had come to the battle unarmed, lest concern for his mortal form distract him from his greater battle with Sumeral's dark spirit. In the whirling agony of that day, while the army of the Great Alliance battled with His demented hordes, he stood alone, ringed only by his chosen Fyordyn High Guards. An Iron Ring of his oldest and most faithful allies. The least corrupted of men, and His greatest mortal enemies.

Nine hours they had stood unwavering as His ravening armies had broken over them like wind-whipped waves. But they were mortal, and they wearied, and at each onslaught they were fewer, and the Iron Ring shrank inexorably. Now a terrible fear came over them as His approach was seen, bright like the morning star through the swirling mist and smoke of that awful field.

For He was a glorious and radiant sight in His beauty and power, and all knew that mortal weapons would turn from His body, armoured as it was with the Power of the Great Searing from which He had come. And all knew that His gaze alone was beyond the will of any man to withstand.

But it is said that all things create the means of their own destruction.

So it was now. For in that grim circle was one who was of His creating. Old even then. Made old by His scornful, dismissive blessing. Old beyond loves and hatreds. Old in implacable resolution that He would be thrown down this day though it destroy the world.

And as He raised His spear in triumph to strike the blow that would make all His, Sumeral's gaze fell upon the face of this one, and eyes He had long forgotten stared fearfully but uncowed into His very soul.

And He faltered.

In that timeless moment, His protection fell from Him, and His breast was pierced by a true Fyordyn arrow forged with Ethriss's skill. Then another and another and another, thick through the death-stained air like a cleaning summer storm. And with a great cry His mortal body fell, and turmoil reigned as His Uhriel, bereft of His will, fell before the Guardians, and the earth and sky

and sea were torn from their grasp. So too were scattered His mortal armies.

But in His falling, two things He did. His mortal hand loosed the spear that struck down Ethriss, and His spirit shrank and vowed and learned and hid in the hearts of His most faithful until some future time would come. For He knew that His ways lay now deep in the hearts of all men, and that as surely as He now fell, so He must rise again in the fullness of time.

* * * *

Even the gentle land of Orthlund cowered under that winter. The like had never been known in living memory. It seemed that almost every day there were dark clouds gathering in the north, like armies awaiting reinforcements. And when the howling winds brought them and their bloated burdens of snow relentlessly southward, the Orthlundyn were more than content to surrender their villages to the assault.

Content as they sat and talked and carved in the warmth of their homes, and were grateful for thick walls and stout roofs, and for the past summer that had given them a fine harvest and locked more than enough warm days into their flickering radiant stones to warm them through a dozen such winters.

Inevitably though, all things were dominated by this untypical manifestation. No conversation ended without some allusion to it, and virtually no carving was made during those months that did not enshrine some aspect of it. In most villages, the Carvers' Guilds held equally untypical formal meetings. Some to discuss the new devices that were being discovered to capture the subtleties and richness of their new land. Some to discuss not only that but, horror of horrors, a rationing of stone, for there was no way into the mountains to replenish stocks, and even communication between villages had become difficult and dangerous. It became a time of the miniature.

On the days when it was bright and sunny, the Orthlundyn donned their warmest clothes and wandered through the snow-filled streets of their villages, revelling in the sight of the white, new-shaped fields, and their houses, now strangely decorated with bellying white eaves and wind-blown buttresses. And they would stand in open admiration of the splendour of the mountains – sharp, stern and forbidding in the tingling air.

The children learned new games and devilments and accidentally stored up bright white memories for future, balmier times. The wits founded the Snow Carvers' Guild and filled the streets with strange creatures and carved likenesses of their neighbours, to the amusement of some and the considerable indignation of others.

Only at the very heart of the winter did a little concern creep darkly into the lives of these civilized people. A blizzard blew for seven consecutive days, howling and screaming and so hiding the world that it was folly to take but three steps from a threshold. Then, as the land was shaped and reshaped unseen, conversations faded, chisels were laid aside, and eyes turned pensively to hearths to seek stillness and reassurance in the flickering, summer-stored glow of the radiant stones.

At the height of this storm, high in the mountains where all was impassable, a figure appeared: a man. Wrapped in a long enveloping cloak with a deep hood pulled well forward, bowing against the pitiless, biting wind, he moved slowly through the grey swirling gloom.

Occasionally, finding some rocky outcrop, he would stop and rest for a while in its lee, straightening up, grateful for a brief respite. Then, wrapping his cloak about himself for greater warmth, he would move off again.

All around him the wind screamed and clattered and echoed through valleys and clefts, bouncing off ringing rock faces and hissing over the snow, to sound sometimes like the clamour of a terrible battle,

sometimes like the mocking laughter of a thousand tormentors, sometimes like a great sigh. From time to time the man paused and turned and listened.

That he was lost, he knew. But that was all he knew. That and the knowledge that, for all his cloak and hood were thick and warm, he would surely soon die in this fearful place if he did not come across shelter and warmth soon.

Then through the tumult around him came another sound. The man paused as though his own soft footsteps might obscure it. But it came again and again. Distant and shifting, but persistent. It was a cry. A cry for help.

The hooded head cast about for the direction from which it came, but the wind mocked him and brought it to him from every angle, now near, now far. Then for an instant the wind was gone. Dropped to a low sighing moan. And the plaintive cry rode on it like a distraught messenger, revealing its true self before the wind returned to rend and scatter it. The man turned and moved forward, ignoring the many wind-born counterfeits now tempting him elsewhere again.

He soon came upon the caller, a small figure dark in the snow, held fast by the leg in a cruel, long-forgotten trap. Despite his desperate need and long pleading however, the caller cried out in terror as the hooded figure loomed out of the gloom towards him. But the man bent down and laid a calming hand on him.

‘Don’t be afraid,’ he said.

The metal of the trap was bitterly cold and the man had to wrap his hands in his cloak to prise apart its heavy sprung jaws. As he strained, the wind blew his hood back and the trapped figure looked up at him and gave him a name. Then the jaws were open and their captive rolled away with a cry of relief.

The man examined the injured leg closely and grimaced.

‘It stopped hurting some time ago,’ said the victim faintly.

The man nodded. ‘That’s the cold,’ he said. ‘It’s stopped the bleeding too and probably saved your life.’

‘For a little while,’ the figure said weakly.

The man nodded. ‘Neither of us have long, without better fortune,’ he said quietly. Then he looked again at the leg. ‘But whatever happens, I’m afraid this is lost. It’s almost completely severed.’ And with an unexpected and powerful twist he tore away the remains of the damaged limb and dropped it into the snow. Its owner fainted.

Bending forward the man picked up the unconscious form and, angrily kicking the trap shut, moved off again into the storm.

Slowly, his unguided footsteps took him steadily downwards, across icy rock slopes and through drift filled gulleys, a seemingly endless pilgrimage towards what must surely be a chill final sleep.

Gradually the terrain softened, but such light as there was began to fade and, unrelenting, the wind increased, making the man lower his head so that all he could see was the snow before him. Shifting his burden occasionally he thought no thoughts in his mounting weariness but the placing of one foot in front of the other, and did not notice that after a while he was once again walking uphill.

Then his journey ended as a sheer, snow covered vertical face appeared abruptly before his downcast gaze. He looked up and to the left and right, but in all directions it disappeared into the gathering

darkness.

Reaching out uncertainly, as if for reassurance, he placed his hand against the wall and brushed it from side to side. As the loose packed snow fell away, some of it was pressed into deep crevices etched into the surface, and he saw that it was not rock, but metal, and intricately carved.

He stared at it for some time, as if waiting. Then, as he watched, his fingers searched out a pattern in the snow-packed surface and, unbidden, his hand took from his pocket a small medallion and placed it against the pattern. It clicked softly into place, and so well did it fit that its outlines could no longer be seen. The man felt an ancient silence stir within him and, bringing his face close to the great metal wall, he whispered softly.

A thin black vertical line appeared in front of him and slowly he stepped back. The line widened into a crack and then widened further as the wall revealed itself to be a huge gate.

As its two great leaves swung open noiselessly and majestically, the man, still holding his burden, was silhouetted against a radiant and welcoming light that rose to fill the courtyard beyond.

Far to the north, a chill and brooding presence stirred also, though uneasily, like one who has heard floating down the long deserted corridors of his ancient, empty mansion, a soft and feared footfall.

Chapter 1

Anderras Darion was the name of Hawklan's castle. Situated above the village of Pedhavin, it looked out over the undulating farm and forest lands of central Orthlund. Its construction showed little sign of age, though it was known to be ancient and its location was unusual in that its huge bulk sealed the mouth of a hanging valley. The great front wall bedded deep into the surrounding rock made it appear as if it were growing from the mountains like a natural outcrop, and its builders had fitted the local rock so cunningly that no line could be seen where the wall met the sides of the valley, nor where block fitted to block. Only the Great Gate and the towers rising from and behind the wall marked it as being other than one of nature's extravagances.

The Gate was double-leaved and unusually high and, from a distance, appeared to be of timber overlain with plain polished bronze. However, closer examination showed it to be covered with countless tiny carvings depicting scenes from a great war and a great peace, and while no one knew what the Gate was made of, the intricate texture of the carvings was unaffected by both the onslaughts of winters and summers alike, and by the hands of generations of people who had travelled to see them and marvel.

Carvers from the Guild would climb the steep winding road up from the village: sometimes alone, to learn again humility in the face of this wonder; sometimes with their apprentices, to sharpen the edge of their young aspirations. Fathers too would bring their children and read to them the stories enshrined in the seemingly endless patterning of the Gate, for Hawklan was no severe overlord: he was a healer. And though his castle overlooked the village, it blended so harmoniously with the mountains that, like them, it offered not menace, but stability and calm.

Although the Orthlundyn took little interest in myths and legends, on special days the villagers would picnic and dance on the grass mounds that fringed the foot of the Castle wall and, in token of the long ages when Anderras Darion was sealed and unassailable, someone would bring a ladder and climb high up the Gate and, painstakingly running his finger along the carvings for fear of losing his place in such fine workmanship, would tell the stories that could not normally be told. For even within the height of an ordinary man, there were stories enough for a lifetime.

Sometimes a blind man would come to the Gate and run his hands over its finely etched and scored

surface, and the villagers would sit spellbound. For always he would tell a story different to the one that they could see, and always they went away laughing and excited.

Of the many strangers who visited the Gate, one alone lingered in the memories of the villagers. He was a tiny man and he came out of the mountains on a sharp and frosty day, trailing his tiny shadow in the wintry sun. He stared at the Gate for many an hour, and ran his hands across it with his eyes first open, then closed. Then he brought his face close to the surface, gently blew a long humming stream of misty air at the ornate patterning, and turned his ear to it in rapt concentration. Those standing near say they heard a faint singing as from a great distance. The little man nodded and sighed, though not sadly.

‘This is a miraculous gate,’ he said to the group of curious children that had followed him. ‘You must listen to it when the wind blows. And even when it doesn’t. It holds more stories than you can see or feel, and they are all true.’

Then he went on his way and was never seen in the village again. The children puffed and blew at the Gate, but heard nothing, and soon forgot the little man, although occasionally, one of them, quieter than the others, would raise his hand suddenly for silence when a soft wind drifted up from the fields below.

‘Listen,’ he would say. ‘The Castle’s singing.’ But the others would laugh.

To the left of the Great Gate was a bubbling pool, the water from which spilled over the rocks and tumbled and cascaded its way down to join the river that ran through the outskirts of the village. This stream was from the valleys beyond the Castle, and its water was cold and clear and sharp. No one knew how deep the pool was, as nothing would sink in it, such was the uprush of water from it, even in the driest summer.

Atop the eyeless wall, towers and solid rectangular blocks of buildings grew in a random but not disordered manner, soaring up and raking back in tiers beyond the sight of anyone standing at its foot. Only the birds could see all the splendour of the Castle, but such as could be seen by earthbound creatures filled them with wonder and awe, and sober contemplation of the people who had made it. There were many skills in the land, but none could pretend to such as had made this edifice.

Anderras Darion gave a benign security to the village of Pedhavin. Its occupant was known and loved; the wicket in the Great Gate was always open, and the Gate alone was a joy and a wonder and a point of proud gossip in villages all around. And yet the Castle stood immovable and solid, its walls seeming to hold the mountains apart: unassailable by stone and ladder, fire and iron. Not even treachery would open the Great Gate once sealed, while the only other entrance was filled with churning, rushing water and who knew what else under the Castle’s deep foundations. The valley beyond was lush and fertile, and surrounded by high crags, made sheer and impregnable by the same skills that had made the Castle itself. Anderras Darion was a comforting place, nestling in the mountains, like an old matriarch who radiated security, but whose merest glance could scatter her towering offspring.

* * * *

Hawklan sat alone at a table in one of the smaller dining halls. Size, of course, is relative, and even though the hall was indeed smaller than many in the Castle, it would have comfortably accommodated several hundred diners and attendants. In the past it probably had. Hawklan however, was unaffected by his inappropriate scale in this echoing room. He was slouched back in a carved chair and gazing idly at a splash of multi-coloured light making its leisurely but inexorable way across the table as the sun shone through a round window above. Cutting through the dust motes, the yellow ray left the scene enshrined in the glass resting uncertainly and inaccurately on the heavily grained table.

The window showed a warrior bidding farewell to his wife and child. Hawklan could see the red of the

warrior's cloak and the blue of his wife's gown, but the green of the fields in the background did not survive the sun-carried journey, and the gold of the warrior's sword mingled with the yellow of the child's tunic. Hawklan turned and looked up at the original. He knew that if he walked across the room and gazed up at the scene he would see that the artist had caught the distress and conflict in the warrior's face as his child shied away from his fearsome armour. It was a masterly piece of work that always made Hawklan want to reach up and embrace the three and comfort them. It also made him thankful that he had no such conflict to face. He returned his gaze to the tabletop and breathed a sigh.

High in the beams above a feathered ear caught the sound, and a single shiny black eye opened and turned a gimlet gaze onto the figure below with a businesslike twist of the head. The owner of the eye was a raven. He was called Gavor.

Spreading his wings he craned forward and, resting on the warm air that filled the cavernous roof, he floated silently into the void. With barely a twitch of his delicate feathers he spiralled gracefully down through the sun-striped air and came to rest a little way in front of Hawklan. The landing was not quite as graceful as the flight, and certainly not as quiet, for Gavor's wooden leg was apt to give him trouble from time to time. Not least when he wished it to.

The hollow thud of Gavor's landing and the regular clunk of his wooden leg made Hawklan lift his head to look at the approaching bird. It stopped in front of him and returned his gaze.

'Rrrukk,' it said. Hawklan did not speak.

'Rrrukk,' it repeated. A slight smile flickered in Hawklan's eyes and spread reluctantly across his face.

'Very good, Gavor,' he said. 'Very good. Your bird impressions are coming on very nicely. You *will* be in demand at the next village fair. How's the nightingale coming along? Is your throat still sore?'

Gavor raised his head with regal disdain.

'Dear boy,' came his cultured tones. 'Such irony doesn't become you. It really isn't your style.'

'I *do* apologize,' said Hawklan with patent insincerity, laying a hand on his chest. 'Please accept my humblest apologies. I was overwhelmed by the sight of you. May I ask to what do we owe the pleasure of your august presence at our repast?'

Gavor maintained his hauteur. 'You sighed, dear boy. You sighed.'

Hawklan looked at the bird quizzically and suspiciously.

Gavor shrugged. 'You sighed,' he repeated. 'There I was. Up in the rafters. Brooding, as it were. Contemplating the mysteries of the universe. When my reverie was shattered by this heart-rending sigh soaring up through the hall. "Ah, such pain," I thought. "My friend and saviour is being crushed under some unbearable burden. I must help him." And down I come. And what do I get? Sarcasm – base ingratitude. There's friendship for you.'

'I'm touched by your concern, Gavor,' said Hawklan. 'But I didn't sigh.'

Gavor turned away and started clunking up and down the table, pecking at various morsels left in the silver dishes. He paused to swallow something.

'Ah yes you did, my friend. Most distinctly. Mind you, I will admit I've never actually heard anyone sigh before, but I know what one sounds like. I've read about them on the Gate.' He levelled a wing at Hawklan. 'And what you produced was a sigh. Quite unequivocally. A sigh.'

He paused and rooted out a piece of meat.

‘Mm. Delicious,’ he said. ‘My compliments to the cook. Loman’s cooking is improving noticeably – for a castellan.’

‘If Loman hears you calling him a cook, we’ll be eating raven pie for a week,’ said Hawklan.

Gavor ignored the comment. ‘As I was saying,’ he continued. ‘You sighed, Hawklan. A great heaving outpouring of despair. Almost knocked me off my perch. So I’ve come to see what’s wrong, dear boy. If I allow you to get away with sighing, you’ll be groaning next, and you’ve no idea how it echoes up there. I really can’t preen myself if you’re going to assail me with such a tragic cacophony.’

Hawklan laughed. ‘I may concede that perhaps I breathed out rather heavily, but I give you my solemn promise that I will not allow it to degenerate into groaning. I’ve far too much respect for your feathers.’

‘Huh,’ Gavor grunted, cracking a nut with a shuddering blow of his great black beak. ‘You’ve been very quiet recently. Not that you were ever particularly raucous. But you’ve been . . . solemn. Sad almost.’ Gavor’s tone had changed. ‘What’s the matter, Hawklan?’ he asked suddenly, with concern.

Hawklan stood up, pushing the heavy chair back as he did. He was a tall man, but lean and spare. His face looked weathered, yet ageless and relaxed, its dominant feature being bright green penetrating eyes. It was the combination of these eyes with the angular, high cheek-boned face and prominent nose that had prompted Gavor to call him ‘Hawklan’ when they first met, twenty years ago, in the snow-filled valleys to the north. He, Gavor, dying, with his leg caught in an old, forgotten trap, and the strange quiet man with no memory, who freed him and nursed him to health with magical hands.

Hawklan shrugged his shoulders as he walked away from the table. Gavor, partly mistaking the gesture and partly to be nearer his friend, glided after him with an imperceptible movement of his wings. There was no graceless landing here, as his good foot closed gently on Hawklan’s shoulder and his wings folded to avoid Hawklan’s head.

Hawklan tapped the black beak gently with his finger. ‘You’ve known me too long, Gavor,’ he said.

Gavor cocked his head on one side. ‘As long as you’ve known yourself, dear boy. Now tell all, do.’

Hawklan’s eyes flitted briefly to the round window with its coloured glass picture.

‘Ah,’ said Gavor, catching the movement. ‘A sensitive artist and a sad tale from harsher times. But their pain is long over, and would ever have been beyond your powers.’

‘Look at it, Gavor. Look at the background. Tell me what you see.’

Gavor jumped off Hawklan’s shoulder, dipped almost to the floor, and then soared up towards the window, his black plumage iridescent with purples and blues as he cut through the beam of sunlight.

‘What do you see?’ called Hawklan.

‘Fields, dwellings, hills. The closer I look, the more I can see. It’s a remarkable piece of craftsmanship.’

‘What else?’

‘Sky and clouds.’

‘On the horizon, Gavor. In the far distance.’

Gavor turned over in mid-air and flew slowly past the window. A small feather drifted down.

‘Black clouds, Hawklan. Just on the horizon – very symbolic.’

‘Yes, but it’s settled in my mind and won’t go away. Black clouds in the distance. Foreboding. Like something in the corner of your eye that disappears when you look directly at it.’

Gavor landed back on Hawklan’s shoulder. He knew his friend was not given to self-indulgent flirtations with matters dark, and he dismissed immediately any intention of teasing him out of his mood. It was, however, Hawklan who initiated the change.

‘Aren’t you going to tell me it’s Spring, and that I should get a wife?’ he asked.

‘As a matter of fact I was, dear boy,’ replied Gavor with mock testiness. ‘But you’ve spoilt the surprise.’

‘Some surprise. You usually give me the benefit of your highly dubious experience in these matters every Spring. While you have the wind left, that is’

Gavor shook his head indignantly. ‘I’m a creature of wide but discerning tastes,’ he said. ‘Not to say stamina. I never lose my wind.’

He saw that Hawklan’s mood was passing.

‘I fail to see why I should allow myself to be distressed by your peculiar lack of interest in such matters, dear boy. It’s not natural. You’re bound to have gloomy thoughts.’

Hawklan paused and smiled resignedly. ‘Gloomy thoughts I could deal with, Gavor. But vague presentiments . . .’

Gavor took off again and flew in great arcs around the hall.

‘Hawklan,’ he shouted. ‘You know there’s only one thing you can do with a presentiment, don’t you?’

Hawklan stared up at him, black and shining, flitting in and out of the roof beams and sunbeams. He swooped down close.

‘Wait, dear boy. Wait.’

‘I suppose you’re right,’ said Hawklan. ‘There *is* nothing else I can do really.’

‘Of course I’m right, dear boy,’ came the echoing reply from the rafters. ‘Always am. And I’m right about you finding a woman. Oh, excuse me, a spider.’

There was a brief scuffle overhead, and then Gavor glided into view again. He perched on a high window ledge and looked out.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘talking of women. Look who’s coming across the courtyard in a hurry. Hair rivalling the sunshine, mouth like winter berries, and a grace of movement that not even my words can encompass.’

He sighed massively. ‘I tell you, Hawklan, if I were a man . . . or she a bird . . .’

‘Gavor!’ said Hawklan menacingly, interrupting his friend’s lecherous flow.

‘I know, dear boy. Proud father and all that. Gavor for the pot, etc, etc.’

‘Yes. And I’d help him pluck you.’

'More ingratitude. Well, I fear you're beyond my aid, so I'm off to the . . . er . . . north tower, I think, today. To . . . a friend. If anyone wants me I'll be back later.' He paused and looked down at his friend below, his head on one side, as if listening to some far off voice. 'Wait, Hawklan,' he said. 'That's all you can do. But watch your back.'

And then he was gone, into the sunlit air; a dwindling black spot against the many towers of the castle and the blue spring sky.

Hawklan's brow wrinkled slightly then he smiled and shrugged off the last of his mood. Outside, in the corridor approaching the entrance to the hall, he heard Tirilen's light and confident footsteps. He wondered why she was hurrying, and instinctively straightened his long habit as he walked across the hall to greet her.

Chapter 2

Pedhavin was a village of several thousand souls, and as such was quite large by the standards of Orthlund.

It was situated at a crossroads. The River Road ran east to west, starting as a narrow track wending a weary way over the mountains from the Decmilloith of Riddin, before becoming a wide road to sweep across Orthlund, and eventually fade away near the banks of the Great River in the west.

The other road ran north to south, and skirted the western edge of the mountains. It was known simply as the Pedhavin Road; at least, near Pedhavin it was. Elsewhere it bore different names, dependent on the whims of the local population.

As with Anderras Darion, no one knew who had built the roads, or why; but also like the castle, they were made by a people with skills now lost. Innumerable small blocks butted together so tightly that the joints between them could scarcely be seen, let alone felt under the feet. Joints so tight that not even the most vigorous of weeds could find a foothold.

Not that these two roads were in any way unique. Almost all the roads that criss-crossed Orthlund were similarly built, and provided a network for travel far beyond the needs of the Orthlundyn. Only towards the borders of the country did the roads begin to deteriorate, particularly in the west, near the Great River. But the Orthlundyn rarely travelled, even in their own land, and such deterioration was of no interest to them.

The houses of Pedhavin were, for the most part, two storeys high, built in stone, and crowned with low-pitched roofs which jutted out at eaves level like so many resolute chins. They were scattered indiscriminately about the slopes beneath the castle, forming a rambling maze of little streets and open squares and courtyards, unadorned by tree or garden.

They all bore a similarity of style, but individually were very different. The inhabitants of Pedhavin were mainly farming people, as were most of the Orthlundyn, but their passion was away from the changing mysteries of growth and decay, away from the yielding of grasses and soil. It was carving. Carving in the hard mountain rock, permanent and solid. Carving with subtle techniques nurtured and preserved by the Carvers' Guild, a meritocracy appointed by public acclaim, and the nearest thing the Orthlundyn had to a public institution. Lintels, arches, thresholds, balconies, walls and roofs throughout Orthlund all bore testimony to this passion.

In their farming was their shared peace, their common wealth, but in their carving was their individuality, strong and determined. There was an ancient and watchful patience in the Orthlundyn, and nowhere was it more evident than in the carvings that festooned the houses of Pedhavin.

* * * *

One day, down the Pedhavin Road and into this quiet village, shadowed and lit by the spring sunshine, came a tinker, bowed under an enormous double pack, looking like a creature from legend.

While Hawklan sat musing in his dining hall, and Gavor sat drowsily on a high beam, this tinker was entertaining a crowd on the green near the crossroads.

He was a strange-looking creature, dressed in a tunic that had more coloured patches than original material, with a similarly tailored cloak and a sharp nebbed hat sporting a prodigious many-coloured feather. His odd appearance was further enhanced by his posture, with his neck craning forward, one shoulder higher than the other and a bending at the waist as if he were eternally preparing to pick something off the ground. His head jerked this way and that, as did his eyes, although frequently head and eyes went in different directions. His long arms bore long hands with long bony fingers, and all twitched as much as his head. Then his thin, tight clad legs would bend and flex in such a way that watchers were inclined to put their hands over their ears in anticipation of the great cracking that their appearance indicated they might make.

With an elegant flourish he produced a shimmering cloth, and with practiced hands laid it out on the ground, hopping round it jerkily and flicking out creases here and there. Then another and another, pausing only to wink broadly at one of the silent, gathering crowd, and to expose two bright white rows of teeth shining in his brown, wrinkled face. It was a smile that few could resist.

Then he plunged into his voluminous pack and waited for a moment with his arms immersed, sweeping his smile across his entire audience. With a slight movement of his head, he mimicked their own involuntary craning curiosity. The adults reflected his smile knowingly back at him and the children laughed, the strangeness of the man beginning to fade. The Orthlundyn were reserved, but neither unfriendly nor inhospitable.

Abruptly, there were more flourishes, and even more frenzied activity, and all manner of things started to appear on the three cloths. As they appeared, so the reserve of the crowd faded further, and as people started to gossip and point, so the tinker started to underscore his actions with a jerky stream of staccato chatter delivered in a high creaking voice that seemed to fit his creaking shape.

‘Here, ladies. Laces from the north and the south. Ribbons woven and dyed by the Eirthlundyn over the Great River.’

He draped the laces around the necks of the women, and whirled the coloured ribbons high and twisting into the air, as he twisted himself in and out of the crowd.

‘Not many Eirthlundyn left now, but they know how to adorn their women,’ he noted more confidentially to the men. ‘And, ladies. These perfumes.’

Small crystal bottles appeared from various mysterious pockets in his tattered tunic, and like the ribbons and laces they were handed around indiscriminately. He looked pensively at one.

‘Such a journey to bring these to you, dear ladies; such a journey as you could not imagine. From rare hot lands that burned and wrinkled my skin to its present delicate leathery hue. And what it did to my feet, I must walk on, but we need not dwell on. And my pocket. Ah . . . But I was ever foolish in such matters, and their women kept so fair and beautiful in that terrible sun. How could I resist? Only the women of Pedhavin are worthy of such treasures I thought, and here I am with the most subtle and fragrant perfumes you will ever know.’

Then again, confidentially. 'With these, no man will be able to resist you, ladies.'

As the hubbub of the crowd grew and the women started to dab themselves with perfume and hold the ribbons and laces against one another, heads cocked critically, the tinker deftly isolated the men like a sheepdog cutting out sheep from a flock.

'For the ladies, gentlemen, the finery and the frippery, but for you . . .' More plunging in the pack. 'For you . . .'

Chisels and knives and all manner of tools appeared.

'Steel such as you've never seen. Edges that even your Pedhavin stone won't easily turn. Careful, sir. When Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor says edge, he means edge. You'll lose your finger and not even know it's gone.'

'Hawklan will put it back on for me,' laughed the young man who was holding the knife, and his friends joined in. However, he eased the knife back into its carved leather sheath very carefully.

'From Riddin sir, the leather. The finest leather you could possibly find. No one works leather like the Riddinvolk.' Then he rested his hand on the young man's arm.

'Hawklan, sir? Who is he?'

The young man turned and pointed up the hill to the castle.

'Our healer. That's his castle up there.'

'His castle?' said the tinker, eyes widening. The young man nodded.

'Ah,' said the tinker with a great exhalation. 'I was going to ask you whether the great lord might allow me in to show my humble wares to his servants, and you tell me that this splendid castle houses only a healer.' His voice became almost contemptuous. 'A mixer of herbs and stitcher of gashes.' He shook his head. 'Orthlund is a strange place.'

An older man caught his eye. 'We have no lords in Orthlund, tinker . . . Derimot,' he said in a friendly, but firm tone. 'No man holds sway over another here. Hawklan had the key to open Anderras Darion when he came, and he speaks nothing of his past, so we respect his wish. He's a most exceptional healer. And much loved.' He looked significantly at the tinker who was still for a moment before bowing his head and twisting it round to look up at the man.

'Had the key when he arrived?' he said quietly. The man nodded.

Then, like a wave returning down the shore to the sea after lingering at the storm line, the tinker burst into movement again.

'I meant no offence, sir. I'm much travelled, and not all healers are deserving of honours by any means. In other lands, such a castle would house a most mighty Lord, with many servants, and . . .' he winked, 'many needs.'

So Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor flitted through the crowd gathered around his three cloths, gangling like a huge, amiable and multi-coloured spider. Chattering endlessly, bartering and bantering, as soft hands tested linens and silks, and soft eyes looked knowingly as rare perfumes were bought. Chattering, as brown, experienced hands examined chisels and sickles, and brown voices asked cautious questions, carefully trying to hide the desires bred from the love of the land and the love of the carving that saw

fulfilment in the glitter of the shining tools.

But nothing was hidden from Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor. Least of all the tall blonde girl who whispered something to her large, brawny companion and then ran off towards the Castle Road, clutching the tiny golden trinket she had just bought.

Chapter 3

Tirilen was the daughter of Loman, the castellan of Anderras Darion. She was born in the same year that Hawklan had come out of the wintry mountains with Gavor in his arms, and opened the long sealed castle.

Not as tall as Hawklan, she was nonetheless tall for a woman, and tended to look even taller because she stood at once erect and relaxed. Her long blonde hair was normally bound by a single ribbon, but occasionally it would fly free, and then she would subject it to an endless sequence of unnecessary groomings, running it through her hands and teasing it this way and that, before sweeping the whole back with a toss of the head.

Her eyes slanted slightly and their blue was like a reflection of the spring sky, while her straight and rather narrow nose overtopped a straight and rather narrow mouth. A mouth that could become tight and resolute with grim determination, or peevish and pouting if she were caught in some misdemeanour that perhaps provoked her father too far.

Now she was a quiet, alert young woman, but for most of her young life she had behaved like a riotous twelve-year-old boy and had been the continual despair of the women of the village charged by Loman with her education into womanhood since the death of her mother. Tirilen looked and moved like thistledown in the breeze, but in her time she had hitched up her skirts and waded into the river to tease the slumbering fishermen, scrambled and run across the rocks like a rabbit in rowdy games, and routinely knocked the heads of any of the local boys who showed signs of becoming unusually tender. Generally she had shown little inclination to behave in anything approaching a ladylike manner.

Loman was a stern and solid man, with a strong sense of justice and integrity which he shared with most of the Orthlundyn. He had frequently castigated his daughter when taxed by the village women, but he had had little heart for it, and Tirilen had only to smile and put her arms around him to ensure she could carry on as usual. Since her earliest years he had recognized his own independent temperament housed in his wife's frame, and he took solace from the knowledge that while she knew of his love and affection she would come to no great harm, nor do any, and he would keep her as a friend as well as a daughter when life eventually eased them apart. They had always been happy with one another and were more so now.

Only with Hawklan had Tirilen's quieter nature appeared. He had asked Loman to be his castellan at their first strange meeting, but Loman and his toddling daughter only moved into the castle some three years later when, despite Hawklan's aid, Loman's wife died. Then Hawklan had helped with the upbringing of the noisy, blue-eyed child as Loman pulled himself through the blackness that followed. He was a second father to Tirilen, although their relationship was very different from that she had with her real father. Hawklan it was who received those confidences and confessions which Tirilen preferred not to bring to her father's attention, but which needed to be excised by utterance. And Hawklan it was who guided her into looking behind the surface of the dour man to find the true father within.

Hawklan it was also, who found she had no small gift for healing, and who took charge of her instruction. Thus when the mood was right, she had learned about the herbs and other healing plants that could be found in the fields and among the rocks, and about repairing gashes and fractures. He could not teach her

how to speak to the animals, because he himself did not know how he did it, but she was sensitive to their silent distress calls and frequently appeared in Hawklan's workroom with some injured creature that she had found because 'on impulse' she had turned from her path.

* * * *

Like Gavor and Hawklan's other close friends, Tirilen too had noticed his growing preoccupation; a lessening of his gentle ironic humour and, she alone noticed, an occasional strange, distant expression in his green eyes. In conversation and everyday intercourse he seemed happy enough, but he was increasingly to be found alone and pensive, and she sensed an unknown and mounting pain.

It was only Gavor who asked the question directly and received any semblance of an answer. And vague though it was, he was pleased, because he knew that once question and answer began to appear in the mind, then the inner conflict was beginning to be resolved. With the emergence into the light of this slender bloom from the depths, Gavor deemed it advisable to leave lest their normal banter trample it underfoot, and he was pleased to see the arrival of Tirilen, to whose hands it could be more safely entrusted.

However, the bloom having appeared, it transferred a portion of its uneasy perfume onto Gavor. Hawklan's powerful intuition was not lightly set aside and Gavor felt dark clouds gathering distantly on his own inner horizons. Hawklan's words began to crystallize unspoken concerns of his own, though not clearly. A change was in the air, and not a good one. He croaked at himself disparagingly as he flew above the rooftops of Anderras Darion. He had no intention of visiting his 'friend' in the north tower. Uncharacteristically, he too now wanted to be alone. Spiralling high above the Castle, resting on the warm spring air rising up from the front wall, he looked down at the crowd on the green by the crossroads, and at Tirilen leading Hawklan down the road to the village.

He started crossly as a small brown bird whirred past him at great speed and disappeared in the direction of the green.

* * * *

Not many could resist Tirilen when she chose to be persuasive, and, his heart lightened a little by speaking of his concern to Gavor, Hawklan made only a token opposition to her invitation to see the strange tinker and listen to his chatter.

He had to stride out to keep up with her as they walked down the road to the village. She, unusually, was talking incessantly.

'He's so funny, and he's got so many wonderful things in his pack, you'd wonder how he could possibly get them all in, let alone lift it. And he seems to know so much about everything – sewing, farming, carving . . .'

'And emptying purses,' said Hawklan dryly.

Tirilen smiled at him knowingly and then linked her arm in his.

'Look at this,' she said, carefully unwrapping the pendant she had bought. Hawklan looked at it studiously.

'It's an unusual design,' he said, 'although there's something vaguely familiar in the style. Gold too, by the feel of it.'

They were almost leaning on one another as they examined the pendant and they strode out in step down

the last, steep part of the road. Hawklan rubbed the pendant gently between his thumb and forefinger and wrinkled his nose slightly.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Tirilen.

Just clouds on the horizon, thought Hawklan.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘I just thought I felt a tiny sharp edge, but it must have been my imagination.’

* * * *

At the green the tinker was still in full flow and the crowd was even bigger. Most of the people they had met on the way were either laughing or carefully examining purchases, and Hawklan had become increasingly anxious to see this phenomenon that had landed so randomly on the village.

He soon found himself at the front of the crowd as it was in continuous movement, and the villagers, invariably glad to see him, virtually ushered him through. The tinker was at the edge of the little clearing around his laden cloths, busily expounding to someone the virtues of an intended purchase, but he turned round the instant Hawklan appeared and made straight for him, or as straight as his jerky gait would allow.

His eyes stopped flickering for a moment and held Hawklan’s gaze fixed.

‘Hawklan,’ he said to himself softly, as if sending the word to some deep part of his memory.

‘*Hawklan.*’ Again with the same strange softness. Then, in his normal voice. ‘Hawklan? Hawklan the healer? From the . . . ?’ A long finger unfolded in the direction of the castle.

Hawklan smiled and nodded. The tinker clapped his hands, and his face lit up as he returned the smile.

‘Ah, what have I for a healer?’ he said, screwing up his face thoughtfully. ‘Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor, who has everything for everybody, must have something for a healer – especially a rich healer like yourself.’

This last he said in a loud whisper accompanied by an enormous wink and a complicated nod of the head in the direction of the castle. Hawklan laughed out loud along with many in the crowd.

‘I’m afraid you’ll starve to death waiting for my gold, Derimot. Although I’ll happily give you some food and drink if that becomes likely.’

‘Take the food, Derimot,’ shouted someone in the crowd. ‘Hawklan has no coffers, but he has the finest kitchen in Orthlund.’

‘In that case I may accept your offer one day,’ said the tinker, bowing low, but creaking his head round to look at Hawklan. ‘Local knowledge is always worth more than gold.’ And he sent an acknowledging nod to his unknown adviser in the crowd. Then he turned his attention once more to Hawklan, looking him up and down professionally.

‘Look at my wares, Hawklan. There are things here that only I could obtain. No one – no one – has the skill and knowledge of Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor when it comes to trading. And all of it is the very finest. When I leave, you may never see such things again.’

Hawklan inclined his head in acknowledgement. ‘Thank you, Derimot, I shall,’ he said, and he walked across to the articles now scattered and disarranged by the villagers.

He always took an interest in objects from beyond Orthlund, in the hope that they might stir some memory of the time before he found himself walking in the wintry mountains some twenty years ago.

The tinker flitted away and gathered a crowd of children around him.

‘Now, children,’ he said very slowly. ‘Your turn.’ He put his long arms around several of them, and crouching on the floor brought them together in a confidential huddle. His mouth pursed up into a disparaging expression.

‘Fol-de-rols and fripperies are alright for the women, and tools and suchlike will quieten the men. But what should a tinker bring from far lands for the people who really matter, eh?’

He waited, eyes wide in expectation.

‘Toys,’ came the ready chorus in reply.

‘Toys indeed,’ he echoed. ‘Sewing and carving are to keep the grown-ups out of the way, but toys are the really important things aren’t they?’

Hawklan heard the laughter and squeals of the children counterpointing Derimot’s chatter as he looked at the various articles laid out before him. He picked up one or two things and then laid them down again gently with a small twinge of regret. For some reason, it did not distress him that he knew nothing of what he had been before he came to the village. He seemed to be full of happiness and light, and he fitted into this peaceful, tolerant and wise community as if he had been born there. He doubted that he had ever been anything particularly unpleasant.

But inevitably he was curious, and he was ever watchful for some flash of knowledge which might illuminate that part of his life. However, there was nothing here; even though almost everything was new to him and obviously came from distant places as the tinker claimed. For a brief moment he felt a warning forming inside him . . .

‘Look at this, Hawklan.’

The tinker’s voice startled him and he turned round suddenly to find himself with his face only inches away from Derimot’s twinkling eyes.

‘Hold out your hand,’ said the creaking voice, with odd seductiveness.

Without thinking, Hawklan proffered his right hand and Derimot took it from underneath in his left, holding it like a tiny bridge between their two faces. Then he snapped the fingers of his right hand and placed his clenched fist on Hawklan’s extended palm.

‘Ha-ha,’ he cried, and releasing Hawklan he brought his hands together with a loud crack.

Hawklan found himself gazing at a small doll. It was a tiny soldier, and it was marching up and down his hand. Apart from its rather stiff-legged walk, it was remarkably lifelike. Every detail was perfect. Even its tiny eyes moved, and Hawklan noticed that a button on the tunic had come undone, revealing an ornately decorated shirt underneath. By its side hung a tiny sword, which it proceeded to draw and use in an intricate drill, cutting glittering silver arcs in the bright sunlight.

Hawklan stared, spellbound. The Orthlundyn made ingenious toys for their children, but this was far beyond anything they could do.

Suddenly and without anything apparently happening, he found he was both cold and sweating. The tiny

creature just inches from his face moved hauntingly, hypnotically, but its eyes . . .

Hawklan felt an overwhelming urge to tighten his grip around it to stop its obscene, tortured performance. An urge to hurl it onto the ground where he could stamp it out of all existence. He felt a great pit open at his feet.

The tinker seized the tiny figure with a swift movement, and Hawklan staggered forward with a gasp.

‘Hawklan?’

He heard Tirilen’s voice, concerned, in the distance.

‘What’s the matter? You’re white as a sheet.’ The voice was closer now.

‘Wasn’t that a remarkable toy, then,’ said the tinker, looking at him intently. For the briefest of moments, Hawklan looked straight into the tinker’s eyes. They were lit with a sinister red glow; a red like the heart of a volcano. And there was a doubting recognition in them. For that moment, Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor looked as if he was standing straight and terrible. Hawklan seemed to feel the earth rumble under his feet and he felt his left hand clutching for a sword scabbard that was not there.

Tirilen laid a hand on his arm, and he looked around, surprised. The chattering crowd had suddenly fallen silent and all were looking at one another awkwardly. The tinker clapped his hands and laughed. ‘Ah. A goose has walked over my grave,’ he cried, and everyone laughed and applauded, the old saw cutting through the embarrassment. The crowd became louder than ever.

‘Hawklan?’ Tirilen’s voice was full of concern. He smiled rather foolishly.

‘I’m fine,’ he said. ‘Just felt a little dizzy. Standing up too quickly probably.’

He moved between her and the tinker, who was holding a wooden box containing the tiny doll, now innocuous.

‘Isn’t it a most incredible doll, sir? Most skilfully crafted,’ he said.

Hawklan felt tiny ripples of unreasoned anger still flowing somewhere deep within him but his natural courtesy and an unexpected caution kept them under control.

‘It is indeed,’ he replied. ‘A most unusual toy. I’ve never seen anything like it, and the locals here are not without skill in making such things. Where did you get it from?’

The tinker looked sideways at Hawklan, long-forgotten doubts and fears starting to bubble deep within him. What had possessed him to break his journey and stop here? Here of all places? And in this, the most ludicrous of his guises, noisy and clamorous like some frightened child clattering and shouting to keep night-bred terrors at bay. And what power had prompted him to test the sight of this . . . this healer with the mannequin?

Abruptly his doubts and fears faded as another, greater, spectre came to him and filled him with a terrible paralysing chill. Could this be Ethriss? Lying watchful in this green-eyed, mortal frame? Ethriss the Terrible One, who had thrown down the Master and His Uhriel into millennia of silent and impotent darkness? His very presence radiated a profound healing knowledge. He had seen instantly the corruption in the mannequin. But most damning of all, he had the key to that sinkhole, Anderras Darion. Anderras Darion stood open. Open! And had for twenty years according to these village oafs. Orthlund was a dreadful place. His chilling fear deepened and froze both his mind and his body.

‘Are you all right?’ Hawklan’s gentle voice penetrated into the tinker’s darkness like a sunlit dagger, making him start. He disguised the movement with an angular twitch.

‘Just trying to recall, sir,’ he said thoughtfully, clearing his throat. ‘So many places I’ve travelled to.’

No. Ethriss awake would have felt his presence and swept him out of existence like dust in the wind. But still, Ethriss he might be – dormant, as He had been, waiting only the sign to rise again.

Then the black favour of his Master loomed suddenly in his mind. Was this not perhaps the true purpose of his journey? Was it not He who had said he must go south through the darkness of Orthlund rather than through Riddin as was his wont? Riddin could be seen. Riddin was known. But the Harmony of Orthlund blinded and deceived all the eyes he sent into it.

A treacherous shaft of ambition entered his swirling fears. Bind him, it said. This is His will. Bind him while he still sleeps. Bind him in a deeper sleep for His delectation. But gently, very gently. It could not be here – he shuddered inwardly – nor could he be drawn too near Narsindal too soon. There His presence pervaded the very air, and would beyond doubt waken the dormant Guardian, if Guardian he be. Then

...

‘The Gretmearc, sir,’ he said. ‘That’s where it was. The Gretmearc at Altfarran. They have many such toys there. Many.’

Chapter 4

Something had changed. The image of the tiny marching doll wavered in Hawklan’s mind and troubled him greatly, as did the fleeting glimpse he had had of the tinker, tall and menacing. Something seemed to be shifting deep inside him, like moving pebbles presaging a landslide. And like those pebbles, it seemed to be beyond control. He felt a need to do something, but nothing had happened that warranted any action. And yet, things *were* different. The dark clouds on his horizon were unequivocal.

He left Tirilen at the green and wandered slowly back through the village. Behind him he could hear friendly cries of dismay as the tinker started to load his wares into his pack, and the tinker’s protestations as he reluctantly made yet another last sale.

The sun was now quite low in the sky and beginning to cast long shadows, etching out the patterns of the spring evening on walls and quiet streets. Hawklan nodded acknowledgements to the few people he met who had come out to look at the shadows. There was always someone, somewhere in Pedhavin, looking at the shadows, for the carvers worked their stone not only to represent animals and people and ideas, but so that they could tell other tales when the light of the sun, or the moon, or the stars, fell on them and painted strangely solid shapes in their tenuous wake.

Some shadows would be large and grandiose, spilling out over the streets and houses, while others were changes within the carvings themselves. Hawklan found himself looking at a small frieze on which was carved a group of people gathered at the green he had just left. He knew the figures were arranged in such a way that at a certain time of day they would apparently turn to look at the sun, while at another they seemed to be looking at one another and to be engaged in deep conversation.

‘Not a bad piece of rock spoiling,’ came a deep voice from behind him. He recognized it and turned with a smile. Isloman was Loman’s elder brother and he was standing in the middle of the street looking critically at the frieze. In his arms he cradled a huge rock effortlessly. Although Hawklan was as tall as Isloman, he always felt dwarfed by the man’s massive frame and enormous strength.

‘Do you want any help with that?’ Hawklan asked, knowing the answer. The grime on Isloman’s face

cracked as he grinned.

‘No thank you, Hawklan. It’s only a pebble for a lady’s bracelet,’ he said, swinging the rock up onto his shoulder, and supporting it lightly with one hand.

‘Then I should prefer not to meet her,’ retorted Hawklan. Isloman bellowed his great laugh.

‘Are you sure it wasn’t a woman who lured you out of your castle today?’

Hawklan nodded an acknowledgement. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Much more of a woman than she was but twelve months ago, and even more of a match for both of us than she used to be.’

Isloman was the third member of the triumvirate that looked after and doted on Tirilen. The women of the village had little doubt why she used to behave the way she did, with no mother and three fathers.

The two men walked slowly up the street together, Isloman pausing every now and then to examine some grotesque shadow he was making with the huge rock on his shoulder.

Hawklan liked the bluff openness of Isloman. He had a presence like the mountains themselves, honest and direct; and as they walked, Hawklan welcomed his company, the companionable silence dispelling a little the effects of the strange tinker and his tiny, sinister doll.

By common consent, Isloman had been for a long time the Guild’s First Carver and, as such, he was the only villager who earned his bread by carving alone. No stranger, however, would have associated the delicate and sensitive work he did with the rocklike figure he himself presented.

Reaching his workshop, Isloman dropped the rock back into his two hands and, with a grunt, bent his knees to lower it to the ground. He gave it an affectionate pat as he stood up.

‘It’s taken me weeks to find that. I could hear it calling, but could I find it?’ He shook his head ruefully. ‘Just look at it. Isn’t it magnificent?’

Hawklan looked blankly from him to the rock and back again, and Isloman growled and clapped a huge hand on his shoulder.

‘Ah. I forgot. You’re rock-blind aren’t you? Not being a local.’ Then, with a great wink, ‘Still, you’re useful enough when someone needs to be put together.’

‘That’s a great relief,’ said Hawklan, rubbing his shoulder. It was an exchange they had had many times before.

Isloman stripped off his leather apron and stained shirt, and then plunged his great torso into a nearby water butt. When he emerged he was blowing like a granite leviathan and he completed his toilet by rubbing himself with a handful of small sharp pebbles from a box next to the butt. It was the dexterity with which his huge hands manipulated these pebbles that offset for Hawklan the physical distress he felt whenever he watched this ritual. Even so, he usually had the feeling he was being skinned. He knew too that Isloman enjoyed his discomfiture and would very soon start to laugh. And he did. He leaned back, boomed his hands on his great chest and roared with laughter.

‘I’m sorry, Hawklan. I can’t help it. I’d be the greatest carver in the history of all Orthlund if I could capture the look on your face when I dry off.’ He raised a finger significantly. ‘In fact, I may well make it my life’s work.’

‘Not if I have to keep watching you do that, you won’t,’ said Hawklan in mock alarm.

‘Ah. It’s only a knack,’ said Isloman with a chuckle as he rolled the pebbles in his hand. He looked wistful for a moment as he stared down at them. ‘I’ve used pebbles like these on a baby before now. Many a time, when Tirilen was little.’

Hawklan nodded and smiled.

‘Come on,’ said Isloman, pulling on a clean shirt. ‘I’ll show you what I’m going to coax out of that piece we just brought up.’

Inside the workshop there was the chaos that only an artist could create. Isloman shuffled through sketches and sheets of writing and figures, talking earnestly and enthusiastically as he did. Hawklan however, was lost, as usual. The sketches were inordinately complicated and were works of art in themselves. The scripts were in the ancient carver’s tongue, and Isloman’s explanation was full of technical nuances which were utterly beyond him. Still, he enjoyed Isloman’s enthusiasm. It was like being bathed in sunlight.

He found himself absently handling a chisel while Isloman was talking.

‘I see you made a purchase from our visitor,’ he said during a lull.

‘Yes,’ said Isloman, with a slight frown, gently taking the chisel from Hawklan’s hand.

‘Hm,’ he muttered doubtfully.

‘Is anything wrong?’ Hawklan asked. Isloman shrugged slightly.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘There’s something peculiar about it that I didn’t notice when I bought it, but I don’t know what it is.’ He shrugged again and laid the chisel back on the table. ‘I think that tinker could sell anything. I’ve never seen the like of him before, have you? And we’ve had some characters come through here on their way to the market from time to time.’

‘The Gretmearc?’ said Hawklan.

‘Yes.’

A tiny doll walked jerkily through Hawklan’s memory and made an invitation.

‘I’ve never been to the Gretmearc,’ said Hawklan, pushing the chisel with the end of his finger.

‘I’ve only been a couple of times,’ said Isloman. He smiled at the recollection.

‘It’s a long way and not too easy through the mountains. But . . .’ He sat up and smacked his hands on his knees. ‘Everyone should go to the Gretmearc at least once in his life. Tirilen’s always pestering to go. I suppose Loman or I will have to take her one day.’

Then he looked at Hawklan in some surprise. ‘It’s a strange place for you to mention, Hawklan. You, who’ve never been more than two days’ walk from the village. Are you getting itchy feet?’

A small black certainty floated into Hawklan’s mind. He returned Isloman’s gaze.

‘It seems I have to go, Isloman. I don’t know why, and I’ve only just realized it; but yes, I have to go.’ Hawklan’s tone was suddenly serious. Isloman’s great square head tilted a little to one side, his brown eyes full of concern and puzzlement. The sun shone in through the window and lit up grey flecks, like stone, in his short-cropped hair. He could see into the heart of any rock, and into the hearts of many men, but that of Hawklan was ever closed. And yet he trusted him completely. Rockblind the man might

be, but his inner sight was beyond that of any other Isloman had ever known. Without hesitation or further questions he said, 'Shall I go with you?'

Hawklan smiled and patted his friend on the arm. 'No, Isloman,' he said. 'It's just a whim. You follow the songs of the rocks. I must follow this song.' Isloman nodded in reluctant acceptance.

'You can tell me how to get there and give me the benefit of your great experience in travelling far and wide,' said Hawklan, to ease his friend's concern.

* * * *

Derimot Findeel Dan-Tor pleasantly declined the hospitality offered by the villagers as he filled his enormous pack and fastened it in a great flurry of knots and tapes and splendid shining buckles.

'You've already been generosity itself to an impoverished wanderer, and I've a friend I hope to meet in the next village tonight.'

So he was escorted to the leaving stone by an entourage of laughing children.

Some way outside the village he stopped, lowered his pack to the ground and straightened up. His crooked form seemed to unfold for ever, until eventually he stood very tall and very straight, and quite free of the twitchings and twistings that had characterized him in the village. He looked up at Anderras Darion, still visible over the hillock that separated him from the village, and reddening now in the setting sun. The red glow from the Castle reflected in his eyes, and he averted his gaze as if in some pain.

Raising his left hand he snapped his long, bony fingers with a crack like a snapping twig. Out of the deepening gloaming a small brown bird with blank yellow eyes appeared and perched on the still upraised hand. He lowered it until it was opposite his mouth. The bird tilted its head and the tinker spoke to it long and earnestly. Then, as abruptly as it had appeared, the bird was gone, flying in a straight line towards the mountains, its wings whirring purposefully in the evening quiet.

Watching it, the tinker tapped his foot unthinkingly. The ground around it rippled like water and churned up tiny dust devils which danced around him, as if in homage.

Chapter 5

Loman ran his finger along a small ledge as he walked down the winding corridor. He examined the slight skim of dust on the end of it carefully, then brushed it idly with his other hand.

'Scallywags,' he muttered.

The scallywags in question were the apprentices of the Carvers' Guild who, amongst other things, were charged with the cleaning of the Castle and who were allowed special days away from the fields to do so. It had been Isloman's idea. He believed, in fact he knew, that the apprentices could gain nothing but good from the close proximity to the countless carvings that were to be found throughout the Castle, covering almost every wall and ceiling as fully as they covered the Great Gate. And it would be a small repayment to Hawklan from the village for his many services.

Loman however, had earthier reservations, as the organizing of these 'scallywags' fell on his shoulders, and, as he had said at the very beginning, some of them were far from being as diligent as they might be. He went through the duty list for the day in his mind, and narrowing his eyes, fixed the apple-shaped face of the negligent culprit for later attention.

He grunted to himself as he went down a short flight of stairs.

‘Worse than being a nursemaid sometimes. I could do the jobs myself by the time I’ve sorted those imps out.’

He was a little out of sorts today because of the disruption of his routine. It was a good routine and he did not like to change it. In fact he did not like change at all very much, and today seemed to be full of it, with Hawklan suddenly wanting to go to the Gretmearc. ‘On a whim,’ no less! And Isloman more than half encouraging him. Then Tirilen almost throwing a tantrum like the old days because Hawklan refused to take her. Now, thanks to his own zeal, he had to find him a sword. A sword – for Hawklan! He grunted again.

And that damned tinker with his fancy tools. Loman was not only the castellan of Anderras Darion; he was, unusually for one of the Orthlundyn, a consummate smith. As his brother saw into the heart of the rock, so he saw into the heart of metals, and as his brother heard the song of the rock and drew a greater beauty from it, so he did with metals.

The tools he made were part of a greater harmony, rarely spoken of but always understood by the Orthlundyn. They did not tear shape from the rock; that would be destruction. They discovered it and drew it out gently, parting it from its parent when the time was right, like the natural and painless dropping of fruit from a tree for the benefit of both. That was creation.

He stopped for a moment and raised a pensive hand to his mouth. He had not seen the tinker nor any of his wares and he wondered why Isloman had bothered to purchase anything from him. And the other people as well. Why had they bought tools and implements they did not really need, nor knew the origins of? They, above all, knew that ill-conceived implements could rend and destroy. What blindness had come over them? More change. And not for the better, he was sure.

Shaking his head, he strode out again, dismissing his reveries in favour of the business in hand. He moved for some time along corridors and down stairways until, turning a final corner, he paused and clenched his fists nervously. This was never easy and always he had to pause and take his fear in hand despite the familiarity of the route ahead.

Always too, as he stood here, as if as an antidote to the grimness ahead, he recalled the events of some twenty years before. Events presaged by his brother bursting noisily into his workshop on the coldest night of that long bitter winter.

Only recently returned from the horror of the Morlider War with its terrible winter night-fighting, Loman was brought to his feet by cruelly learned reflexes and, seizing a nearby hammer, he found himself facing his brother wild-eyed and savage, hand poised for a fearful blow, and mind uncertain for the moment where he was.

Isloman screwed up his face in self-reproach, seeing immediately the folly of his hasty intrusion. Briefly he cast his eyes downwards.

‘I’m sorry, Loman,’ he said. ‘I’m so sorry.’

But then his urgency overrode his regret. ‘Come quickly. Quickly. The castle.’ And seizing his brother’s arm, he dragged him out into the deep snow.

Loman swore robustly and stepped sharply back into the warmth to gather up his cloak. Fastening it about himself with a scowl, he prepared to take his brother severely to task for his conduct, but Isloman merely pointed up into the blackness that shrouded the mountains. Loman followed his gaze.

Where all should have been darkness, a single light shone out, soft and warm. For a moment he was

again disorientated, then . . .

‘It’s the Gate,’ he whispered in disbelief, his breath cloudy in the light from his own door. ‘The Gate’s open.’

He could never remember clearly what must have been a leg-wrenching walk up the steep, snow-clogged road to the castle, but he remembered standing awe-stricken with several other villagers in front of the long sealed Gate, its two great leaves now swung wide like a welcoming embrace.

He remembered too, following the line of footprints that led him across the snow-covered courtyard lit gently by lights whose source he could not see. Footprints that brought him to an open door and whose melting remains took him down a long passageway and into a low-ceilinged hall illuminated by a flickering fire.

The cowed figure sitting in front of it with a great black bird perched on its shoulder, might have been an image of terror, but Loman’s heart told him there was no terror there. Only a great peace. It told him he had not known such peace for many a year, if ever.

The figure rose as he entered and turned to face him. Before he could speak however, it turned to Isloman and held out its hands.

‘You’re hurt,’ it said.

Isloman’s left hand went involuntarily to his right arm. It had been gashed by some poisoned Morlider weapon and the wound had resisted all attempts to heal it and was daily draining the big man’s strength. As if surprised at his own actions, he stepped forward, rolling up his sleeve carefully as he did so, and offered the wounded arm to the figure.

The figure’s long hands, at once powerful and delicate, took hold of the bandaged wound and held it silently for some time. Then the cowed head looked up and Loman could feel its eyes searching into his brother.

‘You’re sorely hurt,’ it said. ‘But you have a great harmony within you. I can help make your arm sound again, but it will be a long time before your heart is quiet again.’

Isloman withdrew his arm and nursed it gently against himself. ‘Thank you,’ he said softly.

The figure then turned to Loman and looked at him quietly. ‘Your heart also will need time to find peace. Will you tend my castle for me?’ Such was the presence of the figure that Loman felt his eyes water and an ache tighten his throat.

‘Yes,’ he whispered, the cry of his heart deafening his mind’s questions.

But one of the villagers asked them in his stead.

‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘Where have you come from in this weather? How . . .’

The figure turned towards him. ‘I know nothing,’ it said, in a tone that was gentle but irrevocably final. The bird on his shoulder made what sounded like a dismissive grunt and flapped its wings impatiently. Then with a flick of its head it threw back the figure’s cowl to reveal the wearer’s lean face, with its green eyes and prominent nose.

‘I call him Hawklan,’ said the bird, to everyone’s considerable surprise. ‘He calls me Gavor. We met in the mountains. He’s done wonders for my leg already – look.’ And it proffered a makeshift wooden leg

to its startled audience.

There was a long silence and it cocked its head on one side. 'He really is quite bright,' it added reassuringly. 'Just a bit shy. And we're both hungry.'

The memory of that night alone always served as a reaffirmation for Loman. I forget too easily, he thought as he looked at the waiting columns. Forget too easily the darkness his presence alone lifted from me. Then he strode forward determinedly.

As he walked into the sinister gloaming between the columns, the sound of his soft footsteps and the creak of his clothes started to rise up ahead of him loudly and unmistakably, to warn all around of his presence. He knew from bitter experience that if he stepped from the correct path, those noises would rebound on him a thousandfold, as would then the increasing sounds of his desperate struggles to escape. The noise would multiply and grow until, staggering blindly, he would crash into column after column, heedless of pain and injury, pursued by his own terror until eventually he would perish, crushed by the sound of his own screaming.

The labyrinth carried memories far less welcome than those of the arrival of Hawklan, for even with Hawklan's patient help it had taken him a long time to learn the correct path, and twice in the early days he had missed the way while unaccompanied. On both occasions some destiny had brought Hawklan along, to quiet the mounting tumult with a soft word, but still it had taken many days of Hawklan's care to restore Loman's mind and soothe the wild-eyed terror from his face. Even after all this time the noises from the labyrinth echoed distantly in his darker dreams.

He paused. Around him he could hear faint whispers hissing and murmuring to and fro, their source unknown and unimaginable. Whispers that were waiting expectantly for his tread to falter and lead him astray and into their maw. Waiting. Waiting and watching. He shuddered involuntarily, and the sound rumbled into the dark distance before rolling back towards him like grotesque gloating laughter. It was a terrible place. Unlike anywhere else in the castle.

'There is some darkness in the heart of all things, however fair,' Hawklan had said.

As with so many other things, Hawklan himself had known his way through the maze, and whence it led, but not from whence his knowledge came. 'I know nothing,' he replied gently to all his questioners until they stopped asking. Stopped not out of frustration, but out of the realization that he told only the truth. Whatever mystery surrounded Hawklan, it was not his for the telling and he must be accepted for what he was – a great healer and a strange bearer of light into the hearts of those who came near him.

Loman glanced around at the waiting columns again. This was the dark heart of the labyrinth itself, where all avenues faded into the ominous gloom and all were identical. Only faith could guide his feet for the remainder of the journey and he placed his trust in it until finally he emerged from the whispering horror into a hall bright with spring sunlight.

This was carried along a maze of its own by the mirror-bright stones of the creators of Anderras Darion. Window-like openings set in the walls showed the village and the countryside below as clearly as if he were standing on top of the main wall. But he knew he was far, far below that. Here, he was deep in the heart of the castle, for this hall was the antechamber to the Armoury of Anderras Darion.

Taking a large key from his pouch, Loman moved over to a small wicket set in one leaf of a pair of massive doors, not dissimilar to the Great Gate in appearance. It opened smoothly and he stepped inside.

Outside, the sun shone on forests and fields, rivers and mountains. In here it shone on row upon glittering row of weapons. Swords and clubs, axes and spears, lances, bows, arrows, shields and armour of every

description, all arranged as if for battle, and all immaculate. And in numbers far too great to count.

Loman stood and stared and reminded himself that it was his idea that Hawklan should have a sword. 'There are bad people in this world, Hawklan,' he had said. 'And for all your knowledge and healing skills, you're not well travelled. If you're armed and carry yourself well, that's some protection in itself. But there are some funny animals in the mountains as well.'

Hawklan was unconcerned. 'Loman,' he said, 'I've no fear of animals. I mightn't be able to hear the rocks singing, but at least I can talk to any animals I might meet.'

'Dear boy,' Gavor had interrupted. 'Your talking, and their listening are two different things – take it from a carnivore. Listen to Loman's advice. We'd hate to think of you being eaten by a deaf bear.'

Gavor's logic won the day.

Now however, this exchange was lost under the tide of ambivalence that always overtook Loman when he looked around this huge chamber. Fighting alongside his brother in the Morlider War had soon dispelled any idea that war was a glorious and ennobling thing. It was fear and horror and destruction, and while it had been necessary, and some good had come from it, this was only a reflection of the spirit of the people rising above the degradation, not a measure of the value of war itself.

And yet he had enjoyed the companionship and even some of the fighting, although the Morliders were not like those who had come in the past. They were vicious and cruel, imbued with an evil spirit hitherto unknown. While their forebears had plundered and looted the coastal regions of Riddin, the newcomers moved much further inland, and added the crimes of murder, rapine and senseless destruction to their record of infamy. So much so that the Muster of Riddin set aside their staves and cudgels and the near-carnival atmosphere of earlier conflicts, sent messengers to Orthlund and Fyorlund to ask for help, and took to sword and axe and grim determination.

Loman nodded reflectively. He could hear again the deafening sound of the last battle, when the Morliders had been swept back onto their remaining boats and had fled out to their floating islands. Men roaring and screaming. Animals bellowing. Steel hacking steel and flesh. Arrows hissing overhead. Flames crackling. The excitement and the horror of it was still vivid in his mind, and he could never reconcile the two. He took solace from the fact that, though tempted, he personally had done little evil, and had even prevented some by staying the hands of his battle-fevered comrades against excess over a defeated foe. Even so, he hoped that the lore of the Riddinvolk was true and that it would be many years before the Ocean currents brought the Morliders' islands so near to the shores of Riddin again.

Leaning forward, he picked up a double headed axe from a rack, and spun it in his hand, flickering sunlight from the blade all around. Here was the paradox enshrined in metal for him as he closed his eyes and listened to its song. That it had killed was all too clear from its mournful tone, but it had been made by craftsmen whose understanding and skill exceeded his by far. Its balance was perfect, its edge unassailable and the inner harmony of the metal spoke not only of great skill, but of a love even greater than his own, though he found that hard to imagine.

Loman, probably the finest smith in Orthlund, felt like a gauche apprentice when he handled any of these weapons. He felt humility and awe, just as his brother did when he studied the castle's many carvings.

He turned round sharply as he heard the door of the Armoury close gently.

* * * *

Physically, Loman was in many ways like his elder brother. He had the same brown eyes and craggy

square head, and he maintained the short cropped hair, though his was almost black and free from any grey. He was, however, not as tall. In fact he was a little shorter even than Tirilen, but he was stronger than his brother by far, with his massive shoulders and arms, and his great barrel of a chest.

Stepping into the Armoury, Hawklan looked at him holding the axe and standing in the sunlight against the rows of shining weapons, like a reaper in a cornfield. When he thought of the two brothers, the images in his mind were coloured by their respective callings. Isloman reminded him of a tower of rock – tall, open and clearly visible – while Loman reminded him of a huge anvil – squat and solid. A darker and more introverted personality, he was more apt to take hurt to himself without comment than was his brother.

‘I’m sorry, Loman,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to disturb your contemplation.’

Loman grunted. ‘Only daydreaming,’ he replied, turning the axe one more time and then placing it gently into its place in the rack.

Hawklan nodded. He could not hear the song of the metal, but he knew Loman could, and he knew what this place meant to him for all its tormented implications.

To ease the smith away from his darker emotions, he adopted an ironic tone. ‘Well, have you found a suitable sword for me yet?’

Loman caught the intonation and eyed him narrowly, then sweeping his arms expansively around the tiers of weapons he replied with equal irony. ‘They’re all suitable, my lord.’

Hawklan chuckled but continued in the same vein.

‘Master smith,’ he said. ‘My needing a sword is your idea. You’re the metal-seer. The ex-soldier. Just find me something that’ll set your mind at ease and that won’t weigh me down! I have to carry the thing, don’t forget.’

Loman’s intended reply was halted by a metallic clatter ringing through the stillness of the great room. Both men started, and then Hawklan craned forward as if he had suddenly heard a distant but familiar sound.

Without speaking, the two men ran quickly along the wide, straight aisles in the direction of the sound. At the end of the Armoury, several minutes walk away, was a great mound reaching up to and touching the high ceiling. It consisted of weapons and armour, but of such different styles and designs that it was apparent they had come from many diverse and distant lands.

As with everything else in the castle, there was no clue as to the history of the mound, or why such precious items had been stored so carelessly. To Loman, though the styles might have differed, all possessed the same inner harmony as the castle’s own weapons – as he so classified those that were racked – albeit in varying degrees. From this he concluded that they belonged to allies rather than enemies, but he could not imagine why they had been left there, heaped so randomly.

As they stood gazing at the mound, looking for the cause of the sound, it occurred again.

‘Look,’ whispered Loman, pointing earnestly and turning Hawklan around to face the mound directly with a powerful grip on his arm. ‘Look!’

Gazing upwards in the direction indicated by Loman, Hawklan saw something sliding purposefully down the mound towards him. He watched transfixed as the object clattered to the ground at his feet. It was a sword. A black handled sword in a plain black scabbard. He looked at it for some moments and then slowly bent down and picked it up.

The atmosphere around the two men seemed to be charged, as if a storm were brewing in spite of the spring sunshine flooding all around them. Both knew that speech was inappropriate. Hawklan stood up and wrapped his right hand firmly around the hilt of the sword. As he did so, he heard a sound like a distant trumpet. A faint, infinitely distant clarion call from another age. For an instant he felt a surge of recognition, also from times past, but it slipped away like a dream at dawn.

‘My sword,’ he heard himself say softly.

‘Hawklan?’ said Loman, almost fearfully. Hawklan breathed out – half gasp, half sigh – and shook his head to assuage Loman’s concern. He turned and offered him the sword.

‘What do you think of it?’ he asked.

Loman took the sword reverently, his eyes still wide in amazement at what he had seen and felt. Carefully he drew the sword from its scabbard. It too was black. For a moment he seemed to go rigid, as if every fibre in him had been assailed in some way. Hawklan watched him, concerned, but did not speak.

For several minutes Loman scrutinized the sword intently, tested its weight and balance, held it up into the sunlight where it shone brilliantly, and looked along it, turning it over and over. Very delicately he touched his calloused finger on its edge. Then he too breathed out; a long whistling breath which seemed to carry away some appalling tension.

‘Well?’ asked Hawklan.

Loman looked at him strangely.

‘This is craftsmanship like none I’ve ever imagined. I sit at the feet of those who made these.’ He waved his arm across the waiting rows of points and edges. ‘But they are not fit to sit at the feet of the one who made this.’

His voice was strained and hoarse, and his breathing was shallow and nervous. His hands trembled slightly.

‘When you said “my sword”, did you mean it was or it will be?’

Hawklan shrugged slightly and made a vague gesture with his hands, but did not reply. Loman did not press the question. Slowly regaining his composure he became businesslike.

‘The hilt is some kind of stone, and it has a device embedded in it though I don’t know what it means. We’ll have to ask Isoman about that. The workmanship . . .’ His craggy face became almost rapturous. ‘The workmanship needs a poet not a smith to describe it. And look at this edge.’

He lifted a loose hair from Hawklan’s shoulder and dropped it on the upturned edge of the blade. It parted without faltering in its slow fall to the floor.

‘And the black metal?’ asked Hawklan. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that before.’

Loman’s composure wavered again. He seemed to be struggling with some powerful emotion. Eventually he shook his head and without looking at Hawklan, said softly, ‘It’s beyond words. Even the finest poet couldn’t describe it. It has a harmony in it that nothing could sully. And it’s killed many evil things. Many.’ A silence fell between the two men.

‘A happy chance find then?’ said Hawklan. Loman looked at him and shook his head.

'I'm no sage, Hawklan, and I always take travellers' tales with a mighty pinch of iron. But there's no denying there are strange forces in this world. Some good, some bad, and most of them beyond the understanding of ordinary men. Over the years I've spent many hours in here studying these weapons and nothing's ever tumbled down of its own accord like that before – nothing. Nor have I felt the presence of such a creation as this, as surely I must have done had . . . something not been hiding it. Chance never laid this at your feet.' He swayed a little. 'This is something from your past. Take an old soldier's tip . . . watch your back.'

'How strange,' said Hawklan. 'That's what Gavor said the other day. But no one would want to attack me. I'm only a healer.'

Loman replaced the sword in its scabbard gently and handed it to Hawklan. His hands were shaking.

'If this sword sought you out then you have some great need and the enemies you could face will be worse by far than any an unlucky traveller might stumble across in the mountains.'

Hawklan looked at Loman in silence, his dour, down-to-earth castellan, whose only concerns seemed to be his smithing and the day-to-day running of the Castle. He had never heard him speak in such a way before, and the seriousness of the man chilled him. He shuddered in the spring sunshine.

Without realizing what he was doing, Hawklan swung the belt of the sword around his waist and fastened it. Loman watched him silently. The movement was practiced and familiar, and the belt fitted perfectly.

Chapter 6

The ease with which Hawklan had donned the strange sword did not move Loman as it might have done but minutes earlier. The onset of impending change crystallized in Loman's heart as soon as he saw the black sword sliding down the great mound of weapons to land at Hawklan's feet. The very movement in that huge, familiar and infinitely still room had unnerved him more than he cared to admit, but the brief touch of the black metal had dwarfed his first reaction by plunging him into another world: a world of perfection and singing voices, of wisdom that spread through every particle of his smith's soul and told him tales and epic sagas of times and worlds long gone. Of evil victorious, of evil conquered, of terrible prices paid and great rewards reaped, of courage and cowardice, fidelity and treachery.

He could scarcely bear to touch it again. It made everything around him insubstantial and inadequate. Even the mountains became dreamlike. Only Hawklan still seemed solid. More solid indeed than the sword itself.

It was the same too for Isloman when he first held the sword. Loman took it to his workshop to seek his opinion on the strange black stone hilt. He handed it to him with a brief warning.

'Take care, brother,' he said, looking into Isloman's eyes. Isloman returned the gaze, and felt the word "brother" reaching through the encrusted layers of affectionate chafing that separated them in their daily lives like a shield protecting a vulnerable breast.

He took the sword gingerly and, holding the scabbard in his left hand, gently laid the hilt in the open palm of his right. As soon as the black stone touched his hand, his eyes widened and he drew a breath that seemed to last forever.

Concerned, Loman took his arm and whispered his name urgently.

Eventually, Isloman lifted the hilt from his hand and stared at it intently. Then he looked at Loman, his eyes almost closed as if he were having difficulty in seeing him. Laying the sword on a table, he put both

his hands to his temples.

‘Where did this come from?’ he asked.

Loman told him.

Isloman sat down on his favourite stool and stared out into the spring sunshine.

‘What did you . . . learn, from the hilt?’ Loman asked after a long silence.

Isloman opened his mouth but made no sound, then he shook his head.

‘So it is with the blade,’ said Loman hoarsely. ‘Where has it come from, Isloman? Who could have made such a thing? How could it have lain so close to us for so many years and we not feel it?’

Isloman shook his head again. ‘And it sought out Hawklan?’ he said.

Loman nodded. ‘Rattled and clattered down that mound like any old piece of tin, to fall right at his feet. And he felt something when he took hold of it I’m sure, but he wouldn’t . . . or couldn’t say what.’

Isloman nodded. ‘This sword is beyond our words, Loman, and he sees deeper than you or I ever will.’

‘He just said, “my sword”. Very quietly.’

The two brothers sat for a long time in silence, with the black sword lying on the table between them. Slowly a sense of normality returned as the sound of children playing outside wafted into the room.

‘What’s the device embedded in the hilt?’ Loman asked eventually. Isloman picked up the sword again, and lifted the hilt into the dust-laden sunlight streaming through the window. Twinkling in the inner depths of the black stone were two intertwined strands which seemed to stretch into an eternal void filled with countless stars. Briefly he felt the urge of float forward into that great harmony, but a sense of unfulfilled need came over him and kept him earthbound.

He laid the sword down and stared at it. Then something occurred to him and he raised his hand as if to halt the memory before it moved on.

‘Just a moment,’ he said, and he walked over to the end of the workshop where he kept his collection of books; all manner of dissertations and commentaries and lore about carving. Strictly speaking the collection was not his, it was the Guild’s, he being its trustee as First Carver until one more worthy came along.

His craggy block of a head nodded up and down slightly as his finger tapped its way along the old spines, and he put out his tongue like a ‘do not disturb’ sign.

‘Aha.’

He reached down an ancient tome and, after blowing the dust from it, began gently turning the pages. Without looking up from the book he motioned to Loman.

‘I thought I remembered,’ he said. ‘Look.’ Loman gazed at the book blankly.

‘This is a very old book, Loman,’ Isloman explained needlessly. ‘And it’s written in a tongue and a style which I can barely understand. But look . . .’ His heavy finger tapped a diagram lightly. Loman squinted at it and frowned.

‘It means nothing to me, Isloman,’ he said. ‘It’s one of your carvers’ drawings.’

‘Uh-uh,’ muttered Isloman to himself, engrossed in the page and not hearing his brother. ‘As far as I can make out, it says that following the Rise of Six . . . someone or other, before the Age of the Great Alliance, I think, and long before the Golden Age, certain weapons were forged . . . or re-forged by Theowart . . . Sph . . . Sphaera, and . . . Enartion, with earth, water and air taken from the Places of Great . . . that might be, or Old, Power. And they were blessed by Ethriss . . . and consecrated to life.’

He nodded his head in satisfaction.

‘So?’ queried Loman.

‘So,’ said Isloman. ‘This diagram . . .’ He prodded the picture in the book. ‘This diagram shows a sword like that.’ He pointed to the sword on the table.

Loman looked intently and disbelievingly at the diagram. ‘Does it say anything else?’ he asked.

Isloman scanned the page again. ‘No,’ he said. ‘But, as I said, it’s a very old book, and it talks about times that were ancient when it was written.’

Neither spoke for a long time and the sound of children playing in the distance filled the room again. Very softly, Loman began to speak about things they had not discussed for many years. There were no records of Anderras Darion ever having been open, other than in children’s tales. In the past, the skills of generations had failed so totally to open its Great Gate or gain access in any way, that all attempts had long since been abandoned, and public wonder at the castle had been confined solely to the Gate. Then Hawklan had come out of the mountains one bleak winter when all paths were impassable, and opened it with a key and a word. A man with no memory, who knew the castle as if he had lived there all his life. A man who was a healer, not a prince or a warrior as might be expected. And now this mysterious sword had sought him out.

‘Who is he, Isloman? And what does all this mean? Your book doesn’t tell us much. We know that this sword is far beyond our understanding. But it seems to presage danger. Danger for Hawklan, danger perhaps for us all. What shall we do?’

Isloman answered without hesitation. ‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘We can’t do anything but wait. If Hawklan needs help and we can give it then we will, won’t we? Something’s happening which we can’t begin to judge. But I know this, and so do you – there’s no evil in that sword, and no evil in Hawklan. And I trust Hawklan’s sight without question.’

Returning to the castle, the two brothers found that Hawklan had taken Isloman’s advice to find clothes more appropriate for the long journey to the Gretmearc than his long loose habit and soft shoes.

As they entered his room with the sword, Tirilen was eyeing him critically and making small, pecking adjustments to his unfamiliar garments.

‘Isn’t he lovely?’ she said, a cryptic expression on her face. She took him by the elbow and turned him round to face them. Hawklan looked faintly embarrassed. Loman and Isloman exchanged brief glances although neither spoke, nor made any other outward sign of what they had seen. Each knew the other had noted Hawklan’s remarkably changed appearance.

Loman covered their awkwardness by stepping forward and looping the sword belt around Hawklan’s waist. For a moment he looked like a faithful squire attending on his lord.

‘What did you find out about it?’ Hawklan asked.

‘Nothing definite,’ said Loman. ‘Isloman thinks as I do. It’s very old and it’s done some rare deeds in its time. It was made by craftsmen of . . .’ He paused, at a loss. ‘I doubt a finer weapon exists in the whole Armoury . . . or anywhere for that matter.’

Hawklan turned directly to Isloman, trying to ignore Tirilen still moving around him making final adjustments to his clothes. ‘And the hilt?’ he asked.

‘It has the qualities that Loman tells me are in the metal. They’re quite . . . overwhelming. I certainly don’t understand them fully and I doubt I could explain them to you even if you weren’t rock-blind,’ said Isloman.

Hawklan nodded. ‘What about the device in the hilt? Did you recognize it?’ he asked.

Isloman told him of the old book and its obscure references to times long gone. At the names Theowart, Sphaera, Enartion and Ethriss, Hawklan seemed to hear again the distant note he had heard when he first handled the sword, but it slipped from him just as before.

He looked at his two friends, dominating the room with their massive presence. They were looking at him strangely although patently trying not to. Tirilen too, had an uncertainty about her as she stood back to examine her handiwork.

‘What’s the matter?’ he asked. Both the men seemed to start a little at the question.

‘Oh nothing. You just look different in your travelling clothes,’ said Loman with a slightly nervous smile. Hawklan knew they were keeping something from him, but he did not press them. They would not deceive him in any serious matter. He probably looked rather foolish in the clothes that Tirilen had found for him and they were too embarrassed to tell him. That would be typical of them.

But it was not that. Quite the contrary. Hawklan wore the clothes and the sword as if they were a natural part of him. The brothers saw before them the man they knew as a healer: a gentle, slightly innocent man, full of stillness and light. But his healer’s cowed robe had been laid aside and, standing armed, breeched, and booted, in a metal-buckled jerkin and with a long hooded cloak over his shoulders, the whole in black, his bearing was purely that of a warrior and leader. A warrior and a leader the like of which could be seen in the thick of battle in many of the carvings that filled the Castle.

* * * *

Before he left, Hawklan asked Loman and Isloman to teach him some basic sword skills, but, strangely, they both refused.

‘If I try to use it I’ll probably cut my foot off . . . or worse,’ he protested jokingly. ‘I’ve never handled a sword in my life.’

But the two men did not respond to his levity. They shook their heads. ‘That sword’s far beyond our understanding, Hawklan,’ said Isloman soberly, almost reverently. ‘We can only learn from it, not teach.’ Then, as if reluctant to deny a friend such help, ‘But I doubt you’ll be able to draw it in an ill cause. You must do as we must. Learn from it. Trust its judgement. It sought you out, not you it. Have faith in it.’

Chapter 7

Hawklan was gone. Off on his strange pilgrimage to the Gretmearc. It thus fell to Tirilen to repair her uncle.

Isloman had spent the whole day in a towering fury – his hand gashed by his new chisel and, worse, far

worse, his precious, long sought rock tortured by the rending scar the chisel had made when it slipped from his hand.

'Months this rock and I have searched for one another,' he fumed, as Tirilen treated and bound up his bleeding hand. 'And for this to happen. To me of all people.' He leaned forward and put his head in his hands in distress.

Tirilen had been businesslike in treating the hand, although the cut had an unpleasant quality about it, but she was at a loss to contend with this uncharacteristic outburst, following as it did his equally uncharacteristic rage. After a moment, she put her arms around him hesitantly and held him almost as if he had been a hurt child. Eventually he sat up and looked at her.

Putting his large hand against her cheek, he said quietly, 'You're very like your mother, Tirilen. In many ways. I'm sorry I've been such an old woman. I shouldn't have burdened you with my carelessness and its consequences.'

'Don't be silly, uncle,' she replied. 'It was an ugly cut. You couldn't have left it.' She frowned a little. 'That tinker was like a bad wind. He threw dust in our eyes, and whatever he was, we couldn't see him for it. I've set aside the pendant I bought from him. Look what it did.'

She lifted up her chin and showed him a small but angry red mark where the pendant had rested against her. 'And it was so pretty when I bought it.'

Isloman scowled and clenched his fists menacingly. Tirilen became businesslike again.

'Where's the chisel now?' she asked before he could speak.

He answered a little shamefacedly. 'I . . . threw it away when . . .' He indicated his damaged hand. Tirilen stopped winding up a bandage and looked at him, her face a mixture of concern and surprise. Nothing was ever 'thrown away' in Orthlund. Everything had its use and its time, its place in the Great Harmony.

'Threw it away?' she echoed in a tone of disbelief.

'Yes. I'm afraid so,' Isloman replied, looking even more shamefaced. Tirilen laid the bandage neatly in its place in her box, and took his hand.

'You must go and find it, uncle,' she said firmly. 'Straight away. Who knows what harm it might do left lying idly?'

'You're right,' he said. Then looking at his bandaged hand he nodded and, standing up, gave her a kiss on the forehead. 'You've done a fine job on this,' he said briskly. 'Hawklan would be pleased with you.'

'You were very lucky,' she replied. 'It came very close to doing you an injury that even Hawklan would have found difficult to mend. You could have been crippled for life. Now go and find that chisel right away.'

Isloman pursed his lips regretfully. 'I don't know what came over me,' he said. 'You don't have to be young to be foolish, do you?'

As he was leaving, Tirilen spoke again.

'Uncle. You can't work properly today. Both your hand and your heart are too hurt. Go round the village and see what other harm has been done by this tinker's wares.'

Isloman, his huge frame filling the doorway, looked at her steadily. She was so different now from the boisterous child she had been. More and more she's growing like her mother, he thought, and an old hurt throbbed briefly.

His tour of the village turned into a dark pilgrimage of his own as he wended his way round the clean sunlit streets and sharp-edged houses. People came out and, without speaking, gave him things they had bought and now rejected. In the end it was four or five of them, heavily laden, who left the tinker's wares in a pile outside the leaving stone of the village, marking it with the ancient sign for 'Unclean' as a warning to passers-by.

Doubtfully, Tirilen laid words on it to protect any plants and animals that might light on it. She wished Hawklan were here. She did not have this kind of skill.

Isloman looked down at the tools, fabrics and jewellery, even toys, and shook his head sadly.

'Is this all we can do with them, Isloman?' asked Ireck, his friend and an Elder of the Guild. Isloman did not answer.

'What else can we do,' said Otaff, another Elder of the Guild. 'They're tainted in ways we cannot read. Who can say what blinded us into accepting them. Perhaps when Hawklan returns he'll know what to do. For now we must hope that the signs and Tirilen's words protect the unwary and the innocent.'

He looked sadly at the pile. 'This must remain here. Outside the village. To mark our shame.'

No one dissented from this unhappy conclusion, and the group dispersed slowly without any leave-taking.

* * * *

Tirilen sat on a wide ledge in a room high in the castle, staring out across the countryside. Her blonde hair hung loose, shining in the bright spring sunshine. She pressed her nose against the window.

'What's happening, Gavor?' she said to the raven, currently examining some fruit in a bowl on the table. He walked across to her purposefully and then flitted up on to her shoulder and peered earnestly in the direction she was looking.

'You're steaming up the window, dear girl, that's what's happening,' he said after a moment. Tirilen glowered sideways at him.

'Sorry,' he said.

An insect collided drowsily with the window and lurched off into the clear air erratically. Tirilen curled up her knees and, wrapping her arms around her legs, rested her head on them.

'Steady, dear girl,' said Gavor, tottering at this unexpected manoeuvre. 'I'm used to a bigger perch than this you know.'

Tirilen smiled. 'Yes. A lot of us are missing Hawklan in one way or another.'

Gavor did not comment. He hopped off her shoulder and started walking up and down the room fretfully. He too was unsettled by the feeling of impending change that seemed to be pervading the castle and the village. Not the changes wrought by the coming of spring, but something more elusive and subtle; something alarming.

He tapped his wooden leg thoughtfully on the floor and mumbled to himself. The strange tinker and his appalling wares. Isloman injured and demented, albeit briefly. Hawklan gone. He, who never went more than a few days walk from the village. Gone on a wild trip across the mountains for no reason that he cared to state. And without him too. And that sword!

Gavor felt the clouds on his horizon. Whatever was happening emanated from that tinker surely? But the change centred around Hawklan; his friend. His friend who had gone on alone. They had never been apart before.

Temperamentally however, Gavor was not given to brooding. He regarded himself as a bird of action when times required, and this was such a time.

‘Rrukkk,’ he said.

Tirilen looked at him coldly. ‘You should eat less,’ she said.

‘I shall ignore that remark, dear girl,’ he replied haughtily. ‘That was just an ejaculation. A punctuation mark in my thoughts as it were. I’ve made up my mind.’

Tirilen was silent.

He continued, slightly discomfited. ‘I’m going after Hawklan. The poor boy’s sure to get lost in those mountains. Especially with the directions Isloman has given him.’

Tirilen’s eyes widened. ‘But he did say he wanted to go alone,’ she said, unconvincingly.

Gavor bent his head. ‘I know. But I can’t leave him. He’s going to need someone. I can feel it in my pinions. He’s so naive.’

Tirilen frowned thoughtfully, and then abruptly stood up and threw the window open. The warm breeze blew her hair about her face.

‘Yes. You’re right,’ she said, extending her arm for him to jump on. ‘Go and find him. Look after him. Watch over him.’

A tear ran down her face as she held her hand out through the window. Gavor left his perch and soared off majestically, his black wings shimmering in the sunlight.

Swooping back, he lay for a moment on the air rising up the tower wall.

‘Don’t cry, dear girl,’ he shouted. ‘Gavor to the rescue.’

He extended his wooden leg and made feints and thrusts with it as if it were a tiny sword.

‘Oops!’

His antics cost him his balance, and he dropped out of sight suddenly. Tirilen thought she caught a word she was unfamiliar with rising up from below, and then he flapped into view again.

‘And I’ll be able to practice my nightingale impressions in some privacy. Away from the scorn that greets me here,’ he said with great dignity.

Tirilen laughed and waved to him, and then wiped her eyes on her sleeve, briefly the little girl she had once been.

As she watched Gavor disappear from view, she could hear him whistling awkwardly, and then clearing his throat and coughing.

Chapter 8

Two days after leaving the village, Hawklan was well into the mountains. As Loman had teased, it was further than he had ever been before, but he felt he was being urged forward rather than being drawn back, which was the feeling he had had in the past whenever he travelled any distance from the Castle.

He was on the line of the River Road, which passed through the village and went straight into the mountains. It had ceased to be a road as such, many miles back, and was now only a rough track, though still well formed and quite easy walking.

Coming to the top of a long steep incline, he paused for a moment, and took off his pack. Looking for a suitable place to sit, he turned round and saw spread before him the rolling farmlands and forests of Orthlund. It was an impressive and beautiful sight when seen from Anderras Darion, but here he was much higher and the air was wonderfully clear from a rainstorm earlier in the day.

He had been plodding relentlessly uphill for some considerable time and had not once looked behind. The sudden sight overwhelmed him and the Great Song of Orthlund, rich in spring harmonies, flowed up the valleys and filled him with such joy that tears ran down his sweat-stained face. From somewhere deep inside came the thought that he would fight again to defend such a land, such a people, such a balance and harmony.

The thought was so alien to him, and such a paradox, that his head drooped and tilted to one side as if he were trying to hear from where it had come. Without realizing it he rested his left hand on the pommel of the black sword. His forehead wrinkled in puzzlement as he mouthed the words, 'fight again?'

Then he shook himself and wiped his hands over his face, transforming tears and sweat into grimy streaks. He sat down on a rock to look again at the view. He saw from the line of the path ahead that it was unlikely he would see such a view again as he went deeper into the mountains. Idly he took out the black sword and examined it. He knew the sword must be his, and that it must have come from a time before he had wakened so abruptly to find himself walking in the mountains twenty years earlier. But no memory came to prompt him. Not the faintest flicker.

The black blade and hilt shone brilliantly in the bright sunlight, and when he held it up, the device in the hilt flickered and twinkled endlessly. It was so familiar and yet so strange. And what was in its making that rendered the bluff and hearty mason almost speechless and made his taciturn brother eloquent?

Somewhere deep inside he felt an unease – a distant roaring darkness – but it slipped from him as he searched for it. The loss seemed to numb him in some way and he sat unthinking for a long time in the quiet sunlight. Then, slowly, his mood lightened and he stood up and carefully sheathed the sword.

Swinging his pack onto his back he turned away from the view and strode out along the path, which, he noted thankfully, was relatively level for some way. Looking ahead, the snow-covered mountains dominated the scene and he was glad of the advice he had received from Isloman about the route he should take, and how to keep warm should he find himself having to travel at or near the snowline.

Village legend had it that the mountains had been formed when a great god of the earth had driven one country into another to trap a terrible and foul foe. The Orthlundyn took no great interest in old tales, but they had a fund of them to tell their children: tales of heroes and gods battling with great demons and powers of evil. And around their firesides, especially at festival times, for all they were a rational people, they would talk mysteriously about the strange creatures that still existed in the mountains; remnants of

times long gone.

Certainly the mountains made at once a heroic and mysterious sight, solid and deep-rooted, and gleaming white in the spring light. Food enough for the dullest imagination, thought Hawklan. Then he remembered Gavor's remarks about animals, and wondered what he would do if he met one to whom he could not in fact talk – or one that would not listen. His confidence was not now as great as it had been back at the Castle.

Suddenly there was a scuffle and a raucous cry from the rocks to his right. The noise startled him, coming as it did after such a thought and after several hours of almost complete silence.

A small brown bird flew rapidly out of a gap between two yellow-lichened rocks, and with whirring wings hurtled straight towards the mountains. Momentarily shaken, Hawklan watched it until it disappeared from sight and then turned to look again at the place from where it had come. A familiar, fruity voice intoned an oath, and Gavor stalked into view on top of the rock.

He looked down at Hawklan.

'Dear boy,' he said, in feigned surprise. 'Do forgive the intrusion, but I was just passing. Got a friend in the area, you know.'

'Gavor!' exclaimed Hawklan with some menace in his voice.

Gavor ignored the tone and peered purposefully in the direction the brown bird had flown.

'I say. Little beggar's got a fair turn of speed, hasn't he?'

'Gavor, I told you to stay at the castle. I have to make this journey alone,' said Hawklan, though not very convincingly. He had already begun to miss his old friend's irreverent chatter.

'Nonsense, dear boy, nonsense. You're too innocent for the world yet. You need Gavor's more experienced eye to guide you round its pitfalls.'

'Jaundiced is the word I'd have used, rather than experienced,' replied Hawklan.

Gavor snorted and, unfolding his great black wings, glided down to land on Hawklan's shoulder. He winked at him as he landed. Then his tone became more serious.

'I'll watch your back for you, dear boy,' he said.

Hawklan started to walk along the path again. 'What do you mean?' he asked.

'What I say, dear boy, what I say. I'll watch your back. In fact I've been watching it for some time already.'

Hawklan turned his head and looked at him.

Gavor continued. 'Did you know that that little brown . . . bundle of feathers with the ghastly eyes has been following and watching you?'

Hawklan's face showed disbelief, but he did not speak.

'Well it has,' said Gavor. 'And I've never seen a bird like it until that tinker came.'

'I don't understand you,' Hawklan said. 'It looked like a perfectly ordinary little bird to me.'

The affectation left Gavor's voice.

'No,' he said. 'No normal bird can fly that fast, or has eyes like that. There were two or three of them nosing around the village while the tinker was there, but I didn't think much about it. But when he went, they went. They've all gone. Not a trace. Until I saw you, and there was one of them skulking behind the rocks and watching you.'

Hawklan slowed his stride as the path rose up a small incline.

'How can you be sure it was watching me?' he asked. 'There are all manner of birds and animals up here.'

'No there aren't,' said Gavor categorically. 'Not this high. I watched it for an hour. It kept pace with you all the time. And not once did it pause to eat or drink anything – not once. Distinctly unnatural.'

Hawklan did not speak, and for a while they moved on in silence. He was disconcerted by this strange revelation, if only because of the way it had affected Gavor.

'What did you do to it?' he asked eventually.

'Nothing, regretfully,' said Gavor irritably. 'Little beggar heard me gliding in before I was anywhere near it. I don't understand it. I'm known for my subtle approach.'

'What would it want?' asked Hawklan, ignoring the last remark. 'Why should a bird follow me?'

'I've no idea, dear boy, no idea. But I'd risk a guess that it's a messenger. Someone wants to know where you are and what you're doing. I'm glad I came now, in spite of your rather churlish greeting.'

Hawklan knew that, in spite of Gavor's news, he could only go forward. His mind pushed Gavor's strange reasoning to one side.

'I'm glad you've come too, Gavor,' he said. 'I've missed your company. And I'll feel much happier indeed with you at my back after what you've just said.'

'Dear boy,' came the reply. 'You're just too kind.'

High above, on a narrow pointed spur, two small brown birds sat and watched the two travellers through blank yellow eyes. Nearby, a succulent insect chewed its way luxuriously through a leaf, unhindered and unthreatened.

Chapter 9

The Lord Eldric sat square in his ornate chair at the head of the table. He was staring straight ahead and his hands were gripping the carved animal heads that decorated the ends of the chair's arms. He was abnormally still. Only a pulse in his temple and his whitened knuckles gave any measure of his thoughts.

A fire was burning in the large hearth and its flickering lights offered the only movement in the room. Even the house dogs had stopped their ceaseless prowling up and down among the guests, and the guests themselves were sitting as still as their Lord, every eye, without exception, watching him. Apart from the crackling of the fire, the only sound in the hall was the breathing of the newly arrived messenger, standing stock-still by the Lord, but still breathless from his long and frantic journey.

One of the dogs whined a little. Eldric breathed out a sigh of resignation and turned to the messenger.

'You are . . .?' he asked quietly.

‘Hrostir, Lord. Second son of the Lord Arinndier. Serving with his High Guard.’

Eldric nodded in acknowledgement and turned his gaze forward again. The tension seemed to have gone from him a little, but the pulse still throbbed in his temple.

‘I recognize you now, Hrostir. You’ve grown a great deal since I last saw you. How is your father?’

‘Well when I left him, Lord, but that was some time ago. I’ve been on Palace duty.’

Eldric nodded, then his face twisted momentarily into a spasm of distress, and his hands tightened once more on the wooden heads of the chair arms. Leaning forward, he took up the document that Hrostir had given him, and looked at it for the second time.

‘You’ve done well, Hrostir,’ he said, his deep voice regaining its normal tone of command. ‘Very well. Your father can be proud of you.’ He raised his hand and indicated the table. ‘Join our meal. Take what you want, then rest yourself. I’ll need to talk to you very shortly.’

‘My horse, Lord,’ said Hrostir.

‘It’s being tended, Lord,’ volunteered the servant who had brought the insistent messenger into the hall. Eldric nodded to the servant and then again to Hrostir, to indicate that he could now eat with a clear conscience. Hrostir bowed and made his way to one of the empty seats that were always left at the Festival table.

Eldric rested his head on his hand thoughtfully for a moment and then beckoned the servant. The man bent forward to receive his instructions and then left the hall quickly. Eldric turned his attention to his guests, his bearded face a mixture of anger and sudden weariness.

‘My friends,’ he said. ‘It’s said to be a good omen when an unexpected guest arrives at the First Feast of the Grand Festival. And I consider it particularly auspicious that the guest is the son of my old friend. However, we’re in need of such an omen, for he’s brought . . . grim news. His disturbance of our feast is our pleasure, but I fear the paper he’s brought will disturb us less pleasantly.’

He paused as if reluctant to say the words out loud. Then, sensible of his duties, and like a man who must kill a wounded horse, swiftly and cleanly, leaving the mourning for another time, he spoke.

‘The King has suspended the Geadrol. The Great Council of Lords is to sit no more.’

His tone was a mixture of defiance and resignation, and its cutting edge severed the tension in the hall. A hubbub of disbelief, anger and shock rose up from his guests. Eldric sat back in his chair with his head bowed until the babble faded away as one persistent voice spoke all their questions.

‘What does it mean, Lord?’

The questioner was Tirke, a friend of Eldric’s son Jaldaric, currently seconded, like Hrostir, to the King’s service in the capital of Fyorlund, Vakloss. Eldric did not like Tirke. He considered him to be impatient, rash and arrogant, and his assessment was indeed accurate as far as it went. However, for his son’s sake he tolerated him, aware that if he forbade the friendship it might continue clandestinely and the guilt of this would probably bring Jaldaric further under Tirke’s influence.

He remembered a vulgar barrack-room epithet about it being better to have someone inside the tent ‘looking’ out rather than outside ‘looking’ in, and the thought made him smile unexpectedly. The smile coloured his view of Tirke. He was, after all, only a young lad, and we all do foolish things when we are young.

‘It means, Tirke, what it says. The Geadrol is suspended. The King will rule without the benefit of the advice of his Lords.’

‘And restraint,’ said a voice to his left. Eldric nodded a worried acknowledgement.

‘He can’t do that,’ burst out Tirke, banging his hand on the table. Several voices were raised in agreement. Eldric picked up the paper and brandished it.

‘He *has* done it,’ he said. ‘I’m no lawyer, but I imagine this edict is legal and within the Law. Rgoric has had many troubles in his reign and much personal sadness, and not all his actions have been of the wisest, but I’m sure he’d do nothing that wasn’t legal nor in the best interests of the country, however it might appear to us at the moment.’

Tirke made a contemptuous noise.

‘He’s been working for this for years. Chipping away at the rights and power of the Geadrol bit by bit, all with this in mind.’

Eldric opened his mouth to speak, but Tirke continued. ‘I’m sorry, Lord Eldric, but I must speak as I think. You know I’m right. He’s steadily reduced the effectiveness of the Geadrol over many years, and he picks now to do this. Not just the Festival of the Four Guardians, but the Grand Festival, when everyone’s away to their estates. Only once in six years does this happen.’

Eldric was beginning to become angry. Though whether it was Tirke’s unpleasant, hectoring manner, or because he felt inclined, against his Oath of Fealty, to agree with him, he could not have said.

‘Tirke, these are times of change. Troubled times. The King isn’t blessed with the good health that most of us are fortunate in . . .’ He lost his train of thought and shook his head irritably. In any event, he doubted he could plead too well on behalf of the King.

Somewhat at a loss he said. ‘Why would he want to rule without his Lords, Tirke? Why? It’s difficult enough even with advisers.’

Tirke looked at him impatiently and leaned forward on the table.

‘The King wants all authority in his hands.’

‘Authority?’ queried Eldric. ‘Authority. What is authority, Tirke? It’s not a thing that can be seized like a . . . goblet.’ He picked up a glass in demonstration. ‘Authority can only be given, and freely given at that. Given by the people to the Lords and the King. And it’s hedged about by our ancient Law, for the protection of all. You can’t seize a gift. And anyway, who’d want to seize such a burden as the rule of all Fyorlund?’

His age seemed to have fallen from him and his voice was strong and firm, but Tirke was not daunted.

‘Lord Eldric, with respect, you speak of things as they should be. I speak of them as they are. You speak from a good and just heart, a heart that can’t see evil in people.’

Eldric’s eyes narrowed.

‘Take care, Tirke. You abuse your friendship with my son, and the Festival hospitality. Your talk is nearly treasonable.’

But Tirke was not listening. His excitement and anger carried his thoughts beyond his discretion.

‘I mean no disrespect to the King, Lord, but he’s a sick man. Even with the Lords’ advice, it’s difficult for him to fulfil the duties of Kingship. We here all know that Dan-Tor is the real Kingly authority, and has been for years.’

He wrinkled his mouth in distaste at the name of the King’s chief adviser and physician.

‘Enough, Tirke,’ said Eldric loudly. The lad was telling the truth, but Eldric could not allow the King to be impugned. ‘Lord Dan-Tor, Tirke, is thought of most highly by the King. He’s brought him great comfort and solace in his many troubles.’

Then, to try to calm the young man, he continued, ‘Although I admit he’s not to everyone’s liking. We should be thankful for what he’s done for our King.’

The slight softening of his tone did not have the effect he sought. It released a monumental outburst from Tirke. He banged his fist on the table again and jumped to his feet.

‘Lord Eldric, are you blind? That . . . devil’s spawn out of Narsindal has our King strung like a puppet. It’s he who wants . . .’

‘Enough!’ Eldric’s voice thundered down the table and stopped Tirke in mid-sentence. The sudden impact made him step back and he reached down with one hand to hold his chair to prevent himself from stumbling over it. Suddenly sobered, his face went white. Eldric too had stood up. He was quivering with rage and his normally ruddy face was livid. His grey beard and hair seemed almost to be bristling.

‘Enough. I told you before that you abused my son’s friendship and my hospitality. Now you impugn the King and his advisers and you mention the name of *that* land at my Festival Feast.’ He pushed his chair back angrily and strode around the table until he stood facing Tirke.

Tirke stood very still, looking at him, his mouth tight and his eyes fearful.

‘Go to your quarters, Tirke,’ said Eldric, unexpectedly quietly, but with a barely controlled rage. ‘Reflect on what you’ve said and allow calmer judgements to prevail. I’ll attribute your indiscretion to the fine wine we’ve had tonight.’

Tirke nodded an awkward bow and turned hesitantly as if to address the watching guests. Then he turned back to Eldric and a tremor passed over his face as he fought to control himself. He opened his mouth to speak, but Eldric’s eyes froze his words, and he turned away stiffly and marched to the doorway of the hall, his shoulders hunched high with tension and his fists clenching and unclenching.

Eldric watched the empty doorway for some time and then slowly returned to his seat. He slumped down on it despondently as the last of his anger suddenly left him. He felt slightly repentant. Tirke had been the recipient of the fears and shock that had arisen in him with the arrival of Hrostir and the Edict. He looked up at his guests sitting uncertainly about the table laden with the remains of the Festival Feast.

‘I’m sorry, my friends,’ he said, ‘but the lad went too far, Festival or no.’

There was a general murmur of agreement.

‘I think his heart’s in the right place, but his mouth’s another matter.’

The little jest eased the tension around the table and Eldric, sitting back in his chair, raised his hand to prevent anyone speaking.

‘I’ve already sent to the Lords Arinndier, Darek and Hreldar, and asked them to attend me here so that

we can discuss this matter,' he gestured towards the paper, 'and decide what to do. If necessary we'll go to Vakloss and ask the King for an accounting. I'm sure that some sound reason lies behind this deed, and that a simple asking will elicit it.'

No one offered any comment. Most of them were inclined to agree with Tirke, if not with his manners, but no one felt inclined to argue with their Lord that night. Eldric stood up and smiled.

'I'm afraid I've disturbed our humble celebration and I apologize. However, I've done all that I can do about our news until my friends arrive so I see no reason why our festivities shouldn't continue.'

He clapped his hands loudly and the hall was suddenly filled with light and cheerful music. The clouds that had gathered disappeared as servants and guests alike hastily cleared the tables and began the traditional dancing and singing with which the beginning of the week-long Festival was always celebrated.

* * * *

The Geadrol was the King's Council of Lords. It advised him in all matters and was an ancient institution. It had no leader; not even the King himself when he chose to attend and join in the debates. Nor did it have any formal spokesman to take its considerations to the King; this task was allocated according to a strict rota.

The debates were governed by a strictly observed precedent. One Lord would speak, and would be allowed to say his piece fully, then another would speak similarly, a scribe taking note of all that was said. After a while, one Lord would, if he felt able, summarize the various arguments, referring as need arose to the scribe or to the Lords themselves for clarification. If his summary was accepted by the main participants, then the matter would be thrown open to further debate, and he would act as Gatherer until a satisfactory conclusion had been reached.

Necessarily, the task of Gatherer tended to fall mainly to the older and more experienced Lords, though by no means always.

The conduct of the Geadrol was the envy of houses of government in many distant lands, but its success was due mainly to the stern discipline of the Fyordyn and, as an institution, it did not travel well.

By tradition, the Lords in Geadrol were always dressed and armed for war, but voices were never raised, and interruptions were made only by the scribe or Gatherer. All had an opportunity to state their case as fully as they wished, and discussion continued until a wide agreement had been reached. The matter would then be laid before the King, whose acceptance was usually a formality.

Only when the nation was threatened could this procedure be modified, and then only slightly. The Geadrol would appoint a small group of its more experienced members to handle matters. They, together with the King, would use the same principle of thorough debate, but with less formality and greater urgency.

No one could say that the Geadrol was a form of government suitable for making rapid decisions, but under normal circumstances, the quality of the Lords' debates, their judicious though not slavish regard for precedent, and their innate tolerance, ensured that such advice as was given to the King ensured in turn a society that was, for the most part, free from those disturbances that made rapid decisions necessary.

The whole was governed by the Law. Like the Geadrol, this relied heavily on precedent and it could only be altered by the King and his Geadrol, 'The greater part of the people freely consenting'.

* * * *

When the guests had departed to their rooms, Eldric sat alone, surveying the scattered remains of the feast. The sight of his normally spartan hall so happily dishevelled, with its panelled walls and elaborately moulded ceiling lit by the traditional many-coloured torches, and everything decorated with winter and spring blossoms, never failed to induce a mellowness in him that he relished. His father had been a great celebrator of the Festival and its joy was rooted deep in Eldric's memories.

He nodded to himself. In spite of the sombre interruption, it had been a lively affair, a fine honouring of the First Day of the Grand Festival.

There would be more events through the week: more feasting and dancing, bonfires, pageants, games and above all, traditional masques portraying the great events of Fyorlund's history, with splendid arch-villains to be hissed, and great heroes to be cheered. It was a happy up-ending of all the normal social disciplines and Eldric knew that the traditional momentum of the Grand Festival would allow his guests to continue their celebrations largely unclouded by the news of the King's actions. But he himself was less favoured. Now, for the first time since the Morlider War, matters of state responsibility would dominate his thoughts through this happy time, and drag his oldest friends from their own celebrations.

He frowned and leaned back in his chair. As he did so, his eye fell on the small shrine of the Four Guardians. It was standing in its place of honour against the north wall of the hall where it had been placed with all due ceremony to mark the opening of the Festival. Around it were candles whose light glittered from the ubiquitous Fyordyn symbol that topped the shrine – a polished iron ring.

The shrine was a simple, old-fashioned piece of work. No one even dared to suggest to Eldric that he replace it with one of the more modern representations that came from Dan-Tor's workshops in Vakloss. In his mind he knew its every detail. The figures were old and worn, and bore only intermittent traces of their original paintwork. They and their shrine had been in his family for many generations, and he remembered the feeling of comfort and security that they used to give him when he was a child. He smiled as he thought of it, and wondered if his own son, Jaldaric, would in turn look back on such a memory.

Heaving himself up out of his chair he walked, a little shakily, across to the shrine. Then crouching down as he used to, he brought his face close to it and peered in at the scene. Apart from the warmth of the nearby candles on his cheek nothing from the outside world impinged on his senses.

As was traditional, three of the Guardians, Sphaera, Enartion and Theowart had their backs to the watcher, and were gazing out across the black waters of Lake Kedrieth, where Sumeral, the Enemy of Life, had sunk from this world of men after a terrible battle with the Kings and Peoples of the Great Alliance. Somewhere hidden in the shrine, Eldric knew, would be a figure representing the fourth Guardian, Ethriss, the Guardian of Life who vanished from the field at the very moment of victory. It would be well hidden by the makers of the shrine because to find it would be a bad omen, a sign of the Second Coming of Sumeral.

The saga of the defeat of Sumeral was a stirring allegory of the conflict between evil and good that must be fought continually in all men. No one knew the real, time-shrouded, origins of this myth, or why it should hold such strong sway in the minds of the Fyordyn. Nor why it should be celebrated with yearly revels leading up to the Grand Festival every sixth year, with its intangible but powerful sense of reaffirmation. That it was the relic of ancient celebrations of thanksgiving for the passing of winter seemed to Eldric to be a peculiarly vapid explanation.

Eldric looked past the Guardians into the inky depths of Lake Kedrieth, and felt again his childhood

wonder at the skill of the artist in the sinister quality imbued in its dark, glistening surface.

He smiled, a little ruefully. That had been a long time ago. Times were simpler then. Now, Fyorlund's King was weak and ailing. There was no heir from his lovely queen to continue the royal line that had been unbroken for centuries. Lords on the northern borders had been declared rebels simply for opposing his will in the matter of quite reasonably extending their High Guards. And now this – the suspension of the Geadrol – an almost unbelievable act. And over all stretched the gaunt, enigmatic figure of the King's personal adviser and physician, Dan-Tor.

Eldric looked deep into the little model of Lake Kedrieth. Its lifeless surface seemed to ripple slowly and ominously, as if something far below it were stirring. He shuddered and stood up, resting his weight on his cracking knees. He grunted at the sound. He did not like becoming old. Its sole consolation was that it had given him the experience to better use the wits it had left him. And he would need them. People would be looking to him for some response to Rgoric's action.

He turned and beckoned Varak, the Commander of his High Guard.

Chapter 10

Hawklan was distressed when he heard Gavor's tale of the happenings at the village since his departure – Isloman damaging his hand, the tinker's wares being cast out of the village. Strange and worrying events. He nodded his satisfaction at Gavor's account of the villagers' actions and of Tirilen's treatment of Isloman's injury and her laying words over the abandoned wares, but the healer in him was not moved to return. Still he felt himself impelled away from Anderras Darion, or rather, drawn by some force towards the Gretmearc; a force that became stronger as he moved further from the village.

He was quite proud of the progress he was making. This was due in part to the good weather, but also to the fact that he knew where he was going. Not once did he need to consult the elaborate instructions that Isloman had painstakingly written for him in the florid script and formal grammar of the Carver's writing.

This knowledge was a phenomenon with which he had been familiar ever since he had walked out of the snow-blocked mountains to open the Great Gate of Anderras Darion. He had recognized each thing as he came to it, but it was a recognition without memory. None of the castle's countless rooms were strange to him, nor any of the miles of corridors. Even the mysteries of the terrifying labyrinth that guarded the Armoury became familiar as he moved into it. But nothing carried so much as a wisp of the past in its wake.

So it was now in the mountains. He knew the route as he took it. He knew mountain lore when he needed it – more even than Isloman had told him – how to read the weather signs, how to pace his walking, how to travel on the treacherous snow he might reach at the height of his journey, where and how to shelter – all were familiar.

And yet, he was not curious except insofar as he was intrigued by his own lack of curiosity. He had treated people who had lost their memories and he knew he exhibited none of their symptoms; no shapeless distress, no fretful questioning, no haunting elusive familiarity in the things around him, no sudden flashes of recollection that gradually became longer and longer. It was like nothing he had ever seen in anyone else. The knowledge was there. It always had been. But it did not announce its coming or its arrival in any way. He felt no more reaction to the unending revelations than he would if he looked at a chair and knew it for a chair. It puzzled him a little – but only a little. Something in his makeup was above such concerns.

On the fifth day out from the village, Hawklan woke and crawled out of his small shelter into a cold mist that obliterated the view in every direction, reducing visibility to a small circle of snow-covered earth of

which he was the centre. He stretched and took a deep cold breath then wrapped his cloak tight around himself and drew its hood over his head. Out of the corner of his eye he saw glistening pearls of moisture forming on the edges of the fabric.

He ate a little food and dismantled and packed his shelter, the snow crunching under his feet as he moved around. The sound made him pause. The mountains were normally quiet, but there was always a background murmur echoing around the valleys: a mixture of wind on the rocks and in the sparse vegetation, distant streams starting their busy journeys to the sea, countless tiny birds, insects and other creatures pursuing their daily rounds. Now, in the mist, however, there was a different silence. Standing very still as he gazed into the greyness and watched his cloudy breath, the only thing that Hawklan could hear was the sound of his own pulse gently throbbing in his head. He found it peculiarly restful, and stood for quite a time before breaking the self-induced spell.

He looked round for Gavor. There in the snow were his characteristic footprints – one claw mark and one small hole. He was about to call out when a sudden cry startled him. It came from the direction in which Gavor had gone. Hawklan called out his friend's name, but his voice fell dead in the damp mist, and seemed hardly to leave his mouth. An equally muffled reply returned to him.

'Here, dear boy.'

Hawklan walked along the trail of tiny prints towards the voice and soon reached Gavor, looking a little the worse for wear and walking unsteadily round the motionless body of a small dead bird.

'Gavor,' he said in some annoyance, 'I wish you wouldn't kill things when I've food enough for both of us.'

'Dear boy,' said Gavor, 'I'm well aware of your dietary eccentricities. You know I wouldn't dream of offending your delicate sensibilities. This one wasn't on my breakfast menu I can assure you.'

Hawklan looked at him suspiciously. 'What was that noise then?' he asked.

Gavor cleared his throat.

'Me, dear boy, I must confess. Me. Crying out in some considerable alarm.'

Hawklan waited, expecting some elaborate rigmarole to excuse this gratuitous killing, but Gavor offered none.

'I was pottering around, looking for some tasty . . . er . . . leaf, to start the day, when this thing fell out of the sky.'

Hawklan's suspicious look darkened. Gavor continued.

'Fell, dear boy. I assure you. Nearly hit me. Gave me quite a start I can tell you. I'm still a little shaky.'

Hawklan bent down and picked up the dead bird. It was exactly like the one that Gavor had chased out of the rocks.

'Do you recognize it?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Gavor. 'It's the little beggar who was watching you. Or its double.' Then he flapped his wings excitedly.

'Ah, that's it,' he cried. 'The noise. The noise. I recognize it now.'

‘What noise?’

‘The noise its wings made. That whirring sound. I remember.’ Then, angrily. ‘It’s been following us all the way. I’ve heard it flying about and didn’t realize what it was. Scruffy little beggar.’

Hawklan looked down at the tiny figure in his hand.

‘Well, it’s not following now,’ he said, turning it over. ‘I wonder what killed it? I can’t see any injury. It looks healthy enough.’

‘Apart from being dead,’ chuckled Gavor, before adding, insincerely, ‘Sorry.’

Hawklan held the bird close to his face to examine it more thoroughly. He put his finger gently under its head and lifted it slightly. Abruptly its eyes opened. They were yellow, and they glared malevolently at him. Before he could react, the bird wriggled out of his hand and flew off at great speed.

Gavor rose up as if to follow, but the bird had only flown a little way when it uttered a strange cry and crashed straight down onto an exposed slab of rock standing above the thin snow. At the same time, Gavor cried out and fell to the ground, rolling on to his side in the snow.

So fast did these events happen, that Hawklan was still standing with his palm extended. He looked at the stricken bird and then at Gavor.

‘Gavor, what’s the matter?’ he cried out, kneeling down by his friend.

‘I’m all right,’ said Gavor, struggling to his feet, wings flapping awkwardly and throwing up flecks and sprays of snow.

‘Look, look,’ he said excitedly, thrusting his head out urgently, pointing into the mist. Hawklan turned round and followed his gaze. The morning sun was beginning to colour the mist and for a brief moment he thought he saw two tiny figures fading into the yellow haze. As he blinked to focus in the disorienting mistlight, they were gone. Gavor opened his wings and skimmed off in the same direction.

Hawklan stood up and brushed the snow off his cloak. He walked over to the brown bird lying motionless again on the rock. Picking it up warily, and holding it well away from his face, he gently lifted its eyelid. The eye was pale yellow and quite devoid of life. With gentle fingers he examined the bird carefully. There were no signs of injury, nor equally, any signs of life. And yet somehow it did not feel to be dead. He frowned uneasily.

Gavor appeared out of the mist above and settled on his shoulder.

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘Not a soul, dear boy. And I’m sure I saw two of them. Little people. Like children.’

‘So did I, Gavor,’ said Hawklan. ‘It was probably the mist swirling. It plays funny tricks on the eyes. There’s no one up here. We’ve met no one since we started, and anyway they’d have come to see what the noise was about by now.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ said Gavor in a resigned tone. ‘But I’m sure I saw something.’

‘Are you all right now?’ asked Hawklan. ‘What happened? Why did you fall when that bird fell down?’

Gavor put his head on one side. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It was like a noise. A strange noise, a strange singing.’

His voice changed and became very distant.

‘It was a killing song. I’ve read of them on the Great Gate. And I was on the edge of it. It was a killing song for that brown bird, and they had to sing it twice.’

‘Gavor, what in the world are you talking about? And who are “they”?’

Gavor’s eyes lit up in a mixture of alarm and excitement.

‘It’s true,’ he said. ‘Really true.’ He was talking as much to himself as to Hawklan. ‘A killing song. I could tell. But it wasn’t for me. It was for that. It’s the Alphraan. They’re real, and we saw them.’

Hawklan had never heard him gabble on so before.

‘Well I heard nothing,’ he said. ‘And I’ve never heard of an Alphraan, let alone seen one, so perhaps you’d care to tell what you’re talking about.’

Gavor collected himself. ‘The Alphraan, dear boy. The Alphraan. It’s all on the Gate. You must have read it. High up, over on the right hand side. Tiny people who live in caves in the mountains.’ He spread his wings. ‘Miles and miles of caves. They make carvings that sing and they use songs to hide themselves and even to fight with when necessary. We’d better leave. They’re very discerning, they’re not keen on . . . humans.’

Hawklan looked at his friend sceptically. ‘Gavor, I’ve never seen anything about them on the Gate. And singing carvings are just a village tale. All that’s happened here is that a little bird, which you happen not to like for some reason, has died suddenly. Probably of . . .’ He looked skyward for an idea. ‘. . . exhaustion maybe.’ Then, defensively, as he caught Gavor’s expression, ‘And we saw the mist swirling in the sun and casting shadows, not magical creatures from some old carver’s tale.’

Gavor looked at him with undisguised scorn.

‘Look at it dear boy,’ he said, nodding his shining black head at the body in Hawklan’s hand, and shaking a shower of droplets loose. ‘It’s as fat as a ripe apple. I don’t know how its wings lifted it. *That* never died of exhaustion. They had to sing their song twice to kill it, that’s how exhausted it was. *I* heard them. It’s not my fault you’ve got cloth ears. And that was no swirling mist we saw. That was the Alphraan.’

Hawklan grunted dismissively. ‘Very well. If you say so. But I think you’re going fey. It’s probably the altitude. Come on.’

He looked hesitantly at the dead bird. ‘We should find somewhere to leave this. It must return to the earth.’

Gavor jumped down onto Hawklan’s arm and examined the body. He shuddered.

‘Put it in your pack, dear boy. Nothing’s going to eat that. It doesn’t belong to the earth. It’s repellent. I’m surprised you can’t feel it. We must keep it with us until a suitable time for its disposal presents itself. It’ll only do harm if we leave it lying here.’

Hawklan looked intently at his friend, puzzled by this enigmatic speech. He wanted to ask him what he was talking about, but his ears were ringing oddly in the mist-damped silence and he felt impelled to move on quickly.

‘Come on then. Let’s be on our way,’ he said, swinging his pack onto his back and dropping the small brown body casually into his pocket. ‘Maybe you’ll recover your wits when we get out of this mist.’ His voice echoed peculiarly and menacingly in his own ears, and for an instant he felt as though he were

constrained to a certain path as intangibly and yet as definitely as if he were in the labyrinth guarding the Armoury at Anderras Darion. Beyond the path lay a roaring death, without a doubt.

He shook his head to dismiss the notion, then strode purposefully forward towards the sunlight glowing through the mist.

Chapter 11

Hawklan began to notice a change in himself. A broadening, an enlarging of his awareness and knowledge. These were the only words he could find to describe the feelings within him, but they were not very adequate. As more of his latent knowledge quietly manifested itself, he felt as though he were emerging from a chrysalis; the world began to look very different, and he knew that he too was different.

He had set off from Pedhavin apparently on a whim. Not exactly a light-hearted one, but equally, not a doom-laden compulsion. Now, as he and Gavor paced out the long lonely miles through the mountains, he realized that what was moving him forward was not an idle whim, but a stern resolve.

He was surprised to encounter within himself both steel and flint and their sparks drove him on, though why he should be so driven he could not have said. He knew only that he must find the source of that appalling doll and perhaps now, since Gavor's news, he must find also the source of all the tinker's wares. It was his hope that in finding these, all questions would be answered.

Just as he had once awoken to find himself wandering in the mountains, unaware of who he was or how he came to be there, so he began to realize that he must be awakening again. But with this realization came the feeling that the past twenty years would prove to be but a short episode in his life – a brief respite. Twenty years in the Great Harmony of Orthlund and in the sanctuary of Anderras Darion. Twenty years of lightness of touch, of healing and bringing contentment to people. Twenty years – resting? – waiting? – preparing?

'You're looking very pensive, dear boy.' Gavor interrupted his thoughts.

'That will be because I'm thinking, Gavor,' Hawklan replied, a little more tartly than he had intended.

Gavor drew in a long hissing breath and then clicked his black tongue reproachfully.

'Not a good idea, dear boy,' he said. 'Humans don't really have the brain for it. It's a well-known fact. Wears it out, you know.'

He hopped onto Hawklan's head and tapped the top of it lightly with his beak.

'What are you doing?' said Hawklan, waving his hand vaguely over his head to dislodge the bird.

'Just checking, dear boy,' replied Gavor, nimbly jumping up and down to avoid the flailing hand, and keeping his balance by spreading his wings a little, pinions gently flicking the air.

'Yes, thought so,' he said. 'Distinctly hollow sound developing. And our normal placidity and equanimity aren't what they could be, are they?'

'Of course not,' said Hawklan. 'Nor would yours be if you'd some demented bird trying to peck its way into your skull.'

Gavor swooped off Hawklan's head and then soared up into the air with a laugh. Hawklan ran his hands through his dishevelled hair.

‘I can live with most of your bird impressions, Gavor – just. But I’m not too keen on your woodpecker.’

Gavor turned over and over in a warm updraught. The joy of it made him laugh out loud in sheer delight.

‘A true artist must live his part you know, dear boy. It’s an endless struggle for perfection,’ he shouted. Then he performed his inadequate nightingale briefly, and cried, ‘Come on up. The air’s splendid.’

Hawklan shook his head and smiled broadly, his green eyes bright. There were times when Gavor seemed to have a boundless capacity for glee. Watching the black shape twisting and turning high above him in the blue sky, Hawklan admitted to himself a small twinge of envy. The slight taint of this emotion did not however, mar the enjoyment he felt in watching his friend’s happiness, but it brought to his mind the incident in the mist.

The inert body of the brown bird felt heavy and anxious in his pocket. ‘Don’t know how those wings could carry it,’ Gavor had said. And then the strange figures. He was as sure as Gavor that he had seen something, someone, two tiny figures. But he had not wanted to pursue them for some reason. His mind had seemed to be full of sounds urging him away from the mist and the high ground.

He was about to shout up to Gavor and ask him more about the Alphraan, when Gavor called out, ‘Visitors coming, Hawklan,’ and dropped down to perch on a nearby rock.

The ‘visitors’ proved to be villagers from Pedhavin returning from the Gretmearc: Jareg with his wife and children. Most of the Orthlundyn threatened to visit the Gretmearc at least once in their lifetime, but few actually got round to it; there was always some more pressing matter at home. Jareg however, was an exception. He was always thought of as being rather restless by his neighbours. ‘It shows in his work,’ they would say. ‘His father was the same. Hasty. Touch of Riddin blood in the whole family, if you ask me.’ And as if in confirmation, he had actually packed his bags and taken his family on this great adventure.

They all greeted Hawklan warmly as they came together on the narrow path, the children embracing him, and the wife staring at him with open, laughing admiration.

‘Didn’t recognize you, Hawklan, dressed like that. Sword and all,’ she said with teasing irony. ‘You look like a great warrior, not our healer. What are you doing here?’ Hawklan kissed her on the forehead and, acknowledging her comment with an embarrassed smile, looked for something to deflect the conversation from both his appearance and the reason for his journey. It was not difficult, for Jareg had with him a large, black horse, walking listlessly behind his two packhorses. Hawklan felt the pain radiating from it.

‘Bought yourself a present I see,’ he said in some surprise, indicating the animal. The Orthlundyn rarely bought horses, usually being able to meet their few needs from their own stock.

‘Yes,’ said Jareg doubtfully. ‘But I’m not so sure it was a good idea. He looked all right at the market, and he’s a fine creature – Muster stock. I thought he’d be good to breed from. But something seems to be wrong with him.’

Hawklan took the horse’s handsome black head in his two hands, and spoke to it.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked it.

The horse made no reply, but showed the whites of its eyes and looked for a moment as if it might shy away from him. Hawklan spoke again, gently, laying his hand on its forehead. ‘Don’t be frightened. Tell me what’s the matter.’

The horse still looked fearful, and did not answer.

‘You bought this at the Gretmearc, you say?’ Hawklan asked. Jareg nodded.

Hawklan was puzzled. Animals were as subtle and sensitive in their feelings as humans, not infrequently more so, but they were usually much more straightforward to deal with. He began to wonder if indeed a Riddin horse would speak a different language from an Orthlundyn horse, but that was nonsense. He was sure this one understood him and chose not to reply . . . or could not. And it was in some kind of pain. He tried again, but again there was no response.

‘What’s the matter with it?’ Jareg asked. Hawklan’s lean face showed his doubts.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It won’t talk to me.’

‘It’s a Muster horse, but that should act in its favour,’ said Jareg. ‘They work them hard but they look after them very well.’ He patted the horse anxiously. ‘Thinking about it, there must be something wrong with it. I don’t think the Muster normally sell their horses. But . . .’ he laughed good-naturedly. ‘Those Gretmearc people would sell you your own shirt, and send you away feeling you’ve got a bargain.’

Hawklan nodded. He had heard of the Riddin Muster from Isloman and Loman. It was a relic of some ancient time but it was now deeply embedded in the culture and hearts of the Riddinvolk. At the appropriate command, an elaborate and rapid system of messengers could bring thousands of people riding to the defence of the land, working in highly organized and trained groups of anything up to twenty thousand riders.

The Muster always trained regularly, a strict rota of duty and work sharing ensuring that the disruption of the normal working lives of the people was minimal. And everyone – men, women, and even children – participated without exception. It was its continual state of readiness that enabled it to hold off the Morlider raiders until help came from Fyorlund and Orthlund some twenty years or so ago when the Morlider had attacked with such suddenness and such unprecedented viciousness.

In more peaceful times, its meetings were full of ceremony, hectic merrymaking, and displays of horsemanship, but never at the cost of basic effectiveness. The down-to-earth Riddinvolk always assumed that the Muster had been formed to deal with the Morlider in the distant past and never lost sight of that fact. Folklore however, took its formation back into legend and a myth, and linked it with great wars in times beyond remembering, when a terrible evil had arisen and had been defeated only after many years of bitter and bloody strife.

The quality of Muster horses was legendary. Hawklan nodded. ‘It certainly seems to be in excellent condition,’ he said, as he walked quietly around the horse, stroking it soothingly and feeling its responses under his hands. ‘Yes. Excellent. But . . .’

He stepped back, his face furrowed into an uncharacteristic frown. Healing involved, amongst other things, entering into the pain of the sufferer, and when Hawklan felt a sinister, strangling, restraint deep within him, he recognized it as belonging to the horse. His green eyes narrowed.

‘I thought it was just shocked in some way,’ he said thoughtfully, as if to himself. ‘But it feels as if someone has laid a stifling hand on its heart to silence it.’

He seemed puzzled by his own words. The idea was horrific and a spasm of pain passed over his face as he turned away from the horse. ‘Yes. That’s what’s happened,’ he said, laying a hand on the horse again. ‘There’s something deep inside it that I can barely reach, let alone move. Who would do such a thing? And how?’

A cloud passed over the sun briefly, echoing the feeling of darkness that Hawklan’s concern had brought

to the group.

Hawklan reached up and, putting his arms about the horse's neck, rested his forehead against it and closed his eyes. For seemingly endless minutes, the group stood still and silent, like the mountains themselves. Slowly the horse's great head sank lower and lower, and it began to breath noisily, in unison with Hawklan's own breathing. Then, abruptly, it jerked upright and whinnied slightly. Hawklan stepped back, his eyes wide and watering tearfully, his forehead glistening.

'What have you done?' said Jareg anxiously.

Hawklan shook his head, and wiped his eyes with a kerchief offered to him by Jareg's wife. 'I'm not sure,' he said quietly. 'I think I might have helped it. It don't think it'll get any worse, and it may be better able to help itself now; it's a powerful animal in every way.'

'What should I do with it?' Jareg asked. Hawklan smiled and patted him on the shoulder.

'Just look after it as you have been doing. I'll be back in a couple of weeks or so and I'll look at it again. I'm sure I'll be able to help it some more. Don't worry. It's a fine animal.'

His reassurance restored everyone's good spirits and they spent some time showing him their gifts and purchases and talking about the excitement and wonders of the Gretmearc, before eventually continuing on their way.

Hawklan watched them thoughtfully as they left.

Gavor spoke. 'What did you see in the horse, Hawklan?' he asked.

Hawklan shook his head. 'I don't know,' he said. 'I've never felt the like. But it was nothing natural, that's for sure. It felt primitive – very old. It was horrible.' He shuddered.

Gavor cocked his head to one side at this untypical response. 'If it wasn't natural then it was unnatural,' he said. 'Who would do such a thing, dear boy? Come to that, who could do it?'

Hawklan pondered. Isloman, a First Carver, slipping with a chisel. A tinker with unclean wares that deceived the sight of the Orthlundyn – and disturbed his own equilibrium. A fine animal ruthlessly invaded. He stood silent for a moment, then he smiled ruefully. 'I don't know that either, Gavor, but I fear we're being manipulated and that we're destined to find out why at the Gretmearc.'

Gavor nodded. Hawklan had told him all that words could offer. 'Very well, dear boy,' he said. 'I'll continue to watch your back.'

Hawklan turned round to look at the departing family. They were on the skyline and they turned to wave before dropping out of sight. He saw the horse throw its head back, and he bent forward to catch the faint, distant sound.

'What did it say?' Gavor asked.

Hawklan frowned as if in pain. 'It said, "Take care at the Gretmearc – old enemies are abroad."' '

Gavor turned a beady eye on him. 'That's not much use,' he said.

Hawklan looked at him crossly. 'No,' he said. 'But it cost that horse dear to say it.'

He rested his hand on the pommel of the black sword, and the spring sun sparkled in a tear than ran down his face in memory of the pain he had felt in the horse.

Old enemies, he thought. And I'm walking – being drawn? – towards them. I wonder if I'll know them when I see them?

Chapter 12

It was with some relief that Eldric welcomed the last of the three Lords he had summoned following Hrostir's news of the suspension of the Geadrol.

Lord Darek rode into the courtyard with his small, yellow-liveried escort, and dismounted stiffly.

'I'm sorry,' were his first words to Eldric. 'I came as quickly as I could, but I don't ride like I used to.'

Eldric smiled warmly and took his hand. 'Nonsense. You're here a good day earlier than I thought you'd be,' he said. 'It's a long journey. I'm only sorry you've had to make it under such circumstances, and at this time of all times. You must rest a while before we talk.'

Darek shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'Let me attend to my men and then we'll talk right away. I couldn't begin to rest with all the hares your news set running around in my head, and I presume you've all been pacing the floor for at least two days waiting for me. And being none too charitable about the delay.'

Eldric raised his hands and shrugged in mute confession and apology. 'You always were too sharp, Darek,' he said with a smile. 'Come inside. My men will attend to your escort and the horses, and we'll join Hreldar and Arinndier straight away.'

Leading his guest through a blossom-decorated doorway, he added wryly, 'You'll not decline a little Festival fare while you're talking, I trust?' Darek allowed a brief smile of acknowledgement to light up his thin, dour face.

Within minutes they had joined the others in one of the rooms of Eldric's private quarters. It was simply decorated and well-lit with ample comfortable furniture, and Darek sat down in a capacious chair with an aura of considerable relief.

The four Lords presented a considerable contrast. Eldric, bluff, solid and open-countenanced; by a month or so the senior in years, but by far the most senior in the eyes of the people and his peers. Arinndier, some five years younger, but bigger and stronger and with the demeanour of a much younger man. Darek, thin and wiry, with a quiet, rather scholarly manner. And finally Hreldar. A real Festival Lord, as Eldric described him. Round faced and jolly. A man much given to easy and infectious laughter.

For all their contrasts however, they were bound by long ties of affection and loyalty. Ties forged mainly during the years they spent fighting shoulder to shoulder in the Morlider War, and subsequently tested and tempered by their long service together in the Geadrol.

Ironically, for four Geadrol Lords, their conference was remarkably brief.

Hrostir had little to add to the news he had brought. Leaving Vakloss at the end of his routine secondment to the Palace, he had come across the edict almost by accident, so quietly had it been posted. It came as no great surprise to any of the Lords that there had been no public outcry at such an edict. For all its virtues, there was no widespread interest in the affairs of the Geadrol and, at that time, the Grand Festival dominated all horizons. Few things were deemed so serious that they could not be left until 'after the Festival'. Taking a copy of the edict, Hrostir had ridden post-haste to Eldric with the news rather than to his father because his estate was the nearer and because of his seniority.

He looked a little uncertainly at his father as he concluded, but Arinndier nodded his approval. 'You heard no rumours, no palace gossip, before this happened?' he asked. 'Noted nothing untoward?'

Hrostir shook his head. ‘Nothing, Lord,’ he said. ‘The Lord Dan-Tor is away somewhere with a small escort, I believe; but he never celebrates the Festival anyway, as you know. Everything else was normal. Everyone was full of preparations for the Festival as usual.’

Following this, there was little any debate could yield but conjecture and concern, and after a while this became abundantly clear.

‘We’re just getting bogged down,’ said Eldric, eventually.

He stood up and paced over to the window. The spring sun was warm and pleasant on his face. He could see some of his guests on the lawn below performing an impromptu and accelerating round dance to the accompaniment of a pipe and drum. Others stood watching, encouraging the dancers with clapping hands and shouts. Laughter filled the air as the dance headed inexorably towards chaos. ‘We must leave for Vakloss immediately,’ he said after a long pause. Then, catching Darek’s eye, ‘Or at least, first thing tomorrow. We can talk on the way and perhaps clarify our thoughts further, but we’ll neither learn nor achieve anything until we ask the King directly why he’s done this.’

* * * *

The Lord Eldric’s castle was not Anderras Darion. It was a fine building raised with great skill and understanding, but though much younger than Anderras Darion, it looked older despite the Festival decorations currently adorning it. Its crenellations and corners had been smoothed and rounded by countless years in the cold, harsh winter winds that blew across Fyorlund, and its stone walls were pitted and blotched with lichen. Thick ivy clambered relentlessly up most of the towers, actually reaching the roofs of some of the smaller ones.

A lesser building would have seemed to be decaying but, like its Lord, the castle had a quiet, solid dignity, showing only slightly the impairments of old age, and demonstrating a robust grip on life and a capacity for continuing for some time to come.

Commander Varak stood on one of the lower levels of the castle watching the four Lords and their party dwindle into the distance as the dawn sun broke through a streaky troubled sky and filled the scene with long obscuring shadows. Idly he loosened a piece of damp moss from a joint in the top of the wall he was leaning on and flicked it over the edge to fall erratically through the early morning air into the dried moat below. Screwing up his eyes he peered into the distance, but the new light, with its harsh contrasts, had swallowed his last view of the pennants of the entourage.

He stood up and cleared his throat as if about to speak. It was a characteristic sound, much imitated by the cadets – when he was well out of hearing. Like the Lord Darek he was thin and wiry, but his movements were brisker and more precise than the Lord’s.

Varak was a classical example of a High Guard Commander. His subordinates both feared and loved him and the loyalty he received from them he passed unstintingly to his Lord. He lived a hard, spartan life and expected the same from his men, though it was a point of honour with him that he would never ask of them what he would not do himself.

If he had a weakness it was that he could be too rigid and narrow in his thinking and reluctant to change his ideas once they had been established. It was this rigidity that was making itself felt at the moment, as the conflicting loyalties of his Lord affected him.

The King’s action in suspending the Geadrol was without precedent, and presented problems that even he, a simple soldier, as he liked to think of himself, could see. The Lords swore their Oath of Fealty to the People and to the King as their Protector, ruling through his Lords in Geadrol. Now the King had

suspended the Geadrol, by what right did he rule? Where then should the Lords place their loyalty?

He was not however disposed to dwell on these problems. They were beyond any action he could take. If he'd been asked, he'd have told the Lords that they'd only find out what was happening by asking the King to his face; but he hadn't been asked, and it had taken them half a day to see the obvious as a result. He cleared his throat and frowned a little at his own insubordination.

Turning away from the battlements, he pulled his tunic straight and brushed from his arms the grit that his leaning had lifted from the wall. Thus did Eldric's castle shrink.

Walking through the castle he reviewed the task ahead of him. It might have taken Eldric some time to see the obvious, but he had shown his old military instinct at the very outset.

Following Hrostrir's news at the First Feast, he had told Varak to find the old plans for removing the entire household to the mountain stronghold. Varak's surprise had shown.

'Have a quick look at them, Varak. Just refresh your memory. See if there are any obvious improvements needed.'

His manner had been apparently offhand, but he had spoken in the Battle Language, something he had not done since the Morlider War, except on formal occasions. It was an involuntary action and Varak had been both moved and disconcerted.

He paused as he walked along a balcony overlooking the hall where most of the Festival Feasts had been held. The dawn light was growing stronger and seeping into the room, illuminating the servants who were just starting to clear the remains of the Final Feast.

Watching them he saw that one or two were still a little the worse for drink, and quite a lot of whispering and giggling rose up to greet him. Most of it seemed to come from the direction of the north wall where two men were staging a mock sword fight with some bedraggled boughs of blossom. Inevitably one of them lost his balance and, as he sought to recover it, he bumped into the Shrine. The impact was slight but an abrupt and unexpected silence fell over the room and the man, suddenly sobered, hastily inspected the Shrine for damage. His friends gathered round, anxious at this inadvertent assault on one of their Lord's treasured personal artefacts.

Varak shook his head knowingly, and allowed himself a brief smile. He was about to turn away when the little cluster broke up suddenly, leaving the original culprit isolated and reaching awkwardly inside the Shrine to adjust something. As they stepped back, several of the servants scribed a circle over their hearts with extended forefingers. The ancient Sign of the Ring. Voices reached up to Varak in muffled alarm.

'The fourth figure . . .'

Varak started. The hidden figure of Ethriss must have been jolted loose and fallen into view. He found his own right hand reaching up to echo the responses he had just seen and he restrained it only with an effort. Stepping back from the balcony rail, he cleared his throat in some embarrassment at having fallen victim to such a superstition. Then, sternly, he brought his mind back to the more urgent matters left to him by his Lord.

The casual instruction of a few days ago had just been made chillingly purposeful. Prior to leaving, Lord Eldric had given him quite specific orders.

'Commander, while I'm away at Vakloss I want you to move the entire household to the mountain

stronghold. It's just an exercise of course, but everyone will need shaking up a little after the Festival; there's far too much inclination to turn a seven day celebration into a fourteen day one. My fellow Lords will be doing the same, and we'll see who's managed the most effectively when we return. Probably in a couple of weeks.'

Varak had saluted.

'No questions, Commander?' Eldric asked.

'None, Lord,' Varak replied, his eyes exposing the lie.

'Good.' Eldric nodded gratefully. Then again, in the Battle Language. 'I rely on you absolutely in this matter.'

Into our mountain strongholds like rebels, was Varak's first thought, but it passed almost immediately, to be replaced with a genuine regret.

Eldric's an old man, he thought reproachfully. He shouldn't have to deal with things like this. And those other three aren't much use. Well, Arinndier's all right, but the other two . . . He made a contemptuous gesture with his right hand. Thank the Guardians this house kept the old values alive. Kept a proper High Guard, well trained and disciplined. True, Arinndier kept his up to scratch, but he could not understand how someone like Lord Darek, with his quiet shrewdness, could join in the current trend to turn High Guards into ceremonial rather than combat troops.

No one threatens us, went the specious wisdom. A bit of discipline's good for the lads, but no need to risk them in mountain training, patrolling in Narsindal, doing endless tedious duties at the bleak fortress of Narsindalvak . . .

The arguments rattled irritably in his head. It was all wrong; he felt it in his bones. Darek's High Guards in their yellow liveries looked like a bunch of spring flowers, and Hreldar's beggared description with their multi-coloured liveries and braids and laces. A good breath of mountain air would blow them on their backs, let alone a *real* training exercise.

Then, the unusual introspection and his consideration of the inadequacy of the High Guards of two such important lords, seemed to shake loose many old thoughts, and stray pieces fell into place to give him a sudden fearful insight.

The King had long since stopped The Watch – the rotation of the various High Guards as duty garrison at the great tower fortress of Narsindalvak. For generations they had maintained a continuous watch over Narsindal, both from the tower itself and through their regular patrols. Now that was no more! True, the conditions in Narsindal were invariably appalling, and no patrols in Varak's memory had ever seen Lake Kedrieth because of the mists that surrounded it and the ever-changing shape of the marshes that marked its edges. However, the patrols had kept the men in good fettle and, although they had grumbled, it had given them a feeling of continuity with the great traditions of the past, and a certain dignity.

But Varak suddenly saw the end of The Watch and the deterioration of the High Guard as part of a corruption. No one these days could believe in Sumeral and his defeat by the four Guardians and the Great Alliance, or that he might one day rise again from the depths of Lake Kedrieth. That was foolish superstition. But Narsindal was indisputably a bad place. Men had been lost there regularly. Its predominant inhabitants, the Mandrocs, were bad enough: man-like, dog-snouted savages, but there were worse things lurking in those perpetual mists.

Varak shivered slightly. He had taken many patrols into Narsindal in the past and felt in his bones that

myths or no, it was wrong not to keep watch on it. Somewhere in those old stories was a hard kernel of truth that was not wisely ignored.

The word corruption lingered in his mind, and Tirke's outburst at the First Feast rose before him – Dan-Tor, that devil's spawn out of Narsindal, has our King strung like a puppet.

Then old habits reasserted themselves. These were not problems he could do anything about other than speak his piece when the time came. He pushed them aside vigorously, straightened up, and strode off down the sun dappled corridor, the echoes of his clicking heels hanging in the air like dust motes.

Chapter 13

Hawklan enjoyed the remainder of his long journey through the mountains, despite some of the leg-wrenching slopes he had to contend with. On more than one occasion he chose to leave the path to climb some nearby peak, just for the sake of sitting quietly in the rich stillness and calm that the ancient rocks exuded. Gavor too seemed to be in his natural habitat, spending most of his time gliding in wide circles high overhead.

They met no other travellers, but Hawklan gradually learned of the many plants and creatures that discreetly thrived there. Only the little brown birds occasionally disturbed their peace. Hawklan would see Gavor spiralling silently downwards towards some rocky slope or cluster of vegetation, then one of the birds would burst alarmingly from cover and fly rapidly into the distance, its wings whirring peculiarly.

'I don't know how they can fly so fast,' was Gavor's predominant comment. 'Or how they know I'm coming.'

At such times, Hawklan felt impelled to look again at the small burden he was carrying. It was unchanged; no sign of either stiffness or decay. Dead and yet not dead. It felt almost as though the tiny body had been temporarily vacated – left empty for some reason. He shared Gavor's puzzlement.

Before he left the mountains, they offered him one last gift, just as they had done at the beginning of his journey.

He was nearing the top of a long steep slope which led towards a high ridge. Perspiring freely in the warm spring sunshine, he sat down on a rock and looked back at the green valley he had spent the morning clambering out of.

I can see why so few Orthlundyn actually get round to making this trip, he thought ruefully, massaging his legs. But he still felt no urge to return, only the urge to continue moving forward.

Gavor's fruity chuckle interrupted his reverie.

Turning, he saw that his friend was sitting on a small outcrop of rock at the top of the ridge. 'Come on, dear boy, do hurry up,' came the provocative cry. 'My legs are getting tired standing waiting for you.' He danced up and down waving his wooden leg as if to ease a cramp. Hawklan looked at him malevolently, but did not answer. Then, levering himself to his feet, he started up the last part of the slope. Gavor chuckled again.

When at last he reached the top of the ridge, Hawklan found it was broad and grassy, and he paused to revel for a moment in the cool breeze that was rising up from the other side. Gavor glided down to greet him.

'Come along, dear boy, come along. Don't dawdle. Come and see your first view of the Decmilloith of Riddin.'

Hawklan followed Gavor across the springy turf.

Just as, days ago, he had suddenly seen a great swathe of Orthlund spread out before him, now he saw Riddin. The view burst on him after he had walked a little way past the top of the grassy knoll. He continued forward until he came to the edge of a cliff which fell away suddenly in a sheer drop.

Riddin looked very different from Orthlund. It had forests and farmlands like Orthlund and it had a harmony of its own, but it was not the Great Harmony of Orthlund: it looked busier, more hectic. It was criss-crossed by hedges and ditches, and roads – so many roads and pathways that Hawklan could hardly believe his eyes. Then there were countless isolated houses and little villages, far more than in Orthlund. He felt vigour and excitement in the harmony of Riddin and wondered what its people would be like. He stood motionless for several minutes, then he opened his arms wide as if to embrace the whole country. Gavor spread his great shining wings in a similar gesture and, laughing out loud, launched himself into the void.

For the remainder of that day, the track they had been following led them down through softer, rolling countryside, becoming wider as they passed farms and the occasional small cluster of houses. Such few people as they saw looked at them uncertainly, but responded pleasantly to Hawklan's smile and greetings.

Finally, rounding a bend at the top of a small slope, they found themselves looking down on the road that would lead them north to Altfarran and the Gretmearc. Hawklan hesitated.

'What's the matter, dear boy?' said Gavor, sensing his uncertainty. Hawklan did not reply.

Gavor followed his gaze down to the road. 'Ah,' he said after a moment. 'Too many people, eh?'

Used to the scarcely frequented roads of Orthlund, and following his long journey in pleasant isolation, Hawklan felt a momentary reluctance to join the people he could see on the road below. Gavor flapped his wings, ruffling Hawklan's hair and ending his brief reverie. 'Wait until it gets busy, dear boy,' he said brusquely. 'You'll soon find out what a crowd is.'

'Thank you, Gavor,' Hawklan replied, with heavy irony, as he started forward. 'I really don't know where I'd be without your support and encouragement.' Gavor laughed gleefully.

After a little while however, Hawklan began to find the presence of so many other people as interesting, if not as restful, as the quiet of the mountains. People were riding and walking, some alone, some in groups, some empty-handed, some carrying packs on their backs or on their heads or in panniers. There was an indescribable variety of carts – handcarts, carts pulled by horses and other creatures, even ornate wheeled houses, something that Hawklan had never even heard of. At each junction in the road, people joined and people left, but on the whole the road became busier.

'It's not Orthlund is it, Gavor?' concluded Hawklan after a while.

'Ah, dear boy,' said Gavor wistfully. 'There's nothing like Orthlund in the entire world. It's a special place. Very special. But the odd trip away will make you appreciate it a little more.'

Generally the many travellers on the road were friendly and courteous, although occasionally the air would be rent by abuse and vilification as the sheer press of numbers, where the road took them through a village or past some small roadside market, resulted inevitably in friction between some of the many disparate travellers.

'You great donkey!'

Hawklan started at the sound of an impact and the none-too-dulcet cry that immediately followed it; the proximity of both leading him to imagine he was in some way responsible for the former and the intended recipient of the latter.

Turning, he saw that the owner of the voice was a small, stout old woman. She was brandishing an angry fist at a youth who, despite the fact that he towered head and shoulders over her, was retreating and raising his hands defensively. Incautiously, Hawklan smiled at the sight, just as the old lady caught his eye.

‘You,’ she shouted, making a commanding gesture, ‘you with the crow on your shoulder. Stop grinning and give a hand with this.’

Gavor’s head shot round as if he had been stung, and looking over the top of Hawklan’s head he glowered at the old woman.

‘What did she call me?’ he muttered disbelievingly under his breath.

‘Shush,’ said Hawklan urgently, as his legs involuntarily marched him towards the beckoning woman.

The cause of the disturbance was a slight collision between the woman’s cart and the youth’s, which had left them with their wheels locked together. Looking at the two protagonists, Hawklan had reservations about the old woman’s immediate declamation of the youth’s guilt but, exchanging a quick look of understanding with him, he decided not to pursue the matter.

It took only a few minutes to separate the carts, after which the youth was summarily dismissed and Hawklan conscripted to hold the horse’s head while the woman checked her load.

‘You on your way to the Gretmearc?’ she cried, from the far side of the cart.

‘Yes,’ replied Hawklan, stroking the horse’s head. It was a fine, strong-spirited animal that radiated well-being.

‘I’m going part of the way myself,’ said the woman, bustling back purposefully to take the horse from Hawklan. ‘The horse is rested now so you can ride with me. It’ll save your legs. And you won’t mind, will you, horse?’ She patted the horse’s cheek solidly and Hawklan felt the warmth of the animal’s response. ‘Besides,’ she continued, glancing up at Gavor. ‘It’ll be someone for you to talk to. You must get lonely with only your pet for company.’

‘Hawklan . . .’ began Gavor menacingly.

‘Oh,’ cried the woman. ‘It talks.’

‘*It!*’ hissed Gavor under his breath. Hawklan threw him a pleading glance and with wilful awkwardness Gavor hopped over his head and on to the shoulder farthest away from the woman. ‘In deference to our position as visitors here, Hawklan,’ he whispered, ‘I shall refrain from entering into any badinage with this old . . . horse-person, but do at least advise her that this *it* is a *he*. I can assure you I am anything but neuter.’

Hawklan smiled and, reaching up, tapped Gavor’s beak. ‘Don’t worry, I’ll defend your honour,’ he said quietly. ‘But I don’t think you and the lady are going to get on too well. Give your feet a rest.’ And Gavor was gone, his powerful wings lifting him high into the spring sky.

The woman watched him as Hawklan climbed up onto the cart. ‘I hope I didn’t frighten it,’ she said anxiously. ‘It’ll come back won’t it?’

Hawklan nodded. 'Don't worry. He'll be all right.'

The woman grunted then flicked the reins gently. 'Where are you from?' she asked as the horse started forward. Hawklan settled himself to the cart's gently swaying rhythm.

'Orthlund,' he answered.

She looked at him in some surprise. 'Oh,' she said. 'We don't get many Orthlundyn over here. Quiet kind of a place I'm told.'

Hawklan glanced at the busying traffic all around them, and nodded. 'Quieter than this, for sure,' he said.

The old woman laughed pleasantly. 'You shouldn't travel the Altfarran Road if you want peace and quiet,' she said. Then she clucked at her horse, and fell silent.

'You're not going to the Gretmearc?' Hawklan ventured.

'Bless you, no,' the woman replied. 'I'm taking some things up to my sister's. She lives just this side of Altfarran.' Then, after a pause, 'Mind you, I might look in there. It's a long time since I've had a good wander round, and I might find something for the Line's celebration.'

The Line, it transpired, was her local Muster group, and the celebration was an annual event in honour of its founding.

'Really,' she confessed confidentially, 'no one knows when any of the Lines were founded. It's just an excuse for a party and a bit of showing off.' Then she laughed again. 'Mind you,' she added, more seriously, 'we might have the Ffyrst with us this year.'

'Ffyrst?' queried Hawklan.

The woman's look of surprise returned. 'Urthryn,' she said, and then, casting her eyes upwards. 'I forgot. You Orthlundyn don't have a Ffyrst do you? Or a King?' She shook her head. 'I really don't know how you manage over there without someone in charge.'

It was a question that Hawklan could not begin to answer. 'We just look after each other,' he said, vaguely, but the words sounded oddly inadequate as a measure of the great respect that each Orthlundyn held for his neighbour's right to pursue his life unhindered yet not uncared for.

'Horses for ploughs, horses for battle,' she said, shaking her head and frowning slightly, her tone suddenly more serious. 'It's not really for me to talk. Your people pulled their weight when the Morlider were here, and that's not forgotten, but a people need someone to lead them. What would you do if someone like the Morlider suddenly attacked you out of the blue? Started destroying your farms and your homes? Slaughtering your friends? Fight them one at a time?' She looked at him purposefully.

Hawklan offered no comment. The thoughts were dark and grievously at odds with both the bright day and the motherly figure sitting next to him. They had never occurred to him, but something deep seemed to move inside him. The woman continued. 'Still, as I said, it's none of my business how you run your country. You were good neighbours when you were needed.' Then, looking at him appraisingly, 'Besides, you're a fighting man, I can see that. You know you've got to have someone in charge, don't you? However you pick them. We choose our councillors and they choose the Ffyrst – first among equals. Up in Fyorlund they've got their King Rgoric and their . . . what is it? Geadrol?' Her voice tailed away and she sighed. Hawklan felt her mood slip into sadness.

'What's the matter?' he asked, partly from concern, partly to lead the woman away from this oddly

disturbing topic.

The woman shrugged. 'Nothing,' she said. 'Just mentioning Rgoric reminded me of Urthryn's lass, Sylvriss. I was at their wedding, you know. Head over heels with Rgoric she was, and he with her. They were so happy. But . . .'

Her reminiscence was interrupted by Gavor who dropped out of the sky onto Hawklan's shoulder, making her start.

'There's some kind of commotion along the road behind us,' he said softly.

'Commotion . . .?' began Hawklan, but before he could continue, he caught a distant sound. It was peculiar – like a single word being shouted by different people one after the other. He turned to the old woman to ask her what it might be, but she too was craning her head to catch the faint sound.

Then, abruptly, she turned away from the sound and roared, 'Muster!' in the opposite direction. Hawklan winced at the force of her voice, but noted that the call was immediately taken up by others. It was soon echoing faintly along the road ahead of them.

'Haha! First Hearer again,' the woman said, smiling broadly, and before Hawklan could ask what was happening she clicked at the horse and it negotiated its way over to the side of the road and stopped.

'Come along young man, down you get, and sharp about it,' she said briskly, and with remarkable sprightliness she jumped down from the cart and signalled Hawklan to join her.

'What's happening?' he managed eventually, as the woman positioned herself in front of him and gazed back along the road, screwing up her eyes in an attempt to see further.

'Muster,' she said, without elaboration. No wiser, Hawklan looked around and noticed that the road had been almost completely cleared. What had been a busy, rambling crowd seemed to have been swept to the sides of the road as if by a great brush. It needed no heightened perception to see now who were Riddinvolk and who were strangers, for the crowd fell clearly into two parts. Those, like the old woman, standing purposefully at the front, forming a friendly but complete barricade, and those like himself, standing somewhat bewildered at the rear. For all its informality, it was an impressive display of discipline.

'Muster?' Hawklan inquired.

'It'll be here soon,' she said with a beaming smile of pride lighting up her round red face. 'Won't be long. Ever seen it before?'

Hawklan shook his head.

'Most strangers find it very exciting,' the old woman continued. She rubbed her hands together gleefully. 'I do. Even now, after all this time.' She patted her horse's nose. 'Not as good as riding in it though, is it, old friend?' she said quietly.

The good-natured firmness of the Riddinvolk, together with natural curiosity, silenced any reproaches from visitors about this unexpected interruption to their progress, and an unsought stillness fell over the waiting crowd. It was punctuated only by the odd figure scuttling rapidly across the road to seek a better vantage point.

Then the sound of cheering and shouting reached them and, presaged by a fearful rumbling which grew in intensity until many of the strangers began to look alarmed, the Muster burst upon them.

Hawklan estimated there must have been about sixty riders, although he had little time to do more than gasp and take an involuntary step backwards. He had an impression of crouched bodies – men and women both – urging themselves forward, of long heads and necks reaching out, of flying hair and manes, of gleaming eyes and elated and determined faces. And of noise: the noise of hooves striking the hard ground, of riders shouting, tackle rattling, and the crowd shouting and cheering. He noted that even the old lady was bobbing up and down with excitement, and clapping her hands.

Then, as suddenly as they had arrived, they were gone, and a shuffling silence descended on the watchers as they stood uncertainly in the settling dust. For a moment it was as if the force that had just swept through them had taken their will to move for its own need.

The old lady turned round. ‘There you are, young man,’ she said. ‘Only a small group, but at full gallop on a training run. And going well too,’ she added with a knowing condescension. ‘What did you think of that?’ She did not wait for an answer, but dug her elbow in his ribs. ‘Something to tell the folks back home, eh?’

Hawklan agreed readily. The whole thing had made a deep impression on him. The skill of the riders in travelling at such a speed along the comparatively narrow road, so close to onlookers. And the discipline and speed of the locals in clearing the busy road ahead. He found that his heart was beating rapidly and powerfully, and his breath was fast and shallow.

What a formidable fighting force, he thought. They must be able to handle all but the most highly disciplined infantry. Then almost immediately he wondered where such a thought could have come from. He had an unnerving sensation that, more and more, such dark and strange images were gathering at the edges of his mind.

Who am I? he thought, unexpectedly.

Chapter 14

In a small clearing in a wood about a day’s ride to the north of Pedhavin, the bright spring sunshine shone down on a group of young men. Some of them were cleaning weapons or tackle, and one or two were reading, but the majority were lounging about idly.

Their camp was clean and orderly as were the men themselves, but from their various postures and the vigour, or lack of it, with which those working pursued their tasks, it was apparent that they had been there for some time and, despite the spring weather and the pleasant ease of their location, they were ceasing to relish an enforced leisure.

‘Has he told you when we’re going to move yet, Jal?’ one of them asked, brushing an insect off his nose as he stared straight up into the blue sky.

The recipient of this question was a well-built individual sitting on a grassy knoll and leaning against a tree. He had fair curly hair and a round, rather innocent face. Looking up, he eyed his questioner narrowly and then furrowed his brow as if searching his memory.

‘I make that the . . . twenty-fourth time you’ve asked that question in two days, Idrace,’ he said after a while.

‘Twenty-fifth,’ came a voice from somewhere. Someone else clapped leisurely and Jaldaric raised an acknowledging hand.

‘It could well be,’ he conceded wearily. ‘It could well be. But the answer’s still the same.’

The questioner levered himself up and leaned on one elbow. He was dark-haired, with a hooked nose and powerful deep-set eyes. 'Well then,' he said, with exaggerated shrewdness, 'that means it must be at least two days since you asked him about it, mustn't it, Captain?'

Jaldaric looked round idly for something to throw at his tormentor, but finding nothing suitable, he stood up awkwardly and stretched. Orthlund was a beautiful place, but this inaction was beginning to be soul-destroying.

'Thank you, Idrace,' he said, with mock formality. 'I shall attend to my lack of diligence immediately. I shall also retail your anxiousness faithfully to the Lord Dan-Tor. I'm sure he'll be most impressed by your eager zeal.'

'No, no,' Idrace replied magnanimously. 'I insist you retain the credit for yourself, Captain.'

Jaldaric dropped grass on his friend's head. 'Where is he then?' he asked.

'Usual place,' said Idrace, shaking his head and indicating the direction with a flick of his thumb as he resumed his supine vigil under the spring sky.

Jaldaric brushed the grass and leaves from his tunic and, circling his shoulders to relieve their stiffness, set off down a narrow winding track.

It was in fact four days since he had inquired about when they would be breaking camp and continuing their southward journey, and he judged that another careful inquiry now would not be too presumptuous.

Normally he did not have any great problem in dealing with the Lord Dan-Tor, though opinions among the Fyordyn generally were divided about him, often quite markedly. At one extreme, he was the King's saviour and good right arm, cutting through old and fusty ways and leading Fyorlund into a newer, brighter future. At the other he was a destroyer of long, cherished and valuable traditions, and a man whose influence on the King was wholly pernicious.

For Jaldaric himself, there was, admittedly, some quality in the man that made him feel uneasy. Something he felt he could not see, like a shadow in the corner of his eye. But as a Captain in the High Guard, seconded to Palace duty, he had to judge the man by his actions, and hitherto, in his day-to-day dealings, he had found the Lord pleasant, courteous, clear in his orders, and generally thoughtful about the men and animals. He'd served under far worse in his time.

After his lone visit to that village though, Dan-Tor had changed. He made a single statement on his return, and the tone of its transmission had brooked no questioning. 'Our journey is delayed, perhaps even abandoned. We must wait here until I receive news.' Since then he had become quieter, even abruptly irritable on occasions. And he had taken to spending most of his time away from the camp, deeply preoccupied, just staring out over the countryside.

Jaldaric made a leisurely progress along the narrow path. It took him through soft burgeoning grasses and under natural arbours decked in scented blossoms. All around him birds were singing, and he could hear small animals scurrying away busily at his approach. Eventually it took him out of the dappled shade of the trees and onto a small rocky outcrop overlooking the rolling Orthlund countryside.

He paused for a moment to allow his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness, then following the path around the rocks, he came to the place where the Lord was most usually to be found. Today was no different. The tall, lank, figure was standing motionless against the skyline, looking northwards. Not for the first time, Jaldaric wondered how the man could stand so still for so long.

‘Captain?’

Dan-Tor’s voice made him start. He had not sought to approach secretly, but his training made him both naturally silent and aware of his gait and he had made no noise that he was aware of.

‘Lord,’ he replied. ‘Am I disturbing you?’

The figure turned slowly and looked at him for a moment, then a brilliant white smile cracked open the lined brown face. ‘Not at all, Captain,’ he said. ‘You’ve been remarkably patient. I presume you’ve come to ask when we’ll be restarting our journey.’

Jaldaric let out a discreet sigh of relief and returned the smile. ‘Indeed, Lord. The men are getting a little . . .’

‘. . . bored.’ Dan-Tor finished the sentence. ‘And you’re not finding it too exhilarating yourself are you?’

Jaldaric avoided the question. ‘Perhaps if you could tell us what happened in the village, Lord, it might help,’ he offered. Dan-Tor did not reply, but turned away to look northwards again.

There was a long silence. Jaldaric did not wish to press his question and, having intruded, was loth to move away without being formally dismissed.

‘Don’t be deceived by this land, Captain,’ Dan-Tor said unexpectedly. ‘Nor by the people.’

‘Lord?’

There was another long pause, then, ‘Terrible things have come from this land in the past, Captain, and may yet again in the future.’

‘Lord?’ Jaldaric repeated, stepping forward. ‘I don’t understand you. This is a beautiful country, and such people as we’ve met have been . . .’

Dan-Tor’s hand went up sharply and Jaldaric fell silent. ‘You have neither my sight nor my knowledge, Captain,’ he said, his tone suddenly sharp. Jaldaric waited cautiously. Once again, the Lord’s mood had changed abruptly. ‘This land is not what it seems, and its people are deep, devious, and dangerous.’

Dangerous to whom? The suddenness of the thought caught Jaldaric by surprise and only a conscious effort prevented him from speaking it out loud.

‘Set the men to their drills,’ Dan-Tor continued curtly. ‘Remind them that but a few years ago they’d have been serving in The Watch at Narsindalvak and that would have been a most salutary lesson in boredom and futility for them. We’ll be here until I receive news. It may well be some time. Dismiss.’

‘Lord.’

Chastened, Jaldaric saluted and set off back down the narrow track. Once in the shade, he scowled slightly at the rebuff he had just received. The Lord’s comment however, was apt. He would indeed have to bend his mind to keeping his men properly occupied. This idleness was becoming corrosive. It was only a matter of time before the Lord’s arbitrary irritability began to affect them all and then there *would* be problems, so far from home.

As Jaldaric walked away, Dan-Tor fixed his gaze implacably northwards. The interruption had irritated him. Like some buzzing insect. What did these so-called soldiers know of waiting, of boredom? Boredom. A fitting word for this merest blink of a penance. What word existed to measure the unending

eons he had been bound in the darkness?

He grimaced. Orthlund was a fearful place, and lingering here with matters unsettled irked him immeasurably, clouding his thoughts and judgement and twisting like an ancient knife in his heart. Especially so near to that sinkhole of a castle, Anderras Darion.

Anderras Darion. Twenty years open and he had not known; his spies impotent in this accursed land.

But had He? What other eyes did He have?

Or had he, Dan-Tor, been sent like some expendable lackey into the darkness, to be His eyes because all others had failed? What tremor had He felt those twenty years ago? The implications made his flesh crawl.

A cloud moved in front of the sun, and his dark thoughts ebbed away slightly. At least his presence gave his birds their sight here. And wait he must, now. Wait until they told him of the binding of Hawklan by his servant at the Gretmearc. Then he could abandon his southward journey and return with his triumphant news to Narsindal.

At that very thought however, doubts surged in upon him. What train of consequences had he set in motion with his impulsive decision? Had this land blinded him to make him take such a risk?

Blinded and perhaps blighted.

Still, the deed was done. If Hawklan were not Ethriss, then no harm could arise. He was still an enigma, a man with a strange history and strange skills that could beyond doubt be used against Him in the fullness of time. He must be examined, perhaps even turned to the true way. Many before had been so persuaded, and been of great value, rising high in His service, not least himself.

But if he were Ethriss, what then? Ethriss awake would see all; would rouse the Guardians and sweep all before him more cruelly than before.

The chill horror of his Master's wrath pervaded Dan-Tor as he stood in the warm Orthlund sunlight.

And yet the trap, though new-made, was of an ancient and well-tried form. One of His designing in times gone. No one could see it for what it was without the insight of the Old Power, and certainly none could escape it without great skill in the use of the Old Power. No. The trap could not fail. It was subtle beyond any human imagining. And it would be well laid. His servant there was able and well skilled.

But is he? The doubt rankled relentlessly. Can he safely use the Old Power against such a prey? What if he is opposed by a powerful will? Will his paltry human frame and spirit not shatter under such a burden? Is he not already unsound?

Dan-Tor drew in a long hissing breath of rage as his thoughts took him on a seemingly perpetual and unbreakable cycle of elation and terror. What rewards would come to him who bound Ethriss for His pleasure? What horrors would be bestowed on him who jeopardized His intent through an impulsive whim?

The Lord gazed steadily northward, but his eyes were unseeing. His every fibre listened for the approach of his sinister flying messengers.

Chapter 15

Then they were there. Altfarran, where three rivers ended their tumultuous journeys from the mountains

and formed the swirling head of the River Endamar. And there was the Gretmearc; the massive, rambling market that sprawled either side of the river, its two halves joined by a huge, many levelled and ramshackle bridge which seemed to be permanently full of people, animals, and vehicles travelling in both directions.

It was a brilliant spring morning when Hawklan parted from the old woman but it was late afternoon by the time he arrived at the Gretmearc. He was quite tired, having tried to walk too quickly through the increasing crowds, but his heart lightened at the sight that greeted him. The Gretmearc was a blaze of colour and movement. Its tents and stalls and booths, its rambling buildings, its people, everything, flickering and shining in the sunshine. Its noises rose and fell like the sound of waves on a shore, and everywhere there were pennants and bunting and flags, countless flags. The flags of countries, of towns and cities and villages, of great houses and of individuals and companies, all cracking and fluttering noisily in the brisk breeze.

Although he had grown used to crowds and bustle on his journey after leaving the mountains, Hawklan found that the presence of so many people and so much noise and activity disorientated him a little at first. Gavor however, kept laughing raucously and flapping his wings.

‘Look at all those trees,’ he cried, indicating the forests fringing the market on the far side of the river. Hawklan did not understand immediately.

Gavor explained. ‘Where there are trees, dear boy, there are nests. Where there are nests, there are . . .’
‘. . . friends.’

Hawklan finished his sentence resignedly.

‘Exactly,’ confirmed Gavor, tapping his wooden leg in emphasis and anticipation.

Hawklan shook his head. ‘I should have recognized the tone of voice by now,’ he said. Then, sternly: ‘I haven’t come all this way to end up treating your deservedly pecked behind, Gavor. Just concentrate on looking for anything like that tinker brought with him.’ Gavor slumped sulkily.

Despite his tiredness, Hawklan began his search immediately, though as he began walking around the Gretmearc’s many aisles and walkways, he realized that his strange prior familiarity with places had been fading since he left the mountains and was now apparently gone. For a moment he felt uneasy, but his alarm soon passed in the bright sunshine and happy crowds.

All around him, people were shouting and peddling their wares.

‘Now, ladies, ladies. You know me. I’m always here. I wouldn’t . . .’

‘I’m not asking twenty for this. Not eighteen. Not even sixteen . . .’

‘Trust me. No, no. Don’t. Go and see for yourself. If you can’t find these same up the posh end at twice the price, I’ll . . .’

Jewellery shone and glittered; dishes and plates, apparently unbreakable, were rattled and clattered casually from skilled hand to skilled hand; clothes and ribbons were waved and flourished, held out into the sunlight and against bosoms for critical inspection.

Then, out of the din, ‘. . . the very finest crafted toys . . .’

Nearly dislodging Gavor, Hawklan looked round hastily for the owner of the voice. His eye lit on a small,

round ball of a man with a laughing face. He was behind a stall overflowing with all manner of children's toys on the far side of a crowded aisle on the level below where Hawklan was standing.

Not seeing a stairway near at hand, Hawklan followed what seemed to be the common practice and, climbing over the guard rail, swung down to the lower level.

As he reached the stall, the little man craned his head back and looked up at him with mock exaggeration. 'Yes, young man,' he began, a peculiar though not unpleasant nasal rasp in his friendly voice. 'Looking for presents for your children?'

'I've no children,' said Hawklan unthinkingly, caught by the little man's familiarity.

'Never mind, sir. A well set up lad like you, plenty of time. Perhaps something for the nephews and nieces?' He rolled round and riffled hastily through a mound of toys at the back of the stall. Turning back he brandished two ornate toy swords under Hawklan's nose and made a ferocious face. 'Morlider and Muster sets, sir. Always popular.' Then, prodding himself with one of the swords, 'Guaranteed harmless, sir. Gretmearc guaranteed,' he added significantly.

Hawklan, laughing at the man's antics, shook his head and looked at the bewildering array of toys displayed before him.

'Do you have any tiny dolls?' he asked. 'Walking dolls – soldiers perhaps?'

The little man's arms opened to indicate the miraculous justice of a fate that had brought Hawklan to this very stall, and rolling round once more to his multi-coloured stockpile he emerged with a small box.

Opening it delicately, he reached inside and produced a tiny figurine. Placing it on the wide counter he snapped his fingers, and the figure started to march.

'Expensive, sir,' came the little man's voice. 'I'll not deny that. But marvellous work, sir.'

Hawklan bent down and watched the tiny figure carefully. It was indeed a marvellous piece of work – walking up and down, as the tinker's had, even executing a little sword drill. But it was sincerely made, and without corruption. With mixed feelings he stood up and, thanking the stallholder, rejoined the crowd.

As the afternoon wore on he examined many articles on many stalls, but he found no hint of the corruption that the tinker's doll had borne. He soon learned that the toy seller's nasal accent was that of the permanent inhabitants of the Gretmearc. It stood out distinctly among the wide range of accents and dialects that filled the air incessantly. He noticed too that the locals talked louder and faster than anyone else, with a sharp and ready wit which could be very abrasive if they thought they were being trifled with. It surprised him a little at first that this accent should be so different from the singsong lilt of the Riddinvolk; then he remembered the old woman telling him that the Gretmearc itself was not technically part of Riddin but a separate, self-governing enclave.

He was a little disconcerted by the attention he himself attracted, with his commanding presence, his Black Sword and, not least, the still sulking Gavor on his shoulder. Only one person really troubled him however, a weasel-faced man who latched onto him as he was passing a weapons stall, and who kept making ludicrous offers for the sword.

Hawklan refused the man politely several times while Gavor slowly emerged from his sulk to watch the man's antics. Finally he whispered in Hawklan's ear, and at the man's next approach, Hawklan spun round, his cloak billowing, his green eyes blazing, and his hand on his sword hilt.

‘I’ll give you this sword where you’d least appreciate it if you don’t go away,’ he thundered.

Gavor, with his sense of the theatrical, hopped on to Hawklan’s head and spreading his wings wide so that he looked like some ferocious helm, hissed menacingly at the man, his black eyes glinting and his black mouth gaping wide.

The man stumbled backwards and fell over under the impact of this assault, then scrambling to his feet he fled into the crowd. There was laughter and scattered applause from nearby stallholders, and some jeering after the fleeing man.

One stallholder threw Hawklan a large piece of fruit as a token of appreciation. The weasel-faced man was obviously well-known. The incident cheered Gavor up considerably, though Hawklan was a little subdued by the effect of his own mock ferocity.

For some while longer he wandered around but, coming unexpectedly across one of the formal sleeping areas, he decided to abandon his search until the next day.

The cheapest and simplest section of the sleeping area was filled with open-sided shelters looking like great, wide-canopied mushrooms, each with a plain timber floor raised a little above the grass.

Hawklan flopped down into the first free space he saw, gratefully ate the fruit the stallholder had given him and, wrapping his cloak around himself, fell asleep almost immediately. Gavor cast a glance towards the distant trees then, after some hesitation, took up a post by Hawklan’s head. Soon, he too was apparently asleep, but to the keen-eyed, a glint of starlight could be caught in his shining black eyes from time to time.

Towards the middle of the night, Hawklan awoke, slightly alarmed, as if disturbed by some noise.

‘Sorry, dear boy,’ whispered Gavor apologetically. ‘Tummy rumbles. Must have missed a meal today.’ Hawklan’s face creased into a smile in the moonlight.

‘You never missed a meal in your life. It’s probably someone you ate. Some unsuspecting insect having its revenge.’

Gavor snorted, and Hawklan stretched himself carefully to avoid disturbing his neighbours. The air was punctuated by a hissing cacophony of snorts, whistles and wheezes and, lifting his head, he could see the area was completely full of sleeping people lying in every conceivable posture. Some were lying by the dying embers of an open stove that had been lit to protect them from the cold night air. Hawklan was glad of the cloak that Tirilen had found, which had kept him warm in the snows and cool in the hot sun.

He lay back and stared out at the sky. Most of the stars had been obliterated by a brilliant full moon that silvered the black void. He asked himself again what could have drawn him here so compulsively after twenty years of quiet contentment in Pedhavin. But no answer came. No reason, no logic took him from cause to effect. Just the drive that had said he must come here. Just the tinker’s voice. ‘At the Gretmearc at Altfarran. They have many such toys there.’ Toys! He shuddered at the memory of the prancing mannequin.

But what was he to do? All that he could do was look around. If he came across any sinister item such as those the tinker had sold, perhaps he would know what to do next. Would he have to trace these things back further to a more distant source? And then what? Who or what could be making such things, and why? And again, why was he being driven, or drawn towards them?

The thoughts tumbled to and fro in his mind, chasing one another around and around as he drifted in and

out of consciousness. He could not exorcise them, so he left them alone, letting them flit about as they wished. Eventually he fell into a deep and untroubled sleep.

The following day it rained. High grey clouds had blown in from the north, and they lingered over the Gretmearc to deposit their contents in a long steady soaking stream that showed every intention of staying for the day. Fires appeared in the mushroom-shaped shelters and other places, and most booths and stalls became drying centres for the squelching crowds. Hawklan remarked that although there was no conspicuous sign of anyone in authority over the Gretmearc, things seemed to get done with remarkable speed and efficiency.

‘Self interest, dear boy,’ remarked Gavor. ‘We’re some way north here, and the weather’s more often bad than good, so – keep the customers here by keeping them comfortable, and make a trade of it at the same time. These blighters pray for bad weather you know,’ he concluded with an airy wave of his wing enveloping a busy line of stalls.

‘I’d no idea you were so cynical, Gavor,’ replied Hawklan. Gavor pooh-poohed the suggestion.

‘Not cynical, dear boy. Wouldn’t dream of being cynical. It’s no different to the Pedhavin farmers sharing their crops with one another, or making Isloman their First Carver and then giving him food because he won’t be able to grow his own. Self interest. They want his carving and his knowledge, so they look after him. Same here. They need these people, so they look after them.’

Hawklan conceded the point suspiciously. He was certainly glad of the numerous opportunities he would have to get warm and dry if need arose.

Gavor however, was less enchanted. ‘This is ruining my feathers, dear boy. I’ll really have to ask you to excuse me. See you later.’ And then he was gone, in a flurry of feathers and spray, before Hawklan could speak.

In what promised to be a weary repetition of the previous day, Hawklan found himself wandering again through the myriad winding aisles and different levels of the Gretmearc, looking for something he hoped he would recognize. The rain streaked down in a steady, unremitting vertical stream, but in spite of it, and in spite of the grey leaden sky, the Gretmearc seemed to be as full and as busy as ever, and only marginally less cheerful than it had been the day before in the spring sunshine.

He pulled his hood further over his head and wrapped his cloak around himself. He was quite glad that the rain allowed him to do this as it made him feel less conspicuous and hid the Black Sword that had attracted such attention yesterday.

Towards the end of the day, he was beginning to reconsider the worth of the intuition that had brought him there. True, it had been an interesting journey over the mountains, and the Gretmearc itself was indeed well worth a visit – he promised himself he would persuade Loman to allow Tirilen to come here in the summer, or perhaps next year – but he had neither seen nor felt anything untoward once he had become used to the rather frenetic atmosphere of the place. An excess of it, he knew, would not be to his taste, but it seemed to be free from corruption. And all the goods he had looked at had been free from any taint that he could note. Many of them were poor in quality by the standards of Orthlund, but all were sincerely made and without malice. Indeed, some items had been made with a skill and inner knowledge that would have earned praise even in Orthlund. Bowls and glasses, pictures, tapestries, jewellery, carvings in many materials, objects brought from far distant places, things of great beauty and harmony.

The tinker must have lied, Hawklan concluded eventually. It was obvious on reflection. If the man knew the nature of the goods he was selling, and he surely must, then he would have no desire to have the

source of such articles discovered.

Rather disconsolately, Hawklan went back to the rest area. Sitting with his back to the central pillar, he stared for a long time out through the open walls at the still busy market.

Shortly before sunset, the rain stopped and the cloud broke a little. Evening was heralded by a deep red sky and the plip-plopping of the last raindrops falling off leaves and gutters. The air was fresh and cool and clean, and Hawklan could hear the gurgling of water running along in places he could not see. Gradually he felt his despondency ease a little.

Gavor appeared from nowhere, looking very pleased with himself.

‘Ah. My faithful body shield,’ said Hawklan, raising an eyebrow. Gavor was only slightly abashed.

‘Dear boy. I did keep an eye on you for a long time, truly. Then I met an old friend, and we fell to talking and . . .’

‘I know,’ said Hawklan. ‘Spare me the details. Your inability to resist the lusts of the feather is legendary. One of these days it’ll get you plucked. I thought this place would be too much for you as soon as you showed me those trees.’

Gavor contrived to look injured.

‘Dear boy. You really are too severe on an old friend. Truly I’ve had you in sight all day. Well . . . most of it anyway. And damp and dull it’s been I can tell you. I presume you’ve not found what you’re looking for, hence this odium stored for poor faithful Gavor.’

‘No. I’m afraid not, Gavor. I fear the tinker simply lied, and I’ve been following a hope not an insight. I’ll look again tomorrow and then we’ll set off for home.’

Gavor cocked his head on one side, but said nothing.

They shared a meal with a family that had come up from the far south of Riddin. The husband was a leatherworker whose skin was burnt and bronzed like the material of his trade, while his much younger wife was plump and homely. They had come to the Gretmearc to celebrate the wife’s acceptance into her husband’s Muster Line, and they had a contentment in one another that made Hawklan think he was already back in Orthlund.

They spent a pleasant evening talking about their respective homes and trades, and regaled one another with the things they had seen around the Gretmearc. Later, when the couple had lain down to sleep, Hawklan sat for a long time looking at the glow of the fire shining on their relaxed faces.

When finally he too lay down, he found it difficult to get to sleep in spite of being tired with the miles he had walked during the day and the quiet, warm and drowsy evening he had spent with the now sleeping couple. He looked out at the bodies lying all around, and at the occasional figures wandering through them, silhouetted against the lights of the Gretmearc. He listened to the mounting chorus of snores and whistles mingling with the dying crackling of the fires, and the occasional fall of a raindrop nudged out of its leafy hollow by a stray breeze.

At last however, as he worked out what part of the Gretmearc he would explore the following day, he fell asleep.

* * * *

He hardly seemed to have closed his eyes when they were open again and he was wide awake.

Something moved, only inches from his face. He blinked to clear his vision, and found himself looking into two baleful yellow eyes, each bearing an image of his own startled face and the glowing embers behind him.

Chapter 16

Eldric wrinkled his nose in distaste as the party rode into the elaborately paved square that fronted his house in Vakloss. Arinndier smiled at Eldric's involuntary commentary, and spurred his horse alongside. He mimicked Eldric's voice.

'Ha. Courtesy of Dan-Tor. Daytime at night no less.'

Eldric looked at him and smiled. 'You may mock me, young man,' he said, 'knowing I won't box your ears in front of the Guards. But these things are an abomination, and you know it.' He gesticulated contemptuously with his riding whip towards the globes that floated high above their heads and filled the square with a low humming and a bright blue-tainted white light.

Arinndier's face became more sober. The globes were one of the many changes that Dan-Tor had wrought in the City under the guise of improvements, but while the arguments in their favour seemed sound enough, there was an intangible quality about both the arguments and the improvements themselves that left him and many others decidedly uncomfortable.

'They do provide a better light than our old torches,' he offered tentatively.

'Better for what?' retorted Eldric without hesitation. 'When we were young, we'd no need to assault the night with this.' He gestured again with his whip. 'No deeds were done under the old torchlight that couldn't be done in broad daylight. These things make more and deeper shadows than the ones they dispel – like the man himself,' he added bitterly.

'Times change,' said Arinndier flatly. Both men sensed that the banter was on the point of turning sour. Eldric growled, and jumped down from his horse. Another voice chimed in.

'Haha! You two warriors bemoaning the passing of the old gloom again, eh?' It was Darek, who had just trotted up with Hreldar.

Eldric growled again. 'The old gloom, as you call it, served our fathers well enough. And many before them. And . . .' He stuttered to a halt as his friends began to laugh. Looking for a way to conclude the debate with a modicum of dignity and good humour he joined in the laughter and shouted, 'And it didn't make you look purple.'

As the others dismounted, he put his arm around his horse's neck, patted it affectionately and thanked it for carrying him so well and so faithfully. The horse lifted its head and shook it from side to side, its mane flying in the buzzing air. Eldric looked at the harsh shadow of the horse dancing over the ornate paving and shook his head sadly. Still, there were more urgent matters to hand.

'Come along, my friends,' he said soberly. 'We've much still to discuss and our horses must be tended first.'

They had not intended to reach Vakloss at night, but an urgency had pushed them forward and they had gained over half a day almost without realizing it. The early arrival however, did not affect their plans. In fact, it would give them an opportunity for further discussion in more comfortable and, Eldric regrettably had to concede, more secure surroundings.

They had talked on the journey, but although the Lords of Fyorlund did not hold themselves high above the people, the close proximity of their High Guards and servants both when riding and at their staging camps made it advisable to avoid the more delicate aspects of the King's suspension of the Geadrol. Whatever the outcome of their meeting with the King, it would not be aided by the gossip that could spring from some incautious remark by one of their retainers.

The four Lords were respected and experienced members of the Geadrol, each having served on many occasions as Gatherer, but they were at a loss to know how to act in the light of the King's unprecedented action. Such brief discussions as they had had on the journey had yielded no greater inspiration than those they had had at Eldric's castle, and they were still reluctantly obliged to concede that their only choice was to go to the King and ask him directly to justify his action before the Law.

It was not a prospect that any of them relished, least of all Eldric, as the most senior. He knew that Tirke's outburst at the First Feast not only represented the feelings of many of the ordinary people of Fyorlund, but contained a great deal of truth.

The King had been a sick and tormented man ever since he had returned from the Morlider War with Dan-Tor at his side. Eldric had originally, and for a long time, attributed the King's condition to a combination of misfortunes. To his coming too soon to the throne following the premature death of his father at a time of great unrest, the Riddinvolk just having sent requests for aid against the Morlider. To his subsequent marriage to Sylvriss, the beautiful daughter of Urthryn, the Ffyrst of Riddin, producing no heir to the throne.

But now? Now he did not know what to think. That Dan-Tor was becoming the real power behind the throne was indisputable. His boundless energy and considerable abilities had taken many of the King's burdens from his shoulders at times when illness had struck him down, but these were not returned subsequently. The King had less and less to do other than fret and ponder how it should be that he, in generations of Kings, should be so ill-fated both in his health and his lack of an heir. More and more he turned in on himself, becoming bitter and arbitrary in his whims.

That Dan-Tor was manipulating the King to slowly erode the power of the Geadrol might indeed be the case, but why? Eldric, so used to the patient, interminable listening and sifting of the Geadrol, so used to the counter-balancing weights of authority and responsibility, could not answer this, could not bring himself to believe that one man would want to take all authority to himself without regard to the responsibilities that such an achievement would bring. It was a diseased idea. It could only flit nervously at the edges of his mind, never coming clearly into the centre where he could face and deal with it.

* * * *

'He does come from Narsindal you know.'

Eldric spoke half to himself as the four men sat in his room. They had fallen into an uneasy silence and the memory of Tirke's outburst had returned to Eldric's mind and sent it spinning back across the years to the time when Dan-Tor had first appeared.

The four of them had been there, returning with the army from Riddin after the Morlider had finally been driven away. They had used the eerie, blasted Pass of Elewart for the sake of speed, instead of taking the much longer, though less daunting route through Orthlund. The Pass led them into Narsindal and they were obliged to travel along the edge of the mountains that formed its southern boundary for some considerable distance.

The prospect of an early return home after a victory well won however, prevented the dank cheerless atmosphere from damping their spirits too much, and the torchlight now dancing in the carvings on his

golden cup reminded Eldric of the clatter and rattle of horsemen and equipment colourful and cheerful even in the murk of Narsindal.

He felt a lump come into his throat as he remembered the young King Rgoric, who had fought with so much courage and led with such flair and inspiration, riding up and down the long train, talking with the men and cheering them on, especially the wounded. Laughter, that was what came to mind – laughter. What a King he could have been.

Then, quite suddenly, King Rgoric was laid low. A minor arrow wound, almost healed, unaccountably deteriorated and he developed a severe and intractable fever which none of his physicians could ease. The train halted and the gloom of Narsindal started to settle into the hearts of the men. The physicians were divided. To move the King was to risk his life, but to leave him in that place was equally hazardous. Then, while they were debating, a tall lank figure appeared from nowhere, claiming to be a travelling physician who had lost his way.

Intelligent, cultured, genial and patently relieved at having been rescued, he was readily accepted by both Lords and men, and was soon offering, discreetly, his advice to the physicians on the King's illness.

And that had been that. The King recovered and returned to Vakloss in triumph but, as Dan-Tor had intimated, the fever returned from time to time, and as he was the only one who seemed to be able to relieve it, the King's dependency on him grew and grew.

'What do you mean?' said Arinndier cutting into Eldric's thoughts.

'Dan-Tor,' Eldric replied. 'He came out of Narsindal.'

Arinndier shrugged. 'He was lost,' he said.

'Lost,' said Eldric viciously. 'Who gets lost in Narsindal? How can you wander into it accidentally? Twenty-odd years and I don't think any of us have asked the obvious question, we were so relieved when he cured the King. Where does he come from, and what in Ethriss's name was he doing in Narsindal in the first place?'

No one seemed inclined to offer an answer.

'What are you trying to say, Eldric?' asked Arinndier after a while. Eldric puffed out his cheeks and shook his head.

'I don't know, Arin,' he said. 'Too much seems to be happening for me to Gather it properly.' He paused as if reluctant to continue. 'But everything that's gone wrong in this country seems to stem from the arrival of Dan-Tor.'

'That could equally be due to the King's illnesses. They started at the same time,' said Darek, his legalistic mind seeking round the suggestion to test it.

Eldric nodded to concede the point, but his expression rejected it, and even Darek's thin face showed no conviction in his comment.

'True,' said Eldric. 'But I don't think any of us believe that, do we?' He looked round at his friends, tired and subdued from their journey and their fruitless debates. There was no denial. Eldric entwined his fingers and rested his head on them.

'Look at our country. It *has* changed. And for the worse. We're not just playing the old men's game, are we? – "Things were better when I was a lad." Things are actually deteriorating.' He sat back and,

holding up his hand, enumerated the points with his fingers. 'Narsindalvak deserted. No patrols along the borders or into the interior of Narsindal. Lords, The Watch was a tradition that had been unbroken for generations. Why are *we* so wise that we can discard it so lightly? Then we allow the King to make more and more decisions without proper debate in the Geadrol – all for seemingly good reasons – his poor health, whatever – but still without proper debate. And not twenty years after they saw actual combat, our High Guards are gradually being turned into . . .' He caught Hreldar's eye. This was no time to get into that debate. He left the comment unfinished.

'And little things like those damned globes. All manner of things that are supposed to make life easier for someone but always seem to bring some poison in their wake. A craft lost, and craftsmen embittered. Some stream choked or land blighted . . .'

He paused and closed his eyes. A chair creaked as Hreldar shifted his position. Eldric continued.

'It's as if something's been corroding our whole society – our whole way of life.' He opened his eyes and looked at Darek.

That's my inner feeling. I offer it without reasoned argument I admit but, for what its worth, I believe it. I can't see why it should be thus, but I can't chase it from my mind, and I can't chase that silly young man's words from my mind either. He called Dan-Tor that devil spawn out of Narsindal.'

Darek chewed his bottom lip pensively and looked down at his hands.

'I understand, Eldric,' he said slowly. 'I think we probably all feel something similar now you've put it into words. But without facts and proper argument, how can we convince anyone else? Who can we accuse, and of what? And who would we want to convince anyway? We're not intending to become rebels, are we?'

Eldric brushed the remark aside.

'That's a different matter, Darek, and you know it. Evison and the others in the north have a case that can be argued. They've been a bit hasty perhaps, but the King had no right to forbid extension of their High Guards when they were suffering from Mandroc raids.' He became brisk. 'Good grief. Between ourselves I think their reply was a model of moderation. I know what I'd have said if I'd had Mandrocs raiding my lands and the King had said, "No, you can't have more Guards."'

Arinndier smiled broadly and Darek's thin mouth allowed itself a slight curve. Only Hreldar, plump and jolly Hreldar, with his multi-coloured, laced and braided High Guards, did not smile.

'Mandrocs,' he said quietly. 'Narsindal again. Seeping through the mountains.' The atmosphere in the room changed perceptibly, as if the mists of that grim country had crept in and suffused the air. Eldric's bright torches did not seem to be able to dispel it. The men looked at one another in silence again. Into Eldric's mind came the picture of his family's Festival shrine and he felt himself approaching the edge of a great chasm. He leapt.

'Here are some facts then,' he said quietly. 'Dan-Tor came out of Narsindal. Our society has decayed since he came. Our King has been broken. Our great Geadrol has been progressively demeaned and now finally cast aside. And lastly, but perhaps most significantly, our ancient duties over Narsindal have been wilfully neglected and, for the first time in generations, our Northern borders are plagued by Mandroc attacks.'

He looked distinctly embarrassed, but grimly determined to continue.

‘I think . . . I think . . . that Dan-Tor is *of* Narsindal. I think that it’s his homeland.’ Then, hesitantly but distinctly, ‘I think . . . that he’s an agent of Sumeral . . . a herald of the Second Coming.’

Arinndier and Darek both looked up sharply. Only Eldric’s seriousness and self-imposed discomfiture stopped them from laughing outright, as at some dubious jest by their friend. Hreldar’s expression did not change. He nodded.

Arinndier tried to steer his friend away from this embarrassment. His tone was gently humorous.

‘Eldric. You’ve been reading Festival tales to the children. Sumeral, the Guardians, the Uhriel – fairy tales. Or, at best, some ancient grain of truth distorted and embellished over the years.’ He felt a twinge of unease. Recent happenings might have started to unhinge his old friend and it entered his mind that it might fall to him to confront the King if Eldric was indeed failing.

But Eldric did not look like a failing old man. The speaking of his fears seemed to have lifted years from him.

‘No, Arin,’ he said firmly. ‘I’m right. And the more I think of it, the more certain I become.’ He levelled a finger at Arinndier. ‘You’ve forgotten what that place used to feel like when we patrolled there. It’s not just miserable and cold – our own mountain training equipped us for that. It’s evil, and it always has been. Our old legends contain much more than a grain of truth I’m sure; and Dan-Tor is part of it.’

‘Rubbish,’ burst out Darek, with substantially less regard for his friend’s finer feelings than Arinndier. ‘I’ll go along with your intuition about Dan-Tor being a menace. But children’s ogres? Never.’ Repenting slightly, he became conciliatory. ‘Sumeral is probably a residual race memory of some old bandit chieftain, or some bad Mandroc trouble once. We’re rational people . . .’

‘No, Darek.’

Hreldar interrupted him, and laid a hand on his arm. ‘We’ve all been friends for a long time, and none of us would claim Eldric was gifted with a great imagination.’ Eldric smiled slightly and the uneasy tension his strange proclamation had produced, lessened a little. ‘It’s cost him dear to say what he’s just said and I’ll trust his intuition all the way. You’ve only to think back to your grandparents to remember how they thought about Narsindal and Sumeral.’

Darek scowled. ‘No, I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I respect your sincerity, Eldric, and yours, Hreldar, but what you’re saying is nonsense. If it were anyone else I’d say their brains had addled with being too long in the saddle. We’re an old people, strong in tradition and respect for the past. We’ve our legends and sagas, but we mustn’t confuse them with reality, for all our grandparents’ superstitions.’

To his surprise, Arinndier heard Eldric chuckle at this rebuke. He himself felt a little disorientated by this incredible turn in their discussion and was quite willing to let the others talk while he collected himself. At the moment he had to agree with Darek but, equally, he could not lightly put aside anything that Eldric said. Hreldar was right. Eldric had indeed precious little imagination or flare for the romantic, and it could not have been easy for him to say what he did.

‘I’ll give you some more facts then, Lawyer Darek,’ said Eldric, still chuckling. ‘Do you seriously maintain that our great body of literature – so coherent, so consistent – has come about just because of some old mountain bandit? Or our military traditions – so practical – the Riddin Muster, our High Guards – so well trained, so numerous – were intended to deal with a few marauding Mandrocs or Morlider?’

He waited until Darek was about to speak, then he leaned forward and spoke earnestly.

‘And do you seriously maintain that Narsindalvak, that enormous, towering fortress was built because of those same Mandrocs? Built in a manner we can’t begin to duplicate, I might add. No, Darek. Mandrocs are a nuisance, and have been a serious nuisance at times in the past, I’ll grant, but never a menace. We are what we are, and Narsindalvak is what it is, because long ago something massively evil came out of that place or . . . was imprisoned in it.’

He stood up. ‘Isn’t it part of our very Law? We’re the Watchers of Narsindal. The Protectors of the Orthlundyn and the Southern Lands. The Riddinvolk with their Muster guard the Pass of Elewart – the only other exit from Narsindal – and they kept their Muster well up to scratch even before the Morlider turned nasty. The more I think about it, the more I remember what Narsindal used to feel like, the more I’m convinced that something evil’s afoot, and when it’s ready it’ll come out of Narsindal, and if we do nothing, Fyorlund will fall like a rotten tree.’

His tone had suddenly become sombre, and when he sat down he looked grim. Darek’s face was tight and anxious. Arinndier recognized that he was exercising the discipline of the Geadrol, and thinking well before he spoke, but it was obviously proving an effort. He seized the opportunity.

‘Lords, let us be formal,’ he said firmly. The others bowed in acquiescence and some relief at this traditional call. The King might have suspended the Geadrol but its ways were sound and practical and should be applied here before they went to see the King, otherwise they would spend the evening in fruitless and wandering discussion, perhaps even acrimony, neither reaching conclusions nor making plans. Arinndier spoke again, clearly and steadily as at a First Gathering.

‘The Lord Eldric has raised for discussion the suggestion that the Lord Dan-Tor is an agent of an unknown enemy in Narsindal, and that he has worked assiduously to destroy our ability to stand as effective resistance to this enemy.’ He listed the points that Eldric had raised and finished equally formally. ‘Lord Darek, continue.’

Darek raised his hands as if to speak, then he lowered them, and folding his arms, leaned back in his chair and looked down pensively.

‘Lord Darek?’ Arinndier prompted.

Darek spoke very quietly. ‘I can only treat your Gathering as being acceptable.’ He paused reluctantly. ‘A childish memory has just reminded me that Sumeral had many human servants and they were granted immortality. I must add to your Gathering that Dan-Tor looks no different today than he did when we first saw him.’

Despite the discipline of the Geadrol, a flicker of distaste passed over his face.

‘Accepted, Lord Darek,’ said Arinndier. ‘Lord Hreldar, continue.’

Hreldar moved his right hand across his body from left to right, palm downwards, in a cutting motion. He had nothing to say.

‘Lord Eldric, continue.’

Eldric made the same gesture.

‘All the evidence is thus accepted as being adequate as First Face?’

They all nodded.

‘This being accepted then, we each know it is our duty to seek further evidence on this matter as

circumstances permit. I raise for discussion next, the matter of what action should be taken to protect the King, the Lords, and the people, should the King's accounting be found wanting or should his behaviour enhance this First Face evidence.'

It had been an inspired move by Arinndier to formalize their discussion after Eldric's extraordinary suggestion. In addition to preventing the night being wasted in angry argument, it also gave some shape, however apparently absurd, to the nameless and vague unease which all knew had been growing for many years. Now they could focus their attention on the immediate problem of what practical action they should take when they spoke to the King the following day and, still maintaining their formal procedure, they spent several hours talking away the frustration of the last few days by deciding their detailed tactics for the immediate future – insofar as they could foretell it.

* * * *

Outside, the Lord Dan-Tor's globes wavered a little in the night breeze, buzzing as they shone their garish light across the square. The heat from them twisted upwards and wasted itself into the night as if in fruitless homage to the stars whose light they hid. Occasionally a figure would walk across the square, and feeling exposed in the brightness would move rapidly for the darker shadows at the edges.

One such was an old torch-maker. He looked longingly at a stone he had caught with his foot, and then up at the globes, with an expression of distaste that verged on hatred. Past experience had taught him however, that the globes were too high and too hard to be damaged by such a missile.

His whole craft had been destroyed almost overnight by Dan-Tor's globes and he and his Guild, though provided for after a fashion, were left without any purpose. They knew, more than anyone, that the globes were an abomination, though few would listen to them. Their skills were ancient and yet they would die out totally within a few years. Their torches had filled the night streets of Vakloss with yellow, clear light, with softened shadows that blended with the moon and the starlight, and in which people could walk and talk in the reflective quiet of the night. He looked vainly for the moon and stars tonight, blasted out of existence by Dan-Tor's lights. And people skulked and talked in whispers these days.

And the waste! He shuddered. The torches held and used the very sunlight itself. But these things! What horrors fed them? He kicked the stone bitterly and turned towards his home. The word abomination did not seem strong enough for what he felt. With their very brilliance, the torches oppressed the city. It seemed to be full of foreboding these days.

* * * *

From a window high above, Eldric watched the man fade into the gloom. The four Lords had finished their discussion and were taking leave of one another when the lone figure had caught Eldric's eye.

Scarcely had the man disappeared when a group of liveried men marched in a tight formation across the square.

'Who are they?' he asked. 'I don't recognize that livery.'

The others joined him in the curved window alcove.

'I've no idea,' said Arinndier. 'But I'd like to know why they're marching in formation at this time of night.'

The others expressed their ignorance also. A servant, who was adjusting the torches, glanced out of another window.

'Lords,' he said, 'they're the King's High Guard.' He raised his eyebrows significantly.

The four men turned as one.

'The King has no High Guard,' said Darek. 'You know that. He has a palace retinue drawn by rote from the High Guards of the Lords. They wear the Regal Sash over their own livery.' His tone was a mixture of admonishment and inquiry underlain by alarm.

The servant shrugged. 'I'm sorry, Lord Darek. They're the King's High Guard. They appeared a few days after the Geadrol was suspended. The proclamation said they were needed because of increasing disorder in the city.'

'Proclamation? Disorder?' exclaimed Hreldar.

The servant nodded. The four men were silent.

'The rote Guards were stood down as usual for the Grand Festival so that they could return to their Lords. Then these people suddenly appeared,' the servant continued.

Eldric let out a noisy breath. 'Thank you, Alar,' he said, laying a hand on the man's shoulder. 'Leave these few things; we'll attend to them. Get to your bed.'

The man bowed and left the room.

Darek drove his fist into the table in an uncharacteristic display of passion. When he spoke, he could not keep the anger out of his voice. 'The suspending of the Geadrol is without precedent, but it's an arguable matter. It may or may not be acceptable depending on the circumstances. But the King is expressly forbidden his own High Guard. It's the exclusive right and duty of the Lords to maintain them. This is an illegal act beyond all doubt, beyond all argument.'

With his shoulders hunched high he levered his weight on to his two fists on the table. Then he dropped back and brought the flat of his hand down onto the table again with a resounding slap accompanied by an oath.

The others watched him. It was their habit to tease him and call him Lawyer Darek because of his scholarly ways and interest in the Law. They all knew that the formation of a King's High Guard was directly contrary to the Law. A grave and serious offence. But no single act since they had heard of the suspension of the Geadrol had chilled them as much as this passionate outburst from their staid friend.

Eldric gazed out into the darkness in the direction the men had marched. He could not avoid the thought that he too would soon be walking into the shadow, and possibly many others with him.

Chapter 17

Gavor was suddenly wide awake. Something was wrong. Looking round in the dim light of the dying fire he could see no sign of anything that might have disturbed him, until his gleaming eye fell on the place where Hawklan had lain. It was empty. He blinked and shook his head, but no image of a sleeping Hawklan formed in the empty place to indicate he might have been dreaming. Flapping his wings anxiously he began to hop round and round on the pack where he had been perching, peering intently out into the night.

Through the high hedge that surrounded the sleeping area he could see that the Gretmearc seemed to be as busy as it had been during the day, if not busier; all manner of lights flickering and shining as traders vied for the attention of the passing crowds. The harsh shadows and the many strange colours that

formed as these lights mingled and washed across the crowded pathways gave the scene a slightly sinister, unreal appearance in Gavor's eyes.

But no familiar silhouette etched itself against this background. All was still around the sleeping area, in contrast to Gavor's mind, which was beginning to whirl at the behest of some unseen and growing alarm that reason could not allay.

A nearby figure mumbled something and turned over.

The proximity of the sound overlying the muffled hubbub of the Gretmearc made Gavor start.

'Shush, dear boy,' he whispered unthinkingly, and then his body chose action as a response to his mounting fears.

Had the fretful sleeper opened his eyes to examine the owner of the soothing voice that exhorted him to rest, he would have seen a silent shadow flying swiftly out of the shelter as Gavor took to the air in search of his friend; wings, blacker than the night, sweeping the air aside purposefully.

Gavor's fears took him up up up desperately, through and into the darkness, until he found himself resting on a cool breeze and high above the glittering turmoil. Gliding slowly in wide, wind-swishing circles he began to grow at once calmer and more concerned. Concerned that his friend had left the shelter without waking him, and concerned about the panorama below him.

From his lofty vantage he saw that the Gretmearc was much bigger than it had seemed during the day, as all the tree walkways around the western edge were lit and their twinkling lights penetrated deep into the forest. Also, many of the larger buildings, dull and still during the day, were now teeming with activity. Most even had rooms below ground from which light and sounds cascaded up into the air through open windows and stairwells. Worse, not all the sounds were those of merrymaking. Angry voices floated up to him occasionally, and the sounds of fighting also. It did little to ease Gavor's concern to realize that the Gretmearc of the night was not the same as that of the day.

He flew a little higher.

'Where've you gone, dear boy?' he said, as if the sound of his own voice would keep at bay the realization that his chances of finding Hawklan were remote.

Where to start in those two great pools of light, joined by the slender glow-worm thread of the bridge, its lights edged by turbulent reflections from the water below? He closed his eyes and rolled over and over, tumbling as he did so. When he opened them he flew straight towards the first lights that caught his eye, in a wind-whistling dive that arched the tips of his feathers upwards.

The Gretmearc held and sold many truths, but in its day-to-day intercourse it was not a place in which to seek out the literal truth. Its people thrived on gossip and rumour and wild fanciful tales which came and went as intangibly as midges on a summer's evening. It was therefore some credit to Gavor that his antics on that night formed the main topic of conversation among the locals for almost a week and eventually took a small but interesting part in the Gretmearc's folklore, to be brought out at festive moments and retold and embellished until they finally took their place as one of the Minor Tales of the Gretmearc.

'Nearly had heart failure when that black bird came swooping down the passageway straight at me.'

'Wings beating like a tent in a storm – blew two of my torches right out.'

'Bowled Jearl right over just as he was coming out of the ale parlour. Right down the stairs he went – never touched a drop since.' Laughter.

‘And your stall, Sarti. All those laces and ribbons and what-not. It flew out with half your stock around its neck – better dressed than your wife.’ More laughter, though not too much from Sarti.

‘And that woman’s fancy hat.’ Universal and loud laughter at this height of the telling. The discomfiture of an outsider always has that extra relish.

‘And not forgetting Pytr.’ Applause and mock cheers as Pytr stands and pushes back his hat to reveal the dark scar in the middle of his forehead made by Gavor’s beak when Pytr leapt high into the air and seized him by the leg.

‘I’d have wrung the beggar’s neck . . .’

‘If I’d held him,’ comes the chorus, and Pytr grins and rubs his forehead ruefully.

‘Never came again though, did it?’ The mood begins to fade.

‘Wonder what it was after?’

‘Came with that queer fellow with the fancy black sword I heard tell. The one who saw old weasel-face off. Never saw him myself though.’

‘Probably left when he heard what his pet had done to Sarti’s stall. It would’ve taken Sumeral himself to frighten Sarti for a week after that, let alone a black sword.’

The remark is injudicious, and while there is some laughter, it is nervous. Narsindal, with its dark legends, is a mountain range away, but it is too close to the Gretmearc to be too ready a source of humour. One or two of the older ones reflexively circle their forefingers over their hearts in the Sign of the Ring, and look nervously towards the north. The spirit of the gathering has been destroyed by that name.

* * * *

Gavor, flustered and exhausted, and still slightly beribboned, settled on a table outside a small tent near the edge of the Gretmearc, his heart pounding and his crop heaving.

‘Oh, Hawklan dear boy, where are you?’ he muttered. Then, in self-reproach, ‘Fine protector you are, you feathered clown.’

He felt as if he had flown down every aisle in the Gretmearc a hundred times, and peered into every conceivable cranny. Knots of desperation and anxiety balled up in him and threatened to choke him. His claw opened and closed fretfully, scarring the coarse grain of the wooden table.

‘Would you like something to drink?’

Gavor started and spread his wings in readiness for flight. He had had one of these yokels nearly pull his leg off tonight and had let him off lightly, but he was in no mood now for another. This one would get a right belt, as the locals would say.

He turned round and saw a little untidy old man with bushy grey hair and a beard to match. He had an oval, strangely youthful face made slightly disreputable by a broken nose. Looking at him with his head on one side, Gavor decided the youthful quality in his face came from the little bright eyes which gleamed like a baby’s. He was wearing a long, much-stained robe which was secured at the waist by an equally tired cord.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the old man quietly, ‘I’m afraid I startled you. My name’s Andawyr. I’m a healer, after

my own fashion. You, I presume, are the gentleman who's responsible for all that.' He waved his hand in the direction from which Gavor had just arrived. A distinct uproar over and above the noise of the Gretmearc generally, marked where he pointed. Such a commotion had followed Gavor all that night.

'I've been listening to your progress,' he said, chuckling, then he potted off into the tent to return after a moment with a bowl of water and some fruit which he placed on the table in front of Gavor. He stood well back. Gavor eyed him suspiciously and the old man returned his gaze with an amused twinkle in his eyes.

'I'd consider it an honour if you'd join me in my modest meal,' he said, sitting down. Gavor decided.

'That's most kind of you, dear . . . er . . . old . . . sir. Most kind. Thank you. I am rather jaded at the moment. Singularly humourless, some of these locals.'

He tugged at a small string of beads that had become entangled in his wing feathers, and the thread snapped, scattering the beads across the table: coloured dots each reflecting a tiny image of the tent's flickering torchlight up from the streaked brown table.

'Do excuse me,' said the old man, and stepping forward cautiously, he reached out and pulled a length of ribbon off Gavor's head. Laying it delicately on the table, he said, 'Fine workmanship that. Marshlanders probably. But not really your colour.' Then his chuckle broke into a laugh, and Gavor could not help himself but join in.

'May I ask your name?' said Andawyr.

'Shertainly,' said Gavor, who had begun to drink the water very noisily. 'Itsh Gavor.' And a fine spray of silver drops spread across the table to join the twinkling beads.

'May I also ask the reason for your hectic journey across the Gretmearc?'

Somewhat to his own surprise, Gavor told him. The old man had an aura of trustworthiness about him, for all his shabby appearance. He could well be a healer. He had qualities about him not unlike Hawklan's.

'Ah,' said Andawyr when he had finished. 'Your loyalty and concern do you credit, but perhaps your friend has simply gone for a walk in the night air and lost his way. The Gretmearc at night can be very bewildering.'

Gavor shook his head. 'No, no,' he said. 'He'd been walking all day, he was very tired. Besides, he wouldn't have left without waking me.'

'Perhaps a lady?' Andawyr volunteered tentatively.

Gavor croaked dismissively. 'Definitely not. You *really* don't understand my friend.'

Andawyr pondered for a moment. 'The Gretmearc can be a wild place at times, at least parts of it, but it's not normally dangerous for anyone who isn't looking for trouble. Your friend will be all right, I'm sure.'

'No, Andawyr.' Gavor repeated his denial. 'I can't explain. Something's wrong. I must look for him again. Thank you for your kindness, but I must go.'

Andawyr looked at him intently and then raised his hand. 'A moment if you will, Gavor. It's not often I meet someone as interesting as yourself, and you've given me great enjoyment listening to your progress

through the night.’ He chuckled again. ‘Please let me help you look for your friend.’

His voice was unexpectedly deep and soothing, and Gavor felt the fatigue ease from his limbs as a warmth spread through them. The urgency of his concern lessened.

‘Tell me all about your friend,’ the voice continued. And Gavor did. All about Hawklan and his memory, and Anderras Darion, the tinker, the strange finding of the black sword, the trip across the mountains, and the birds and the figures in the mist.

The old man had pulled his hood up over his head and was sitting very still. Occasionally he asked a question in that same soft soothing voice, and occasionally Gavor saw his eyes catch the lights of the Gretmearc and flash brilliantly. He seemed to be very interested in the tinker and the birds.

‘I really must go now,’ said Gavor eventually.

‘You must allow me to help you find your friend, Gavor,’ said Andawyr. ‘I insist.’ He raised a finger to indicate he would hear no refusal. ‘From what you say, I fear you may be right. I think your friend could be in great danger, and many others besides. And I doubt he’s in any position to defend himself. Just excuse me for one moment.’ And he turned and went into the tent.

Gavor heard him talking to someone, then he reappeared, smiling and rubbing his hands. Gavor stared at him awkwardly. He had no wish to return his kindness with rudeness, but this little old man wasn’t going to be much use.

‘Andawyr,’ he said. ‘It’s most kind of you to offer. But you don’t even know what Hawklan looks like, and you can’t possibly travel as fast as I can.’

‘True,’ replied Andawyr. ‘But I know the Gretmearc – almost its every nook and cranny, and you don’t. Believe me, you’ve barely begun to get to know it. You couldn’t cover it in seven such nights as you’ve spent tonight. Ten, even. And we healers must stick together, mustn’t we?’

Chapter 18

Dilrap puffed and fluttered his way down the stairs and along the marble floored corridors of the Palace. The formal robes of his office seemed to have been specially designed to accentuate his wobbling shape and his fluttering concerns: long, wide sleeves eternally having to be hitched back so that he could use his hands; a full length and voluminous gown hanging down from his stomach and, when not threatening to trip him, snagging on some nearby object; a neckline totally unsuitable for such sloping shoulders requiring the almost permanent use of one hand or the other, and a ceremonial hood which invariably fell in front of his eyes whenever disarray in his garments required attention.

Luckless heir to the traditionally hereditary position of King’s Secretary, Dilrap fought a perpetual and losing battle to live up to the dignified standard set by his late father. He had much of his father’s integrity and fine intellect, but he was also burdened by a fair portion of his mother’s more hysterical temperament, and this, coupled with years of coping with the arbitrary wilfulness of King Rgoric and the searing contempt of Lord Dan-Tor, had effectively reduced him to a jumble of bewildered reflex responses.

His attire signalled the same message relentlessly. Even when standing still, he was apt to look as if he had been caught unexpectedly in a strong breeze, so many and varied were his jerks and twitches.

Today, he was worse than usual. The King’s fey and wayward mood persisted still. Too long parted from the ministrations of Lord Dan-Tor, Dilrap concluded, though in the past, he had to admit, the King’s

first adviser had been absent for far longer periods without the King becoming so . . . unsettled.

Then there were all these unsavoury new Guards cluttering up the place. They seemed disciplined enough, but without exception they radiated a peculiar viciousness, and, when off-duty were, for the most part, ill-mannered and uncouth. Ethriss alone knew where most of them had been collected from.

And now these four grim-faced Lords with their warlike formal dress! Dilrap nervously flicked the shoulders of his robe as he pursued his reluctant errand.

He had tried to tell the King that the suspension at the Geadrol was at best unwise and at worst illegal. Tried to suggest that perhaps he should wait for the return of the Lord Dan-Tor. But all to no avail. Receiving nothing for his pains but a stinging rebuke, he had chosen to say nothing when these sinister new Guards appeared, to replace the seconded High Guards who had been stood down for the Festival. To say nothing, even though he had known full well that such a guard, independent of the Lords, was indisputably illegal and would further enrage those who, Grand Festival or no, must surely be coming, angry-eyed, to confront their King over his suspension of the Geadrol. As for calling them his own High Guard, that merely added calculated insult to the deed.

Dilrap's mind shied away from everything that had happened recently, not least the implications of how such a large and organized force could suddenly have sprung into existence. The whole mess stank of Lord Dan-Tor's scheming prematurely implemented by the king to appease who knew what fevered whim. He wanted none of it. Let the Lords deal with the King, if they could. Let the King explain everything to his Lords, if he could.

And here they were. Two black clad Guards opened a pair of double doors for him, and as he felt them close behind him, Dilrap leaned back briefly before stepping around the elaborately decorated screen that hid the door from the rest of the room. He wished, as he wished almost every day, that he was far away, tilling soil, or tending cattle – just doing something else – anything else, in fact.

With a twitch of the head, and hitching the right shoulder of his gown into a position of temporary equilibrium, he prepared to address the four Lords.

The room was large and elegant, though its wooden panelling and paintings of past Kings and past tales were thrown into a dusty shade by the spring sunshine flooding in through the tall arched windows that ran down one side. The four men, dressed formally and fully armed, as was the tradition, looked out of place among the delicate tables and chairs, even though their attitudes showed no belligerence. They had been standing in silence for some time in different parts of the room, and Dilrap watched them as they turned and quietly converged on him like predators finding prey.

He had known them all for many years. Eldric, a solid, old-fashioned Fyordyn Lord; paternal, compassionate and just, with a personal aura like a rock. Arinndier, taller and physically more imposing than Eldric, but giving the impression almost of being his elder son. Hreldar, well-rounded and jolly. In Hreldar, Dilrap saw a physically kindred spirit, though the Lord's easy and pleasant disposition was far removed from his own nervous clamourings. And finally Darek; lawyer Darek. Thin-faced, lean, and generally coldly formal. Dilrap always had the feeling that Darek found him distasteful, though his conduct was invariably punctilious. Ironically however, Darek had considerable respect for the Honoured Secretary's legal and administrative skills, and no small sympathy for the man.

Now however, Dilrap's long acquaintance with them told him nothing. Eldric seemed concerned and uncertain. Arinndier looked almost nervous. Hreldar was uncharacteristically grim, and Darek had a look of fierce restraint in his eyes that Dilrap could not meet.

He bowed.

‘Lords,’ he said, hitching up a sleeve, ‘the King has consented to receive you, although he would have preferred that you wait until the Lord Dan-Tor was here as he is suffering from a recurrence of his fever. He feels that because of his condition he may not be able to sustain too long a conversation; honoured though he is by your presence.’

‘How long will it be before the Lord Dan-Tor returns, Honoured Secretary?’ asked Eldric.

Dilrap twitched and shrugged his shoulders. ‘He’s been gone for some weeks now, Lord,’ he replied. ‘He doesn’t normally leave the King for too long if he feels that his fever is likely to return, but I fear he’s misjudged the matter this time. I fear also that wherever he is, he knows nothing of the King’s condition or he’d have been back by now.’

Knowing the answer, Eldric asked. ‘And you don’t know where he is?’

Dilrap hitched up his gown again then, looking at Eldric squarely, shook his head.

‘You know the Lord Dan-Tor, Lord. He comes and goes as he pleases, and tells no one, least of all, me. I’ve no idea where he is or when he’ll return.’

Eldric nodded.

Darek spoke unexpectedly. ‘Regrettably our business can’t wait. We must see the King now. Take us to him.’

His voice was cold and severe and caused a cascade of twitchings to envelop Dilrap. Eldric turned and looked at Darek sternly. He did not speak, but his expression made it clear that Darek should rein in his anger more tightly. Darek’s face did not change. Eldric turned again to the Secretary.

‘If you please, Honoured Secretary. Our business is indeed urgent, as I’m sure you’re aware. Will you conduct us to the King?’

As Dilrap bustled back through the winding corridors of the Palace, he was acutely aware of the four grim men restraining their strides to keep just behind him. The click of their hard-shod heels on the marbled floor and the creak and clatter of their leather clothing and weapons punctuated the continuous hissing of his own robes and his anxious and noisy breathing.

They paused only once on their relentless march, when a familiar figure emerged from a small ante-chamber. Tall and straight, with black hair and searching brown eyes, Rgoric’s queen was a beautiful woman, for all the strain of her husband’s long illness would haunt her face on occasions. A rider in the Muster, daughter of Urthryn, the Ffyrst of Riddin, Sylvriss exuded a presence that drew all eyes to her, and she was loved and respected universally by the Fyordyn.

Clad in a long simple robe, she dominated the group more than any man could have, but other than to acknowledge their formal greetings, she did not speak. It was obvious why the Lords were there, and facile small-talk between them at that moment was as inappropriate as serious discussion was impossible. But she held Eldric’s gaze for a long moment, in a silent reaffirmation of her loyalty both to what he represented and to her husband, and an acknowledgement of all the complex realities that that implied.

Be true, the gaze said.

Then with a brief bow, she was gone, and the group continued its way, though a little more slowly, their stern resolve tempered now by sadness.

‘Honoured Secretary, where are you taking us? This isn’t the way to the Audience Room,’ said Eldric as

Dilrap turned unexpectedly into a wide, lavishly decorated passage. Hitching his robe back onto his left shoulder he looked awkwardly at Eldric out of the corner of his eye.

‘Lord, the King holds council in the Throne Room these days,’ he replied, then he hustled ahead quickly as if to avoid questions. A hiss of anger reached him which he clearly identified as Darek’s and, without turning round, he knew that Eldric would be once again admonishing his friend.

With an almost audible sigh of relief he reached the doors to the Throne Room. They were guarded by two black-liveried men. The Lords exchanged glances. They had continually encountered Guards wearing this livery since arriving at the palace. It was the livery they had seen the previous night being worn by the marching troop that the servant had identified as the King’s High Guard. Hitherto they had not spoken to any of them, but as one of them turned an icy and insolent gaze towards them, Eldric could not forbear.

‘Which Lord do you serve, Guard?’ he asked. ‘I don’t recognize your livery.’

The man did not answer, but turned away and put his hands on the ornate handles of the double door. Eldric’s eyes widened and his face became livid. Dilrap intervened swiftly.

‘They’re only allowed to speak to their superior officers, Lord. The man means no disrespect. Doubtless His Majesty will explain when you speak to him.’

Eldric seemed disposed to pursue the matter, but the guard had opened the two doors wide, and was standing in his original position, staring straight ahead, eyes apparently unfocussed. Eldric looked at him and then along the stretch of carpet leading into the centre of the Throne Room. Dilrap was already wobbling along it into the distance, to announce their arrival to the King, and no time could be spared to deal with this upstart and his silent impertinence. Clenching his fists, he gave the guard a murderous scowl and then strode forward to meet the King.

The Throne Room was the largest hall in the Palace and was normally used only for ceremonial occasions and large banquets. It had two wide balconies running along each side, the upper one being the larger, and the lower one being supported by a wall perforated by a line of arches, forming a gloomy corridor which gave the appearance of a series of alcoves.

Spring sunshine flooded in through a single large window at the end of the hall, but it mingled unpleasantly with the unnecessary glare of Dan-Tor’s globes. Rows of arms and armour lined the hall and glistened coldly in the unhealthy light.

The four Lords marched the length of the hall in that purposeful and measured tread that could carry the Fyordyn High Guards tirelessly over miles of the harsh Fyorlund countryside. None gave any sign that they had seen the lines of black liveried guards standing motionless around the hall, their full numbers being hidden in the gloom of the arches.

The Throne itself was set on a stepped dais so that its foot stood at about the height of a tall man. It was a great stone creation, undecorated, but highly polished, and it glistened with a myriad coloured minerals. Once, under the subtle touch of the traditional torchlight, it had radiated colours as from an inner glow. Now it glared garishly.

One of the many reasons the Throne Room was not used for small audiences was the fact that the Throne itself was monumentally uncomfortable. This gave rise to two theories concerning its manufacture, namely, on the one hand and somewhat mundanely, that it was indeed intended only for occasional ceremonial use, while on the other, more irreverently, that it was made for a King who had spent much of his life in the saddle.

This lack of comfort was immediately apparent in the posture of its present occupant. Eldric always felt a twinge of distress whenever he saw the King, the memory of what he had been always being close to the forefront of his mind. The tall, proud bearing hunched into permanently rounded shoulders, the lean handsome face turned cadaverous, the keen eyes now shifty and the strong mouth peevish and pinched. Oddly however, what distressed him most were not these visible features, which at least carried an echo of the former man, but the touch of the King's hand. Once warm and firm, it had become cold and flaccid, like a dead thing.

As the four Lords approached, the King wearily shifted his position, and resting his elbow on the stone arm of the throne, cradled his head in his hand. He acknowledged their slight formal bow with a cursory nod of his head and gestured towards Dilrap, now quivering by the side of the dais and trying to appear inconspicuous.

'Lords,' he began, his voice weary, 'my Honoured Secretary tells me you have urgent business to discuss with me. Business so urgent that you must disturb me when my health is again far from perfect.' Briefly, his face became petulant. 'A King should look for more concern from his Lords.'

'Majesty,' said Eldric, 'you know of our concern for your well-being, and that we would not lightly seek to disturb you. But as members of your Geadrol we . . .'

The King leaned forward and looked straight into Eldric's upturned face.

'The Geadrol is suspended, Lord Eldric. You've seen my edict have you not?'

Eldric returned the gaze steadily. There was a long silence.

'Majesty, we have indeed seen your edict. It's one of the reasons why we've asked to see you,' he replied quietly.

'One of the reasons,' burst out the King. 'Do you then have a catalogue of complaints, Lords?'

Darek took half a pace forward as if to speak, but Hreldar laid a restraining hand on his arm. Eldric looked again directly into the King's face, searching for the truth behind what was happening, searching for a way to reach the real man who lay behind the petulant, almost crazed eyes. He continued in the same quiet tone.

'We have no complaints. Majesty. We seek only to find your reasons for your suspending the Geadrol and for your forming your own High Guard.'

The King seemed to waver between a passionate outburst and a more conciliatory reply. Eldric's calm presence prevailed and Rgoric anxiously threw out a hasty reassurance.

'Lord Eldric, I have no High Guard. You know the Law forbids that. This High Guard,' he gestured around the room, 'is that of the Lord Dan-Tor.'

Before Eldric could reply, Darek spoke harshly.

'The people know these as your High Guard, Majesty. Where would they get such an idea from, if not from you? Besides, Dan-Tor is entitled Lord out of courtesy and respect for the services he's rendered to you. He's not Fyordyn and can never be a true Lord under the Law, thus he may not be granted the right to raise a High Guard.'

The point was valid, but the manner of its expression unfortunate. The King's manner reverted and his lip curled contemptuously.

‘Ah. Lawyer Darek. Your dilettante dabbings in the Law are well known. Doubtless your knowledge is adequate for discussions across the dining table, or for settling quarrels between stable hands, but is it appropriate here, I ask myself?’

The failure to address Darek as Lord was a considerable discourtesy, but to call him by a nickname, and in such a manner, was a massive and calculated insult. Darek’s face froze in disbelief. Eldric spoke quickly before Darek’s rage found tongue.

‘Majesty. Lord Darek’s anxiety expresses itself hastily, but a more trustworthy and honourable Lord you will travel far to find, as you know. We’re all of us concerned to hear the reasons for the suspension of the Geadrol and the forming of these new High Guards. The one is an act without precedent and the other, at First Face, appears to be a serious breach of the Law.’

Either Eldric’s tone, or the realization that he had indeed gone too far in insulting Darek, swayed the King away from a further caustic reply, and he took refuge in ill-health. He put his hand to his head as if in pain. Then he gesticulated vaguely.

‘Lord Eldric, you tax me. My fever has returned of late, as I’m sure the Honoured Secretary told you. I rely on the Lord Dan-Tor to determine legal niceties. The details of my actions are as prepared by him. I’m sure you’ll find that all is in order. He has a great respect for the Law. He’d allow nothing that wasn’t correct. If you could await his return, he’ll explain it far better than I can.’ He became almost jovial. ‘I was trained as a warrior, not a lawyer, Eldric, as you may recall,’ he said with an uncertain smile.

Eldric found the plaintive heartiness repellent, but he kept his face impassive.

‘When will he return, Majesty?’ he asked. The King shifted on the hard throne and looked down at his hands. They were trembling slightly.

‘Soon I hope,’ he muttered, half to himself. ‘He’s off on some expedition. With your son I believe.’

‘Jaldaric? Expedition? Where?’ Eldric exclaimed, surprised by this revelation.

The King grimaced and wrapped his arms around himself to still a surge of pain. His action was patently unfeigned and Eldric stepped forward anxiously.

‘Majesty, are you ill?’

The King grimaced again. ‘Yes, Sumeral damn you. Of course I’m ill,’ he shouted with unexpected violence. ‘Dan-Tor’s been too long away, and now you harass me with your petty questions. The realm is under threat from within and without, and all you’re concerned about is your debating house.’

He wiped spittle from his chin. ‘You lordlings are all the same. You care nothing for your King or for Fyorlund.’

Eldric took a pace backwards, stunned by this outburst.

Arinndier spoke. ‘Majesty, that’s unjust and untrue, and is your illness speaking. If Fyorlund is under threat, tell us the nature of it. The Law provides for the defence of the realm. Precedents are established and are of proven worth.’

Rgoric craned his neck forward so that his head was almost lower than his shoulders. He looked like a great bird of prey as he pointed an angry finger at Arinndier.

‘I’ll tell you the nature of the threat, Lord Arinndier,’ he began. ‘We have rebel Lords on our northern

borders.’ He turned suddenly to Eldric. ‘One, a neighbour of yours, I believe, Lord Eldric.’ Then turning again to Arinndier. ‘The Orthlundyn are preparing for war against us in the south, and my so-called Lords can do nothing but come bleating to me about their precious Geadrol. That’s the nature of the threat. Treachery to the north, aggression to the south and such faint hearts from those who should support me that I’m obliged to carry the entire burden alone. Small wonder my health is broken.’ He clutched at himself again.

Arinndier half turned and cast a significant glance at his friends. Even Eldric was having difficulty keeping the concern out of his face and voice.

‘Majesty,’ he said, with the aura of a last attempt, ‘the Lords in the North are, at worst, in error, but they represent no threat or disloyalty. Their conduct can and will be accounted for in due course.’

He walked a little way up the steps towards the King, who kept his eyes cast down. His voice was gentle and concerned. ‘And the Orthlundyn. Majesty. They’re a remnant race. You know that. A handful of artists and farmers tending their own lands. A gentle people, devoid of ambition. We’re their Protectors. It’s laid down so in the Law. What would it benefit them to make war on us? They’re few and their land is so lush and fertile that much of it lies fallow from year to year. We’re many and our land is harsh and rocky, albeit more than adequate for our needs.’

There was a long silence. The King did not move.

‘Majesty?’ prompted Eldric eventually.

Without lifting his head, the King spoke. ‘When did you last visit Orthlund, Lord Eldric?’ His voice was flat.

Eldric shrugged vaguely. ‘Many years ago, Majesty, but . . .’

‘But nothing!’ thundered the King, standing up suddenly. Eldric stepped back hastily and missed his footing on the dais steps. Arinndier caught him as he staggered back.

‘You know nothing, Eldric. Nothing. Dan-Tor knows. He has been there. He has heard their plotting and scheming. He has seen the engines of war they’re making, the armies they’re gathering. He doesn’t talk and squabble in front of me. He looks to my real needs and the needs of Fyorlund. He goes among my enemies and learns their ways the better to plan their downfall.’

His face became a mask of uncontrollable rage. ‘What do they want? I’ll tell you what they want. They want the metals and fuels from our mines. They seek to possess our land because they think I’m too sick to oppose them, and they know you’re too concerned with your talking and debating to realize what’s happening.’ He brandished his fist menacingly towards Eldric. ‘Well, they’ll learn otherwise, as will you. As will all my enemies.’

Arinndier stepped in front of Eldric. his face grim.

‘What mines?’ he demanded.

The King faltered and some of his control returned. ‘Don’t presume to question me, Lord,’ he said.

Arinndier was unmoved. ‘What mines?’ he said again, even more firmly.

‘I’ll not be questioned,’ cried the King, his voice a mixture of rage and fear.

Eldric spoke, his voice soft with realization and horror.

‘You’ve opened those ancient hell pits in the northern mountains.’

A chill seemed to fill the entire hall, damping even the warmth of the tainted spring sunlight. The four men felt themselves frozen in an eternal moment.

The response of the Lords to this pronouncement seemed to shake the King further out of his rage, and his uncertainty increased. He cast about.

‘I need the mines if I’m to prosecute a war against my enemies. Lord Dan-Tor says . . .’ He stopped. Eldric bowed his head and put his hands over his eyes.

‘Majesty.’ It was Hreldar. His voice was soft and considerate. ‘Majesty. Lord Eldric may not have been to Orthlund for many years, but I have. Not two years ago. The people are unchanged: gentle and kindly, well contented with their ways. They’re not preparing for war. They’re concerned only with their crops and their carvings. They’ve no use for our hard land. As the Lord Eldric said, most of their own lies fallow and resting.’ His voice became grimmer. ‘And no one has need for what might come out of those mines. Majesty, you’ve been grossly deceived.’

During this speech, the King shook his head from side to side repeatedly. At first slowly, then accelerating as if he were desperately trying not to hear Hreldar’s soft insistence.

‘No,’ he said, in a half-strangled voice, ‘I’m not deceived. It’s you who’ve been deceived. The Orthlundyn have laid traps for your unwary eye. They’re a subtle people. You lack the insight and vision to see into their hearts.’ He paused and a look of cunning came into his eyes.

‘Or,’ he said slowly, ‘you’re lying to me. You’re trying to deceive me. You’re in league with them. *Traitors!*’

Rgoric screamed this last word, but Hreldar did not flinch. Slowly he looked at each of his three friends in turn. As their eyes met, each nodded.

The King had not moved since his declamation. He sat frozen, his hands clutching the stone arms of the throne. But his eyes, staring wide, followed this silent exchange.

Of the many things the Lords had discussed, this was the one that had given them the greatest difficulty and pain. But, looking at the King, and weighing his words, there was no alternative.

Hreldar spoke. ‘Rgoric: by the authority of the Geadrol under the Law, the Rights and Responsibilities of Kingship are hereby removed from you until such time as the Lords in Geadrol shall meet and decide.’

Still the King did not move, but his look changed to one of unhinged triumph.

‘Traitors,’ he whispered, ‘you’ll remove nothing. Did you think I was unaware of your treachery? Unprepared for you? Why else should I have my own High Guards?’ He raised his left hand. ‘Look to your backs, Lords. See my true friends.’

As the four Lords turned to follow his gaze, the watching Guards spilled out silently from the sides of the hall and surrounded them like a great black cloud.

Chapter 19

Hawklan started at the sight of his own sleep-drawn face staring back at him out of the two yellow eyes and lifted his arm as if to protect himself from a blow. As he did so, the eyes moved away from him and he found himself focussing on their owner: a small brown bird, companion to those that had followed him

through the mountains and to the one that lay dead in his pocket.

It was hopping back in response to his sudden movement and its eyes were flaring with a yellow and unhealthy glow. In spite of this, Hawklan's involuntary response was to reach out a hand in reassurance. He spoke softly to the bird to avoid disturbing his sleeping neighbours, but though it opened its beak it made no sound. Instead, Hawklan heard a confused whining jabber ring through his mind, as if many voices were speaking simultaneously in a strange and repellent tongue. He grimaced; the sensation was disturbing.

The eyes flared again briefly, and then became a vacant, unpleasant yellow. Levering himself up onto one elbow, Hawklan stared at the watching bird. Birds were never easy to communicate with, their language, like their lives, being short and frenetic, but he had never encountered anything as strange as this – or quite as unpleasant.

Abruptly the bird lifted its head twice in a clear message of invitation, and Hawklan heard the whining jabber again. He thought he felt a note of encouragement in it and, narrowing his eyes suspiciously, he slowly sat up.

He made to waken Gavor, sound asleep on top of his pack, his good claw reflexively clutching its frame, and his wooden leg pushed into an eyelet for stability. But the raven was working steadily through a whole gamut of snores and whistles and Hawklan knew that to wake him now would be to waken the entire area. Nonetheless, there might be danger in this strange little bird. He reached out again to waken Gavor, but an impatient whine from the bird made him move his hand instead to his own temple.

Almost against his will, he abandoned his idea of waking Gavor and, standing up, carefully made his way through the sleepers towards the waiting bird.

As he neared it, it hopped away again. Some part of Hawklan noted that it judged its distance nicely, keeping just beyond where he could reach it with a single step and a sword cut. It was a strange thought and reminded him of those he had had about the Muster, but he shrugged it aside and, wrapping his cloak around himself against the cold night air, he followed the bird out into the bustling Gretmearc crowds.

It became quickly obvious that the bird was indeed leading him somewhere, as its behaviour was grotesquely unnatural. It fluttered and hopped innocuously from stall to stall, but each time it landed it turned round, blank eyes wide, to check that Hawklan was still there.

Hawklan tried again to talk to it but received again only the whining jabber. It rang unpleasantly in his head still sounding like many voices speaking at once. It also had a distinctly unhealthy feel about it and, to his annoyance, Hawklan found that now he could not close his mind against it.

For a moment the noise seemed to become coherent, as if something deep inside him understood it and, without realizing what he was doing, Hawklan gripped his sword with his left hand. His face became grim and the lights of the Gretmearc cast harsh shadows over his lean features, turning it into the face of a terrible fighting man. The bird increased the distance between them and Hawklan felt people making way for him nervously.

Another harsh thought came unbidden into his mind – slay it now, it's an abomination – but yet another stopped him. Somewhere behind this unpleasant little creature must presumably lie the source of the evil that had plagued the village of Pedhavin with its unclean wares, and had sent the devilish doll with its mocking corruption to horrify him. Evil came from a disturbance in the balance, in the harmony of things, and it had to be corrected. He was a healer. Who better suited to the task? Involuntarily, and in contrast to his healing thought, he gripped his sword harder, and his stride lengthened.

Gradually the bird led him away from the crowds and into darker, less frequented areas of the Gretmearc. But he did not notice. He had eyes only for the tiny hopping form, while his mind sought to deal with the persistent jabber that pervaded it. He did not pay attention to where he was going, nor look for the small landmarks by which he could find his way back from a strange place if need arose.

When eventually he looked around, he found he was completely alone in a part of the Gretmearc he had not visited during his long search. There were several large buildings that from the signs on them housed grain and foodstuffs, and timber and other building materials. They were all shuttered and dark however, there being little or no call to deal in these items during the night. There were a few small tents and booths, but these too were all sealed and almost all of them presented a dilapidated, deserted appearance.

The sudden awareness of his solitude startled Hawklan. He could not recall how he had come here, or when he had left the crowds behind. Occasionally an odd shadowy figure passed him muttering a muffled greeting, as if surprised to see anyone else there.

He could still see the bird faintly in the glow from the relatively distant Gretmearc, and its yellow eyes flashed as it turned round every few paces. For the first time since he left the rest area, he thought about the danger he might be courting. What did he expect to find? Certainly nothing good. And not all evils could be cured by all healers; some killed you first.

Hawklan stopped. It had been a mistake not to wake Gavor, but he had not anticipated such a wilful and winding luring-on, for that, he knew, was what was happening. Why should anyone want to lure him anywhere? Who would want to harm an innocent healer? He realized he was gripping the pommel of his sword violently in his left hand, and the thought of the sword brought Loman's voice back to him. 'This is something from your past – watch your back.'

He had an unpleasant sensation in his stomach and his mouth was dry. It came to him that this was fear: an emotion he could not remember having felt before. He had seen it in others and eased it away but, experiencing it for himself, he found it to be singularly wretched, and far less easily cured.

He turned round nervously. There was nothing there except the glow of the Gretmearc visible through the gaps between the hulking silhouettes of the tents and buildings. Silhouettes that seemed to be watching and waiting.

The whine inside his head made him turn back again. The bird had come close to him and was pacing up and down fretfully. Hawklan felt his fear ease a little. He had no idea how to use the sword he carried, but on the testimony of Loman and Isloman, it was a sword beyond compare and would play its part if required. Even so . . . ?

'Carry on,' he said to the bird, his voice loud in the silence and rather hoarse. He could not see too well in the dark, but he had the distinct impression that the bird sneered at him.

The strange procession continued forward through the darkness, and Hawklan's fear refused to abate any further. He found he was listening for sounds behind him, looking for darker shades within the shadows. Involuntarily his footfall became softer, and the bird turned round more frequently to see if he was still there. It too, seemed to be becoming more and more agitated.

Suddenly Hawklan found himself in an open space. The bird gave a little hop and, with a whirr of its wings, flew off at a tremendous speed. Hawklan lifted both hands to his temples as the incessant whining jabber stopped abruptly.

In its place came a low soothing hum and, for a moment, Hawklan felt a little dizzy. Before he could

recover fully, the area was suddenly filled with light and he found himself staring at a strange pavilion in the middle of an open clearing between several large buildings.

He had grown quite used to unusual spectacle in his brief stay at the Gretmearc, but this was by far the most brilliant he had seen. All manner of lights shone from and around it. Every colour he had ever seen, and more. Some flickered rapidly, some slowly, merging, changing, separating, lingering briefly to make hauntingly beautiful tableaux. Some flowed sinuously around and over the building as if they alone carved it out of the night darkness. In and out of the haze they went, chasing and changing. Now the building was sharp, distinct and crystalline, now shining, shimmering and glistening uneasily like a child's soap bubble, now a shapeless cloud of multi-coloured nothingness. Hawklan had never seen such a display.

After his anxious pursuit of the bird, the whole sight was warm and inviting, and relief flooded over him. No harm could come to him in this place, it felt too good. The bird must have abandoned its task as lure. Perhaps its increasing agitation had been at his own growing awareness of danger and finally the unexpected sight of this obviously new building had put it to flight.

He had to admit that his relief at the bird's flight outweighed his curiosity to seek out what might have been the cause of his entire journey. He had not known what to expect, but he did not relish finding anything untoward in an area as dark and as peculiarly lonely as that he had just come through. Tomorrow he would return in the daylight with Gavor and they could search together. He swayed slightly, still dizzy. He must be tired. He would go back to the sleeping area . . . after he had looked at this wonderful pavilion that had so fortuitously interrupted his search.

Looking down, he saw at his feet a narrow stream of moving light which made a glittering flowing pathway that could carry him to the entrance of the building. It was enchanting.

Gently he stepped forward, and the lights surged up over his feet like the summer sun sparkling off an Orthlund stream. He could feel the warm, caressing urging of mountain-bred waters swirling around him and pushing him forward. He smiled.

As he moved along the path he could not lift his eyes from it, so fascinating was it. But he felt there were people coming out of the pavilion, laughing and shouting, some of them greeting him as they walked past.

Then, without realizing he had walked the full length of the path, he found himself in an entrance area lit even more brightly than the outside. The light was so intense that he could not focus properly and he still felt the need to keep his eyes lowered. He became aware of someone coming forward to greet him.

Before he could say anything, the individual had taken him gently by the arm and was speaking to him and leading him somewhere. Hawklan felt drowsiness overcoming him – waking up in the middle of night after walking round the Gretmearc all day, and then doing the same thing again, following that silly bird – small wonder he felt tired.

His friendly guide seemed to agree with him but Hawklan only caught snatches of what he was saying. His voice was at one moment distorted and distant, and at another, soft and comforting inside his head. He recognized words, but could not remember what many of them meant.

The intense light pressed down into him and he felt unable to lift his head to look at anyone or see what it was the place was selling or showing. The voice talked on and on, ebbing and flowing through his head like waves breaking on a shore. Hawklan knew he was being welcomed, although he did not know what he was supposed to do.

Gradually he gathered enough of his wits together to ask a question of his guide, but before he could, the hand on his arm turned him slightly, and, softly but quite clearly, the voice said, 'You're very tired. Sit

down here. I'll be back soon and then we can talk.'

Hawklan found himself sitting. It was a great relief. His feet and legs seemed to be getting heavier and heavier, and he knew in a moment he would drift off into sleep. The seat was indescribably comfortable, and everywhere was so warm after the cold moonlit spring night outside.

There was a strange, subtle fragrance in the air, and he became aware of a low, all-pervading humming. He had the impression that many people were making him welcome and were moving round him very quietly to avoid disturbing him. He tried to quieten his own breathing to match theirs.

'You rest there quietly, you've had a long hard journey, now you shall have some of the comforts of the Gretmearc,' said the soft voice somewhere. 'Here's a drink to refresh you.'

Hawklan mumbled thanks and looked at the goblet that had appeared in his hand. Like the building – where was it he'd seen that building? – it swirled and flowed and welcomed him with a shifting kaleidoscope of colours. The soporific humming continued. It seemed to be right inside him now, like his own heart, and the fragrance was becoming stronger, heavier. He felt his hands sagging. A gentle grip took the hand holding the goblet and turned it upright maternally.

'Not yet, Hawklan,' the voice said, kindly. 'Not yet. Look at your drink.'

Hawklan screwed up his eyes to focus on the goblet. The surface of the liquid was smooth and inviting, and the goblet seemed to be infinitely deep, he felt he was looking across the universe. Figures formed in it – smiling figures. Through his half-open eyes he could see them: Tirilen, Loman, and then Isloman standing over them both. They were smiling and Tirilen was beckoning to him. The fragrance rising up from the cup was now almost overpowering, and Hawklan could do nothing to stop himself falling, falling, falling into dark depths beneath him to meet his friends. He felt Isloman's welcoming grip on his right arm.

Then he became aware of a faint ripple in his calm. Something about the figures in the goblet was strange – wrong, even. His mind tried to reach out and identify the sour note that had crept into this magic harmony. It was familiar. Slowly, like icy raindrops falling on an upturned face, he felt flashes of wakefulness jolting him.

The eyes!

What were his friends doing in a wine goblet?

An alien sound penetrated through the drowsy haze that enveloped him. He made a faint effort to stand up but Isloman's grip on his right arm urged him comfortingly back into the chair.

The strange noise persisted, and for a moment came into focus. It was someone singing and shouting. Someone . . . drunk?'

Hawklan felt confusion swirl about him.

These kind people who were helping him – he wanted to tell them that his friends were in the goblet – that something was wrong – but there was now a sense of urgency around him. He became vaguely aware of people running about, and the clamour was growing, breaking through to him with increasing clarity.

He felt the goblet drop from his hand and heard it splash onto the ground.

Slowly turning his head to apologize, he saw three figures struggling: one of them a small, scruffy individual. As he watched and tried to focus on this strange interruption, he felt the warm euphoria that

had pervaded his limbs turning into a leaden weight, and cold chills of fear began to form inside him.

A noise drew him away from the slow, slow, struggling figures, and he looked down at his feet. In the pool of spilt wine he could see the caricatured figures of his friends reaching out to him, their hands clawlike. Gleaming eyes and gaping mouths transfixed him. He could feel the tiny hands seizing his foot. He tried to move it, but it would not respond.

‘Wanna shee wot’s appening,’ came the garbled cry of the small struggling figure. ‘Gorra right. Gretmearc rules. All shstallsh to be open to everyone – shee? – everyone.’

Hawklan turned again and tried to call out to the men struggling with him to leave him alone, but no sound came. The little figure staggered and with a joyous shout fell to the ground taking one of his assailants with him.

‘Shorry,’ he cried in a jovial sing-song voice.

Staggering to his feet he sent another man sprawling, and then he lurched into a table which fell over, crashing noisily into a large and elaborate display of some kind. The lights inside the pavilion went wild, flickering dementedly.

The little figure laughed infectiously and gave a cheer of approval.

Hawklan smiled at the man’s antics and tried to rise so that he could intervene. But the grip on his arm tightened, and the scrabbling at his foot grew more frantic. He tried to call out again.

Suddenly, through all the flickering commotion and the noise of the happy destruction being wrought by the drunken man and his pursuers, a solid black shadow flapped into the pavilion and flew over Hawklan’s head.

Hawklan heard a sickening and vaguely familiar thud behind him, followed by a cry, and some of his leaden stupor eased. Then a familiar grip tightened on his shoulder and an equally familiar voice, now urgent and fearful, said, ‘Get up. Hawklan. Get up.’

Hawklan struggled to obey. Black wings beat in his face and the cry was repeated. This time the voice was almost screaming. It was a tone he had never heard before.

There was another crash as the drunk continued to career around the pavilion.

‘Gavor,’ mumbled Hawklan. ‘Gavor. Help me.’

He felt another presence at his back and Gavor was gone again. His mind groped for consciousness now as a drowning man strives for air. The knowledge that his friend might be in danger acted on him more effectively than did any awareness of his own peril, and he exerted what will he had left to try to stand up.

He was partly successful, but his right arm was still gripped tightly, and the scrabbling at his foot persisted and grew horribly. Without looking, he raised his foot and drove it down fiercely. The impact seemed to shake his entire body and he heard tiny cries of fury and hatred swirling off into the distance.

His vision was clearing, as was his head, but everything still seemed to be moving very slowly. He turned and saw Gavor deliver a pitiless blow to the temple of a strangely liveried individual who fell like a stricken tree and lay still. Gavor flapped desperately for a moment to recover his balance and then looked across at Hawklan’s right hand.

Hawklan followed the wide-eyed stare and looked down in horror. He could feel his hand, but not see it.

His arm stopped just below his elbow. The hand and forearm had been absorbed into the chair, and he could feel it pulling him further in.

The remains of his stupor fled and he became coldly and frighteningly conscious. He pulled desperately on his arm to try and free it, but nothing moved. He felt as if he was trying to lift an entire mountain, and worse, the grip on his arm tightened menacingly. Gavor was about to land on the chair and assail it with his beak, but Hawklan waved him away.

'Don't touch it,' he cried. Then almost without realizing it, he seized the hilt of his sword in his left hand and pulled it from its scabbard like a great dagger. He felt a strange surging power run through him, and the grip of the chair eased momentarily, before tightening again, and drawing him in further, irresistibly.

Here was an obscenity that could be healed in only one way.

Arching his body awkwardly, he drove the sword down into the chair with all his strength, although, more correctly, the sword seemed to leap forward of its own accord, like a hound after prey.

There was a dreadful choking sound from the chair and the grip tightened on Hawklan's arm until he began to feel his bones being crushed. Abruptly he was in a dark and tormented place, assailed by clamour and death from all sides, and so full of unending despair that his whole being was filled with a dreadful killing frenzy. He heard his voice screaming both in pain and rage and, withdrawing the sword, he plunged it repeatedly into the horror that would have bound him.

The grip on his hand finally slithered away and the choking sound rose up into a howling scream. Freed, Hawklan staggered back and, his frenzy still on him, seized the sword with both hands and swung it down in a whistling, pitiless arc.

The blade seemed to pass through the terrible chair, leaving it intact, but Hawklan felt it cutting through something, and his flesh crawled at the sensation. He lifted the sword high again, the action harmonizing with his still mounting fury, then with a roar of murderous anger that mingled with and overtopped the cry rising from the chair, he struck again.

The impact seemed to shake the very earth beneath his feet, and he knew he had struck some evil to the heart.

The screaming rose in pitch, a rasping shriek, becoming louder and louder, until Hawklan felt that the very sound itself was solidifying about him. For an instant it seemed that the seat and the back of the chair were the maw of some dreadful beast spewing forth hatred in its death agony.

Then, it was over. The screaming dwindled into a loathsome gurgling, and everywhere was suddenly silent. Hawklan was equally suddenly spent. He gazed around shakily. The two men who had been struggling with the drunken little man were staring, thunderstruck, at the chair, which seemed to be rotting away as they watched. Beside it, the liveried figure was stirring and groaning.

The little man leapt to his feet and ran over to Hawklan, remarkably sober.

'Run, man, run. We've been lucky so far,' he said, his whole manner urgent.

Then, eyes wide, as he stared at the remains of the chair, he muttered, 'This is unbelievable. Appalling.'

Hawklan hesitated and the man pushed him in the chest with unexpected strength, sending him staggering backwards through the doorway and out into the night.

In the far north of Fyorlund, on its bleak border with Narsindal, stood the great tower fortress of Narsindalvak. Built on top of a high peak with its roots set deep into the ancient mountain rock, the single circular tower tapered high into a sky invariably leaden with low cloud.

The base was unprotected by any wall, but was a solid and massive extension of the tower's flaring taper. It blended into the rock in a manner that a travelled observer would have likened to the construction of Anderras Darion.

Narsindalvak dominated the surrounding land for many miles and its sheer size imposed a respect and awe on even the most hardened of its occupants. But for all its soaring majesty the towering fortress attracted little affection, for inside its great sprawling roots lay the extensive barracks that had housed the generations of High Guards who until relatively recent times had maintained The Watch, the Fyordyn's ancient and traditional duty to guard their borders against the Second Coming of Sumeral.

In token of this duty, rings of windows peered out of every level of the tower like countless staring eyes, and at the top its sweeping sides flared out again to form the huge high-domed Watch Hall, the weary guard post for those same generations of High Guards.

Situated at the end of a long, weary and claustrophobic valley journey, Narsindalvak offered nothing to entice a visitor but a continually howling wind and an unending view of the monotonous greyness of the plains of Narsindal, misty and miserable at their best; dank, sinister and dangerous at their worst.

For the High Guards, the dreary hours in the Watch Hall, staring through the polished stones that brought distant objects so near, were punctuated only by the long patrols along the southern borders and into the interior of Narsindal.

The former were to discourage Mandrocs from establishing camps in the mountains from which they could raid the northern estates of Fyorlund for food and livestock. Very rarely however, were Mandrocs seen, although occasionally a patrol might come across the remains of a recent camp.

Figures bedded deep in Fyordyn lore, the Mandrocs were supposed to be the remains of hosts that had followed Sumeral, now confined forever to Narsindal because, unlike other of His followers, they were corrupted beyond redemption. Kindlier souls saw them as nomadic savages; vicious, admittedly, when provoked, but who would not be, scraping for survival in the midst of such harshness. None loved them however, and few inquired into their ways.

The patrols to the interior were ostensibly to examine Lake Kedrieth where, legend had it, Sumeral – the Enemy of Life – had built his stronghold, Derras Ustramel, and had been there destroyed by the Guardians at the Last Battle. However, while conditions around Narsindalvak and the southern borders generally, were unpleasant, in the interior they were appalling, and no one in living memory had ever actually seen Lake Kedrieth because of the ever present mists and the shifting, treacherous marshes that formed its shores.

Scarcely a year went by however, without one or two High Guards disappearing while on patrol in the interior, and this had helped make the gradual reduction and final abandonment of The Watch easier. There was a faint uneasiness amongst the Fyordyn about the loss of this ancient tradition, but it found no focus, no clear voice and, apart from some of the older High Guards' officers who saw the Narsindalvak tours as important training for their men, few came to its defence. Fewer still claimed to be sorry to see this ancient anachronism quietly discarded.

Now, to the Lords and most of the Fyordyn, Narsindalvak stood empty, deserted, and nearly forgotten. However, in this they were deceived, for as the High Guards had abandoned the great tower, another force had replaced them. The Mathidrin, the black liveried Guards formed and nurtured by the Lord

Dan-Tor and now pervading Rgoric's Palace. They did not keep The Watch.

* * * *

Captain Urssain handed his exhausted horse to a guard and, stretching his aching limbs, stared up at the dizzying perspective of the tower, clearly visible today against a sky whose thin clouds were lit by a watery sun. Briefly he gazed around at the view. The dreary landscape faded, as ever, into the misty distance and, free now from the pounding clatter of his journey, he became aware of the moaning wind that eternally serenaded Narsindalvak.

Good to be reminded of what I'm missing, he thought ironically. Palace life suits me fine.

He marched quickly up the wide ramp to the recessed door now being held open for him, acknowledging the attendant Guard with a curt salute. Despite his considerable fatigue, he knew that his approach would have been noted days ago and that any delay now would find little favour. Within a few minutes he was standing looking down at his Commander, making every effort to keep the nervousness from his voice and manner.

Commander Aelang stared at the papers in front of him for what must have been the fourth time then, swearing, stood up. He was a little shorter than Urssain but more heavily built and with a menacing physical presence. Short-cropped red hair and a heavy-jowled jawline framed a sallow face that housed red-rimmed, pale grey eyes, a broad nose, and an incongruously voluptuous mouth.

He began pacing the floor. Urssain watched him carefully. Commander Aelang was not a man to be trusted. He was not only a devious, ruthless, and ambitious schemer, he was capable of considerable personal viciousness when the mood so took him, and his mood now looked decidedly uncertain.

Abruptly he turned, and snatching up the papers from his desk, waved them in Urssain's face.

'I'm supposed to act on these?' he said savagely. Then, reading, '“Commander Aelang. You will take the new deep penetration patrol and arrest the traitor Jaldaric of the House of Eldric – Rgoric, Protector of etc etc.” Just like that?' As he spoke he revealed the discoloured teeth and prominent canines that had earned him the title 'Mandrocsson' amongst the Mathidrin troopers.

'They're the King's direct orders, Commander,' Urssain replied reluctantly. 'I don't see any alternative.'

Aelang dropped down into his chair again, and motioned Urssain to do the same. 'Relax, Urs. Sit down, you look exhausted.'

Gratefully, Urssain lowered himself into a nearby chair, quietly resolving that under no circumstances would he relax.

Aelang rested his head on his hand. Recent events had moved so rapidly that he had had little opportunity to think matters through. It occurred to him that this was all some devious test by Lord Dan-Tor. Or perhaps even the King. But nothing seemed to ring true. What was going on? What did the King know about the deep penetration patrol? Was he, Aelang, Commander of Narsindalvak, being used as a pawn in some power struggle between the King and the Lords? Aelang curled his lip. He was no man's pawn, he was a player, albeit a minor one for the time being.

He looked up and caught Urssain's eye. 'Didn't you try to dissuade him?' he said.

Urssain returned the gaze steadily and shook his head. 'No,' he said, without hesitation. 'He never asked my advice and I wasn't going to volunteer it. I was content to remember yours. Keep your mouth shut, your head down, and your ears open.'

Aelang waited.

Urssain continued. ‘“Lock the Lords up on my signal,” he said. So I did.’ He shrugged. ‘It was so sudden I didn’t even have anywhere to hold them. I’ve had to put them in some old servants’ quarters for the time being. Then when I got back to the King, he was muttering something about the wolf and his cubs, and he just handed me those and told me to bring them to you personally, straight away.’ He indicated the orders. ‘Personally, mark you, no messengers. I was going to ask him why, but . . .’ He shifted uncomfortably and leaned forward. ‘I didn’t think it would serve anyone’s ends to get myself arrested for questioning his orders, however stupid. And that’s what would have happened.’ He lowered his voice. ‘To be honest, I think he’s raving. I was glad to be away.’

He sat back to watch the effect of his report.

Aelang’s face however, was impassive, and there was a long silence before he spoke, ‘What about the other Lords’ families?’ he asked eventually.

Urssain shook his head. ‘I don’t know,’ he replied. ‘He said nothing about them to me.’

Aelang nodded and idly fingered the papers lying on the desk. Urssain was his man. He had taken considerable pains to have him placed in charge of the Palace Guards when the Garrison was suddenly moved to Vakloss at the King’s behest. He too was a devious and ambitious man, but he knew where his best interests lay. And his assessment of Rgoric was remarkably unequivocal. Aelang wondered if its very simplicity might not indeed cut through all the convoluted possibilities and uncertainties that were vexing him.

The Geadrol suspended, troopers were transferred to Vakloss almost overnight, and then called the King’s High Guards, of all things. Lords arrested, and now this! Could it be some unexpected move by the King against Lord Dan-Tor? That would be contrary to everything he had ever learned about the King. Could it be Dan-Tor using the King to precipitate some crisis? That was possible. Everything had the feel of Dan-Tor. But too much was happening too quickly, and too crudely. No. It was all too fast, too soon. Dan-Tor would surely never have sanctioned such crude action against the Lords. Certainly he would never have sanctioned the use of this particular patrol for a simple arrest. Perhaps after all, this was some aberration on the King’s part. Perhaps Dan-Tor had misjudged the King when he went off on one of his jaunts and the King had slipped his leash and was running wild, implementing schemes long planned for a later time. It seemed to be increasingly probable.

Aelang let the papers fall slowly back onto the desk. And yet to disobey this, a direct and personal order from the King. There would be plenty of people happy to profit from his making such a mistake; plenty to take his place, one of them sitting opposite him now. And, for all his judgment of the matter, he could well find himself the recipient of the Lord Dan-Tor’s anger if he disobeyed a direct order from the King. He swore again softly. Urssain was right; there really was no alternative.

If this is some folly of the King’s, then I’ll be judged by the way in which I put this order into practice, he concluded. Besides, practicalities always made opportunities of their own.

‘Where is this Jaldaric?’ he asked brusquely.

Urssain looked at him awkwardly. ‘He’s in charge of the patrol that’s escorting the Lord Dan-Tor. According to the King they’re heading south through Orthlund on some mission or other.’

Aelang’s cruel face almost smiled at the increasing folly of it all. This was getting worse and worse. He had put the right man in Vakloss. The King must indeed be raving.

‘When’s he due back?’ he asked, knowing the answer.

Urssain gave it with a shrug. ‘You know the Lord Dan-Tor better than I do,’ he said.

Aelang stood up and moved over to a map hanging on the wall. He stared at it for some time in the pallid sunlight that was washing into the room.

‘So we have to move the patrol right across the country and down into Orthlund of all places. Keeping it out of sight all the way. Then we have to take it through Orthlund, still keeping it out of sight. Looking for the Lord Dan-Tor, who could be anywhere, but who doubtless will be moving quietly along the very roads where we won’t dare to travel.’ He looked significantly at Urssain, but the Captain neither spoke nor moved.

Keeping your head down still, Urs, Aelang thought. Well, I’ve got a better use for you now.

‘This is going to be. . . delicate, Urs,’ he said pensively. ‘You’ll have to come with me.’

Urssain’s eyes narrowed briefly as old instincts came into play. Rgoric’s order meant trouble for Aelang and he did not want to be too close if it happened. On the other hand, Aelang was also a consummate survivor. He cut through his own debate by reminding himself that there was no way in which he could reasonably oppose his Commander, so he contented himself with a token resistance.

‘Yes, Commander,’ he said. ‘But what about the Palace? There’s a lot happening there, the King being the way he is. And Vakloss. There’s already some serious rumblings from the people about the King having his own High Guard. That’s bothering them more than the Geadrol being suspended.’

Aelang turned his pale eyes onto the captain and bared his teeth in a grim smile. ‘Captain.’ He emphasized the word to remind Urssain who had won him his promotion. ‘With all this . . . activity, going on, it’s in our best interests to find the Lord Dan-Tor as soon as possible, isn’t it?’ The comment summarized all their problems succinctly. ‘And I need someone by me that I can rely on to handle that patrol. We’ll send a rider with a sealed message to try to find the Lord Dan-Tor and persuade him to head back, while we obey this order and follow – as slowly as we dare – with the patrol.’

Chapter 21

Under the unexpectedly powerful impact of Andawyr’s blow, Hawklan, sword in hand, found himself staggering backwards out of the pavilion for some distance. Even as he struggled to recover his balance, he felt the cold night air at once waking and quietening both his mind and his body.

In front of him the pavilion flickered and shone dementedly, no longer a thing of fascination or enchantment, but something unpleasant and unnatural, and now, seemingly increasingly uncontrolled. Looking around him he noticed that for all the glare of its many-changing lights, and the light it threw in the clearing, the pavilion cast no illumination on the surrounding buildings.

Screwing up his eyes, he peered into the entrance, now dazzlingly bright. In the haze, he could make out a confusion of movement. They were struggling figures. He stepped forward, anxious to aid his rescuers, but before he had taken two paces, there was a dull thud and a gasp and the little old man ran out into his arms, followed by Gavor, black and purposeful against the brightness.

Andawyr looked at Hawklan angrily.

‘What are you still here for, you blockhead?’ he shouted. ‘Get away, man, get away.’ Then seizing Hawklan’s arm he spun him round and began dragging him across the clearing, now garish and swirling under the hysterical lights.

Gavor made an unsteady landing on Hawklan's shoulder. 'Dear boy,' he gasped. 'What on earth's happening? You're just not safe to let off on your own. Oh. This is Andawyr. He found you. He . . .'

Gavor did not finish his sentence. Before they reached the waiting darkness, the light around them took on a new quality. It steadied and became a cold green colour. Hawklan felt his progress slow, as if he were under water, or as if a thousand tiny strings had suddenly seized him. Turning, he saw that Andawyr also seemed to be having difficulty.

His face was torn with anger and fear and he was muttering to himself. 'Ethriss give me strength. I'm not ready for this.'

'Hawklan.' A soft soothing voice sounded in Hawklan's mind. 'Don't be afraid.' The voice carried the memory of some long-forgotten sweetness. 'This turmoil is but a dream. Set it aside. Journeying so far from your home has wearied your very spirit. Come and rest. Come and be easy. Hawklan felt a warm restfulness pervading him again, and slowly started to turn back towards the pavilion.

'No.' A harsh, angry voice rent through his peace. It was distorted and ugly but it tore away Hawklan's euphoria as if it had been a suffocating veil. He was again in the cold night air, but his movements were still clogged by the eerie green light. Andawyr was speaking, his voice still distorted and oddly distant.

'Fight, Hawklan,' it said. 'Fight your way to the darkness and then flee for your life.'

Hawklan opened his mouth to speak. He would not leave the old man, but he could not form the words of refusal he wished to use. Andawyr's eyes showed understanding.

'No. Go, now,' came his voice. 'I must face this one. He's far beyond any skill you've yet mastered.'

Then he staggered as if struck, and Hawklan felt as though the green light around him was solidifying, so difficult was it to move. A small spark of his recent frenzy flared briefly, and he tightened his grip on his sword. The greenness wavered and his movements became a little easier.

Slowly he turned round. The pavilion was now a blur of insanely dancing light. It seemed to exist in some other place, the entrance to which was like a jagged tear in the fabric of reality and from which emanated the baleful glare now sweeping over the three escapees.

Silhouetted black against this light was a single figure. Hawklan could not make out its shape clearly nor distinguish any details of its appearance except for its eyes which seemed to be like holes through which the green depths behind it were pouring.

'Hawklan, lay down your sword, and rest,' came the voice again, soothingly. Hawklan hesitated and the green light glowed welcomingly.

Then again Andawyr was by his side, leaning heavily on him for support, as if he were being assailed, though Hawklan could see nothing. The old man's face was damp with effort and only a grim determination was keeping some fear at bay.

'Obscenity,' he gasped at the waiting figure. 'Who taught you thus? Where did you find what was needed for . . . that?' Andawyr's finger jabbed through the green light towards the interior of the pavilion.

Hawklan sensed uncertainty in the ominous figure, but it made no sound.

'You'll gain scant thanks from your teacher for this night's work, apprentice,' said Andawyr. 'Others can use the Old Power. And without this corruption. Go your way. Leave us.' Then, almost pleadingly. 'There are other, wiser ways. Seek them while you have the chance. Repent your folly.'

The green light dimmed perceptibly, and the figure moved. Then the light flared again and Hawklan heard a hissing breath exuding rage and frustration. A wave of appalling malice swept over him and he felt his own face contorting into a wide-eyed snarl in response. Slowly he began to raise his sword to strike down the menacing figure.

‘No,’ cried Andawyr desperately. ‘He’s corrupted the Old Power and his failure to bind you has unhinged him. He’s beyond all control now, don’t add your own darker nature to his madness, you’ll destroy us all.’

The words rolled off Hawklan unheard as he felt his anger lock with the figure’s.

‘Healer, he’s too frail for his burden.’ Andawyr’s voice rang out powerfully. The compassion in the words cut through the swirling malice and hatred and dispelled Hawklan’s rage as if it had been no more than autumn smoke. Turning, he saw the old man unwind the waist cord from his stained smock.

‘Ethriss and my teachers help and forgive me,’ Andawyr said to himself, then taking the cord in his right hand, he flicked it towards the figure. It shone, white and dazzling, and Hawklan felt the myriad tiny ties release him. The figure seemed to struggle against an unseen force, but Hawklan could feel its rage and malice growing for some terrible blow.

‘No,’ cried Andawyr, his voice alive with concern. ‘I beg you. There is always another path. Even for you.’

The figure’s eyes flared briefly, and abruptly it released its blow. It seemed to Hawklan that someone else was looking through his own eyes. Someone who saw a wave of wrongness surge from the figure to envelop the waiting Andawyr.

With an unexpected calmness and grace, the little man gently opened his arms as if to welcome the assault, and Hawklan felt the wrongness surge around the motionless figure then, subtly changed – righted – return to its creator.

Abruptly the inner watcher was gone from him, and Hawklan watched as, with a terrible cry, the figure in the gaping green doorway staggered backwards and disappeared from view. He had a brief glimpse of a hand vainly trying to protect a tormented and all too human face from some blinding light.

Hawklan turned to Andawyr. The little man’s face was both regretful and triumphant. ‘One more thing,’ he said anxiously, twirling his cord. ‘It’ll give us a little more time.’ He edged Hawklan to one side and, with his tongue protruding slightly, he flicked the cord. A ring of white flame sprang from it and floated across the clearing, growing in size and intensity as it did. Andawyr nodded with workmanlike satisfaction.

The glittering ring hit the pavilion and started to spread over it. As it approached the lights, they danced frantically as if to avoid its enveloping whiteness, but its progress was relentless and each light in turn crackled and sighed into extinction as it reached them. Slowly the whole structure sank silently to the ground and faded into nothingness.

Hawklan became aware of a cool night breeze on his face and moonlight filling the strangely misty clearing. Then the distant sounds of the Gretmearc impinged. He turned to his rescuer, once again a little old man in a stained smock fastened by an old cord.

A thousand questions burst over him, but Andawyr cut across them. ‘Come on,’ he hissed urgently. ‘We must get away. Follow me. Quickly.’

Chapter 22

Hawklan strode out to keep up with Andawyr's trotting gait as they moved through the darkness that fringed the edge of the Gretmearc. They passed a bewildering array of rest areas, store-houses, dwellings, and closed stalls before finally reaching Andawyr's tent.

Once inside, the little man made a pass with his hands over the threshold of the entrance and then relaxed visibly. He patted his hands on his chest as if to dust something off them.

'It should be a little while before they recover, he said. 'But I fear we've not got a great deal of time. Anyway that will keep most prying eyes out.' He took hold of Hawklan's right hand. 'Come along, we must attend to that right away, whatever else we manage to do.'

Hawklan looked down at the hand and saw that it and a portion of his forearm had turned white. Not just pale, but an appalling deathly white as if the flesh had been under water for a long time and was just about to start putrefying. He flexed it and found no pain or stiffness, but the sight of it moving made him feel nauseous and dizzy. Andawyr's unexpectedly strong grip prevented him from falling, but he sat down heavily on a chair by the table.

'Sorry, young fellow,' said Andawyr gently. 'I've never seen this before, but I know what it is. I can tend it for you.'

'What's happened to it?' asked Hawklan, recovering himself slightly, and being heartened by Andawyr's confidence. Andawyr did not reply immediately. He was busy examining the arm in great detail, and muttering to himself. Then he stood up and started bustling round the tent, still muttering.

'Where's my bag. Dar-volci? Have you moved it again?' he said irritably.

'What?' came a bad tempered and deep voice from a side room somewhere.

'I said, have you moved my bag again?' shouted Andawyr.

There was silence for a moment, then what sounded like a sigh, and, 'Of course not, you old fool. What would I want with your bag?'

Andawyr shrugged apologetically at his guests. 'An . . . old friend,' he said.

'We'll leave if we're going to cause trouble for you,' said Hawklan, concerned at the tone of the conversation. Andawyr was dismissive.

'Take no notice of Dar-volci,' he said very loudly. 'He's just an uncouth mountain dweller with no idea how to behave in civilized company.'

The object of this jibe ignored it, but retorted in an oily voice. 'Found your bag yet, Andy?'

Andawyr stood up very straight, his fists clenched, his mouth taut and the start of a twitch flickering along his jawline.

'Dar-volci,' he growled warningly. A low chuckle came from the other room. 'Have you looked in your cupboard yet, old friend?'

Andawyr snorted and, spinning on his heel, stalked off into another room. He returned a moment later carrying a huge double-handled bag which seemed to be almost as big as he was. He dropped it on the floor next to Hawklan, opened it and started rooting around inside it, making a great clatter amongst the

contents.

Gavor gave a small flap of alarm when it looked at one stage as if the little man was going to disappear into it entirely.

Eventually he stood up, rather flushed, with a length of cloth in his hand.

‘This should do it,’ he said, triumphantly. ‘Give me your arm.’ Gingerly, Hawklan offered the seemingly alien limb. Andawyr took it and quickly and expertly wrapped the cloth around it, singing softly and rhythmically to himself as he did so. Hawklan tried to follow the movements of Andawyr’s hands, but they were so deft that he soon lost track. When he had finished, Andawyr’s forehead was damp, but he looked up at Hawklan and smiled, his little eyes shining.

‘Not familiar with this technique, are you?’ he said.

Hawklan shook his head. ‘I’ve some healing in my voice, but your weave means nothing to me.’

‘No reason why it should,’ said Andawyr. ‘It’s a fairly . . . specialized method, used for fairly specialized injuries.’ He made a slight adjustment to the bandage. ‘There. That should do it.’

Hawklan looked at his arm. The bandage covered the whole of the damaged area and was wrapped individually around each finger. To his surprise however, he found he could move his hand and fingers quite easily. Looking closely at the bandage he saw that it was without texture, and apparently without edges. Nor could he see any sign of how it had been fastened. He looked at Andawyr and was about to speak when the little man raised his hand.

‘One day when we’ve more time I’ll explain it to you. All you need to know now is that the bandage will fall off in a few days when your arm is well again and, in the meantime, you should be able to use your hand perfectly normally.’ He looked at Hawklan strangely. ‘I’ll be honest though. I don’t know what saved you from that trap. It certainly wasn’t just me and the bird. There’s more to you than meets even my eye. We must talk urgently.’ He seemed to come to a decision. ‘Come over here,’ he said, seriously.

Over here proved to be yet another room, the door of which appeared when Andawyr made a movement with his hands against the wall of the tent. Hawklan ducked through the low opening and turning round was surprised to see Andawyr closing a heavy wooden door. Again, in anticipation of his curiosity, Andawyr spoke.

‘My personal quarters,’ he said, as if that explained all. ‘Only a travelling model I’m afraid, but fairly secure.’ Then looking at his guest’s face, ‘I’m sorry if all this is bewildering, Hawklan, but we do have a great deal to talk about and not a great deal of time. I must make the most of what we have before we have to leave. My little trick on the tent door will keep most ordinary searchers away, but whoever set that trap for you will open it with no trouble, and they’ll be after me now as well. Either for revenge because I’ve done them a hurt they didn’t expect, or because I’ve seen too much. Either way, they’ll want to know who I am just as much as I want to know who they are, and now we’ve no longer got the element of surprise, they’ve the greater strength.’

He put his hand to his head.

‘But you destroyed that pavilion,’ said Hawklan, trying to follow the little man’s conversation.

Andawyr shook his head and laughed grimly. ‘Destroy. Would I had. Would I could. By some miracle you slew its heart and I managed to throw dust in its keeper’s eyes to stop him running completely amok.’ He shook his head. ‘But he’s almost totally out of control now. Who could have given him such

Power? Taught him to use it like that?' he said to himself.

Hawklan could contain himself no longer. 'Andawyr, what on earth's happening? I thought I'd no curiosity in me, but this evening has shown me otherwise. Who are you? What was that place I was in, and what was that appalling . . . chair?' He shuddered. 'What happened to me in there? And to my arm? And how did you find me?'

Andawyr lifted both his hands to ward off further questions.

'In a moment young fellow, in a moment. I can only tell you a few things, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to spend our time asking questions, not answering them. Will you please trust me?'

Hawklan looked into the man's eyes for a long time, then glanced at Gavor. The raven nodded.

'Yes,' he said abruptly.

'Good,' said Andawyr. 'Now sit down and make yourself comfortable.'

Hawklan looked dubiously at the various chairs scattered about the room.

Andawyr smiled. 'It's all right,' he said. 'None of these chairs will harm you – besides, you're better armed than you realize.'

Hawklan sat down cautiously on the edge of a very hard upright chair and Gavor hopped onto his shoulder. Andawyr chuckled.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'I can understand your concern. But that was no chair you were sitting on in that . . . place. Still, another time maybe.' Then he became very serious, and his oval punchbag face looked searchingly into Hawklan's. Occasionally as he spoke, Hawklan thought he saw a bright white light flickering through his stained old smock, so that he looked like a worn cover over a brilliant lantern. And always, Hawklan sensed a barely controlled excitement in the little man. Excitement mixed with doubt and fear.

'The question,' Andawyr began, 'is not who I am, Hawklan, but who you are. But I'll answer some of your questions first . . . briefly. Don't interrupt. I'm Andawyr, leader of the Cadwanol.' He looked carefully at Hawklan to see his reaction to the name, but there was none, although Gavor bent forward intently. 'We're a group of . . . teachers. Dedicated, amongst other things, to studying and preserving ancient lore. It's a very old Order, and we've accumulated much knowledge and many skills over the centuries. I was here just to buy supplies, but I've had a feeling there's been something amiss for a long time now and the Gremearc's such a hotchpotch of a place there's always some useful gossip to be picked up.'

Hawklan shifted on his chair, struggling to contain his patience. Andawyr continued.

'As for where you were, that was all too easy to find once they started.' He leaned forward and put his head in his hands as if in pain.

'Are you all right?' Hawklan asked.

Andawyr nodded. 'Yes,' he said, looking up and smiling slightly. 'I'm a little shocked that's all. I didn't think this morning that I'd ever be called upon to face such a trial as that . . .' His voice tailed off and his face became thoughtful. Hawklan waited.

After a moment, Andawyr straightened up. 'The slowest apprentice couldn't have missed them. They

positively shouted their whereabouts to anyone with the ears to hear. And the pavilion? Well . . . put simply, that was a trap – an appalling trap for a considerable prey. And that brings us back to the real question. Who are you that so much effort should be expended on your behalf? Why are they so frightened of you that you have to be so bound?’

He peered deep into Hawklan’s face again. ‘Show me your sword.’

Hawklan drew it and laid it gently in Andawyr’s extended hands. ‘Careful, it’s very sharp,’ he warned.

The old man did not move, but stared down at the sword, slowly moving his eyes along its length. Then he let out a long slow breath.

‘When I heard Gavor’s tale, I couldn’t believe it,’ he said, softly. ‘But it’s here. Actually here. In my hands. I still can’t believe it.’ He looked up at Hawklan. ‘You don’t know what this is, do you?’ he said.

‘It’s a very fine sword I believe,’ Hawklan offered, tentatively.

Andawyr shook his head in amused amazement. ‘A fine sword,’ he echoed to himself. Then his voice fell to a whisper as if the walls themselves should not hear. ‘This is his sword. Ethriss’s sword. Left at Anderras Darion when he went to face Sumeral at the Last Battle. Small wonder it slew the heart of that . . . trap, and protected your arm.’

Abruptly, his face broke up as if he were in great pain or about to weep uncontrollably. Gavor flapped his wings uneasily.

‘Why me?’ said Andawyr. ‘Why me? Why now?’

Hawklan watched him uncertainly, then carefully lifting the sword from the still outstretched hands, replaced it in its scabbard.

‘What’s the matter, Andawyr?’ he asked.

The pain in Andawyr’s face faded into some kind of resignation and he bowed his head away from the gaze of the green eyes.

‘Everything’s the matter, Hawklan. You may be our greatest hope, but at the moment I’m your greatest hope, and you, along with everyone else, are in great danger.’

Despite Andawyr’s obvious distress, Hawklan’s impatience broke through again. ‘Andawyr, what are you talking about? Tell me what’s happening. I’m a simple healer; who would want to harm me?’

Andawyr started at Hawklan’s unexpectedly authoritative tone and, leaning forward, took hold of his hands.

‘Someone who appears out of the mountains – impassable mountains in mid-winter if I recall Gavor’s tale correctly. Someone with no memory. Someone with the key and the word to open Anderras Darion. Ethriss’s own castle. Someone who knows the castle as he walks through it, even the passage through the labyrinth that guards the armoury. Someone who sees an ancient corruption in a tinker’s toy, and then has the Black Sword of Ethriss fall at his feet. That someone is more than a simple healer, Hawklan. Isn’t he?’

‘Who am I, then?’ Hawklan almost shouted.

‘Close your eyes and relax,’ Andawyr said, abruptly and decisively. ‘Trust me.’ Hawklan hesitated, but

Gavor closed his claw reassuringly on his shoulder.

Hawklan nodded and closed his eyes. As he did so he thought he glimpsed again the flickering white light within the old man. Andawyr reached up and placed the palms of his hands on Hawklan's temples then he too closed his eyes.

The room was very quiet; not a vestige of sound from the Gretmearc penetrated into it. Gavor fidgeted.

Hawklan felt himself floating free in a great space filled with countless swirling images and whisperings. Occasionally, tiny portions of the sounds and the scenes would come together and make sense, but they slipped away before he could catch them, like morning dreams. Then abruptly he was standing on something solid.

Andawyr's voice said, 'Open your eyes, Hawklan. You're quite safe. Don't be afraid. Just tell me what you see.'

Hawklan opened his eyes. He could still feel the pressure of Andawyr's hands holding his temples, but he could not see him. Instead he found he was standing in the middle of an apparently endless plain. Looking around he could see no distinguishing features at all. The ground beneath his feet was smooth and flat and unblemished in every direction. And everything was silent and still. He described it to Andawyr.

'The ground you're standing on, what's it like?' came the question.

Hawklan looked down and tapped his foot. The sensation was strange.

'It feels very solid. Like . . . rock perhaps . . . only more solid . . . more permanent,' he said.

He felt Andawyr sigh. 'I feared so,' he said. 'Close your eyes. I'll bring you back.'

Then he was floating free again through the shifting scenes and sounds until Andawyr said, 'All right. Open your eyes now,' and the pressure went from his temples. He was back in Andawyr's room.

'What was all that about?' he asked rather irritably. Andawyr's face was screwed up with doubt and disappointment, and he was squeezing the remains of his nose between his thumb and forefinger pensively. He jumped slightly.

'I'm sorry,' he said, scratching his head, but he offered no answer.

'Sorry!' Hawklan spoke heatedly. 'Andawyr, you're a complete stranger to me and I'm in your debt. You've saved me from something extremely unpleasant – probably even saved my life. You destroyed a man and a building with a flick of your hand.' He looked at his bandaged hand. 'You've treated an injury, the like of which I've never even seen. You bring us to a room in a tent that feels as if it's in the very heart of a castle, with its timbered ceiling and stone walls. You say, "Trust me," then transport my mind who knows where. Then you say, "sorry".'

He stood up suddenly, and banged his fist down on a nearby table. 'What's going on, Andawyr?' he shouted.

Gavor cleared his throat. 'Steady, dear boy.'

Andawyr looked up at the green eyed figure towering over him. 'I don't know where to start,' he said plaintively.

Hawklan bent forward, almost menacingly. 'Find a beginning, then. Somewhere. Anywhere. And start

there. Tell me what's happening in plain simple language that a plain simple healer can understand, without any more conjuring tricks or mysterious commentaries.'

Although not spoken, Hawklan's final cadence said 'Or else' quite unequivocally.

Andawyr continued staring up at him thoughtfully for some time, then motioned him to sit down.

'I'm sorry, Hawklan,' he said. 'As I said, I've had a trial of my own today, a severe one, and I'm caught in a maze of questions at least as bewildering as yours. I can't tell you everything that's happening, because for all my knowledge, I'm afraid I don't know.' He shrugged apologetically.

Hawklan's eyes narrowed, but Andawyr returned his gaze sternly.

'Hawklan, I understand your impatience, but you're a principal player in this, and your naiveté and ignorance are weapons in the hands of our enemies. Just listen while I do my best.'

Hawklan bridled at the word 'ignorance'. Something lurched inside him.

'There is no more voracious, destructive and shadow dwelling creature than ignorance,' he said, his voice strange. He leaned forward and took Andawyr's arm in a powerful grip. 'It must always be destroyed, but only the light of truth can do it – only the light of truth – no matter what horrors it exposes.'

Gavor cocked his head to one side, listening intently. Andawyr looked into the piercing green eyes with a mixture of fear and awe.

'Have you studied the Great Gate of Anderras Darion, Hawklan?' he asked, rather hoarsely.

'No,' said Hawklan. 'I know some of the tales from it, but I doubt a lifetime would be long enough to study even the visible part of it, let alone those parts that the blind can read or, according to village legend, those parts that sing in the wind. Gavor knows more of it than I do.'

Andawyr sighed. 'This is going to take some time,' he said. 'Try not to get angry with me again, please.'

Hawklan's face was neutral.

'Do you know the history of Sumeral, Hawklan? The Great Enemy. The Corruptor. The Enemy of Life?'

'The name's familiar. He's some evil demon out of legend, isn't he?'

Andawyr shook his head. 'Ah, the poor Orthlundyn,' he said sadly. 'Such a price they paid.' He fell silent for a moment, his eyes distant as if in the past. Hawklan waited.

'He's not a mythical character, Hawklan, nor is the Great Gate a repository for children's tales. It's a history. A history of the rise and fall of Sumeral. Of His rise while the Guardians slept, of His power spreading forth across the world, destroying the Great Harmony of things that the Guardians had created, then finally corrupting Mandrocs and men and sending them out as all-conquering armies.' He sighed heavily. 'There was a great and terrible shadow on the world then.'

He fell silent and pensive again.

'Then in His pride and arrogance, He woke the Guardians, and they stemmed His surging greed. But His shadow had fallen on them too, because they knew that they would have to teach His corruption if they were to defeat it. They knew that even as they sustained the righteous courage of the Kings of men, they were weakening themselves irreparably and sowing the seeds for His Second Coming.'

He looked hard at Hawklan, now beginning to feel somewhat contrite after his outburst.

‘You believe in powers beyond yourself, don’t you?’ he asked.

Hawklan nodded. ‘Yes, though belief is an odd word. They’re all around like the wind and the sky. I feel and direct them in my healing. I hear them in the miracle of every living thing, and my friends hear them in the rocks and minerals of the land.’

‘Good,’ said Andawyr. ‘And good and evil power?’

Hawklan frowned, the question made no sense. ‘The spirit that flows through things is neither good nor bad.’ He gesticulated vaguely. ‘It’s like fire and water. It can be used to create or to destroy. It has no will of its own.’

Andawyr nodded as if satisfied, then abruptly changed the direction of the conversation.

‘Let me tell you what I’ve learned about you,’ he said, pulling his chair closer to Hawklan.

‘When I took you into your own mind, you passed through your memories of the past twenty years, then you found yourself on a featureless landscape. What you saw as a barren, hard plain is the barrier between you and your earlier life. It’s far beyond my skills to penetrate such a barrier. It’s been put there by a mighty power, and only that or some great pain can remove it. Who you are, or rather, who you were, will not lightly be discovered, so we must use such signs as we have.’ He hesitated. ‘Those signs tell me that you may be . . .’ He hesitated again, until the reluctant words blurted themselves out. ‘You may be Ethriss himself. The first among the Guardians. The Guardian of Life, and Sumeral’s greatest enemy.’

Hawklan looked at him in embarrassed disbelief.

‘Andawyr,’ he said, gently. ‘Orthlund is a land of small villages peopled by quiet farmers, carvers. It’s a civilized country, full of peace and harmony. We’ve neither Lords nor Kings, let alone mythical gods.’

Andawyr grimaced. ‘This is no use,’ he said angrily. ‘I can’t do anything here. I’ve neither the time nor the resources. If you are Ethriss, dormant yet waked, then He too has wakened. Terrible times lie ahead if we don’t act.’

He paused, struck by a sudden thought. ‘If He is indeed awake, and His servants are peddling their wares, then . . . the Uhriel too must be awake.’ He took Hawklan’s arm urgently. ‘Come with me to the Caves of Cadwanen. To the Council of the Cadwanol. There I’ll be able to explain things properly. Great forces have already been set against you, and greater will follow. You need protection until you can be taught about yourself . . .’

Andawyr was interrupted by the urgent voice of Dar-volci filling the room.

‘Andawyr. Danger. We’re discovered.’

Chapter 23

‘What’s happening, Dar-volci?’

Andawyr’s voice rang out, although his mouth did not move. Hawklan realized that the sound was in his own head. So too was the reply.

‘There’s been a group of unsavoury characters wandering about for some time, but now the door seal’s

failing. Someone who knows what's what is attacking it.'

The room shook with an ominous rumble. Andawyr looked round in alarm.

'They're attacking us here as well. Directly,' his voice said. 'How could they have found us? It's not possible. Unless . . .'

He spun round and stared at Hawklan angrily. His manner was so grim that Hawklan started back and reached for his sword, knocking over his chair in the process.

'What did you bring from that pavilion, Hawklan?' Andawyr's tone was commanding.

'Nothing,' said Hawklan, alarmed at this sudden power from the little man.

'You've something of theirs. Some corruption. You must have. This place couldn't be located without that, let alone attacked.' He put his hands to his head desperately, then snapped his fingers.

'Have you any of the tinker's wares with you?'

'No,' replied Hawklan earnestly. 'I didn't know they were corrupted when I left.'

A booming impact interrupted him and the room shook violently as if it had been struck by a great hammer. The two men staggered and Gavor flapped into the air with a raucous cry. Papers cascaded off the table, books tumbled off shelves and an ominous crack appeared in the ceiling.

Andawyr looked at the crack, the alarm in his face changing to terror. 'Ethriss protect us if they're that strong,' he said. 'We're lost before we can begin.'

'The bird, Hawklan,' Gavor cried suddenly.

'Bird? What bird?' said Andawyr.

Hawklan looked vaguely at Gavor.

'The brown bird!' Gavor shouted impatiently. 'From the mountains.'

Hawklan nodded and, digging into his pocket, retrieved the corpse of the little bird and held it out to Andawyr.

Andawyr's eyes opened wide in horror, and as if mimicking him, the bird's eyes opened, a baleful blazing yellow. Beak gaping, it flew directly at Andawyr's face with a shriek that sounded like a thousand voices screaming in triumph and hatred. Hawklan lifted his hands to his ears, but, like Dar-volci's voice, the appalling sound seemed to be inside his head.

Andawyr let out a cry of terror and caught the bird with the flat of his hand as he lifted it to protect his face. There was a red flash and he staggered back, grasping his hand in pain, while the still shrieking bird flew crazily into a far corner of the room, colliding with the walls and floor several times on the way.

Andawyr lifted his uninjured hand and levelled it at the bird as it prepared to fly at him again. Hawklan turned his face away as a bright whiteness shone from the extended hand and engulfed the bird. It thrashed frantically in the corner and its screeching became demented with rage, but it could not escape. Sweat started out on Andawyr's forehead.

'This is the one the Alphraan downed, Gavor?' he said breathlessly. Gavor nodded.

‘A powerful sign, Hawklan, the Alphaaan protecting you. They’ve little love for hum . . .’

He staggered and Hawklan caught him. The light holding the bird wavered and its screeching and thrashing became even more frenzied, as if it were drawing power from some unseen source.

Hawklan’s face was lined hard and grim by the glaring light. He looked at Andawyr. The man was failing visibly.

‘What can I do?’ he shouted.

‘Nothing,’ gasped Andawyr. ‘This creature’s beyond me. It’s part of a greater whole. But it must be bound. I must go to the Council by a route that you can’t travel. If I survive that, I fear I must go to Narsindal to seek . . .’ He paused and gasped for breath. Another violent shock rocked the room. ‘Dar-volci will help you escape the tent. Flee for your life . . . your soul. Return to Anderras Darion now, as quickly as you can. Learn everything you can from the Gate, and from the lore of Orthlund. I’ll try to reach you if I can, or send another. Above all, Hawklan, be on your guard. Watch the shadows, your days of peace are ended. They’ll try to bind you again. Be on your guard. Go quickly now.’

Hawklan moved to help him, but Andawyr waved him to the door with his injured hand. Hawklan ignored the gesture and looking into the old man’s pained eyes, laid his hands gently on his head. Andawyr closed his eyes and some of the pain left his face. Then he opened them abruptly, and nodded desperately to the door.

Hawklan lifted his hands from the old man’s head, ran to the door and pushed it open. However, instead of walking through it, he found himself pitched forward headlong as if an enormous hand had pushed him squarely in the back. Gavor joined him in an equally undignified manner.

As the two rolled over, there was a great echoing boom and the bird’s frantic screeching stopped abruptly. Turning, Hawklan saw the hole in the tent wall disappear, and he had a fleeting vision of the room he had just left dwindling rapidly into the distance, sparking white with Andawyr’s flickering light.

Before he could gather his wits properly, there was a raucous shout from outside the tent, ‘They’re ’ere,’ and a long knife blade was thrust through the tent wall. With one swift rasping stroke, the entrance was rent open to reveal a bulky figure standing dark against the early morning sky.

Behind him, Hawklan glimpsed other figures milling around. Their leader seemed to be a man with a ragged bandage tied over his eyes. One hand was gripping the shoulder of another man so powerfully that he was grimacing in pain, and the other, claw-like, was swinging from side to side.

There was a timeless pause as the figure in the entrance hesitated. The healer in Hawklan reached out instinctively to the blind man, but some other part of him was repelled. The blind man cocked his head on one side as though he had heard something familiar and, slowly, his sightless gaze turned towards Hawklan. Hawklan recognized the face he had seen reeling back into the pavilion, but now its look of horror had been replaced by one of madness.

Then the swinging hand levelled itself at him like a quivering compass point, and the man’s mouth opened wide in a triumphant snarl. Hawklan felt his unspoken command.

The man in the entrance moved forward and, without thinking, Hawklan stepped low in front of him and then stood up. With a great cry the man flew into the air over Hawklan’s back and crashed heavily onto the floor. Even as the man was falling, Hawklan extended his right hand towards the face of another approaching attacker. Although the hand did not touch him, he too crashed to the ground as he tried to avoid it.

As he moved to face yet another, Dar-volci's voice intruded. 'Never mind these,' his deep voice bellowed. 'Run for it. Out of the back.' Hawklan turned round but there was no one there. He hesitated. 'Shift, you great lummo,' came the powerful voice again, from a side room. 'I'll be out in a minute. I can handle these once Andy's away safe.'

A hand grabbed at Hawklan's shoulder and, without looking, he swung his fist back into the groin of its owner. There was a gasp and the grip vanished. Hawklan sensed more attackers behind him.

'I don't know where you learned those tricks, dear boy,' said Gavor, jumping up and down agitatedly. 'But I really think the man's offering us good advice.'

Hawklan nodded. He spun round and laid out one more individual with an open handed blow under his chin, then ran towards the back of the tent. As he did so a small brown sinuous animal ran between his legs in the direction of the assailed entrance.

Drawing his sword, Hawklan slashed an opening in the tent wall, but before he stepped through it, he turned to see where his pursuers were. He saw one trip over the small animal, which ran on unhindered to the next man, stood on its hind legs and opened its mouth to reveal a massive and formidable set of teeth. It sank these into the man's leg, and there was a sound of breaking bones that made Hawklan wince. The man let out a great scream and collapsed on to his fellow who was just getting up.

'Come on, dear boy,' Gavor flapped urgently. 'If that's Dar-volci's pet, I shudder to think what he's like.'

And with that he was gone, flying off toward the crowds and noise of the Gretmearc. Hawklan followed him, listening for any sounds of pursuit. But all he could hear was Dar-volci's stentorian voice swearing roundly and filigreed about with thuds and screams.

* * * *

Within the hour, Hawklan had gathered his pack from the rest area, purchased a few supplies, and was making steady, inconspicuous progress down the road that would lead back to the mountains and to Orthlund. Gavor was flying watchful, high above him.

There had been no signs of pursuit after they had left Andawyr's assailed tent, and the Gretmearc crowds had absorbed them into anonymity as effectively as a mountain mist, although part of Hawklan had wanted to draw the black sword and return to face those who had seen fit to so assault him and seek his downfall.

A deeper, darker voice sounded within him however. These people are unknown to you, it said, and would have bested you like a child, but for Gavor and good fortune. Those who know them better told you to flee. To return might be to make vain any sacrifice they have paid.

Reluctantly Hawklan had bowed to this wiser counsel.

Gavor had had less sombre reservations. 'Dar-volci'll be all right,' he said confidently. 'Judging by the noises that were coming from that tent he sounds as if he's twice the size of Isloman. And did you see that rat thing – with the teeth?' His tone was awe-stricken, and he hopped involuntarily onto Hawklan's head to be further from the ground.

Hawklan nodded, and grimaced at the memory of those bone-crunching teeth. 'That was no rat,' he said. 'I've never seen anything like it before. It must be some kind of a guard animal.'

'Well, if he's got that thing on a leash, at least we'll have no difficulty recognizing Dar-volci if we ever

meet him,' Gavor concluded.

However, their journey was for the most part silent. Each was rapt in his own thoughts. In contrast to his peaceful journey from Pedhavin, Hawklan now found that his mind was troubled and his perceptions darker. He realized he was searching the faces of passers-by for signs of treachery and enmity. Running feet or hooves behind him would see his hand move gently to his sword hilt. A glade of trees overshadowing the road, beautiful though it was still, would become also a possible place of ambush, and part of him would peer into it, seeking out less innocent shadows.

He did not relish this new sight and he became increasingly anxious to be back at Anderras Darion, back amongst familiar surroundings with familiar faces and sounds around him, back amongst light and openness. But Andawyr's voice kept returning to him.

'Watch the shadows. Your days of peace are ended.'

* * * *

The story continues in

THE FALL OF FYORLUND

the second volume of

THE CHRONICLES OF HAWKLAN

Fantasy Books by Roger Taylor

The Call of the Sword

The Fall of Fyorlund

The Waking of Orthlund

Into Narsindal

Dream Finder

Farnor

Valderen

Whistler

Ibryen

Arash-Felloren

Caddoran

The Return of the Sword

Further information on these titles is available from www.mushroom-ebooks.com