

# Deathgate Cycle

## Volume 1

### DRAGON WING

MARGARET WEIS AND TRACY  
HICKMAN

#### PROLOGUE

"BE AT EASE, HAPLO. COME IN AND MAKE YOURSELF COMFORTABLE. SIT DOWN. THERE are no formalities between us."

"Allow me to fill your glass. We drink what was once called the stirrup cup, a salute to your long journey.

"You like the port? Ah, my talents are many and manifold, as you know, but I begin to think that only time-not magic- can produce a truly fine port. At least that's what the old books teach. I've no doubt our ancestors were right about that ... no matter how wrong they were in other things. There is something about the drink I miss, a warmth, a mellowness that comes with age. This port is too harsh, too aggressive. Fine qualities in men, Haplo, but not in wine.

"So, you are prepared for your journey? Is there any need or want I can satisfy? Say so, and it's yours. Nothing?"

"Ah, I do envy you. My thoughts will be with you every moment, waking and sleeping. Another salute. To you, Haplo, my emissary to an unsuspecting world.

"And they must not suspect. I know we've been over this before, but I want to stress this again. The danger is great. If our ancient enemy catches even the slightest hint that we've escaped their prison, they will move land, sea, sun, and sky-as they did once-to thwart us. Sniff them out, Haplo. Sniff them out as that dog of yours sniffs out a rat, but never let them catch a whiff of you.

"Let me refill your glass. Another salute. This one to the Sartan. You hesitate to drink. Come. I insist. Your rage is your strength. Use it, it will give you energy. Therefore..."

"To the Sartan. They made us what we are.

"How old are you, Haplo? You have no idea?

"I know-time has no meaning in the Labyrinth. Let me think. When I first saw you, you looked to be just over twenty-five years. A long life for those of the Labyrinth. A long life, and one that had almost ended.

"How well I remember that time, five years ago, I was about to reenter the Labyrinth when you emerged. Bleeding, barely able to walk, dying. Yet you looked up at me with an expression-I will never forget it-Triumph! You had escaped. You had beaten them. I saw that triumph in your eyes, in your exultant smile. And then you collapsed at my feet.

"It was that expression which drew me to you, dear boy. I felt the same when I escaped from that hell so long ago. I was the first one, the first one to make it through alive.

"Centuries ago, the Sartan thought to defeat our ambition by sundering the world that was ours by rights and throwing us into their prison. As you well know, the way out of the Labyrinth is long and tortuous. It took centuries to solve the twisting puzzle of our land. The old books say the Sartan devised this punishment in hopes that our bounding ambition and our cruel and selfish natures would be softened by time and suffering.

"You must always remember their plan, Haplo. It will give you the strength you'll need to do what I ask of you. The Sartan had dared to assume that, when we emerged into this world, we would be fit to take our places in any of the four realms we chose to enter.

"Something went wrong. Perhaps you'll discover what it was when you enter Death Gate. It seems, from what I have been able to decipher in the old books, that the Sartan were to have monitored the Labyrinth and kept its magic in check. But, either through malicious intent or for some other reason, they forsook their responsibility as caretakers of our prison. The prison gained a life of its own-a life that knew only one thing, survival. And so, the Labyrinth, our prison, came to see us, its prisoners, as a threat. After the Sartan abandoned us, the Labyrinth, driven by its fear and hatred of us, turned deadly.

"When at last I found my way out, I discovered the Nexus, this beautiful land the Sartan had established for our occupation. And I came across the books. Unable to read them at first, I worked and taught myself and soon learned their secrets. I read of the Sartan and their 'hopes' for us and I laughed aloud-the first and only time in my life I have ever laughed. You understand me, Haplo. There is no joy in the Labyrinth.

"But I will laugh again, when my plans are complete. When the four separate worlds-Fire, Water, Stone, and Sky-are again one. Then I will laugh long and loudly.

"Yes. It's time for you to leave. You've been patient with the ramblings of your lord. Another salute.

"To you, Haplo.

"As I was the first to leave the Labyrinth and enter the Nexus, so you shall be the first to enter Death Gate and walk the worlds beyond.

"The Realm of the Sky. Study it well, Haplo. Come to know the people. Search out their strengths and their weaknesses. Do what you can to cause chaos in the realm, but always be discreet. Keep your powers hidden. Above all, take no action that will draw the attention of the Sartan, for if they discover us before I am ready, we are lost.

"Death first, before you betray us. I know you have the discipline and the courage to make that choice. But more important, Haplo, you have the skill and the wits to make such a choice unnecessary. This is why I've chosen you for this mission.

"You have one other task. Bring me someone from this realm who will serve as my disciple. Someone who will return to preach the word, my word, to the people. It can be someone of any race - elven, human, dwarven. Make certain that he or she is intelligent, ambitious, . . . and pliable.

"In an ancient text, I came across a fitting analogy. You, Haplo, shall be the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

"And now, a final salute. We will stand for this one.

"To Death Gate. 'Prepare ye the way.' "

## CHAPTER 1

### YRENI PRISON, DANDRAK,

#### MID REALM

THE CRUDELY BUILT CART LURCHED AND BOUNCED OVER THE ROUGH CORALITE terrain, its iron wheels hitting every bump and pit in what passed for a road. The cart was being pulled by a tier, its breath snorting puffs in the chill air. It took one man to lead the stubborn and unpredictable bird while four more, stationed on either side of the vehicle, pushed and shoved the cart along. A small crowd, garnered from the outlying farms, had gathered in front of Yreni Prison, planning to escort the cart and its shameful burden to the city walls of Ke'lith. There, a much larger crowd awaited the cart's arrival.

Dayside was ending. The glitter of the firmament began to fade as the Lords of Night slowly drew the shadow of their cloaks over the afternoon stars. Night's gloom was fitting for this procession.

The country folk-for the most part-kept their distance from the cart. They did this not out of fear of the tier-although those huge birds had been known to suddenly turn and take a vicious snap at anyone approaching them from their blind side-but out of fear of the cart's occupant.

The prisoner was bound around the wrists by taut leather thongs attached to the sides of the cart, and his feet were manacled with heavy chains. Several sharp-eyed bowmen marched beside the cart, their feathered shafts nocked and ready to be let loose straight at the felon's heart if he so much as twitched the wrong way. But such precautions did not appear to offer the cart's followers much comfort. They kept their gaze-dark and watchful-fixed on the man inside as they trudged along behind at a respectful distance that markedly increased when the man turned his head. If they'd had

a demon from Hereka chained up in that cart, the local farmers could not have gazed on it with any greater fear or awe.

The man's appearance alone was striking enough to arrest the eye and send a shiver over the skin. His age was indeterminate, for he was one of those men whom life has aged beyond cycles. His hair was black without a touch of gray. Sleeked back from a high, sloping forehead, it was worn braided at the nape of his neck. A jutting nose, like the beak of a hawk, thrust forward from between dark and overhanging brows. His beard was black and worn in two thin short braids twisted beneath a strong chin. His black eyes, sunken into high cheekbones, almost disappeared in the shadows of the overhanging brows. Almost, but not quite, for no darkness in this world, it seemed, could quench the flame that smoldered in those depths.

The prisoner was of medium height, his body bare to the waist and marked all over with gashes and bruises, for he had fought like a devil to avoid his capture. Three of the sheriff's boldest men lay in their beds this day and would probably lie there for a week recovering. The man was lean and sinewy, his movements graceful and silent and swift. One might say, from looking at him, that here was a man born and bred to walk in the company of Night.

It amused the prisoner to see the peasants fall back when he glanced around at them. He took to looking behind him often, much to the discomfiture of the bowmen, who were constantly lifting their shafts, their fingers twitching nervously, their gazes darting for instructions at their leader—a solemn-faced young sheriff. Despite the chill of the fall evening, the sheriff was sweating profusely, and his face brightened visibly when the coralite walls of Ke'lith came in sight.

Ke'lith was small in comparison with the other two cities on Dandrak Isle. Its ill-kept houses and shops barely covered a square menka. In the very center stood an ancient fortress whose tall towers were catching the last light of the sun. The keep was constructed of rare and precious blocks of granite. In this day, no one remembered how it was built or who had built it. Its past history had been obscured by the present, by the wars that had been fought for its possession.

Guards pushed open the city gates and motioned the cart forward. Unfortunately the tier took exception to a ragged cheer that greeted the cart's arrival in Ke'lith and came to a dead stop. The recalcitrant bird was alternately threatened and coaxed by its handler until it began moving again, and the cart trundled through the opening in the wall onto a smoothed coralite street known grandiosely as Kings Highway; no king in anyone's memory had ever set foot on the place.

A large crowd was on hand to view the prisoner. The sheriff barked out an order in a cracked voice and the bowmen closed ranks, pressing close around the cart, the front men in dire peril of being bitten by the nervous tier.

Emboldened by their numbers, the people began to shout curses and raise their fists. The prisoner grinned boldly at them, seeming to consider them more amusing than threatening until a jagged-edged rock sailed over the cart's sides and struck him in the forehead.

The mocking smile vanished. Anger contorted the blood-streaked face. His fists clenched, the man made a convulsive leap at a group of ruffians who had discovered courage at the bottom of a wine jug. The leather thongs that held the man fastened to the cart stretched taut, the sides of the vehicle quivered and trembled, the chains on his feet jangled discordantly. The sheriff screeched—the young man's voice rising an octave in his fear—and the bowmen swiftly lifted their weapons, although there was some confusion over their target: the felon or those who had attacked him.

The crudely made cart was strong, and the man inside, though he exerted all his energy, could neither break his bonds nor the wood that held them. His struggles ceased and he stared through a mask of blood at the swaggering ruffian.

"You wouldn't dare do that if I were free."

"Oh, wouldn't I?" the youth jeered, his cheeks flushed with drink.

"No, you wouldn't," replied the man coolly. His black eyes fixed themselves upon the youth, and such was the enmity and dire threat in their coal-fire stare that the young man blanched and gulped. His friends—who were urging him on, though they themselves stayed well behind him—took offense at the felon's remarks and became more threatening.

The prisoner turned, glaring at one side of the street, then the other. Another rock struck him in the arm, followed by rotting tomatoes and a stinking egg that missed the felon but caught the sheriff squarely in the face.

Having been prepared to kill the prisoner at the first opportunity, the bowmen now became his protectors, turning their arrows toward the crowd. But there were only six bowmen and about a hundred in the mob, and things appeared likely to go ill for both prisoner and guards, when a beating of wings and high-pitched screams from overhead caused most of those in the crowd to take to their heels.

Two dragons, guided by helmed and armored riders, swooped in low over the heads of the mob, sending them ducking into doorways and dashing down alleys. A call from their leader, still wheeling high overhead, brought the dragon knights back into formation. He descended and his knights followed him, the dragons' wingtips clearing the buildings on either side of the street by barely a hand's breadth. Wings rucked neatly at their flanks, their long tails lashing wickedly behind, the dragons alighted near the cart.

The knights' captain, a paunchy middle-aged man with a fiery-red beard, urged his dragon closer. The tier-terrified at the sight and smell of the dragons—was heaving and howling and going through all kinds of gyrations, causing its handler no end of grief.

"Keep that damn thing quiet!" snarled the captain.

The tiermaster managed to catch hold of the head and fixed his beast with an unblinking stare. As long as he could maintain this steady gaze, the stupid tier—for whom out of sight was out of mind—would forget the presence of the dragons and calm down.

Ignoring the stammering, babbling sheriff, who was hanging on to the captain's saddle harness as a lost child hangs on to its newly found mother, the captain gazed sternly at the bloody, vegetable-stained prisoner.

"It seems I arrived in time to save your miserable life, Hugh the Hand."

"You did me no favor, Gareth," said the man grimly. He raised his shackled hands. "Free me! I'll fight all of you, and them too." He flicked his head at the remnants of the mob peeking out of the shadows.

In the wild, these enormous birds are a dragon's favorite prey. Tiers' wings are large and covered with soft feathers and are almost completely useless. They can, however, run extremely fast on their powerful legs. They make excellent beasts of burden and are extensively used as such in the realms of the humans. Elves consider the tier repulsive and unclean.

The captain of the knights grunted. "I'll bet you would. That death's a damn sight better than the one you're facing now- kissing the block. A damn sight better and a damn sight too good for you, Hugh the Hand. A knife in the back, in the dark-that's what I'd give you, assassin scum!"

The curl of the Hand's upper lip was emphasized by a feathery black mustache and was clearly visible even in the failing light. "You know the manner of my business, Gareth."

"I know only that you are a killer for hire and that my liege lord met his end by your hand," retorted the knight gruffly. "And I've saved your head merely to have the satisfaction of placing it with my own hands at the foot of my lord's bier. By the way, they call the executioner Three-Chop Nick. He's never yet managed to sever a head from a neck at the first blow."

Hugh gazed at the captain, then said quietly, "For what it's worth, I didn't kill your lord."

"Bah! The best master I ever served murdered for a few barls [1]. How much did the elf pay you, Hugh? How many barls will you take now to restore my lord's life to me?"

Yanking on the reins, the captain-his eyes blinking back tears-turned the head of his dragon. He kicked the creature in the flanks, just behind the wings, and caused it to rise into the air, where it remained, hovering over the cart, its snakelike eyes daring any of those lurking in the shadows to cross its path. The dragon knights riding behind likewise took to the air. The tiermaster, his own eyes watering, blinked. The tier once more trod sullenly forward, and the cart clattered over the road.

It was night when the cart and its dragon escort reached the fortress keep and dwelling place of the Lord of Ke'lith. The lord himself lay in state in the center of the courtyard. Bundles of charcrystal soaked in perfumed oil surrounded his body. His shield lay across his chest. One cold, stiff hand was clasped around his sword hilt; the other hand held a rose placed there by his weeping lady-wife. She was not among those gathered around the body, but was within the keep, heavily sedated with poppy syrup. It was feared that she might hurl herself upon the flaming bier, and while such sacrificial immolation was customary on the island of Dandrak, in this case it could not be allowed; Lord Rogar's wife having just recently given birth to his only child and heir. The lord's favorite dragon stood nearby, proudly tossing its spiky mane. Standing beside it, tears rolling down his face, was the head stablemaster, a huge butcher's blade in his hand. It wasn't for the lord he wept. As the flames consumed its master's body, the dragon which the stablemaster had raised from an egg would be slaughtered, its spirit sent to serve its lord after death.

All was prepared. Every hand held a flaming torch. Those milling about the courtyard awaited only one thing before they set fire to the bier: the head of the lord's murderer to be placed at his feet.

Although the keep's defenses had not been activated, a cordon of knights had been drawn up to keep the curious out of the castle. The knights drew aside to allow the cart entry, then closed ranks as it trundled past. A cheer went up from those standing in the courtyard when the cart was sighted rumbling beneath the arched gateway. The knights escorting it dismounted, and their squires ran

forward to lead the dragons to the stables. The lord's dragon shrieked a welcome-or perhaps a farewell-to its fellows.

The tier was detached and led away. The tiermaster and the four men who had pushed the vehicle were taken to the kitchen, there to be fed and given a share of the lord's best brown ale. Sir Gareth, his sword loosened in its scabbard, his eyes noting every move the prisoner made, climbed into the cart. Drawing his sideknife, he cut the leather thongs attached to the wooden slats.

"We caught the elflord, Hugh," Gareth said in an undertone as he worked. "Caught him alive. He was on his dragonship, sailing back to Tribus, when our dragons overtook him. We questioned him and he confessed giving you the money before he died."

"I've seen how you 'question' people," said Hugh. One hand free, he flexed his arm to ease the stiffness. Gareth, loosing the other one, eyed him warily. "The bastard would've confessed to being human if you'd asked him!"

"It was your accursed dagger we took from my lord's back, the one with the bone handle with those strange markings. I recognized it."

"Damn right, you did!" Both hands were free. Moving swiftly, suddenly, Hugh's strong hands closed over the chain-mail armor that covered the knight's upper arms. The assassin's fingers bit deep, driving the rings of the chain mail painfully into the man's flesh. "And you know both how and why you saw it!"

Gareth sucked in his breath, his sideknife jerked forward. The blade was three-quarters the way to Hugh's rib cage when, with an effort of will, the knight halted his reflexive lunge.

"Get back!" he snarled at several of his fellows, who, seeing their captain accosted, had drawn their swords and were preparing to come to his assistance.

"Let go of me, Hugh." Gareth spoke through gritted teeth. His skin was a ghastly leaden hue, sweat beaded on his upper lip. "Your trick didn't work. You won't meet an easy death at my hand."

Hugh, with a shrug and a slight sardonic smile, released his grip on the knight's arms. Gareth caught hold of the assassin's right hand, jerked it roughly behind his back, and, grabbing his left, bound the two together tightly with the remnants of the leather thongs.

"I paid you well," the knight muttered. "I owe you nothing!"

"And what about her, your daughter, whose death I avenged-"

Spinning Hugh around by the shoulder, Gareth swung his mailed fist. The blow caught the assassin on the jaw and sent him crashing through the wooden slats of the cart. Sprawled on his back on the ground, the Hand lay in the muck of the courtyard. Gareth jumped down from the cart. Straddling the prisoner, the knight stared down at him coldly.

"You'll die with your head on the block, you murdering bastard. Bring him," he ordered two of his men, and kicked Hugh in the kidney with the toe of his boot. Gareth watched with satisfaction as the man writhed in pain. The knight added grimly, "And gag his mouth."

## CHAPTER 2

### KE'LITH KEEP, DANDRAK, MID REALM

"HERE is THE ASSASSIN, MAGICKA," SAID GARETH, GESTURING TO THE bound-and-gagged prisoner.

"Did he give you any trouble?" asked a well-formed man of perhaps forty cycles, who gazed at Hugh with a sorrowful air, as though he found it impossible to believe that so much evil could reside in one human being.

"None that I couldn't handle, Magicka," said Gareth, subdued in the presence of the house magus.

The wizard nodded and-conscious of a vast audience- straightened to his full height and folded his hands ceremoniously over his brown velvet cassock; he was a land magus and so wore the colors of the magic he favored. He did not, however, wear in addition the mantle of royal magus-a title he had, according to rumor, long coveted but one which Lord Rogar, for reasons of his own, refused to grant.

Those standing in the muddy courtyard saw the prisoner being led before the person who was now-by default-the highest voice of authority in the fiefdom, and crowded around to hear. The light of their torches flared and danced in the cold evening breeze. The lord's dragon, mistaking the tenseness and confusion for battle, trumpeted loudly, demanding to be unleashed upon the enemy. The stablemaster patted it soothingly. Soon it would be sent to fight an Enemy that neither man nor even the long-lived dragon can finally avoid.

"Remove the gag from his mouth," ordered the wizard.

Gareth coughed, cleared his throat, and cast the Hand a sidelong glance. Leaning near the wizard, the knight spoke in low tones. "You will hear nothing but a string of lies. He'll say anything-"

"I said, remove it," remonstrated Magicka in a commanding tone that left no doubt in the minds of anyone standing in the courtyard who was now the master of Ke'lith Keep.

Gareth sullenly did as he was told, yanking the gag from Hugh's mouth with such force that he wrenched the man's head sideways and left an ugly weal on one side of his face.

"Every man, no matter how heinous his crime, has the right to confess his guilt and cleanse his soul. What is your name?" questioned the wizard crisply.

The assassin, gazing over the wizard's head, did not answer. Gareth smote Hugh rebukingly.

"He is known as Hugh the Hand, Magicka."

"Surname?"

Hugh spit blood.

The wizard frowned. "Come, Hugh the Hand can't be your real name. Your voice. Your manners. Surely you are a nobleman! The baton sinister, no doubt. Yet, we must know the names of your

ancestors in order to commend to them your unworthy spirit. You will not speak?" Reaching out a hand, the wizard caught hold of Hugh's chin and jerked the man's face to the torchlight. "The bone structure is strong. The nose aristocratic, the eyes exceedingly fine, although I seem to see something of the peasant in the deep lines in the face and the sensuality of the lips. But there is undoubtedly noble blood in your veins. A pity it runs black. Come, sir, reveal your true identity and confess to the murder of Lord Rogar. Such confession will cleanse your soul."

The prisoner's swollen mouth widened in a grin; there was a flicker of flame deep in the sunken black eyes. "Where my father is, his son will shortly follow," Hugh replied. "And you know better than any here that I did not murder your lord."

Gareth raised his fist, intending to punish the Hand for his speech. A glimpse of the wizard's face caused him to hesitate. Magicka's brow cleared in an instant, his face smooth as a pail of fresh cream. The sharp eyes of the captain, however, had noted the ripple that passed across its surface at Hugh's accusation.

"Insolence," the wizard said coldly. "You are bold for a man facing a terrible death, but we will hear you cry out for mercy before long."

"You better silence me and silence me quick," said Hugh, his tongue running across his cracked and bleeding lips. "Otherwise people might remember that you're now guardian of the new little lord, aren't you, Magicka? Which means you can run things around here until the kid's . . . What? Eighteen? Or maybe longer than that if you can keep your web wound tight around him. And I've no doubt you'll be a great comfort to the grieving widow. What mantle will you wear tonight-the purple of royal magus? And wasn't it strange, my dagger disappearing like that. As if by magic-

The wizard lifted his hands. "The ground quakes in fury at this man's blasphemy!" he shouted. The courtyard began to shake and tremble. Granite towers swayed. People cried out in panic, huddling close together. Some fell to their knees, wailing and pressing their hands in the muck and mud, shouting in supplication to the magus to ease his anger.

Magicka glared down his long nose at the captain of the knights. A punch from Gareth, given somewhat reluctantly, it seemed, in the small of Hugh's back, caused the assassin to gasp and draw a painful breath. The Hand's gaze, however, never wavered or faltered, but remained fixed on the wizard, who was pale with fury.

"I have been patient," said Magicka, breathing heavily, "but I will not be subjected to such filth. I apologize to you, captain," the wizard continued, shouting to be heard above the rumbling of the ground and the cries of the people. "You were right. He will say anything to save his miserable life."

Gareth grunted but did not reply. Magicka raised his hands placatingly and, gradually, the ground ceased to shake. People drew deep breaths of relief and rose to their feet again. The knight's gaze flicked aside at Hugh, met the Hand's own intense, penetrating stare. Gareth frowned; his eyes went from the assassin to the wizard, and they were dark and thoughtful.

Magicka, speaking to the crowd, did not notice.

"I am sorry, truly sorry, that this man must leave this life with such black spots upon his soul," said the wizard in grieved and pious tones. "Yet so he chooses. All here are witness that I have given him ample opportunity to confess."

There were sympathetic, respectful murmurs.

"Bring forth the block."

The murmurs changed in aspect, becoming loud and anticipatory. People shifted around to get a good view. Two burly wardens, the strongest that could be found, emerged from a small doorway leading to the dungeon of the keep. Between them they carried a huge stone-not the lacy and delicate coralite of which almost everything in the city except the keep itself was constructed. Magicka, whose business it was to know the types and natures and powers of all rocks, recognized the stone as marble. It did not come from this island or from the larger, neighboring continent of Uylandia, for no such rock existed there [2]. The marble, therefore, came from the larger, neighboring continent of Aristagon, which meant that this block had been dug out of the land of the enemy.

Either it was a very old piece of marble and had been brought over legitimately during one of the few periods of peace between the humans and the elves of the Tribus Empire-a theory the wizard discounted-or Three-Chop Nick, as he was known, had smuggled it over, which Magicka thought probable.

Not that it mattered. There were numerous diehard nationalists among the lord's friends, family, and followers, but the wizard doubted if there were any who would object to a piece of dung such as Hugh the Hand losing his head on an enemy rock. Still, they were a hotheaded clan and the wizard was thankful that the marble was so covered with dried blood that few of Rogar's kin would recognize the stone. None would think to question its origin.

The marble block was about four feet by four feet and had a groove cut out of one side that was almost exactly the size of the average human neck. The warders-staggering under the weight-hauled the block out into the courtyard and placed it in front of Magicka. The executioner, Three-Chop Nick, ducked out from beneath the doorway and a tremor of excitement rippled through the crowd.

Nick was a giant of a man and not one soul on Dandrak knew who he really was or what he looked like. Whenever he performed an execution, he wore black robes and a black hood over his head so that, when passing among the populace on a daily basis, he would not be recognized and shunned. Unfortunately, the result of his clever disguise was that people began to suspect every man over seven footspans in height of being an executioner and tended to avoid them all indiscriminately.

When it came time to deal out justice, however, Nick was the most popular and sought-after executioner on Dandrak. Whether an incredible bungler or the most talented showman of his time, Three-Chop certainly knew how to entertain an audience. No victim ever died swiftly, but lingered on in screaming agony as Nick hacked and chopped away with a sword that was as dull as his wits.

All eyes went from the hooded Nick to the black-haired prisoner, who-it must be admitted-had impressed most of those present with his coolness. But all those in the courtyard that night had either admired or actually been fond of their murdered liege lord, and it was going to be a distinct pleasure for them to see his killer die horribly. The people noted with satisfaction, therefore, that-at

the sight of the executioner and the bloodstained weapon in his hand-Hugh's face set in masklike calm, and though he carried himself well and forbore to tremble, they could see his breath come quick and hard.

Gareth grabbed the Hand by the arms and, dragging him out of the wizard's presence, led the prisoner the few steps to the block.

"What you said about Magicka . . ." Gareth hissed the words in a low undertone, and, perhaps feeling the wizard's eyes boring into his back, let the sentence stand unfinished, contenting himself with interrogating the assassin with a glance.

Hugh returned his gaze, his eyes black hollows in the flickering torchlit night. "Watch him," he said.

Gareth nodded. -His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot, his face unshaven. He had not slept since the death of his lord two nights previous. He wiped his hand across his sweat-rimed mouth; then the hand went to his belt. Hugh caught a flash of fire, reflecting off a sharp-edged blade.

"I can't save you, Hugh," Gareth mumbled. "They'd cut us both to ribbons. But I can end it for you quick. It'll likely cost me my captaincy"-the knight glanced back darkly at the wizard- "but then, after what I've heard, it's likely I've lost that anyhow. You're right. I owe that much to her."

He shoved the Hand around to stand in front of the block. The executioner solemnly removed his black robes-he disliked having them fouled with blood-and handed them to a young boy standing nearby. Highly elated, the child stuck out his tongue at an unfortunate friend who had been hovering near, hoping for the same honor.

Grasping the sword, Nick took two or three practice swings to limber up his arms and then indicated, with a nod of his head, that he was ready.

Gareth forced Hugh to his knees before the block. The knight stepped back, but not far, only two or three paces. His fingers flexed nervously around the knife concealed in the folds of his cape. His excuse was framing itself in his mind. When the blade sank into his neck, Hugh screamed out that it was you, Magicka, who killed my lord. I heard it clearly. The words of a dying man are, they say, always true. Of course, I know that he lied, but I feared the peasants-being a superstitious lot-would take it ill. I thought it best to cut his miserable life short. Magicka wouldn't believe it. He'd know the truth. Ah, well, Gareth didn't have that much left to live for anyway.

The executioner grabbed hold of Hugh's hair, intending to position the prisoner's head on the block. But Magicka, perhaps sensing an uneasiness in the crowd that not even the excitement of a forthcoming execution could quite banish, raised a restraining hand.

"Halt," he cried. His robes swirling around him in the chill wind that had sprung up, the wizard walked toward the block. "Hugh the Hand," said Magicka in a loud, stern voice, "I give you one more chance. Tell us-now that you are near the Realm of Death-have you anything to confess?"

Hugh raised his head. Perhaps the fear of approaching oblivion had finally struck him.

"Yes. I have something to confess."

"I'm glad we understand each other," said Magicka gently. The smile of triumph on the thin, aesthetic face was not lost on the watchful Gareth. "What is it you have to regret in leaving this life, my son?"

The Hand's swollen mouth twisted. Straightening his shoulders, he looked at Magicka and said coolly, "That I never killed one of your kind, wizard."

The crowd gasped in pleasurable horror. Three-Chop Nick chuckled beneath his hood. The longer this death dragged out, the better the wizard would reward it.

Magicka smiled with cool pity.

"May your soul rot like your body," he said.

Casting Nick a look that plainly invited the executioner to have a good time, the wizard stepped back well out of the way, to keep the blood from spattering on his robes.

The executioner drew forth a black handkerchief and started to bind it around Hugh's eyes.

"No!" the assassin shouted harshly. "I want to carry that face with me."

"Get on with it!" Foam flecked the wizard's lips.

Nick grabbed his hair, but Hugh shook the hand free. Voluntarily the prisoner laid his head down upon the bloodstained marble. His eyes were wide open, staring unblinkingly, accusingly at Magicka. The executioner reached down, took hold of the man's short braid, and yanked it over to one side. Three-Chop liked a clear expanse of neck with which to work.

Nick raised his blade. Hugh drew a breath, gritted his teeth, and kept his eyes focused on the wizard. Gareth, watching, saw Magicka blench, swallow, and dart hasty glances here and there, as though seeking escape.

"The horror of this man's evil is too much!" the wizard cried. "Be swift! I cannot bear it!"

Gareth gripped his knife. Nick's arm muscles bulged, preparing for the downward stroke. Women covered their eyes and peeped out between their fingers, men craned to see over each other's heads, children were hastily lifted up to get a better view.

And then there came, from the gates, the clash of arms.

## CHAPTER 3

### KE'LITH KEEP, DANDRAKE: MID REALM

A GIGANTIC SHAPE, BLACKER THAN THE LORDS OF NIGHT, APPEARED ABOVE THE KEEP'S towers. No one could see clearly in the gloom, but the flapping of huge wings was audible. The gate guards clashed sword against shield, sounding the alarm, causing everyone in the courtyard to turn his attention from the impending execution to the threat above. Knights drew their swords and shouted for their mounts. Raids by Tribus corsairs were commonplace, and one had

been expected daily in retaliation for the abduction and subsequent death of the elflord who had allegedly hired Hugh the Hand.

"What is it?" bellowed Gareth, endeavoring vainly to see what was going on, torn between leaving his post at the side of the prisoner and rushing to the gates that were his responsibility.

"Ignore it! Get on with the execution!" snarled Magicka.

But Three-Chop Nick demanded an attentive audience, and he had lost this one. Half of the crowd was staring at the gate; the other half was running toward it. Lowering his blade with an air of wounded pride, Nick waited in hurt and dignified silence to see what all the fuss was about.

"It's a real dragon, fools! One of ours, not an elf ship. It's one of ours!" Gareth shouted. "You two, keep an eye on the prisoner." The captain raced to the gates to quell the spreading panic.

The battle dragon swooped low over the castle. A score of rope cables, glistening in the torchlight, snaked through the air. Men leapt from the dragon's back, slid down the cables, and landed in the courtyard. Everyone could see the silver insignia of the King's Own glittering on their panoply, and the crowd muttered ominously.

Swiftly the soldiers deployed, clearing a large area in the center of the courtyard and placing themselves in position around it. Shields in their left hands, spears in their right, they stood at relaxed attention, facing outward, refusing to meet anyone's eyes or answer anyone's questions.

A lone dragonrider appeared. Flying over the gate, the small, swift-flying dragon hovered over the circle cleared for it, wings holding it poised in the air while it scanned the area in which it would land. By now its rider's elegant livery, flashing red and golden in the flaring torchlight, could be easily recognized. The people caught their breath and glanced at each other with questioning eyes.

The riding dragon settled to the ground, wings trembling, its flanks heaving. Flecks of saliva dripped from its fanged mouth. Jumping from the saddle, the rider cast a swift glance around the courtyard. He was clad in the short gold-trimmed cape and red flared coat of a king's courier, and the people waited in breathless anticipation to hear the news he had to impart.

Almost everyone expected it to be a declaration of war against the elves of Tribus; some of the knights were already looking about for their squires so that they might be ready to muster at a moment's notice. It was, therefore, with considerable shock that those standing in the courtyard saw the courier raise a hand gloved in the finest soft and supple leather and point at the block.

"Is that Hugh the Hand you are about to execute?" he shouted in a voice as soft and supple as his gloves.

The wizard strode across the courtyard and was admitted into the circle through the ranks of the King's Own.

"What if it is?" answered Magicka warily.

"If it is Hugh the Hand, I command you, in the name of the king, to deliver him to me-alive," said the courier.

The wizard glowered at the man darkly. Ke'lith's knights looked questioningly in Magicka's direction, awaiting his orders.

Until recently, the Volkaran had never known a king. In the world's very early days, Volkaran had been a penal colony established by the inhabitants of the main continent Uylandia. The famous prison at Yreni held murderers and thieves; exiles, whores, and various other social embarrassments were shipped off to the surrounding isles of Providence, Pitrin's Exile, and the three Djerns. Life was hard on these outer isles, and over the centuries, the isles produced a hard people. Each isle was ruled by various clans; each clan's lord spent his time either beating assaults off his own lands or attacking those of his neighbors on Uylandia.

Thus divided, the humans were easy prey for the stronger, wealthier elven nation of Tribus. The elves gobbled the humans up piecemeal, and for almost forty cycles, the elves ruled both Uylandia and the Volkaran Isles. Their iron grip on the humans had come to an end twenty cycles earlier, when a chieftain of the strongest clan on Volkaran married the matriarch of the strongest clan on Uylandia. Rallying their people, Stephen of Pitrin's Exile and Anne of Winsher formed an army that overthrew the elves and hurled them-some of them literally-off the isle.

When Uylandia and Volkaran were free of occupation, Stephen and Anne proclaimed themselves king and queen, murdered their most dangerous rivals, and, though it was rumored that they were now intriguing against each other, the two continued to be the most powerful and feared force in the realm. In the old days, Magicka would have simply ignored the command, carried out the execution, and done away with the courier if the man proved obstinate. Now, standing in the shadow cast by the pitch-black wings of the battle dragon, the wizard was reduced to quibbling.

"Hugh the Hand is the murderer of our lord, Rogar of Ke'lith, and it is the king's own law that we take his life in punishment."

"His Majesty fully approves and applauds your excellent and swift execution of justice within his kingdom," said the courier with a graceful bow, "and he regrets that he must interfere, but there is a royal warrant out for the arrest of the man known as Hugh the Hand. He is wanted for questioning in regard to a conspiracy against the state-a matter which takes precedence over all local affairs. Everyone knows," added the courier, looking directly into Magicka's eyes, "that this assassin has had dealings with the elflords of Tribus."

The wizard knew, of course, that Hugh hadn't had dealings with an elflord on Tribus. The wizard also knew, at that instant, that the courier knew this as well. And if the courier knew this, then he might know a number of other things-such as how Rogar of Ke'lith had truly met his death. Caught in his own net, Magicka flopped and floundered.

"Let me see the warrant," he demanded.

Nothing, it seemed, would give the king's courier greater pleasure than producing the king's warrant for Magicka's viewing. Thrusting his hand into a leather pouch that hung from the dragon's saddle, the courier withdrew a scrollcase. He removed the scroll inside and handed it to the wizard, who pretended to study it. The warrant would be in order. Stephen wasn't one to make a mistake like that. There was the name, Hugh the Hand, and it was sealed with the Winged Eye that was Stephen's device. Gnawing his lip until it was raw and bleeding, Magicka could do nothing but cast his people a much-suffering glance that said he had tried but greater powers were at work here. Placing his hand over his heart, he bowed coldly in silent, ungracious acquiescence.

"His Majesty thanks you," said the courier, smiling. "You, Captain!" He gestured. Gareth-his face carefully expressionless, though he, too, had followed the unspoken as well as the spoken-came up to stand behind the wizard. "Bring me the prisoner. Oh, and I'll need a fresh dragon for my return trip. King's business," he added.

Those two words-king's business-could commandeer anything from a castle to a flagon of wine, a roast boar to a regiment. Those who disobeyed did so at their extreme peril. Gareth looked at Magicka. The wizard literally shook with rage, but said nothing- merely gave a swift, short nod-and the knight left to obey the command.

The courier deftly retrieved the parchment, rerolled it, and slid it back into its scrollcase. As he glanced about idly, awaiting Gareth's return with the prisoner, his gaze alighted on the bier. Instantly his face assumed an expression of deep sorrow.

"Their Majesties extend their sympathy to Lady Rogar. If they can be of service, her ladyship can be assured that she has only to call upon them."

"Her ladyship will be most grateful," said Magicka sourly.

The courier, smiling once again, began to slap his gloves impatiently against his thigh. Gareth was leading the prisoner past the King's Own, but there was as yet no sign of a fresh mount. "About that dragon-

"Here, my lord, take this one," cried the old stablemaster eagerly, offering the reins of the lord's dragon to the messenger.

"Are you certain?" queried the courier, glancing from the bier to the wizard. He was, of course, familiar with the custom of sacrificing the dragon-no matter how valuable-in honor of the fallen.

Magicka, with a furious snort, waved his hand. "Why not? Carry my lord's murderer away on my lord's most prized dragon! King's business, after all!"

"Yes, it is," said the courier. "King's business."

The King's Own suddenly shifted their stance, turning their spears point outward and locking shields to form a circle of steel around the courier and those who stood near him.

"Perhaps there are some aspects of the king's business you would be interested in discussing with His Majesty. Our gracious monarch will be happy to arrange for the governing of this province in your absence, Magicka."

The shadow of the wings of the circling battle dragon slid over the courtyard.

"No, no," protested the wizard hastily. "King Stephen has no more loyal subject than myself! You may assure him of that!"

The courier bowed and answered Magicka with a charming smile. The soldiers surrounding him remained attentive and on alert.

Gareth, sweating beneath his leather helm, entered the circle of steel. The captain knew how close he'd come to being ordered to fight the King's Own and his stomach was still clenching.

"Here's your man," Gareth said gruffly, shoving Hugh forward.

The courier took in the prisoner with one swift glance that noted the lash marks on the back, the bruises and cuts on the face, the swollen lip. Hugh, his dark sunken eyes seeming to have vanished completely in the shadows beneath his brows, regarded the courier with a detached curiosity that held no hope, only a sardonic expectation of further torment.

"Cut loose his arms and unlock those manacles."

"But, my lord, he is dangerous-"

"He cannot ride like that and I have no time to waste. Do not worry"-the courier waved a negligent hand-"unless he can sprout wings, I do not think he will try to escape by leaping from the back of a flying dragon."

Gareth drew his dagger and cut the bonds around Hugh's arms. The stablemaster, summoning his helpers with a cry, gingerly entered the ring of steel, removed the saddle from the courier's spent mount, and put it on the back of Lord Rogar's dragon. Patting the dragon's neck, the stablemaster cheerfully passed the reins to the courier. The old man would not see the dragon again; whatever came into King Stephen's hands never left. But it was far better to lose it than be forced to thrust a knife into the throat of a creature who loved and trusted him, then watch its life spill out, wasted on a man dead and gone.

The courier mounted. Reaching down his hand, he held it out to Hugh. The assassin appeared for the first time to comprehend the fact that he was freed, his head was not on the block, that terrible sword was not about to sever his life. Moving stiffly and painfully, he stretched out his hand, caught hold of the courier's, and let the man pull him up on the dragon's back.

"Bring him a cloak. He'll freeze," ordered the courier. Many capes were offered, and he selected one of thick fur and tossed it to Hugh. The prisoner wrapped the cloak around his shoulders, reached back and gripped firmly the rim of the dragon's saddle. The courier spoke a word of command and the dragon, with a trumpeting call, spread his wings and soared upward.

The leader of the King's Own gave an ear-piercing whistle. The battle dragon flew down until the ropes dangling from its back were within the soldiers' reach. Swiftly they climbed back up and took their places on the dragon's large flat back. The dragon lifted its wings, and within moments the shadow was lifted, the sky was empty, night's gray gloom returned.

In the courtyard below, men glanced at each other in silence, their faces grim. Women, eyeing their husbands and sensing the tense atmosphere, hurriedly rounded up children, sharply reprimanding or slapping those who whined.

Magicka, his face livid, stalked into the keep.

Gareth waited until the wizard had departed, then ordered his men to set fire to the bier. The flames crackled as the men and women gathered around and began to sing their lord's soul to his ancestors.

The captain of the knights sang a song for the lord he had loved and loyally served for thirty years. When he finished, he watched the leaping, roaring flames consume the body.

"So you never killed a wizard? Hugh, my friend, you might yet get your chance. If I ever see you again . . . King's business!" Gareth grunted. "If you don't show up, well, I'm an old man with nothing left to live for." His eyes went to the wizard's quarters, where a robed silhouette could be seen looking out the window. Having his duties to attend to, the captain walked to the gate to make certain all was secure for the night.

Forgotten, an artist bereft of his art, Three-Chop Nick sat disconsolately upon the block.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOMEWHERE, VOLKARAN ISLES, MID REALM

THE COURIER KEPT HIS DRAGON UNDER TIGHT REIN. GIVEN ITS HEAD, THE SMALL riding dragon could swiftly outfly the larger battle dragon. But the courier did not dare fly unescorted. Elven corsairs often lurked in the clouds, waiting to snap up lone human dragonriders. And so the going was slow. But at length the torches of Ke'lith vanished behind them. The craggy peaks of Witheril soon obscured the smoke rising from the bier of the province's fallen lord.

The courier kept his dragon flying near the tail of the nightrae- the battle dragon. It was a sleek black wedge, cutting through night's gray gloom. The King's Own, strapped into their harnesses, were so many black lumps upon the nightrae's back.

The dragons flew over the small village of Hynox, visible only because its squat, square dwellings showed up plainly. Then they passed over Dandrak's shore and headed out into deepsky. The courier glanced up and down, this way and that, like a man who has not flown much before-an odd thing in a supposed king's messenger. He could see two of the three Wayward Isles, he thought. Hanastai and Bindistai showed up clearly. Even in deepsky, it was not truly dark-as dark as legend held night had been in the ancient world before the Sundering.

Elven astronomers wrote that there were three Lords of Night. And though the superstitious believed that these were giant men who conveniently spread their flowing cloaks over Arianus to give the people rest, the educated knew that the Lords of Night were really islands of coralite floating far above them, moving in an orbit that took them, every twelve hours, between Arianus and the sun.

Beneath these isles were the High Realm, purportedly where lived the mysteriarchs, powerful human wizards who had traveled there in voluntary exile. Beneath the High Realm was the firmament or day's stars. No one knew precisely what the firmament was. Many-and not just the superstitious-believed it to be a band of diamonds and other precious jewels floating in the sky. Thus, legends of the fabulous wealth of the mysteriarchs, who had supposedly passed through the firmament, evolved. There had been many attempts made by both elves and humans to fly up to the firmament and discover its secrets, but those who tried it never returned. The air was said to be so cold it would freeze blood.

Several times during the flight, the courier turned his head and glanced back at his companion, curious to note the reactions of a man who had been snatched from beneath the falling ax. The

courier was doomed to disappointment if he thought he would see any sign of relief or elation or triumph. Grim, impassive, the assassin's face gave away nothing of the thoughts behind its mask. Here was a face that could watch a man die as coolly as another might watch a man eat and drink. The face was, at the moment, turned away from the courier. Hugh was intently studying the route of their flight, a fact that the courier noticed with some uneasiness. Perhaps sensing his thoughts, Hugh raised his head and fixed his eyes upon the courier.

The courier had gained nothing from his inspection of Hugh. Hugh, however, appeared to gain a great deal from the courier. The narrowed eyes seemed to peel back skin and carve away bone, and might have, in a moment, laid bare whatever secrets were kept within the courier's brain, had not the young man shifted his eyes to his dragon's spiky mane. The courier did not look back at Hugh again.

It must have been coincidence, but when the courier noted Hugh's interest in their flying route, a blanket of fog immediately began to drift over and obscure the land. They were flying high and fast and there was not much to see beneath the shadows cast by the Lords of Night. But coralite gives off a faint bluish light, causing stands of forests to show up black against the silvery radiance of the ground. Landmarks were easy to locate. Castles or fortresses made of coralite that have not been covered over with a paste of crushed granite gleam softly. Towns, with their shining ribbons of coralite streets, show up easily from the air.

During the war, when marauding elven airships were in the skies, the people covered their streets with straw and rushes. But there was no war upon the Volkaran Isles now. The majority of humans who dwelt there thought fondly that this was due to their prowess in battle, the fear they had generated among the elflords.

The courier, considering this, shook his head in disgust at their ignorance. A few humans in the realm knew the truth- among them King Stephen and Queen Anne. The elves of Aristagon were ignoring Volkaran and Uylandia because they had much bigger problems to deal with at the moment-a rebellion among their own people.

When that rebellion was firmly and ruthlessly crushed, the elves would turn their attention to the kingdom of the humans- the barbaric beasts who had stirred up this rebellion in the first place. Stephen knew that this time the elves would not be content with conquering and occupying. This time they would rid themselves of the human pollution in their world once and forever. Stephen was quietly and swiftly setting up his pieces on the great gameboard, preparing for the final bitter contest.

The man sitting behind the courier didn't know it, but he was to be one of those pieces.

When the fog appeared, the assassin, with an inward shrug, immediately gave up attempting to ascertain where they were going. Being a ship's captain himself, he had flown most of the airships throughout the isles and beyond. They had been taking a negative rydai [3], traveling in the general direction of Kurinandistai. And then the fog had come and he could see nothing.

Hugh knew the mist had not sprung up by chance, and it only confirmed what he had begun to suspect-that this young "courier" was no ordinary royal flunky. The Hand relaxed and let the fog float through his mind. Speculating about the future did no good. Not likely to be much better than the present, the future could hardly be worse. Hugh had done all he could to prepare for it; he had his bone-handled, rune-marked dagger- slipped to him at the last moment by Gareth-tucked into his

belt. Hunching his bare, lacerated shoulders deep into the thick fur cape, Hugh concentrated on nothing more urgent than keeping warm.

He did, however, take a certain grim delight in noting that the courier seemed to find the fog a nuisance. It slowed their flight and he was continually having to dip down into clear patches that would suddenly swirl up before them, to see where they were. At one point it appeared that he had managed to get them lost. The courier held the dragon steady in the air, the creature fanning its wings to keep them hovering in the sky in response to the rider's command. Hugh could feel the courier's body tense, note the darting, shifting glances cast at various objects on the ground. It seemed, from muttered words spoken to himself, that they had flown too far in one direction. Altering course, the courier turned the dragon's head and they were once again flying through the mist. The courier cast an irritated glance at Hugh, as much as to say that this was his fault.

Early in his life, primarily for his own survival, Hugh had taught himself to be alert to all that happened around him. Now, in his fortieth cycle, such precaution was instinctive, a sixth sense. He knew the instant there was a shift in the wind, a rise or dip in the temperature. Though he had no timekeeping device, he could tell within a minute or two how much time had elapsed from one given period to another. His hearing was sharp, his eyes sharper. He possessed an unerring sense of direction. There were few parts of the Volkaran Isles or the continent of Uylandia that he hadn't traveled. Adventures in his youth had taken him to distant (and unpleasant) parts of the larger world of Arianus. Not given to boasting, which was a waste of breath-only a man who cannot conquer his deficiencies feels the need to convince the world he has none-Hugh had always been confident in his own mind that, set him down where you would, he could within a matter of moments tell where upon Arianus he stood.

But when the dragon, at the courier's soft-spoken command, descended from the sky and landed upon solid ground, Hugh gazed around him and was forced to admit that for the first time in his life he was lost. He had never seen this place before.

The king's messenger dismounted from the dragon. Removing a glowstone from the leather pouch, he held the stone in his open palm. Once exposed to the air, the magical jewel began to give off a radiant light. A glowstone gives off heat as well, and it is necessary to place it in a container. The courier walked unhesitatingly to a corner of a crumbling coralite wall surrounding their landing site. Leaning down, he deposited the glowstone in a crude iron lamp.

Hugh saw no other objects in the barren courtyard. Either the lamp had been left in expectation of the courier's arrival or he himself had placed it there before he departed. The Hand suspected the latter, mainly because there was no sign of anyone else nearby. Even the nightrae had been left behind. It was logical to assume, therefore, that the courier had started his journey from this place and obviously expected to return-a fact that might or might not have much significance. Hugh slid down off the dragon's back.

The courier lifted the iron lamp. Returning to the dragon, he stroked the proudly arched neck and murmured words of rest and comfort that caused the beast to settle itself down in the courtyard, tucking its wings beneath its body and curling its long tail round its feet. The head fell forward on the breast, the eyes closed, and the dragon breathed a contented sigh. Once asleep, a dragon is extremely difficult and even dangerous to wake, for sometimes during sleep the spells of submission and obedience which are cast over them can be accidentally broken and you've got a confused, irate, and loudly vocal creature on your hands. An experienced dragonrider never allows

his animal to sleep unless he knows there is a competent wizard nearby. Another fact Hugh noted with interest.

Coming close to him, the courier raised his lantern and stared quizzically into Hugh's face, inviting question or comment. The Hand saw no need to waste his breath in asking questions he knew would not be answered, and so stared back at the courier in silence.

The courier, nonplussed, started to say something, changed his mind, and softly exhaled the breath he had drawn in to speak. Abruptly he turned on his heel, with a gesture to the assassin to follow, and Hugh fell into step behind his guide. The courier led the way to a place that Hugh soon came to recognize, from early and dark childhood memories, as a Kir monastery.

It was ancient and had obviously been long abandoned. The flagstones of the courtyard were cracked and in many cases missing entirely. Coralite had grown over much of the standing outer structures that had been formed of the rare granite the Kir favored over the more common coralite. A chill wind whistled through the abandoned dwellings, where no light shone and had probably not shone for centuries. Bare trees creaked and dry leaves crunched beneath Hugh's boots.

Having been raised by the grim and dour order of Kir monks, the Hand knew the location of every monastery on the Volkaran Isles. He could not remember hearing of any that had ever been abandoned, and the mystery of where he was and why he had been brought here deepened.

The courier came to a baked-clay door that stood at the bottom of a tall turret. He fit an iron key into the lock. The Hand peered upward, but could not see a glimmer of light in any of the windows. The door swung open silently-an indication that someone was accustomed to coming here frequently, since the rusted hinges were well-oiled. Gliding inside, the courier indicated with a wave of his hand that Hugh was to follow. When both were in the cold and drafty building, the courier locked the door, tucking the key inside the bosom of his tunic.

"This way," he said. The direction was not necessary-there was only one possible way for them to go, and that was up. A spiral staircase led them round and round the interior of the turret. Hugh counted three levels, each marked by a clay door. All were locked, the Hand noted, surreptitiously testing each as they ascended.

On the fourth level, at another clay door, the iron key again made an appearance. A long narrow corridor, darker than the Lords of Night, ran straight and true before them. The courier's booted footsteps rang on the stone. Hugh, accustomed by habit to treading silently in his soft-soled, supple leather boots, made no more noise than if he had been the man's shadow.

They passed six doors by Hugh's count-three on his left and three on his right-before the courier raised a warning hand and they stopped at the seventh. Once again the iron key was produced. It grated in the lock and the door slid open.

"Enter," the courier said, standing to one side.

Hugh did as he was told. He was not surprised to hear the door shut behind him. No sound of a key turning in the lock, however. The only light in the room came from the soft glow given off by the coralite outside, but that faint shimmer illuminated the room well enough for the Hand's sharp eyes. He stood still a moment, closely inspecting his surroundings. He was, he discovered, not alone.

The Hand felt no fear. His fingers, beneath his cloak, were clasped around the hilt of his dagger, but that was only common sense in a situation like this. Hugh was a businessman and he recognized the setting of a business discussion when he saw it.

The other person in the room with him was adept at hiding. He was silent and kept himself concealed in the shadows. Hugh didn't see the person or hear him, but he knew with every instinct that had kept him alive through forty harsh and bitter cycles that there was someone else present. The Hand sniffed the air.

"Are you an animal? Can you smell me?" queried the voice—a male voice, deep and resonant. "Is that how you knew I was in the room?"

"Yeah, an animal," said Hugh shortly.

"And what if I had attacked you?" The figure moved over to stand by the window. He was outlined in Hugh's vision by the faint radiance of the coralite. The Hand saw that his interrogator was a tall man clad in a cape whose hem he could hear dragging across the floor. The man's head and face were covered by chain mail, only the eyes visible. But the Hand knew his suspicions had been correct. He knew to whom he was talking.

Hugh drew forth his dagger. "A hand's breadth of steel in your heart, Your Majesty."

"I am wearing a mail vest," said Stephen, King of the Volkaran Isles and the Uylandia Cluster. He was, seemingly, not surprised that Hugh recognized him.

A corner of the assassin's thin lips twitched. "The chain mail does not cover your armpit, Majesty. Lift your elbow." Stepping forward, Hugh placed thin, long fingers in the gap between the body armor and that covering the arm. "One thrust of my dagger, there . . ." Hugh shrugged.

Stephen did not flinch at the touch. "I must mention that to my armorer."

Hugh shook his head. "Do what you will, Majesty, if a man's determined to kill you, then you're dead. And if that's why you've brought me here, I can only offer you this advice: decide whether you want your corpse burned or buried."

"This from an expert," said Stephen, and Hugh could hear the sneer if he could not see it on the man's helmed face.

"I assume Your Majesty requires an expert, since you've gone to all this trouble."

The king turned to face the window. He had seen almost fifty cycles, but he was well-built and strong and able to withstand incredible hardships. Some whispered that he slept in his armor, to keep his body hard. Certainly, considering his wife's reputed character, he might also welcome the protection.

"Yes, you are an expert. The best in the kingdom, I am told."

Stephen fell silent. The Hand was adept at reading the words men speak with their bodies, not with their tongues, and though the king might have thought he was masking his turbulent inner emotions

quite well, Hugh noted the fingers of the left hand close in upon themselves, heard the silvery clinking of the chain mail as a tremor shook the man's body.

So it often was with men making up their minds to murder.

"You also have a peculiar conceit, Hugh the Hand," said Stephen, abruptly breaking his long pause. "You advertise yourself as a Hand of Justice, of Retribution. You kill those who allegedly have wronged others, those who are above the law, those whom-supposedly-my law cannot touch."

There was anger in the voice, and a challenge. Stephen was obviously piqued, but Hugh knew that the warring clans of Volkaran and Uylandia were currently being held together only by a mortar composed of fear and greed, and he did not figure it worth his while to argue the point with a king who undoubtedly knew it as well.

"Why do you do this?" Stephen persisted. "Is it some sort of attempt at honor?"

"Honor? Your Majesty talks like an elflord! Honor won't buy you a cheap meal at a bad inn in Therpes."

"Ah, the money?"

"The money. Any knife-in-the-back killer can be had for the price of a plate of stew. That's fine for those who just want their man dead. But those who've been wronged, those who've suffered at the hands of another-they want the one who brought them grief to suffer himself. They want him to know, before he dies, who brought about his destruction. They want him to experience the pain and the terror of his victims. And for this satisfaction, they're willing to pay a high price."

"I am told the risks you take are quite extraordinary, that you even challenge your victim to fair combat."

"If the customer wants it."

"And is willing to pay."

Hugh shrugged. The statement was too obvious for comment. The conversation was pointless, meaningless. The Hand knew his own reputation, his own worth. He didn't need to hear it recited back to him. But he was used to it. It was all part of business. Like any other customer, Stephen was trying to talk his way into committing this act. It amused the Hand to note that a king in this situation behaved no differently from his humblest subject.

Stephen had turned and was staring out the window, his gloved hand-fist clenched-resting on the ledge. Hugh waited patiently, in silence.

"I don't understand. Why should those who hire you want to give a person who has wronged them the chance to fight for his life?"

"Because in this they're doubly revenged. For then it's not my hand that strikes the killer down, Your Majesty, but the hands of his ancestors, who no longer protect him."

"Do you believe this?" Stephen turned to face him; Hugh could see the moonlight flash on the chain mail covering the man's head and shoulders.

Hugh raised an eyebrow. His hand moved to stroke the braided, silky strands of beard that hung from his chin. The question had never before been asked of him and proved, so he supposed, that kings were different from their subjects—at least this one was. The Hand moved to the window to stand next to Stephen. The assassin's gaze was drawn to a small courtyard below them. Covered over with coralite, it glowed eerily in the darkness, and he could see, by the soft blue light, the figure of a man standing in the center. The man wore a black hood. He held in his hand a sharp-edged sword. At his feet stood a block of stone. Twisting the ends of his beard, Hugh smiled.

"The only things I believe in, Your Majesty, are my wits and my skill. So I'm to have no choice. I either accept this job or else, is that it?"

"You have a choice. When I have described the job to you, you may either take it or refuse to do so."

"At which point my head parts company from my shoulders."

"The man you see is the royal executioner. He is skilled in his work. Death will be quick, clean. Far better than what you were facing. That much, at least, I owe you for your time." Stephen turned to face Hugh, the eyes in the shadow of the chain-mail helm dark and empty, lit by nothing within, reflecting no light from without. "I must take precautions. I cannot expect you to accept this task without knowing its nature, yet to reveal it to you is to place myself at your mercy. I dare not permit you to remain alive, knowing what you will shortly know."

"If I refuse, I'm disposed of by night, in the dark, no witnesses. If I accept, I'm entangled in the same web in which Your Majesty currently finds himself twisting."

"What more do you expect? You are, after all, nothing but a murderer," Stephen said coldly.

"And you, Your Majesty, are nothing more than a man who wants to hire a murderer." Bowing with an ironic flourish, Hugh turned on his heel.

"Where are you going?" Stephen demanded. "If Your Majesty will excuse me, I'm late for an engagement. I should've been in hell an hour previous." The Hand walked toward the door.

"Damn you! I've offered you your life!" Hugh didn't even bother to turn around. "The price is too low. My life's worth nothing, I don't value it. In exchange, you want me to accept a job so dangerous you've got to trap a man to force him to take it? Better to meet death on my own terms than Your Majesty's."

Hugh flung open the door. The king's courier stood facing him, blocking his way out. At his feet stood the glowlamp, and it cast its radiance upward, illuminating a face that was ethereal in its delicacy and beauty.

He's a courier? And I'm a Sartan, Hugh thought. "Ten thousand barls," said the young man. Hugh's hand went to the braided beard, twisting it thoughtfully. His eyes glanced sideways at Stephen, who had come up behind him.

"Douse that light," commanded the king. "Is this necessary, Trian?"

"Your Majesty"-Trian spoke with respect and patience, but it was the tone of one friend advising another, not the tone of a servant deferring to a master-"he is the best. There is no one else to whom we can entrust this. We have gone to considerable trouble to acquire him. We can't afford to lose him. If Your Majesty will remember, I warned you from the beginning-"

"Yes, I remember!" Stephen snapped. He stood silent, inwardly fuming. He would undoubtedly like nothing better than to order his "courier" to march the assassin to the block. The king would probably, at this moment, enjoy wielding the executioner's blade himself. The courier gently drew an iron screen over the light, leaving them in darkness.

"Very well!" the king snarled.

"Ten thousand barls?" Hugh couldn't believe it.

"Yes," answered Trian. "When the job is done."

"Half now. Half when the job is done."

"Your life now! The barls then!" Stephen hissed through clenched teeth.

Hugh took a step toward the door.

"Half now!" Stephen's words were a gasp, almost incoherent.

Hugh, bowing in acquiescence, turned back to face the king.

"Who's the victim?"

Stephen drew a deep breath. Hugh heard a clicking, catching choke in the king's throat, a sound vaguely similar to the rattle in the throats of the dying.

"My son," said the king.

## CHAPTER 5

### KIR MONASTERY, VOLKARAN ISLES, MID REALM

HUGH WAS NOT SURPRISED. IT HAD TO BE SOMEBODY CLOSE TO HIS MAJESTY, TO account for all the intrigue and secrecy. The Hand knew Stephen had an heir to the throne, nothing more than that. Judging by the king's age, the kid must be eighteen, twenty cycles. Old enough to get into serious trouble.

"The prince is here, in the monastery. We"-Stephen paused, trying to moisten a dry tongue-"have told him his life is in danger. He believes you are a nobleman in disguise, hired to take him to a secret hiding place where he will be safe." Stephen's voice cracked. Angrily he cleared his throat and resumed speaking. "The prince will not question this decision. He knows well enough what we say is true. There are those who are a threat to him-"

"Obviously," said Hugh.

The king stiffened, the chain mail clinked, and Stephen's sword rattled in its sheath.

The courier, with a whispered, "Restrain yourself, Your Majesty!" swiftly interposed his body between that of the king and the assassin.

"Remember, sir, whom you are addressing!" Trian rebuked.

Hugh ignored him. "Where am I to take the prince, Majesty? What am I to do with him?"

"I will provide you with the details," Trian answered.

Stephen had apparently had enough. His nerve was failing him. He stalked past Hugh toward the door, turning his body slightly so that he avoided touching the assassin. He probably did it unconsciously, but the Hand, recognizing the affront, smiled grimly in the darkness and struck back.

"There is a service I offer all my clients, Majesty."

Stephen paused, hand on the door handle. "Well?" He did not look around.

"I tell the victim who is having him killed and why. Shall I so inform your son, Majesty?"

The chain mail jingled softly; a tremor shook the man's body. But Stephen's head remained unbowed, his shoulders straight. "When the moment comes," he said, "my son will know."

Stiff-backed, straight-shouldered, the king walked into the corridor; Hugh heard his footsteps receding in the distance. The courier moved to stand next to the Hand, not speaking until he heard in the distance—the sound of a door slam shut.

"There was no call to say that," said Trian softly. "You wounded him deeply."

"And who is this 'courier,'" returned Hugh, "who hands out the monies of the royal treasury and worries about a king's feelings?"

"You are right." The young man had turned slightly toward the window and Hugh could see him smile. "I am not a courier. I am the king's magus."

Hugh raised an eyebrow. "Young, aren't you, Magicka?"

"I am older than I appear," answered Trian lightly. "Wars and kingship age a man. Magic does not. And now, if you will accompany me, I have clothing and supplies for your journey, as well as the information you require. This way."

The wizard stood aside to allow Hugh to pass. Trian's manner was respectful, but the Hand noted that the wizard was deftly blocking the corridor down which Stephen had passed with his body. Hugh turned in the direction indicated. Trian paused to pick up the glowlamp, removed the screen, and walked near Hugh, hovering close at his elbow.

"You must, of course, look and act the part of a nobleman, and we have provided suitable costume. One reason you were chosen is the fact that you are gently born, though not acknowledged. There is a true air of aristocracy about you that is inbred. The prince is highly intelligent and would not be fooled by a clod in expensive clothes."

After a short walk of no more than ten steps, the wizard brought Hugh to a halt outside one of the many doors lining the corridor. Using the same iron key, Trian inserted it into the lock and the door opened. Hugh stepped inside, and they traversed a corridor that ran at an angle to the first. This corridor was not as well-kept as the former. The walls were crumbling. Footing was treacherous on the cracked floor, and both Hugh and the wizard trod carefully and cautiously. Turning left, they entered another corridor; another left turn brought them to a third. Each successive corridor was shorter than the one previous. They were, Hugh recognized, moving deeper into the building's interior. After this, they began a series of zigs and zags-turns taken seemingly at random. Trian talked the entire way.

"It was advisable that we learn all we could about you. I know that you were born on the wrong side of the sheets following your father's liaison with a serving wench, and that your noble father-whose name, by the way, I was unable to discover- cast your mother out into the streets. She died during the elven attack on Firstfall and you were taken in and raised by Kir monks." Trian shuddered. "It must not have been an easy life," he said in a low undertone with a glance at the chill walls that surrounded them.

Hugh saw no need to comment and so kept silent. If the wizard thought to confuse or distract him by this conversation and the circumvented route they were taking, Trian was not succeeding. Kir monasteries are built generally along the same plans-a square inner courtyard surrounded on two sides by the monks' cells. On the third side were housed those who served the monks or, like Hugh, orphans taken in by the order. Here, too, were the kitchens, the "study" rooms, and the infirmary. . .

. . . The boy lying on the straw pallet on the stone floor tossed and turned. Though it was bitterly cold in the dark, unheated room, the child's skin burned with an unnatural heat and he had, in his convulsive struggles, thrown aside the thin blanket used to cover his bare limbs. A second boy, some years older than the sick child, who appeared to be about nine cycles, entered the chamber and stared pityingly down at his friend. In his hands, the older boy carried a bowl of water. Placing it carefully upon the floor, he knelt beside the sick child and, dipping his fingers into the water, dabbled the liquid onto the dry, fever-parched lips.

This seemed to ease the child's suffering. His thrashings stopped and his glazed eyes turned to see who cared for him. A wan smile spread over the thin, pale face. The older boy, with an answering smile, tore a piece of fabric from his ragged clothes and placed it in the water. Wringing it out, careful not to waste a drop, he sponged the child's hot forehead.

"It'll be all right-" the older boy started to say, when a dark shadow loomed over them, a cold and bony hand grasped his wrist.

"Hugh! What are you doing?" The voice was chill and dank and dark as the room.

"I- I was helping Rolf, Brother. He has the fever and Gran Maude said that if it didn't break he'd die-"

"Die?" The voice shook the stone chamber. "Of course he will die! It is his privilege to die an innocent child and escape the evil to which mankind is heir. That evil which daily must be scourged from our weak shells." The hand forced Hugh to his knees. "Pray, Hugh. Pray that your sin in attempting to thwart the ancestor's will by performing the unnatural act of healing be forgiven you. Pray for death-

The sick child whimpered and stared up at the monk in fear. Hugh flung aside the hand that held him down. "I'll pray for death," he said softly, rising to his feet. "I'll pray for yours."

The blow of the monk's staff caught Hugh across his upper body. He staggered. The second blow knocked him to the floor. Blows rained down upon the boy's body until the monk grew too tired to lift the weapon. Then he stalked out of the infirmary. The water bowl had been broken during the beating. Bruised and battered, Hugh groped about in the darkness until he found the rag-wet with water or his own blood, he didn't know which. But it was cool and soothing and he placed it gently on the forehead of his friend.

Lifting the thin body in his arms, Hugh held the sick boy close, rocking him awkwardly, soothing him until the body in his arms ceased to twitch and shiver and grew still and cold. . . .

"At the age of sixteen," Trian was continuing, "you ran away from the Kir. The monk to whom I spoke said that before you left, you broke into their record rooms and learned the identity of your father. Did you find him?"

"Yeah," answered the Hand, inwardly thinking: So this Trian has gone to some trouble over me. The magus has actually been to the Kir. He has questioned them, extensively, it seemed. Which means . . . Yes, of course. Now, isn't that interesting? Who will learn more about whom during this little walk?

"A nobleman?" Trian probed delicately.

"So he called himself. He was, in reality-how did you phrase it?-a clod in expensive clothes."

"You speak in the past tense. Your father is dead?"

"I killed him."

Halting, Trian stared at him. "You chill me to the bone! To speak of such a thing so carelessly-

"Why the hell should I care?" Hugh kept walking and Trian had to hurry to catch up. "When the bastard found out who I was, he came at me with his sword. I fought him-bare-handed. The sword ended up in his belly. I swore it was an accident, and the sheriff believed me. After all, I was only a boy and my 'noble' father was well-known for his lecherous ways-girls, youths, it didn't matter to him. I didn't tell anyone who I was, but let them think I was someone my father had abducted. The Kir had seen to it that I was well-educated. I can sound high-bred when I want to. The sheriff assumed I was some nobleman's son, stolen to feed my father's lust. He was more than willing to hush up the old lech's death, rather than start a blood feud."

"But it wasn't an accident, was it?"

A stone turned under Trian's foot. He reached out instinctively to Hugh, who caught the wizard's elbow and steadied him. They were descending, moving deeper and deeper into the monastery's interior.

"No, it wasn't an accident. I wrested the sword from him; it was easy, he was drunk. I spoke my mother's name, told him where she was buried, and stuck the blade in his gut. He died too quick. I've learned, since then."

Trian was pale, silent. Lifting the glowlamp in its iron lantern, he flashed it into Hugh's deeply lined, grim face. "The prince must not suffer," the wizard said.

"So, back to business." Hugh grinned at him. "And we were having such a pleasant chat. What did you hope to find out? That I'm not as bad as my reputation? Or the opposite? That I'm worse."

Trian was apparently not to be drawn off onto any side paths. Keeping his hand on Hugh's arm, he leaned close, speaking softly, though the only ones to hear them that the assassin could see were bats.

"It must be swift and clean. Unexpected. No fear. Perhaps, in his sleep. There are poisons-"

Hugh jerked his arm from the man's touch. "I know my business. I'll handle it that way, if that's what you want. You're the customer. Or rather, I take it you speak for the customer."

"That is what we want."

Reassured, sighing, Trian walked only a short distance further, then halted before another locked door. Instead of opening it, he placed the glowlamp on the floor and indicated with a motion of his hand that Hugh was to look inside. Stooping, placing his eye to the keyhole, the assassin peered into the room.

The Hand rarely felt emotion of any sort, never showed it. In this instance, however, his bored and disinterested glance through the keyhole at his intended victim sharpened to an intense, narrow-eyed stare. He was not looking at the plotting, scheming youth of eighteen who had sprung from Hugh's reasoning. Curled up on a pallet, fast asleep, was a towheaded, wistful-faced child who could not be older than ten.

Slowly Hugh straightened. The wizard, lifting the glowlamp, scanned the assassin's face. It was dark and frowning, and Trian sighed again, his delicate brows creased in worry. Placing a finger on his lips, he led Hugh to another room two doors down from the first. He unlocked it with the key, drew Hugh inside and softly shut the door.

"Ah," the wizard said softly, "there's a problem, isn't there?"

Hugh gave the room in which they stood a swift and comprehensive glance, then looked back at the anxious magus. "Yeah, I could use a smoke. They took my pipe away from me in prison. Got another?"

## CHAPTER 6

## KIR MONASTERY, VOLKARAN ISLES, MID REALM

"BUT YOU FROWNED, YOU SEEMED ANGRY. I ASSUMED-"

"-that I was feeling squeamish about butchering a small child?"

It is his privilege to die an innocent child, and escape the evil to which mankind is heir. The words came to him from the past. It was this dark and chill room, the cracked stone walls that brought the memory back to him. Hugh drove it down into the depths of his mind, sorry he'd recalled it. A warming blaze burned in the firepit. He lifted a coal with the tongs and held it to the bowl of a pipe the magus had produced from a pack lying on the floor. Stephen, it seemed, had thought of everything.

A few puffs and the sterego [4] glowed and old memories faded. "The frown was for myself, because I'd made a mistake. I'd misjudged . . . something. That sort of mistake can be costly. I would be interested to know, however, what a kid that age could have done to earn an early death."

"One might say ... he was born," answered Trian, seemingly before he thought, because he cast Hugh a swift furtive glance to see if he'd heard.

There was very little the assassin missed. Hugh paused, the hot coal held over the smoking bowl, and stared quizzically at the wizard.

Trian flushed. "You are being paid well enough not to ask questions," he retorted. "In fact, here is your money."

Fumbling in a purse that hung at his side, he produced a handful of coins and counted out fifty one-hundred-barl pieces.

"I trust the king's marker will be sufficient?" Trian held it out.

Hugh, raising an eyebrow, tossed the coal back into the fire. "Only if I can collect on it."

Puffing on the pipe to keep it lit, the Hand accepted the money and inspected it carefully. The coins were genuine, all right. A water barrel was stamped on the front, a likeness (though not a good one) of Stephen's head adorned the back. In a realm where most things were obtained by either barter or stealing (the king himself was a notorious pirate whose ravages committed among the elven shipping had helped him win his throne), the "double barl" coin as it was called was rarely seen, much less used. Its value was exchangeable in the precious commodity- water. [5]

This job would make Hugh's fortune. He would never have to work again, if he chose. And all for killing one little kid.

There is an abundance of water in the Low Realm-those isles in the heart of a perpetual storm known as the Maelstrom. But no dragon has yet been found who will fly into the Maelstrom. The elves, with their magical, mechanical dragonships, are able to sail the storm-tossed route and consequently hold a virtual monopoly on water. The prices the elves charge- when they'll sell it to humans at all-are exorbitant. Therefore, the raiding of elven transport ships and of water storage ports is not only financially lucrative for humans, it is a matter of life or death.

It didn't make sense. Hugh balanced the coins in his hand and stood looking at the wizard.

"Very well, I suppose you must know something," Trian admitted reluctantly. "You are, of course, familiar with the current situation between Volkaran and Uylandia?"

"No."

On a small table stood a pitcher, a large bowl, and a mug. Tossing the money on the table, the assassin lifted the water jug and, pouring its contents into the mug, tasted it critically. "Low Realm stuff. Not bad."

"Water for drinking and washing. You must at least appear to be a nobleman," returned Trian irritably. "In looks and smell. And what do you mean, you know nothing of politics?"

Casting off his cloak, Hugh leaned over the bowl and plunged his face into the water. Laving it over his shoulders, he picked up a bar of lye soap and began to scrub his skin, wincing slightly when the lather stung the raw lash marks on his back. "You spend two days in Yreni prison and see how you smell. As for politics, they have nothing to do with my business, beyond providing the occasional customer or two. I didn't even know for certain Stephen had a son-"

"Well, he does." The wizard's voice was cold. "And he also has a wife. It is no secret that their marriage is strictly one of convenience, to keep their two powerful nations from going for each other's throats and leaving us at the mercy of the elves. The lady would like very much, however, to have power consolidated in her hands. The crown of Volkaran cannot be passed on to a female, and the only way Anne can take control is through her son. We recently discovered her plot. My king barely escaped with his life this time. We fear he would not a next."

"And so you get rid of the kid. That solves your problem, I guess, but leaves your king without an heir."

Pipe clamped firmly between his teeth, Hugh stripped off his pants and splashed water abundantly over his naked body. Trian turned his back, either from modesty or perhaps sickened by the sight of numerous weals and battle scars-some fresh-that marred the assassin's skin.

"Stephen is not a fool. That problem is being resolved. When we declare war upon Aristagon, the nations will unite, including the queen's own. During the war, Stephen will divorce Anne and marry a woman of Volkaran. Fortunately His Majesty is of an age that he can still father children-many children. The war will force the nations to remain united despite Anne's divorce. By the time peace comes-if ever-Uylandia will be too weakened, too dependent on Stephen to break the ties."

"Very clever," Hugh conceded. Tossing the towel aside, he drank two mugs of the cool, sweet-tasting Low Realm water, then relieved himself in a chamber pot in a corner. Refreshed, he began to look over the various articles of clothing that were folded neatly upon a cot. "And what'll make the elves go to war? They've got their own problems."

"I thought you knew nothing of politics," muttered Trian caustically. "The cause of war will be the . . . death of the prince."

"Ah!" Hugh drew on the underclothing and the thick woolen hose. "All very neat and tidy. That's why you must trust the deed to me, rather than handle it yourself with a few magics in the castle."

"Yes." Trian's voice broke on the word; he nearly choked. The Hand paused in the act of drawing a shirt on over his head to give the magus a sharp glance. The wizard kept his back turned, however. Hugh's eyes narrowed. Laying the pipe aside, he continued to dress himself, but more slowly, paying keen attention to every nuance of the wizard's words and tone.

"The child's body must be found by our people on Aristagon. Not a difficult task. When the word goes forth that the prince has been taken captive by the elves, there will be raiding parties sent to look for him. I will provide you with a list of locations. We understand you have a dragonship-

"Of elven make and design. Isn't that convenient?" Hugh responded. "You had this well-thought-out, didn't you? Even to the point of framing me for Lord Rogar's murder."

Hugh pulled on a velvet doublet, black, braided in gold. A sword lay on the bed. Picking it up, examining it critically, Hugh slid the blade from the sheath and tested it with a quick, deft flick of his wrist. Satisfied, he replaced the blade and buckled the sword belt around his waist. He slipped his dagger into the top of his boot.

"And not only framing me for murder. Maybe committing the murder, as well?"

"No!" Trian turned to face him. "The house wizard murdered his lord, as you, I gather, have already guessed. We were on the watch and merely took advantage of the situation. Your dagger was 'appropriated' and substituted for the one in the body. The word was whispered to that knight friend of yours to the effect that you were in the neighborhood."

"You let me lay my head on the blood-slimed stone, let me see that maniac standing above me with his dull sword. And then you save my life and think that fear alone will buy me."

"It would have another man. With you, I had my doubts and-as you may have gathered-I had already expressed them to Stephen."

"So I take the kid to Aristagon, murder him, leave the body for the grieving father to find, who then shakes his fist and vows vengeance on the elves, and all humankind marches off to war. Won't it occur to someone that the elves aren't really that stupid? They don't need war with us right now. This rebellion of theirs is serious business."

"You seem to know more about the elves than you do your own people! Some might find that interesting."

"Some might, who don't know that I have to have my ship overhauled by elven shipbuilders and that its magic must be renewed by elven wizards."

"So you trade with the enemy-"

Hugh shrugged. "In my business, everyone's an enemy."

Trian licked his lips. The discussion was obviously leaving a bitter taste in his mouth, but that's what happens, thought Hugh, when you drink with kings.

"The elves have been known to capture humans and taunt us by leaving the bodies where they may easily be discovered," Trian said in a low voice. "You should arrange matters so that it appears-

"I know how to arrange matters." Hugh placed his hand on the wizard's shoulder and had the satisfaction of feeling the young man flinch. "I know my business." Reaching down, he picked up the coins, studied them again, then dropped two into a small inner pocket of the doublet. The remainder he tucked away carefully into his money pouch and stored that in a pack. "Speaking of business, how will I contact you for the rest of my pay, and what assurance do I have that I'll find it and not a feathered shaft in my ribs when I return?"

"You have our word, the word of a king. As for the feathered shaft"-now it was Trian who experienced satisfaction-"I assume you can take care of yourself."

"I can," said Hugh. "Remember that."

"A threat?" Trian sneered.

"A promise. And now," said the Hand coolly, "we'd best get going. We'll need to do our traveling by night."

"The dragon will take you to where your ship is moored-

"-and then return and tell you the location?" Hugh raised an eyebrow. "No."

"You have our word-

Hugh smiled. "The word of a man who hires me to murder his child."

The young wizard flushed in anger. "Do not judge him! You cannot understand-" Biting his tongue, he silenced himself.

"Understand what?" Hugh flashed him a sharp, narrow-eyed glance.

"Nothing. You said yourself you have no interest in politics." Trian swallowed. "Believe what you want of us. It makes little difference."

Hugh eyed him speculatively, decided that no more information would be forthcoming. "Tell me where we are and I will find my way from here."

"Impossible. This fortress is secret! We worked many years to make it a safe retreat for His Majesty."

"Ah, but you have my word," Hugh mocked. "It seems we're at an impasse."

Trian flushed again, his teeth clenched over his lip so tightly that, when at last he spoke, Hugh could see white marks upon the flesh.

"What of this? You provide me with a general location-say the name of an isle. I'll instruct the dragon to take you and the prince to a town on that isle and leave you. That's the best I can do."

Hugh considered this, then nodded in agreement. Knocking the ashes from the pipe, he tucked the long, curved stem with its small rounded bowl into the pack and inspected the remainder of the pack's contents. He evidently approved what he saw, for he cinched it tightly.

"The prince carries his own food and clothing, enough for"- Trian faltered, but forced the words out-"for a ... a month."

"It shouldn't take that long," said the Hand easily, throwing the fur cloak over his shoulders. "Depending on how close this town is to where we're bound. I can hire dragons-"

"The prince must not be seen! There are few who know him, outside of the court, but if by chance he were recognized-"

"Relax. I know what I'm doing," Hugh said softly, but there was a warning in the black eyes that the wizard thought best to heed.

Hugh hefted the pack and started for the door. Movement glimpsed from the corner of an eye drew his attention. Outside, in the courtyard, he saw the king's executioner bow in apparent response to some unheard command and then quit his post. The block alone remained standing in the courtyard. It gleamed with a white light strangely inviting in its coldness and purity and promise of escape. The Hand paused. It was as if he felt, for a brief instant, the invisible filament, cast out by Fate, wrap itself around his neck. It was tugging him away, dragging him on, entangling him in the same vast web in which Trian and the king were already struggling.

One swift, clean stroke of the sword would free him. One stroke against ten thousand barbs. Twisting the braid of his beard, Hugh turned to face Trian.

"What token shall I send to you?"

"Token?" Trian blinked, not understanding.

"To indicate the job is done. An ear? A finger? What?"

"Blessed ancestors forbend!" The young wizard was deathly white. He swayed unsteadily on his feet and was forced to lean against a wall to retain his balance. And so he did not see Hugh's lips tighten in a grim smile, the assassin's head incline ever so slightly, as if he'd just received an answer to a very important question.

"Please . . . forgive this weakness," Trian muttered, brushing a shaking hand across his damp skin. "I haven't slept in several nights and . . . and then the dragon ride up rydai and back again in such haste. Naturally, we want a token.

"The prince wears"-Trian gulped and then, suddenly, seemed to find some inner reserve of strength-"the prince wears an amulet, the feather of a hawk. It was given him when he was a babe by a mysteriarch from the High Realm. Due to its magical properties, the amulet cannot be removed unless the prince is"- here Trian faltered once again-"dead." He drew a deep, shivering breath. "Send us this amulet, and we will know . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What magic?" Hugh asked suspiciously.

But the wizard, pale as death, was silent as death. He shook his head, whether physically unable to speak or refusing to answer, Hugh couldn't tell. At any rate, it was obvious he wasn't going to find out any more about the prince or his amulet.

It probably didn't matter. Such magically blessed objects were commonly given to babes to protect them from disease or rat bites or keep them from tumbling headfirst into the firepit. Most of the charms, sold by roaming charlatans, had as much magical power in them as did the stone beneath Hugh's feet. A king's son, of course, was likely to have a real one, but Hugh knew of none-even those with true power-who could protect a person from, say, having his throat cut. Long ago, so legend told, there had been wizards who possessed such skill in their art, but not now. Not for many years, since they had left the Mid Realm and gone to dwell on the isles that floated high above. And one of these wizards had come down and given the kid a feather?

This Trian must take me for a real fool. "Pull yourself together, wizard," said Hugh harshly, "or the kid will suspect."

Trian nodded and gratefully drank the mug of water the assassin poured for him. Closing his eyes, the wizard drew several deep breaths, centered himself, and within a few moments managed to smile calmly and normally. Color returned to his ashen cheeks.

"I am ready now," Trian said, and led the way down the corridor to the chamber where the prince lay sleeping.

Inserting the key in the lock, the wizard silently opened the door and stepped back.

"Farewell," Trian said, tucking the key into the breast of his doublet.

"Aren't you coming? To introduce me? Explain what's going on?"

Trian shook his head. "No," he said softly. He was, Hugh noted, careful to keep his gaze straight ahead, not so much as glancing into the room. "It is now in your hands. I'll leave you the lamp."

Turning on his heel, the wizard practically fled down the corridor. He was soon lost in the shadows. Hugh's sharp ears caught the sound of a lock click. There was a rush of fresh air, swiftly shut off. The wizard was gone.

Shrugging, fingering the two coins in his pocket with one hand, the other reassuringly touching the hilt of his sword, the assassin entered the chamber. Holding the lamp high, he shone it on the child.

The Hand cared nothing for and knew less about children. He had no memory of his own childhood-little wonder, it had been brief. The Kir monks had no use for the state of blissful, carefree childish innocence. Early on, each child was exposed to the harsh realities of living. In a world in which there were no gods, the Kir worshiped life's only certainty-death. Life came to mankind haphazardly, at random. There was no choice, no help for it. Joy taken in such a dubious gift was seen to be a sin. Death was the bright promise, the happy release.

As part and parcel of their belief, the Kir performed those tasks which most other humans found offensive or dangerous. The Kir were known as the Brothers of Death.

They had no mercy for the living. Their province was the dead. They did not practice healing arts, but when the corpses of plague victims were tossed out into the street, it was the Kir who took them, performed the solemn rites, and burned them. Paupers who were turned from the doors of the Kir when they were alive gained entrance after death. Suicides-cursed by the ancestors, a disgrace to their families-were welcomed by the Kir, their bodies treated with reverence. The bodies of murderers, prostitutes, thieves-all were taken in by the Kir. After a battle, it was the Kir who tended to those who had sacrificed their lives for whatever cause was currently in vogue.

The only living beings to whom the Kir extended any charity at all were male children of the dead, orphans who had no other refuge. The Kir took them in and educated them. Wherever the monks went-to whatever scene of misery and suffering, cruelty and deprivation, they were called upon to attend-they took the children with them, using them as their servants and, at the same time, teaching them about life, extolling the merciful benefits of death. By raising these boys in their ways and grim beliefs, the monks were able to maintain the numbers of their dark order. Some of the children, like Hugh, ran away, but even he had not been able to escape the shadow of the black hoods under whose tutelage he had been reared.

Consequently, when the Hand gazed down at the sleeping face of the young child, he felt no pity, no outrage. Murdering this boy was just another job to him, and one that was likely to prove more difficult and dangerous than most. Hugh knew the wizard had been lying. Now he only had to figure out why.

Tossing his pack on the floor, the assassin used the toe of his boot to nudge the child. "Kid, wake up."

The boy started, his eyes flared open, and he sat up, reflexively, before he was truly awake. "What is it?" he asked, staring through a mass of tousled golden curls at the stranger standing above him. "Who are you?"

"I'm known as Hugh-Sir Hugh of Ke'lith, Your Highness," said the Hand, remembering in time he was supposed to be a nobleman and naming the first land holding that came to his mind. "You're in danger. Your father's hired me to take you to someplace where you'll be safe. Get up. Time is short. We must leave while it is still night."

Looking at the impassive face with its high cheekbones, hawk nose, braided strands of black beard hanging from the cleft chin, the child shrank back amidst the straw.

"Go away. I don't like you! Where is Trian? I want Trian!"

"I'm not pretty, like the wizard. But your father didn't hire me for my looks. If you're frightened of me, think how your enemies'll feel."

Hugh said this glibly, just for something to say. He was prepared to pick up the kid-kicking and screaming-and carry him off bodily. He was therefore somewhat surprised to see the child consider this argument with an expression of grave and keen intelligence.

"You make sense, Sir Hugh," the boy said, rising to his feet. "I will accompany you. Bring my things." He waved a small hand at a pack lying next to him on the straw.

It was on Hugh's tongue to tell the kid to bring his own things, but he recalled himself in time. "Yes, Your Highness," he said humbly, bending down.

He took a close look at the child. The prince was small for his age, with large pale blue eyes; a sweetly curved mouth; and the porcelain-white complexion of one who is kept protectively within doors. The light glistened off a hawk feather hanging from a silver chain around the child's neck.

"Since we are to be traveling companions, you may call me by my name," said the boy shyly.

"And what might that be, Your Highness?" Hugh asked, lifting the pack.

The child stared at him. The Hand added hastily, "I've been out of the country many years, Your Highness."

"Bane," said the child. "I am Prince Bane."

Hugh froze, motion arrested. Bane! The assassin wasn't superstitious, but why would anyone give a child such an ill-omened name? Hugh felt the invisible filament of Fate's web tighten around his neck. The image of the block came to him-cold, peaceful, serene. Angry at himself, he shook his head. The choking sensation vanished, the image of his own death disappeared. Hugh shouldered the prince's pack and his own.

"We must be going, Your Highness," he said again, nodding toward the door.

Bane lifted his cloak from the floor and threw it clumsily over his shoulders, fumbling at the strings that fastened it around his neck. Impatient to be gone, Hugh tossed the packs back to the ground, knelt, and tied the strings of the cloak.

To his astonishment, the prince flung his arms around his neck.

"I'm glad you're my guardian," he said, clinging to him, his soft cheek pressed against Hugh's.

The Hand held rigid, unmoving. Bane slipped away from him. "I'm ready," he announced in eager excitement. "Are we going by dragon? Tonight was the first time I'd ever ridden one. ' I suppose you must ride them all the time."

"Yes," Hugh managed to say. "There's a dragon in the courtyard." He lifted the two packs and the lamp. "If Your Highness will follow me - "

"I know the way," said the prince, skipping out of the room.

Hugh followed after him, the touch of the boy's hands soft and warm against his skin.

## CHAPTER 7

### KIR MONASTERY, VOLKARAN ISLES, MID REALM

THREE PEOPLE WERE GATHERED IN A ROOM LOCATED IN THE UPPER LEVELS OF THE monastery. The room had been one of the monks' cells and was, consequently, cold, austere, small, and windowless. The three-two men and one woman-stood in the very center of the room. One man had his arm around the woman; the woman had her arm around him, each supporting the other, or it seemed both might have fallen. The third stood near them.

"They are preparing to leave." The wizard had his head cocked, though it was not with his physical ear he heard the beating of the dragon's wings through the thick walls of the monastery.

"Leaving!" the woman cried, and took a step forward. "I want to see him again! My son! One more time!"

"No, Anne!" Trian's voice was stern; his hand clasped hold of the woman's and held it firmly. "It took long months to break the enchantment. It is easier this way! You must be strong!"

"I pray we have done right!" The woman sobbed and turned her face to her husband's shoulder.

"You should have gone along, Trian," said Stephen. He spoke harshly, though the hand with which he stroked his wife's hair was gentle and loving. "There is still time."

"No, Your Majesty. We gave this matter long and careful consideration. Our plans are sound. We must follow through on them and pray that our ancestors are with us and all goes as we hope."

"Did you warn this . . . Hugh?"

"A hard man such as that assassin would not have believed me. It would have done no good and might have caused a great deal of harm. He is the best. He is cold, he is heartless. We must trust in his skill and his nature."

"And if he fails?"

"Then, Your Majesty," said Trian with a soft sigh, "we should prepare ourselves to face the end."

## CHAPTER 8

### HET, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

AT ALMOST PRECISELY THE SAME TIME HUGH LAID HIS HEAD ON THE BLOCK IN KE'LITH, another execution-that of the notorious Limbeck Bolttightener-was being carried out thousands of menka [6] below on the isle of Drevlin. It would seem at first that these executions had nothing in common except the coincidence of their time. But the invisible threads cast by that immortal spider, Fate, had just wrapped around the soul of each of these oddly disparate people and would slowly and surely draw them together.

On the night that Lord Rogar of Ke'lith was murdered, Limbeck Bolttightner was seated in his cozy, untidy dwelling in Het-the oldest city on Drevlin-composing a speech.

Limbeck was, in his own language, a Geg. In any other language in Arianus, or in the ancient world before the Sundering, he would have been known as a dwarf. He stood a respectable four feet in height (without shoes). A full and luxuriant growth of beard adorned a cheerful, open face. He was developing a slight paunch, unusual in a hardworking young adult Geg, but that was due to the fact that he sat a great deal. Limbeck's eyes were bright, inquisitive, and extremely nearsighted.

He lived in a small cavern amid hundreds of other caverns that honeycombed a large mound of coralite located on the outskirts of Het. Limbeck's cave was different in certain respects from those of his neighbors, which seemed fitting since Limbeck himself was certainly an unusual Geg. His cave was taller than the others, being almost two Glegs high. A special platform, built of knobwood planks, allowed Limbeck to climb up to the ceiling of his dwelling and enjoy another of the cavern's oddities-windows.

Most Glegs didn't need windows; the storms that buffeted the isle made windows impractical, and in general, the Glegs were far more concerned with what was going on inside than outside. A few of the city's original buildings-the ones that had been built long, long ago by the hallowed and revered Mangers-had windows, however. Small panes of thick, bubble-filled glass set into recessed holes in the sturdy walls, the windows were perfectly suited to a lifetime of battering wind, rain, and hail. It was windows such as these that Limbeck had confiscated from an unused building in the center of town and transported to his cavern. A few turns of a borrowed bore-hoogus created the perfect-size openings for two windows on the ground floor and four more up above.

In this, Limbeck established the major difference between himself and the majority of his people. They looked only within. Limbeck liked to look without-even if looking without only brought visions of slashing rain and hail and lightning or (during those brief periods when the storms subsided) the vat-things and hummer coils and blazing bluezuzts of the Kicksey-Winsey.

One other feature of Limbeck's dwelling made it positively unique. On the front door, which faced the interior of the mound and its interconnecting streets, was a sign with the letters WUPP painted in red, marching along boldly at a definite uphill slant.

In all other aspects, the dwelling was a typical Geg dwelling- the furniture was functional and made out of whatever material the Glegs could find, there were no frivolous decorations. None could be found that would stay put. The walls and floors and ceiling of the snug cavern shook and quivered with the thumping, throbbing, whumping, zzzt, crackle, and clanging of the Kicksey-Winsey-the dominant feature, the dominant force on Drevlin.

Limbeck, the august leader of WUPP, did not mind the noise. He took comfort in it, having listened to it, albeit somewhat muffled, in his mother's womb. The Glegs revered the noise, just as they revered the Kicksey-Winsey. They knew that if the noise ceased their world would come to an end. Death was known among the Glegs as the Endless Hear Nothing.

Wrapped in the comforting banging and drumming, Limbeck struggled with his speech. Words came easily to him. Writing them down did not. What sounded fine and grand and noble when it came out of his mouth looked trite and pretentious when he saw it on paper. At least it did to Limbeck. Jarre always told him he was far too critical of himself, that his speeches read just as well as they sounded. But, as Limbeck always replied with a fond kiss on her cheek, Jarre was prejudiced.

Limbeck talked aloud as he wrote, in order to hear his words spoken. Being extremely nearsighted and finding it difficult to focus properly when he wore his spectacles, Limbeck invariably took them off when writing. His face pressed close to the paper, his quill scratching away, he got nearly as much ink up his nose and down his beard as he did on his speech.

"It is therefore our purpose, as Worshipers United for Progress and Prosperity, to bring to our people a time of good living now, not sometime in a future that may never come!" Limbeck, carried away, banged his fist on the table, sloshing ink out of the inkwell. A small river of blue crept toward the paper, threatening to inundate the speech. Limbeck stemmed the tide with his elbow; his frayed tunic soaked up the ink thirstily. Since the tunic had long ago lost any color it might have once possessed, the purple splotch on the sleeve was a cheerful improvement.

"For centuries we have been told by our leaders that we were placed in this realm of Storm and Chaos because we were not deemed worthy to take our place with the Welves above. We who are flesh and blood and bone could not hope to live in the land of the immortals. When we are worthy, our leaders tell us, then the Welves will come from Above and pass judgment on us and we shall rise up into the heavens. In the meantime, it is our duty to serve the Kicksey-Winsey and wait for that great day. I say"-here Limbeck raised a clenched and inky fist above his head-"I say that day will never come!

"I say that we have been lied to! Our leaders deluded! It is easy enough for the High Froman and the people of his script to talk of waiting for change until Judgment comes. They do not need a better life. They receive the God's payment. But do they disperse it equally among us? No, they make us pay, and pay dearly, for our share that we have already earned by the sweat of our brow!"

(I must pause here for cheering, Limbeck decided, and put a blot that was supposed to be a star to mark the place.)

"It is time to rise up and-" Limbeck hushed, thinking he heard a strange sound. Now, how anyone could hear anything in this land, other than the noise of the Kicksey-Winsey and the buffeting and roaring of the storms that swept daily over Drevlin, was a mystery to the Welves who came monthly for their shipment of water. But the GEGs, accustomed to the deafening noises, minded them no more than the rush of air through the leaves of a tree would bother an elflord of Tribus. A Geg could sleep soundly through a ferocious thunderstorm and start bolt upright at the rustle of a mouse in his pantry.

It was the sound of distant shouting that aroused Limbeck's attention and, stricken by sudden consciousness, he peered up at a timekeeping device (his own invention) set in a hollow of the wall. A complex combination of whirly-wheels and spokey-spikes, the device dropped one bean every hour on the hour into a jar below. Each morning, Limbeck emptied the jar of beans into the funnel above, and the measuring of the day began again.

Leaping to his feet, Limbeck peered nearsightedly into the jar, hastily counting up the beans. He groaned. He was late. Grabbing a coat, he was heading out the door when, at that moment, the next line in his speech occurred to him. He decided to take just a second to record it and sat back down. All thoughts of his appointment went clean out of his mind. Ink-bedaubed and happy, he once more lost himself in his rhetoric.

"We, the Worshipers United for Progress and Prosperity, advocate three tenets: The first, all of the scripts should come together and pool their knowledge of the Kicksey-Winsey and learn how it

operates so that we become its masters, not its slaves. [Blot for cheering.] The second, worshipers quit waiting for a day of Judgment and start to work now to better the quality of their own lives. [Another blot.] The third, worshipers should go to the Froman and demand a fair share in the Welves' payment. [Two blots and a scribble.]"

At this juncture, Limbeck sighed. He knew, from past experience, that his third tenet would be the most popular with the young GEGs impatient over serving long hours for inadequate pay. But of the three, Limbeck himself knew it to be the least important.

"If only they had seen what I saw!" Limbeck mourned. "If only they knew what I know. If only I could tell them!"

The sound of shouting broke in on his thoughts again. Raising his head, Limbeck smiled with fond pride. Jarre's speech was having its usual effect. She doesn't need me, Limbeck reflected, not sadly but with the pleasure of a teacher who takes pride in seeing a promising student blossom. She's doing fine without me. I'll just go ahead and finish.

During the next hour, Limbeck-smudged with ink and inspiration-was so absorbed in his project that he no longer heard the shouts and therefore did not notice that they changed in tone from cheers of approval to roars of anger. When a sound other than the monotonous whump and whuzzle of the Kicksey-Winsey did finally attract his attention, it was only because it was the sound of a door banging. Occurring some three feet away from him, it startled him immensely.

"Is that you, my dear?" he said, seeing a dark and shapeless blur that he assumed was Jarre.

She was panting as if from an undue amount of exertion. Limbeck patted his pocket for his glasses, couldn't find them, and groped with his hand over the table. "I heard the cheers. Your speech went well tonight, I gather. I'm sorry I wasn't there as I promised, but I got involved . . ." He waved a vague and ink-splattered hand at his work.

Jarre pounced on him. The GEGs are small in stature, but wide of girth, with large strong hands and a tendency to square jaws and square shoulders that give a general overall impression of squareness. Male and female GEGs are equally strong, since all serve the Kicksey-Winsey until the marrying age of about forty years, when both are required to retire and stay home to bear and raise the next generation of Kicksey-Winsey worshipers. Jarre was stronger even than most young women, having served the Kicksey-Winsey since she was twelve. Limbeck, not having served it at all, was rather weak. Consequently, when Jarre pounced on him, she nearly carried him out of his chair.

"My dear, what is the matter?" Limbeck said, gazing at her myopically, aware for the first time that something was the matter. "Didn't your speech go well?"

"Yes, it went well. Very well!" Jarre said, digging her hands into his tattered and ink-stained tunic and attempting to drag him to his feet. "Come on, we've got to get you out of here!"

"Now?" Limbeck blinked at her. "But my speech-"

"Yes, that's a good idea. We shouldn't leave it behind for evidence." Letting loose of Limbeck, Jarre hastily caught up the sheets of paper that were a by-product (no one knew why) of the Kicksey-

Winsey and began stuffing them down the front of her gown. "Hurry, we haven't much time!" She glanced around the dwelling hastily. "Is there anything else lying around that we should take?"

"Evidence?" questioned Limbeck, bewildered, searching for his glasses. "Evidence of what?"

"Of our Union," said Jarre impatiently. Cocking an ear, she listened and ran over to peer fearfully out one of the windows.

"But, my dear, this is Union Headquarters," began Limbeck when she shushed him.

"There! Hear that? They're coming." Reaching down, she picked up his glasses and stuck them hastily and at a precarious slant on his nose. "I can see their lanterns. The coppers. No, not the front. The back door, the way I came in." She began to push and hustle Limbeck along.

Limbeck stopped, and when a Geg stops dead in his tracks, it is almost impossible to shift or budge him. "I'm not going anywhere, my dear, until you tell me what's happened." He calmly adjusted his spectacles.

Jarre wrung her hands, but she knew the Geg she loved. Limbeck had a stubborn streak in him that not even the Kicksey-Winsey could have knocked out. She had learned to overcome this on former occasions by moving fast and not giving him time to think, but, seemingly, that wasn't going to work tonight.

"Oh, very well," she said in exasperation, her eyes darting constantly to the front door. "We had a big crowd at the rally. Bigger than anything we'd expected-"

"That's marvel-"

"Don't interrupt. There isn't time. They listened to my words and-oh, Limbeck, it was so wonderful!" Despite her impatience and fear, Jarre's eyes shone. "It was like setting a match to saltpeter. They flared up and exploded!"

"Exploded?" Limbeck began to get uneasy. "My dear, we don't want them to explode-"

"You don't!" she said scornfully. "But now it's too late. The fire's burning and it's up to us to guide it, not try to put it out again." Her fist clenched, her square chin jutted forward. "Tonight we attacked the Kicksey-Winsey!"

"No!" Limbeck stared, aghast. So shaken was he by this news that he sat down quite suddenly and unexpectedly.

"Yes, and I think we damaged it permanently." Jarre shook her thick mane of short-cut curly brown hair. "The coppers and some of the clarks rushed us, but all of our people escaped. The coppers'll be coming to the Union Headquarters in search of you, my dear, and so I came to take you away. Listen!" Sounds of blows could be heard hammering on the front door; hoarse voices were shouting to open up. "They're here! Quickly! They probably don't know about the back-"

"They're here to take me into custody?" Limbeck said, pondering.

Jarre, not liking the expression on his face, frowned and tugged at him, trying to pull him back up on his feet. "Yes, now come-"

"I'll stand trial, won't I?" he said slowly. "Most likely before the High Froman himself!"

"Limbeck, what are you thinking?" Jarre had no need to ask. She knew all too well. "Punishment for hurting the Kicksey-Winsey is death!"

Limbeck brushed this aside as a minor consideration. The voices grew louder and more persistent. Someone called for a chopper-cutter.

"My dear," said Limbeck, a look of almost holy radiance illuminating his face, "at last I'll have the audience I've sought all my life! This is our golden opportunity! Just think, I'll be able to present our cause to the High Froman and the Council of the Clans! There'll be hundreds present. The newssingers and the squawky-talk-"

The blade of the chopper-cutter smashed through the wooden door. Jarre turned pale. "Oh, Limbeck! This is no time to play at being a martyr! Please come with me now!"

The chopper-cutter wrenched itself free, disappeared, then smashed through the wood again.

"No, you go ahead, my dear," said Limbeck, kissing her on the forehead. "I'll stay. I've made up my mind."

"Then I'll stay too!" Jarre said fiercely, entwining her hand around his.

The chopper-cutter crashed into the door, and splinters flew across the room.

"No, no!" Limbeck shook his head. "You must carry on in my absence! When my words and my example inflame the worshipers, you must be there to lead the revolution!"

"Oh, Limbeck"-Jarre wavered-"are you sure?"

"Yes, my dear."

"Then I'll go! But we'll spring you!" She hastened to the doorway, but could not forbear pausing for one final glance behind her. "Be careful," she pleaded.

"I will, my dear. Now, go!" Limbeck made a playful shooing motion with his hand.

Blowing him a kiss, Jarre disappeared through the back door just as the coppers crashed through the splintered door in the front.

"We're looking for one Limbeck Bolttightner," said a copper, whose dignity was somewhat marred by the fact that he was plucking splinters of wood out of his beard.

"You have found him," said Limbeck majestically. Thrusting out his hands, wrists together, he continued, "As a champion of my people, I will gladly suffer any torture or indignity in their names! Take me to your foul-smelling, blood-encrusted, rat-infested dungeon."

"Foul-smelling?" The copper was highly incensed. "I'll have you know we clean our jail regular. And as for rats, there ain't been one seen there in twenty years, has there, Fred?" He appealed to a fellow copper, who was crashing through the broken door. "Ever since we brought in the cat. And we washed up the blood from last night when Durkin Wrenchwielder come in with a split lip on account of a fight with Mrs. Wrenchwielder. You've no call," added the copper testily, "to go insultin' my jail."

"I ... I'm very sorry," stammered Limbeck, taken aback. "I had no idea."

"Now, come along with you," said the copper. "What have you got your hands stuck in my face for?"

"Aren't you going to shackle me? Bind me hand and foot?"

"And how would you walk? I suppose you'd expect us to carry you!" The copper sniffed. "A pretty sight we'd look, haulin' you through the streets! And you're no lightweight, neither. Put your hands down. The only pair of manacles we had busted some thirty years ago. We keep 'em for use when the young'uns get outta hand. Sometimes parents like to borrow 'em to throw a scare into the little urchins."

Having been threatened with those manacles often in his own turbulent urchinhood, Limbeck was crushed.

"Another illusion of youth fled," he said to himself sadly as he allowed himself to be led away to a prosaic, cat-patrolled prison.

Martyrdom was not starting out well.

## CHAPTER 9

### HEX TO WOMBE DREVLIN, LOW REALM

LIMBECK WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE FLASHRAFT RIDE ACROSS DREVLIN TO THE capital city of Wombe. He had never ridden a flashraft before. Nobody in his scrift had, and there were more than a few mutterings among the crowd about common criminals getting privileges to which ordinary citizens weren't entitled.

Somewhat hurt at being referred to as a common criminal, Limbeck climbed up the steps and entered what resembled a gleaming brass box fitted with windows and perched on numerous metal wheels that ran along a metal track. Taking his spectacles from his pocket, Limbeck hooked the frail wire stems over his ears and peered at the crowd. He easily located Jarre among the throng, though her head and face were hidden in the shadows of a voluminous cloak. It was too dangerous for any sort of sign to pass between them, but Limbeck did not think it would hurt if he brought his thick fingers to his lips and blew her a small kiss.

A couple standing alone at the far end of the platform caught his attention and he was astounded to recognize his parents. At first it touched him that they would come to see him off. However, a glimpse of his father's smiling face, half-hidden by a gigantic muffler he had wound around his

neck to ensure that no one knew him, made Limbeck understand that his parents had not come out of filial devotion but probably to make certain they were actually seeing the last of a son who had brought them nothing but turmoil and disgrace. Sighing, Limbeck settled back in the wooden seat.

The flashraft's driver, commonly known as a flasher, glared back at his two passengers, Limbeck and the copper who accompanied him, in the only compartment on the vehicle. This unusual stop in the station of Het had put the flasher way behind schedule and he didn't want to waste any more time. Seeing Limbeck start to stand up-the Geg thought he saw his old teacher in the crowd-the flasher threw both sections of his carefully parted beard over his shoulders, grasped two of the many tin hands before him, and pulled. Several metal hands sticking up from the compartment's roof reached out and grabbed hold of a cable suspended above them. An arc of blue lightning flared, a whistle-toot shrilled loudly, and, amidst crackling zuzts of electricity, the flashraft jolted forward.

The brass box rocked and swayed back and forth, the hands above them that clung to the cable sparked alarmingly, but the flasher never seemed to notice. Grasping another tin hand, he pushed it clear to the wall and the vehicle picked up speed. Limbeck thought he had never in his life experienced anything so marvelous.

The flashraft was created long ago by the Mangers for the benefit of the Kicksey-Winsey. When the Mangers mysteriously disappeared, the Kicksey-Winsey took over the operation and kept the flashraft alive just as it kept itself alive. The GEGs lived to serve both.

Each Geg belonged to a scrift-a clan that had lived in the same city and had worshiped the same part of the Kicksey-Winsey since the Mangers first brought the GEGs to this realm. Each Geg performed the same task his father performed before him and his grandfather before him and his grandfather before him.

The GEGs did their work well. They were competent, skilled, and dexterous, but unimaginative. Each Geg knew how to serve his or her particular part of the Kicksey-Winsey and had no interest in any other part. Further, he never questioned the reasons for doing what he did. Why the whirly-wheel had to be turned, why the black arrow of the whistle toot should never be allowed to point to red, why the pull-arm needed to be pulled, the push-arm pushed, or the cranky-clank cranked were questions that did not occur to the average Geg. But Limbeck was not an average Geg.

Delving into the whys and wherefores of the great Kicksey-Winsey was blasphemous and would call down the wrath of the clarks-the ecclesiastical force on Drevlin. Performing his or her act of worship as taught by the scrift teachers and doing it well was the height of ambition for most GEGs. It would gain them (or their children) a place in the realms above. But not Limbeck.

After the novelty of moving at a terrific rate of speed wore off, Limbeck began to find riding in the flashraft extremely depressing. The rain dashed against the windows. Natural lightning-not the blue lightning created by the Kicksey-Winsey-streaked down from the swirling clouds and occasionally fought the blue lightning, causing the brass box to buck and jolt. Hail clattered on the roof. Lumbering around, beneath, above, and through huge sections of the Kicksey-Winsey, the flashraft seemed to be smugly exhibiting-to Limbeck, at least-the enslavement of the GEGs.

The flames from gigantic furnaces lit the oppressive and everlasting gloom. By their light, Limbeck could see his people- nothing more than squat, dark shadows against the glowing red- tending to the Kicksey-Winsey's needs. The sight stirred an anger in Limbeck, an anger that he realized

remorsefully had been banked and nearly allowed to die out as he'd grown absorbed in the business of organizing WUPP.

He was glad to feel the anger again, glad to accept its offer of strength, and was just pondering on how he could work this into his speech when a comment from his companion brought a momentary interruption to his thoughts.

"What was that?" asked Limbeck.

"I said, it's beautiful, ain't it?" repeated the copper, staring at the Kicksey-Winsey in reverent awe.

That does it, thought Limbeck, thoroughly outraged. When I come before the High Froman, I will tell them the truth. . . .

. . . "Get out!" shouted the teacher, his beard bristling with rage. "Get out, Limbeck Bolttightner, and never let me see those weak eyes of yours in this school again!"

"I don't understand why you're so upset." Young Limbeck rose to his feet.

"Out!" howled the Geg.

"It was a perfectly sousound question."

The sight of his instructor rushing at him, upraised wrench in hand, caused the pupil to beat a swift and undignified retreat from the classroom. Fourteen-turn Limbeck left the Kicksey-Winsey school in such haste that he didn't have time to put on his spectacles, and consequently, when he reached the red creaking cog, he took a wrong turn. The exits were marked, of course, but the nearsighted Limbeck couldn't read the writing. He opened a door he thought led to the corridor that led to the marketplace, got a blast of wind right in the face, and realized that this particular door opened on Outside.

The young Geg had never been Outside. Due to the fearsome storms that swept over the land on the average of one or two an hour, no one ever left the shelter of the town and the comforting presence of the Kicksey-Winsey. Rife with tunnels and covered walkways and underground passages, the cities and towns of Drevlin were constructed in such a way that a Geg could go for months without ever feeling a raindrop splash on his face. Those who had to travel used the flashraft or the Gegavators. Few Gogs ever, ever walked Outside.

Limbeck hesitated on the doorstep, peering nearsightedly into the windswept, rain-drenched landscape. Though the wind blew strongly, there was a lull between storms and a feeble gray light was strained through the perpetual clouds-as close as Drevlin ever came to basking in the rays of Solarus. The light made the ordinarily gloomy landscape of Drevlin almost lovely. It winked and blinked on the many whirling and pumping and turning arms and claws and wheels of the Kicksey-Winsey. It glistened in the clouds of steam rolling up to join their cousins in the skies. It made the dreary and drab landscape of Drevlin, with its gouges and slag heaps and pits and holes, seem almost attractive (particularly if all one could see was a kind of pleasant, fuzzy, mud-colored blur).

Limbeck knew at once he had taken a wrong turning. He knew he should go back, but the only place he had to go was home, and he was aware that by now word of his getting kicked out of Kicksey-Winsey school would have reached his parents. Braving the terrors of Outside was far

more attractive than braving the wrath of his father, and so Limbeck, without a second thought, walked Outside, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Learning to walk in mud was an experience all in itself. On his third step, he slipped and plunked down heavily in the muck. Upon rising, he discovered that one boot was firmly mired, and it took all his strength to tug it out. Peering dimly around, Limbeck concluded that the slag heaps might provide better walking. He slogged his way through the muck and eventually reached the piles of coralite that had been tossed aside by the strong digger hands of the Kicksey-Winsey. Climbing up on the hard, pocked surface of the coralite, Limbeck was pleased to note he was right-walking was much easier up here than in the mud.

He guessed, too, that the view should be spectacular, and thought he really should see it. Pulling out his spectacles, he hooked them over his ears and gazed around.

The smokestacks and holding tanks, lightning-flinging arms and huge revolving wheels of the Kicksey-Winsey thrust up from the flat plains of Drevlin; many of them towering so far into the sky that their steaming heads were lost in the clouds. Limbeck stared at the Kicksey-Winsey in awe. One tended, when one served only one portion of the gigantic creation, to concentrate on just that one part and lose sight of the whole. The old saying about not seeing the wheel for the cogs came to Limbeck's mind.

"Why?" he asked (which was, by the way, the very question that had caused him to be thrown out of school). "Why is the Kicksey-Winsey here? Why did the Mangers build it, then leave it? Why do the immortal Welves come and go every month and never fulfill their promise to lift us up into the shining realms above? Why? Why? Why?"

The questions beat in Limbeck's head until either these resounding whys or the wind rushing past him or the act of staring up at the gleaming structure of the Kicksey-Winsey or all three together began to make him dizzy. Blinking, he took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes. Clouds were massing on the horizon, but the Geg judged it would be some time yet before another storm swept over the land. If he went home now, a storm of a different sort would sweep over him. Limbeck decided to explore.

Fearing he might fall and break his precious spectacles, Limbeck tucked them carefully into the pocket of his shirt and began to make his way across the slag heap. Being short and stocky and deft in their movements, GEGs are remarkably surefooted. They clump across narrow catwalks built hundreds of feet above the ground without turning a hair in their beards. GEGs desiring to go from one level to another will often catch hold of the spokes of one of the huge wheels and ride it up, dangling by their hands, from the bottom to the top. Despite the fact that he couldn't see very clearly, Limbeck soon figured out how to traverse the cracked and broken piles of coralite.

He was just moving really well and making some headway when he stepped on a loose chunk that tilted and threw him sideways. After that, he had to concentrate on watching his footing, and it was undoubtedly due to this that he forgot to watch the approach of the clouds. It was only when a gust of wind nearly blew him off his feet and drops of rain splattered into his eyes that he remembered the storm.

Hastily Limbeck pulled out his spectacles, put them on, and looked around. He had traveled quite a distance without knowing it. The clouds were swooping down on him, the shelter of the Kicksey-Winsey was some distance away, and it would take him a long time to retrace his route among the

broken coralite. The storms on Drevlin were fierce and dangerous. Limbeck could see blackened holes blown in the coralite from the deadly lightning strikes. If the lightning didn't get him, there was no doubt that the giant hailstones would, and the Geg was just beginning to think that he wouldn't have to worry about facing his father ever again when, turning completely around, he saw a large Something on the fast-darkening horizon.

Just what the Something was, he couldn't tell from this distance (his spectacles were covered with water), but there was a chance that it might offer shelter from the storm. Keeping his spectacles on, knowing that he would need them to help locate the object, Limbeck tottered and stumbled over the slag heap.

Rain began pouring down, and Limbeck soon discovered he could see better without spectacles than he could with them, and pulled them off. The object was now nothing but a blur in front of him, but it was a blur that was rapidly growing larger, indicating he was getting nearer. Without his spectacles, Limbeck couldn't see what it was, until he was actually standing right in front of it.

"A Welf ship!" he gasped.

Though he had never seen one, the Geg recognized the ship instantly from the descriptions given by those who had. Made of dragon skin stretched over wood, with huge wings that kept it soaring in the air, the ship was monstrous in both appearance and size. The magical power of the Welves kept it afloat, carrying them from the heavens to the lowly realm of the Gecs below.

But this ship wasn't flying or floating. It was lying on the ground, and Limbeck, staring at it nearsightedly through the driving rain, could have sworn-if such a thing were possible for a ship of the immortal Welves-that it was broken. Pieces of sharp wood jutted up at odd angles. The dragon skin was torn and rent, leaving gaping holes.

A bolt of lightning striking quite near him, and the resultant thunder, caused the Geg to remember his danger. Hurriedly he leapt into one of the holes that had been torn in the side of the ship.

A sickening smell made Limbeck gag.

"Ugh." He grasped his nose with his hand. "It reminds me of the time the rat crawled up the chimney and died. I wonder what's causing it."

The storm had settled in; the darkness inside the ship was intense. The lightning strikes were almost continuous, however, providing brief flashes of illuminating light before the ship was once again plunged into pitch-darkness.

The light didn't help Limbeck much. Nor did his spectacles, when he finally remembered to put them on. The interior of the ship was strange and made no sense to him. He couldn't tell up from down or what was floor or wall. Objects were scattered about, but he didn't know what they were or what they did and was reluctant to touch them. He had a fear, in the back of his mind, that if he bothered anything the strange craft might suddenly rise up and fly off with him. And though the thought of such an adventure was somewhat exciting, Limbeck knew that if his father had been mad before, he would positively foam at the mouth to hear that his son had in any way annoyed the Welves.

Limbeck resolved to keep near the doorway, holding his nose, until the storm ended and he could find his way back to Het. But the whys and whats and wherefores that were continually plunging him into trouble in school began buzzing in his brain.

"I wonder what those are," he muttered, staring at a number of fascinating-looking blurs lying scattered about on the floor just a few feet in front of him.

Cautiously he drew nearer. They didn't look dangerous. In fact, they looked like . . .

"Books!" said Limbeck in astonishment. "Just like the ones the old clark used to teach me to read."

Before Limbeck quite knew what was happening, the "why" was propelling him forward.

He was very near the objects and could see, with growing excitement, that they were books, when his foot struck against something that was soft and squishy. Leaning down, gagging at the foul smell, Limbeck waited for another lightning flash to show him the obstacle.

It was, he saw in horror, a bloated and decaying corpse. . . .

"Hey, wake up," said the copper, poking Limbeck in the side. "Wombe's the next stop."

## CHAPTER 10

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

AN ORDINARY FELON ON DREVLIN WOULD HAVE BEEN BROUGHT BEFORE HIS LOCAL Froman for judgment. Petty thefts, drunk-and-disorderlies, the odd brawl-these were considered to fall under the domain of the head of the defendant's own scrift. A crime against the Kicksey-Winsey, however, was considered high treason and therefore the defendant was required to go before the High Froman.

The High Froman was head of the most important scrift in Drevlin-at least that was how his clan viewed themselves and that was how other Glegs were expected to view them. It was their scrift which was in charge of the Palm-the hallowed altar where, once a month, the Welves descended from the heavens in their powerful winged dragon ships and accepted the homage of the Glegs, given in the form of holy water. In return, the Welves left behind "blessings" before they departed.

The capital city of Wombe was very modern, compared to other cities on Drevlin. Few of the original buildings constructed by the Mangers remained standing. The Kicksey-Winsey, needing to expand, had leveled and built over them, thus destroying much of the existing housing of the Glegs. Nothing daunted, the Glegs had simply moved into sections of the Kicksey-Winsey that the Kicksey-Winsey had abandoned. It was considered quite fashionable to live in the Kicksey-Winsey. The High Froman himself had a house in what had once been a holding tank.

The High Froman held court inside a building known as the Factree. A huge structure, one of the largest on Drevlin, the Factree was made of iron and corrugated steel and was, so legend had it, the birthplace of the Kicksey-Winsey. The Factree had long since been abandoned and partially demolished, the Kicksey-Winsey having fed parasitically off that which gave it birth. But here and

there, standing silent and ghostly within the eerie light of the glimmerglamps, could be seen the skeleton of a clawlike arm.

The Factree was a sacred and holy place to the GEGs. Not only was it the Kicksey-Winsey's birthplace, but it was in the Factree that the GEGs' most hallowed icon was located-the brass statue of a Manger. The statue, which was the figure of a robed and hooded man, was taller than the GEGs and considerably thinner. The face had been carved in such a way that it was shadowed by the hood. There was a suggestion of a nose, and the outlines of lips and prominent cheekbones and the rest blended into the metal. In one of its hands the Manger grasped a huge, staring eyeball. The other arm, held in a crooked position, was hinged at the elbow.

Standing on a raised dais next to the statue of the Manger was a tall overstuffed chair. It had obviously been constructed for those built along different dimensions than the GEGs, for its seat was some three GEG-feet off the floor, its back was nearly as tall as the Manger, and it was extremely narrow. This chair was the High Froman's ceremonial sit-up-high, and he squeezed his large body into it on occasions of state. He overlapped the sides and his feet dangled well above the dais, but these minor detractions in no way reduced his dignity.

The Froman's audience sat cross-legged on the concrete floor beneath the dais or perched on ancient limbs of the Kicksey-Winsey or stood around on the balconies overlooking the main floor. On this day, a considerable crowd had jammed into the Factree to witness the trial of the GEG who was a reputed troublemaker, the leader of an insurrectionist, rebellious group which had finally gone so far as to inflict injury on the Kicksey-Winsey. Most of the night scrifts for every sector were present, as were those GEGs over forty who were no longer working on the Kicksey-Winsey but were staying home raising young. The Factree was filled over and beyond capacity, and those who could not see or hear directly were kept informed of the proceedings by the squawky-talk-a sacred and mysterious means of communication developed by the Mangers.

A whistle-toot, blowing three times, called for relative silence. That is, the GEGs kept quiet, the Kicksey-Winsey didn't.

The proceedings were interspersed with whoosh, thump, whang, zizzt, occasional sharp cracks of thunder, and howling gusts of wind from Outside. Being accustomed to these noises, the GEGs considered that quiet had descended and the ceremony of Justick could be commenced.

Two GEGs-one's shaved face painted black, the other white- stepped out from behind the statue of the Manger, where they had been standing, waiting for the signal. In their hands they held between them a large metal sheet. Casting their stern gazes over the crowd to see that all was in order, the two GEGs began to vigorously shake the metal, creating the effect of thunder.

Real thunder was not in the least impressive to the GEGs, who heard it every day of their lives. Artificial thunder, reverberating through the Factree over the squawky-talk, sounded eerie and wonderful and drew gasps of awe and murmurs of approval from the crowd. When the last vibrations of the quivering sheet had faded away, the High Froman made his appearance.

A GEG of some sixty turns, the High Froman was from the wealthiest, most powerful clan in Drevlin-the Longshoremans. His family had held the title of High Froman for several generations, despite attempts by the Dockworkers to wrest it from them. Darral Longshoreman had given his years of service to the Kicksey-Winsey before taking over the duties of his office upon his own

father's death. Darral was a shrewd Geg, nobody's fool, and if he enriched his own clan at the expense of others in Drevlin, he was merely carrying on a time-honored tradition.

High Froman Darral was dressed in the ordinary working clothes of the GEGS-baggy trousers falling over thick, clumping boots, and a high-collared smock that fit rather tightly over his stout middle. This plain outfit was incongruously topped by a crown of cast iron-a gift from the Kicksey-Winsey-which was the High Froman's pride (despite the fact that after about fifteen minutes it gave him a pounding headache). Around his shoulders he wore a cape made of large and ugly bird feathers-the feathers of the tier-(a gift from the Welves), which signified the GEGS' symbolic desire to fly upward to heaven. In addition to the feathered cape, which appeared only at trials of Justick, the High Froman had painted his face gray, a symbolic blending of the black and white faces of the Geg warders now standing on either side of him and designed to prove to the GEGS that Darral-in all things-was neutral.

In his hand, the High Froman held a long stick from which dangled a long, pronged tail. At a signal from Darral, one of the warders took the end of this tail and inserted it reverently and with muttered words of prayer to the Manger into the base of the statue. A bulbous glass ball affixed on top of the stick hissed and sputtered alarmingly for an instant, then sullenly began to glow with a bluish-white light. The GEGS murmured appreciatively, many parents drawing the attention of children in the audience to similar glimmerglamps that hung upside-down like bats from the ceiling and lit the GEGS' storm-ridden darkness.

After the murmurs again died down, there was a brief wait for a particularly violent whoosh-whang from the Kicksey-Winsey to subside; then the High Froman launched into his speech.

Facing the statue of the Manger, he raised his flashglamp. "I call upon the Mangers to descend from their lofty realm and guide us with their wisdom as we sit in judgment this day."

Needless to say, the Mangers did not respond to the call of the High Froman. Not particularly surprised at the silence-the GEGS would have been tremendously astounded if anyone had answered- High Froman Darral Longshoreman determined that it was his duty by default to sit in judgment, and this he did, clambering up into the seat with the assistance of the two warders and a footstool.

Once he was wedged into the extremely uncomfortable chair, the High Froman gestured for the prisoner to be led forward, inwardly hoping-for the sake of his squeezed posterior and his already aching head-that the trial would be a short one.

A young Geg of about twenty-five seasons who wore thick bits of glass perched on his nose and carried a large sheaf of papers, stepped respectfully into the presence of the High Froman. Darral stared-narrow-eyed and suspicious-at the pieces of glass covering the young Geg's eyes. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask what the samhill they were, but then it occurred to him that Fromans were supposed to know everything. Irritated, the High Froman took out his frustration on the warders.

"Where's the prisoner?" he roared. "What's the delay?"

"Begging the Froman's pardon, but I am the prisoner," said Limbeck, flushing in embarrassment.

"You?" The High Froman scowled. "Where's your Voice?"

"If the Froman pleases, I am my own Voice, Yonor," said Limbeck modestly.

"This is highly irregular. Isn't it?" asked Darral of the warders, who appeared perplexed at being thus addressed and could only shrug their shoulders and look-in their face paint-incredibly stupid. The Froman snorted and sought help in another direction.

"Where's the Voice for the Offense?"

"I have the honor of being the Offensive Voice, Yonor," said a middle-aged Geg, her shrill tones carrying clearly over the distant whumping of the Kicksey-Winsey.

"Is this sort of thing-" the Froman, lacking words, waved a hand at Limbeck-"done?"

"It is irregular, Yonor," answered the Geg, coming forward and fixing Limbeck with a grim, disapproving stare. "But it will have to do. To be honest, Yonor, we couldn't find anyone willing to defend the prisoner."

"Ah?" The High Froman brightened. He felt immensely cheered. It was likely to be a very short trial. "Then carry on."

The Geg bowed and returned to her seat behind a desk made out of a rusting iron drum. The Voice of the Offense was dressed in a long skirt, and a smock tucked in tightly at the waist [7]. Her iron-gray hair was coiled into a neat bun at the nape of her neck and was held in place with several long, formidable-appearing hairpins. She was stiff-backed, stiff-necked, stiff-lipped, and reminded Limbeck-much to his discomfiture-of his mother.

Subsiding into his seat behind another iron drum, Limbeck felt his confidence oozing from him and was suddenly conscious that he was tracking mud all over the floor.

The Voice of the Offense called the High Froman's attention to a male Geg seated beside her. "The Head Clark will be representing the church in this matter, Yonor," said the Offensive Voice.

The Head Clark wore a frayed white shirt with a starched collar, sleeves whose arms were too long, breeches tied by rusty ribbons at the knees, long stockings, and shoes instead of boots. He rose to his feet and bowed with dignity.

The High Froman ducked his head and squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. It was not often that the church sat in on trials, rarer still for them to be part and parcel of the Offense. Darral might have known his self-righteous brother-in-law would be in on this, since it was a blasphemous crime to attack the Kicksey-Winsey. The High Froman was wary and suspicious of the church in general and his brother-in-law in particular. He knew that his brother-in-law thought that he himself could do a better job running the nation than he-Darral. Well, he wouldn't give them an opportunity to say that about this case! The High Froman fixed Limbeck with a cold stare, then smiled benignly at the Prosecution.

"Present your evidence."

The Offensive Voice stated that for several years the Worshipers United for Progress and Prosperity-she pronounced the name in severe and disapproving tones-had been making a nuisance of themselves in various small towns among the northern and eastern scrifts.

"Their leader, Limbeck Bolttightner, is a well-known troublemaker. From childhood, he has been a source of grief, sorrow, and disappointment to his parents. For example, with the aid of a misguided elderly clark, young Limbeck actually learned to read and to write."

The High Froman took advantage of the opportunity to cast a reproachful glance at the Head Clark. "Taught him to read! A clark!" said Darral, shocked. Only clarks learned to read and write, in order that they could pass the Word of the Mangers in the form of the Struction Manal on to the people. No other GEGs, it was assumed, had time to bother with such nonsense. There were murmurs in the courtroom, parents pointing out the unfortunate Limbeck to any children who might be tempted to follow his thorny path.

The Head Clark flushed, appearing deeply chagrined at this sin committed by a fellow. Darral, grinning despite his pounding head, shifted his pinched bottom in the chair. He did not succeed in making himself comfortable, but he felt better, having the satisfactory knowledge that in the contest between himself and his brother-in-law he was ahead one to nothing.

Limbeck gazed around with a smile of faint pleasure, as if finding it entertaining to relive the days of his childhood.

"His next act broke his parents' heart," continued the Offensive Voice sternly. "He was enrolled in Prentice School for Bolttightners and one infamous day, during class, Limbeck, the accused"-she pointed a quivering finger at him-"actually stood up and demanded to know why."

Darral's left foot had gone numb. He was endeavoring to work some feeling into it by wriggling his toes when he heard that tremendous why shouted by the Voice of the Offense and came back to the trial with a guilty start.

"Why what?" asked the High Froman.

The Offense, considering she had made her point, appeared taken aback and uncertain how to proceed. The Head Clark rose to his feet with a supercilious sneer that promptly evened the score between church and state. "Just 'why,' Yonor. A word that calls into question all our most cherished beliefs. A word that is radical and dangerous and could, if carried far enough, lead to a disruption of government, the downfall of society, and very possibly the end of life as we know it."

"Oh, that why" said the High Froman knowingly, frowning at Limbeck and cursing him for having given the Head Clark an opportunity to score a point.

"The accused was thrown out of school. He then upset the town of Het by disappearing for an entire day. It was necessary to send out search parties, at great expense. One can imagine," said the Voice feelingly, "the anguish of his parents. When he wasn't found, it was believed that he had fallen into the Kicksey-Winsey. There were some who said at the time that the Kicksey-Winsey, angered at the 'why,' had seen fit to deal with him itself. Just when everyone believed he was dead and all were busy planning a memorial, the accused had the audacity to turn up alive."

Limbeck smiled deprecatingly, and appeared embarrassed. The Froman, after an indignant snort, returned his attention to the Offense.

"He said he had been Outside," said the Voice in hushed and awe-filled horror that carried well over the squawky-talk.

The assembled GEGS gasped.

"I didn't mean to be gone that long," Limbeck put in mildly. "I got lost."

"Silence!" roared the Froman, and instantly regretted yelling. The pounding in his head increased. He turned the flashlamp on Limbeck, nearly blinding him. "You'll get your chance to speak, young man. Until then you'll sit quietly or you'll be taken from the court. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir. Yonor," Limbeck answered meekly, and subsided.

"Anything else?" the High Froman asked the Offense peevishly. He couldn't feel his left foot at all, and the right one was beginning to tingle strangely.

"It was after Limbeck's return that the accused formed the aforementioned organization known as WUPP. This so-called union advocates, among other things: the free and equal distribution of the Welves' payment, that all worshipers get together and pool their knowledge about the Kicksey-Winsey and so learn 'how' and 'why-' "

"Blasphemy!" cried the shuddering Head Clark in hollow tones.

"And that all GEGS cease to wait for the Judgment day and work to improve their lives themselves-"

"Yonor!" The Head Clark leapt to his feet. "I ask that the court be cleared of children! It is appalling that young and impressionable minds should be subjected to such profane and dangerous notions."

"They're not dangerous!" protested Limbeck.

"Hush up!" The Froman scowled and gave the matter some thought. He hated to concede another point to his brother-in-law, but this did offer an ideal way to escape from his chair. "Court recessed. No children under the age of eighteen will be allowed back in. We'll break for lunch and return in an hour."

With help from the warders—who had to literally pull him free—the High Froman heaved his bulk out of his chair. He removed the iron crown from his head, rubbed life back into his tortured posterior, stomped on his foot until he could feel it again, and breathed a sigh of relief.

## CHAPTER 11

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

COURT RESUMED, MINUS CHILDREN AND THOSE PARENTS WHO WERE FORCE TO STAY home and take care of them. The High Froman, with a resigned and martyred expression, put on his crown and once more wedged himself into the torturous chair. The prisoner was brought in, and the Voice of the Offense concluded her case.

"These dangerous ideas, so seductive to impressionable minds, actually swayed a group of young people as rebellious and discontented as the accused. The local Froman and the clarks- knowing, Yonor, that young people are by nature somewhat rebellious, and hoping that this was just a phase through which they were passing-"

"Like pimples?" suggested the High Froman. This brought the desired laugh from the crowd, although they seemed somewhat uncertain about chuckling in the presence of the frowning Head Clark, and the laughter ended in a sudden spate of nervous coughing.

"Er . . . yes, Yonor," said the Voice, resenting the interruption. The Head Clark smiled with the patient air of one who tolerates a dullard in his presence. The High Froman, seized with the sudden urge to throttle the Head Clark, missed a considerable portion of the Offensive Voice's speech.

"-incited a riot during which the Kicksey-Winsey, Sector Y-362, sustained minor damage. Fortunately, the Kicksey-Winsey was able to heal itself almost immediately and so no lasting harm was done. At least to our revered idol!" The Offensive Voice rose to a screech. "What harm may have been done to those who dared do such a thing cannot be calculated. It is, therefore, our demand that the accused-Limbeck Bolttightner-be removed from this society so that he can never again lead our young people down this path that can only take them to doom and destruction!"

The Voice of the Offense, having rested her case, retired behind the iron drum. Thunderous applause reverberated throughout the Factree. Here and there, however, came hisses and a boo, which caused the High Froman to look stern and brought the Head Clark to his feet.

"Yonor, this outburst only goes to prove that the poison is spreading. We can do one thing to eradicate it." The Head Clark pointed at Limbeck. "Remove the source! I fear that if we do not, the Day of judgment that many of us feel to be at last close to hand will be postponed, perhaps indefinitely! I would urge you, in fact, Yonor, to prohibit the accused from speaking in this assembly!"

"I don't consider four hisses and a boo an outburst," said Darral testily, glaring at the Head Clark. "Accused, you may speak in your own defense. But take care, young man, I'll tolerate no blasphemous harangues in this court."

Limbeck rose slowly to his feet. He paused, as if pondering a course of action, and finally, after profound deliberation, laid the sheaf of papers down on the iron drum and removed his spectacles.

"Yonor," said Limbeck with deep respect. "All I ask is that I be allowed to relate what happened to me the day that I was lost. It was a most remarkable occurrence and it will, I hope, serve to explain why I have felt the need to do what I have done. I have never told this to anyone before," he added solemnly, "not my parents, not even the person I hold most dear in all the world."

"Will this take long?" asked the Froman, putting his hands on the arms of the chair and endeavoring to find a certain amount of relief from his cramped situation by leaning to one side.

"No, Yonor," said Limbeck gravely.

"Then proceed."

"Thank you, Yonor. It happened the day I was thrown out of school. I had to get away, to do a lot of thinking. You see, I didn't consider that my 'why' had been blasphemous or dangerous. I don't hate the Kicksey-Winsey. I revere it, truly. It fascinates me! It's so wonderful, so big, so powerful." Limbeck waved his arms, his face lit by the holy radiance. "It draws its source of energy from the storm and does it with incredible efficiency. It can even take raw iron from the Terrel Fen below and turn that iron into steel and mold that steel into parts so that it is continually expanding. It can heal itself when it is injured.

"It accepts our help gladly. We are its hands, its feet, its eyes. We go where it can't, help it when it gets into trouble. If a claw gets stuck on Terrel Fen, we have to go down and shake it loose. We push bleppers and turn whirly-wheels and raise the raisers and lower the lowers and everything runs smoothly. Or seems to. But I can't help," added Limbeck softly, "wondering why."

The Head Clark, scowling, rose to his feet, but the High Froman, pleased to have an opportunity to gain one on the church, regarded him with a stern air. "I have given this young man permission to speak. I trust our people are strong enough to hear what he has to say without losing their faith. Don't you? Or has the church been derelict in its duties?"

Biting his lip, the Head Clark sat back down and glared at the High Froman, who smiled complacently.

"The accused may proceed."

"Thank you, Yonor. You see, I've always wondered why there are parts of the Kicksey-Winsey that are dead. In some sectors it sits idle, rusting away or getting covered over with coralite. Some parts haven't moved in centuries. Yet the Mangers must have put them there for a reason. Why? What were they supposed to do and why aren't they doing it? And it occurred to me that if we knew why the parts of the Kicksey-Winsey that are alive are alive, and if we knew how they were doing it, then we might be able to understand the Kicksey-Winsey and its true purpose!

"And that's one reason that I think all the scrifts should get together and pool their knowledge-

"Is this leading somewhere?" asked the High Froman irritably. His headache was starting to make him nauseous.

"Er, yes." Limbeck nervously put his spectacles back on. "I was thinking these thoughts and wondering how I could make people understand, and I wasn't paying much attention to where I was going, and when I looked around, I discovered I had wandered completely outside of the Het town limits. Quite by accident, I assure you!

"There weren't any fierce storms in the area just then, and I thought I'd take a little look around, sort of distract myself from my trouble. It was difficult walking and I guess I was concentrating on keeping my footing, because suddenly a storm struck. I needed shelter and I saw a large object lying on the ground, so I ran for it.

"You can imagine my surprise, Yonor," said Limbeck, blinking at the High Froman from behind the thick glass lenses, "when I discovered that it was one of the Welves' dragonships."

The words, echoing from the squawky-talk, resounded in the Factree. Gags stirred and muttered among themselves.

"On the ground? Impossible! The Welves never land on Drevlin!" The Head Clark was pious, smug, and self-satisfied. The High Froman appeared uneasy, but knew-from the reaction of the crowd-that he had allowed this to proceed too far to stop now.

"They hadn't landed," Limbeck explained. "The ship had crashed-"

This created a sensation in the court. The Head Clark leapt to his feet. The Gags were talking in excited voices, many shouting, "Shut him up!" and others answering, "You shut up! Let him talk!" The High Froman gestured to the warders, who shook the "thunder," and order was resumed.

"I demand that this travesty of Justick stop!" boomed the Head Clark.

The High Froman considered doing just that. Ending the trial now accomplished three things: it would rid him of this mad Gag, end his headache, and restore the circulation in his lower extremities. Unfortunately, however, it would appear to his constituents as if he had caved in to the church, plus, his brother-in-law would never let him forget it. No, better to let this Limbeck fellow go ahead and speak his piece. He would undoubtedly string together enough rope to hang himself before long.

"I have made my ruling," said the High Froman in a terrible voice, glaring at the crowd and the Head Clark. "It stands!" He transferred the glare to Limbeck. "Proceed."

"I admit that I don't know for certain the ship had crashed," amended Limbeck, "but I guessed that it had, for it was lying broken and damaged among the rocks. There was nowhere to go for shelter except inside the ship. A large hole had been torn in the skin, so I entered."

"If what you say is true, you were fortunate that the Welves did not strike you down for your boldness!" cried the Head Clark.

"The Welves weren't in much position to strike anyone down," returned Limbeck. "These immortal Welves-as you call them- were dead."

Shouts of outrage, cries of horror and alarm, and a muffled cheer rang through the Factree. The Head Clark fell back into his seat, stricken. The Offense fanned him with her handkerchief and called for water. The High Froman sat bolt upright in shock and managed to wedge himself firmly and inextricably in his chair. Unable to rise to his feet to restore order, he could only wriggle and fume and wave the flashglamp, half-blinding the warders, who were attempting to pull him free.

"Listen to me!" Limbeck shouted in the voice that had quelled multitudes. No other speaker in WUPP, Jarre included, could be as compelling and charismatic as Limbeck when he was inspired. This speech was the reason he had allowed himself to be arrested. This was, perhaps, his last chance to bring his message to his people. He would make the most of it.

Jumping onto the iron drum, scattering his papers beneath his feet, Limbeck waved his hands to attract the crowd's attention.

"These Welves from the realms above are not gods, as they would have us believe! They are not immortal, but are made of flesh and blood and bone like ourselves! I know, because I saw that flesh rotting away. I saw their corpses in that twisted wreckage.

"And I saw their world! I saw your 'glorious heavens.' They had brought books with them, and I looked at some of them. And truly, it is heaven! They live in a world of wealth and magnificence. A world of beauty that we can only begin to imagine. A world of ease that is supported by our sweat and our labor! And let me tell you! They have no intention of ever 'taking us up to that world' as the clarks keep telling us they will, 'if we are worthy'! Why should they? They have us to use as willing slaves down here! We live in squalor, we serve the Kicksey-Winsey so that they can have the water they need to survive. We battle the storm every day of our miserable lives! So that they can live in luxury off our tears!

"And that is why I say," shouted Limbeck over the rising tumult, "that we should learn all we can about the Kicksey-Winsey, take control of it, and force these Welves, who are not gods at all, but mortals, just like us, to give us our proper due!"

Chaos broke out. Gags were yelling, screaming, shoving, and pushing. Appalled at the monster he'd unwittingly unleashed.

The Froman-finally freed from his chair-stomped his feet and pounded the butt-end of his flashlamp on the concrete with such ferocity that he yanked the tail free of the statue and doused the light.

"Clear the court! Clear the court!"

Coppers charged in, but it was some time before the excited Gags could be made to leave the Factree. Then they milled around in the corridors for a while, but fortunately for the High Froman, the whistle-toot signaled a script change and the crowds dispersed-either going to perform their service for the Kicksey-Winsey or returning home.

The High Froman, the Head Clark, the Offensive Voice, Limbeck, and the two warders with smeared face paint were left alone in the Factree.

"You are a dangerous young man," said the High Froman. "These lies-"

"They're not lies! They're the truth! I swear-"

"These lies would, of course, never be believed by the people, but as we have seen this day when you recite them, they lead to turmoil and unrest! You have doomed yourself. Your fate is now in the hands of the Manger. Hold on to the prisoner and keep him quiet!" the High Froman ordered the warders, who latched on to Limbeck firmly, if reluctantly, as though his touch might contaminate them.

The Head Clark had recovered sufficiently from his shock to appear smug and pious again, this expression mingling with righteous indignation and the certain conviction that sin was about to be punished, retribution exacted.

The High Froman, walking somewhat unsteadily on feet to which the circulation was only now returning, made his way with aching head over to the statue of the Manger. Led along by the warders, Limbeck followed. Despite the danger, he was, as usual, deeply curious and far more interested in the statue of the Manger itself than in whatever verdict it might hand down. The Head Clark and the Voice crowded close to see. The High Froman, with many bowings and scrapings and mumbled prayers that were echoed reverently by the Head Clark, reached out, grasped the left hand of the Manger, and pulled on it.

The eyeball that the Manger held in the right hand suddenly blinked and came to life. A light shone, and moving pictures began to flit across the eyeball. The High Froman cast a triumphant glance at the Head Clark and the Voice. Limbeck was absolutely fascinated.

"The Manger speaks to us!" cried the Head Clark, falling to his knees.

"A magic lantern!" said Limbeck excitedly, peering into the eyeball. "Only it isn't really magic, not like the magic of the Welves. It's mechanical magic! I found one on another part of the Kicksey-Winsey and I took it apart. Those pictures that seem to move are frames revolving around a light so fast that it fools the eyes-"

"Silence, heretic!" thundered the High Froman. "Sentence has been passed. The Mangers say that you shall be given into their hands."

"I don't think they're saying any such thing, Yonor," protested Limbeck. "In fact, I'm not certain what they're saying. I wonder why-"

"Why? Why! You will have a lot of time to ask yourself why as you are falling into the heart of the storm!" shouted Darral.

Limbeck was watching the magic lantern that was repeating the same thing over and over and did not clearly hear what the High Froman had said. "Heart of the storm, Yonor?" The thick lenses magnified his eyes and gave him a buglike appearance that the Froman found particularly disgusting.

"Yes, so the Mangers have sentenced you." The High Froman pulled the hand and the eyeball blinked and went out.

"What? In that picture? No, they didn't, Yonor," Limbeck argued. "I'm not certain what it is, but if you'd only give me a chance to study-"

"Tomorrow morning," interrupted the High Froman, "you will be made to walk the Steps of Terrel Fen. May the Mangers have mercy on your soul!" Limping, one hand rubbing his numb backside and the other his pounding head, Darral Longshoreman turned on his heel and stalked out of the Factree.

## CHAPTER 12

### XOMBE, LOW REALM

"VISITOR" SAID THE TURNKEY THROUGH THE IRON BARS.

"What?" Limbeck sat up on his cot.

"Visitor. Your sister. Come along."

Keys jangled. The closer clicked and the door swung open. Limbeck, considerably startled and extremely confused, rose from the cot and followed the turnkey to the visitors' vat. As far as he knew, Limbeck didn't have a sister. Admittedly, he'd been gone from home a number of years, and he didn't know all that much about rearing children, but he had the vague impression that it took a considerable length of time for a child to be born, then be up walking about, visiting brothers in jail.

Limbeck was just performing the necessary calculations when he entered the visitors' vat. A young woman flung herself at him with such force that she nearly knocked him down.

"My dear brother!" she cried, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him with more attachment than is generally displayed between siblings.

"You've got till the whistle-toot blows the next scrift change," said the turnkey in bored tones as he slammed shut and locked the closer behind him.

"Jarre?" said Limbeck, blinking at her. He'd left his spectacles in the cell.

"Well, of course!" she said, hugging him fiercely. "Who else did you think it would be?"

"I... I wasn't sure" Limbeck stammered. He was extremely pleased to see Jarre, but he couldn't help experiencing a slight twinge of disappointment at the loss of a sister. It seemed that family might be a comfort at a time like this. "How did you get here?"

"Odwin Screwloosener has a brother-in-law who serves on one of the flashraft runs. He got me on. Didn't it make you furious," she said, releasing her grip on Limbeck, "to see the enslavement of our people exhibited before your eyes?"

"Yes, it did," answered Limbeck. He was not surprised to hear that Jarre had experienced the same sensations and thought the same thoughts he had during the flashraft journey across Drevlin. The two often did this.

She turned away from him, slowly unwinding the heavy scarf from around her head. Limbeck wasn't certain-Jarre's face was pretty much a blur to him without his spectacles-but he had the feeling that her expression was troubled. It might be, of course, the fact that he was sentenced to be executed, but Limbeck doubted it. Jarre tended to take things like that in stride. This was something different, something deeper.

"How is the Union getting along?" Limbeck asked.

Jarre heaved a sigh. Now, Limbeck thought, we're getting somewhere.

"Oh, Limbeck," Jarre said, half-irritable, half-sorrowful, "why did you have to go and tell those ridiculous stories during the trial?"

"Stories?" Limbeck's bushy eyebrows shot up into the roots of his curly hair. "What stories?"

"You know-the ones about the Welves being dead and books with pictures of heaven in them-"

"Then the newssingers sang them?" Limbeck's face glowed with pleasure.

"Sang them!" Jarre wrung her hands. "They shouted them at every scrift change! Those stories were all we heard-"

"Why do you keep calling them stories?." Then, suddenly, Limbeck understood. "You don't believe them! What I said in court was true, Jarre! I swear by-"

"Don't swear by anything," Jarre interrupted coldly. "We don't believe in gods, remember?"

"I swear by my love for you, my dear," said Limbeck, "that all I said was true. All those things really happened to me. It was that sight and the knowledge it brought-the knowledge that these Welves aren't gods at all, but mortals just like us-that gave me the inspiration to start our Union. It's the memory of that sight which gives me the courage to face what I am facing now," he said with a quiet dignity that touched Jarre to the heart.

Weeping, she threw herself into his arms again.

Patting her comfortingly on her broad back, Limbeck asked gently, "Have I hurt the cause a great deal?"

"No-o-o," hedged Jarre in a muffled voice, keeping her face buried in Limbeck's now-tear-sodden tunic. "Actually, uh . . . You see, my dear, we let it ... urn ... be known that the torture and hardship you suffered at the hands of the brutal imperialist-"

"But they haven't tortured me. They've really been very nice to me, my dear."

"Oh, Limbeck!" cried Jarre, pushing away from him in exasperation. "You're hopeless!"

"I'm sorry," said Limbeck.

"Now, listen to me," Jarre continued briskly, wiping her eyes. "We don't have much time. The most important thing we've got going for us right now is this execution of yours. So don't mess that up! Don't"-she raised a warning finger-"say anything more about dead Welves and suchlike."

Limbeck sighed. "I won't," he promised.

"You're a martyr for the cause. Don't forget that. And for our cause's sake, try to look the part." She cast a disapproving eye over his stout figure. "I believe you've actually gained weight!"

"The prison food is really quite-"

"Think of someone besides yourself at a time like this, Limbeck," Jarre scolded. "You've got only tonight left. You can't look emaciated by that time, I suppose, but do the best you can. Could you manage to bloody yourself up?"

"I don't think so," Limbeck said abjectly, aware of his limitations.

"Well, we'll have to make the best of it." Jarre sighed. "Whatever you do, try to at least look martyred."

"I'm not sure how."

"Oh, you know-brave, dignified, defiant, forgiving."

"All at once?"

"The forgiving part is very important. You might even say something along those lines as they're strapping you onto the lightning bird."

"Forgiveness," muttered Limbeck, committing it to memory.

"And a final defiant shout when they shove you off the edge. Something about 'WUPP forever . . . they'll never defeat us.' And you returning, of course."

"Defiance. WUPP forever. Me returning." Limbeck peered at her myopically. "Am I? Returning?"

"Well, of course. I said we'd get you out and I meant it. You didn't think we'd let them execute you, did you?"

"Well, I-"

"You're such a druskh," Jarre said, playfully ruffling up his hair. "Now, you know how this bird thing works-"

The whistle-toot went off, its blast resounding through the city.

"Time!" shouted the turnkey. His fat face pressed against the iron bars of the door to the visitors' vat. He began to rattle the opener in the closer.

Jarre, a look of annoyance on her face, walked over to the door and peered through the bars. "Five more tocks."

The turnkey frowned.

"Remember," said Jarre, holding up a formidable-looking fist, "that you'll be letting me out."

The turnkey, muttering something unintelligible, walked away.

"Now," said Jarre, turning around again, "where was I? Oh, yes. This bird contraption. According to Lof Lectric-"

"What does he know about it?" demanded Limbeck jealously.

"He's with the Lectriczinger scrift," replied Jarre in lofty tones. "They fly the lightning birds to harvest lectric for the Kicksey-Winsey. Lof says that they'll put you on top of what looks like two giant wings made out of wood and tier feathers with a cable attached. They strap you to this thing and then shove you off above the Steps of Terrel Fen. You float around in the storm and get hit by hail and driving rain and sleet-"

"Not lightning?" asked Limbeck nervously.

"No." Jarre was reassuring.

"But it's called a lightning bird."

"It s only a name."

"But with my weight on it, won't it sink instead of fly up into the air?"

"Of course! Will you stop interrupting me?"

"Yes," said Limbeck meekly.

"The contraption will begin to fall, snapping the cable. The lightning bird will eventually crash into one of the isles of the Terrel Fen."

"It will?" Limbeck was pale.

"But don't worry. Lof says that the main frame is almost certain to withstand the impact. It's very strong. The Kicksey-Winsey produces the wooden sticks-"

"Why, I wonder?" mused Limbeck. "Why should the Kicksey-Winsey make wooden sticks?"

"How would I know!" Jarre shouted. "And what does it matter anyway! Now, listen to me." She put both hands on his beard and tugged until she saw tears in his eyes, long experience having taught her that this was one sure way of getting his mind off its latest tangent. "You'll land on one of the islands of the Terrel Fen. These islands are being mined by the Kicksey-Winsey. When the dig-claws come down to dig up the ore, you must put a mark on one of them. Our people will be watching for it, and when the dig-claw comes back up, we'll see your mark and know which island you're on."

"That's a very good plan, my dear!" Limbeck smiled at her in admiration.

"Thank you." Jarre flushed with pleasure. "All you have to do is stay away from the dig-claws so that you won't get mined yourself."

"Yes, I'll do that."

"The next time the dig-claws come down, we'll make certain that a help-hand is lowered." Seeing Limbeck look puzzled, Jarre patiently explained. "You know-one of the claws with a bubble clutched in it that carries a Geg down to the isle to free a stuck claw."

"Is that how they do it?" Limbeck marveled.

"I wish you'd served the Kicksey-Winsey!" Jarre said, tugging on his beard in irritation. "There, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it." She kissed him and rubbed his cheeks to erase the pain. "You're going to be all right. Just remember that. When we bring you up, we'll put it out that you were judged innocent. It will be obvious that Mangers support you, and that therefore they support our cause. We'll have GEGS flocking to join us! The day of revolution will dawn!" Jarre's eyes gleamed.

"Yes! Wonderful!" Limbeck was caught up in her enthusiasm.

The turnkey, nose thrust between the bars, coughed meaningfully.

"All right, I'm coming!" Jarre wound her scarf back around her head. With some difficulty, muffled by the scarf, she kissed Limbeck a final time, leaving fuzz in his mouth. The turnkey opened the door. "Remember," Jarre said mysteriously, "martyred."

"Martyred," Limbeck agreed good-naturedly.

"And no more stories about dead gods!" The last was said in a piercing whisper as the turnkey hustled her away.

"They're not"-Limbeck began-"stories."  
He said the last with a sigh. Jarre was gone.

## CHAPTER 13

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

THE GEGS, A VERY GENTLE AND GOOD-NATURED PEOPLE, HAD NEVER, IN THEIR ENTIRE history (that they could remember), been to war. Taking another Geg's life was unheard-of, undreamt-of, unthinkable. Only the Kicksey-Winsey had the right to kill a Geg, and that was generally by accident. And, although the GEGS had execution down on their lawbooks as a punishment for certain terrible crimes, they couldn't ever bring themselves to actually put another one of their fellows to death. Therefore they dumped it in the laps of the Mangers, who weren't around to protest. If the Mangers wanted the condemned to live, they'd see to it that he lived. If they didn't, he didn't.

Walking the Steps of Terrel Fen was the GEGS' term for this method of ridding themselves of undesirables. The Terrel Fen are a series of small islands that float beneath Drevlin, revolving downward in a never-ending spiral until they eventually vanish into the swirling clouds of the All-dark. It was said that in the ancient days, just after the Sundering, it was actually possible to "walk" the Terrel Fen, the islands being close enough to Drevlin that a Geg could leap from one to the other. The ancient GEGS presumably forced their criminals to do this very thing.

Over the centuries, however, the islands had gradually been pulled deeper and deeper into the Maelstrom, so that now one could-during pauses in the storm-only vaguely make out the shape of the nearest island drifting down below. As one of their more ingenuous High Fromen pointed out, a Geg would have to sprout wings in order to survive long enough for the Mangers to judge him on the way down. This led, quite naturally, to the GEGS thoughtfully providing wings for the condemned, which led to the development of the "bird contraption" that Jarre had described.

"The "Feathers of Justick" was its formal appellation. It was made of the finely shaped and neatly trimmed wood pieces spit out by the Kicksey-Winsey for use in the lectriczingers.

The wooden frame, four feet wide, had a wingspan of about fourteen feet. The frame was covered with a woven material (another product of the Kicksey-Winsey) that was then decorated with her feathers, held in place by a sticky substance made of flour and water. Ordinarily, a strong cable attached to the lectriczinger allowed it to zoom up into the heart of the storm and harvest lightning. But, of course, it couldn't very well do this with a two-hundred-rock Geg weighing it down.

During a lull in the storms, the offending Geg was taken to the edge of Drevlin and placed in the center of the Feathers of Justick. His wrists were strapped securely to the wooden frame, his feet dangled out over the back end. Six clarks lifted the contraption and, at the order of the High Froman, ran with it to the edge of the isle and cast it off.

The only Gogs present to witness the execution were the High Froman, the Head Clark, and six minor clarks necessary to send the Wings of Justick into the air. Long ago, all Gogs not serving the Kicksey-Winsey had attended executions. But then had come the sensational "walking" of the notorious Dirk Screw. Drunk on the job, Dirk fell asleep, and didn't notice the tiny hand on the whistle-toot attached to the bubble-boiler waving at him wildly. The resultant explosion parboiled several Gogs and- what was worse-seriously damaged the Kicksey-Winsey, which was obliged to shut itself down for a day and a half to effect repairs.

Dirk, though severely steam-burned, was taken alive and was sentenced to Walking the Steps. Crowds of Gogs came to witness the execution. Those at the back, complaining that they couldn't see, began to push and shove their way to the front, with the tragic result that numerous Gogs standing on the edge of the isle took unexpected "walks." The High Froman banned all further public viewing of executions from that time forward.

On this occasion, the public didn't miss much. Limbeck was so fascinated by the proceedings that he completely forgot to look martyred, and highly annoyed the clarks, who were strapping his hands to the wooden frame, with his endless string of questions.

"What is this stuff made from?" Referring to the paste. "What holds the frame together? How big are the sheets of fabric wrapped around the frame? Do they come that big? Really? Why does the Kicksey-Winsey make fabric?"

Finally the Head Clark, in the interests of protecting the innocent, decreed that a gag be placed in Limbeck's mouth. This was done, and the Feathers of Justick was ready to be cast off into the air without ceremony at the hurried command of the High Froman, who-crown on his head-had a splitting headache and wasn't able to enjoy the execution in the slightest.

Six stout clarks grasped the main-frame section of the Feathers and hoisted it up over their heads. At the signal from the Head Clark, they broke into a lumbering run, dashing down a ramp, heading for the edge of the isle. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a gust of wind caught the Feathers, snatched it from their hands, and lifted it into the air. The Feathers bucked and lurched, spun around three times, then crashed down to the ground.

"What the samhill are you doing out there?" shouted the High Froman. "What the samhill are they doing out there?" he demanded of his brother-in-law, who-looking harassed-ran to the edge to find out.

The clarks extricated Limbeck from the broken lectriczinger and brought him, dizzy and spitting feathers out of his mouth, back to the starting platform. Another Feathers of Justick was procured-the High Froman fuming at the delay-and Limbeck was strapped on. The clarks received a stern lecture from their superior about the need to hold on tightly to the frame, and then they were off.

The wind lifted the Feathers at just the right moment and Limbeck sailed gracefully into the air. The cable snapped. The clarks, the Head Clark, and the High Froman stood at the edge of the isle watching the feathered contraption glide slowly outward and sink slowly downward.

Somehow or other, Limbeck must have managed to yank the gag from his mouth, because Darral Longshoreman could have sworn that he heard a last "Whyyyyy?" trail off into the heart of the Maelstrom. Removing the iron crown off his head, he fought back an impulse to hurl it over the edge of the isle, and-heaving a vast sigh of relief-returned to his home in the holding tank.

Limbeck, floating on the air currents swirling him gently round and round, twisted his neck to look at the isle of Drevlin above him. For many moments he enjoyed the sensation of flying, circling lazily beneath the isle, peering up at the coralite formations that appeared unique from this viewpoint-much different than when seen from up above. Limbeck wasn't wearing his spectacles (he had them wrapped in a handkerchief tucked safely away in a pocket of his trousers), but having been caught in an updraft, he found himself swept quite close to the bottom of the isle and therefore had an excellent view.

Millions and millions of holes bored up into the interior. Some were extremely large-Limbeck could easily have sailed into one if he had been able to manage the wings. He was quite startled to see thousands of bubbles drifting out of these holes. They burst almost immediately when they hit the open air, and Limbeck realized in a flash that he had happened on a remarkable discovery.

"The coralite must produce some sort of gas that is lighter than air and so keeps the island afloat." His mind went to the picture he'd seen on the Eyeball. "Why would some islands float higher than others? Why would the island that the Welves live on, for example, be higher than ours? Their island must weigh less, that's logical. But why? Ah, of course." Limbeck didn't notice, but he was rapidly descending in a spiral that would have made him dizzy if he had thought about it. "Mineral deposits. That would account for the difference in weight. We must have more mineral deposits-such as iron and so forth-on our island than the Welves do on theirs. Which is probably why the Mangers built the Kicksey-Winsey down here instead of up there. But that still doesn't explain why it was built in the first place."

Moved to write down his latest observation, Limbeck was irritated to find that his hands were tied to something. Looking to see what, he was recalled to his current interesting, if desperate, situation. The sky around him was growing rapidly darker. He could no longer see anything of Drevlin. The wind was blowing harder and had taken on a distinct circular motion; the ride was growing considerably more bumpy and erratic. He was tossed this way and that way, upward and downward and around and around. Rain began to pelt down on him, and Limbeck made another discovery. Although not as momentous as the first, this one had rather more impact.

The paste solution holding the feathers to the fabric dissolved in water. Limbeck watched in growing alarm as, one by one and then in clumps, the tier feathers began sliding off. Limbeck's first impulse was to loosen his hands, although what he would do when his hands were loose wasn't

exactly obvious. He gave a violent tug at his right wrist. This had the effect-and a startling effect it was-of causing the contraption to flip completely over in midair.

Limbeck found himself hanging by his wrists from the rapidly defeathering wings, staring down at his feet. After the first moment of sickening panic subsided and Limbeck was fairly certain he wasn't going to throw up, he noticed that his situation had improved. The fabric, now missing most of the feathers, billowed out above him, slowing his rate of descent, and though he was still getting tossed around considerably, the motion was more stable and less erratic.

The laws of aerodynamics were just beginning to emerge from Limbeck's fertile mind when he saw, materializing out of the storm clouds below him, a darkish blob. Squinting, Limbeck ascertained at length that the blob was one of the islands of the Terrel Fen. It had seemed to him that when he was among the clouds, he was drifting down very slowly, and he was astonished to note that the isle appeared to be rising up to meet him at an alarming rate of speed. It was at this point that Limbeck discovered two laws simultaneously: the theory of relativity being one, the law of gravity being another.

Unfortunately, both laws were driven clean out of his head by the impact.

## CHAPTER 14

### SOMEWHERE, UYLANDIA CLUSTER, MID REALM

THE MORNING LIMBECK WAS GLIDING DOWNWARD INTO THE TERREL FEN, HUGH AND the prince were flying dragonback into the night side somewhere over the Uylandia Cluster. The flight was cold and cheerless. Trian had given the dragon its directions, so that Hugh had nothing to do but sit in the saddle and think. He could not even tell what track they were flying, for a magical cloud accompanied them.

The dragon would occasionally dip down below the cloud to get its bearings, and then Hugh tried to glean, from the softly glowing coralite landscape moving smoothly beneath them, some idea of where he was and where he had been. Hugh had no doubt but that he'd been double-crossed, and he would have given half the money in his purse to know the whereabouts of Stephen's hideout in case he decided to complain about his treatment in person. It was useless, however, and he soon gave up.

"I'm hungry-" began Bane, his childish high voice splitting the still night air.

"Hold your tongue!" snapped Hugh.

He heard a swift intake of breath. Glancing around, he saw the boy's eyes widen and shimmer with tears. The kid had probably never been yelled at in his entire life.

"Sound carries clearly in the night air, Your Highness," said the Hand softly. "If someone is following us, we don't want to make it easy for him."

"Is someone following us?" Bane was pale but undaunted, and Hugh gave the kid credit for courage.

"I think so, Your Highness. But don't worry."

The prince pressed his lips tightly together. Timidly he slid his arms around Hugh's waist. "That doesn't bother you, does it?" he whispered.

Small arms tightened around Hugh, he felt a warm body nestle against his, and the child's head rested lightly on his strong back. "I'm not afraid," Bane added stoutly, "it's just nicer when you're close."

A strange sensation swept over the assassin. Hugh felt suddenly dark and empty and abhorrently evil. Gritting his teeth, he resisted the impulse to free himself of the kid's touch by concentrating on their immediate danger.

Someone was following them. Whoever it was, he was good at it, too. Twisting around in the saddle, Hugh searched the sky, hoping that their shadow-fearful of losing sight of them-might grow careless and show himself. Hugh saw nothing, however. He couldn't even have told exactly how he knew they had company. It was a prickling at the back of his neck, instinct reacting to a sound, a smell, something glimpsed from the corner of the eye. He quietly accepted the warning, his one thought: Who was trailing them and why?

Trian. There was that possibility, of course, but Hugh discounted it. The wizard knew their destination better than they did. He might have been following them to make certain the Hand didn't attempt to subvert the dragon and make off with it. That would have been foolish in the extreme. Hugh was no wizard, he knew better than to meddle with a spell, especially one laid on a dragon. Ensoceled, dragons were obedient and tractable. Break the enchantment, and they regained their own will and intelligence and became totally erratic and unpredictable. They might continue to serve you, but they might also decide to make you their evening repast.

If it wasn't Trian, who was it?

Someone from the queen, no doubt. Hugh cursed the wizard and his king long and hard beneath his breath. The bungling fools had let slip their plans. Now, undoubtedly, Hugh had to contend with some baron or earl attempting to rescue the child. The Hand would have to rid himself of this nuisance, which meant laying a trap, cutting a throat, hiding a body. The kid would probably recognize the man, know him to be a friend. He would grow suspicious. Hugh would have to convince the prince that the friend had been an enemy; that his enemy was truly his friend. It looked to be a lot of bother, and all because Trian and his guilt-ridden king had been careless.

Well, thought Hugh grimly, it'll cost them.

The dragon began spiraling down, without guidance from Hugh, and the Hand guessed that they had reached their destination. The magical cloud disappeared and Hugh glimpsed a patch of forest, dark black against the blue-glowing coralite, and then a large cleared area and the sharply defined and delineated shapes that were never found in nature but were created by man.

It was a small village, nestled in a valley of coralite and surrounded by heavy forests. Hugh knew of many such towns that used the hills and trees to hide themselves from elven attack. They paid the penalty by being well off the major airways, but if it came to a question of living well or living at all, some people gladly chose poverty.

Hugh knew the value of life. Measuring it against good living, he considered them fools.

The dragon circled the sleeping village. Seeing a glade in the forest, Hugh guided the beast to a smooth landing. As he unpacked their gear from the dragon's back, he wondered where their shadow had set down. He did not spend much time considering the question. The Hand had laid his snare. It required only baiting.

The dragon left them immediately after it was unloaded. Rising into the air, it disappeared above the treetops. Casually, taking his time, Hugh shouldered the packs. Motioning to the prince to follow, he was heading off into the woods when he felt a tug at his sleeve.

"What is it, Your Highness?"

"Can we talk out loud now?" The child's eyes were wide.

Hugh nodded.

"I can carry my own pack. I'm stronger than I look. My father says someday I'm going to grow up to be as tall and strong as he is."

Stephen said that, did he? To a kid he knew would never grow up. If I had that bastard in front of me, it'd be a pleasure to twist his neck.

Silently Hugh handed Bane the pack. They reached the edge of the forest and plunged into the deep shadows beneath the hargast trees. Soon they would be lost to sight and hearing, their feet making no sound on the thick carpet of fine dustlike crystals.

The Hand felt another tug at his sleeve.

"Sir Hugh," said Bane, pointing, "who's that?"

Startled, the Hand glanced around. "There's no one there, Your Highness."

"Yes, there is," said the child. "Don't you see him? It's a Kir monk."

Hugh halted and stared at the boy.

"It's all right if you don't see him," added Bane, shifting his pack to lie more comfortably across his small shoulders. "I see lots of things other people don't. But I've never seen a Kir monk walk with anyone before. Why is he with you?"

"Let me carry it, Your Highness." Hugh took the pack from the prince and, propelling the child in front of him with a firm grip of his hand, resumed walking.

Damn Trian! The blasted wizard must have let something else slip. The kid had picked up on it and now his imagination was running wild. He might even guess the truth. Well, there was nothing to be done about it now. It only made the assassin's job that much more difficult-and therefore that much more expensive.

The two spent what was left of the night in a water harvester's warming shed. The sky was lightening; Hugh could see the faint glimmer of the firmament that presaged dawn. The edges of the Lords of Night glistened a fiery red. Now he could determine the direction in which they were moving and could at last orient himself. Inspecting the contents of his pack before leaving the monastery, he'd ascertained that he had all the proper navigational equipment-his own having been taken from him in Yreni prison. He removed a small leather-bound book and silver baton topped by a quartz sphere. The baton had a spike on the end and Hugh shoved it into the ground.

All such sextants are of elven make-humans possessing no mechanical magic skills. This one was practically new and he guessed it was a trophy of war. Hugh gave the baton a tap with his finger and the sphere rose into the air, much to the delight of Bane, who was watching in wide-eyed fascination.

Scarcity of water in the Mid Realm means that much of it must be harvested from plant life. Water farmers raise such water-producing plants; water harvesters go foraging for the liquid.

"What's it doing?" he demanded.

"Look through it," Hugh offered.

The prince hesitantly placed his eye level with the sphere. "I just see a bunch of numbers," he said, disappointed.

"That's what you're supposed to see." Hugh made a mental note of the first number, turned a ring at the bottom of the baton, read off the second, and finally a third. Then he began flipping pages in the book.

"What are you looking for?" Bane squatted down on his haunches to peer over Hugh's arm.

"Those numbers you saw are the position of the Lords of Night, the five Ladies of Light, and Solarus, all in relation to each other. I find the numbers in this book, match them with the time of year, which tells me where the islands are located at this particular moment, and it should tell me within a few menkas where we are."

"What funny writing!" Bane turned his head nearly upside-down to see. "What is it?"

"It's elvish. Their navigators were the ones who figured all this out and came up with the magical device that takes the readings."

The boy frowned. "Why didn't we use something like that when we flew on the dragon?"

"Because dragons know instinctively where they are. No one's sure how, but they use all their senses-sight, hearing, smell, touch-plus some we probably don't even know exist to guide them. Elf magic won't work on dragons, so they had to build dragonships and they had to make things like this to tell them where they were. That's why"-Hugh grinned-"elves consider us barbarians."

"Well, where are we? Do you know?"

"I know," said Hugh. "And now it's time, Your Highness, for a nap."

They were on Pitrin's Exile, probably about 123 menkas backtrack [8] from Winsher. Hugh felt more relaxed, once this was in his mind. It had been unsettling, not being able to tell up from down, so to speak. Now he knew and he could rest. It wouldn't be full light for another three hours.

Rubbing his eyes, yawning, and stretching, like a man who has traveled far and is bone-tired, Hugh-shoulders slumped and feet dragging-marched the prince into the shed. Seeming half-asleep, the assassin gave the door a push to close it. It didn't shut all the way, but he was, apparently, too tired to notice.

Bane took a blanket from his pack, spread it, and lay down. Hugh did the same, shutting his eyes. When he heard the child's breathing fall into a slow and steady rhythm, he swiftly twisted, catlike, to his feet and crept silently across the floor of the shed.

The prince was already fast asleep. Hugh looked at him closely, but the boy did not appear to be shamming. Curled up in a ball, lying on top of his blanket, he would freeze in the chill predawn air.

Fishing another blanket out of his pack, Hugh tossed it over the kid, then moved silently back to the opposite side of the shed, the side near the door. He slipped off his tall boots and laid them on the floor, carefully arranging them so that they were turned sideways, one resting on top of the other. He dragged his pack over and laid it just above his boots. Removing the fur cloak, he wrapped it in a ball and placed it next to the pack. A blanket, spread over the cape and pack, left the soles of the boots showing. Anyone looking in from the doorway would see the feet of a blanket-wrapped man fast asleep.

Satisfied, Hugh drew his dagger from his boot and squatted down in a dark corner of the shed. Eyes on the door, he waited.

Half an hour passed. The shadow was giving Hugh ample time to fall into deep sleep.

The Hand waited patiently. It wouldn't be too long now. Day had dawned fully. The sun was shining. The man must fear they would waken and start on their way again. The assassin watched the thin ribbon of gray light streaming in through the partially shut door. When that ribbon began to widen, Hugh's hand tightened its grip on the dagger.

Slowly, silently, the door swung open.

A head thrust inside. The man looked long and carefully at the supposedly slumbering figure of Hugh beneath the blanket, then turned the same careful scrutiny to the boy. Hugh held his breath. Apparently satisfied, the man entered the shed.

Hugh expected the man to be armed and to immediately attack the dummy of himself. The assassin was disconcerted to see that the man carried no weapon in his hand and was padding soft-footed over to the boy. It was just to be a rescue, then.

Hugh leapt, wrapped an arm around the man's neck, and put the dagger to his throat.

"Who sent you? Tell me the truth and I'll reward you with a quick death."

The body in Hugh's grasp went limp and the assassin saw, in astonishment, that the man had fainted.

## CHAPTER 15

### PITRIN'S EXILE, VOLKARAN ISLES, MID REALM

"NOT EXACTLY THE SORT OF PERSON I'D SEND OUT ON A MISSION TO RESCUE MY SON from the hands of an assassin," muttered Hugh, stretching out the comatose man on the floor of the shed. "But then, maybe the queen's having trouble finding bold knights these days. Unless he's shamming."

The man's age was indeterminable. The face appeared careworn and haggard. He was bald on the top of his head; wispy gray hair hung in a long fringe around the sides. But his cheeks were smooth, and the wrinkles around the mouth came from worry, not age. Tall and gangly, he appeared to have been put together by someone who had run out of the correct parts and been forced to substitute. His feet and hands were too big; his head, with its delicate, sensitive features, seemed too small.

Kneeling beside the man, Hugh lifted a finger and bent it back until it almost touched the wrist. The pain was excruciating, and a person feigning unconsciousness would invariably betray himself. The man didn't even twitch.

Hugh gave him a sound smack on the cheek to bring him around, and was about to add another when he heard the boy coming up to his side.

"Is that who was following us?" The prince, keeping close to Hugh, stared curiously. "Why that's Alfred!" The boy grasped hold of the collar of the man's cape, jerked his head up, and shook him. "Alfred! Wake up! Wake up!"

Bang! went the man's head against the floor.

The prince shook him again. The man's head bumped the floor again, and Hugh-relaxing-sat back to watch.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Alfred groaned each time his head hit the floor. Opening his eyes, he stared dazedly at the prince and made a feeble effort to remove the small hands from his collar.

"Please . . . Your Highness. I'm quite awake, now . . . Ouch! Thank you, Your Highness, but that won't be necess-"

"Alfred!" The prince threw his arms around him, hugging the man so tightly he nearly smothered him. "We thought you were an assassin! Have you come to travel with us?"

Rising to a sitting position, Alfred gave Hugh-and particularly Hugh's dagger-a nervous glance. "Uh, traveling with you may not be quite feasible, Your-"

"Who are you?" interrupted Hugh.

The man rubbed his head and answered humbly, "Sir, my name-"

"He's Alfred," interrupted Bane, as if that explained everything. Noting from Hugh's grim face that it didn't, the boy added, "He's in charge of all my servants and he chooses my tutors and makes certain my bathwater's not too hot-

"My name is Alfred Montbank, sir," the man said.

"You're Bane's servant?"

"'Chamberlain' is the correct term, sir," said Alfred, flushing. "And that is your prince to whom you are referring in such a disrespectful manner."

"Oh, that's all right, Alfred," said Bane, sitting back on his heels. His hand toyed with the feather amulet he wore around his neck. "I told Sir Hugh he could call me by my name, since we're traveling together. It's much easier than saying 'Your Highness' all the time."

"You're the one who's been following us," Hugh said.

"It is my duty to be with His Highness, sir."

Hugh raised a black eyebrow. "Obviously somebody didn't see it that way."

"I was mistakenly left behind." Alfred lowered his gaze, staring fixedly at the floor of the shed. "His Majesty the king flew off so quickly, he undoubtedly overlooked me."

"And so you followed him-and the boy."

"Yes, sir. I was almost too late. I had to pack some things I knew the prince would need, which Trian had forgotten. I was forced to saddle my own dragon, and then I had an argument with the palace guards, who didn't want to let me leave. The king and Trian and the prince had disappeared by the time I was through the gates. I had no idea what to do, but the dragon seemed to have some notion of where it wanted to go and-

"It would follow its stablemates. Go on."

"We found them. That is, the dragon found them. Not wanting to presume to thrust myself into their company, I kept a proper distance. Eventually we landed in that dreadful place-

"The Kir monastery."

"Yes, I-

"Could you get back there again if you had to?"

Hugh put the question casually, easily, out of curiosity. Alfred answered, never dreaming his life hung in the balance.

"Why, yes, sir, I think I could. I've a good knowledge of the countryside, especially the lands surrounding the castle." Lifting his gaze, he looked directly at Hugh. "Why do you ask?"

The assassin was tucking the dagger back into his boot. "Because that's Stephen's secret hideout you stumbled across. The guards will tell him you followed him. He'll know you found it-your disappearance clinches it. I wouldn't give a drop of water for your chances of living to a ripe old age if you went back to court."

"Merciful Sartan!" Alfred's face was the color of clay-he might have been wearing a mask of silt. "I didn't know! I swear, noble sir!" Reaching out, he grasped Hugh's hand pleadingly. "I'll forget the way, I promise-"

"I don't want you to forget it. Who knows, it might come in handy one day."

"Yes, sir . . ." Alfred hesitated.

"This is Sir Hugh." Bane introduced them. "He has a black monk walking with him, Alfred."

Hugh stared at the child in silence. No expression shifted the stone facade of the face except perhaps for a slight narrowing of the dark eyes.

Alfred, flushing red, reached out his hand and smoothed Bane's golden hair. "What have I told you, Your Highness?" said the chamberlain, gently rebuking. "It is not polite to tell people's secrets." He glanced apologetically at Hugh. "You must understand, Sir Hugh. His Highness is a clairvoyant and he has not quite learned how to handle his gift."

Hugh snorted, rose to his feet, and began to roll up his blanket.

"Please, Sir Hugh, allow me." Leaping up, Alfred sprang to snatch the blanket from Hugh's hand. One of the chamberlain's huge feet obeyed him. The other seemed to think it had received different orders and turned the opposite direction. Alfred stumbled, staggered, and would have pitched headfirst into Hugh had not the assassin caught his arm and shoved him upright.

"Thank you, sir. I'm very clumsy, I'm afraid. Here, I can do that now." Alfred began struggling with the blanket, which seemed suddenly to have gained a malevolent life of its own. Corners slid through his fingers. He folded one end, only to unfold its opposite. Wrinkles and bumps popped up in the most unlikely places. It was difficult to tell, during the ensuing tussle, who was going to come out on top.

"It's true about His Highness, sir," Alfred continued, wrestling furiously with the strip of cloth. "Our past clings to us, especially people who influenced us. His Highness can see them."

Hugh stepped in, throttled the blanket, and rescued Alfred, who sat back, panting and wiping his high domed forehead.

"I'll bet he can tell my fortune in the wine lees, too," Hugh said in a low voice, pitched so that the child wouldn't hear. "Where would he get that kind of talent? Only wizards beget wizards. Or maybe Stephen's not really this kid's father."

Hugh shot this verbal arrow aimlessly, not expecting to hit anything. His shaft found a target, however, burying itself deep, from the looks of it. Alfred's face went a sickly green, the whites of his eyes showed clearly around the gray iris, and his lips moved soundlessly. Stricken, he stared speechless at Hugh.

So, thought the Hand, this is beginning to make sense. At least it explains the kid's strange name. He glanced over at Bane. The child was rummaging through Alfred's pack.

"Did you bring my sweetmelts? Yes!" Triumphantly he dug the candy out. "I knew you wouldn't forget."

"Get your things together, Your Highness," ordered Hugh, throwing his fur cloak over his shoulders and hefting his own pack.

"I'll do that, Your Highness." Alfred sounded relieved, glad for something to occupy his mind and his hands and keep his face averted from Hugh's. Out of three steps across the floor, he missed only one, which brought him to his knees, where he needed to be anyway. With great goodwill he set to do battle with the prince's blanket.

"Alfred, you had a view of the landscape when you traveled. Do you know where we are?"

"Yes, Sir Hugh." The chamberlain, sweating in the chill air, did not dare look up, lest the blanket take him unawares. "I believe this village is known as Watershed."

"Watershed," repeated the Hand. "Don't wander off, Your Highness," he added, noticing the prince starting to skip out of the door.

The boy glanced back. "I just want to look around outside. I won't go far and I'll be careful."

The chamberlain had given up attempting to fold the blanket and had at last stuffed it bodily into the pack. When the boy had disappeared out the door, Alfred turned to face Hugh.

"You will allow me to accompany you, won't you, sir? I won't be any trouble, I swear."

Hugh gazed at him intently.

"You understand that you can never go back to the palace, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. I've set fire to my bridge, as they say."

"You haven't just set it on fire. You've cut it from the bank and dumped it down the gorge."

Alfred ran a trembling hand over his bald pate and stared at the floor.

"I'm taking you with me to look after the kid. You understand, he's not to go back to the palace either. I'm very good at tracking. It would be my duty to stop you before you did anything foolish, like trying to sneak him away."

"Yes, sir. That's understood." Alfred raised his eyes and looked directly into Hugh's. "You see, sir, I know the reason the king hired you."

Hugh flicked a glance outside. Bane was gleefully throwing rocks at a tree. His arms were thin, his throw clumsy. He continually fell short of the mark, but patiently and cheerfully kept at it.

"You know about the plot against the prince's life?" Hugh questioned easily, his hand, beneath his cloak, moving to the hilt of his sword.

"I know the reason," repeated Alfred. "It's why I'm here. I won't get in the way, sir, I promise you."

Hugh was confounded. Just when he thought the web was unraveling, it got more tangled. The man knew the reason, he said. It sounded as if he meant the real reason! He knows the truth about the kid, whatever that is. Has he come to help or hinder? Help, that was almost laughable. This chamberlain couldn't dress himself without help. Yet, Hugh had to admit, he'd done an extremely efficient job of tailing them; not an easy matter on a dark night made darker by enchanted fog. And, at the Kir monastery, he had managed to conceal not only himself but also his dragon from a wizard's six senses. But someone that skilled in tracking, hiding, and tailing had fainted dead away when he felt a knife at his throat.

There was no doubt this Alfred was a servant-the prince obviously knew him and treated him as such. But whom was he serving? The Hand didn't know, and he meant to find out. Meanwhile, whether Alfred was truly the fool he appeared or a cunning liar, the man had his uses, not the least of which would be to take charge of His Highness.

"All right. Let's get started. We'll circle around the village, pick up the road about five miles outside it. Not likely anyone around here would know the prince by sight, but it'll save questions. Has the kid got a hood? Get it on him. And keep it on him." He cast a disgusted glance at Alfred's satin-coated, knee-breeched, beribboned, and silk-stockinged finery. "You stink of the court a mile off. But it can't be helped. Most likely they'll take you for a charlatan. First chance we get, I'll bargain with some peasant for a change of clothes."

"Yes, Sir Hugh," Alfred murmured.

Hugh stepped out the door. "We're leaving, Your Highness."

Bane danced up eagerly and caught hold of Hugh's hand. "I'm ready. Are we going to stop at an inn for breakfast? My mother said we might. I've never been allowed to eat at an inn before-"

He was interrupted by a crash and a stifled groan behind him. Alfred had encountered the door. Hugh shook the boy's hand free. The child's soft touch was almost physically painful.

"I'm afraid not, Your Highness. I want to get clear of the village while it's still early, before people are up and stirring."

Bane's mouth drooped in disappointment.

"It wouldn't be safe, Your Highness." Alfred emerged, a large knot forming on his glistening forehead. "Especially if there is someone plotting to ... uh ... do you harm." He glanced at Hugh as he said this, and the assassin wondered again about Alfred.

"I suppose you're right," the prince said with a sigh, accustomed to the problems of being famous.

"But we will make a picnic under a tree," added the chamberlain.

"And eat sitting on the ground?" Bane's spirits lifted, then fell. "Oh, but I forgot. Mother never allows me to sit on the grass. I might catch a chill or get my clothes dirty."

"I don't think that this time she will mind," Alfred replied gravely.

"If you're sure . . ." The prince put his head on one side and looked intently at Alfred.

"I'm sure."

"Hurrah!" Bane darted forward, skipping lightheartedly down the road. Alfred, clutching the prince's pack, hurried after him. He'd make better time, thought Hugh, if his feet could be persuaded to travel in the same general direction as the rest of his body.

The assassin took his place behind them, keeping both under careful surveillance, hand on his sword. If Alfred so much as leaned over to whisper into the kid's ear, that whisper would be made with his last breath.

A mile passed. Alfred seemed completely occupied with the task of staying on his own two feet, and Hugh, falling into the easy, relaxed rhythm of the road, let his inner eye take over guard duty. Freed, his mind wandered, and he found himself seeing, superimposed over the body of the prince, another boy walking along a road, though not with cheerful gaiety. This boy walked with an air of defiance; his body bore the marks of the punishment he had received for just such an attitude. Black monks walked along at his side. . . .

. . . "Come, boy. The lord abbot wants to see you."

It was cold in the Kir monastery. Outside the walls, the world sweat and sweltered in summer heat. Inside, death's chill stalked the bleak hallways and kept court in the shadows.

The boy, who was not a boy any longer, but standing on the threshold of manhood, left his task and followed the monk through the silent corridors. The elves had raided a small village nearby. There were many dead, and most of the brothers had gone to burn the bodies and do reverence for those who had escaped the prisonhouse of their flesh.

Hugh should have gone with them. His task and that of the other boys was to search for charcrystal and build the pyres. The brothers pulled the bodies from the wreckage, composed the twisted limbs and staring eyes, and placed them upon the heaped oil-soaked faggots. The monks said no word to the living. Their voices were for the dead, and the sound of their chanting echoed through the streets. That chant had come to be a music everyone on Uylandia and Volkaran dreaded to hear.

Some of the monks sang the words:

. . . each new child's birth, we die in our hearts, truth black, we are shown, death always returns . . .

The other monks chanted over and over the single word "with." Inserting the "with" after the word "returns," they carried the dark song full-cycle.

Hugh had accompanied the monks since he was six cycles old, but this time he'd been ordered to stay and complete his morning's work. He did as he was told, without question; to do otherwise would be to invite a beating, delivered impersonally and without malice, for the good of his soul.

Often he had silently prayed to be left behind when the others went on one of these grim missions, but now he had prayed to be allowed to go.

The gates boomed shut with an ominous dull thunder; the emptiness lay like a pall on his heart. Hugh had been planning his escape for a week. He had spoken of it to no one; the one friend he had made during his stay here was dead, and Hugh had been careful never to make another. He had the uneasy impression, however, that his secret plot must be engraved on his forehead, for it seemed that everyone who glanced at him kept looking at him with far more interest than they had ever before evinced.

Now he had been left behind when the others were gone. Now he was being summoned into the presence of the lord abbot—a man he had seen only during services, a man to whom he had never spoken and who had never before spoken to him.

Standing in the chamber of stone that shunned sunlight as something frivolous and fleeting, Hugh waited, with the patience that had been thrashed into him since childhood, for the man seated at the desk to acknowledge not only his presence but also his very existence. While Hugh waited, the fear and nervousness in which he'd lived for a week froze, dried up, and blew away. It was as if the cold atmosphere had numbed him to any human emotion or feeling. He knew suddenly, standing in that room, that he would never love, never pity, never feel compassion. From now on, he would never even know fear.

The abbot raised his head. Dark eyes looked into Hugh's soul.

"You were taken in by us when you were six cycles. I see in the records that ten cycles more have passed." The abbot did not speak to him by name. Doubtless he didn't even know it. "You are sixteen. It is time for you to make preparation for taking your vows and joining our brotherhood."

Caught by surprise, too proud to lie, Hugh said nothing. His silence spoke the truth.

"You have always been rebellious. Yet you are a hard worker, who never complains. You accept punishment without crying out. And you have adopted our precepts—I see that in you clearly. Why, then, will you leave us?"

Hugh, having asked himself that question often in the dark and sleepless nights, was prepared with the answer.

"I will not serve any man."

The abbot's face, stern and forbidding as the stone walls around him, registered neither anger nor surprise. "You are one of us. Like it or not, wherever you go, you will serve, if not us, then our calling. Death will always be your master."

Hugh was dismissed from the abbot's presence. The pain of the beating that followed slid away on the ice coating of the boy's soul. That night, Hugh made good his plans. Sneaking into the chamber where the monks kept their records, he found, in a book, information on the orphan boys the monks adopted. By the light of the stub of a stolen candle, Hugh searched for and discovered his own name.

"Hugh Blackthorn. Mother: Lucy, last name unknown. Father: According to words spoken by the mother before she died, the child's father is Sir Perceval Blackthorn of Blackthorn Hall, Djern Hereva." A later entry, dated a week after, stated: "Sir Perceval refuses to acknowledge the child and bids us 'do with the bastard as we will.' "

Hugh cut the page from the leather-bound book, tied it up in his ragged scrip, snuffed the candle, and slipped out into the night. Looking back at the walls whose grim shadows had long ago shut out any of the warmth or happiness he had known in childhood, Hugh silently refuted the abbot's words.

"I will be death's master."

## CHAPTER 16

### STEPS OF TERREL FEN LOW REALM

LIMBECK REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS AND FOUND THAT HIS SITUATION HAD IMPROVED, going from desperate to perilous. Of course, it took him, in his confused state, a considerable amount of time to remember just exactly what the situation was. After giving the matter serious thought, he determined he was not hanging by his wrists from the bedposts. Wriggling and grunting at the pain in his head, he looked about him as best he could in the gloom of the storm and saw that he had fallen into a giant pit, undoubtedly dug by the dig-claws of the Kicksey-Winsey.

Further examination revealed that he had not fallen into a pit but was suspended over a pit-the giant wings having straddled it neatly, leaving him dangling down below. From the pain, he deduced that the wings must have inflicted a smart rap on his head during the landing.

Limbeck was just wondering how he was going to free himself from this awkward and uncomfortable position when the answer came to him rather unpleasantly in the form of a sharp crack. The weight of the Geg hanging from it was causing the wooden frame to break. Limbeck sank down about a foot before the wings caught and held. His stomach sank a good deal further, for-due to the darkness and the fact that he didn't have his spectacles on-Limbeck had no idea how deep this pit was. Frantically he attempted to devise some means of escape. A storm was raging above, water was pouring down the sides of the pit, making it extremely slippery, and at that moment there was another crack and the wings sagged down another foot.

Limbeck gasped, squinched his eyes tightly shut, and shook all over. Again, the wings caught and held, but not very well. He could feel himself slowly slipping. He had one chance. If he could free a hand, he might be able to catch hold of one of the coralite holes that honeycombed the sides of the pit. He jerked on his right hand . . .

. . . and the wings snapped.

Limbeck had just time enough to experience overwhelming terror before he landed heavily and painfully at the bottom of the pit, the wings crashing down all around him. First he shook. Then, deciding that shaking wasn't improving the situation, he extricated himself from the mess and peered upward. The pit was only about seven or eight feet deep, he discovered, and he could easily climb out. Since it was a coralite pit, the water that was streaming into it was draining just as

swiftly through it. Limbeck was pleased with himself. The pit offered shelter from the storm. He was in no danger.

No danger until the dig-claws came down to mine.

Limbeck had just settled himself beneath a huge piece of torn wing fabric, to protect himself from the rain, when the terrible thought of the dig-claws occurred to him. Hastily he leapt to his feet and peered upward, but couldn't see a thing except for a black blur that was probably storm clouds and flashes of fuzzy lightning. Having never served the Kicksey-Winsey, Limbeck had no idea if the dig-claws operated during storms or not. He couldn't see why they wouldn't, yet on the other hand he couldn't see why they would. All of which was no help.

Sitting back down-being careful to first remove several sharp splinters of wood and drop them down the holes of the coralite- Limbeck considered the matter as best he could through the pain in his head. At least the pit offered protection from the storm. And, in all probability, the dig-claws- which were huge, cumbersome things-would move slowly enough that he would have time to get out of the way.

Which turned out to be the case.

Limbeck had been squatting in the pit for about thirty locks or so, the storm was showing no signs of abating, and he was wishing he'd had the foresight to stuff a couple of muffins down his pants, when there was a large thump and the pit in which he was sitting gave a tremendous shudder.

Dig-claws, thought Limbeck, and began to climb up the sides of the pit. It was easy going. The coralite offered numerous hand- and footholds, and Limbeck reached the top in moments. There was no use putting on his spectacles-the rain streaming over the glass would have blinded him. And he didn't need them anyhow. The dig-claw, its metal gleaming in the incessant flashes of lightning, was only a few feet from him.

Glancing upward, Limbeck could see other claws dropping out of the sky, descending on long cables lowered from the Kicksey-Winsey. It was an awesome spectacle, and the Geg stood staring, headache forgotten, his mouth gaping wide open.

Made of bright and shining metal, ornately carved and fashioned to resemble the foot of some huge killer bird, the dig-claws dug into the coralite with their sharp talons. Closing over the broken rock, the claws carried it upward as a bird's claw grasps its prey. Once back on the isle of Drevlin, the dig-claws deposited the rock they had mined from the Terrel Fen into large bins, where the GEGs sorted through the coralite and retrieved the precious gray ore on which the Kicksey-Winsey fed, and without which-so legend had it-the Kicksey-Winsey could not survive.

Fascinated, Limbeck watched the dig-claws come smashing down all around him, biting into the coralite, digging down deep, scooping it up. The Geg was so interested in the procedure- which he'd never seen-that he completely forgot what he was supposed to do until it was almost too late. The claws were shaking free of the coralite and starting to rise back up when Limbeck remembered he was to put a mark on one of them to let Jarre and her people know where he was.

Broken bits of coralite, dropped out of the rising claws, would serve as a writing tool. Grabbing up a chunk, Limbeck made his way through the driving rain, stumbling over the rock-strewn ground, heading for one of the claws that had just come down and was burying itself in the coralite.

Reaching the dig-claw, Limbeck was suddenly daunted by his task. The claw was enormous; he'd never imagined anything so big and powerful. Fifty Limbecks would have fitted comfortably inside its talons. It shook and jabbed and clawed the surface of the coralite, sending sharp shards of rock flying everywhere. It was impossible to get close to it.

But Limbeck had no choice. He had to get near. Gripping his coralite in one hand and his courage in the other, he had just started forward when a bolt of lightning struck the claw, sending blue flame dancing over its metal surface. The simultaneous thunder blast knocked Limbeck off his feet. Dazed and terrified, the Geg was about to give up in despair and run back to his pit- where he figured he would spend the remainder of a short and unhappy life-when the claw came to a shuddering stop. All the claws around Limbeck stopped-some in the ground; others hanging in midair on their way back up; others with talons wide open, waiting to descend.

Perhaps the lightning had damaged it. Perhaps there was a scift change. Perhaps something had gone wrong above. Limbeck didn't know. If he had believed in the gods, he would have thanked them. As it was, he scrambled over the rocks, chunk of coralite in hand, and cautiously approached the nearest claw.

Noticing lots of scratch marks where the claw dipped into the coralite, Limbeck realized that he would have to make his mark on the upper part of the dig-claw, a part that didn't sink into the ground. That meant he had to choose a claw which was already buried. Which meant there was every possibility that it would start up again, yank itself out of the ground, and spill tons of rock down on the Geg's head.

Gingerly Limbeck touched the side of the dig-claw with the coralite, his hand shaking so that it made a ringing sound, like the clapper of a bell. It didn't leave a mark. Gritting his teeth, desperation giving him strength, Limbeck bore down hard. The coralite screeched over the metal side of the claw with a sound that made Limbeck think his head would split apart. But he had the satisfaction of seeing a long scratch mar the claw's smooth unblemished surface.

Still, someone might take that one scratch for an accidental occurrence. Limbeck made another mark on the claw, this one perpendicular to the first. The dig-claw shivered and shook. Limbeck dropped his rock in fright and scrambled backward. The claws were functioning once again. Pausing a moment, Limbeck gazed proudly on his work.

One dig-claw, rising into the stormy sky, was marked with the letter L.

Dashing through the rain, Limbeck returned to his pit. No claws seemed likely to descend on him, this time at least. He climbed back down the sides and, reaching the bottom, made himself as comfortable as possible. Pulling the fabric over his head, he tried not to think about food.

## CHAPTER 17

### STEPS OF TERREL FEN, LOW REALM

THE DIG-CLAWS CARRYING THEIR ORE LIFTED BACK UP INTO THE STORM CLOUDS,  
ON

their way to the Drevlin dumps. Limbeck, watching them ascend, pondered how long it might take them to unload the coralite and return for more. How long would it take someone to notice his

mark? Would someone notice his mark? If someone did notice his mark, would it be someone friendly to his cause or would it be a clark? If it was a clark, what was the clark likely to do about it? If it was a friend, how long would it take to attach the help-hand? Would that happen before he froze to death or died of starvation?

Such gloomy wonderings were unusual to Limbeck, who was not, ordinarily, a worrier. His disposition was naturally cheerful and optimistic. He tended to see the best in people. He held no malice toward anyone for his having been tied to the Feathers of Justick and tossed down here to die. The High Froman and the Head Clark had done what they considered to be best for the people. It wasn't their fault that they believed in those who claimed to be gods. It was no wonder that the Froman and his followers didn't believe Limbeck's story-Jarre herself didn't believe it either.

Perhaps it was thinking about Jarre that made Limbeck feel sad and discouraged. He had fondly assumed that she, at least, would believe in his discovery that the Welves weren't gods. Limbeck, huddling, shivering, in the bottom of his pit, could still not quite accept the fact that she didn't. This knowledge had nearly ruined his entire execution. Now that the initial excitement was over and he had nothing to do but wait and hope things went right and try not to notice that there was an incredible number of things that could go wrong, Limbeck began to reflect seriously on what would happen when (not if) he was rescued.

"How can they accept me as their leader if they think I lie?" Limbeck asked a stream of water running down the side of the pit. "Why would they even want me back at all? We've always said, Jarre and I, that truth was the most important virtue, that the quest for truth should be our highest goal. She thinks I've lied, yet she's obviously expecting me to continue as leader of our Union.

"And when I go back, then what?" Limbeck saw it all clearly, more clearly than he'd seen anything in years. "She'll humor me. They all will. Oh, they'll keep me as head of the Union - after all, the Mangers have judged me and let me live. But they'll know it's a sham. More important, I'll know it's a sham. The Mangers haven't had a damn thing to do with it. It's Jarre's cleverness that will bring me back, and she'll know it and so will I. Lying! That's what we'll be doing!"

Limbeck was growing increasingly upset. "Oh, sure, we'll get a lot of new members, but they'll be coming to us for the wrong reasons! Can you base a revolution on a lie? No!" The Geg clenched his thick wet fist. "It's like building a house on mud. Sooner or later, it's going to slip out from under your feet. Maybe I'll just stay down here! That's it! I won't go back!

"But that won't prove anything," Limbeck reflected. "They'll just think the Mangers did me in, and that won't help the cause at all. I know! I'll write them a note and send it up with the help-hand instead of going myself. There are tier feathers lying around. I can use those as a pen." He jumped to his feet. "And silt for ink. 'By choosing to stay down here and perhaps dying down here' - yes, that sounds well - 'I hope to prove to you that what I said about the Welves was the truth. I cannot lead those who do not believe me, those who have lost faith in me.' Yes, that's quite good."

Limbeck tried to sound cheerful, but he found his pleasure in his speech rapidly draining. He was hungry, cold, wet, and frightened. The storm was blowing itself out, and an awful, terrible silence was descending over him. That silence reminded him of the big silence - the Endless Hear Nothing - and reminded him that he was facing that Endless Hear Nothing, and he realized that the death of which he spoke so glibly was liable to be a very unpleasant one.

Then, too, as if death wasn't bad enough, he pictured Jarre receiving his note, reading it with pursed lips and that wrinkle which always appeared above her nose when she was displeased. He wouldn't even need his spectacles to read the words of the note she'd send back. He could hear them already.

"Limbeck, stop this nonsense and get up here this instant!" Oh, Jarre!" he murmured to himself sadly, "if only you had believed me. The others wouldn't have mattered-

A bone-jarring, teeth-rattling, earth-shaking thud jolted Limbeck out of his despair and simultaneously knocked him down.

Lying on his back, dazed, staring up at the top of the pit, he thought: Have the dig-claws come back? This soon? I don't have my note written!

Flustered, Limbeck staggered to his feet and stared up into the grayness. The storm had passed over. It was drizzling rain and foggy, but it was not lightninging, hailing, or thundering. He couldn't see the claws descending, but then, he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Fumbling for his spectacles, he put them on and looked back up into the sky.

By squinting, he thought he could just barely distinguish numerous fuzzy blobs materializing out of the clouds. But if they were the dig-claws, they were far above him yet, and unless one had come down prematurely or fallen-which seemed unlikely, since the Kicksey-Winsey rarely allowed accidents like that to happen-the dig-claws couldn't have been the cause of that tremendous thud. What, then, was it?

Hurriedly Limbeck began to climb the sides of the pit. His spirits were rising. He had a "what" or a "why" to investigate!

Reaching the rim of the pit, he peeped cautiously over the edge. At first he saw nothing, but that was because he was looking in the wrong direction. Turning his head, he gasped, marveling.

A brilliant light, shimmering with more colors than Limbeck had ever imagined existed in his gray and metallic world, was streaming out of a gigantic hole not more than thirty feet from him. Never stopping to think that the light might be harmful or that whatever had created the humongous thud might be lethal or that the dig-claws might be slowly and inevitably descending, Limbeck clambered up over the edge of the pit and made for the light as swiftly as his short, thick legs would carry his stout body.

There were numerous obstacles blocking his path; the surface of the small isle was pockmarked with holes dug by the claws. He had to avoid these, as well as heaps of broken coralite dropped when the dig-claws carried the ore upward. Making his way up and over and around these took some time, as well as considerable energy. When Limbeck finally reached the light, he was out of breath, both from the unaccustomed exertion and from excitement. For as he drew nearer, Limbeck could see that the colors in the light were forming distinct patterns and shapes.

Intent on the wonderful pictures he could see in the light, Limbeck stumbled almost blindly over the rocky ground and was saved from tumbling headfirst into the hole by tripping over a chunk of coralite and falling flat on his face at the hole's edge. Shaken, he put his hand to his pocket to feel if his spectacles were broken. They weren't there. After a horrible moment of panic, he remembered that they were on his nose. Crawling forward, he stared in amazement.

For a moment, he couldn't see anything but a brilliant, multicolored, ever-shifting radiance. Then forms and shapes coalesced. The pictures in the light were truly fascinating, and Limbeck gazed at them in awe. As he watched the constantly shifting and changing images, that portion of his mind which continually interrupted important and wonderful thoughts with mundane matters such as "Mind you don't walk into that wall!", "That pan's hot!", and "Why didn't you go before we left?", said to him urgently, "The dig-claws are coming down!"

Limbeck, concentrating on the pictures, ignored it.

He was, he realized, seeing a world. Not his own world, but somebody else's world. It was an incredibly beautiful place. It reminded him some, but not quite, of the pictures he'd seen in the books of the Welves. The sky was bright blue-not gray-and it was clear and vast, with only a few puffs of white sailing across it. Lush vegetation was everywhere, not just in a pot in the kitchen. He saw magnificent structures of fantastic design, he saw wide streets and boulevards, he saw what might have been GEGs, only they were tall and slender with graceful limbs . . .

Or had he? Limbeck blinked and stared into the light. It was beginning to fragment and break apart! The images were becoming distorted. He longed for the people to come back. Certainly, he'd never seen anyone-not even the Welves-who looked like what he thought he'd glimpsed in that split second before the light winked out, then blinked back on, and shifted to another picture.

Trying to make sense of the flickering images that were beginning to make his eyes burn and ache, Limbeck pulled himself farther over the lip of the hole and saw the light's source. It was beaming out of an object at the bottom of the hole.

"That was what made the thump," said Limbeck, shielding his eyes with his hand and staring at the object intently. "It fell from the sky, like I did. Is it part of the Kicksey-Winsey? If so, why did it fall? Why is it showing me these pictures?"

Why, why, why? Limbeck couldn't stand not knowing. Never thinking of possible danger, he crawled over the edge of the hole and slid down the side. The nearer he drew to the object, the easier it was to see it. The light pouring out of it was diffused upward and was less brilliant and blinding approached from this angle.

The Geg was, at first, disappointed. "Why, it's nothing but a hunk of coralite," he said, prodding chunks of it that had broken off. "Certainly the largest hunk of coralite I've ever seen-it's as big as my house-and then, too, I've never known coralite to fall out of the sky."

Slithering closer, displacing small bits of rock that skittered out from under him and went bouncing down the side of the crater, Limbeck drew in his breath. Delighted, awed, and astounded, he immediately squelched the mental prod that was reminding him, "The dig-claws! The dig-claws!" The coralite was just a shell, an outer covering. It had cracked open, probably in the fall, and Limbeck could see inside.

At first he thought it must be part of the Kicksey-Winsey, and then he thought it wasn't. It was made of metal-like the Kicksey-Winsey-but the metal body of the Kicksey-Winsey was smooth and unblemished. This metal was covered with strange and bizarre symbols, and it was from cracks in the metal that the bright light was streaming. And it was because of the cracks-or so Limbeck reasoned-that he couldn't see the complete picture.

"If I open the cracks wider, then perhaps I could see more. This is really exciting!" Reaching the bottom of the crater, Limbeck hurried toward the metal object. It was about four times taller than he was and-as he'd first noticed-as big as his house. Gingerly he reached out his hand and made a swift tapping motion with the tips of his fingers on the metal. It wasn't hot to the touch-something he'd feared due to the bright light pouring from it. The metal was cool, and he was able to rest his hand on it and even trace the symbols engraved there with his fingers.

A strange and ominous creaking noise sounded above him, and that irritating part of his brain was shrieking at him something about dig-claws coming down, but Limbeck ordered it to shut up and quit bothering him. Putting his hand on one of the cracks, he noticed that the cracks ran all around the symbols but never intersected one. Limbeck started to tug at the crack to see if he could widen it.

His hand seemed reluctant to perform its assigned task, however, and Limbeck knew why. He was suddenly and unpleasantly reminded of the fallen Welf ship.

"Rotting corpses. But it led me to the truth."

The thought passed through his mind swift as a heartbeat, and, refusing to let himself think about it further, he gave the metal a good hard tug.

The crack widened, the entire metal structure began to shiver and tremble. Limbeck snatched his hand away and jumped backward. But the object was only, apparently, settling itself more firmly into the crater, for the movement ceased. Cautiously Limbeck approached again, and this time he heard something.

It sounded like a groan. Pressing his ear to the crack, wishing angrily that the creaking sounds of the dig-claws descending from the skies would cease so that he could hear better, Limbeck listened intently. He heard it again, louder, and he had no doubt that there was something alive inside the metal shell, and that it was hurt.

Gegs, even the weak ones, have a tremendous amount of strength in their arms and upper body. Limbeck put his hands on either side of the crack and pushed with all his might. Though they bit into his flesh, the metal sides split wide open and the Geg was able, after a brief struggle, to squeeze inside.

The light had been brilliant out there. In here, it was blinding, and Limbeck at first despaired of seeing anything. Then he detected the light's source. It was radiating outward from the center of what the Geg had come to think of-by past association- as a ship. The groaning sound came from somewhere to the right, and Limbeck, by using his hand as a shield, was able to block out most of the light and search for whatever it was that was in pain.

Limbeck's heart jumped. "A Welf!" was his first excited thought. "And a live one at that!" Squatting down beside the figure, the Geg saw a large amount of blood beneath the head, but no signs of blood anywhere else on the body. He also saw-rather to his disappointment-that it wasn't a Welf. Limbeck had seen a human only once before, and that was in pictures in the Welf books. This creature looked something like a human, yet not quite. There was one thing certain, however. The creature, with its great height and thin, muscular body, was definitely one of the so-called gods.

At that moment, the screaming warnings in Limbeck's brain became so insistent that he was forced-reluctantly-to pay attention to them.

He looked up through the crack in the ship's structure and found himself staring into the wide-open maw of a dig-claw, directly above him, and descending rapidly. If Limbeck hurried, he could just manage to escape the ship before the claw smashed into it.

The god-who-wasn't groaned again.

"I've got to get you out of here!" Limbeck said to him.

The GEGs are a softhearted race and there is no doubt that Limbeck was moved by unselfish considerations in determining to risk his own life to save that of the god. But it must also be admitted that the GEG was moved by the thought that if he took back a live god-who-wasn't, Jarre would have to believe his story!

Grasping the god by the wrists, Limbeck started to pull him across the debris-strewn floor of the shattered ship, when he felt-with a shiver-hands grasp him back. Startled, he looked down at the god. The eyes, almost covered in a mask of blood, were wide open and staring at him. The lips moved.

"What?" With the claw's creaking, Limbeck couldn't hear. "No time!" He jerked his head upward.

The god's eyes glanced up. His face was twisted in pain, and it was obvious to Limbeck that the god was holding on to consciousness by a supreme effort. It seemed he recognized the danger, but it only made him more frantic. He squeezed Limbeck's wrists hard; the GEG would have bruise marks for weeks.

"My...dog!"

Limbeck stared down at the god. Had he heard right? The GEG glanced hastily around the wreckage and suddenly saw, right at the god's feet, an animal pinned beneath twisted metal. Limbeck blinked at it, wondering why he hadn't seen it before.

The dog was panting and squirming. It was stuck and couldn't free itself, but it didn't appear to be hurt and it was obviously trying, in its struggles, to reach its master, for it paid no attention to Limbeck.

The GEG looked upward. The claw was coming down with a rapidity that Limbeck found quite annoying-considering how slowly they had descended the last time he'd seen them. He looked from the claw to the god to the dog.

"I'm sorry," he said helplessly. "There just isn't time!"

The god-eyes on the dog-tried to wrench his hands from the GEG's grip. But the effort apparently taxed the god's remaining strength, for suddenly the arms went limp and the god's head lolled back. The dog, looking at its master, whimpered and increased its efforts to free itself.

"I'm sorry," Limbeck repeated to the dog, who paid no attention to him. Gritting his teeth, hearing the sound of the claw coming closer and closer, the GEG pulled the body of the god across the

debris-strewn floor. The dog's struggles became frantic, its whimperings changed to yelps, but that was only- Limbeck saw-because it was watching its master being taken away and it couldn't get to him.

A lump in his throat that was both pity for the trapped animal and fear for himself, Limbeck heaved and pulled and strained and finally reached the crack. With a great effort he dragged the god through. Depositing the limp body on the floor of the crater, Limbeck threw himself down beside the god just as the dig-claw smashed into the metal ship.

There was a shattering explosion. The concussion lifted Limbeck off the ground and slammed him back into it, driving the breath from his stout body. Small bits of shattered coralite fell down around him like rain, the sharp edges biting painfully into his skin. When that ceased, all was quiet.

Slowly, dazedly, Limbeck lifted his head. The dig-claw was hanging motionless, probably injured in the explosion. The Geg looked around to discover what had happened to the ship, expecting to see it a mass of twisted wreckage.

Instead, he didn't see it at all. The explosion had destroyed it. No, that wasn't quite right. There were no pieces of metal lying about; no remnant of the ship remained. It wasn't only destroyed, it had vanished as though it had never been!

But there was the god to prove that Limbeck hadn't lost his mind. The god stirred and opened his eyes. Gasping in pain, he turned his head, staring about.

"Dog," he called feebly. "Dog! Here, boy!"

Limbeck, glancing at the coralite that had been blown to smithereens in the blast, shook his head. He felt unaccountably guilty, though he knew there'd been no way he could have saved the dog and themselves.

"Dog!" called the god, and there was a panicked crack in the voice that made Limbeck's heart ache. Reaching out his hand, he started to try to soothe the god, fearful that he would do himself further injury.

"Ah, dog," said the god with a deep, relieved sigh, his gaze fixed on the place where the ship had been. "There you are! Come here. Come here. That was quite a ride, wasn't it, boy?"

Limbeck stared. There was the dog! Dragging itself out of the broken rock, it hobbled, limping on three paws, to its master. Its eyes shining brightly, its mouth open in what Limbeck could have sworn was a pleased grin, the dog gave its master's hand a lick. The god-who-wasn't relapsed into unconsciousness. The dog, with a sigh and a wriggle, sank down beside its master, laid its head on its paws, and fixed its intelligent eyes on Limbeck.

## CHAPTER 18

### THE STEPS OF TERREL FEN, LOW REALM

"I'VE COME THIS FAR. WHAT DO I DO NOW?"

Limbeck wiped his hand over his sweating forehead, rubbed his fingers under the wire rims of the spectacles that kept slipping down his nose. The god was in pretty bad shape, or so Limbeck thought, being uncertain as to the physical properties of gods. That deep gash on the head would have been critical in a Geg, and Limbeck had no choice but to assume it was critical in a god.

"The help-hand!"

Limbeck jumped up and, with a backward glance at the comatose god and his very remarkable dog, the Geg scrambled up the side of the crater. Reaching the edge, he saw all the dig-claws hard at work. The noise was ear-splitting-gouging and scraping, creaking and screeching: all very comforting to the Geg. Looking up quickly, ascertaining that there were no more dig-claws coming down, Limbeck crawled out of the crater and ran back to his own pit.

It was logical to assume that whatever WUPP Geg found the L mark on the dig-claw would send down the help-hand to the same location or as near as he or she could get. Of course, there was every possibility that no one had seen the L, or that they couldn't get the help-hand ready in time, or countless other dire Occurrences. Running along, tripping and stumbling over the heaps of broken corallite, Limbeck tried to prepare himself to accept without disappointment the fact that no help-hand would be there.

But it was.

The wave of relief that broke over Limbeck when he saw the help-hand sitting on the ground right near his pit nearly drowned the Geg. His knees went weak; he grew light-headed and had to sit down a moment to recover.

His first thought was to hurry, for the dig-claws were about to rise again. Staggering to his feet, he headed back for the crater at a run. His legs informed him in no uncertain terms that they were on the verge of rebellion against this unusual amount of exercise. Pausing a moment for the pain to subside, Limbeck reflected that he probably didn't have to hurry after all. Surely they wouldn't bring up the help-hand until they were certain he was in it.

The pain drained from his legs but seemed to take all his strength with it. His limbs felt six times heavier than normal, and in addition, instead of his legs supporting him, Limbeck had the distinct impression that he was dragging them along. Warily, stumbling and falling, he made his slow way back to the crater. He slid down the sides almost reluctantly, certain that, in his absence, the god-who-wasn't had died.

The god was still breathing, however. The dog, huddled as closely as possible next to its master's body, had rested its head on the god's chest, its eyes keeping watch over the pallid, blood-covered face.

The thought of dragging the god's heavy body up out of the crater and across the cracked and pitted landscape sank Limbeck's heart and left his spirits as heavy as his legs.

"I can't do it," he muttered, collapsing next to the god, his head resting on his propped-up knees. "I don't think ... I can even make it back . . . myself!"

His spectacles steamed up from the vast heat he had worked up. Sweat chilled on his body. Adding another blow to his already numb mind and body, a rumble of thunder indicated a storm brewing. Limbeck didn't care. Just as long as he didn't have to get to his feet again.

"But this god-who-isn't will prove you were right!" nagged that irritating voice. "At last you will have the power to persuade the Gogs that they've been deluded, used as slaves. This could be the dawning of a new day for your people! This could start the revolution!"

The revolution! Limbeck lifted his head. He couldn't see a thing, due to the mist over his spectacles, but that didn't matter.

He wasn't looking at his surroundings anyway. He was back on Drevlin, the Gogs were cheering him. What was even more beautiful, they were doing as he advised.

They were asking "why"!

Limbeck could never afterward clearly recall the next harrowing span of time. He remembered that he tore up his shirt to make a crude bandage to wrap around the head of the god. He remembered glancing askance at the dog, being uncertain how the dog would react to anyone moving its master. He remembered that the dog licked his hand and looked at him with its liquid eyes and stood aside, watching anxiously as the Gog lifted the limp body of the god and began hauling him up the side of the crater. After that, Limbeck remembered nothing but aching muscles and sobbing for breath and dragging himself and the body a few feet, then collapsing, then crawling forward, then collapsing, then struggling on again.

The dig-claws went back up into the sky, though the Gog never noticed. The storm broke, increasing his terror, for he knew that they could not hope to survive its full fury out in the open. He was forced to remove his spectacles, and between his myopia, the blinding rain, and the gathering gloom, Limbeck lost sight of the help-hand. He could only keep traveling in what he hoped was the general direction.

More than once, Limbeck thought the god was dead, for the rain chilled the body, the lips turned blue, the skin ashen. The rain had washed away the blood, and the Gog could see the deep and ugly-looking head wound, a thin trickle of red oozing from it. But the god still breathed.

Perhaps he is immortal, Limbeck thought dazedly.

The Gog knew that he was lost. He knew that he had traveled halfway across this blasted isle at least. They had missed the help-hand, or perhaps the help-hand, growing tired of waiting, had gone back up. The storm was worsening. Lightning flared around them, blasting holes in the coralite and deafening Limbeck with the concussive thunder. The wind kept him flattened to the ground-not that the Gog had the strength to stand. He was about to crawl into a pit and escape the storm (or die, if he was lucky) when he noticed blearily that the pit he was contemplating was his pit! There was the broken wooden frame of the wings. And there was the help-hand!

Hope lent the Gog strength. He made it to his feet. Buffeted by wind, he nevertheless managed to drag the god the last few remaining feet. Lowering the god to the ground, Limbeck opened the door to the glass bubble and looked curiously inside.

The help-hand had been designed to allow the GEGs to come to the assistance of the dig-claws, should that be necessary. Occasionally a claw got stuck in the coralite, or broke, or malfunctioned. When this occurred, a GEG entered the help-hand and was lowered down onto one of the isles to effect repairs.

The help-hand looked like what it was named-a gigantic hand made of metal that had been severed at the wrist. A cable attached to the wrist allowed the hand to be raised and lowered from above. The hand was slightly cupped; thumb and fingers forged together, it held in its secure grip a large protective glass bubble in which rode the repair GEGs. A hinged door allowed entrance and egress, and a brass horn, attached to a tube that ran back up the cable, permitted the GEGs to communicate with those above.

Two stout GEGs could fit comfortably inside the glass bubble. The god, being considerably taller than a GEG, presented a problem. Limbeck dragged the god over to the bubble and thrust him inside. The god's legs hung out over the edge. The GEG finally fit in the god, tucking his legs up so that the knees rested against his chin and folding his arms over his chest. Limbeck climbed in wearily himself, and the dog jumped in after. It would be a tight fit with all three of them, but Limbeck wasn't about to leave the dog behind-not again. He didn't think he could stand the shock of seeing it come back from the dead a second time.

The dog curled itself up against the body of its master. Limbeck, reaching over the god's limp form, struggled against the roaring wind in a futile effort to shut the glass door. The wind whipped around to attack from another direction, and suddenly the door slammed shut on its own, throwing Limbeck back against the side of the bubble. For long moments he lay there, panting and groaning.

Limbeck could feel the hand rock and quake in the storm. He had visions of it breaking, snapping off the cable, and suddenly the GEG wanted only one thing-to get off this rock. It took a supreme effort of will to move, but Limbeck managed to reach over and grasp the horn.

"Up!" he gasped.

No response, and he realized that they must not be able to hear him.

Drawing in a lungful of air, Limbeck closed his eyes and concentrated all his waning strength.

"Up!" he yelled so loudly that the dog sprang to its feet in alarm, the god stirred and groaned.

"Xplf wuf?" came a voice, the words rattling down the tube like a handful of pebbles.

"Up!" Limbeck shrieked in exasperation, desperation, and sheer panic.

The help-hand gave a tremendous lurch that would have knocked the GEG off his feet had he been on them. As it was, he was already scrunched up against the side to allow room for the god. Slowly, with an alarming creaking sound, swinging back and forth in the gale winds, the help-hand began to rise into the air.

Trying not to think what would happen now if the cable snapped, Limbeck leaned back against the side of the bubble, dosed his eyes, and hoped he wouldn't be sick.

Unfortunately, closing his eyes made him dizzy. He felt himself spinning round and round, about to fall into a deep black pit.

"This won't do," said Limbeck shakily. "I can't pass out. I've got to explain to them up above what's going on."

The Geg opened his eyes and-to keep from looking out-set himself to studying the god. He had, he realized, thought of the creature as male. At least it looked more like a male Geg than a female Geg, which was all Limbeck had to go on. The god's face was rough-cut: a square, cleft chin covered with a stubbly growth of beard; firm lips, tightly drawn, tightly closed, never relaxing, appearing to guard secrets that he would take with him to death. A few fine lines around the eyes seemed to indicate that the god, though not an old man, was no youngster. The hair, too, added an impression of age. It was cut short-very short-and though matted with blood and rain-soaked, Limbeck could see patches of pure white at the temples, above the forehead, and around the back where it grew at the base of the neck. The god's body seemed made of nothing but bones and muscle and sinew. He was thin-by Geg standards, too thin.

"That's probably why he's wearing so many clothes," said Limbeck to himself, trying hard not to look out the sides of the bubble, where lightning strikes were making the stormy night brighter than any day the GEGs, in their sunless world, ever knew.

The god wore a thick leather tunic over a shirt with a drawstring collar that encircled his throat. He had wrapped a strip of cloth around his neck, the ends tied in a knot at the base of his throat and thrust into the tunic. The shirt's long, full sleeves covered his wrists; drawstrings held them fast. Soft leather trousers were tucked into knee-high boots that fastened up the sides of the legs with buttons made of what appeared to be the horn of some animal. Over all this, he wore a long collarless coat with wide sleeves that came to the elbows. The colors of his clothes were drab-browns and whites, grays and dull black. The fabric was well-worn, frayed in places. The leather tunic, trousers, and boots had softened around the body, fitting it like a second skin.

Most peculiarly, the god wore rags around his hands. Startled by this, which he must have noticed, but hadn't thought about until now, Limbeck looked at the god's hands more closely. The rags were skillfully applied. Wrapping around the wrist, they covered the back of the hand and the palm and were twined around the base of the fingers and thumb.

"Why?" Limbeck wondered, and reached forward to find out.

The dog's growl was filled with such menace that Limbeck felt the hair rise on his head. The animal had jumped to its feet and was gazing at the Geg with a look that said plainly, "I'd leave my master alone, if I were you."

"Right," Limbeck gulped. He shrank back against the side of the bubble.

The dog gave him an approving glance. Settling itself more comfortably, it even closed its eyes, as much as to say, "I know you'll behave now, so if you'll excuse me, I'll take a short nap."

The dog was right. Limbeck was going to behave. He was paralyzed, afraid to move, almost scared to breathe.

The practical-minded GEGS liked cats. Cats were useful animals who earned their keep by catching mice and who took care of themselves. The Kicksey-Winsey liked cats, at least so it was supposed, since it had been the creators of the Kicksey-Winsey- the Mangers-who first brought cats down from the realms above to dwell with the GEGS. There were, however, few dogs on Drevlin. Those who kept them were generally the wealthy GEGS- such as the High Froman and members of his clan. The dogs were not pets, but were used to protect the wealth. GEGS would not take each other's lives, but there were a few who had no aversion at all to taking each other's property.

This dog was different from GEG dogs, which tended to resemble their owners-short-legged, barrel-chested, with round, thick-nosed, flat faces . . . and an expression of vicious stupidity. The dog holding Limbeck at bay was sleek-coated and slim-bodied. It had a longish nose, its face was exceptionally intelligent, and the eyes were large and liquid brown. Its fur was a nondescript black with patches of white on the tips of the ears, and white eyebrows. It was the eyebrows, Limbeck decided, that made the dog's face unusually expressive for an animal.

Such were Limbeck's observations of god and beast. They were detailed, because he had a long time to study them during his ride in the help-hand back up to the isle of Drevlin.

And all the time, he couldn't help wondering: What? . . . Why? . . .

## CHAPTER 19

### LEK, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

JARRE WAITED IMPATIENTLY FOR THE KICKSEY-WINSEY TO SLOWLY AND LABORIOUSLY wind up the cable from which dangled the help-hand. Occasionally, if some other GEG happened by, she would pull her scarf low over her face and stare with intense and frowning interest at a large round glass case in which lived a black arrow that did practically nothing all its life but hover uncertainly between a great many black lines all marked with strange and obscure symbols. The only thing the GEGS knew about this black arrow-known fondly as the pointy-finger-was that when it flopped over into the area where the black lines all turned red, the GEGS ran for their lives.

This night the pointy-finger was behaving, giving no indication that it was about to unleash blasting gusts of steam that would parboil any GEG caught within reach. Tonight everything was fine, just fine. The wheels were turning, the gears shifting, the cogs cogging. Cables came up and went down. The dig-claws deposited their loads of ore into carts pushed by the GEGS, who dumped the contents into the gigantic maw of the Kicksey-Winsey, which chewed up the ore, spit out what it didn't want, and digested the rest.

Most of the GEGS working tonight were members of WUPP. During the day, one of their crew had sighted the dig-claw with Limbeck's L on it. By extraordinary good fortune, the claw belonged to the part of the Kicksey-Winsey located near the capital city of Wombe. Jarre, traveling-with the aid of WUPP members-by flashraft, had arrived in time to meet her beloved and renowned leader.

All the dig-claws had come up except one which appeared to have broken down on the isle below. Jarre left her supposed work station and came over to join the other GEGS, peering anxiously down into the gap-a large shaft that had been bored straight through the corahte isle, opening out onto the sky below. Occasionally Jarre glanced around nervously, for she wasn't supposed to be on this

work crew, and if she was caught, there would be a lot of explaining to do. Fortunately, other GEGs rarely came into the help-hand area, doing so only if there was trouble with one of the claws. She looked up uneasily at the carts being rolled around on the level above her.

"Don't worry," said Lof. "If anyone looks down here, they'll just think we're helping to fix a claw."

Lof was a comely young Geg. He admired Jarre immensely and hadn't been exactly deeply grieved to hear of Limbeck's execution. Lof squeezed Jarre's hand and seemed inclined to hang on to it, but Jarre needed her hand herself and took it back.

"There it is!" she cried excitedly, pointing down into the gap. "That's it!"

"You mean that thing that just got struck by lightning?" asked Lof hopefully.

"No!" Jarre snapped. "I mean yes, but it wasn't hit."

They could all see the help-hand, clutching its bubble, rising up out of the gap. Never before had it seemed to Jarre that the Kicksey-Winsey was so slow. Several times she wondered if it hadn't broken down, and looked at the giant winder-upper, only to see it crankily winding away.

And, at length, the help-hand rose up into the Kicksey-Winsey. The winder-upper screeched to a halt, the gap closed beneath the hand with a rumble, floor plates sliding across to provide safe footing.

"It's him! It's Limbeck!" exclaimed Jarre, who could see a blurry blob through the glass of the bubble that was streaming with rain.

"I'm not sure," said Lof dubiously, still clinging to a fragment of hope. "Does Limbeck have a tail?"

But Jarre didn't hear. She rushed across the floor before the gap had quite closed all the way, the other GEGs hastening after her. Reaching the door, she began to yank on it impatiently.

"It won't open!" she cried, panicked.

Lof, sighing, reached up and turned the handle.

"Limbeck!" shrieked Jarre, and jumped inside the bubble, only to tumble out again with undue haste.

There came from inside a loud and unfriendly-sounding wuff.

The GEGs, noting Jarre's pale face, backed away from the bubble.

"What is it?" questioned one.

"A d-dog, I think," stammered Jarre.

"Then it's not Limbeck?" said Lof eagerly.

A weak voice came from inside.

"Yes, it's me! The dog's all right. You startled it, that's all. It's worried about its master. Here, give me a hand. This bubble's a tight fit with all of us in here."

Tips of fingers could be seen wagging from the door. The GEGs glanced at each other apprehensively and, with one accord, took another step back.

Jarre paused expectantly, looking for help from each Geg in turn. Each Geg, in turn, looked at the winder-upper or the munching-chopper or the rumble-floor-anywhere but at the bubble that had wuffed.

"Hey, help me get out of this thing!" shouted Limbeck.

Her lips pursed together in a straight line that boded no good for anyone, Jarre marched up to the bubble and inspected the hand. It looked like Limbeck's hand-ink stains and all. Somewhat gingerly she grasped hold of it and tugged. Lof's hopes were dashed, once and for all, when Limbeck-face flushed and sweating-appeared in the doorway.

"Hullo, my dear," said Limbeck, shaking hands with Jarre, completely ignoring, in his distraction, that she had held her face up to be kissed. Stepping out of the bubble, he immediately turned back around and appeared to be entering it again.

"Here, now help me get him out," he called from inside, his voice echoing weirdly.

"Who's him?" asked Jarre. "The dog? Can't it get out by itself?"

Limbeck turned around to beam at them. "A god!" he said triumphantly. "I've brought back a god!"

The GEGs stared at him in amazed and suspicious silence.

Jarre was the first to recover her power of speech. "Limbeck," she said sternly, "was that really necessary?"

"Why, uh . . . yes! Yes, of course!" he answered, somewhat taken aback. "You didn't believe me. Here, help me get him out. He's hurt."

"Hurt?" demanded Lof, seeing, once more, hope glimmer. "How can a god be hurt?"

"Aha!" shouted Limbeck, and it was such a mighty and powerful "Aha" that poor Lof was blown off the track and was completely, finally, and forever out of the race. "That's my point!" Limbeck vanished back into the bubble.

There was some difficulty with the dog, which was standing in front of its master and growling. Limbeck was more than a little concerned at this. He and the dog had developed an understanding on the ride up in the bubble. But this understanding- that Limbeck would remain unmoving in his corner and the dog wouldn't rip out his throat-didn't seem likely to be useful in placating the animal and persuading him to move. "Nice doggy's" and "There's a good boy's" didn't get him anywhere. Desperate, fearful his god would die, Limbeck attempted to reason with the beast.

"Look," he said, "we don't want to hurt him. We want to help him! And the only way we can help him is to get him out of this contraption and to a place where he'll be safe. We'll take very good care of him, I promise." The dog's growling lessened; the animal was watching the Geg with what appeared to be wary interest. "You can come along. And if anything happens that you don't like, then you can rip out my throat!"

The dog cocked his head to one side, ears erect, listening intently. When the Geg concluded, the dog regarded him gravely.

I'll give you a chance, but remember that I still have my teeth.

"It says it's all right," shouted Limbeck happily.

"What says?" demanded Jarre when the dog, jumping lightly out of the bubble, landed on the floor at Limbeck's feet.

The Gecs instantly scrambled for cover, dodging behind those parts of the Kicksey-Winsey that seemed likely to be proof against sharp fangs. Only Jarre held her ground, determined not to desert the man she loved, no matter what the danger. The dog wasn't the least bit interested in the quivering Gecs, however. Its attention was centered completely on its master.

"Here!" panted Limbeck, tugging at the god's feet. "You get this end, Jarre. I'll take his head. There, carefully. Carefully. That's got him, I think."

Having braved the dog, Jarre felt equal to anything, even hauling gods around by their feet. Casting a withering glance at her cowardly compatriots, she grasped hold of the god's leather boots and tugged. Limbeck guided the limp body out of the bubble, catching hold of the shoulders when they appeared. Together the Gecs eased the god onto the floor.

"Oh, my," said Jarre softly, her fear forgotten in pity. She touched the gash on his head with a gentle hand. Her fingers came away covered with blood. "He's hurt awfully bad!"

"I know," said Limbeck anxiously. "And I had to handle him kind of roughly, dragging him out of his ship before the dig-claw smashed him to bits."

"His skin's icy cold. His lips are blue. If he were a Geg, I'd say he was dying. But maybe gods are supposed to look like that."

"I don't think so. He didn't look like that when I first saw him, just after his ship crashed. Oh, Jarre, he just can't die!"

The dog, hearing the compassion in Jarre's voice and seeing her touch his master soothingly, gave her hand a swipe with his tongue and looked up at her with pleading brown eyes.

Jarre was startled at first at feeling the wet slurp, then relaxed. "Why, there, don't worry. It's going to be all right," she said softly, reaching out and timidly giving the animal a pat on the head. He suffered her to do so, flattening his ears and wagging his bushy tail ever so slightly.

"Do you think it will be?" asked Limbeck in deep concern.

"Of course! Look, his eyelids are moving." Briskly Jarre swung around and began giving orders. "The first thing to do is get him someplace warm and quiet where we can take care of him. It's almost time for scrift change. We don't want anyone to see him-"

"We don't?" interrupted Limbeck.

"No! Not until he's well and we're ready to answer questions. This will be a great moment in the history of our people. We don't want to spoil it by rushing into anything. You and Lof go get a litter-"

"A litter? The god won't fit on a litter," Lof pointed out sulkily. "His legs'll hang over the edge and his feet'll drag the floor!"

"That's true." Jarre wasn't accustomed to dealing with a person whose body was so long and narrow. She paused, frowning, when suddenly a clanging gong sounding very loudly caused her to glance around in alarm. "What's that?"

"They're going to be opening the floor!" Lof gasped.

"What floor?" inquired Limbeck curiously.

"This floor!" Lof pointed at the metal plates beneath their feet.

"Why? Oh, I see." Limbeck looked upward at the dig-claws that had dumped their load and were being readied to descend into the gap to fetch up another.

"We've got to get out of here!" Lof said urgently. Sidling up to Jarre, he whispered, "Let the god stay. When the floor opens, he'll drop back into the air where he came from. His dog too."

But Jarre wasn't paying attention. She was watching the carts trundle along overhead.

"Lof!" she said excitedly, grabbing hold of him by his beard and yanking—a habit she had acquired when dealing with Limbeck and one she found difficult to break. "Those carts! The god will fit inside one of those! Hurry! Hurry!"

The floor was beginning to vibrate ominously, and anything was better than having his beard pulled out by the roots. Lof nodded and ran off with the other GEGs to acquire an empty cart.

Jarre wrapped the god snugly in her own cloak. She and Limbeck dragged him away from the center of the floor, as close to the edge as they could possibly get. By this time, Lof and company had returned with the cart, rolling it down the steep ramp that connected the bottom level with the one above. The gong sounded again. The dog whined and barked. Either the noise hurt its ears or it sensed the danger and was urging the GEGs on. (Lof insisted it was the first. Limbeck argued it was the second. Jarre ordered them both to shut up and work.)

Between them, the GEGs managed to drag the body of the god into the cart. Jarre swaddled the god's injured head in Lof's cloak (Lof seemed inclined to protest, but a smack on the cheek delivered by a nervous and exasperated Jarre brought him around). The gong sounded a third time. Cables creaking and screeching, the dig-claws began to descend. The floor rumbled and started to open. The GEGs, all but losing their footing, lined up in back of the cart and gave a great heave. The cart

leapt forward and rolled up the ramp, the Gogs sweating and straining behind it, the dog running around their feet and nipping at their heels.

Gogs are strong, but the cart was made of iron and quite heavy, not to mention that it had the added weight of the god inside. It had never been intended to travel a ramp used mainly by Gogs, and it was far more inclined to roll down the ramp than up it.

Limbeck, noting this, had vague thoughts of weight, inertia, and gravity and would have undoubtedly developed another law of physics had he not been in dire peril of his life. The floor was gaping wide open beneath them, the dig-claws were thundering down into the void, and there came one particularly tense moment when it seemed that the Gogs couldn't hold on and that the cart must win and end up carrying Gogs, god, dog, and all into the gap.

"Now, once more, together!" grunted Jarre. Her stout body was braced against the cart, her face fiery red from the exertion. Limbeck, beside her, wasn't much help, being naturally weak anyway and further weakened by his grueling experience. But he was valiantly doing what he could. Lof was flagging and seemed about to give up.

"Lof," gasped Jarre, "if it starts to roll back, put your foot under the wheel!"

This command from his leader gave Lof, who was naturally flat-footed but saw no reason to carry it to extremes, extra incentive. Strength renewed, he put his shoulder to the cart, gritted his teeth, shut his eyes, and gave a mighty shove. The cart surged forward with such force that Limbeck fell to his knees and slid halfway down the ramp before he could manage to stop himself. The cart popped over the top of the ramp. The Gogs tumbled, exhausted, to the floor of the upper level, and the dog licked Lof's face-much to that Gog's consternation. Limbeck crawled up the ramp on his hands and knees and, reaching the top, sank down in a swoon.

"This is all I need!" Jarre muttered in exasperation.

"I'm not hauling him around too!" protested Lof bitterly. He was beginning to think that his father had been right and that he should never have involved himself in politics.

A vicious tug on his beard and a sound smack on the cheek brought Limbeck to semi-consciousness. He began babbling something about inclines and planes, but Jarre told him to keep quiet and make himself useful by picking up the dog and hiding it in the cart with its master.

"And tell it to keep quiet, too!" Jarre commanded.

Limbeck's eyes opened so wide that it seemed they might fall out of his head. "M-me? P-pick up th-that-"

But the dog, seeming to understand, solved the problem by jumping lightly into the cart, where it curled up at its master's feet.

Jarre took a peep at the god and reported that he was still alive and looked somewhat better now that he was wrapped up in the cloaks. The Gogs covered his body with small chunks of coralite and various debris that the Kicksey-Winsey let fall from time to time, tossed a gunnysack over the dog, and headed the cart for the nearest exit.

No one stopped them. No one demanded to know why they were shoving an ore cart through the tunnels. No one wanted to know where they were going or what they were going to do once they got there. Jarre, grinning wearily, said it was all for the best. Limbeck, sighing, shook his head and pronounced this lack of curiosity a sad commentary on his people.

## CHAPTER 20

### LEK, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

IN THE LABYRINTH, A MAN MUST HONE HIS INSTINCTS TO A FINE, SHARP POINT, AS

sharp as any blade of knife or sword, for the instincts, too, are weapons of self-preservation and are oftentimes as valuable as steel. Struggling to regain consciousness, Haplo instinctively kept himself from revealing that he was conscious. Until he could regain complete control of every faculty, he lay perfectly still and unmoving, stifled a groan of pain, and firmly resisted the overwhelming impulse to open his eyes and look at his surroundings.

Play dead. Many times, an enemy will let you alone.

Voices swam in and out of his hearing. Mentally he grasped at them, but it was like snagging fish with bare hands. They darted among his fingers; he could touch them but never quite catch hold. They were loud, deep voices, sounding quite clearly over a roaring thrumming that seemed to be all around him, even inside of him, for he could swear he could feel his body vibrating. The voices were some distance away and sounded as if they were arguing, but they weren't being violent about it. Haplo did not feel threatened and he relaxed.

"I've fallen in with Squatters, seemingly. . . ."

". . . The boy's still alive. Got a nasty crack on the head, but he'll make it."

"The other two? I suppose they're his parents."

"Dead. Runners, by the looks of them. Snogs got them, of course. I guess they thought the kid too little to bother with."

"Naw. Snogs don't care what they kill. I don't think they ever knew the kid was there. He was well-hidden in those bushes. If he hadn't groaned, we never would've heard him. It saved his life this time, but it's a bad habit. We'll have to break him of it. My guess is the parents knew they were in trouble. They clouted the kid a good one to keep him quiet and hid him away, then tried to lead the snogs away from him."

"Lucky thing for the kid it was snogs and not dragons. Dragons would've sniffed him out."

"What's his name?"

The boy felt hands run over his body, which was naked except for a strip of soft leather tied around his loins. The hands traced a pattern of tattoos that began at his heart, extending across his chest, down his stomach and legs to the tops of his feet but not the soles, down his arms to the back of his hands but not the fingers or the palms, up his neck but not on the head or face.

"Haplo," said the man, reading the runes over the heart. "He was born the time the Seventh Gate fell. That would make him about nine."

"Lucky to have lived this long. I can't imagine Runners trying to make it, saddled with a kid. We better be getting out of here. Dragons'll be smelling the blood before long. Come on, boy. Wake up. On your feet. We can't carry you. Here, you, awake now? All right." Grabbing him by the shoulder, the man took Haplo to stand beside the hacked and mangled bodies of his parents. "Look at that. Remember it. And remember this. It wasn't snogs that killed your father and mother. It was those who put us in this prison and left us to die. Who are they, boy? Do you know?" His fingers dug into Haplo's flesh.

"The Sartan," answered Haplo thickly.

"Repeat it."

"The Sartan!" he cried.

"Right, never forget that, boy. Never forget. . . ."

Haplo floated again to the surface of consciousness. The roaring, drumming sound whooshed and thumped around him but he could hear voices over it, the same voices he vaguely remembered hearing earlier, only now there seemed to be fewer of them. He tried to concentrate on their words, but it was impossible. The throbbing pain in his head stamped out every spark of rational thought. He had to end the pain.

Cautiously Haplo opened his eyes a crack and peered out between the lashes. The light of a single candle, placed some-where near his head, did not illuminate his surroundings. He had no idea where he was, but he could manage to make out that he was alone.

Slowly Haplo lifted his left hand and was bringing it near his head when he saw that it was swathed in strips of cloth. Memory glimmered, shining a feeble ray of light into the darkness of pain that surrounded him.

All the more reason to rid himself of this debilitating injury.

Gritting his teeth, moving with elaborate care so as not to make the slightest sound, Haplo reached across with his right hand and tugged at the cloth covering the left. Wrapped in between the fingers, it did not come completely loose but gave way enough so that the back of the left hand was partially exposed.

The skin was covered with tattoos. The whirls and whorls, curls and curves, were done in colors of red and blue and were seemingly fanciful in nature and design. Yet each sigil had its separate and special meaning, which, when combined with other sigla that they touched, expanded into meaning upon meaning. [9] Prepared to freeze his motion at the barest hint that someone was watching him, Haplo raised his arm and pressed the back of his hand upon the gash in his forehead.

The circle was joined. Warmth streamed from his hand to his head, flowed through his head to his arm, from his arm back to his hand. Sleep would follow, and while his body rested, pain would ease, the wound would close, internal injuries would be healed, complete memory and awareness would be restored on his awaking. With his waning strength, Haplo arranged the cloth so that it

covered his hand. His arm fell limply, striking a hard surface beneath him. A cold nose thrust into his palm ... a soft muzzle rubbed against his fingers. . . .

Spear in hand, Haplo faced the two chaodyn. His only emotion was anger-a fiery, raging fury that burned up fear. He was within sight of his goal. The Last Gate was visible on the horizon. To reach it, he had only to cross a vast open prairie that had looked empty when he reconnoitered. He should have known. The Labyrinth would never let him escape. It would hurl every weapon it had in its possession at him. But the Labyrinth was smart. Its malevolent intelligence had fought against the Patrins for a thousand years before a few had been able to gain the skills to conquer it. Twenty-five gates [10] Haplo had lived and fought, only to be defeated in the end. For there was no way he could win. The Labyrinth had allowed him to get well into the empty prairie without so much as a single tree or boulder on which to set his back. And it had pitted him against two chaodyn.

Chaodyn are deadly foes. Bred of the insane magic of the Labyrinth, the intelligent giant insectlike creatures are skilled in the use of all weapons (these two were using broadswords). Tall as a man, with a hard black-shelled body, bulbous eyes, four arms, and two powerful back legs, a chaodyn can be killed- everything in the Labyrinth can be killed. But in order to slay one, you have to hit it directly in the heart, destroying it instantly. For if it lives, even a second, it will cause a drop of its own blood to spring into a copy of itself, and the two of them, whole and undamaged, will continue the fight.

Haplo faced two of these, and he had only one rune-marked spear and his hunting dagger left. If his weapons missed their mark and wounded his opponent he would face four chaodyn. Missing again, he would face eight. No, he could not win.

The two chaodyn were moving, one drifting off to Haplo's right, the other to his left. When he attacked one, the other would strike him from behind. The Patrins' only chance would be to kill the first outright with his spear, then turn and fight the other.

This strategy in mind, Haplo backed up, feinting first toward one, then the other, forcing them to keep their distance. They did so, toying with him, knowing that they had him, for chaodyn enjoy playing with their victims and will rarely kill outright if there is a chance they can have some sport.

Angered beyond rational thought, no longer caring whether he lived or died, wanting only to strike out at these creatures and, through them, at the Labyrinth, Haplo called on a lifetime of fear and despair and used the strength of his rage and frustration to power his throw. The spear flew from his hand; he shouted after it the rune calls that would send it flying swift and straight to his enemy. His aim was good, the spear tore through the insect's black carapace, and it fell backward, dead before it hit the ground.

A flash of pain shot through Haplo. Gasping in agony, he wrenched his body aside and whirled to face his other foe. He could feel his blood, warm against his chill skin, flow from the wound. The chaodyn cannot use the rune magic, but long experience battling the Patrins has given them the knowledge of where the tattooed body is vulnerable to attack. The head is the best target. This chaodyn, however, had stabbed its sword into Haplo's back. Obviously the insect did not want to kill him, not yet.

Haplo's spear was gone. It was hunting dagger against broadsword. Haplo could either run in under the chaodyn's guard and strike directly for the heart or he could risk a throw. His knife- used for skinning, honing, cutting-did not have runes of flight inscribed upon it. If he missed, he would be

weaponless and probably facing two foes. But he had to end the battle soon. He was losing blood and he lacked a shield with which to parry the chaodyn's sword blows.

The chaodyn, realizing Haplo's dilemma, swung its huge blade. Aiming for the left arm, the insect tried to cut it off- disabling its enemy but not yet killing. Haplo saw the blow coming and dodged as best he could, turning to meet it with his shoulder. The blade sank deep, bone crunched. The pain nearly made Haplo black out. He could no longer feel his left hand, let alone use it.

The chaodyn fell back, recovering, getting itself into position for the next strike. Haplo gripped his dagger and fought to see through a red haze that was fast dimming his vision. He didn't care about his life anymore. His hatred had gained control. The last sensation he wanted to feel before his death was satisfaction in knowing he had taken his enemy with him.

The chaodyn lifted the blade again, preparing to launch another torturing blow at its helpless victim. Calm with despair, lost in a stupor that was not entirely feigned, Haplo waited. He had a new strategy. It meant he would die, but so would his foe. The insect arm swung back, and at the same moment, a black shape leapt out from somewhere behind Haplo and launched itself straight at the chaodyn.

Confused by this sudden and unexpected attack, the chaodyn glanced away from Haplo to see what was coming at it, and, in so doing, shifted the angle of its sword thrust to meet this new foe. Haplo heard a pain-filled yelp, a whimper, and had the vague impression of a furry body falling to the ground. He didn't pay any attention to what it had been. The chaodyn, lowering its arms to strike at the new threat, had left its chest exposed. Haplo aimed his dagger straight for the heart.

The chaodyn saw its danger and attempted to recover, but Haplo had come in too close. The insect creature's sword sliced into the Patryn's side, glancing off his ribs. Haplo never felt it. He drove his dagger into the chaodyn's chest with such force that they both toppled over backward and crashed to the ground.

Rolling off the body of his enemy, Haplo did not bother to try to stand. The chaodyn was dead. Now he, too, could die and find peace, like so many others before him. The Labyrinth had won. He had fought it, though. Even to the end.

Haplo lay on the ground and let his life seep out of his body. He could have tried to heal himself, but that would have required effort, movement, more pain. He didn't want to move. He didn't want to hurt anymore. He yawned, feeling sleepy. It was pleasant to lie here and know that soon he wouldn't have to fight ever again.

A low whining sound caused him to open his eyes, not so much in fear as in irritation that he wasn't going to be allowed to die in peace. Turning his head slightly, he saw a dog. So that Was the black furry thing that had attacked the chaodyn. Where had it come from? Presumably it had been out in the prairie, perhaps hunting, and had come to his aid.

The dog crouched on its belly, head between its paws. Seeing Haplo looking at it, the dog whined again and, dragging itself forward, made an attempt to lick the man's hand. It was then that Haplo saw the dog was hurt.

Blood flowed from a deep gash in the animal's body. Haplo recalled vaguely hearing its cry and the whimper when it fell. The dog was staring at him hopefully, expecting-as dogs do- that this human would care for it and make the terrible pain it was suffering go away.

"I'm sorry," Haplo mumbled drowsily. "I can't help you. I can't even help myself."

The dog, at the sound of the man's voice, feebly wagged its bushy tail and continued to regard him with complete, trusting faith.

"Go off and die somewhere else!" Haplo made an abrupt, angry gesture. Pain tore through his body, and he cried out in agony. The dog gave a small bark, and Haplo felt a soft muzzle nudge his hand. Hurt as it was, the animal was offering him sympathy.

And then Haplo, glancing over half-irritably, half-comforted, saw that the injured dog was struggling to rise to its feet. Standing unsteadily, the dog fixed its gaze on the line of trees behind them. It licked Haplo's hand once more, then set off, limping feebly, for the forest.

It had misunderstood Haplo's gesture. It was going to try to go for help-help for him.

The dog didn't get very far. Whimpering, it managed to take two or three faltering steps before it collapsed. Pausing a moment to rest, the animal tried again.

"Stop it!" Haplo whispered. "Stop it! It's not worth it!"

The animal, not understanding, turned its head and looked at the man as if to say, "Be patient. I can't go very fast but I won't let you down."

Selflessness, compassion, pity-these are not considered by the Patryns to be virtues. They are faults belonging to lesser races who cover for these inherent weaknesses by exalting them. Haplo was not flawed. Ruthless, defiant, burning with hatred, he'd fought and battled his way through the Labyrinth, solitary and alone. He had never asked for help. He had never offered it. And he had survived, where many others had fallen. Until now.

"You're a coward," he said to himself. "This dumb animal has the courage to fight to live, and you give up. What's more, you will die owing. Die with a debt on your soul, for, like it or not, that dog saved your life."

No tender feeling caused Haplo to reach across with his right hand and grasp his useless left. It was shame and pride that drove him.

"Come here!" he commanded the dog.

The dog, too weak to stand, crawled on its belly, leaving a trail of blood in the grass behind.

Gritting his teeth, gasping, crying out against the pain, Haplo pressed the sigil on the back of his hand against the dog's torn flank. Letting it rest there, he placed his right hand on the dog's head. The healing circle was formed; Haplo saw, with his fading vision, the dog's wound close. . . .

"If he recovers, we'll take him to the High Froman and offer him proof that what I said was true! We'll show him and our people that the Welves aren't gods! Our people will see that they've been used and lied to all these years."

"If he recovers," murmured a softer female voice. "He's hurt really bad, Limbeck. There's that deep gash on the head, and he may be hurt someplace else too. The dog won't let me get close enough to find out. Not that it matters. Head injuries as bad as that almost always lead to death. You remember when Hal Hammernail missed a step on the pussyfoot and tumbled down?"

"I know. I know," came the discouraged reply. "Oh, Jarre, he just can't die! I want you to hear all about his world. It's a beautiful place, like I saw in the books. With clear blue sky and a bright shining light beaming down, and wonderful tall buildings as big as the Kicksey-Winsey"

"Limbeck," said the female voice sternly, "you didn't happen to hit your head, did you?"

"No, my dear. I saw them! I truly did! Just like I saw the dead gods. I've brought proof, Jarre! Why won't you believe me?"

"Oh, Limbeck, I don't know what to believe anymore! I used to see everything so clearly-all black and white, with clean, sharp edges. I knew exactly what I wanted for our people- better living conditions, equal share in the Welf's pay. That was all. Stir up a little trouble, put pressure on the High Froman, and he'd be forced to give in eventually. Now everything's a muddle, all gray and confusing. You're talking about revolution, Limbeck! Tearing down everything we've believed in for hundreds of years. And what do you have to put in its place?"

"We have the truth, Jarre."

Haplo smiled. He had been awake and listening for about an hour now. He understood the basic language-though these beings called themselves "Gegs," he recognized the tongue as a derivative of one known on the Old World as dwarven. But there were a great many things they said that he didn't understand. For example, what was this Kicksey-Winsey that they spoke of with such reverent awe? That was why he'd been sent here. To learn. To keep eyes and ears open, mouth shut, and hands off.

Reaching down on the floor beside his bed, Haplo scratched the dog's head, reassuring the animal that he was well. This journey through Death Gate had not started out exactly as planned. Somewhere, somehow, his liege lord had made serious miscalculations. The runes had been misaligned. Haplo had realized the mistake too late. There had been little he could do to prevent the crash, the resultant destruction of his ship.

The realization that he was now trapped on this world did not unduly worry Haplo. He had been trapped in the Labyrinth and escaped. After that experience, on an ordinary world such as this, he would be-as his lord said-"invincible." Haplo had only to play his part. Somehow, after he'd done what he came to do, he would find a way back.

"I thought I heard something."

Jarre entered the room, bringing with her a flood of soft candlelight. Haplo squinted, blinking up at her. The dog growled and started to jump up, but it lay still at its master's stealthy, commanding touch.

"Limbeck!" Jarre cried.

"He's dead!" The stout Geg came hurrying anxiously into the room.

"No, no, he's not!" Sinking down beside the bed, Jarre reached out a trembling hand toward Haplo's forehead. "Look! The wound's healed! Completely. Not...not even a scar! Oh, Limbeck! Maybe you're wrong! Maybe this being truly is a god!"

"No," said Haplo. Propping himself up on one elbow, he gazed intently at the startled GEGs. "I was a slave." He spoke slowly in a low voice, fumbling for words in the thick dwarven tongue. "Once I was as you are now. But my people triumphed over their masters and I have come to help you do the same."

## CHAPTER 21

### PITRIN'S EXILE, MID REALM

#### THE JOURNEY ACROSS PITRIN'S EXILE WAS EASIER THAN HUGH HAD ANTICIPATED.

Bane kept up gamely, and when he did tire, he tried very hard not to show it. Alfred watched the boy anxiously, and when the prince began to show signs of being footsore, it was the chamberlain who announced that he himself could not proceed another step. Alfred was, in fact, having a much more difficult time of it than his small charge. The man's feet seemed possessed of a will of their own and were continually going off on some divergent path, stumbling into nonexistent holes or tripping over twigs invisible to the eye.

Consequently, they did not make very good time. Hugh did not push them, did not push himself. They were not far from the wooded inlet on the isle's edge, where he kept his ship moored, and he felt a reluctance to reach it—a reluctance that angered him, but one for which he refused to account.

The walking was pleasant, for Bane and Hugh, at least. The air was cold, but the sun shone and kept the chill from being bitter. There was little wind. They met more than the usual number of travelers on the road, taking advantage of this brief spell of good weather to make whatever pressing journeys had to be made during the winter. The weather was also fine for raiding, and Hugh noted that everyone kept one eye on the road and one on the sky, as the saying went.

They saw three of the dragon-headed, sail-winged elven ships, but they were far distant, traveling to some unknown destination on the kiratrack side. That same day, a flight of fifty dragons passed directly overhead. They could see the dragonknights in their saddles, the bright winter sun gleaming off helm and breastplate, javelin and arrow tips. This detail had a wizardess with them, flying in the center, surrounded by knights. She carried no visible weapons, only her magic, and that was in her mind. The dragonknights were headed toward the kiratrack as well. The elves weren't the only ones who would take advantage of clear, windless days.

Bane watched the elven ships with wide-eyed, openmouthed, boyish awe. He had never seen one, he said, and was bitterly disappointed that they didn't come closer. A scandalized Alfred had, in fact, been forced to restrain His Highness from pulling off his hood and using it as a flag to wave them this direction. Travelers along the road had not been at all amused by this stunt. Hugh took

grim delight in watching the peasants scatter for cover before Alfred managed to put a damper on His Highness's enthusiasm.

That night, as they gathered around the fire after their frugal meal, Bane went over to sit beside Hugh, instead of his usual place near the chamberlain. Squatting down, he made himself comfortable.

"Will you tell me about the elves, Sir Hugh?"

"How do you know I have anything to tell?" Hugh fished his pipe and the pouch of stergo out of his pack. Leaning back against a tree, his feet stretched out to the flames, he shook the dried fungus out of the leather pouch and into the round, smooth bowl.

Bane gazed not at the assassin but at a point somewhere to Hugh's right, over his shoulder. His blue eyes lost their focus. Hugh thrust a stick into the fire and used it to light his pipe. Puffing on it, he watched the boy with idle curiosity.

"I see a great battle," said Bane dreamily. "I see elves and men fighting and dying. I see defeat and despair, and then I hear men singing and there is joy."

Hugh sat still for so long that his pipe went out. Alfred shifted position uncomfortably and put his palm on a hot coal. Stifling a cry of pain, he wrung his injured hand.

"Your Highness," he said miserably, "I have told you-"

"No, never mind." Casually Hugh knocked the ash out of his pipe, filled it, and lit it again. He puffed on it slowly, his gaze fixed on the boy. "You just described the Battle of Seven Fields."

"You were there," said Bane.

Hugh blew a thin trail of smoke into the air. "Yes, and so was nearly every other human male near my age, including your father, the king." Hugh took a long drag on the pipe. "If this is what you're calling clairvoyance, Alfred, I've seen better acts in a third-rate inn. The boy must have heard the story from his father a hundred times."

Bane's face underwent a swift and startling change-the happiness dissolved into stark, searing pain. Biting his lips, he lowered his head and brushed his hand across his eyes.

Alfred fixed Hugh with an odd look-one that was almost pleading. "I assure you, Sir Hugh, that this gift of His Highness's is quite real and should not be taken lightly. Bane, Sir Hugh does not understand magic, that is all. He is sorry. Now, why don't you get yourself a sweetmelt from the pack."

Bane left Hugh's side, going over to the chamberlain's pack to find his treat. Alfred pitched his voice for Hugh's ears alone. "It's just . . . You see, sir, the king never really talked that much to the boy. King Stephen was never quite . . . uh . . . comfortable in Bane's presence."

No, Hugh mused, Stephen must not have found it pleasant to look into the face of his shame. Perhaps, in the boy's features, the king saw a man he-and his queen-knew all too well.

The glow of the pipe died. Knocking out the ashes, Hugh found a small twig and, splitting the end with his dagger, thrust it into the bowl and attempted to clean out the blockage. He cast a glance at the boy and saw Bane still rummaging through the pack.

"You really believe this kid can do what he claims-sees pictures in the air-don't you?"

"He can!" Alfred assured him earnestly. "I have seen him do it too many times to doubt. And you must believe it too, sir, or else ..."

Hugh, pausing in his work, looked up at Alfred.

"Or else? That sounds very much like a threat."

Alfred cast his eyes down. His hurt hand nervously plucked the leaves off a cupplant. "I ... I didn't mean it-"

"Yes, you did." Hugh knocked the pipe on a rock. "It wouldn't have anything to do with that feather he wears, would it? The one given him by a mysteriarch?"

Alfred went livid, becoming so pale Hugh was half-afraid he might faint again. The chamberlain swallowed several times before he found his voice. "I don't-"

A snapping branch interrupted him. Bane was returning to the fire. Hugh saw Alfred cast the boy the grateful glance of a drowning man who has been tossed a rope.

The prince, absorbed in enjoying his sweetmelt, didn't notice. He threw himself on the ground and, picking up a stick, began to poke at the fire.

"Would you like to hear the story of the Battle of Seven Fields, Your Highness?" Hugh asked quietly.

The prince looked up, eyes shining. "I'll bet you were a hero, weren't you, Sir Hugh!"

"Begging your pardon, sir," interrupted Alfred meekly, "but I don't take you for a patriot. How did you chance to be at the battle to free our homeland?"

Hugh was about to reply when the chamberlain winced and hurriedly jumped up. Reaching down on the ground where he'd been sitting, Alfred picked up a large piece of broken coralite. Its knife-sharp edges sparkled in the firelight. Fortunately, the leather breeches he wore, which they had purchased from a cobbler, had protected him from serious harm.

"You're right. Politics mean nothing to me." A thin trickle of smoke curled up from Hugh's lips. "Let's just say that I was there on business. . . ."

... A man entered the inn and stood blinking in the dim light. It was early morning, and the common room was empty except for a slovenly woman scrubbing the floor and a traveler seated at a table in deep shadow.

"Are you Hugh, called the Hand?" the man who had entered asked the traveler.

"I am."

"I want to hire you." The man plunked a bag down in front of Hugh. Opening it and sorting through it, Hugh saw coins, jewelry, and even a few silver spoons. Pausing, he lifted out what was obviously a woman's wedding ring and looked at the man narrowly.

"That comes from a number of us, for none was rich enough to hire you himself. We gave what valuables we had."

"Who's the mark?"

"A certain captain who hires himself out to the gentry to train and lead foot soldiers in battle. He's a bully and a coward and he's sent more than one squad to its doom while he's stayed safe behind and collected his fee. You'll find him with Warren of Kurinandistai, marching with the army of King Stephen. I've heard they're headed for a place called Seven Fields, on the continent."

"And what's the special service you require of me? You and"-Hugh patted the money sack-"all these."

"Widows and kinsmen of those he last led, sir," said the man. His eyes glinted. "We ask this for our money: that he be killed in such a manner that it will be obvious no enemy hand touched him, that he knows who has bought his death, and" -the man carefully held out to Hugh a small scroll-"that this be left on the body. ..."

"Sir Hugh?" said Bane impatiently. "Go on. Tell me about Seven Fields."

"It was back when the elves ruled us. Over the years, the elves had grown soft in their occupation of our land." Hugh gazed at the smoke curling upward into the darkness. "Elves consider humans to be little better than animals, and so they underrate us. In many ways, of course, they're right, and so you can hardly blame them for continuing to make what seems to be the same mistake over and over.

"The Uylandia Cluster, at the time they ruled it, was divided into bits and pieces, each small bit ruled nominally by a human lord and in actuality by an elven overlord. The elves never had to work to keep the clans from uniting-the clans did that quite well themselves,"

"I've often wondered why the elves didn't demand that we destroy our weapons, as was done in centuries past?" interjected Alfred.

Hugh, puffing on the pipe, grinned. "Why bother? It was to their advantage to keep us armed. We used our weapons on each other, saving the elves a lot of trouble.

"The plan worked, so well, in fact, that the elves shut themselves up in their fine castles, never bothering to open a window and take a good look at what was really transpiring around them. I know, for I used to hear their talk."

"You did!" Bane sat forward, blue eyes glittering. "How? How did you come to know so much about elves?"

The ash glowed red in the pipe, then dimmed and faded. Hugh ignored the question.

"When Stephen and Anne managed to unite the clans, the elves finally opened their windows. In flew arrows and spears, and humans with swords scaled their walls. The uprising was swift and well-planned. By the time word reached the Tribus Empire, most of the elven overlords had been killed or driven from their homes. The elves retaliated. They assembled their fleet-the greatest ever seen in this world-and sailed for Uylandia. Hundreds of thousands of trained elven warriors and their sorcerers faced a few thousand humans-without our most powerful wizards, for by then the mysteriarchs had fled. Our people never stood a chance. Hundreds were slaughtered. More taken prisoner. King Stephen was captured alive-

"It was not his wish!" cried Alfred, stung by the sardonic tone in Hugh's voice.

The pipe gleamed and dimmed. The Hand said nothing; Alfred was goaded by the silence into continuing talking, when he had never meant to speak. "The elven prince Reesh'ahn had marked Stephen out and ordered his men to take the king unharmed. Stephen's lords fell at his side, defending him. And even when he stood alone, he fought on. They say there was a ring of dead around him, for the elves dared not disobey their ruler, and yet none could get close enough to take him without being killed. Finally they rushed him en masse, bore him to the ground, and disarmed him. Stephen fought bravely, as bravely as any of them."

"I wouldn't know about that," said the Hand. "All I know is that the army surrendered-

Shocked, Bane turned to face him. "You must be mistaken, Sir Hugh! Our army won the Battle of Seven Fields!"

"Our army won?" Hugh raised an eyebrow. "No, it wasn't the army who won. It was one woman who beat the elves-a minstrel called Ravenlark, for, they said, her skin was black as a raven's feathers and her voice was like that of a lark singing to welcome the dawn. Her lord had brought her to sing his victory, I suppose, but she ended up chanting his death song. She was captured and taken prisoner like the rest of the humans. They were herded together on a road that ran through the Seven Fields, a road littered with the bodies of the dead, wet with their blood. They were a pitiful lot, for they knew the fate that awaited them-slavery. Envyng those who had died, they stood with heads bowed and shoulders slumped.

"And then the minstrel began to sing. It was an old song, one everyone remembers from childhood."

"I know it!" Bane cried eagerly. "I've heard this part."

"Sing it, then," said Alfred, smiling at the boy, pleased to see him happy again.

"It's called 'Hand of Flame.' " The boy's voice rose shrill and slightly off-key but enthusiastic:

The Hand that holds the Arc and Bridge,  
The Fire that rails the Temp'red Span,  
All Flame as Heart, surmount the Ridge,  
All noble Paths are Ellxman [11].

Fire in Heart guides the Will,  
The Will of Flame, set by Hand,

The Hand that moves Ellxman Song,  
The Song of Fire and Heart and Land:

The Fire born of Journey's End,  
The Flame a part, a lightened call,  
The sullen walk, the flick'ring aim,  
Fire leads again from futures, all.

The Arc and Bridge are thoughts and heart,  
The Span a life, the Ridge a part.

"My nurse taught it to me when I was little. But she couldn't tell me what the words meant. Do you know, Sir Hugh?"

"I doubt if anyone does now. The tune stirs the heart. Ravenlark began to sing it, and soon the prisoners lifted their heads proudly, their backs stiffened. They lined up into formation, determined to walk to slavery or death with dignity."

"I've heard it said the song is elvish in origin," murmured Alfred. "And dates back to before the Sundering."

Hugh shrugged, uninterested. "Who knows? All anyone cares about is that it has an effect on elves. From the sound of the first few notes, the elves stood transfixed, staring straight ahead. They looked like men in a dream, except that their eyes moved. Some claimed they were 'seeing pictures.' "

Bane flushed, his hand tightly grasping the feather.

"The prisoners, noticing this, kept on singing. The minstrel knew the words to all the verses. Most of the prisoners were lost after the first, but they kept up the tune and joined in strong on the chorus. The elves' weapons fell from their hands. Prince Reesh'ahn sank to his knees and began to weep. And, at Stephen's command, the prisoners marched away as fast as their feet could carry them."

"It was to His Majesty's credit that he didn't order a helpless enemy slaughtered," said Alfred.

The Hand snorted. "For all the king knew, a sword in the throat might have broken the spell. Our men were beaten. They wanted only to get out of there. The king had it in his mind, so I've been told, to fall back on one of the nearby castles and regroup and strike again. But it wasn't necessary. When the elves came to their senses, the king's spies reported that they were like men awakened from a beautiful dream who long to go back to sleep. They left their weapons and their dead where they lay and returned to their ships. Once there, they freed their human slaves and limped home."

"The beginning of the elven revolution."

"Supposedly so." Hugh dragged slowly on the pipe. "The elf king proclaimed his son, Prince Reesh'ahn, a disgrace and an outlaw and drove him into exile. Reesh'ahn's now stirring up trouble throughout Aristagon. There've been attempts made to capture him, but each time he's slipped through their fingers."

"And with him, they say, travels the minstrel woman, who- according to legend-was so moved by the prince's sorrow that she chose to follow him," added Alfred softly. "Together they sing the song, and wherever they go, they find more followers." Leaning back, he misjudged the distance between himself and the tree trunk and whanged himself on the head.

Bane giggled, then clapped his hand over his mouth. "I'm sorry, Alfred," he said contritely. "I didn't mean to laugh. Are you hurt?"

"No, Your Highness," Alfred said with a sigh. "Thank you for asking. Now, Your Highness, you should be going to sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow."

"Yes, Alfred." Bane ran to get his blanket from his pack. "If it's all right, I'm going to sleep here tonight," he said. Looking up at Hugh shyly, he spread his blanket out next to the assassin's.

Hugh rose abruptly to his feet and walked over to the fire. Knocking the bowl of the pipe against his hand, he scattered the ashes. "Rebellion." He stared into the flames, keeping his eyes averted from the child. "Ten years have passed and the Tribus Empire is as strong as ever. Their prince lives like a hunted wolf in the caves of the Kirikai Outlands."

"The rebellion has at least kept them from crushing us beneath their boot heels," stated Alfred, wrapping himself in blankets. "Are you certain you'll be warm enough that far from the fire, Your Highness?"

"Oh, yes," the boy said happily, "I'll be next to Sir Hugh." Sitting up, clasping his small arms around his knees, he looked up at the Hand questioningly. "What did you do at the battle? . . ."

". . . Where are you off to, captain? It seems to me the battle's being fought behind you."

"Eh?" The captain started in fear at the sound of a voice when he had figured himself to be alone. Drawing his sword, he whirled around, and peered into the brush.

Hugh, his weapon in hand, stepped out from behind a tree. The assassin's sword was red with elven blood; Hugh himself had taken several wounds in the vicious fighting. But he had never for one moment lost sight of his goal.

The captain, seeing a human and not an elf warrior, relaxed and, grinning, lowered his sword, which was still clean and bright. "My lads are back there." He gestured with his thumb. "They'll take care of the bastards."

Hugh, eyes narrowed, stared ahead.

"Your 'lads' are getting cut to ribbons."

The captain shrugged and turned to continue on his way. Hugh caught hold of the man's sword arm, jerked the weapon from his hand, and spun him around. Astounded, the captain swore an oath and lashed out at Hugh with a meaty fist. The captain ceased to fight when he felt the tip of Hugh's dagger at his throat.

"What?" he gabbled, sweating and panting, his eyes bulging from his head.

"My name is Hugh the Hand. And this"-he held up the dagger-"is from Tom Hales, and Henry Goodfellow, and Ned Carpenter, and the Widow Tanner, and the Widow Giles . . ." Hugh recited the names. An elven arrow thudded into a tree nearby. The assassin didn't flinch. The dagger didn't move.

The captain whined and squirmed and shouted for help. But there were many humans who were shouting for help that day, and no one answered. His death scream mingled with many others.

Work completed, Hugh left. Behind him, he could hear voices raised in song, but he paid scant attention. He was imagining the puzzlement of the Kir monks, who would find the body of the captain far from the field of battle, a dagger in his chest, and in his hand the missive, "No more shall I send brave men to their deaths." . . .

"Sir Hugh!" The small hand was tugging at his sleeve. "What did you do in the battle?"

"I was sent to deliver a message."

## CHAPTER 22

### PITRIN'S EXILE, MID REALM

THE ROAD HUGH FOLLOWED WAS, AT THE BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY, A BROAD, clear stretch of highway. They met numerous people on their way, for the interior of the isle was well-traveled. As they neared the shore, however, the road narrowed. It was rough and ill-kept, littered with splintered branches and broken rock. The hargast trees, or crystal trees as they were sometimes called, grew wild in this region and were far different from the carefully cultivated "civilized" trees grown on the hargast farms.

There is nothing quite so beautiful as an orchard of hargast trees-their silver bark gleaming in the sunlight, the carefully pruned crystalline branches clinking together with musical sounds. The farmers work among them, pruning them, preventing them from growing to the outlandish size that obviates their usefulness. The hargast tree has the natural ability not only to store water but also to produce it in limited quantities. When the trees are kept small-about six to seven feet in height-the water they make is not used to enhance their own growth and can be harvested by driving taps into the trees' bark. A full-grown hargast tree, over a hundred feet tall, uses its water itself. Its bark is too thick to tap. In the wild, the hargast's branches grow to tremendous lengths. Being hard and brittle, they break off easily and shatter when they hit the ground, scattering lethal shards of sharp crystalline bark. A hargast forest is a dangerous place to traverse and consequently Hugh and his companions met fewer and fewer people on the road.

The wind blew strongly, as it always does near the coastline; currents of air sweeping up from the underside of the isle eddied and swirled among the jagged cliffs. Strong gusts caused the three to lose their footing, trees creaked and shuddered, and more than once they heard the ringing, shattering crack of a falling tree limb. Alfred grew increasingly nervous, scanning the skies for elven ships and the woods for elven warriors, although Hugh amusedly assured him that not even the elves bothered with this worthless part of Pitrin's Exile.

It was a wild and desolate place. Cliffs of coralite jutted into the air. The tall hargast trees crowded close to the road, cutting off the sunlight with their long, thin leathery brown filaments. This foliage

remained on the tree during the winter and only fell off in the spring, prior to growing the new filaments, which would suck moisture out of the air. It was nearly noon when Hugh, who had been paying unusual attention to the trunk of every hargast tree growing close to the roadside, suddenly called a halt.

"Hey!" he shouted to Alfred and the prince, who were trudging wearily ahead of him. "This way."

Bane turned to stare at him questioningly. Alfred turned—at least part of Alfred turned. His upper half swung around on Hugh's orders, but his lower half continued acting on previously given instruction. By the time all of Alfred managed to obey, he was lying in the dust of the road.

Hugh waited patiently for the chamberlain to pick himself up.

"We leave the road here." The assassin gestured toward the forest.

"In there?" Alfred peered with dismay into the tangle of underbrush and densely packed hargast trees, standing unmoving, branches clinking together with an ominous musical sound in the swirling winds.

"I'll take care of you, Alfred," said Bane, taking hold of the chamberlain's hand and squeezing it tightly. "There now, you're not scared anymore, are you? I'm not scared, not at all!"

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Alfred gravely. "I feel much better now. However, if I might venture to ask, Sir Hugh, what necessitates our going this way?"

"My airship is hidden in here."

Bane gaped. "An elven airship?"

"This way." Hugh gestured. "And be quick about it." He cast a glance up and down the empty road. "Before someone comes along."

"Oh, Alfred! Hurry, hurry!" The prince pulled at the chamberlain's hand.

"Yes, Your Highness," answered Alfred unhappily. He set his foot into the mass of last spring's rotting filaments on the roadside. There was a rustle, the underbrush leapt and quivered, and Alfred did the same. "What . . . what was that?" he gasped, pointing a trembling finger.

"Go!" grunted Hugh, and shoved Alfred ahead.

The chamberlain slid and stumbled. More out of terror at falling headlong into the unknown than out of agility, he managed to stay on his feet in the thick undergrowth. The prince plunged in after him, keeping the poor chamberlain in a constant state of panic by descrying snakes beneath every rock and log. Hugh watched them until the thick foliage had blocked them from his sight—and him from theirs. Reaching down, he picked up a rock and removed from beneath it a sliver of wood, which he thrust back into the notch that had been made in the trunk of a tree.

Entering the forest, he had no trouble finding the two again; a wild boar blundering through the thickets could not have made a greater clamor.

Moving with his accustomed soft-footed tread, Hugh was standing right beside them before either of the two was aware of him. Purposefully he cleared his throat, figuring that if he didn't give some indication of his presence, the chamberlain might drop dead from fright. As it was, Alfred nearly leapt from his skin at the startling sound, and almost wept with relief when he saw it was Hugh.

"Where . . . which way, sir?"

"Keep going straight ahead. You'll strike a cleared path about twenty feet further."

"T-twenty feet!" Alfred stammered. He gestured at the thick brush in which he was entangled. "It will take us an hour to get that far, at least!"

"If something doesn't get us first," teased Bane, round-eyed with excitement.

"Most amusing, Your Highness."

"We're still too close to the road. Get moving," commanded Hugh.

"Yes, sir," muttered the chamberlain.

They reached the path in less than an hour, but it was hard going nonetheless. Though brown and lifeless in the winter, the bramble bushes were like the hands of the undead, reaching out with their sharp nails to tear flesh and rend clothing. This deep in the forest, the three could hear quite plainly the faint crystalline hum caused by the wind rubbing against the hargast branches. It was much like someone running a wet finger over a crystal glass, and had the effect of setting the teeth on edge.

"No one in his right mind would come in this accursed place!" grumbled Alfred, glancing up at the trees with a shudder.

"Exactly," said Hugh, and continued to beat a path through the brush.

Alfred walked ahead of the prince and held back the thorny branches so that Bane could pass through them safely. The brambles were so thick, however, that this was often not possible. Bane endured scratched cheeks and torn hands without complaint, sucking his wounds to alleviate the pain.

How bravely will he face the pain of dying?

Hugh hadn't meant to ask himself the question, and he forced himself to answer it. As bravely as other kids I've seen. Better to die young, after all, as the Kir monks say. Why should a child's life be considered more precious than a man's? Logically, it should be less so, for a man contributes to society and a child is a parasite. It's instinctive, Hugh supposed. Our animal-like need to perpetuate our own kind. This is just another job. The fact that he's a child shouldn't, won't matter!

The bramble bushes gave way eventually, with a suddenness for which Alfred was evidently unprepared. By the time Hugh reached him, the chamberlain was lying sprawled facefirst on a narrow space of cleared ground.

"Which direction? That's it, isn't it?" cried Bane, dancing around Alfred in excitement. The path led only one direction. Deducing that it must lead to the ship, the prince bolted down it before Hugh could answer his question.

Hugh opened his mouth to command him to come back, then shut it abruptly.

"Oh, sir, shouldn't we stop him?" queried Alfred anxiously as Hugh waited for the chamberlain to drag himself to his feet.

The wind whipped around them, shrieking and moaning, driving h'ne bits of stinging coralite and hargast bark into their faces. Leaves swirled at their feet and the crystalline tree branches swayed above their heads. Hugh stared through the fine dust to see the boy running headlong down the path.

"He'll be all right. The ship's not far from here. He can't mistake the trail."

"But . . . assassins?"

The child's fleeing his one true danger, Hugh said silently. Let him go. "There's no one in these woods. I would've seen the signs."

"If you don't mind, sir, His Highness is my responsibility." Alfred was edging his way down the path. "I'll just hurry after-"

"Go ahead." Hugh waved his hand.

Alfred, smiling and bobbing his head in servile thanks, broke into a run. The Hand half-expected to see the chamberlain break his head at the same time, but Alfred managed to keep his feet under him and pointed the same direction as his nose. His long arms swinging, hands flapping at his sides, he loped down the path after the prince.

Hugh lagged behind, deliberately slowing his steps, pausing, waiting for something uncertain and unknown. He'd felt the same when a storm was approaching-a tension, a prickling of the skin. Yet there was no rain smell in the air, no acrid whiff of lightning. The winds always blew high along the coast-

The sound of the crack splitting the air was so loud that Hugh's first thought was of an explosion, his next that elves had discovered his ship. But the subsequent crash and the shrill, agonized scream, cut off abruptly, informed Hugh of what had really happened.

He felt an overwhelming sense of relief.

"Help, Sir Hugh! Help!" Alfred's voice, blown apart by the wind, was barely heard. "A tree! A tree . . . fallen . . . my prince!"

Not a tree, thought Hugh. A branch. Most likely a big one, from the sound. Sheared off by the wind, it had come crashing down across the path. He'd seen such a thing many times before in this wood, narrowly missed being struck himself.

He did not run. It was as if the black monk at his shoulder laid a restraining hand on his arm and whispered, "There is no need for haste." The shards of broken hargast branch were sharp as arrow points. If Bane was still alive, he wouldn't be for long. There were plants in this forest that would ease the pain, put the boy to sleep, and, though Alfred would never know it, speed the child to an easy death.

Hugh continued walking slowly down the path. Alfred's cries for help had ceased. Perhaps he'd realized how futile it was. Perhaps he'd discovered the prince already dead. They'd take the body to Aristagon and leave it there, as Stephen had wanted. It would appear as if the elves had badly abused the boy before killing him, and that would inflame the humans. King Stephen would have his war, much good it would do him.

But that wasn't Hugh's concern. He'd take the bumbling Alfred along to help, and at the same time worm out of the chamberlain the dark plot he was undoubtedly aiding and abetting. Then, with Alfred in tow, the Hand would communicate with the king from a safe hiding place and demand his fee be doubled. He'd-

Rounding a bend in the path, Hugh saw that Alfred hadn't been far wrong when he said a tree had fallen. A huge limb, big as most trees itself, had cracked in the wind and split the trunk of the ancient hargast in two when it came down. The tree must have been rotten, to have separated like that. Coming nearer, Hugh could see within what was left of the trunk the tunnels of the insects that had been the old tree's true killer.

Though it was lying on the ground, the limb's branches that had remained intact towered above Hugh. The branches that had struck the ground had shattered and cut a wide swath of devastation through the forest; its crystalline remains completely obliterated the path. The dust it had raised still hung in the air. Hugh searched among the branches but could see nothing. He climbed over the split trunk. When he reached the other side, he stopped to stare.

The boy who should have been dead was sitting on the ground rubbing his head, looking dazed and very much alive. His clothing was rumpled and dirty, but it had been rumpled and dirty when he entered the forest. There weren't, Hugh noted, his eyes scanning the boy, any shards of bark or filaments in his hair. He had blood on his chest and on his torn shirt, but nowhere else on his body. The Hand glanced at the split trunk and then turned his measuring gaze on the path. Bane was sitting squarely in the spot where the branch must have fallen. He was surrounded by the sharp, deadly shards.

Yet he wasn't dead.

"Alfred?" Hugh called.

And then he saw the chamberlain, crouched on the ground near the boy, his back to the assassin, intent on doing something that Hugh could not see. At the sound of a voice, Alfred's body twitched in startlement and he jerked to his feet as though someone had yanked him up by a rope attached to his shirt collar. Hugh saw now what the chamberlain had been doing. He was binding a cut on his hand.

"Oh, sir! I'm so thankful you're here-"

"What happened?" Hugh demanded.

"Prince Bane has been extremely fortunate, sir. A terrible tragedy has been averted. The branch came crashing down, just barely missing His Highness."

Hugh, watching Bane closely, saw the puzzled glance the boy gave his chamberlain. Alfred did not notice-his eyes were on his injured hand. He had been attempting, without much success apparently, to wrap a strip of cloth around the wound.

"I heard the boy scream," Hugh said.

"Out of fright, sir," explained Alfred. "I ran-"

"Is he hurt?" Hugh glowered at Bane, pointed to the blood on the child's chest and the front of his shirt.

Bane peered down at himself. "No, I-"

"My blood, sir," interrupted Alfred. "I was running to help His Highness and I fell and cut my hand."

Alfred exhibited the cut. It was deep. Blood was dropping onto the broken remnants of the tree limb. Hugh watched the prince to gauge his reaction to Alfred's statement, saw the boy's frowning gaze fixed intently on his chest. Hugh looked to see what had captured the boy's attention, but saw only a smeared patch of blood.

Or was it? Hugh started to lean down, examine it closer, when Alfred, with a groan, toppled over and collapsed onto the ground. Hugh nudged the chamberlain with the toe of his boot, but got no response. Alfred had, once again, fainted.

Glancing up, Hugh saw Bane trying to wipe the blood off his skin with the tail of his shirt. Well, whatever was there was gone now. Ignoring the comatose Alfred, Hugh faced the prince.

"What really happened, Your Highness?"

Bane gazed up at him with dazzled eyes. "I don't know, Sir Hugh. I remember a cracking sound, and then"-he shrugged- "that's all."

"The branch fell on top of you?"

"I don't remember. Honest."

Scrambling to his feet, moving carefully amidst the shards that were sharp as glass, Bane brushed off his clothes and started over to help Alfred.

Hugh dragged the chamberlain's limp body off the path and propped him up against a tree trunk. A few slaps on the cheeks and he began to come around, blinking up at Hugh dizzily.

"I'm . . . I'm most sorry, sir," Alfred mumbled, attempting to stand and failing miserably. "It's the sight of blood. I never could stomach-"

"Don't look at it, then!" Hugh snapped, seeing Alfred's horrified gaze go to his hand, his eyes start to roll back in his head.

"No, sir. I ... won't!" The chamberlain squeezed his eyelids tightly shut.

Kneeling down beside him, Hugh bandaged the hand, taking the opportunity to examine the wound. It was a clean, deep slice.

"What cut you?"

"A piece of bark, I think, sir."

Like hell! That would have made a ragged cut. This was made by a sharp knife-

There came another cracking sound and a crash.

"Blessed Sartan! What was that?" Alfred's eyes flew open, and he shivered so that Hugh had to grasp his hand and hold it steady to wind the bandage around it.

"Nothing," Hugh snapped. He was completely perplexed and he didn't like the feeling, any more than he'd liked the feeling of relief over not having to kill the prince. He didn't like any of this. That tree had fallen on Bane as surely as rain fell from the sky. The prince should be dead.

What in hell was going on?

Hugh gave the cloth a sharp tug. The sooner he got rid of this kid, the better. Any feeling of reluctance he had once experienced at the thought of murdering a child was rapidly freezing over.

"Ouch!" Alfred yelped. "Thank you, sir," he added meekly.

"On your feet. Head for the ship," Hugh ordered.

Silently, none of the three looking at each other, they continued down the path.

## CHAPTER 23

### PITRIN'S EXILE, MID REALM

"IS THAT IT?" THE PRINCE GRASPED HOLD OF HUGH'S ARM AND POINTED AT THE dragon's head that could be seen floating above the leaves. The main body of the ship was still hidden from their view by the tall hargast trees surrounding it.

"That's it," Hugh answered.

The boy stared, awed. It took a shove from Hugh's hand to start him moving along the path.

It wasn't a real dragon's head, just a carved and painted facsimile. But elven artisans are skilled at their craft and the head looked more real and much more fierce than many live dragons flying the skies. It was about the size of a real dragon's head, for Hugh's was a small one-man ship meant for

sailing between the isles and continents of Mid Realm. The figureheads of the gigantic airships the elves flew into battle or used to descend into the Maelstrom were so large that a seven-foot human could walk into one of the snarling mouths without bothering to duck.

The dragon's head was painted black, with flaring red eyes and white teeth, bared in a fighting snarl. It hovered over them, glaring straight ahead with a baleful gaze, looking so threatening that both Alfred and Bane found it difficult to keep from staring at it as they drew nearer. (The third time Alfred stepped in a hole and stumbled to his knees, Hugh ordered him to keep his eyes on the ground.)

The small path they had been following through the woods took them into a natural cut made in a cliff. Emerging on the other side, they came out into a small canyon bowl. The wind could hardly be felt at all in here; the sheer sides of the cliff cut it off. In the center floated the dragonship, its head and tail jutting out over the canyon walls, its body held in place by many stout ropes tied to the trees beneath it. Bane gasped in delight, and Alfred, staring up at the airship, let the prince's pack slip unnoticed from his fingers.

Sleek and graceful, the dragon's neck, topped with a spiky mane that was both functional and decorative, curved back to meet the hull of the ship that was the dragon's body. The sun of late afternoon sparkled off glittering black scales and glinted in the red eyes.

"It looks like a real dragon!" Bane sighed. "Only more powerful."

"It should look like a real dragon, Your Highness," said Alfred, an unusually stern note in his voice. "It is made from the skin of real dragons, and the wings are the wings of real dragons, slaughtered by the elves."

"Wings? Where are the wings?" Bane craned his neck, nearly falling over backward.

"They're folded back along the body. You can't see them now. But you will when we take off." Hugh hurried them forward. "Come on. I want to leave tonight, and there's a lot of work to do first."

"What makes it stay up there, if not the wings?" asked Bane.

"The magic," Hugh grunted. "Now, keep moving!"

The prince surged forward, stopping only once to try to jump up and grab hold of one of the guy ropes. Failing, he scampered down to stand beneath the belly of the ship, staring upward until he grew dizzy.

"So this, sir, is how you come to know so much about the elves," said Alfred in a low voice.

Hugh flicked him a glance, but the chamberlain's face was bland and only slightly troubled-looking.

"Yeah," the assassin answered. "The ship needs its magic renewed once every cycle, plus there are always minor repairs. A torn wing, or sometimes the skin pulls away from the frame."

"Where did you learn to fly one? I've heard it takes enormous skill."

"I was a slave on a watership for three years."

"Blessed Sartan!" Alfred stopped and stared at him.

Hugh cast him an irritated glance, and the chamberlain, recalling himself, stumbled forward.

"Three years! I never heard of anyone surviving that long! And even after that, you can still do business with them? I would think you would hate them all!"

"How would hating benefit me? The elves did what they had to do, and so did I. I learned how to sail their ships. I learned to speak their language fluently. No, as I've discovered, hate generally costs a man more than he can afford."

"And what about love?" Alfred asked softly.

Hugh didn't even bother to reply.

"Why a ship?" The chamberlain thought it wise to change the subject. "Why risk it? The people on Volkaran would tear you apart if they discovered it. Wouldn't a dragon suit your needs just as well?"

"Dragons tire. You have to rest them, feed them. They can be wounded, take sick, drop dead. Then there's always the chance the enchantment will slip and you're left either fending off the beast, or arguing with it, or soothing its hysterics. With this ship, the magic lasts a cycle. If it gets hit, I get it repaired. With this ship, I'm always in control."

"And that's what counts, isn't it?" said Alfred, but he said it well under his breath.

The chamberlain needn't have bothered. Hugh's attention was completely absorbed in his ship. Passing underneath it, he carefully and closely inspected every single part of it from head to tail (prow to stern). Bane trotted along behind, asking questions with every breath.

"What does that cable do? Why? What makes it work? Why don't we hurry up and take off? What are you doing?"

"Because, Your Highness, if we discovered something broken up there"-Hugh pointed at the sky-"it would be of no use fixing it."

"Why?"

"Because we'd be dead."

Bane subsided for a second or two, then began again. "What's its name? I can't read the letters. Dra . . . Dragon ..."

"Dragon Wing."

"How big is it?"

"Fifty feet." Hugh peered up at the dragonskin covering the hull. The blue-black scales glistened with rainbow colors when the sun struck them. Walking beneath them, the length and breadth of the keel, Hugh satisfied himself that no scales were missing.

Coming around to the front, Bane practically tripping at his heels, he gazed intently at two large crystal panes set into what would be the dragon's breast. These panes, designed to look like the breastplates of a dragon's armor, were, in reality, windows. Hugh, seeing scratches across one, frowned. A branch must have fallen and struck it.

"What's behind those?" asked Bane, noting Hugh studying them intently.

"The steerage. That's where the pilot sits."

"Can I go in there? Will you teach me to fly?"

"It takes months and months of study to learn to fly, Your Highness," responded Alfred, seeing that Hugh was too busy to reply. "Not only that, but the pilot has to be physically strong in order to operate the wings."

"Months?" Bane appeared disappointed. "But what's there to learn? You just get up there and"-he waved a hand-"fly."

"You have to know how to get where you're going, Your Highness," said the chamberlain. "In deepsky, so I've been told, there are no landmarks, very few points of reference. It is sometimes difficult to tell up from down. You must know how to use the navigational equipment on board, as well as being familiar with the skyroutes and the airlines-"

"That stuff's not hard to learn. I'll teach you," said Hugh, seeing the child's face fall.

Bane brightened. Twitching the feather amulet back and forth, he skipped along after Hugh, who was walking the full length of the hull, examining the seams where metal and bone had melded to the epoxy [12] keel. There were no cracks. Hugh would have been surprised to find any. He was a skilled and careful pilot. He'd seen, firsthand, what happened to those who weren't, to those who didn't take care of their ships.

He moved on to the stern. The hull arched gracefully upward, forming the afterdeck. A single dragon's wing-the ship's rudder-hung from the back of the hull. Cables attached to the end of the rudder swung limply in the wind. Grasping the rope. Hugh swung his legs onto the bottom rib of the rudder. Hand over hand, he climbed up the cable.

"Let me come! Please!" On the ground below, Bane jumped for the cable, flapping his arms as though he might fly up without help.

"No, Your Highness!" said a pale-faced Alfred, grasping the prince by the shoulder and firmly holding on to him. "We'll be going up there all too soon, as it is. Let Sir Hugh get on with his work."

"All right," said Bane with cheerful good grace. "Say, Alfred, why don't we go looking for some berries to take with us?"

"Berries, Your Highness?" said Alfred, in some astonishment. "What kind of berries?"

"Just . . . berries. To eat with supper. I know they grow in woods like this. Drogle told me." The child's blue eyes were wide open-as they tended to be when he was proposing something; the blue irises glinted in the midday sun. His hand toyed with the feather amulet.

"A stableboy is hardly a fit companion for Your Highness," Alfred remonstrated. He cast a glance at the tempting stretches of cable, tied to the trees within easy reach and seemingly just made to be climbed by small boys. "Very well, Your Highness, I will take you searching for berries."

"Don't wander far," warned Hugh's voice above them. "Don't worry, sir," returned Alfred in hollow tones. The two traipsed off into the woods-the chamberlain sliding down into ravines and careening off trees, the boy dashing into thickets and losing himself among the heavy undergrowth. "Berries," muttered the Hand.

Thankful they were gone, he concentrated on his ship. Grabbing hold of the deck railing, he pulled himself up and over onto the upper deck. Open planking-one plank placed about every three feet-made walking possible, but not simple. Hugh was used to it and stepped from plank to plank, making a mental note not to let the clumsy Alfred up here. Below the planks ran what appeared to the landlubber's eye to be an overwhelming and confusing number of control cables. Lying down flat on the deck, Hugh inspected the ropes for fraying and wear.

He took his time. Rushing this job might mean a snapped wing cable and resultant loss of control. Soon after he'd completed his task, Bane and Alfred returned. From the sound of the boy's excited chatter, Hugh gathered that the berry picking had been successful.

"Can we come up now?" Bane shouted.

Hugh kicked at a pile of rope lying on the deck with his foot. It tumbled over the side, forming a rope ladder that dangled down almost to the ground. The child swarmed up it eagerly. Alfred cast it one terrified glance and announced his intention of remaining below to guard the packs.

"This is wonderful!" said Bane, tumbling over the rail and nearly falling between the planks. Hugh fished him out.

"Stay here and don't move," the Hand ordered, planting the boy against the bulwarks.

Bane leaned over the rail, looking at the hull. "What's that long piece of wood down there do-? Oh, I know! Those are the wings, aren't they?" he cried in high-pitched excitement.

"That's the mast," explained Hugh, eyeing it critically. "There's two of them, attached to the mainmast there"-he pointed-"at the forecastle."

"Are they like dragon's wings? Do they flap up and down?"

"No, Your Highness. They're more like a bat's wings when they're extended. It's the magic that keeps it afloat. Stand over that way a little more. I'm going to release the mast. You'll see."

The mast swiveled outward, pulling the dragon's wing with it. Hauling on the cable, Hugh didn't allow it to swing out too far for that would activate the magic and they'd take off prematurely. He

released the mast on the port side, made certain the center mast that extended the length of the ship-cradled in its support frame-was free to rise properly and that everything functioned smoothly. Then he looked over the side.

"Alfred, I'm going to lower a rope for the packs. Tie them on securely. When you're finished with that, cast off the mooring cables. The ship will rise slightly, but don't worry. It won't take off unless the side wings are extended and the center wing is raised. When all the cables have been cut loose, then you come up."

"Up that!" Alfred gazed, horrified, at the rope ladder swaying in the breeze.

"Unless you can fly," said Hugh, and tossed a length of cable overboard.

The chamberlain attached it to the packs and, giving it a tug, indicated they were ready. Hugh hauled them up on deck. Handing one to Bane, he told the boy to follow him and, hopping from plank to plank, made his way aft. Opening a hatch, he climbed down a sturdy wooden ladder, Bane gleefully coming after.

They entered in a narrow corridor that ran beneath the upper deck, connecting the steerage way with the passengers' quarters, the storage compartments, and the pilot's quarters, located in the afterdeck. The corridor was dark after the brightness of the day outside, and both man and boy stopped to let their eyes adjust.

Hugh felt a small hand fasten onto his.

"I can't believe I'm really going to get to fly in one of these! You know, Sir Hugh," Bane added with a wistful cheerfulness, "once I've flown in a dragonship, I will have done everything in life I ever wanted to do. I really think I could die quite contentedly after this."

A constricting pain in Hugh's chest nearly suffocated him. He couldn't breathe, for long moments he couldn't see, and it wasn't the darkness of the ship's interior that was blinding him. It was fear, he told himself. Fear that the child had found out. Shaking his head to rid his eyes of the shadow that had fallen over them, he turned to look hard at the boy.

But Bane was gazing up at him with innocent affection, not cunning guile. Hugh jerked his hand roughly out of the child's grasp.

"That cabin's where you and Alfred'll sleep," he said. "Stow the packs there." A thud and a muffled groan sounded from above them. "Alfred? Get down here and take care of His Highness. I've got work to do "

"Yes, sir," came the quavering return, and Alfred slid- literally-down the ladder, landing on the deck in a heap.

Turning on his heel, Hugh stalked off toward the steerage way, shoving past Alfred without saying a word.

"Merciful Sartan," said the chamberlain, backing up to avoid being run down. He stared after Hugh, then turned to Bane. "Did you say or do anything to upset him, Your Highness?"

"Why, no, Alfred," the boy said. Reaching out, he took hold of the chamberlain's hand. "Where did you put those berries?"

"Can I come in?"

"No. Stay in the hatchway," Hugh ordered.

Bane peeked inside the steerage way and his eyes widened in astonishment. Then he giggled. "It looks like you're stuck in a big spider's web! What are all those ropes hooked to? And why are you wearing that contraption?"

The contraption Hugh was strapping on himself resembled a leather breastplate, except that it had numerous cables attached to it. Extending in various directions, the cables ran upward into a complicated system of pulleys fixed to the ceiling.

"I've never in my life seen so much wood!" Alfred's voice floated into the steerage way. "Not even in the royal palace. The wood alone must make this ship worth its weight in barls. Your Highness, please keep back. Don't touch those cables!"

"Can't I go over and look out the windows? Please, Alfred? I won't get in the way."

"No, Your Highness," Hugh said. "If one of these cables wrapped around your neck, it would snap it in a second."

"You can see well enough from where we're standing. Quite well enough," said Alfred, looking slightly green around the mouth. The ground was far below them. All that could be seen were the tops of trees and the side of a coralite cliff.

Harness firmly fastened in place, Hugh settled down on a high-backed wooden chair that stood on one leg in the center of the steerage way. The chair swiveled to the left and the right, allowing the pilot easy maneuvering. Sticking up out of the floor in front of him was a tall metal lever.

"Why do you have to wear that thing?" Bane asked, staring at the harness.

"It keeps the cables in easy reach, prevents them from getting tangled, lets me know which cable goes where." Hugh nudged the lever with his foot. A series of startling bangs resounded through the ship. The cables whirled through the pulleys and snapped taut. Hugh pulled on several of the cables attached to his chest. There came various creaking and rumbling sounds, a sharp jerk, and they could feel the ship lift slightly beneath their feet.

"The wings are unfolding," said Hugh. "The magic is activating."

A crystal globe sextant, located directly above the pilot's head, began to gleam with a soft blue light. Symbols appeared within it. Hugh pulled harder on the cables, and suddenly the treetops and the cliff side began to drop out of sight. The ship was rising.

Alfred gasped. Losing his balance, he staggered backward, clinging to the bulwarks for support. Bane, jumping up and down, clapped his hands. Suddenly the cliff and the trees vanished, and the vast expanse of clear blue sky stretched endlessly before them.

"Oh, Sir Hugh, may I go to the upper deck? I want to see where we're going."

"Absolutely not, Your High-" began Alfred.

"Sure," interrupted Hugh. "Take the ladder we used coming down. Keep hold of the rails and you won't get blown off."

Bane scampered away and in another moment they could hear his boots clomp overhead.

"Blown off!" gasped Alfred. "It's not safe!"

"It's safe. The elven wizards put a magical canopy around it. He couldn't even jump off. As long as the wings are extended and the magic's working, he'll be all right." Hugh flicked Alfred an amused glance. "But you might want to go up and keep an eye on him, all the same."

"Yes, sir," said the chamberlain, swallowing. "I ... I'll do just that."

But he didn't move. Clinging with deathlike grip to the bulwarks, his rigid face white as the clouds sailing past them, Alfred stared fixedly out at the blue sky.

"Alfred?" said Hugh, tugging on one of the cables.

The ship dipped to the left, and a glimpse of treetop sprang suddenly and dizzingly into view.

"I'm going. Right now, sir. I'm going," said the chamberlain, not moving a muscle.

Up on the deck, Bane leaned over the rail, entranced by the sight. He could see Pitrin's Exile sliding away behind him. Below him and before him were blue sky and white clouds; above him sparkled the firmament. The dragon wings extended on either side, their leathery skin barely rippling with the motion of the ship's passage. The center wing stood up straight behind him, swaying slightly back and forth.

Holding the feather in his hands, the boy brushed it idly back and forth across his chin. "The ship is controlled by the harness. Magic keeps it afloat. The wings are like bat's wings. The crystal on the ceiling tells you where you are." Standing on tiptoe, he stared down below him, wondering if he could see the Maelstrom from this high up. "It's easy, really," he remarked, twiddling the feather.

## CHAPTER 24

### DEEPSKY, MID REALM

THE DRAGONSHIP SLICED THROUGH THE PEARLY, DOVE-COLORED NIGHT, ITS WINGS gliding on the magic and the air currents that swept upward over the floating isle of Djern Hereva. Strapped into the flight harness, snug in the small steerage room, Hugh lit his pipe, leaned back, and relaxed, letting the dragonship almost fly itself. A touch here or there upon the cables attached to the harness tilted the wings to slice through the air currents, sliding effortlessly across the sky, from one swirl to another, gliding trackward toward Aristagon.

The Hand kept a lazy half-watch for other winged transports- either live or mechanical. In his elven ship, he was most vulnerable to attack from his own kind, for human dragonriders would

immediately take him for an elf, probably a spy. Hugh was not particularly worried. He knew the flight paths the dragonriders took on their raids of Aristagon or elven shipping. He was flying higher purposefully to avoid these, and figured it unlikely that he'd be annoyed. If he did run into a patrol, he could always dodge it by slipping into a rift of clouds.

The weather was calm, the flying easy, and Hugh had leisure to think. It was then that he decided not to kill the child. The need to make a decision had been in his mind awhile now, but he had put off thinking about it until this time when he was alone and all around him was quiet and conducive to thought. He had never before defaulted on a contract and he needed to satisfy himself that his reasoning was rational and valid and not swayed by sentiment.

Sentiment. Though something within the Hand might have sympathized with a childhood such as Bane's—a childhood unloved, cold, and bleak—the assassin had grown too callous to feel his own pain, much less that of another. He was letting the kid live for the very simple reason that Bane was going to be worth more to the Hand alive than dead.

Hugh did not have his plans quite worked out. He needed time to think, time to wring the truth from Alfred, time to unravel the mysteries that wound around the prince. The Hand had a hideout on Aristagon which he used when he needed his ship repaired. He would go there and wait until he had his information; then he would either return and confront Stephen with his knowledge and demand more money to keep silent, or perhaps contact the queen and discover what she would pay to have her son back. Whatever his decision, Hugh figured his fortune was made.

He was settling into the rhythm of flying the craft, which he could do with his body and part of his mind, letting the other drift free, when the object of his thoughts poked his towhead up through the hatch into the cabin.

"Alfred's sent some dinner."

The boy's eyes were eager and curious, darting here and there at the cables attached to the harness, Hugh's arms resting easily on them.

"Come up," Hugh invited. "Just be careful what you touch and where you step. Keep away from the ropes."

Bane did as he was told, sliding up through the hatch, placing his foot gingerly on the deck. In his hands he carried a bowl of meat and vegetables. It was cold. Alfred had cooked it before they left Pitrin's Exile, then packed it away to be eaten later. But it smelled good to a man accustomed to living on the wayfarer's meal of bread and cheese or the greasy fare of inns.

"Hand it here." Hugh knocked the ashes from his pipe in a crockery mug he carried for this purpose, then held out his hands to take the bowl.

Bane's eyes glistened. "You're supposed to be flying the ship."

"She can fly herself," said Hugh, grasping the bowl and the horn spoon and shoveling the food into his mouth.

"But won't we fall?" Bane peered out the crystal windows.

"The magic keeps us afloat, and even if it didn't, the wings could support us in this calm air. I just have to make certain they stay extended. If I pulled them in, then we'd begin to sink."

Bane nodded thoughtfully, turning his blue-eyed gaze back to Hugh. "What cables draw them in?"

"These." He gestured to two heavy lengths of rope attached to the harness at his breast near his right and left shoulder. "I pull them this way, in front of me, and that draws the wings in. These other cables let me steer by lifting the wings or lowering them. This one controls the mainmast, and this cable's attached to the tail. By flipping it one way or the other, I can control the ship's direction."

"So we could stay afloat like this for how long?"

Hugh shrugged. "Indefinitely, I suppose, or until we came to an isle. Then the wind currents would catch us and might suck us into a cliff or underneath the island, then slam us up against the coralite."

Bane nodded gravely. "I still think I could fly it."

Hugh felt satisfied enough with himself to smile indulgently. "No, you're not strong enough."

The boy gazed at the harness in longing.

"Try it," Hugh invited. "Here, come stand beside me."

Bane did as he was told, moving cautiously, being careful not to accidentally jar one of the ropes. Standing on the deck in front of Hugh, the boy placed his hand on one of the ropes that caused the wing to rise or lower. He pulled at it. The rope moved slightly, enough to cause the wing to shiver, and that was all.

Unaccustomed to having his will thwarted, the prince gritted his teeth and, wrapping both hands around the rope, pulled with all his might. The wooden frame creaked, the wing dipped a fraction of an inch. Grinning in triumph, Bane planted his feet on the deck and pulled even harder. A gust of wind, sweeping upward, caught the wing. The cable slid through his hands. The prince released his grip with a cry, staring at his palms, which were torn and bleeding.

"Still think you can fly it?" the Hand said coolly.

Blinking back tears, Bane mumbled, "No, Sir Hugh," disconsolately. He wrapped his injured hands tightly around the feather amulet, as if seeking some sort of consolation. Perhaps it helped, for he swallowed and lifted shimmering blue eyes to meet Hugh's. "Thank you for letting me try."

"You did well enough, Your Highness," said Hugh. "I've seen men twice your size who didn't do as well."

"Truly?" The tears vanished.

Hugh was rich now. He could afford the lie. "Yeah. Now, go on down and see if Alfred needs any help."

"I'll be back to get the bowl!" Bane said, and ducked through the hatch. Hugh could hear his excited voice calling for Alfred, telling the chamberlain how he had flown the dragonship.

Eating in silence, Hugh idly scanned the skies. He decided that the first thing he would do upon landing on Aristagon would be to take that feather to Kev'am, the elven wizardess, and see what she could make of it. One of the lesser mysteries he had to solve.

Or so he thought at the time.

Three days passed. They flew by the night, hiding during the day on small, uncharted isles. It would take a week, Hugh said, to reach Aristagon.

Bane came every night to sit with Hugh, watch him handle the ship, and ask questions. The Hand answered or not, depending on his mood. Preoccupied with his plans and his flying, Hugh paid no more attention to Bane than he was forced to. Attachments were deadly in this world, bringing nothing but pain and sorrow. The boy was cold hard cash. That was all.

The Hand was, however, puzzled at Alfred. The chamberlain watched the prince nervously, anxiously. It might have been an overreaction to the tree's fall, but Alfred wasn't being protective. Hugh was strongly reminded of the time an elven fire canister had been hurled over a battlement of a castle he'd been caught in during a raid. Rolling about on the stone, the black metal container appeared harmless. But everyone knew that at any moment it could burst into flame. Men regarded that canister in exactly the same way Alfred was regarding Bane.

Noting Alfred's tension, Hugh wondered-not for the first time-what the chamberlain knew that he didn't. The assassin increased his own watchfulness over the boy when they were on the ground, thinking the child might try to run away. Bane meekly obeyed Hugh's command that he not leave the campsite unless escorted by Alfred, and then only to forage in the woods for the berries that he seemed to take such delight in finding.

Hugh never went on these expeditions, considering them foolish. Left to himself to find food, he would have made do with whatever came to hand, so long as it kept life in his body. The chamberlain insisted that His Highness have what he wanted, however, and each day the clumsy Alfred sallied forth into the forest to do battle with overhanging limbs, tangled vines, and treacherous weeds. Hugh stayed behind, resting in a half-wakeful, half-dozing state that allowed him to hear every snap and crash.

The fourth night, Bane came up to the steerage way and stood staring out the crystal windows at the magnificent sight of cloud and vast empty sky below. "Alfred says dinner will be ready soon."

Hugh, puffing on his pipe, grunted noncommittally.

"What's that big shadow I can see out there?" Bane pointed.

"Aristagon."

"Is it? Will we be there soon?"

"No. It's farther away than it looks. Another day or two."

"But where will we stay between here and there? I don't see any more islands."

"There're some, most likely hidden by the mists. Small isles, used by small ships like us for overnight stays."

Standing on tiptoe, Bane peered down beneath the dragon. "I can see great dark clouds way, way below us. Whirling round and round. That's the Maelstrom, isn't it?"

Hugh saw no need to reply to the obvious. Bane stared more intently.

"Those two things down there. They look like dragons, but they're bigger than any dragon I ever saw."

Rising from his chair, careful not to disturb the cables, Hugh glanced out. "Elven corsairs or waterships."

"Elves!" The word was tense, eager. The boy's hand went to stroke the feather he wore around his neck. When he spoke next, it was with studied calm. "Shouldn't we run away from them, then?"

"They're far from us, probably don't even see us. If they did, they'd think we were one of them. Besides, it looks like they've got business of their own to tend to."

The prince looked out again, saw two ships and nothing more. Hugh, however, could tell what was transpiring.

"Rebels, trying to escape an imperial warship."

Bane barely gave them a glance. "I think I heard Alfred calling. It must be time for supper."

Hugh continued to watch the confrontation with interest. The warship had caught up with the rebels. Grappling hooks snaked out from the imperial dragonship and landed on the rebel's deck. It was to an attack similar to this, made by humans, that Hugh owed his escape from the slavery of the elven waterships.

Several of the rebel elves, in an attempt to boost their level of magic and escape capture, were performing the dangerous maneuver known as "walking the dragon wing." Hugh could see them running swiftly, sure-footedly, out on the wing's mast. In their hands, they carried charms given them by the ship's wizard, that they would touch to the mast.

The move was dangerous, foolhardy, and desperate. That far from the ship's center, the magical canopy could not reach them, could not protect them. A gust or-as was happening now-an enemy arrow could catch them and carry them over the wing's edge, to tumble down into the Maelstrom.

"Walking the dragon wing." It had become a term among elves for any risk-taking adventure worth the price. The saying had always, Hugh felt, held a special meaning for him and his way of life. He had named his ship in its honor.

Bane returned with a bowl.

"Where're the elves?" He handed the bowl to Hugh.

"Back behind us. We've flown out beyond them." Hugh took a mouthful and choked, spitting it out. "Damn! What'd Alfred do, spill the pepper pot into this stuff?"

"I told him it was too spicy. Here, I brought you some wine."

The prince handed Hugh the wineskin. He took a deep drink, swallowed, and took another. Giving it back, he shoved over the bowl of uneaten food with his foot. "Take that gunk back and feed it to Alfred."

Bane picked up the bowl, but he didn't leave the steerage way. Fingers toying with the feather, he stood watching Hugh with a strange, calm expectancy.

"What is it?" the Hand snapped.  
But at that very moment, he knew.

He hadn't tasted the poison. The pepper had masked it. But he was feeling the first effects. Cramps clenched his bowels. A burning sensation spread through his body, and his tongue seemed to swell in his mouth. Objects in his sight elongated, then flattened. The boy grew huge, leaning over him with a sweet, charming smile, the feather dangling from his hand.

Rage surged through Hugh, but not as swiftly or strongly as the poison.

Sagging backward, his vision darkening, Hugh saw the feather and heard the boy's awed voice coming from a great distance.

"It worked, father! He's dying!"

Hugh reached out to catch hold and choke the breath out of his murderer, but his arm was too heavy to lift; it hung limp and lifeless at his side. And then the boy was no longer standing over him, but a black monk, with hand outstretched.

"And now, who is master?" asked the monk.

## CHAPTER 25

### DEEPSKY, MID REALM

HUGH CRASHED TO THE DECK, DRAGGING THE CABLES ATTACHED TO THE HARNESS ON his body with him. The ship listed sharply, slamming Bane backward into the bulkhead. The bowl of food fell from the child's hand with a clatter. From the cabin below, there was a resounding crash, followed by a pained and panicked yell.

Staggering to his feet, clinging to the ship's side, the prince looked around dazedly. The deck slanted at a precarious angle. Hugh lay on his back, entangled in the cables. Bane glanced hastily outside, saw the nose of the dragon pointing straight down, and realized what had happened. Hugh's fall had pulled the wings in, the magic was not working, and now they were plunging out of control through the sky, plummeting down toward the Maelstrom.

It had not occurred to Bane that this would happen. Nor had it, apparently, occurred to his father. That was not surprising. A human mysteriarch of the Seventh House, living in realms far above the strife and turmoil of the rest of the world, could have no knowledge of things mechanical. Sinistrad had probably never even seen an elven dragonship. And, after all, Hugh had assured the boy the ship could fly itself.

Bane scrambled among the tangle of cables. Reaching Hugh's body, he pulled and tugged with all his might at the ropes. But he couldn't move them. The wings would not budge.

"Alfred!" the prince yelled. "Alfred, come quickly!"

There was another crash and a scuffling below; then Alfred's face-deathly white-poked up through the hatch.

"Sir Hugh! What's happening! We're falling-" His gaze rested on the man's body. "Blessed Sartan!" With a swiftness and ease unusual in such a clumsy, ungainly body, Alfred dashed in through the hatch, made his way over the coils of rope, and knelt beside Hugh.

"Oh, never mind him! He's dead!" cried the prince. Grabbing hold of Alfred's coat, he jerked him around to face the front of the ship. "Look! You've got to stop us! Take the harness off him and fly this thing!"

"Your Majesty!" Alfred was livid. "I can't fly a ship! It takes skill, years of practice!" The chamberlain's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, he's dead?"

Bane glared at him defiantly, but his gaze dropped before Alfred's. The chamberlain was no longer the buffoon; his eyes were suddenly strangely compelling and intense, and the boy found their penetrating stare highly uncomfortable.

"He got what he deserved," Bane said sullenly. "He was an assassin, hired by King Stephen to kill me. I've killed him first, that's all."

"You?" Alfred's gaze went to the feather. "Or your father?"

Bane looked confused. His lips opened, then clamped shut. His hand clenched around the amulet as if to hide it, and he began to stammer.

"No need to lie," Alfred said, sighing. "I've known for a long time. Longer than your father and mother, or should I say your adopted father and mother, although adoption implies a choice, and they never had one. What kind of poison did you give him, Bane?"

"Him? Why are you worried about him? Are you just going to let us crash?" the prince screeched shrilly.

"He's the only one who can save us! What did you use on him?" Alfred demanded, reaching out his hand to grasp hold of the boy and shake the information out of him if need be.

The prince darted backward, slipping and sliding across the slanting deck until he was brought to a halt by the bulkhead. Turning, he stared through the window. The prince let out a whoop.

"The elven ships! We're heading straight for them! We don't need that filthy murderer. The elves will save us!"

"No! Wait! Bane! It was the berries, wasn't it?"

The boy dashed out of the steerage way. Behind him, Bane heard Alfred shouting that elves were dangerous, but he paid no attention.

"I'm prince of Uylandia," he said to himself, climbing the ladder to the top deck. There, clinging with his hands to the rails, he entwined his legs through them to hold on securely. "They won't dare lay a hand on me. I've still got the enchantment. Trian thinks he broke it, but that's only because it was what I wanted him to think. Father says we mustn't take a chance, and so we had to kill the assassin to get his ship. But I know the enchantment's still with me! Now I'll have an elf ship. I'll make them fly me to my father, and he and I will rule them. We'll rule them all! Just as we planned.

"Hey!" Bane shouted. Holding on to the rail with his legs, he let loose long enough to wave his arms. "Hey, there! Help! Help us!"

The elves were far below, too far away to hear the boy's cry. Besides, they had other, more important things on their minds- such as staying alive. Looking down from his perch, Bane could see the rebel ship and the imperial warship locked together, and he wondered what was going on. He was too high to see the blood spilling over the deck. He could not hear the screams of the cable-haulers, trapped in their harnesses, being dragged through the splintered hulls, nor could he hear the song of the rebel elves who attempted, even as they defended themselves, to turn the hearts of their brothers.

Bright-colored dragonwings beat the air frantically or swung, broken, from snapped cables. Long grappling hooks attached to ropes held one ship firmly to the other. Elven warriors swung, hand over hand, along the cables to board the ship or leapt through the air to land on the deck. Far beneath them, the Maelstrom swirled and boiled, its black clouds with frothy white fringes lit purple by the incessantly flaring lightning.

Bane stared down at the elves eagerly. He felt no fear, only a heady exhilaration caused by the rushing of the wind in his face, the novelty of his situation, and the excitement of his father's plans coming to fulfillment. The dragonship's fall had slowed somewhat. Alfred had managed to pull the wings out far enough so that the ship was no longer tumbling headfirst into the Maelstrom. But it was out of control and falling still, drifting downward in a lazy spiral.

Alfred's voice came to him from below. It was indistinct, he couldn't understand the man's words, yet something about the tone or the rhythm brought back to his mind the hazy memory of when the tree had crashed down on top of him. Bane didn't pay much attention to it. They were nearing the elves, coming closer by the moment. He could see faces upturned, looking at him and pointing. He started to shout again, when suddenly both the elven ships broke apart, disintegrating before his eyes.

Slender figures toppled into the nothingness around them, and Bane was close enough now to hear the screams that would end when they were swallowed up in the Maelstrom. Here and there fragments of the two ships, held aloft by their own enchantment, floated in the air, and he could see elves clinging to them or, on the larger pieces, some still battling.

And Bane and his small ship were plunging down right into the center of the chaos.

Kir monks do not laugh. They see nothing funny in life, and like to point out that when humans laugh, it is often at the misfortune of others. Laughing is not prohibited in a Kir monastery. It simply isn't done. A child, when first taken into the halls of the black monks, may laugh for a day or two, but not longer.

The black monk holding Hugh by the hand did not smile, but Hugh saw laughter in the eyes. Furious, he fought and struggled more fiercely against this one opponent than he had fought against any in his life. This opponent was not flesh and blood. No wound left its mark on it. No jab slowed it down. It was eternal and it held him fast.

"You hated us," said the black monk, laughing at him soundlessly, "yet you served us. All your life you served us."

"I serve no man!" shouted Hugh. His struggles were lessening. He was growing weak, tired. He wanted to rest. Only shame and anger kept him from slipping into welcome oblivion. Shame because he knew the monk was right. Anger that he had so long been their dupe.

Bitter, frustrated, he summoned all his waning strength and made one final attempt to free himself. It was a weak and pitiful blow that wouldn't have made tears come to the eyes of a child. But the monk let loose.

Astounded, bereft of the support, Hugh fell. There was no terror in his heart, for he had the strangest impression that he was not falling down, but up. He was not plunging into darkness.

He was plunging into light.

"Sir Hugh?" Alfred's face, fearful and anxious, floated above him. "Sir Hugh? Oh, praise the Sartan! You're all right! How do you feel, sir?"

With Alfred's help, Hugh sat up. He glanced swiftly around him, searching for the monk. He saw no one other than the chamberlain, nothing except a tangle of ropes and his harness.

"What happened?" Hugh shook his head to clear it. He felt no pain, only a kind of grogginess. His brain seemed too large for his skull, his tongue too big for his mouth. He'd awakened in an inn, on occasion, with exactly this same feeling, an empty wineskin at his side.

"The boy drugged you. It's wearing off now. I know you're not feeling too well, Sir Hugh, but we're in trouble. The ship is falling-"

"Drugged?" Hugh looked at Alfred, trying to bring him into focus through the fog. "He didn't drug me! It was poison." His eyes narrowed. "I was dying."

"No, no, Sir Hugh. I know it might feel that way, but-"

Hugh leaned forward. Catching hold of Alfred by the collar, he dragged the man near him, staring into the light-colored eyes in an effort to see into his very soul. "I was dead." Hugh tightened his grip. "You brought me back to life!"

Alfred returned Hugh's gaze calmly. He smiled, somewhat sadly, and shook his head. "You are mistaken. It was a drug. I have done nothing."

Bumbling, oafish, how could this man lie and Hugh not know it? More important, how could Alfred have saved his life? The face was guileless; the eyes looked at him with pity and sadness, nothing more. Alfred seemed incapable of hiding anything. Had Hugh been anyone else, he must have believed him.

But the assassin knew that poison. He had given it to others. He had seen them die as he had. None of them had ever come back.

"Sir Hugh, the ship!" Alfred persisted. "We're falling! The wings . . . pulled inward. I tried, but I couldn't get them out again."

Now that his attention was called to it, Hugh could feel the ship rolling. He stared at Alfred, then let loose his grip on the man. Another mystery, but it wouldn't be solved by tumbling into the Maelstrom. Hugh staggered to his feet, his hands clutching his pounding head. It was too heavy. He had the dazed feeling that if he let go, his skull might snap loose and roll off his neck.

A glance out the window showed him that they were in no immediate danger—at least not from falling. Alfred had managed to bring the ship into some semblance of control, and Hugh could regain it completely easily enough, despite the fact that some of the cables had snapped.

"Falling into the Maelstrom's the least of our worries."

"What do you mean, sir?" Alfred hurried to his side and looked out.

Gazing up at them, so near that they could see every detail of their torn and bloodied clothing, were three elven warriors, grappling hooks in their hands.

"Here, toss them up! I'll make them fast!" It was Bane's voice, coming from the deck above.

Alfred gasped. "His Majesty said something about seeking help from the elves—"

"Help!" Hugh's lips twisted into a mocking grin. It seemed he had come back to life only to die again.

The grappling hooks snaked through the air. He heard the thuds when they landed on the deck, the scraping sound of the iron claws sliding over the wood. There was a tug and a jerk that knocked him-unsteady as he was-off his feet. The hooks had caught hold. He put his hand to his side. His sword was gone.

"Where . . . ?"

Alfred had seen his gesture and was slipping and sliding across the unsteady deck. "Here, sir. I had to use it to cut you free."

Hugh grabbed hold of the weapon and nearly dropped it. If Alfred had handed him an anvil, it could have seemed no heavier than his sword in his weak and shaking hand. The hooks were dragging the ship to a stop, keeping it floating in the air next to the disabled elven vessel. There

was a sharp pull and the ship sagged downward-the elves were scaling the ropes, coming aboard. Up above, Hugh could hear Bane chattering excitedly.

Gripping the sword, Hugh left the steerage way, padded soft-footed into the corridor to stand beneath the hatch. Alfred stumbled behind, the man's loud, clumsy footfalls making Hugh cringe. He cast the chamberlain a baleful glance, warning him to be silent. Then, slipping his dagger from the top of his boot, the assassin held it out.

Alfred blanched, shook his head, and put his hands behind his back. "No," he said through trembling lips. "I couldn't! I can't...take a life!"

Hugh looked up above, where booted feet could be heard walking across the deck.

"Not even to save your own?" he hissed.

Alfred lowered his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"If you're not now, you're soon going to be," muttered Hugh, and began to silently climb the ladder.

## CHAPTER 26

### DEEPSKY, DESCENDING

#### BANE WATCHED THE THREE ELVES PROPEL THEMSELVES HAND OVER HAND ACROSS

the ropes, their thin, shapely legs grasping it with heels and knees. Beneath them was nothing but empty air and, far below, the dark and awesome, perpetually raging storm. The elves were expert at boarding, however, and did not pause or look down. Reaching the deck of the small dragonship, they swung their legs over the sides and landed lightly on their feet.

Having never seen elves before, the prince studied them as intently as they were ignoring him. The elves were nearly the same height as average humans, but their slender bodies made them appear taller. Their features were delicate, yet hard and cold, as if they had been carved out of marble. Smooth-muscled, they were extremely well-coordinated and walked with ease and grace even on the listing ship. Their skin was nut-brown, their hair and eyebrows white, tinted with silver that glistened in the sun. They wore what appeared to be vests and short skirts made like finely stitched tapestries, decorated with fanciful pictures of birds and flowers and animals. Humans often made fun of the elves' bright-colored garb-to their regret, most discovering too late that it was, in reality, elven armor. Elven wizards possess the power to magically enhance ordinary silken thread, making it as hard and tough as steel.

The elf who appeared to be the leader motioned the other two to look around the ship. One ran aft, staring over the side at the wings, possibly to assess the damage that had caused this ship to tumble out of control. The other ran back to the stern.

The elves were armed, but they didn't carry their weapons in hand. They were, after all, on a ship made by their own kind.

Seeing his men deployed, the elven commander finally deigned to notice the child.

"What is a human brat doing on board a ship of my people?" The commander stared down his long aquiline nose at the boy. "And where is the captain of this vessel?"

He spoke human well, but with a twist to his mouth, as if the words tasted bad and he was glad to be rid of them. His voice was lilting and musical, his tone imperious and condescending. Bane was angry, but knew how to hide it.

"I am crown prince of Volkaran and Uylandia. King Stephen is my father." Bane thought it best to begin this way, at least until he had the elves convinced that he was someone important. Then he would tell them the truth, tell them that he was of truly great importance-greater than they could imagine.

The elf captain was keeping one eye on his men, giving Bane half his attention. "So, my people have captured a human princeling, have they? I don't know what they think they'll get for you."

"An evil man captured me," Bane said, tears coming readily to his eyes. "He was going to murder me. But you've rescued me! You'll be heroes. Take me to your king, that I may extend my thanks. This could be the beginning of the peace between our people."

The elf who had been inspecting the wings returned, his report on his lips. Overhearing the boy's speech, he looked at his captain. Both laughed simultaneously.

Bane sucked in his breath. Never in his life had anyone laughed at him! What was happening? The enchantment should be working. He was positive Trian hadn't been able to break the spell. Why wasn't his enchantment working on the elves?

And then Bane saw the talismans. Worn around the elves' necks, the talismans were created by the elven wizards to protect their people against human war magic. Bane didn't understand this, but he knew a warding talisman when he saw it and knew that, inadvertently, it was shielding the elves from the enchantment.

Before he could react, the captain grabbed hold of him and tossed him through the air like a bag of garbage. He was caught by the other elf, whose strength belied the slender body. The elf captain gave a careless command, and the elf, holding the boy at arm's length as if he were a skunk, walked over to the ship's rail.

Bane did not speak elven, but he understood the command given by the elf captain's gesture.

He was to be tossed overboard.

Bane tried to scream, fear choked off his breath. He fought and struggled. The elf held him by the scruff of the neck and seemed to be highly amused at the child's frantic efforts to free himself. Bane possessed the power of magic, but he was untrained, not having been brought up in his father's house. He could feel magic run through him like adrenaline, he lacked the knowledge to make it work.

There was someone who could tell him, however.

Bane grasped hold of the feather amulet. "Father!"

"He can't help you now," laughed the elf.

"Father!" Bane cried again.

"I was right," said the elf captain to his cohort. "There is someone else aboard-the brat's father. Go search." He gestured to the third elf, who came running back from the stern.

"Go ahead, get rid of the little bastard," the captain grunted.

The elf holding Bane held the boy over the rail and then dropped him.

Bane tumbled through the air. He sucked in his breath to let it out in a howl of terror, when a voice commanded him abruptly to be silent. The voice came as it always did to the child, speaking words that he heard in his mind, words audible only to himself.

"You have the ability to save yourself, Bane. But first you must conquer fear."

Falling rapidly, seeing below him floating pieces of debris from the elven ship and below that the black clouds of the Maelstrom, Bane went stiff and rigid with fright.

"I ... I can't, father," he whimpered.

"If you can't, then you will die, which will be all to the best. I have no use for a son who is a coward."

All his short life, Bane had striven to please the man who spoke to him through the amulet, the man who was his true father. To win the powerful wizard's approval was his dearest wish.

"Shut your eyes," was Sinistrad's next command.

Bane did so.

"Now we are going to work the magic. Think to yourself that you are lighter than the air. Your body is not solid flesh, but airy, buoyant. Your bones are hollow, like a bird's."

The prince wanted to laugh, but something inside told him if he did so he would never be able to control it and would drop to his death. Swallowing the wild, hysterical giggling, he tried to do as his father commanded. It seemed ludicrous. His eyes wouldn't slay shut, but kept flying open to watch in panic-stricken desperation for a bit of debris to cling to until he could be rescued. The wind rushing past made his eyes tear, however, and he couldn't see clearly. A sob welled up in his throat.

"Bane!" Sinistrad's voice flicked through the child's mind like a whip.

Gulping, Bane squinched his eyes tightly shut and tried to picture himself a bird.

At first it was difficult and seemed impossible. Generations of wizards long dead plus the boy's own inherent skill and intelligence came to Bane's aid. The trick was to banish reality, to convince the mind that its body did not weigh sixty-some rock, that it weighed nothing or less than nothing.

It was a skill most young human wizards must study years to attain, yet Bane was having to learn it in seconds. Mother birds teach the young to fly by tossing them out of the nest. Bane was acquiring the art of magic in the same way. Shock and sheer terror jolted his natural talent into taking over and saving him.

My flesh is made of cloud. My blood is fine mist. My bones are hollow and filled with air.

A tingling sensation spread through the prince's body. It seemed as if the magic was changing him into a cloud, for he felt weightless and airy. As this feeling increased, so did his confidence in the illusion he was spinning around himself, and the magic in turn increased, growing stronger and more powerful. Opening his eyes, Bane saw to his delight that he was no longer falling. Lighter than a snowflake, he was drifting in the sky.

"I've done it! I've done it!" He laughed gleefully, flapping his arms like a bird.

"Concentrate!" Sinistrad snapped. "This is not play! Break the concentration and you lose the power!"

Bane sobered. His father's words had not affected him so much as the sudden frightening sensation he'd experienced of growing heavier again. Resolutely he set his mind to its task of keeping him afloat among the wispy clouds.

"What do I do now, father?" he asked, more subdued.

"Remain where you are for the moment. The elves will rescue you."

"But they tried to kill me!"

"Yes, but now they will see that you possess the power and they will want to take you to their wizards. That will lead you to their court. You may as well spend some time there before you return to me. You might gather useful information."

Bane gazed upward, trying to see what was happening on the ship. All that was visible to him from his angle was the underside of the hull and the half-spread wings. The dragonship was still falling, however.

Bane relaxed, floating in the air, and waited for it to come to him.

## CHAPTER 27

### DEEPSKY, DESCENDING

HUGH AND ALFRED CROUCHED AT THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS. THEY COULD HEAR THE elves searching the ship; they heard the elf captain's conversation with Bane.

"Little bastard," Hugh muttered beneath his breath.

Then they heard Bane scream.

Alfred paled.

"You want him, you better help rescue him," Hugh said to the chamberlain. "Keep close behind me."

Clambering up the ladder, Hugh threw open the hatch. Sword in hand, he surged out onto the deck with Alfred right behind him. The first thing he saw was the elf hurling Bane over the side of the ship. Alfred cried out in horror.

"Never mind!" shouted Hugh, looking about swiftly for something to use as a weapon. "Cover my back- By the ancestors! No you don't!"

Alfred's eyes were rolling up into his head. His face was ashen as he swayed on his feet. Hugh reached out a hand, grabbed him to shake him furiously, but it was too late. The chamberlain keeled over and landed on the deck in a pathetic heap.

"Damn!" Hugh swore viciously.

The elves were stiff and weary from their fight with the rebels. They had not expected to find humans on board a dragonship and they were slow to react. Hugh grabbed for the spar, just as one of the elf fighters attempted to reach it first. The Hand was quicker. Lifting it, he snatched it up with all the force he could manage and thwacked the elf across the face. The fighter toppled, striking his head against the hatch when he fell. Presumably he would be out for a while. Hugh dared not finish him off, for he had two other elves in front of him.

Elves are not particularly skilled swordsmen. They prefer the bow and arrow, which demonstrates skill and judgment, not merely brute strength-all they consider swordplay. The short blades elves carry at their sides are generally used for close fighting or to dispatch victims already wounded by arrows.

Knowing the elves' dislike for the blade, Hugh swung his sword wildly, forcing them to keep out of his reach. He edged backward-hopping from plank to plank-until he ran into the bulwarks, the elves pressing him, but not moving in to attack. Not yet. Whatever they lack in technique, elves make up for in patience and wariness. It was taking all Hugh's waning strength just to keep the blade in his hand. The elves could see that he was sick and weak. Feinting, jabbing, they drained his energy. They could afford to wait until weariness forced him to drop his guard.

Hugh's arms ached, his head throbbed. He knew that he could not hold out long. Somehow, this must end. Movement caught his eye.

"Alfred!" Hugh bellowed. "That's it! Take them from behind!"

It was an old trick, and no human fighter worth his codpiece would have fallen for it. As it was, the elven captain kept his eyes fixed on Hugh, but the other warrior lost his nerve and turned his head. What he saw was not a menacing human bearing down on him, but Alfred sitting up and looking about him dazedly.

Hugh was on the elf in a flash, slashing the sword out of his hand and bashing the warrior in the face with his fist. This move left him open to attack from the captain, but he couldn't help that. The elf captain leapt forward to strike. His feet slipped on the slanting deck; the clumsy stroke missed

Hugh's heart and tore through the muscles of his sword arm. Hugh spun on his heel, caught the captain across the jaw with the hilt of the blade and sent the elf sprawling on his back on the deck, his weapon flying from his hand.

Hugh sank to his knees, fighting dizziness and nausea.

"Sir Hugh! You're injured! Let me help-" Hands touched his arm, but Hugh jerked away.

"I'm all right," he snapped. Staggering to his feet, he glared at the chamberlain, who flushed and hung his head.

"I ... I'm sorry I let you down," he stammered. "I don't know what comes over me-"

Hugh cut him off, gesturing at the elves. "Toss this scum overboard before they come to."

Alfred went so pale that Hugh thought he was going to faint again. "I can't do that, sir. Throw a helpless man ... to his death."

"They threw that kid of yours to his death!" Hugh raised his sword, holding it above the neck of the unconscious elf. "Then I'll have to get rid of them here. I can't take a chance on them coming around."

He started to cut the slender neck, but a strange reluctance halted him. A voice came to him from out of a vast and horrifying darkness.

All your life you served us.

"Please, sir!" Alfred caught hold of his arm. "Their ship is still attached to ours." He pointed to where the remnants of the elven vessel nosed alongside the dragonship, the grappling hooks holding it fast. "I could transfer them back there. At least they'd have a chance of being rescued."

"Very well." Too sick and tired to argue, Hugh gave in with an ill grace. "Do what you want. Just get rid of them. What do you care about elves. anyway? They murdered your precious prince."

"All life is sacred," said Alfred softly, leaning down to lift the unconscious elf captain by the shoulders. "We learned that. Too late. Too late."

At least that's what Hugh thought he said. The wind was whistling through the rigging, he was sick and in pain, and who cared anyway?

Alfred performed the task in his usual bumbling fashion- tripping over the planks, dropping the bodies, once nearly hanging himself when he became entangled in one of the wing cables. Eventually he managed to haul the unconscious elves to the ship's rail and heaved them onto their own ship with a strength the Hand found difficult to credit in the tall, gangling man.

But then, there was a lot about Alfred that was inexplicable. Was I really dead? Did Alfred bring me back to life? And, if so, how? Not even the mysteriarchs have the ability to restore the dead.

"All life is sacred. . . . Too late. Too late."

Hugh shook his head and was immediately sorry. He thought his eyeballs must burst out of their sockets.

Alfred returned to find Hugh trying to knot a clumsy bandage around his arm.

"Sir Hugh?" Alfred began timidly.

Hugh did not look up from his work. Gently the chamberlain took over, tying the bandage deftly.

"I think you should come and see something, sir."

"I know. We're still falling. But I can pull us out. How close are we to the Maelstrom?"

"It's not just that, sir. It's the prince. He's safe!"

"Safe?" Hugh stared at him, thinking the man had gone mad.

"It's very peculiar, sir. Although not so peculiar, I suppose, considering who he is and who his father is."

Who the hell is he? Hugh wanted to ask, but now was not the time. Sick and hurting, he made his way across the deck, whose movements were becoming more and more erratic as they drew nearer the storm. Looking down below, he could not repress a low whistle of amazement.

"His father is a mysteriarch of the High Realm," said Alfred. "I suppose he taught the boy to do that."

"They communicate through the amulet," said the Hand, recalling his failing vision focusing on the boy clasping the feather in his hand.

"Yes."

Hugh could see the boy's upturned face, looking at them triumphantly, evidently quite pleased with himself.

"I'm supposed to rescue him, I suppose. A kid who tried to poison me. A kid who wrecked my ship. A kid who tried to turn us all over to the elves!"

"After all, sir," replied Alfred, gazing at Hugh steadily, "you did agree to murder him-for money."

Hugh glanced back down at Bane. They were nearing the Maelstrom. He could see the stinging clouds of dust and debris floating above it and hear the dull booming of the thunder. A cool, moist wind smelling of rain was causing the tail rudder to flap wildly. Right now, Hugh should be examining the snapped cables, trying to rig them so that he could extend the wings and regain the upper air before the ship drifted too close, before the winds of the storm could prevent them from rising. And the pounding in his head was making him sick.

Turning, Hugh left the rail.

"I don't blame you," said Alfred. "He is a difficult child-"

"Difficult!" Hugh laughed, then paused, eyes closed, as the deck canted away beneath his feet. When he was himself again, he drew a deep breath. "Take that spar and hold it out to him. I'll try to maneuver the ship closer. We're risking our own lives doing this. Chances are we'll get caught by the winds and sucked into the storm."

"Yes, Sir Hugh." Alfred ran to get the spar-for once, his feet and his body all going the same direction.

The Hand dropped through the hatch into the steerage way and stood staring at the mess. "Why am I doing this?", he asked himself. It's simple, was the response. You've got a father who will pay to have his son not come back and another father who will pay to get hold of the kid.

That makes sense, Hugh admitted. All, of course, provided we don't wind up in the Maelstrom. Looking out the crystal window, he could see the boy floating among the clouds. The dragonship was falling down to meet him, but unless Hugh could alter their course, they would miss him by over a wing's length.

Gloomily the Hand surveyed the wreckage, prodding his aching mind to function and delineate between the various ropes that were twisting and slithering across the deck like snakes. Finding those he needed, he untangled them and laid them out straight so that they could run easily through the hawseholes. Once the cables were arranged, he cut them loose from the harness with his sword and wound them around his arms. He had seen men suffer broken bones from doing this. If he lost control, the heavy wing would fly out suddenly, jerk the rope, and snap his arms like a twig.

Seating himself, his feet braced against the deck, Hugh began to pay out the line slowly. One length of cable ran swiftly and smoothly through the hawsehole. The wing began to lift and the magic to activate. But the cable on Hugh's right arm remained limp and lifeless, straggling across the deck. He wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. The wing was stuck, jammed.

Hugh hauled back on the cable with all his might, hoping to jolt it free. It did no good, and he realized that one of the exterior cables attached to his guide rope must have snapped. Swearing to himself beneath his breath, the Hand abandoned the broken cable and concentrated on flying the ship with one wing.

"Nearer!" Alfred shouted. "A little more to the left-or is that starboard? I can never remember. Port? Perhaps port? There, I've almost got him . . . Now! Hang on tightly, Your Highness!"

Hugh heard the prince's shrill voice, yammering excitedly about something, the sound of small boots hitting the deck.

Then he heard Alfred's voice, low and rebuking, and Bane's defensive whine.

Hugh pulled back on the cable, felt the wing lift, and the dragonship, aided by its magic, began to float upward. The clouds of the Maelstrom swirled below, seemingly angry to see the prey escaping. Hugh held his breath, concentrating all his energy on holding the wing steady as they continued slowly rising.

It was as if a giant hand reached out to slap them like an irritating mosquito. The ship dropped suddenly and sickeningly, plunging downward so fast that it seemed their bodies went with it but

their stomachs and bowels stayed up above. Hugh heard a frightened shriek and a heavy bump and knew someone must have been thrown to the deck. The Hand hoped both Alfred and the kid had found something to hang on to, but there was nothing he could do about it if they hadn't.

Grimly he held on to the cables, fighting to keep the wing up to slow their descent. Then he heard an ominous ripping sound and the eerie whistle that stops the hearts of all dragonship pilots. The wing had torn, the wind was rushing through it. Hugh paid out the line as far as it would go, opening the wing all the way. Although he couldn't use it to steer, at least its magic would help cushion their fall when they hit the ground-if they hit the ground and if the Maelstrom didn't rip them apart first.

Unwinding the rope from around his arm, Hugh threw it onto the deck. They hadn't reached the Maelstrom yet, and already the wind was whipping the ship around. He couldn't stand up and was forced to crawl across the planking, clinging to the cables and using them to pull himself into the corridor. Once there, he dragged himself up the ladder and peered out. Alfred and Bane were lying flat on the top deck, the chamberlain with his arm wrapped tightly around the boy.

"Down here!" Hugh yelled above the buffeting of the wind. "The wing's split. We're sinking into the storm!"

Alfred slithered on his stomach across the deck, hauling Bane with him. Hugh took a certain grim pleasure in noting that the child appeared to be stricken dumb with terror. Reaching the hatch, the chamberlain shoved the prince ahead of him. Hugh grasped hold of the boy none too gently, pulled him inside, and dropped him onto the deck.

Bane let out a howl of pain that was cut short when the ship flipped over, slamming him into the bulwarks and knocking the breath from his body. The motion sent Alfred plunging through the hatch headfirst, causing Hugh to lose his footing. He crashed down the ladder onto the deck below.

The Hand staggered to his feet and made his way back up the ladder-or perhaps it was down the ladder. The ship was rolling over and over, and he had lost all sense of direction. He grabbed hold of the hatch cover. A rain squall hit the ship; water lashed down with the force of elven spears. A jagged bolt of lightning split the air near enough that the smell made him wrinkle his nose; the concussion of the air rushing back together nearly deafened him. He fumbled at the hatch cover-it was slippery and wet-and finally managed to yank it shut. Wearily he slid back down the ladder and collapsed onto the deck.

"You . . . you're alive!" Bane stared at him in blank astonishment. Then his expression changed to one of joy. Running over to Hugh, the child threw his arms around him and hugged him close. "Oh, I'm so glad! I was so frightened! You saved my life!"

Detaching the clinging hands, Hugh held the prince at arm's length. There was no doubting the sincerity either in the tear-choked voice or on the innocent face. There was no guile or deceit in the blue eyes. The Hand could have almost imagined that he had dreamed everything.

Almost, but not quite.

This Bane, so aptly named, had tried to poison him. Hugh put his hand around the boy's white throat. It would be a simple matter. One twist. Snap the neck. Contract fulfilled.

The ship pitched and tossed in the storm. The hull creaked and groaned and seemed likely to fly apart at any moment. Lightning flashed around them; thunder boomed in their ears.

All your life you served us.

Hugh tightened his grasp. Bane gazed up at him; the child was trusting, shyly smiling. The assassin might have been soothing the prince with a loving caress.

Angrily the Hand hurled the boy away from him, sent him stumbling into Alfred, who caught him reflexively.

Stumbling past the two, heading for the steerage way, Hugh dropped to his hands and knees and heaved up his guts.

## CHAPTER 28

### DREVLIN, LOW REALM

BANE WAS THE FIRST TO REGAIN CONSCIOUSNESS. OPENING HIS EYES, HE STARED around at his surroundings, at the dragonship and its other two occupants. He could hear a low rumble of thunder, and for a moment his terror returned; then he realized the storm was some distance away. Looking outside, he could see it was calm, with only a spatter of rain hitting the ship. The horrid motion had ended. Everything was still, nothing moved.

Hugh lay on the deck amidst the cables, his eyes closed, blood on his head and arm, his hand hanging on to one of the ropes as though his last effort had been to make some attempt to save them. Alfred lay sprawled on his back. The chamberlain did not appear to be injured. Bane remembered little about the terrifying descent through the storm, but he had the impression from somewhere that Alfred had fainted.

Bane, too, had been afraid, more afraid even than when the elf captain had tossed him over the side of the ship. That had happened swiftly, so there had been only a short time for fear. The fall into the storm had seemed to take forever, with terror growing stronger every second. Bane had really thought he might die of it. He recalled, then, his father's voice whispering words that lulled him into sleep.

The prince attempted to sit up. He felt peculiar-not hurt, just peculiar. His body seemed too heavy, a tremendous force was weighing him down, yet there was nothing on top of him. Bane whimpered a little in fright and at the feeling of being alone. He didn't like these strange sensations and he crawled over to shake Alfred, to try to wake him. Then Bane saw Hugh's sword, lying on the deck beneath him, and the child had a thought.

"I could kill them both now," he said, gripping the feather amulet tightly. "We could be rid of them, father."

"No!" The word was stern and sharp and startled him.

"Why not?"

"Because you need them to get you away from this place and bring you to me. But first, there is a task I want you to perform. You have landed on the isle of Drevlin in the Low Realm. A people known as GEGS inhabit this land. Actually, I am quite pleased that chance has brought you here. I was planning to come myself, when I acquired a ship.

"There is a great machine on this isle that very much intrigues me. It was built long ago by the Sartan, but for what purpose, no one has ever been able to discover. I want you to investigate it while you are there. Do this and find out what you can about these GEGS. Though I doubt if they can be of much use to me in my conquest of the world, it is wise to know as much as I can about those I intend to conquer. I might even be able to make use of them. You must watch, my son, for the opportunity."

The voice faded. Bane scowled. If only Sinistrad would stop his irritating habit of saying "When I conquer, when I rule." It was to be "we." Bane had determined this.

"Of course, my father can't know much about me yet; that's why he's never included me in his plans. When we meet, he'll get to know me. He'll be proud of me and he'll be glad to share his power with me. He'll teach me all his magic. We'll do everything together. I won't be lonely anymore."

Hugh began to groan and stir. Bane hurriedly lay back down on the deck and shut his eyes.

Hugh eased himself up painfully, propping his body with his arms. His first thought was one of absolute astonishment to discover he was alive. His next was that he would pay that elven wizard who cast the spell on his ship double what he charged for magic and feel that it was cheap. His next was for his pipe. Reaching into the soiled and sodden velvet tunic, Hugh discovered it safe, unbroken.

The Hand glanced at his companions. Alfred was out cold. Hugh had never in his life known anyone to pass out from sheer terror. Marvelous person to have around in a crisis. The boy was also unconscious, but he was breathing steadily, his color was good. He hadn't been hurt. Hugh's future security was alive and well.

"But first," muttered the Hand, edging across the deck to the boy, "we need to get rid of daddy, if that's who this really is."

Moving slowly and cautiously, careful not to wake the child, Hugh slid his fingers beneath the silver chain from which the feather amulet was suspended and started to lift it from around the boy's neck.

The chain slid through his fingers.

Hugh stared at it incredulously. The chain had not slipped off his fingers but through them-literally! He had seen it pass right through solid flesh and bone with as much ease as if his hand had been as insubstantial as that of a ghost's.

"I'm imagining things. The bump on the head," he said, and grasped the chain, this time firmly.

He held nothing in his hand but air.

Hugh realized then that Bane's eyes had opened, the boy was watching him, not angrily or suspiciously, but with sadness.

"It won't come off," he said. "I've tried." The prince sat up. "What happened? Where are we?"

"We're safe," Hugh said, sitting back and drawing forth his pipe. He'd smoked the last of the sterego, not that he had any way to light it even if he hadn't. He clamped the stem in his teeth and sucked on the empty bowl.

"You saved our lives," Bane told him. "And after I tried to kill you. I'm sorry. I truly am!" The limpid blue eyes lifted to gaze at Hugh. "It was only that I was afraid of you."

Hugh sucked on the pipe and said nothing.

"I feel so strange," continued the prince in easy conversation, that one small matter between them having now finally been cleared up. "Like I'm too heavy for my body."

"It's the pressure down here, the weight of the air. You'll get used to it. Just sit still and don't move."

Bane sat, fidgeting. His gaze went to Hugh's sword. "You're a warrior. You can defend yourself the honorable way. But I'm Weak. What else could I do? You are an assassin, aren't you? You were hired to kill me?"

"And you're not Stephen's son," Hugh countered.

"No, sir, he is not."

The voice was Alfred's. The chamberlain sat up, looking around him in confusion. "Where are we?"

"My guess is we're in the Low Realm. With luck, we're on Drevlin."

"Why luck?"

"Because Drevlin's the only continent down here that's inhabited. The Gags will help us if we can make it to one of their cities. This Low Realm is swept constantly by terrible storms," he added in explanation. "If we're caught in one out in the open ..." Hugh finished his sentence with a shrug.

Alfred blanched and cast a worried glance outside. Bane squirmed and twisted to see. "It's not storming now. Shouldn't we leave?"

"Wait until your body's gotten used to the change in pressure. We'll need to move fast when we go."

"And you think we're on this Drevlin?" Alfred asked.

"Judging from our location when we fell, I'd say so. We were blown around some by the storm, but Drevlin's the largest land-mass down here, and it'd be hard to miss. If we'd been blown off course too far, we wouldn't be anywhere."

"You've been here before." Bane sat up straight, staring at Hugh.

"Yes."

"What's it like?" he questioned eagerly.

Hugh did not immediately reply. His eyes shifted to Alfred, who had lifted his hand and was examining it in puzzlement, as if certain it must belong to someone else.

"Go outside and see for yourself, Your Highness."

"You mean it?" Bane scrambled to his feet. "I can go outside?"

"See if you can find any signs of a Geg settlement. There's a big machine on this continent. If you can see parts of it, there'll be Glegs living nearby. Keep close to the ship. You get caught by a storm with nowhere to go for shelter, and you're finished."

"Is that wise, sir?" Alfred looked anxiously after the boy, who was squeezing his small body out of a hole smashed in the hull.

"He won't go far. He'll get tired sooner than he realizes. Now, while he's gone, tell me the truth."

Alfred became very pale. Shifting uncomfortably, he lowered his eyes and stared at his too-large hands. "You were right, sir, when you said that Bane was not Stephen's child. I will tell you what I know-what any of us knows for certain, as far as that goes, although I believe Trian has conjectured some theories to explain what happened. I must say that they didn't seem to completely cover all the circumstances-" He saw Hugh's face darken, the brows draw together with impatience.

"Ten cycles ago, a child was born to Stephen and Anne. It was a boy, a beautiful baby, with his father's dark hair and his mother's eyes and ears. You think that is odd, that I mention the ears, but it will become important later on. Anne, you see, has a nick in her left ear, right here, at the outer curve. It is a trait in her family. The story goes that long ago, when the Sartan still walked the world, one of their kind was saved from harm when a spear thrown at him was deflected by Anne's ancestor. The point sliced off a part of the man's left ear. All children born since have been marked with that notch as a symbol of the family's honor.

"Anne's child had the notch. I saw it myself when they brought the babe out for the showing."

Alfred's voice lowered. "The child found in the cradle the next morning did not."

"A changeling," commented Hugh. "Surely they knew?"

"Yes, they knew. We all knew. The baby appeared to be the same age as the prince, only a day or two old. But this baby was fair-haired with bright blue eyes, not the milky kind of blue that will turn brown. And the child's ears were both perfectly shaped. We questioned everyone in the palace, but no one knew how the switch was made. The guards swore no one had slipped past them. They were good men. Stephen did not doubt their word. The nurse slept in the room with the baby all night and woke to take him to the wet nurse, who said that she put to her breast Anne's dark-haired boy. By this and by other tokens, Trian judged that the child had been placed there by magic."

"Other tokens?"

Alfred sighed. His gaze strayed outside. Bane was standing on a rock, peering intently into the distance. On the horizon, black clouds flecked with lightning were massing. The wind was beginning to rise.

"The baby had a powerful enchantment woven round him. Anyone who looked at him must immediately love him. No, 'love' isn't the right word." The chamberlain considered the matter. "Dote on,' perhaps, or 'become obsessed by.' We couldn't bear to see him unhappy. A tear falling from his eye made us feel wretched for days. We would have parted with our lives before we parted with that child." Alfred's voice fell silent and he ran his hand over his bald pate. "Stephen and Anne knew the danger of taking this child as their own, but they-all of us- were helpless to prevent it. That's why they named him Bane."

"And what was the danger?"

"A year after the changeling was delivered to us, on the birthday of Anne's true child, a mysteriarch from the High Realm came among us. At first we were honored, for such a thing had not happened in years-that one of the powerful magi of the Seventh House should so humble himself that he would deign to leave his glorious realm above and visit with us below. But our pride and our gladness changed to ashes in our mouths. Sinistrad is an evil man. He took care that we should know him and fear him. He came, he said, to do honor to the little prince. He had brought him a present. When Sinistrad lifted the babe in his arms, we knew-every one of us-whose child Bane truly was.

"No one could do a thing, of course-not against a powerful wizard of the Seventh House. Trian himself is one of the most skilled wizards in the kingdom, and he is only Third House. No, we had to watch with smiles plastered on our faces as the mysteriarch slipped that feather amulet around the baby's neck. Sinistrad congratulated Stephen on his heir and left. His emphasis on that word sent shivers of horror through all of us. But Stephen was helpless to do anything except dote on the child more fiercely than ever, even though he began to loathe the sight of him."

Hugh tugged at his beard, frowning. "But why would a wizard of the High Realm want a kingdom in the Middle? They left us cycles ago of their own free will. Their own kingdom is wealthy beyond anything we can imagine, or so we've heard.

"As I've said, we do not know. Trian has theories-conquest is the most obvious, of course. But if they wanted to rule us, they could bring an army of mysteriarchs down and defeat us easily. No, as I said, it doesn't make sense. Stephen knew that Sinistrad was in communication with his son. Bane is a cunning spy. The boy has learned every secret in the kingdom and has passed it all on, of that we are certain. We might have lived with that, for ten cycles have passed and our strength grows. If the mysteriarchs wanted to take over, they could have done it before this. But something has happened that made it urgent for Stephen to rid himself of the changeling." Alfred glanced outside to see the boy still occupied in scouting out a city, though he was obviously tired and now sitting on the rock instead of standing. The chamberlain motioned Hugh near, whispering in his ear. "Anne is with child!"

"Ah!" Hugh nodded in sudden understanding. "And so they decide to get rid of one heir, now that there's another on the way. What about the enchantment?"

"Trian broke it. Ten years of study it took him, but he managed at last. Now Stephen was able to"- Alfred halted, stammering in confusion-"to . . ."

". . . hire an assassin to kill him. How long have you known?"

"From the first." Alfred flushed. "It was why I followed you."

"And you would have tried to stop me?"

"I'm not certain." Alfred's brow furrowed, and he shook his head confusedly. "I ... don't know."

A dark seed fell into Hugh's mind and took root. It grew fast, twisting around his brain, flowering and bearing a noxious fruit. I decided to break the contract. Why? Because the boy is more valuable alive than dead. But so were a number of men I contracted to kill. I never before broke faith. I never before broke a contract, though sometimes I could have made ten times the fee paid me. Why now? I risked my own life to rescue the bastard! I couldn't kill him after he tried to kill me!

What if the enchantment isn't broken? What if Bane is still manipulating all of us, beginning with King Stephen?

Hugh looked intently at Alfred. "And what's the truth about you, chamberlain?"

"You see it before you, sir, I am afraid," said Alfred humbly, spreading his hands. "I have been in service all my life. I was with Her Royal Highness's family at their castle in Uylandia. When Her Majesty became queen, she was kind enough to bring me with her." A slow flush spread over Alfred's face. His eyes sought the deck. He plucked nervously at the shabby clothing with his clumsy fingers.

Lying does not come easily for this man, not like it does for the child, thought Hugh. Yet, like the child, Alfred is, seemingly, living a lie.

The assassin let it drop, closing his eyes. His shoulder pained him, he felt queasy and lethargic, effects of both the poison and the heavy air pressure. Thinking of all that had passed, he twisted his lips into a bitter smile. Worst of all, his hands smeared red with the blood of countless men, he who had proudly believed himself to be masterless had been mastered-by a child.

Prince Bane poked his head back through the shattered side of the ship. "I think I see it. The great machine! It's off in the distance, that direction. You can't see it now, because the clouds have covered it. But I remember the way. Let's go there now! After all, how can it be dangerous? It's only rain-

A bolt of lightning sizzled from sky to ground, blasting a hole in the coralite. The thunderclap shook the ground and nearly knocked the boy over.

"That's why," said Hugh.

Another lightning bolt struck with shattering force. Bane shot across the deck and crouched down beside Alfred. Rain pounded on the hull. Hail beat on it with deafening ferocity. Soon, water began pouring in through the cracks in the smashed timber. Bane's eyes were wide, his face pale, but he didn't cry out. When he saw his hands were trembling, he clasped them together tightly. Looking at the boy, Hugh saw himself long ago, battling fear with pride-the only weapon in his arsenal.

And it occurred to him that perhaps this was just what Bane wanted him to see.

The assassin fingered the hilt of his sword. It would take only a few seconds. Grasp it, wield it, thrust it deep into the boy's body. If he was going to be stopped by magic, then he wanted to see it act, know for certain.

Or perhaps he had seen it already.

Hugh moved his hand away from the sword. Lifting his pipe, he saw Bane watching him. The boy's lips curved in a sweet, charming smile.

## CHAPTER 29

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

THE HIGH FROMAN WAS HAVING A SAD TIME OF IT. HE WAS BEING PLAGUED BY GODS. Literally dropping from the skies, gods rained down on his defenseless head. Nothing was going right. His once-peaceful realm that had not known a whisper of trouble in the last several centuries was now running amok.

Trudging across the coralite, his band of coppers marching along reluctantly behind him, the Head Clark marching righteously at his side, the Froman thought long and hard about gods and decided that he hadn't much use for them. First, instead of neatly getting rid of Mad Limbeck, the gods had actually had the audacity to send him back alive. Not only that, but they came with him! Well, one of them did—a god who called himself Haplo. And though confused reports had reached the ears of the High Froman that the god didn't consider himself a god, Darral Longshoreman didn't believe it for a flicker.

Unfortunately, whether this Haplo was or he wasn't, he was stirring up trouble wherever he went—and that was pretty nearly everywhere, including, now, the GEGS' capital city of Wombe. Mad Limbeck and his wild WUPP's were dragging the god across the countryside, making speeches, telling the people that they were being misused, ill-treated, enslaved, and the Mangers knew what else. Of course, Mad Limbeck had been ranting and raving about this for some considerable length of time, but now, with the god standing at his side, the GEGS were beginning to listen to him!

Half the clarks had been completely won over. The Head Clark, seeing his church falling apart around him, was demanding that the High Froman do something.

"And what am I supposed to do?" Darral asked sourly. "Arrest this Haplo, this god who says he isn't a god? That won't do anything except convince the people who do believe in him that they've been right all along and convince the rest who don't that they should!"

"Bosh!" sniffed the Head Clark, who hadn't understood a thing the High Froman said but who knew he didn't agree with it.

"Bosh! That's all you've got to say! It's all your fault, anyhow!" the High Froman shouted, working himself into a rage. "Let the Mangers take care of Mad Limbeck, you said. Well, they took care of him, all right! Sent him back to destroy us!"

The Head Clark had stormed off in a huff. But he'd been back quick enough when the ship was sighted.

Plummeting out of the skies where it had no business being, since it wasn't time for the monthly festival yet, the dragonship had landed in the Outland some distance away from an outer sector of Wombe known as Stomak. The High Froman had seen it from his bedroom window and his heart had sunk. More gods- just what he needed!

At first Darral thought he might have been the only one to see it and that he could pretend he hadn't. No such luck. A number of other Gags saw it, including the Head Clark. Worse still, one of his sharp-eyed, no-brains coppers had reported seeing Something Alive come out of it. The copper, as punishment, was now stumbling along after his chief on their way to investigate.

"I guess this'll teach you!" Darral rounded on the unfortunate copper. "It's because of you we're being forced to come out here. If you'd kept your lips from flapping! But, no! You have to go and see one of 'em! Not only that, but you have to shout it out to half the realm!"

"I only said it to the Head Clark," protested the copper.

"It's the same thing," Darral muttered.

"Well, but I think it's only right that we have our own god now, High Froman," persisted the copper. "'Tisn't fair, to my mind, those clods in Met having a god and us going without. I reckon this'll show 'em!"

The Head Clark raised an eyebrow. Anger forgotten, he sidled over to the High Froman. "He does have a point," murmured the clark in Darral's ear. "If we have our own god, we can use him to counter Limbeck's god."

Stumbling along over the cracked and gouged coralite, the High Froman had to admit that his brother-in-law had, for once in his life, come up with something that sounded halfway intelligent. My own god, mused Darral Longshoreman, squelching through the puddles, heading for the dragonship. There's got to be some way to work this to my advantage.

Seeing that they were nearing the wrecked dragonship, the High Froman slowed his march, raising his hand to warn those behind him to slow theirs-something that was not necessary. The coppers had already come to a standstill about ten feet behind their leader.

The High Froman glared at his men in exasperation and started to curse them all for cowards, but on second thought, he considered that it was probably just as well his men remained behind. It would look better if he treated with the gods alone. He cast a sidelong glance at the Head Clark.

"I think you should stay here," said Darral. "It might be dangerous."

Since Darral Longshoreman had never in his entire life been concerned about his welfare, the Head Clark was very rightly suspicious at this sudden consideration and promptly and unequivocally refused. "It's only proper that a churchman greet these immortal beings," said the Head Clark loftily. "I suggest, in fact, that you allow me to do the talking."

The storm had cleared, but there was another coming (on Drevlin there was always another coming!), and Darral didn't have time to argue. Contenting himself with muttering that the Head Clark could talk all he wanted through a split lip, the High Froman and his cohort turned and

marched-with a remarkable courage that would later be celebrated in story and song-right up to the battered hull of the downed ship. (The courage exhibited by the two Gogs should not, after all, be considered that remarkable, the copper having reported that the Creature he had seen emerge from the ship was small and puny-looking. Their true courage would be tested shortly.)

Standing next to the damaged hull, the High Froman was momentarily at a loss. He'd never spoken to a god before. At the monthly sacred docking ceremonies, the Welves appeared in their huge winged ships, sucked up the water, threw down their reward, and departed. Not a bad way of doing things, the High Froman thought regretfully. He was just opening his mouth to announce to the small, puny-looking god inside the ship that his servants were here when there emerged a god who was anything but small and puny-looking.

The god was tall and dark, with a black beard that hung in two braids from his chin and long black hair that flowed over his shoulders. His face was hard, his eyes as sharp and cold as the coralite on which the Geg stood. The god carried in his hand a weapon of bright, glittering steel.

At the sight of this formidable, frightening creature, the Head Clark, forgetting completely about church protocol, turned and fled. Most of the coppers, seeing the church abandoning the field, figured doom had descended and took to their heels. Only one stalwart copper remained-the one who had sighted the god and had reported it to be small and puny. Perhaps he thought he had nothing to lose.

"Humpf! Good riddance," muttered Darral. Turning to the god, he bowed so low his long beard dragged the wet ground. "Your Wurship," said the High Froman humbly, "we welcome you to our realm. Have you come for the Judgment?"

The god stared at him, then turned to another god (the Froman inwardly groaned-how many of these were there?) and spoke something to this second god in words that were a meaningless babble to the High Froman. The second god-a bald, weak, soft-looking god, if you asked Darral Longshoreman-shook his head, a blank expression on his face.

And it occurred to the High Froman that these gods hadn't understood a word he'd said.

In that instant, Darral Longshoreman realized that Mad Limbeck wasn't mad after all. These weren't gods. Gods would have understood him. These were mortal men. They had come in a dragonship, which meant that the Welves in their dragonships were most likely mortal. If the Kicksey-Winsey had suddenly ceased to function, if every whirly had stopped whirling, every gear stopped grinding, every whistle stopped tooting, the High Froman could not have been more appalled. Mad Limbeck was right! There would be no Judgment! They would never be lifted up to Geg's Hope. Glowering at the gods and at their wrecked ship, Darral realized that the gods themselves couldn't even get off Drevlin!

A low rumble of thunder warned the High Froman that he and these "gods" didn't have time to stand around and stare at one another. Disillusioned, angry, needing time to think, the High Froman turned his back on the "gods" and started to head for his city.

"Wait!" came a voice. "Where are you going?"

Startled, Darral whirled around. A third god had appeared.

This must have been the one the copper had seen, for this god was small and frail-looking. This god was a child! And had Darral only imagined it, or had the child spoken to him in words he understood?

"Greetings. I am Prince Bane," said the child in excellent but halting Geg, sounding almost as if he were being prompted. One hand was clasped tightly around a feather amulet he wore on his breast. He held out his other hand, palm open, in the ritual Geg gesture of friendship. "My father is Sinistrad, Mysteriarch of the Seventh House, Ruler of the High Realm."

Darral Longshoreman drew in a deep, shivering breath. Never in his life had he seen such a beautiful being as this. Bright golden hair, bright blue eyes-the child glistened like the shining metal of the Kicksey-Winsey.

Perhaps I've been mistaken. Mad Limbeck is wrong, after all. Surely this being is immortal! Somewhere from deep within the Geg, buried beneath centuries of Sundering, holocaust, and rupture, came a phrase to Darral's mind, "And a little child shall lead them."

"Greetings, Prince B-Bane," returned the High Froman, stumbling over the name that held, in his language, no meaning. "Have you come to pass Judgment on us at last?"

The child's eyelids flickered; then he said coolly, "Yes, I have come to judge you. Where is your king?"

"I am the High Froman, Your Wurship, ruler of my people. It would be a great honor if you would deign to visit our city, Your Wurship." The High Froman's gaze strayed nervously to the approaching storm. Gods probably weren't bothered by bolts of lightning sizzling down from the heavens, and Darral found it somewhat embarrassing to hint that high fromen were. However, the child appeared to be cognizant of the Geg's plight and to take pity on it. Casting a glance back at his two companions, whom Darral now took for the god's servants or guards, Prince Bane indicated he was ready to travel and glanced about for the conveyance.

"I'm sorry, Your Wurship," muttered the High Froman, flushing warmly, "but we have to ... er ... walk."

"Oh, that's all right," said the god, and jumped gleefully into a puddle.

## CHAPTER 30

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

LIMBECK WAS SITTING IN THE DRAFTY HEADQUARTERS OF WUPP WRITING THE SPEECH he would deliver at the rally tonight. His spectacles perched precariously on his head, the Geg scribbled his words onto the paper, happily spattering ink over everything and completely oblivious of the chaos erupting around him. Haplo sat near him, the dog at his feet.

Quiet, taciturn, unobtrusive-indeed, going almost unnoticed- the Patryn lounged in a Geg chair that was too short for him. His long legs extending out in front of him, he idly watched the organized

confusion. His cloth-wound hand dropped occasionally to scratch the dog on the head or to pat it reassuringly in the event that something startled it.

WUPP Headquarters in the Geg capital city of Wombe was- literally-a hole in the wall. The Kicksey-Winsey had once decided it needed to expand in a certain direction, knocked a hole in the wall of a Geg dwelling, then had apparently decided, for some unknown reason, that it didn't want to go that way after all. The hole in the wall remained and the twenty or so Geg families who had occupied the dwelling had moved, since one could never be certain but that the Kicksey-Winsey might change its mind again.

Beyond a few minor inconveniences-such as the perpetual draft-it was, however, ideal for the establishment of WUPP Headquarters. There had been no WUPP Headquarters in the capital of Drevlin. The High Froman and the church both held crushing power here. But after Limbeck's triumphant return from the dead-bringing with him a god who claimed he wasn't a god-reached Wombe via the newssingers, the GEGs clamored to know more about WUPP and its leader. Jarre herself traveled to Wombe to establish the Union, distribute pamphlets, and find a suitable building to serve both as center of operations and a place to live. Her primary, secret goal, however, was to discover if the High Froman and/or the church was going to give them trouble, Jarre hoped they would. She could almost hear the newssingers across the land warbling, "Coppers Crush Converts!" Nothing of the sort had occurred, much to Jarre's disappointment, and Limbeck and Haplo (and the dog) were met by cheering crowds when they entered the city. Jarre hinted that this was undoubtedly a dark and subtle plot by the High Froman to ensnare them all, but Limbeck said it simply proved that Darral Longshoreman was fair and open-minded.

Now crowds of GEGs stood outside the hole in the wall, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the famous Limbeck or of his god-who-wasn't. WUPP members rushed importantly in and out, bearing messages to or from Jarre, who was so busy running things that she didn't have time to make speeches anymore.

Jarre was in her element. She led WUPP with ruthless efficiency. Her skills in organization, her inherent knowledge of the GEGs, and her management of Limbeck had been responsible for setting the GEGs' world aflame with anger and the call for revolution. She poked, prodded, and pummeled Limbeck into shape, shoved him forth to issue words of genius, and hauled him back When it was time to quit. Her awe of Haplo soon faded and she began to treat him the same way she treated Limbeck, telling him what to say and how long to say it.

Haplo submitted to her in everything with easy, casual pliability. He was, Jarre discovered, a man of few words, but those Words had a way of searing into the heart, leaving a mark that burned long after the iron had grown cool.

"Is your speech ready for tonight, Haplo?" She paused in the act of drafting a reply to an attack that the church had made on them-an attack so simpleminded that to answer it was to give it more credence than it deserved.

"I will say what I always say, if that is agreeable to you, madam," he replied with the quiet respect that marked all his dealings with the GEGs.

"Yes," said Jarre, brushing her chin with the end of the feather quill. "I think that will be most satisfactory. You know that we are likely to draw our biggest crowd yet. They say that some scrifts are even talking of walking off the job-a thing absolutely unprecedented in the history of Drevlin!"

Limbeck was startled enough by the tone of her voice to lift his myopic gaze from his paper and stare vaguely in her general direction. In reality, all he could see of her was a squarish blur surmounted by a lump that was her head. He couldn't see her eyes but he knew her well enough to envision them sparkling with pleasure.

"My dear, is that wise?" he said, holding his pen poised above the paper and unconsciously allowing a large drop of ink to splat right in the center of his text. "It's certain to anger the High Froman and the clarks-"

"I hope it does!" Jarre stated emphatically, much to Limbeck's consternation. Nervously he set his elbow in the ink splot.

"Let him send his coppers to break up our meeting," Jarre continued. "We'll gain hundreds more followers!"

"But there could be trouble!" Limbeck was aghast. "Someone could get hurt!"

"All in the name of the cause." Jarre shrugged and returned to her work.

Limbeck dropped another ink blot. "But my cause has always been peace. I never meant for people to get hurt!"

Rising to her feet, Jarre cast a swift meaningful glance at Haplo, reminding Limbeck that the god-who-wasn't was listening. Limbeck flushed and bit his lip, but shook his head stubbornly, and Jarre moved over to his side. Lifting up a rag, she wiped away a particularly large ink spot on the end of his nose.

"My dear," she said, not unkindly, "you've always talked about the need for change. How did you think it would happen?"

"Gradually," said Limbeck. "Gradually and slowly, so that everyone has time to get used to it and comes to see that it is for the best."

"That is so like you!" sighed Jarre.

A WUPPer stuck his head through the hole in the wall, seeking to attract Jarre's attention. She frowned at him severely and the Geg appeared slightly daunted but held his ground, waiting. Turning her back on the WUPPer, Jarre smoothed Limbeck's wrinkled brow with a hand rough and callused from hard work.

"You want change to come about nicely and pleasantly. You want to see it just sort of slip up on people so that they don't notice it until they wake up one morning and realize that they're happier than they were before. Isn't that true, Limbeck?"

Jarre answered her own question. "Of course it is. And it's very wonderful and very thoughtful of you and it's also very naive and very stupid." Leaning down, she kissed him on the crown of the head, to rob her words of their sting. "And it's just what I love about you, my dear. But haven't you been listening to Haplo, Limbeck? Give part of your speech now, Haplo."

The WUPPer who had been waiting to see Jarre turned to shout to the crowd, "Haplo's going to give his speech!"

The GEGs standing in the street broke into rousing cheers and as many as could possibly fit squeezed heads, arms, legs, and other body parts in through the hole in the wall. This somewhat alarming sight caused the dog to leap to its feet. Haplo patted the dog down and obligingly began to orate, speaking loudly in order to be heard above the crunch, whiz, bang of the Kicksey-Winsey.

"You GEGs know your history. You were brought here by those you call the 'Mangers.' In my world, they are known as the Sartan and they treated us as they did you. They enslaved you, forced you to work on this thing that you know as the Kicksey-Winsey. You consider it to be a living entity, but I tell you that it's a machine! Nothing more! A machine kept running by your brains, your brawn, your blood!

"And where are the Sartan? Where are these so-called gods who claimed that they brought you-a gentle, peaceful people- here to protect you from the Welves? They brought you here because they knew they could take advantage of you!

"Where are the Sartan? Where are the Mangers? That is the question we must ask! No one, it seems, knows the answer. They were here and now they're gone and they've left you to the mercy of the minions of the Sartan, those Welves you were taught to believe were gods! But they're not gods, either, any more than I am a god-except for the fact that they live like gods. Live like gods because you are their slaves! And that's how the Welves think of you!

"It's time to rise up, throw off your chains, and take what is rightfully yours! Take what has been denied you for centuries!"

Wild applause from the GEGs peering through the hole cut off. Jarre, eyes shining, stood with clasped hands, her lips moving to the sound of the words, which she had memorized. Limbeck listened, but his eyes were downcast, his expression troubled. Though he, too, had heard Haplo's speech often, it seemed that only now was he really hearing it for the first time. Words such as "blood," "rise up," "throw off," "take," leapt up, growling, like the dog at Haplo's feet. He had heard them, perhaps even said them himself, but they had been only words. Now he saw them as sticks and clubs and rocks, he saw GEGs lying in the streets or being herded off to prison or being made to walk the Steps of Terrel Fen.

"I never meant this!" he cried. "Any of this!" Jarre, her lips pressed tightly together, strode over and, with a vicious jerk, flung down the blanket that had been hung up over the hole in the wall. There were disappointed murmurings from the crowd whose view inside was cut off.

"Whether you did or you didn't, Limbeck, it's gone too far now for you to stop it!" she snapped. Seeing the harried expression on her beloved's face, she softened her voice. "There are pain and blood and tears at every birth, my dear. The baby always cries when it leaves its safe, quiet prison. Yet if it stayed in the womb, it would never grow, never mature. It would be a parasite, feeding off another body. That's what we are. That's what we've become! Don't you see? Can't you understand?"

"No, my dear," said Limbeck. The hand holding the pen was shaking. Ink drops were flying everywhere. He laid it down across the paper on which he'd been writing and slowly rose to his feet. "I think I'll go out for a walk."

"I wouldn't," said Jarre. "The crowds-" Limbeck blinked. "Oh, yes. Of course. You're right." "You're exhausted. All this traveling and excitement. Go lie down and take a nap. I'll finish your speech. Here are your spectacles," Jarre said briskly, plucking them from the top of Limbeck's head and popping them onto his nose. "Up the stairs and into bed with you."

"Yes, my dear," said Limbeck, adjusting the spectacles that Jarre had, with well-meaning kindness, stuck on lopsided. Looking through them that way-with one eyeglass up and the other down-made him nauseous. "I ... think that would be a good idea. I do feel . . . tired." He sighed and hung his head. "Very tired."

Walking to the ramshackle stairs, Limbeck was startled to feel a wet tongue lick across his knuckles. It was Haplo's dog, looking up at him, wagging its tail.

"I understand," the animal seemed to say, its unspoken words startlingly clear in Limbeck's mind. "I'm sorry."

"Dog!" Haplo spoke to it sharply, calling it back.

"No, that's all right," said Limbeck, reaching down to give the animal's sleek head a gingerly pat. "I don't mind."

"Dog! Come!" Haplo's voice had an almost angry edge to it. The dog hurried back to its master's side, and Limbeck retired up the stairs.

"He's so very idealistic!" said Jarre, gazing after Limbeck in admiration mixed with exasperation. "And not at all practical. I just don't know what to do."

"Keep him around," suggested Haplo. He stroked the dog's long nose to indicate that all was forgiven and forgotten. The animal lay down, rolled over on its side, and closed its eyes. "He gives your revolution a high moral tone. You'll need that, when blood starts to flow."

Jarre looked worried. "You think it will come to that?"

"Inevitable," he said, shrugging. "You said as much yourself, to Limbeck."

"I know. It seems, as you say, that it is inevitable, that this is the natural end of what we began long ago. Yet it has seemed to me lately" - she turned her eyes to Haplo - "that we never seriously turned our thoughts to violence until you came. Sometimes I wonder if you aren't really a god."

"Why is that?" Haplo smiled.

"Your words have a strange power over us. I hear them and I keep hearing them, not in my head, but in my heart." She placed her hand on her breast, pressing it as if it pained her. "And because they're in my heart, I can't seem to think about them rationally. I just want to react, to go out and do ... something! Make somebody pay for what we've suffered, what we've endured."

Haplo rose from the chair and came over to Jarre, kneeling down so that he put himself at eye level with the short, stocky Geg. "And why shouldn't you?" he said softly, so softly that she couldn't hear over the whumping, whooshing of the Kicksey-Winsey. Yet she knew what he said, and the pain in

her heart increased. "Why shouldn't you make them pay? How many of your people have lived and died down here, and all for what? To serve a machine that eats up your land, that destroys your homes, that takes your lives and gives nothing to you in return! You've been used, betrayed! It's your right, your duty to strike back!"

"I will!" Jarre was caught, mesmerized by the man's crystal blue eyes. Slowly the hand over her heart clenched into a fist.

Haplo, smiling his quiet smile, rose and stretched. "I think I'll join our friend in a nap. It's liable to be a long night."

"Haplo," called Jarre, "you said you come from below us, from a realm that we . . . that no one knows is down there."

He did not reply, merely looked at her.

"You were slaves. You told us that. But what you haven't told us is how you came to crash on our isle. You weren't"-she paused and licked her lips, as if to make the words come more easily-"running away?"

One corner of the man's mouth twitched. "No, I wasn't running. You see, Jarre, we won our fight. We are slaves no longer. I've been sent to free others."

The dog raised its head, turning to stare sleepily at Haplo. Seeing him leaving, the dog yawned and got up, hind end first, stretching out its front legs luxuriously. Yawning again, it rocked forward, stretching the back legs, then lazily accompanied its master up the stairs.

Jarre watched, then shook her head, and was sitting down to finish Limbeck's speech when a thumping against the curtain recalled her to her duties. There were people to meet, pamphlets to be delivered, the hall to be inspected, parades to be organized.

The revolution just wasn't much fun anymore.

Haplo mounted the stairs carefully, keeping to the inside against the wall. The knobwood boards were cracked and rotting. Large snaggletoothed gaps waited to snare the unwary and send them crashing down to the floor below. Once inside his room, he lay down on the bed, but not to sleep. The dog jumped up on the bed next to him and rested its head on the man's chest, bright eyes fixed on his face.

"The woman is good, but she won't serve our purpose. She thinks too much, as my lord would say, and that makes her dangerous. What we need in this realm to foment chaos is a fanatic. Limbeck would be ideal, but he must have that idealistic bubble of his burst. And I've got to leave this place, to carry on with my mission-investigate the upper realms and do what I can to prepare the way for the coming of my lord. My ship is destroyed. I have to find another. But how...how?"

Musing, he fondled the dog's soft ears. The animal, sensing the man's tension, remained awake, lending its small support, and slowly Haplo relaxed. Opportunity would come. He knew it. He had only to watch for it and take advantage of it. The dog closed its eyes with a contented sigh and slept, and after a few moments, so did Haplo.

## CHAPTER 31

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

"ALFRED."

"Sir?"

"Do you understand what they're saying?"

Hugh motioned to Bane, chatting with the Geg, the two of them scrambling across the coralite. Storm clouds gathered at their backs and the wind was rising and keened eerily among the bits and pieces of lightning-blasted coralite. Ahead of them was the city Bane had seen. Or rather, not a city but a machine. Or perhaps a machine that was a city.

"No, sir," said Alfred, looking directly at Bane's back and speaking more loudly than was usual for him. "I do not speak the language of these people. I do not believe that there are many of our race, or the elves either, for that matter, who do."

"A few of the elves speak it-those who captain the waterships. But if you don't speak it, and I assume that Stephen didn't, then where did His Highness learn it?"

"How can you ask, sir?" said Alfred, glancing significantly toward the heavens.

He wasn't referring to the storm clouds. Up there, far above the Maelstrom, was the High Realm, where dwelt the mysteriarchs in their self-imposed exile, living in a world said by legend to be wealthy beyond the dreams of the greediest man and beautiful beyond the imagining of the most fanciful.

"Understanding the language of a different race or culture is one of the simpler of the magical spells. I wouldn't be surprised if that amulet he wears- Oh!"

Alfred's feet decided to take a side trip down a hole and took the rest of Alfred with them. The Geg stopped and looked around in alarm at the man's cry. Bane said something, laughing, and he and the Geg continued on their way. Hugh extricated Alfred and, keeping his hand on his arm, guided him rapidly over the rough ground. The first raindrops were falling out of the sky, hitting the coralite with loud splatters.

Alfred cast an uneasy sidelong glance at Hugh, and the Hand read the unspoken appeal to keep his mouth shut. In that appeal, Hugh had his answer, and it wasn't the one Alfred had given for Bane's benefit. Of course Alfred spoke the GEGS' language. No one listened intently to a conversation he couldn't understand. And Alfred had been listening intently to Bane and the Geg. What was more interesting-to Hugh's mind-was that Alfred was keeping his knowledge secret from the prince.

Hugh thoroughly approved spying on His Highness, but that opened the other nagging question. Where-and why-had a chamberlain learned to speak Geg? Who-or what-was Alfred Montbank?

The storm broke in all its deadly fury and the humans and the GEGS made for the city of Wombe at a dead run. Rain fell in a gray wall in front of them, partially obscuring their vision. But the noise

made by the machine was, fortunately, so loud that they could hear it over the storm, feel its vibrations underfoot, and knew they were headed in the right direction.

A crowd of GEGs were waiting by an open doorway for them and hustled them all inside the machine. The sounds of the storm ceased, but the sounds of the machine were louder, clanking and banging above, around, below, and beyond. Several GEGs, who appeared to be armed guards of some sort, plus a GEG dressed up to look like an elflord's footman, were waiting- somewhat nervously-to greet them.

"Bane, what's going on?" Hugh demanded loudly, shouting to be heard above the racket made by the machine. "Who is this guy and what does he want?"

Bane looked up at Hugh with an ingenuous grin, obviously highly pleased with himself and his newfound power. "He's the king of his people!" shouted Bane.

"What?"

"King! He's going to take us to some sort of judgment hall."

"Can't he take us somewhere quiet?" Hugh's head was beginning to throb.

Bane turned to the king with the question. To Hugh's amazement, all the GEGs stared at him in horror, shaking their heads emphatically.

"What the hell is the matter with them?"

The prince began to giggle.

"They think you've asked for a place to go to die!"

At this juncture, the GEG dressed in silk hose, knee breeches, and a worn velvet doublet was introduced to Bane by the GEG king. The velvet-clad GEG threw himself to his knees. Taking Bane's hand, he pressed it against his forehead.

"Who do they think you are, kid?" Hugh asked.

"A god," Bane answered airily. "One they've been looking for, it seems. I'm going to pass judgment on them."

The GEGs led their newly discovered gods through the streets of Wombe-streets that ran up, under, and straight through the Kicksey-Winsey. Hugh the Hand was not awed by many things in this world-not even death impressed him much-but he was awed by the great machine. It flashed, it glittered, it sparkled. It whumped and thwanged and hissed. It pumped and whirled and shot out blasts of searing hot steam. It created arcs of sizzling blue lightning. It soared higher than he could see, delved deeper than he could imagine. Huge gears engaged, huge wheels revolved, huge boilers boiled. It had arms and hands and legs and feet, all made of shining metal, all busily engaged in going somewhere other than where they were. It had eyes that shed a blinding light and mouths that screeched and hooted. GEGs crawled over it, climbed up it, clambered down into it, turned it, tapped it, and tended it with obvious loving care and devotion.

Bane, too, was overwhelmed. He gazed with wide-open eyes, his mouth gaping in ungodlike wonder.

"This is amazing!" breathed the boy. "I've never seen anything like this!"

"You haven't, Your Wurship?" exclaimed the High Froman, looking at the child-god in astonishment. "But you gods built it!"

"Oh, er, yes," Bane stammered. "It's just that I meant I'd never seen . . . anything like the way you're taking care of it!" he finished with a rush, exhaling the words in relief.

"Yes," said the high dark with dignity, his face glowing with pride. "We take excellent care of it."

The prince bit his tongue. He wanted very much to ask what this wondrous machine did, but it was obvious that this little king fellow expected him to know everything-not an unreasonable assumption in a god. Bane was on his own in this too, his father having imparted to him all the information he had on the great machine of the Low Realm. This being a god wasn't as easy as it had first appeared, and the prince began regretting he'd agreed to it so fast. There was this judgment thing. Who was he judging, and why? Would he be sending anyone to the dungeons? He really needed to find out, but how?

The little king fellow was, Bane decided, just a bit too shrewd. He was very respectful and polite, but the boy saw that when he wasn't looking, the Geg was scrutinizing him with a gaze that was sharp and penetrating. Walking along on the prince's right, however, was another Geg who reminded the child of a performing monkey he'd seen once at court. Bane guessed from what he'd heard that the beruffled, beribboned, velvet-lined Geg had something to do with the religion in which the boy had suddenly found himself so intimately involved. This Geg didn't appear to be all that bright, and the prince decided to turn to him for answers.

"Pardon me," said the boy with a charming smile for the Head Clark, "but I didn't catch your name."

"Wes Wrenchwanger, Your Wurship," said the Geg, bowing as best he could for his stoutness, and nearly tripping on his long beard. "I have the honor to be Your Wurship's Head Clark."

Whatever that is, Bane muttered to himself. Outwardly he smiled and nodded and gave every indication that nowhere else on Drevlin could he have found a Geg more suited for that position.

Sidling close to the Head Clark, Bane slipped his hand into the Geg's hand-a proceeding which caused the Head Clark to swell rather alarmingly and cast a glance of supreme self-satisfaction at his brother-in-law, the High Froman.

Darral paid little attention. The crowds lining the streets to see them were getting unruly. He was glad to see the coppers reacting to it. For the moment they appeared to have matters under control, but he knew he would need to keep a watchful eye on things. He only hoped the child-god couldn't understand what some of the Gogs were shouting. Damn that Limbeck anyway!

Fortunately for Darral, the child-god was completely absorbed in his own problems.

"Perhaps you could help me, Head Clark," said Bane, flushing shyly and very prettily.

"I would be honored, Your Wurship!"

"You know, it's been an awfully long time since we-your gods . . . Uh, what did you call us?"

"The Mangers, Your Wurship. That is what you call yourselves, isn't it?"

"Yes, oh, yes! Mangers. It's just that, well, as I was saying, we Mangers have been away an awfully long time-

"-many centuries, Your Wurship," said the Head Clark.

"Yes, many centuries, and we've noticed that quite a few things have changed since we were away." Bane drew a deep breath. This was coming easier all the time. "Therefore we've decided that this judgment-thing should be changed as well."

The Head Clark felt some of his smugness begin to drain from him. He glanced uneasily at the High Froman. If he, the Head Clark, screwed up the Judgment, it would be the last screw he ever turned.

"I'm not quite certain what you mean, Your Wurship."

"Modernize it, bring it up-to-date," suggested Bane.

The Head Clark appeared terribly confused. How could you change something that had never before happened? Still, he supposed that the gods must have had it planned out. "I guess it would be all right-

"Never mind. I can see you're uncomfortable with the idea," said the prince, patting the Head Clark on his velvet-covered arm. "I've got a suggestion. You tell me the way you want me to handle it and I'll do it just like you say."

The Head Clark's face brightened. "You can't believe how wonderful this moment is for me, Your Wurship! I've dreamed of it for so long. And now, to have the Judgment go just as I've always imagined . . ." He wiped tears from his eyes.

"Yes, yes," said Bane. He noted that the High Froman was watching them with narrowed eyes and edging nearer all the time. He might have stopped their conversation before this except that it was undoubtedly considered bad manners to interrupt a god in confidential conference. "Go on."

"Well, I always pictured all the GEGS-or at least as many as we could get in there-dressed in their very best clothes, standing in the Factree. You would be there, seated in the Manger's Chair, of course."

"Of course, and-

"And I would be there, standing before the crowd in my new Head Clark suit that I would have made specially for the occasion. White, I think, would be proper, with black bows at the knees, nothing too overdone-

"Very tasteful. And then-

"The High Froman would be standing there with us too, I suppose, Your Wurship? That is, unless we could find something else for him to do. You see, Your Wurship, what he'll find fit to wear is going to be a problem. Perhaps, with this modernization you were discussing, we might dispense with him."

"I'll think about it." Bane gripped the feather amulet and tried very hard to be patient. "Go on. We're all up in front of the crowd. I stand up and I ..." He looked expectantly at the Head Clark.

"Why, you judge us, Your Wurship."

The prince had the sudden satisfying vision of sinking his teeth into the Geg's velvet arm. Reluctantly banishing the thought, he drew a deep breath. "Fine. I judge you. And then what happens? I know! We'll declare a holiday!"

"I don't really think there'll be time for that, do you, Your Wurship?" said the Geg, looking at Bane with a puzzled expression.

"P-perhaps not," stammered the prince. "I forgot about . . . the other. When we're all . . ." Slipping his hand from the hand of the Head Clark, the boy wiped his sweating forehead. It was certainly hot inside the machine. Hot and noisy. His throat was getting sore from shouting. "What is it we're all doing now, after I've judged you?"

"Why, that depends on whether or not you've found us worthy, Your Wurship."

"Let's say I find you worthy," Bane said, gritting his teeth. "Then what?"

"Then we ascend, Your Wurship."

"Ascend?" The prince looked at the catwalks running hither and thither above him.

The Head Clark, misunderstanding his gaze, sighed with happiness. His face glowing beatifically, he lifted his hands.

"Yes, Your Wurship. Right straight up into heaven!"

Marching along behind Bane and his adoring GEGs, Hugh devoted one eye to his surroundings and the other to the prince. He soon ceased to try to keep track of where they were, admitting to himself that he could never find his way out of the insides of the machine without help. News of their coming had apparently rushed on ahead of them. Thousands of GEGs lined the halls and corridors of the machine, staring, shouting, and pointing. GEGs busy with their work actually turned their heads, bestowing on Hugh and his companions-had they known it-a high honor by forgetting their tasks for a few seconds. The reaction of the GEGs, however, was mixed. Some were cheering with enthusiasm, but others appeared to be angry.

Hugh was more interested in Prince Bane and what he was doing in such close confab with the ruffled Geg. Silently cursing himself for never having bothered to learn any of the Geg language when he was with the elves, Hugh felt a tug on his sleeve and turned his attention to Alfred.

"Sir," said Alfred, "have you noticed what the crowd is yelling?"

"Gibberish, as far as I'm concerned. But you understand it, don't you, Alfred?"

Alfred flushed deeply. "I am sorry I had to conceal my knowledge from you, Sir Hugh. But I believed it important that I conceal it from another." He glanced at the prince. "When you asked me that question, it was just possible that he could have heard my answer, and so I felt I had no choice-

Hugh made a deprecating motion with his hand. Alfred had a point. It had been the Hand who had made the mistake. He should have realized what Alfred was doing and never spoken up. It was just that never in Hugh's life had he felt so damn helpless!

"Where did you learn to speak Geg?"

"The study of the GEGs and the Low Realm has been a hobby of mine, sir," answered Alfred with the shy, proud consciousness of a true enthusiast. "I daresay I have one of the finest collections of books written about their culture in the Mid Realm. If you would be interested, when we return, I'll be happy to show you-

"If you left those books in the palace, you can forget them. Unless you plan on asking Stephen to give you leave to run back in and pick up your things."

"You're right, sir, of course. How stupid of me." Alfred's shoulders sagged. "All my books ... I don't suppose I'll ever see them again."

"What were you saying about the crowd?"

"Oh, yes." The chamberlain glanced around at the cheering and occasionally jeering GEGs. "Some are calling out, 'Down with the Froman's god!' and 'We want Limbeck's god!' "

"Limbeck? What does that mean?"

"It's a Geg name, I believe, sir. It means 'to distill or extract.' If I might make a suggestion? I think . . ." Instinctively he lowered his voice, and in the noise and commotion, Hugh lost his words.

"Talk louder. No one can understand us, can they?"

"Oh, I suppose not," said Alfred, light dawning. "That hadn't occurred to me. I was saying, sir, that there might be another human such as ourselves down here."

"Or an elf. That's more likely. Either way, odds are they've got a ship we can use to get out of here!"

"Yes, sir. I thought that might be the case."

"We've got to see this Limbeck and his god or whatever."

"That shouldn't be difficult, sir. Not if our little 'god' commands it."

"Our little 'god' seems to have gotten himself in some sort of trouble," said Hugh, his gaze going to the prince. "Look at his face."

"Oh, dear," murmured Alfred.

Bane had twisted his head back to search for his companions. His cheeks were pale, his blue eyes wide. Biting his lip, he made a hurried motion for them to come up to him.

An entire squadron of armed GEGS marched between them and the prince. Hugh shook his head. Bane gazed at him pleadingly. Alfred, looking sympathetic, gestured at the crowd. Bane was a prince. He knew what was due an audience. Sighing, he turned around and began to wave his small hand feebly and without enthusiasm.

"I was afraid of this," said Alfred.

"What do you think's happened?"

"The boy said something about the GEGS thinking he was the god who had come to 'judge' them. He spoke about it glibly, but it is very serious to the GEGS. According to their legends, it was the Mangers who built the great machine. The GEGS were to serve it until the Day of Judgment, when they would be rewarded and carried up into the higher realms. That was how the isle GEG's Hope came by its name."

"Mangers. Who are these Mangers?"

"The Sartan."

"Devil take us!" the Hand swore. "You mean they think the kid is one of the Sartan?"

"It would seem so, sir."

"I don't suppose he could fake it, with help from daddy?"

"No, sir. Not even a mysteriarch of the Seventh House, such as his father, possesses magical powers compared to those of the Sartan. After all," said Alfred, gesturing, "they built all this."

Hugh cared little about that now. "Great! Just great! And what do you think they'll do when they find out we're impostors?"

"I couldn't say, sir. Ordinarily, the GEGS are peaceful, gentle people. But then, I don't suppose they've ever had anyone pretend to be one of their gods before. In addition, they seem to be in a turmoil over something." Alfred, looking at the crowds growing increasingly hostile, shook his head. "I would say, sir, that we've come at rather a bad time."

## CHAPTER 32

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

THE GEGS TOOK THE "GODS" TO THE FACTREE-THE SAME PLACE WHERE Limbeck had been given his trial. They had some difficulty entering, due to the crowds of milling GEGS

massed outside. Hugh couldn't understand a word they were shouting; despite that, it was obvious to him that the populace was divided into two distinct and highly vocal factions, with a large segment who seemed unable to make up their minds. The two factions appeared to feel strongly about their beliefs, because Hugh saw fights break out on several occasions. He remembered what Alfred had said about the Glegs being ordinarily peaceful and gentle.

We've come at rather a bad time. No kidding. It looked to be in the middle of a revolution of some sort!

The coppers kept back the crowd, and the prince and his companions managed to squeeze through the stout bodies into the relative quiet of the Factree-relative to the fact that the whanging and banging of the Kicksey-Winsey was constantly in the background.

Once inside, the High Froman held a hasty meeting with the coppers. The little king's face was grave and Hugh observed several times that he shook his head. The Hand didn't give a half-barl for the Glegs, but he had lived long enough to know that being caught in a country undergoing political upheaval was not conducive to a long and healthy life.

"Excuse us." He approached the Head Clark, who bowed and stared at him with the blank, bright smile of one who doesn't understand a word that is being said to him but who is trying to appear as if he did, in order not to be rude. "We have to have a little talk with your god."

Gripping Bane firmly by the shoulder, ignoring the boy's yelps and squirming, Hugh marched the prince across the vast empty floor, over to where Alfred stood gazing up at a statue of a hooded man holding what appeared to be an eyeball in his hand.

"Do you know what they expect me to do?" Bane demanded of Alfred as soon as they neared him. "They expect me to transport them up into heaven!"

"May I remind His Highness that he brought this on himself by telling them he was a god?"

The child's head drooped. He stole up to Alfred's side and slipped a hand in the chamberlain's. Lower lip quivering, Bane said softly, "I'm sorry, Alfred. I was afraid they were going to hurt you and Sir Hugh, and it was the only thing I could think of to do."

Strong hands jerked Bane around, rough fingers bit into his shoulders. Hugh knelt down and looked straight into the child's eyes, behind which he wanted to see cunning and malevolent purpose. All he saw were the eyes of a frightened kid. It angered him.

"All right, Your Highness, you go on fooling the Glegs as long as you can-anything to get us out of here. But we just want to make it plain that you don't fool us one bit, not anymore. Those phony tears better dry up and you better listen- you and daddy both." He glanced at the feather as he spoke, and the boy's hand closed over it protectively. "Unless you can hoist these dwarves into the skies, you better be prepared to do some fast thinking. I don't suppose these people will take kindly to being hoodwinked."

"Sir Hugh," warned Alfred, "we're being watched."

The Hand looked over to the High Froman, who was observing the proceedings with interest. Releasing the boy, patting him on the shoulders, Hugh smiled.

"What is it you plan to do, Your Highness?" he muttered in an undertone.

Bane gulped back his tears. Fortunately there was no need to keep their voices lowered. The rhythmic pounding and thumping of the machine muffled everything, including thought.

"I've decided I'll tell them I've judged them and found them wanting. They haven't earned the right to go up to heaven."

Hugh glanced at Alfred. The man shook his head. "It would be very dangerous, Your Highness. If you said such a thing, in the state of turmoil that seems to have gripped the realm, the Gags might well turn on us."

The child's eyes blinked rapidly, their gaze shifting quickly from Alfred to Hugh and back again. Bane was obviously frightened. He had plunged in over his head and felt himself sinking. Worse still, he must know that the only two who could save him had very good reasons for letting him drown.

"What do we do?"

We Hugh would have liked nothing better than to leave the changeling on this storm-swept patch of rock. He knew he wouldn't, however. Enchantment? Or did he just feel sorry for the brat? Neither, he assured himself, still planning to use the kid to make his fortune.

"There's talk of another god down here. 'Limbeck's god,' " said Alfred.

"How did you know that?" Bane flared. "You can't understand what they're saying!"

"Yes, I can, Your Highness. I speak some Geg-"

"You lied!" The child gazed at him in shock. "How could you, Alfred? I trusted you!"

The chamberlain shook his head. "I think it best for all of us to admit that none of us trusts the others."

"Who can blame me?" cried Bane with glittering innocence. "This man tried to kill me, and for all I know, Alfred, you were helping him!"

"That is not true, Your Highness, yet I can understand how you might come to think so. But I had not meant to make accusations. I think it behooves us to realize that, though we do not trust each other, our lives in total now depend on each other individually. I think-"

"-too much!" Hugh broke in. "The kid understands, don't you, Bane? And drop the babe-lost-in-the-woods act. We both know who and what you are. I presume that you want to get out of here, go up and pay dad a visit. The only way you're going to get off this rock is with a ship, and I'm the only pilot you've got. Alfred, here, knows something about these people and how they think-at least he claims he does. He's right when he says we're each other's only chance in this game, so I suggest that you and daddy there play along nicely."

Bane stared at him. His eyes were no longer the eyes of a child who is eagerly studying the world; they were the eyes of one who knows all about it. Hugh saw himself reflected in those eyes; saw a

chill, unloved childhood; saw a child who had unwrapped all of life's pretty presents and discovered the boxes contained filth.

Like me, Hugh thought, he no longer believes in the bright, the shining, the beautiful. He knows what's underneath.

"You're not treating me like a kid," said Bane, wary and cautious.

"Are you one?" Hugh asked bluntly.

"No." Bane clasped the feather tightly as he spoke, and repeated more loudly, "No, I'm not! I'll work with you. I promise, so long as you don't betray me. If you do, either of you, then I'll make you regret it." The blue eyes gleamed with a most unchildlike shrewdness.

"Fair enough. I give you each the same promise. Alfred?"

The chamberlain looked at them in despair and sighed. "Must it be like this? Trusting only because each of us holds a knife in the other's back?"

"You lied about speaking Geg. You didn't tell me the truth about the kid until it was almost too late. What else have you lied about, Alfred?" Hugh demanded.

The chamberlain went white. His mouth worked, but he couldn't answer. Finally he managed to squeeze out, "I promise."

"All right. That's done. Now, we've got to find out about this other god. He could be our way off this rock. Chances are, it's an elf whose ship got caught in the storm and sucked down."

"I could tell the High Froman that I want to meet this god." Bane was swift to see and understand the possibilities. "I'll tell him that I can't judge the Gags until I find out what this fellow 'god' of mine thinks about the matter." The boy smiled sweetly. "Who knows, it could take us days to come up with the answer! But would an elf help us?"

"If he's in as much trouble down here as we are, he would. My ship's wrecked. His probably is too. But we might be able to use parts of one to fix the other. Shhh. We've got company."

The High Froman joined them, the Head Clark bustling importantly along behind. "When would Your Wurship like to commence the Judgment?"

Bane drew himself up to his full height and managed to look offended. "I heard the people shouting something about another god being present in your land. Why wasn't I informed of this?"

"Because, Your Wurship," said the High Froman, casting a reproachful glance at the Head Clark, "this is a god who claims he isn't a god. He claims that none of you are gods, but says you are mortals who have enslaved us."

Hugh contained himself patiently during this conversation that he couldn't understand. Alfred was listening to the Gags with close attention, and the Hand kept close watch on Alfred's face. He did not miss the man's dismayed reaction over what was being said. The assassin ground his teeth, frustrated nearly to the point of madness. Their lives were dependent on a ten-cycle kid who, at this point, looked like he might very well burst into tears!

Prince Bane got a grip on himself, however. Pointed chin in the air, he made some answer that apparently eased the situation, for Hugh saw Alfred's face relax. The chamberlain even nodded slightly, before he caught himself, aware that he shouldn't be reacting.

The kid has nerve, he's quick-thinking. Hugh twisted his beard. And perhaps I'm "enthralled," he reminded himself.

"Bring this god to me," said Bane with an imperious air that made him, for a brief moment, resemble King Stephen.

"If Your Wurship wishes to see him, he and the Geg who brought him here are speaking at a rally tonight. You could confront him publicly."

"Very well," said Bane, not liking it but not knowing what other response to make.

"Now, perhaps Your Wurship would care to rest. I notice that one member of your party is injured." The Geg's glance went to Hugh's torn and bloodstained shirt sleeve. "I could send for a healer."

Hugh saw the glance, understood, and made a negating gesture.

"Thank you, his injury isn't serious," said Bane, "but you could send us food and water."

The High Froman bowed. "Is that all I can do for Your Wurship?"

"Yes, thank you. That will be all," said Bane, failing to conceal the relief in his voice.

The gods were shown to chairs placed at the feet of the Manger, possibly to provide inspiration. The Head Clark would have liked very much to stay and visit, but Darral nabbed his brother-in-law by the velvet sleeve and dragged him-protesting volubly-away.

"What are you doing?" raved the Head Clark. "How could you risk insulting His Wurship by saying such a thing? Implying that he isn't a god! And that talk about slaves!"

"Shut up and listen to me," snapped Darral Longshoreman. He'd had his fill of gods. One more "Your Wurship" and he thought he'd gag. "Either these folk are gods or they're not. If they're not, and this Limbeck turns out to be right, what do you think will happen to us, who've spent our lives telling our people that we were serving gods?"

The Head Clark stared at his brother-in-law. Slowly his face drained of all its ruddy color. He gulped.

"Exactly." Darral nodded emphatically, his beard wagging. "Now, suppose they are gods, do you really want to be judged and taken up into heaven? Or do you like it down here, the way things used to be before all this hullabaloo started?"

The Head Clark considered. He was very fond of being Head Clark. He lived well. Gecs respected him, bowed and took off their hats when he walked down the street. He didn't have to serve the Kicksey-Winsey, except when and where he chose to put in an appearance. He got invited to all the best parties. When you came right down to it, what more did heaven have to offer?

"You're right," he was forced to admit, though it galled him to do so. "What do we do?"

"I'm working on it," said the High Froman. "Just leave it to me.

"I'd give a hundred barls to know what those two are talking about." Hugh watched the two GEGS walk off in close conversation.

"I don't like this at all," said Alfred. "This other god, whoever it is, is fomenting rebellion and chaos down here. I wonder why. The elves wouldn't have any reason to upset things in the Low Realm, would they?"

"No. It's to their advantage to keep the GEGS quiet and hard at work. But there's nothing we can do, I guess, except to go to this rally tonight and hear what this god has to say."

"Yes," said Alfred absently.

Hugh glanced at the man. The high domed forehead glistened with sweat, and his eyes had acquired a fevered luster. His skin was ashen, his lips gray. He hadn't, it occurred to Hugh suddenly, fallen over anything in the last hour.

"You don't look good. Are you all right?"

"I ... I'm not feeling very well, Sir Hugh. Nothing serious. Just a reaction from the crash. I'll be fine. Please don't worry about me. Your Highness understands the serious nature of tonight's encounter?"

Bane gave Alfred a thoughtful, considering look. "Yes, I understand. I'll do my best to help, although I'm not certain what it is I'm supposed to do."

The boy appeared to be sincere, but Hugh could still see that innocent smile as the child fed him poison. Was Bane, in truth, playing the game with them? Or was he merely moving them ahead one more square?

## CHAPTER 33

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

#### A COMMOTION OUTSIDE THE HOLE IN THE WALL ATTRACTED JARRE'S ATTENTION.

She had just put the finishing touches on Limbeck's speech. Laying it down, she went to what served as the door and peered out the curtain. The crowds in the street had grown larger, she saw with satisfaction. But the WUPP's assigned to guard the door were arguing loudly with several other GEGS attempting to enter.

At the sight of Jarre, their clamor increased.

"What is it?" she asked.

The Gags began shouting at once, and it took her some time to quiet them down. When she had done so and had heard what they had to say, she gave instructions and reentered WUPP Headquarters.

"What's going on?" Haplo was standing on the stairs, the dog at his side.

"I'm sorry the commotion woke you," Jarre apologized. "It's nothing, really."

"I wasn't asleep. What is it?"

Jarre shrugged. "The High Froman's come up with his own god. I might have expected something like this of Darral Longshoreman. Well, it won't work, that's all."

"His own god?" Haplo descended the stairs with a step swift and light as a cat's. "Tell me."

"Surely you can't take this seriously? You know there are no such things as gods. Darral probably told the Welves we were threatening them, and they've sent someone down here to try to convince my people that, 'Yes, we Welves really are gods.' "

"Is this god an el ... a Welf?"

"I don't know. Most of our people have never seen a Welf. I don't suppose anyone knows what they look like. All I know is that it seems this god is a child and he's been telling everyone he's come to judge us and he's going to do so at the rally tonight and prove that we're wrong. Of course, you can deal with him."

"Of course," murmured Haplo.

Jarre was bustling about. "I've got to go make certain everything's arranged at the Together Hall." She threw a shawl around her shoulders. On her way out the hole in the wall, she paused and looked back. "Don't tell Limbeck about this. He'll get himself all worked up. It'll be better to take him completely by surprise. That way, he won't have time to think."

Thrusting aside the curtain, she stepped outside, to the sound of loud cheers.

Left alone, Haplo threw himself in a chair. The dog, sensing his master's mood, thrust his muzzle comfortingly into the man's hand.

"The Sartan, do you think, boy?" mused Haplo, absently scratching the dog beneath the chin.

"They're as close to a god as these people are likely to find in a godless universe. And what do I do if it is? I can't challenge this 'god' and reveal to him my own powers. The Sartan must not be alerted to our escape from their prison. Not yet, not until my lord is fully prepared."

He sat in thoughtful, brooding silence. The hand stroking the animal slowed in its caress and soon ceased altogether. The dog, knowing itself no longer needed, settled down at the man's feet, chin on its paws, its liquid eyes reflecting the concern in the eyes of its master.

"Ironic, isn't it?" said Haplo, and at the voice the dog's ears pricked and it glanced up at him, one white eyebrow slightly raised. "Me with the powers of a god and unable to use them." Drawing back the bandage that swathed his hand, he ran a finger over the blue-and-red spiderweb lines of the sigla whose fantastic whorls and patterns decorated his skin. "I could build a ship in a day. Fly

out of here tomorrow if I so chose. I could show these dwarves power they've never imagined. I could become a god for them. Lead them to war against the humans and the 'Welves.' " Haplo smiled, but his face grew immediately sober. "Why not? What would it matter?"

A strong desire to use his power came over him. Not only to use the magic, but to use it to conquer, to control, to lead. The Gogs were peaceful, but Haplo knew that wasn't the true nature of dwarves. Somehow the Sartan had managed to beat it out of them, reduce them to the mindless machine-serving "Gogs" that they had become. It should be easy to uncover the fierce pride, the legendary courage of the dwarves. The ashes appeared cold, but surely a flame must flicker somewhere!

"I could raise an army, build ships. No! What has gotten into me!" Haplo angrily jerked the cloth back over his hand. The dog, cringing at the sharp tone, looked up apologetically, thinking, perhaps, that it had been at fault. "It's my true nature, the nature of the Patryns, and it will lead me into disaster! My lord warned me of this. I must move slowly. The Gogs are not ready. And I'm not the one who should lead them. Their own. Limbeck. Somehow, I must blow on the spark that is Limbeck.

"As for this child-god, there's nothing to be done but wait and see and trust in myself. If it is a Sartan, then that might be all for the better. Right, boy?" Leaning down, Haplo thumped the animal on its flank. The dog, pleased at the return of its master's good humor, closed its eyes and sighed deeply.

"And if it is a Sartan," muttered Haplo beneath his breath, leaning back in the small uncomfortable chair and stretching his legs, "may my lord keep me from ripping out the bastard's heart!"

By the time Jarre had come back, Limbeck was awake and anxiously perusing his speech, and Haplo had made a decision.

"Well," said Jarre brightly, unwinding her shawl from around her ample shoulders, "everything is all ready for tonight. I think, my dear, that this will be the biggest rally yet-"

"We need to talk to the god," interrupted Haplo in his quiet voice.

Jarre flashed him a look, reminding him that this subject was not to be mentioned in front of Limbeck.

"God?" Limbeck peered at them from behind the spectacles perched precariously on his nose. "What god? What's going on?"

"He had to know," Haplo mollified an angry Jarre. "It's best to always know as much as you can about the enemy."

"Enemy! What enemy!" Limbeck, pale but calm, had risen to his feet.

"You don't seriously believe that they are what they claim- Mangers-do you?" demanded Jarre, staring at Haplo with narrowed eyes, arms akimbo.

"No, and that is what we must prove. You said yourself this was undoubtedly a plot by the High Froman to discredit your movement. If we can capture this being who calls himself a god and can prove publicly that he's not-"

"-then we can cast down the High Froman!" cried Jarre, clapping her hands together eagerly.

Haplo, pretending to scratch the dog, lowered his head to hide his smile. The animal gazed up at his master with a wistful, uneasy aspect.

"Certainly there's that possibility, but we must take this one step at a time," said Haplo after a pause, seeming to give the matter grave consideration. "First, it's essential that we find out who this god really is and why he's here."

"Who who is? Why who is here?" Limbeck's spectacles slid down his nose. He pushed them back and raised his voice. "Tell me-"

"I'm sorry, my dear. It all happened while you were asleep." Jarre informed him of the arrival of the High Froman's god and how he had paraded the child through the city streets and what the people were saying and doing and how some of them believed the child was a god and some believed he wasn't and-

"-and there's going to be trouble, that's what you mean, don't you?" concluded Limbeck. Sinking down into his chair, he stared bleakly at her. "What if they really are the Mangers! What if I've been wrong and they've come to ... to pass judgment on the people? They'll be offended and they might abandon us again!" He twisted the speech in his hands. "I might have brought great harm to all our people!"

Jarre, looking exasperated, opened her mouth, but Haplo shook his head at her.

"Limbeck, that is why we need to talk to them. If they are the Sar . . . Mangers," he corrected himself, "then we can explain and they'll understand, I'm sure."

"I was so certain!" Limbeck cried woefully.

"And you are right, my dear!" Jarre knelt beside him and, putting her hands on his face, turned it so that he was forced to look at her. "Believe in yourself! This is an impostor, brought by the High Froman! We'll prove that and we'll prove that he and the clarks have been in league with those who have enslaved us! This could be our great chance, our chance to change our world!"

Limbeck did not reply. Gently removing Jarre's hands, he held them fast, thanking her silently for her comfort. But he lifted his head and fixed a troubled gaze on Haplo.

"You've gone too far to back out now, my friend," said the Patryn. "Your people trust you, believe in you. You can't let them down."

"But what if I'm wrong?"

"You're not," said Haplo with conviction. "Even if this is a Manger, the Mangers are not gods and never were. They are human, like myself. They were endowed with great magical power, but they were mortal. If the High Froman claims the Manger is a god, just ask the Manger. If he really is one, he will tell you the truth."

The Mangers always told the truth. They had gone throughout the world protesting that they were not divine, yet taking upon themselves the responsibilities of the divine. False humility to mask pride and ambition. If this was a true Sartan, he would refute his own godhood. If not, Haplo would know he was lying, and exposing him would be easy.

"Can we get in to see them?" he asked Jarre.

"They're being held in the Factree," she said, pondering. "I don't know much about it, but we have those in our group who do. I'll ask them."

"We should hurry. It's almost dark and the meeting is supposed to commence in two hours' time. We should see them before that."

Jarre was on her feet and heading for the hole in the wall. Limbeck, sighing, leaned his head on his hand. His spectacles slid down his nose and dropped into his lap, where they lay unnoticed.

The woman has the energy and determination, mused Haplo. Jarre knows her limitations. She can make the vision reality, but it is Limbeck who has the eyes-half-blind that they are-to see. I must show him the vision.

Jarre returned with several eager, grim-looking GEGS. "There's a way in. Tunnels run underneath the floor and come up near the statue of the Manger."

Haplo nodded his head toward Limbeck. Jarre understood.

"Did you hear me, my dear? We can get inside the Factree and talk to this so-called god. Do we go?"

Limbeck raised his head. His face beneath the beard was pale, but there was an expression of determination. "Yes." He raised a hand, stopping her from interrupting. "I've realized it doesn't matter if I'm right or if I'm wrong. All that matters is to discover the truth."

## CHAPTER 34

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

TWO GUIDE GEGS, LIMBECK, JARRE, HAPLO, AND, OF COURSE, THE DOG NAVIGATED A series of twisting, winding tunnels that intersected, bisected, and dissected the ground below the Kicksey-Winsey. The tunnels were old and marvelous in their construction, lined with stone that appeared, from its regular shape, to have been made either by the hand of man or the metal hands of the Kicksey-Winsey. Here and there, carved into the stones, were curious symbols. Limbeck was absolutely fascinated with these, and it was with some difficulty and a few tugs on his beard that Jarre managed to persuade him that there was a need for hurry.

Haplo could have told him much about these symbols. He could have told him they were in reality sigla-the runes of the Sartan-and that it was the sigla carved upon the stones that kept the tunnels dry despite the almost constant flow of rainwater dripping through the porous coralite. It was the sigla that maintained the tunnels centuries after those who built them had left them.

The Patryn was nearly as interested in the tunnels as Limbeck. It was becoming increasingly obvious to him that the Sartan had abandoned their work. Not only that, but they had left it unfinished...and that was not at all like these humans who had attained the power and the status of demigods. The great machine, which, even far below ground, they could still feel throbbing and pulsing and pounding, was, Haplo had observed, running on its own, at its own whim, by its own design.

And it was doing nothing. Nothing creative, that Haplo could see. He had traveled the length and breadth of Drevlin with Limbeck and the WUPPERS, and everywhere he had gone he had inspected the great machine. It knocked over buildings, it dug holes, it built new buildings, it filled in holes, it roared and steamed and tooted and hummed and did what it did with a wondrous amount of energy. But what it was doing was nothing.

Once a month, so Haplo had heard, the "Welves" came down from above in their iron suits and their flying ships and picked up the precious substance-water. The Welves had been doing this for centuries and the GEGS had come to believe that this was the ultimate purpose of their beloved and sacred machine-to produce water for these godlike Welves. But Haplo saw that the water was merely a by-product of the Kicksey-Winsey, perhaps even a waste product. The function of the fabulous machine was something grander, something far more magnificent than spitting out water to slake the thirst of the elven nation. But what that purpose was, and why the Sartan had left before it could be accomplished, was something Haplo could not begin to fathom.

There was no answer for him in the tunnels. Possibly it lay ahead. He had learned, as had all the PatrYns, that impatience- any slip from the tightly held reins of control imposed upon themselves- could lead to disaster. The Labyrinth was not kind to those with flaws. Patience, endless patience- that was one of the gifts the PatrYns had received from the Labyrinth, though it came to them covered with their own blood.

The GEGS were excited, noisy, and eager. Haplo walked through the tunnels after them, making no more noise than did his shadow cast by the light of GEG glimmerglamps. The dog trotted along behind, silent and watchful as his master.

"Are you certain this is the right way?" Jarre asked more than once, when it seemed that they must be walking in endless circles.

The guide GEGS assured her it was. It seemed that several years ago, the Kicksey-Winsey had taken it into its mechanical head that it should open the tunnels. It had done so, punching through the ground with its iron fists and feet. GEGS swarmed below, shoring up the walls and providing the machine support. Then, just as suddenly, the Kicksey-Winsey changed its mind and launched off in a completely new direction. These particular GEGS had been part of the tunnel scrift and knew them as well as they knew their own houses.

Unfortunately, the tunnels were not deserted, as Haplo had hoped. The GEGS now used them to get from one place to another, and the WUPPERS on their way to the Factree ran into large numbers of GEGS. The sight of Haplo created excitement, the guide GEGS felt called upon to tell everyone who he was and who Limbeck was, and almost all the GEGS that didn't have other, more pressing business, decided to follow along.

Soon there was a parade of GEGS tromping through the tunnels, heading for the Factree. So much for secrecy and surprise. Haplo comforted himself with the knowledge that an army of GEGS

mounted on shrieking dragons could have flown through the tunnel and, due to the noise of the machine, no one topside would be the wiser.

"Here we are," shouted one Geg in a booming voice, pointing to a metal ladder leading up a shaft and into darkness. Glancing further down the tunnel, Haplo could see numerous other ladders, placed at intervals-the first time they had come across such a phenomenon-and he calculated that the Geg was correct. These ladders obviously led somewhere. He just hoped it was the Factree.

Haplo motioned the guide GEGs, Jarre, and Limbeck to draw near him. Jarre kept the numerous other GEGs back with a wave of her hand.

"What's up the ladder? How do we get into the Factree?"

There was a hole in the floor, explained the GEGs, covered with a metal plate. Moving the plate allowed access to the main floor of the Factree.

"This Factree is a huge place," said Haplo. "What part of it will I come up in? What part have they given over to the god?"

There was some lengthy discussion and argument over this. One Geg had heard that the god was in the Manger's room two floors up over the main floor of the Factree. The other Geg had heard that the god was, by orders of the High Froman, being kept in the Bored Room.

"What's that?" Haplo asked patiently.

"It's where my trial was held," said Limbeck, his face brightening at the memory of his moment of supreme importance. "There's a statue of a Manger there, and the chair where the High Froman sits in judgment."

"Where is this place from here?"

The GEGs thought it was about two more ladders down, and they all trooped in that direction, the two guide GEGs arguing among themselves until Jarre, with an embarrassed glance at Haplo, ordered them sharply to hold their tongues.

"They think this is it," she said, placing her hand upon the ladder's steel rungs.

Haplo nodded. "I'll go up first," he said as softly as he could and still make himself heard above the roar of the machine.

The guide GEGs protested. This was their adventure, they were leading, they should get to go up first.

"There might be guards of the High Froman up there," said Haplo. "Or this so-called god might be dangerous."

The GEGs looked at each other, looked at Haplo, and backed away from the ladder. There was no further discussion.

"But I want to see them!" protested Limbeck, who was beginning to feel they'd come all this way for nothing.

"Shhh!" remonstrated Haplo. "You will. I'm just going up to . . . scout around. Reconnoiter. I'll come back and get you when it is safe."

"He's right, Limbeck, so be quiet," scolded Jarre. "You'll have your chance soon enough. It would never do for the High Froman to arrest us before tonight's rally!"

Cautioning the need for quiet-at which all the GEGs stared at him as if he were absolutely insane-Haplo turned to the ladder.

"What should we do with the dog?" asked Jarre. "He can't climb the ladder, and you can't carry him."

Haplo shrugged, unconcerned. "He'll be all right, won't you, dog?" Leaning down, he patted the animal on the head. "You stay, dog, all right? Stay."

The dog, mouth open and tongue lolling, plopped itself down on the floor and, ears cocked, looked around with interest.

Haplo began his ascent, climbing the ladder slowly and carefully, allowing his eyes time to adjust to the increasing darkness as he moved out of the bright light of the glimmerglamps. The climb was not long. Soon he was able to see pinpoints of the glimmerglamp light below him, reflecting off a metal surface above.

Reaching the plate, he put his hand on it and cautiously and gently pushed. It gave way smoothly and easily and, he was thankful to note, quietly. Not that he was anticipating trouble. He wanted this chance to observe these "gods" without them observing him. Thinking regretfully that, in the old days, the threat-or the promise-of danger would have caused the dwarves to clamor up the ladders in droves, Haplo cursed the Sartan beneath his breath, silently lifted the plate, and peered out.

The glimmerglamps lit the Factree brighter than a Geg day. Haplo could see clearly and he was pleased to note his guides had judged correctly. Directly in his line of vision stood a tall statue of a robed and hooded figure. Lounging around the statue were three people. They were human-two men and a child. That much Haplo could tell at a glance. But the Sartan were also of human derivation.

He inspected each one closely, though he was forced to admit to himself that he would not be able to tell, simply by looking, if these humans were Sartan or not. One man sat beneath the statue, in its shadow. Clad in plain clothing, he appeared to be of middle age, with thinning, receding hair that emphasized a domed, protruding forehead, and a lined, careworn face. This man shifted restlessly, his gaze going worriedly to the child, and when he did so, Haplo saw that his movements, particularly of his hands and feet, were ungainly and awkward.

By sharp contrast, the other adult human male present was one Haplo might have mistaken for a fellow survivor of the Labyrinth. Lithe, well-muscled, there was an alert watchfulness about the man that-though he was lying relaxed, stretched out on the floor, smoking a pipe-indicated he kept

instinctive, watchful vigil. The face, with its dark, deep crevices and twisted black beard, reflected a soul of cold, hard iron.

The kid was a kid, nothing more, unless you counted a remarkable beauty. An odd trio. What brought them together? What brought them here?

Down below, one of the overly excited GEGS forgot the injunction to maintain silence and shouted in what he apparently thought was a whisper to ask if Haplo could see anything.

The man with the twisted beard reacted instantly, his body coiling swiftly to a standing position, his black eyes darting to the shadows, his hand closing over the hilt of a sword. Beneath him, Haplo heard a resounding smack and knew that Jarre had effectively punished the offender.

"What is it, Hugh?" asked the man sitting in the shadow of the statue. The voice spoke human and it quavered with nervousness.

The man addressed as Hugh put his fingers to his lips and crept several steps in the direction of Haplo. He did not look down or he must have seen the plate, but was staring into the shadows.

"I thought I heard something."

"I don't know how you can hear anything over that racket that damn machine's making," stated the child. The boy was eating bread and staring up at the statue.

"Do not use such language, Your Highness," rebuked the nervous man. He had risen to his feet and seemed to have some idea of joining this Hugh in his search, but he tripped and only saved himself from a headlong fall by bracing himself against the statue. "Do you see anything, sir?"

The GEGS, undoubtedly under threat of bodily harm from Jarre, actually managed to keep quiet. Haplo froze, hardly daring to breathe, watching and listening intently.

"No," said Hugh. "Sit down, Alfred, before you kill yourself."

"It probably was the machine," said Alfred, looking as though he wanted very much to convince himself.

The boy, bored, tossed his bread to the floor and walked over to stand directly in front of the statue of the Manger. He reached out to touch it.

"Don't!" Alfred cried in alarm.

The child, jumping, snatched his hand back.

"You frightened me!" he said accusingly.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. Just . . . move away from the statue."

"Why? Will it hurt me?"

"No, Your Highness. It's just that the statue of the Manager is ... well, sacred to the GEGS. They wouldn't like you bothering it."

"Pooh!" said the child, glancing around the Factree. "They're all gone anyway. Besides, it seems like he wants to shake hands or something." The boy giggled. "The way he has his hand stuck out like that. He wants me to take it-"

"No! Your Highness!" But the stumble-footed man was too late to prevent the boy reaching out and grasping hold of the Manger's mechanical hand. To the child's delight, the eyeball flickered with a bright light.

"Look!" Bane shoved aside Alfred's frantic grasping hand. "Don't stop it! It's showing pictures! I want to see!"

"Your Highness, I must insist! I know I heard something! The GEGS-"

"I think we could handle the GEGS," said Hugh, coming over to look at the pictures. "Don't stop it, Alfred. I want to see what it's showing."

Taking advantage of the trio's preoccupation and feeling an intense interest in this statue himself, Haplo crept up out of the hole.

"Look, it's a map!" cried the child, much excited.

The three were intent on the eyeball. Haplo, coming up silently behind, recognized the images flitting across the eye's surface as a map of the Realm of the Sky, a map remarkably like one his lord had discovered in the Halls of the Sartan in the Nexus. At the very top were the isles known as Lords of Night. Beneath them the firmament, and near them floated the isle of the High Realm. Then came the Mid Realm. Further down were the Maelstrom and the land of the GEGS.

Most remarkable, the map moved! The isles drifted around in their oblique orbits, the storm clouds swirled, the sun was periodically hidden by the Lords of Night.

Then, suddenly, the images changed. The isles and continents ceased to orbit at random and all lined up neatly in a row—each realm positioning itself directly beneath the one above. Then the segment flickered, faltered, and went out.

The man known as Hugh was not impressed.

"A magic lantern. I've seen them in the elven kingdom."

"But what does it mean?" asked the boy, staring, fascinated. "Why does everything go around, then stop?"

Haplo was asking himself the same question. He had seen a magic lantern before. He had something similar to it on his ship, projecting images of the Nexus, only it had been devised by his lord and was much more sophisticated. It seemed to Haplo that there might be more pictures than what they were seeing, for the images stopped with an abrupt jerk in what looked to be mid-frame.

There came a low whirring sound and, suddenly, the pictures started over again. Alfred, whom Haplo took to be some sort of servant, started to reach out and grab the statue's hand, probably with the design of stopping the pictures.

"Please don't do that," said Haplo in his quiet voice.

Hugh whirled, sword drawn, and faced the intruder with an agility and skill that Haplo inwardly applauded. The nervous man crumpled to the floor, and the boy, turning, stared at the Patryn with blue eyes that were not frightened so much as shrewdly curious.

Haplo stood with his hands up, palms outward. "I'm not armed," he said to Hugh. The Patryn wasn't the least afraid of the man's sword. There were no weapons in this world that could harm him, guarded as he was by the runes upon his body, but he must avoid the fight, for by that very act of protecting himself he would reveal to knowing eyes who and what he truly was. "I don't mean anyone any harm." He smiled and shrugged, keeping his hands in the air and plainly visible. "I'm like the boy, here. I only want to see the pictures."

Of all of them, it was the child who intrigued Haplo. The cowardly servant, lying in a pathetic heap on the floor, did not merit his interest. The man he assumed to be a bodyguard he could dismiss now that he had noted his strength and agility. But when Haplo looked at the child, he felt a stinging sensation of the runes upon his chest and knew by that sensation that some sort of enchantment was being cast at him. His own magic was instinctively acting to repel it, but Haplo was amused to note that whatever spell the child was casting wouldn't have worked anyway. His magic-whatever its source-had been disrupted.

"Where did you come from? Who are you?" demanded Hugh.

"My name is Haplo. My friends, the Gogs"-he gestured to the hole out of which he'd come. Hearing a commotion behind him, he assumed that the ever-curious Limbeck was following- "and I heard of your coming and decided that we should meet and talk to you in private, if that's possible. Are the High Froman's guards around?"

Hugh lowered the sword slightly, though his dark eyes continued to follow Haplo's every move. "No, they left. But we're probably being watched."

"No doubt. Then we haven't much time before someone returns."

Limbeck, puffing and panting from his scramble up the ladder, trotted up behind Haplo. The Gog glanced askance at Hugh's sword, but his curiosity was stronger than his fear.

"Are you Mangers?" he asked, his gaze going from Haplo to the boy.

Haplo, watching Limbeck closely, saw an awed expression smooth out his face. The Gog's myopic eyes, magnified behind the spectacles, grew wide. "You are a god, aren't you?"

"Yes," answered the child, speaking Gog. "I am a god."

"Do these speak human?" asked Hugh, pointing to Limbeck, Jarre, and the other two Gogs, who were cautiously poking their heads up out of the hole.

Haplo shook his head.

"Then I can tell you the truth," said Hugh. "The kid's no more a god than you are." To judge by the expression in Hugh's dark eyes, he had apparently reached the same decision about Haplo that Haplo had reached about Hugh. He was wary, cautious, suspicious still, but crowded inns force people to sleep with odd bedfellows or spend the night out in the cold. "Our ship got caught in the Maelstrom and crashed on Drevlin, not far from here. The Gags found us and thought we were gods, and we had to play along."

"Like me," said Haplo, nodding. He glanced down at the servant, who had opened his eyes and was staring around him with a bemused look. "Who's that?"

"The kid's chamberlain. I'm called Hugh the Hand. That's Alfred, and the kid's name is Bane, son of King Stephen of Volkaran and Uylandia."

Haplo turned to Limbeck and Jarre—who was staring at the three with deep suspicion—and made introductions. Alfred staggered to his feet and gazed at Haplo with a curiosity that deepened when he saw the man's wrapped hands.

Haplo, becoming aware of Alfred's stare, self-consciously tugged at the cloth.

"Are you injured, sir?" questioned the servant in respectful tones. "Forgive me for asking, but I notice the bandages you wear. I am somewhat skilled in healing—"

"Thank you, no. I'm not wounded. It's a skin disease, common to my people. It's not contagious and it doesn't cause me any pain, but the pustules it creates aren't pleasant to look at."

Disgust twisted Hugh's features. Alfred's face paled slightly, and it was a struggle for the servant to express the proper sympathy. Haplo watched with inward satisfaction and did not believe he would encounter any further questions about his hands.

Hugh sheathed his sword and drew near. "Your ship crashed?" he asked Haplo in low tones.

"Yes."

"Destroyed?"

"Completely."

"Where are you from?"

"Down below, on one of the lower isles. You've probably never heard of it. Not many have. I was fighting a battle in my own lands when my ship was hit and I lost control—"

Hugh walked toward the statue. Apparently deeply engrossed in the conversation, Haplo joined him, but managed to cast a casual glance back at the servant. Alfred's skin was a deathly hue, his eyes still staring intently at the Patryn's hands, as if the man wished desperately his look could pierce through the cloth.

"You're stranded down here, then?" asked Hugh.

Haplo nodded.

"And you want . . ." Hugh hesitated, certain, perhaps, that he knew the answer but wanting the other to say it.

". . . to get out." Haplo was emphatic.

Now it was Hugh who nodded. The two men understood each other completely. There was no trust between them, but that wasn't necessary, not as long as each was able to use the other to achieve a common goal. Bedfellows, it seemed, who wouldn't fight over the blankets. They continued to converse in low tones, considering their problem.

Alfred stood staring at the man's hands. Bane, frowning, gazed after Haplo; the boy's fingers stroked the feather amulet. His thoughts were interrupted by the Geg.

"You're not a god, then?" Drawn by an irresistible force, Limbeck had moved nearer to talk to the child.

"No," answered Bane, wrenching his gaze from Haplo. Turning to the Geg, the prince carefully and quickly smoothed his dour expression. "I'm not, but they told me to tell that man, your king, that I was so that he wouldn't hurt us."

"Hurt you?" Limbeck appeared amazed. The concept was beyond him.

"I'm really a prince of the High Realm," continued the child. "My father is a powerful wizard. We were going to see him when our ship crashed."

"I'd dearly love to see the High Realm!" exclaimed Limbeck. "What's it like?"

"I'm not sure. You see, I've never been there before. I've lived all my life in the Mid Realm with my adopted father. It's a long story."

"I've never been to the Mid Realm either. But I've seen pictures of it in a book I found in a Welf ship. I'll tell you how I found it." Limbeck began to recite his favorite tale-that of stumbling across the elven vessel.

Bane, fidgeting, craned his head to look back at Haplo and Hugh, standing together before the statue of the Manger. Alfred was muttering to himself. None of them was paying any attention to Jarre.

She didn't like this, any of it. She didn't like the two tall, strong gods putting their heads together and talking in a language she couldn't understand. She didn't like the way Limberk was looking at the child-god, she didn't like the way the child-god was looking at anyone. She didn't even like the way the tall, gawky god had tumbled down onto the floor. Jarre had the feeling that, like poor relatives coming to visit, these gods were going to devour all the food and, when that was gone, leave the GEGs with nothing but an empty cupboard.

Jarre slipped over to where the two GEGs were standing nervously beside the hole.

"Bring up everybody," she said in as soft a voice as is possible for a Geg. "The High Froman's tried to fool us with sham gods. We're going to capture them and take them before the people and prove that the High Froman is a fraud!"

The Glegs looked at the so-called gods, then at each other. These gods didn't appear very impressive. Tall, maybe, but skinny. One of them carried a formidable-looking weapon. If he were mobbed, he wouldn't get a chance to use it. Haplo had mourned the extinction of Geg courage. It hadn't completely died out. It had just been buried under centuries of submission and toil. Now the coals had been stirred up. Here and there, flames were flickering.

The excited Glegs backed down the ladder. Jarre leaned over and looked down after them. Her square face, dimly illuminated by the glimmerglamps, was awesome, almost ethereal, when viewed from below. More than one Geg had a sudden image of ancient days when the clan priestesses would have summoned them to war.

Noisily, but in the disciplined manner the Glegs had learned serving the great machine, they clambered up the ladder. What with the whumping and the thumping going on all around, no one heard them.

Forgotten in the confusion, Haplo's dog lay at the foot of the ladder. Nose on paws, it watched and listened and seemed to ponder whether its master had really been serious about that word "stay."

## CHAPTER 35

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

HAPLO HEARD A WHINE, FELT A PAWING AT HIS LEG. HE TURNED HIS ATTENTION FROM examining the Manger pictures to look down at his feet.

"What is it, boy? I thought I told you to ... Oh." The Patryn glanced over and saw the Glegs streaming up out of the hole. The Hand, hearing a sound at his back, looked in the opposite direction-toward the main entrance of the Factree.

"Company," said Hugh. "The High Froman and his guards."

"And over there."

Hugh glanced swiftly toward the hole, his hand going to his sword. Haplo shook his head. "No, we can't fight. There are too many. Besides, they don't want to harm us. They want to claim us. We're the prize. There's no time to explain. It looks as if we're going to be caught in the middle of a riot. You better go take care of that prince of yours."

"He's an investment-" began Hugh.

"The coppers!" Jarre shrieked, catching sight of the High Froman. "Quick, grab the gods before they stop us!"

"Then you better go guard your investment," suggested Haplo.

"What is it, sir?" gasped Alfred, seeing Hugh running toward them, sword in hand.

The two groups of GEGs were yelling and shaking their fists and snatching up makeshift weapons off the Factree floor.

"Trouble. Take the kid and go with . . ." Hugh began. "No, dammit, don't faint . . ."

Alfred's eyes rolled back in his head. Hugh reached out to shake him or slap him or something, but it was too late. The chamberlain's limp body slid down and flopped gracelessly across the feet of the Manger's statue.

The GEGs rushed toward the gods. The High Froman, instantly recognizing his danger, ordered the coppers to rush the GEGs. Shouting wildly-some for the WUPPERS and some for the Froman-the two groups came together. For the first time in the history of Drevlin, blows were struck, blood was shed. Haplo, gathering up his dog in his arms, melted back into the shadows and watched quietly, smiling.

Jarre stood near the hole, helping GEGs climb out, rallying her people to attack. When the last GEG was up out of the tunnels, she looked around and discovered that the battle had surged ahead of her. Worse, she had completely lost sight of Limbeck, Haplo, and the three strange beings. Leaping onto the top of a crate, Jarre peered over the heads of the milling, fighting press of GEGs and saw, to her horror, the High Froman and the Head Clark standing near the statue of the Manger, taking advantage of the confusion to spirit away not only the gods but also the august leader of WUPP!

Furious, Jarre jumped from her crate and ran toward them, but got caught up in the midst of the battle. Pushing and shoving and lashing out with her fists at the GEGs blocking her path, she struggled to get near the statue. She was flushed and panting, her trousers were torn, her hair had fallen down over her face, and one eye was swelling shut when she finally reached her destination.

The gods were gone. Limbeck was gone. The High Froman had won.

Her fist doubled, Jarre was prepared to punch the head of the first copper who came near her when she heard a moan and, looking down, saw two large feet sticking up in the air. They weren't GEG feet. They were god feet!

Hurrying around to the front of the Manger, Jarre was amazed to see the base of the statue standing wide open! One of the Froman's gods-the tall, gawky one-had apparently fallen into this opening and was lying half in and half out of it.

"I'm in luck!" said Jarre. "I've got this one, at least!"

She glanced fearfully behind her, expecting to see the Froman's coppers, but in the confusion and turmoil, no one was paying any attention to her. The Froman would be intent on getting his gods out of danger and, undoubtedly, no one had missed this one yet.

"But they will. We have to get you away from here," muttered Jarre. Hurrying over to the god, she saw that he was lying on a staircase that led inside the statue. Descending below the floor level, the stairs provided a quick and easy means of escape.

Jarre hesitated. She was violating the statue-the GEGS' most Holy of Holies. She had no idea why this opening was here or where it might lead. It didn't matter. This was only going to be a hiding place. She'd wait inside here until everyone was gone. Jarre bounded over the comatose god and stumbled down the stairs. Turning, she grabbed the god's shoulders and dragged him, bumping and sliding and groaning, inside the statue.

Jarre had no clear plan in mind. She only hoped that by the time the High Froman came looking for this god and discovered the opening in the statue, she would have been able to smuggle him back to WUPP Headquarters. But when Jarre drew the god's feet over the base, the opening suddenly and silently slid shut. The Geg found herself in darkness.

Jarre held perfectly still and tried to tell herself everything was all right. But panic was swelling up inside her until it seemed she must split apart. Her terror wasn't caused by fear of the dark. Living nearly all of their lives inside the Kicksey-Winsey, the GEGS were used to the darkness. Jarre shook all over. Her hands were sweating, her breath came fast, her heart pounded, and she didn't know why. And then it came to her.

It was quiet.

She couldn't hear the machine, couldn't hear the comforting whistles and bangs and hammerings that had lulled her to sleep as a babe. Now there was nothing but awful, terrible silence. Sight is a sense outside and apart from the body, an image on the surface of the eye. But sound enters the ears, the head, it lives inside. In sound's absence, silence echoes.

Abandoning the god on the staircase, heedless of pain, forgetting her fear of the coppers, Jarre flung herself against the statue. "Help!" she screamed. "Help me!"

Alfred regained consciousness. Sitting up, he accidentally began to slide down the stairs, and only saved himself by reflex-ively grabbing and hanging on to the steps beneath. Thoroughly confused, surrounded by pitch-black night with a Geg screaming like a steam whistle in his ears, Alfred endeavored to ask several times what was going on. The Geg paid no attention to him.

Finally, crawling on hands and knees in the darkness back up the stairs, he reached out a hand in the direction of the nearly hysterical Jarre.

"Where are we?"

She pounded and shrieked and ignored him.

"Where are we?" Alfred caught hold of the Geg in his large hands-uncertain, in the darkness, just what part he'd grabbed- and began to shake her. "Stop this! It isn't helping! Tell me where we are and maybe I can get us out of here!"

Not clearly understanding Alfred's words, but angered at his rough handling, Jarre came to herself with a gulp and shoved the chamberlain away with a heave of her strong arms. He slid and slithered and nearly tumbled back down the stairs, but managed to stop his fall.

"Now, listen to me!" Alfred said, separating each word and speaking it slowly and distinctly. "Tell me where we are and maybe I can help get us out!"

"I don't know how!" Breathing hard, shivering, Jarre huddled as far away from Alfred as possible on the opposite side of the staircase. "You're a stranger here. What could you know?"

"Just tell me!" pleaded Alfred. "I can't explain. After all, what will it hurt?"

"Well . . ." Jarre considered. "We're inside the statue."

"Ah!" breathed Alfred.

"What does 'ah' mean?"

"It means ... uh ... I thought that might be the case."

"Can you open it back up?"

No, I can't. No one can. Not from the inside. But how would I know that if I've never been here before? What do I tell her? Alfred was thankful for the darkness. He was a terrible liar and it made it easier that he couldn't see her face and that she couldn't see his.

"I'm . . . not certain, but I doubt it. You see, uh . . . What is your name?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does. We're here together in the dark and we should know each other's names. Mine is Alfred. And yours?"

"Jarre. Go on. You opened it once, why can't you open it again?"

"I ... I didn't open it," stammered Alfred. "It opened by accident, I guess. You see, I have this terrible habit. Whenever I'm frightened, I faint. It's something I can't control. I saw the fighting, you see, and some of your people were rushing toward us, and I ... just passed out." That much was true. What followed wasn't. "I guess that when I fell I must have tripped something on the statue that caused it to open."

I regained consciousness. I looked up to see the statue, and I felt, for the first time in a long, long while, safe and secure and deeply, fervently at peace. The suspicion that had been awakened in my mind, the responsibility, the decisions I will be forced to make if that suspicion is true, overwhelmed me. I longed to escape, to disappear, and my hand moved of its own volition, without my prompting, and touched the statue's robe in a certain place, in a certain way.

The base slid open, but then the enormity of my action must have been too much for me. I suppose I fainted again. The Geg came upon me and, seeking a haven from the melee raging outside, dragged me in here. The base closed automatically and it will stay closed. Only those who know the way in know the way out. Anyone stumbling across an entrance by mistake would never return to tell of it. Oh, they wouldn't die. The magic, the machine, would care for them, and care for them very well. But they would be prisoners for the rest of their lives.

Fortunately, I know the way in, I know the way out. But how can I explain this to the Geg?

A terrible thought occurred to Alfred. By law, he should leave her here. It was her own fault, after all. She shouldn't have entered the sacred statue. But then Alfred considered, with a pang of conscience, that perhaps she had endangered herself for him-trying to save his life. He couldn't just abandon her. He knew he couldn't, no matter what the law said. But right now it was all so confusing. If only he hadn't given way to his weakness!

"Don't stop!" Jarre clutched at him.

"Stop what?"

"Talking! It's the quiet! I can't stand listening to it! Why can't we hear anything in here?"

"It was made that way purposely," said Alfred with a sigh. "Designed to offer rest and sanctuary." He had reached a decision. It probably wasn't the right one, but then, he'd made few right decisions in his lifetime. "I am going to lead us out of here, Jarre."

"You know the way?"

"Yes."

"How?" She was deeply suspicious.

"I can't explain it. In fact, you will see many things that you won't understand and that I can't explain. I can't even ask you to trust me, because, of course, you don't, and I can't expect you to." Pausing, Alfred considered his next words. "Let's look at it like this: you can't get out this way. You've tried. You can either stay here or you can come with me and I'll show you the way out."

Alfred heard the Geg draw breath to speak, but he forestalled her.

"There's one more thing you should consider. I want to return to my people just as desperately as you want to go back to yours. The child you saw is in my care. And the dark man with him needs me, although he doesn't know it." Alfred was silent a moment, thinking of the other man, the one who called himself Haplo, and it occurred to him that the silence was loud in here, louder than he'd remembered.

"I'll go with you," said Jarre. "What you say makes sense."

"Thank you," answered Alfred gravely. "Now, hold still one moment. This stairway is steep and dangerous without light."

Alfred reached out his hand and felt the wall behind him. It was made of stone, like the tunnels, and was smooth and even. Running his hand along the surface, he had nearly reached the juncture where the wall met the stairs when his fingers brushed over lines and whorls and notches carved in the stone. They formed a distinct pattern, one that he knew. Tracing his finger over the rough edges of the carving, following the lines of the pattern he could see clearly in his mind, he spoke the rune.

The sigil beneath his fingers began to glow with a soft, radiant blue light. Jarre, seeing it, caught her breath and sank backward, pressing herself against the wall. Alfred gave her a soothing, reassuring pat on the arm and repeated the rune. A sigil carved beside and touching the first caught the magical fire and began to glow. Soon, one after the other, a line of runes appeared out of the

darkness, running the length of the steep staircase. At the bottom, they curved around a corner leading to the right.

"Now it's safe for us to go down," said Alfred, rising and brushing the dust of ages from his clothes. Keeping his words and actions purposefully brisk, his tone matter-of-fact, he held out his hand to Jarre. "If I might be of assistance?"

Jarre hesitated, gulped, and hugged her shawl closely around her. Then, pressing her lips together, her face grim, she rested her small work-worn hand in Alfred's. The blue-glowing runes glittered brightly in her fearful eyes.

They descended the stairs swiftly, the runes making it easy to see the way. Hugh would not have recognized the bumbling, stumble-footed chamberlain. Alfred's movements were surefooted, his stance erect. He hurried ahead with an anticipation that was eager, yet wistful and tinged with melancholy.

Reaching the bottom of the steep staircase, they found that it opened into a small narrow corridor; a veritable honeycomb of doorways and tunnels branched off it in countless directions. The blue runes led them out of the corridor and into a tunnel- third from their right. Alfred followed the sigla unhesitatingly, bringing with him a wide-eyed and awestruck Jarre.

At first the Geg had doubted the man's words. She had lived among the delvings and burrowings of the Kinsey-winsey all her life. GEGs have a keen eye for minute detail and excellent memories. What looks to be a blank wall to a human or an elf holds a myriad of individual characteristics- cracks, crevices, chipped paint- for a Geg, and once seen, is not soon forgotten. Consequently, GEGs do not easily lose themselves, either above ground or below. But Jarre was almost instantly lost in these tunnels. The walls were flawless, perfect and completely devoid of the life that a Geg can find, even in stone. And though the tunnels branched out in all directions, they did not turn and twist or ramble. There was no indication anywhere that a tunnel had been built just for the hell of it, out of a sense of adventure. The corridors ran straight and smooth and gave the impression that wherever you were going, they'd get you there the quickest route possible, and no nonsense. Jarre recognized in the design a sense of strong purpose, a calculated intent that frightened her by its sterility. Yet her strange companion seemed to find it comforting, and his confidence eased her fear.

The runes led them in a gentle curve that kept taking them to their right. Jarre had no idea how far they traveled, for there was no feeling of time down here. The blue sigla ran on before them, lighting their path, each flaming to life out of the darkness as they neared it. Jarre became mesmerized by them; it seemed as if she walked in a dream and might have kept walking forever as long as the runes led the way. The man's voice added to this eerie impression, for- as she had asked- he talked the entire time.

Then, suddenly, they rounded a corner and Jarre saw the sigla climb into the air, form a glowing archway that burned and glistened in the darkness, inviting them to enter. Alfred paused.

"What is it?" Jarre asked, starting out of her trance, blinking, and tightening her grip on Alfred's hand. "I don't want to go in there!"

"We have no choice. It's all right," said Alfred, and there was that note of wistful melancholy in his voice. "I'm sorry I frightened you. I'm not stopping because I'm afraid. I know what's in there, you see, and . . . and it only makes me sad, that's all."

"We'll go back," said Jarre suddenly, fiercely. She turned and took a step, but almost immediately the runes that had showed the way behind them flared a bright blue, then slowly began to fade. Soon the two were surrounded by darkness, the only light coming from flickering blue sigla outlining the archway.

"We can go in now," said Alfred, drawing a deep breath. "I'm ready. Don't be frightened, Jarre," he added, patting her hand. "Don't be frightened by anything you see. Nothing can harm you."

But Jarre was frightened, though she couldn't say of what. Whatever lay beyond was hidden in darkness, yet what frightened her wasn't a fear of bodily harm or the terror of the unknown. It was the sadness, as Alfred had said. Perhaps it had come from the words he'd been speaking during their long walk, although she was so disoriented and confused that she could recall nothing of what he'd said. But she experienced a feeling of despair, of overwhelming regret, of something lost and never found, never even sought. The sorrow made her ache with loneliness, as if everything and everyone she had ever known was suddenly gone. Tears came to her eyes, and she wept, and she had no idea for whom she was crying.

"It's all right," repeated Alfred. "It's all right. Shall we go in now? Do you feel up to it?"

Jarre couldn't answer, couldn't stop crying. But she nodded, and, weeping, clinging closely to Alfred, walked with him through the archway. And then Jarre understood, in part, the reason for her fear and her sadness.

She stood in a mausoleum.

## CHAPTER 36

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

"THIS IS DREADFUL! SIMPLY DREADFUL! UNHEARD-OF! WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO? What are you going to do?"

The Head Clark was clearly becoming hysterical. Darral Longshoreman felt a tingling in his hands and was hard pressed to resist the temptation to administer a right to the jaw.

"There's been enough bloodshed already," he muttered, grasping hold of his hands firmly behind his back in case they took it upon themselves to act on their own. And he managed to ignore the voice that whispered, "A little more blood wouldn't hurt, then, would it?"

Decking his brother-in-law, though undoubtedly very satisfying, wasn't going to solve his problems.

"Get hold of yourself!" Darral snapped. "Haven't I got trouble enough?"

"Never has blood been spilled in Drevlin!" cried the Head Clark in an awful tone. "It's all the fault of this evil genius Limbeck! He must be cast forth! Made to walk the Steps of Terrel Fen. The Mangers must judge him!"

"Oh, shut up! That's what brought on all this trouble in the first place! We gave him to the Mangers, and what did they do? Gave him right back to us! And threw in a god! Sure, we'll send Limbeck down the Steps!" Darral waved his arms wildly. "Maybe this time he'll come up with a whole army of gods and destroy us all!"

"But that god of Limbeck's isn't a god!" protested the Head Clark.

"They're none of them gods, if you ask me," stated Darral Longshoreman.

"Not even the child?"

This question, asked in wistful tones by the Head Clark, posed a problem for Darral. When he was in Bane's presence, he felt that, yes, indeed, he had at last discovered a god. But the moment he could no longer see the blue eyes and the pretty face and the sweetly curved lips of the little boy, the High Froman seemed to waken from a dream. The kid was a kid, and he, Darral Longshoreman, was a sap for ever thinking otherwise.

"No," said the High Froman, "not even the child."

The two rulers of Drevlin were alone in the Factree, standing beneath the statue of the Manger, gloomily surveying the battlefield.

It hadn't, in reality, been much of a battle. One might hardly even term it a skirmish. The aforesaid blood had flowed, not from the heart, but from several cracked heads, gushed out a few smashed noses. The Head Clark had sustained a bump, the High Froman a jammed thumb that had swelled up and was now turning several quite remarkable colors. No one had been killed. No one had even been seriously injured. The habit of living peacefully over numerous centuries is a hard one to break. But Darral Longshoreman, High Froman of his people, was wise enough to know that this was only the beginning. A poison had entered the collective body of the Glegs, and though the body might survive, it would never be healthy again.

"Besides," said Darral, his heavy brows creased in a scowl, "if these gods aren't gods, like Limbeck said they weren't, how can we punish him for being right?"

Unaccustomed to wading in such deep philosophical waters, the Head Clark ignored the question and struck out for high ground. "We wouldn't be punishing him for being right, we'd be punishing him for spreading it around."

There was certainly some logic to that, Darral had to admit. He wondered sourly how his brother-in-law had come up with such a good idea and concluded it must have been the bump on the head. Wringing his wounded thumb and wishing he was back home in his holding tank with Mrs. High Froman clucking over him and bringing him a soothing cup of barkwarm [13], Darral pondered the idea, born of desperation, that was lurking about in the dark alleys of his mind.

"Maybe this time, when we throw him off the Steps of Terrel Fen, we can leave off the kite," suggested the Head Clark. "I always did think that was an unfair advantage."

"No," said Darral, the rattle-brained ideas of his brother-in-law making his decision for him. "I'm not sending him or anyone else Down anymore. Down isn't safe, seemingly. This god-that-isn't-a-god of Limbeck's says he comes from Down. And therefore" -the High Froman paused during a particularly loud spate of banging and whanging from the Kicksey-Winsey-"I'm going to send him Up."

"Up?" The bump on the head was not going to come to the aid of the Head Clark on this one. He was absolutely and categorically lost.

"I'm going to turn the gods over to the Welves," said Darral Longshoreman with dark satisfaction.

The High Froman paid a visit to the prison vat to announce the captives' punishment-an announcement he reckoned must strike terror into their guilty hearts.

If it did, the prisoners gave no outward sign. Hugh appeared disdainful, Bane bored, and Haplo impassive, while Limbeck was in such misery that it was doubtful if he heard the High Froman at all. Getting nothing from his prisoners but fixed cold stares and, in Bane's case, a yawn and a sleepy smile, the High Froman marched out in high dudgeon.

"I presume you know what he's talking about?" inquired Haplo. "This being given to the 'Welves'?"

"Elves," corrected the Hand. "Once a month, the elves come down in a transport ship and pick up a supply of water. This time, they'll pick us up with it. And we don't want to end up prisoners of the elves. Not if they catch us down here with their precious water supply. Those bastards can make dying very unpleasant."

The captives were locked up in the local prison-a grouping of storage vats that the Kicksey-Winsey had abandoned and which, when fitted with locks on the doors, made excellent cells. Generally the cells were little used-perhaps the occasional thief or a Geg who had been lax in his service to the great machine. Due to the current civil unrest, however, the vats were filled to capacity with disturbers of the peace. One vat had to be emptied of its inhabitants in order to make room for the gods. The Geg prisoners were crowded into another vat so as to avoid being placed into contact with Mad Limbeck.

The vat was steep-walled and solid. Several openings covered with iron grilles dotted the sides. Hugh and Haplo investigated these grilles and discovered that fresh air, smelling damply of rain, was flowing in through them, leading the men to assume the grilles covered shafts that must eventually connect with the outside. The shafts might have offered a means of escape except for two drawbacks: first, the grilles were bolted to the metal sides of the vat, and second, no one in his right mind wanted to go Outside.

"So you're suggesting we fight?" inquired Haplo. "I presume these elven ships are well-manned. We're four, counting the chamberlain, plus a child, and one sword between us. A sword that's currently in the possession of the guards."

"The chamberlain's worthless," grunted Hugh. Leaning back comfortably against the brick wall of their prison, he drew out his pipe and stuck the stem between his teeth. "The first sign of danger, and he faints dead away. You saw him back there during the riot."

"That's odd, isn't it?"

"He's odd!" stated Hugh.

Haplo could remember Alfred's eyes trying desperately to pierce the cloth covering the Patryn's hands, almost as if the chamberlain knew what was beneath. "I wonder where he got to? Did you see?"

Hugh shook his head. "All I saw was Glegs. I had the kid. But the chamberlain's bound to turn up. Or rather stumble up. He won't leave His Highness." The Hand nodded at Bane, who was talking away at the misery-stricken Limbeck.

Haplo followed Hugh's gaze and focused on the Geg.

"There's always Limbeck and his WUPP's. They'd fight to save us, or, if not us, their leader."

Hugh glanced at him dubiously. "Do you think so? I always heard Glegs had the fighting spirit of a flock of sheep."

"That may be true now, but it didn't used to be so. Not in the old days. Once, long ago, the dwarves were a fierce, proud people."

Hugh, returning his gaze to Limbeck, shook his head.

The Geg sat huddled in a corner, his shoulders slumped, arms dangling limply between his knees. The child was talking at him; the Geg was completely oblivious of the conversation.

"He's been walking along with his head in the clouds," said Haplo. "He didn't see the ground coming and got hurt in the fall. But he's the one to lead his people."

"You're really caught up in this revolution of theirs," observed Hugh. "Some might wonder why you care."

"Limbeck saved my life," answered Haplo, lazily scratching the ears of the dog that was stretched out at his side, its head resting in his lap. "I like him and his people. As I said, I know something about their past." The mild face darkened. "I hate seeing what they've become. Sheep, I believe, was how you put it."

Hugh sucked thoughtfully, silently on his empty pipe. The man sounded good, but Hugh found it difficult to believe this Haplo was that concerned about a bunch of dwarves. A quiet, unassuming man, you tended to ignore him, forget he was around. And that, said Hugh to himself, might be a very big mistake. Lizards that blend in with the rocks do so to catch flies.

"Somehow we've got to get some backbone into your Limbeck, then," remarked Hugh. "If we're going to save ourselves from the elves, we'll need the Glegs to help us."

"You can leave him to me," said Haplo. "Where were you headed, before you got caught up in all this?"

"I was going to return the kid to his father, his real father, the mysteriarch."

"Damn nice of you," commented Haplo.

"Hunh," Hugh grunted, his lips twisting in a grin.

"These wizards who live in the High Realm. Why was it they left the world below? They must have enjoyed a large amount of power among the people."

"The answer to that depends on who you ask. The mysteriarchs claim they left because they'd advanced in culture and wisdom and the rest of us hadn't. Our barbaric ways disgusted them. They didn't want to bring up their kids in an evil world."

"And what do you barbarians say to all this?" asked Haplo, smiling. The dog had rolled over on its back, all four feet in the air, its tongue lolling out of its mouth in foolish pleasure.

"We say"-Hugh sucked on the empty pipe, his words coming out between the stem and his teeth-"that the mysteriarchs were afraid of the growing power of the elven wizards and beat it. They left us in the lurch, no doubt of it. Their leaving was the cause of our downfall. If it hadn't been for the revolt among their own people, the elves'd be our masters still."

"And so these mysteriarchs wouldn't be welcome, if they returned?"

"Oh, they'd be welcome. Welcomed with cold steel, if the people had their way. But our king maintains friendly relations, or so I've heard. People wonder why." His gaze shifted back to Bane.

Haplo knew the changeling's story. Bane himself had proudly explained it to him. "But the mysteriarchs could come back if one of them was the human king's son."

Hugh made no response to the obvious. He removed the pipe from his mouth, tucked it back in his doublet. Crossing his arms over his chest, he rested his chin on his breast and closed his eyes.

Haplo rose to his feet, stretched. He needed to walk, needed to work the kinks out of his muscles. Pacing the cell, the Patryn thought about all he'd heard. He had very little work to do, it seemed. This entire realm was overripe and ready to fall. His lord would not even have to reach out his hand to pluck it. The fruit would be found lying, rotting, on the ground at his feet.

Surely this was the clearest possible evidence that the Sartan were no longer involved in the world? The child was the question. Bane had evinced a magical power, but that might be expected of the son of a mysteriarch of the Seventh House. Long ago, before the Sundering, the magics of those wizards had reached the lower level of both Sartan and Patryns. After all this time, they had likely grown in power.

Or Bane could be a young Sartan-clever enough not to reveal himself. Haplo looked over to where the boy sat talking earnestly to the distraught Geg.

The Patryn made an almost imperceptible sign with his wrapped hand. The dog, who rarely took his eyes from his master, immediately trotted over to Limbeck and gave the Geg's limp hand a swipe with his tongue. Limbeck looked up and smiled wanly at the dog, who, tail wagging, settled down comfortably at the Geg's side.

Haplo drifted over to the opposite end of the vat to stare in seeming absorption at one of the air shafts. He could now hear clearly every word being said.

"You can't give up," said the boy. "Not now! The fight's just beginning!"

"But I never meant there to be a fight," protested poor Limbeck. "Gegs attacking each other! Nothing like that has ever happened before in our history, and it's all my fault!"

"Oh, stop whining!" said Bane. Scratching at an itch on his stomach, he looked around the vat and frowned. "I'm hungry. I wonder if they're going to starve us. I'll be glad when the Welves get here. I-"

The boy fell suddenly silent, as if someone had bidden him hold his tongue. Haplo, glancing surreptitiously over his shoulder, saw Bane holding the feather amulet, rubbing it against his cheek. When he spoke again, his voice had changed.

"I've got an idea, Limbeck," said the prince, scooting forward to be very near the Geg. "When we leave this place, you can go with us! You'll see how well the elves and the humans live up above while you Gegs slave down here below. Then you can come back and tell your people what you've seen and they'll be furious. Even this king of yours will have to go along with you. My father and I will help you raise an army to attack the elves and the humans-"

"An army! Attack!" Limbeck stared at him, horrified, and Bane saw that he had gone too far.

"Never mind about that now," he said, brushing aside world warfare. "The important thing is that you get to see the truth."

"The truth," repeated Limbeck.

"Yes," said Bane, sensing that the Geg was, at last, impressed. "The truth. Isn't that what's important? You and your people can't go on living a lie. Wait. I just got an idea. Tell me about this Judgment that's supposed to come to the Gegs."

Limbeck appeared thoughtful, his misery fading. It was as if he'd put on his spectacles. Everything that was blurry, he could now see clearly-see the sharp lines and crisp edges. "When the Judgment is given and we are found worthy, we will ascend to the realms above."

"This is it, Limbeck!" said Bane, awed. "This is the Judgment! It's all happened just like the prophecy said. We came down and found you worthy and now you're going to ascend into the upper realms!"

Very clever, kid, said Haplo to himself. Very clever. Bane no longer held the feather. Daddy was no longer prompting. That last had been Bane's own idea, seemingly. A remarkable child, this changeling. And a dangerous one.

"But we thought the Judgment would be peaceful."

"Was that ever said?" Bane countered. "Anywhere in the prophecy?"

Limbeck turned his attention to the dog, patting its head, attempting to avoid answering while he tried to accustom himself to this new vision.

"Limbeck?" pushed Bane.

The Geg continued to stroke the dog, who lay still beneath his hands. "New vision," he said, looking up. "That's it. When the Welves come, I know just what to do."

"What?" asked Bane eagerly.

"I'll make a speech."

Later that evening, after their jailors brought them food, Hugh called a meeting. "We don't want to end up prisoners of the elves," explained the assassin. "We've got to fight and try to get away, and we can-if you GEGs will help us."

Limbeck wasn't listening. He was composing.

" 'Welves and WUPP's, wadies and gentle . . . No, no. Too many 'wahs.' ' . . . Distinguished visitors from another realm' -that's better. Drat, I wish I could write this down!" The Geg paced up and down in front of his companions, mulling over his speech and pulling distractedly on his beard. The dog, trotting along behind him, looked sympathetic and wagged its tail.

Haplo shook his head. "Don't look for help there."

"But, Limbeck, it wouldn't be much of a battle!" Bane protested. "The GEGs outnumber the elves. We'll take them completely by surprise. I don't like elves. They threw me off their ship. I nearly died."

"Distinguished visitors from another realm-"

Haplo pursued his argument. "The GEGs are untrained, undisciplined. They don't have any weapons. And even if they could get weapons, we don't dare trust them. It'd be like sending in an army of children-ordinary children," Haplo added, seeing Bane bristle.

"The GEGs aren't ready yet." He put an unconscious emphasis on the word that caught Hugh's attention.

"Yet?"

"When father and I return," struck in Bane, "we're going to whip the GEGs into shape. We'll take on the elves and we'll win. Then we'll control all the water in the world and we'll have power and be rich beyond belief."

Rich. Hugh twisted his beard. A thought occurred to him. If it came to open war, any human with a ship and the nerve to fly the Maelstrom could make his fortune in one run. He would need a watership. An elven watership and a crew to man it. It would be a shame to destroy these elves.

"What about the GEGs?" suggested Haplo.

"Oh, we'll take care of them," answered Bane. "They'll have to fight a lot harder than what I've seen so far. But--"

"Fight?" repeated Hugh, interrupting Bane in mid-dictatorship. "Why are we talking about fighting?" Reaching into his pocket, he drew forth his pipe and clamped his teeth down on it. "How are you at singing?" he asked Haplo.

## CHAPTER 37

### THE RESTING PLACE, LOW REALM

JARRE'S HAND SLID NERVELESSLY FROM ALFRED'S. SHE COULD NOT MOVE; THE strength seeped from her body. She shrank back against the archway, leaning on it for support. Alfred never seemed to notice. He walked ahead, leaving the Geg, shaken and trembling, to wait for him.

The chamber he entered was vast; Jarre couldn't recall ever seeing such a huge open space in her life—a space not inhabited by some whirly, clanging, or thumping part of the Kicksey-Winsey. Made of the same smooth, flawless stone as the tunnels, the walls of the chamber glowed with a soft white light that began to shine from them when Alfred set his foot inside the archway. It was by this light that Jarre saw the coffins. Set into the walls, each covered by glass, the coffins numbered in the hundreds and held the bodies of men and women. Jarre could not see the people closely—they were little more than silhouettes against the light. But she could tell that they were of the same race as Alfred and the other gods who had come to Drevlin. The bodies were tall and slender and lay resting with arms at their sides.

The floor of the chamber was smooth and wide, and the coffins encircled it in rows that extended up to the high domed ceiling. The chamber itself was completely empty. Alfred moved slowly, looking all around him in wistful recognition, as does someone returning home after a long absence.

The light in the room grew brighter, and Jarre saw that there were symbols on the floor, similar in shape and design to the runes that had lit their way. There were twelve sigla, each carved singular and alone, never touching or overlapping. Alfred moved carefully among these, his gangly, ungainly form weaving its way across the empty chamber in a solemn dance, the lines and movements of his body appearing to imitate the particular sigil over which he was passing.

He made a complete circuit of the chamber, drifting across the floor, dancing to silent music. He glided close to each rune but never touched it, gliding away to another, honoring each in turn, until finally he came to the center of the chamber. Kneeling, he placed his hands upon the floor and began to sing.

Jarre could not understand the words he sang, but the song filled her with a joy that was bittersweet because it did nothing to lighten the terrible sadness. The runes on the floor glittered brightly, almost blinding in their radiance during Alfred's song. When he ceased, their gleaming light began to fade and, within moments, was gone.

Alfred, standing in the center, sighed. The body that had moved so beautifully in the dance stooped, the shoulders rounded. He looked over at Jarre and gave her a wistful smile,

"You're not still frightened?" He made a weak gesture toward the rows of coffins. "Nobody here can harm you. Not anymore. Not that they would have anyway-at least, not intentionally." He sighed and, turning in his place, looked long around the room. "But how much harm have we done unintentionally, meaning the best? Not gods, but with the power of gods. And yet lacking the wisdom."

He walked, slowly and with head bowed, over to a row of coffins that stood very near the entrance, near Jarre. Alfred placed his hand on one of the crystal windows, his fingers stroking it with an almost caressing touch. Sighing, he rested his forehead against another coffin up above. Jarre saw that the coffin he touched was empty. The others around it held bodies in them, and she noticed-her attention called to these because of him-that they seemed all to be young. Younger than he is, she thought, her gaze going to the bald head, the domed forehead carved with lines of anxiety, worry, and care that were so pronounced a smile only deepened them.

"These are my friends," he said to Jarre. "I told you about them as we were coming down here." He smoothed the crystal closure with one hand. "I told you that they might not be here. I told you that they might have gone. But I knew in my heart what I told you wasn't true. They would be here. They will be here forever. Because they're dead, you see, Jarre. Dead before their time. I am alive long after!"

He closed his eyes, then covered his face with his hand. A sob wrenched the tall, ungainly body that leaned against the coffins. Jarre didn't understand. She hadn't listened to anything about these friends, and she could not and did not want to think about what she was seeing. But the man was grieving and his grief was heartbreaking to witness. Looking at the young people with their beautiful faces, serene and unmarred and cold as the crystal behind which they lay, Jarre understood that Alfred did not grieve for one but for many, himself among them.

Wrenching herself from the archway, she crept forward and slipped her hand into his. The solemnity, the despair, the sorrow of the place and of this man had affected Jarre deeply-just how deeply, she would not come to know until much later in her life. During that future time of great crisis when it seemed to her that she was losing all that was most valuable to her, everything he said-the story of Alfred and his losses and those of his people- would come back to her.

"Alfred. I'm sorry."

The man looked down at her, the tears glistening on his eyelashes. Squeezing her hand, he said something that she did not understand, for it was not in her language, nor in any other language that had been spoken for long ages in the realm of Arianus.

"This is why we failed," he said in that ancient language. "We thought of the many . . . and forgot the one. And so I am alone. And left perhaps to face by myself a peril ages old. The man with the bandaged hands." He shook his head. "The man with the bandaged hands."

He left the mausoleum without looking back. No longer afraid, Jarre walked with him.

Hugh woke at the sound. Starting up, pulling his dagger from his boot, he was on the move before he had completely thrown off sleep. It took him but an instant to collect himself, his eyes blinking back the blur of waking, adjusting to the dim glow of glimmerglamps shining from the never-

sleeping Kicksey-Winsey. There was the sound again. He was heading in the right direction; it had come from behind one of the grilles located on the side of the vat.

Hugh's hearing was acute, his reflexes quick. He had trained himself to sleep lightly, and he was, therefore, not pleased to discover Haplo, fully awake, calmly standing near the air shaft as if he'd been there for hours. The sounds-scuffling and scraping- could now be heard clearly. They were getting closer. The dog, fur bristling around its neck, stared up at the shaft and whined softly.

"Shhst!" Haplo hissed, and the dog quieted. It walked around in a nervous circle and came back to stand beneath the shaft again. Seeing Hugh, Haplo made a motion with his hand. "Cover that side."

Hugh did not hesitate, but obeyed the silent command. To argue about leadership now would have been foolhardy, with some unknown something creeping toward them in the night and the two of them with only their bare hands and one dagger to fight it. He reflected, as he took up his stance, that not only had Haplo heard and reacted to the sound, he had moved so softly and stealthily that Hugh, who had heard the sound, had not heard Haplo.

The scuffling grew louder, nearer. The dog stiffened and bared its teeth. Suddenly there came a thump and a muffled "Ouch!"

Hugh relaxed. "It's Alfred."

"How in the name of the Mangers did he find us?" Haplo muttered.

A white face pressed against the grillwork from the inside.

"Sir Hugh?"

"He has a wide range of talents," remarked Hugh.

"I'd be interested in hearing about them," returned Haplo. "How do we get him out?" He peered inside the grillwork. "Who's that with you?"

"One of the Glegs. Her name's Jarre."

The Geg poked her head beneath Alfred's arm. The space they were in was, seemingly, a tight fit, and Alfred was forced to scrunch up until he practically doubled in two to make room.

"Where's Limbeck?" Jarre demanded. "Is he all right?"

"He's over there, asleep. The grille's bolted fast on this side, Alfred. Can you work any of the bolts out from yours?"

"I'll see, sir. It's rather difficult . . . without any light. Perhaps if I used my feet, sir, and kicked-"

"Good idea." Haplo backed out of the way, the dog trotting at his heels.

"It's about time his feet were good for something," said Hugh, moving to the side of the vat. "It's going to make one hell of a clatter."

"Fortunately, the machine's doing an excellent job of clattering itself. Stand back, dog."

"I want to see Limbeck!"

"In just a moment, Jarre," came Alfred's mollifying voice. "Now, if you'll just scoot over there and give me some room."

Hugh heard a thud and saw the grillwork shiver slightly. Two more kicks, a groan from Alfred, and the grille popped off the side of the vat and fell to the ground.

By now, Limbeck and Bane were both awake and had come over to stare curiously at their midnight callers. Jarre slid out feet-first. Landing on the floor of the vat, she raced to Limbeck, threw her arms around him, and hugged him tight.

"Oh, my dear!" she said in a fierce whisper. "You can't imagine where I've been! You can't imagine it!"

Limbeck, feeling her trembling in his arms, somewhat bewil-deredly smoothed her hair and gingerly patted her on the back.

"But, never mind!" said Jarre, returning to the serious business at hand. "The newssingers say the High Froman's going to turn you over to the Welves. Don't worry. We're going to get you out of here now. This air shaft Alfred found leads to the outskirts of the city. Where we'll go once we leave here, I'm not quite certain, but we can sneak out of Wombe tonight and-"

"Are you all right, Alfred?" Hugh offered to help extricate the chamberlain from the shaft.

"Yes, sir."

Tumbling out of the air shaft, Alfred attempted to put his weight on his legs, and crumpled over in a heap on the ground. "That is, perhaps not," he amended from where he sat on the floor of the vat, a pained expression on his face. "I am afraid I've damaged something, sir. But it's not serious." Standing on one foot, with Hugh's help, he leaned back against the vat. "I can walk."

"You couldn't walk when you had two good feet."

"It's nothing, sir. My knee-"

"Guess what, Alfred!" interrupted Bane. "We're going to fight the elves!"

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness!"

"We're not going to have to escape, Jarre," Limbeck was explaining. "At least I'm not. I'm going to make a speech to the Welves and ask for their help and cooperation. Then the Welves will fly us to the realms above. I'll see the truth, Jarre. I'll see it for myself!"

"Make a speech to the Welves!" Jarre gasped, her breath completely taken away by this astounding revelation.

"Yes, my dear. And you've got to spread the word among our people. We'll need their help. Haplo will tell you what to do."

"You're not going to ... fight anyone, are you?"

"No, my dear," said Limbeck, stroking his beard. "We're going to sing."

"Sing!" Jarre stared from one to another in blank astonishment. "I ... I don't know much about elves. Are they fond of music?"

"What'd she say?" Hugh demanded. "Alfred, we've got to get this plan moving! Come here and translate for me. I have to teach her that song before morning."

"Very well, sir," said Alfred. "I assume, sir, you are referring to the song of the Battle of Seven Fields?"

"Yes. Tell her not to worry about what the words mean. They'll have to learn to sing it in human. Have her memorize it line by line and say it back to us to make sure she's got the words. The song shouldn't be too difficult for them to learn. Kids sing it all the time."

"I'll help!" Bane volunteered.

Haplo, squatting on the ground, stroked the dog, watched and listened, and said nothing.

"Jarre? Is that her name?" Hugh approached the two Gogs, Bane dancing at his side. The man's face was dark and stern in the flickering light. Bane's blue eyes gleamed with excitement. "Can you rally your people, teach them this song, and have them there at the ceremony?" Alfred translated. "This king of yours said the Welves will be here this day at noon. That doesn't give you much time."

"Sing!" Jarre murmured, staring at Limbeck. "Are you really going? Up there?"

Taking off his spectacles, Limbeck rubbed them on his shirt sleeve and put them on again. "Yes, my dear. If the Welves don't mind-

"The Welves don't mind," Alfred translated to Hugh, giving him a meaningful glance.

"Don't worry about the Welves, Alfred," interposed Haplo. "Limbeck's going to make a speech."

"Oh, Limbeck!" Jarre was pale, biting her lip. "Are you sure you should go up there? I don't think you should leave us. What will WUPP do without you? You going off like that-it will seem like the High Froman's won!"

Limbeck frowned. "I hadn't thought about that." Removing his spectacles, he began to clean them again. Instead of putting them back on, he absentmindedly stuck them in his pocket. He looked at Jarre and blinked, as if wondering why she was all blurry. "I don't know. Perhaps you're right, my dear."

Hugh ground his teeth in frustration. He didn't know what had been said, but he could see the Gog was having second thoughts, and that was going to lose him his ship and probably his life. He looked impatiently at Alfred to help, but the chamberlain, limping on one foot, appeared

undignified and storklike, also very sad and unhappy. Hugh was just admitting to himself that he might have to rely on Haplo when he saw the man, with a signal of his hand, send the dog forward.

Gliding across the floor of the vat, the animal came to Limbeck and thrust its muzzle in the Geg's hand. Limbeck started at the unexpected touch of the cold nose, and jerked his hand away. But the dog remained, looking up at him intently, the bushy tail slowly brushing from side to side. Limbeck's nearsighted gaze was drawn slowly and irresistibly from the dog to its master. Hugh glanced swiftly back at Haplo to see what message he was giving, but the man's face was mild and tranquil, with that quiet smile.

Limbeck's hand absently stroked the dog, his eyes fixed on Haplo. He sighed deeply.

"My dear?" Jarre touched him on the arm.

"The truth. And my speech. I must make my speech. I'm going, Jarre. And I'm counting on you and our people to help. And when I come back, when I've seen the Truth, then we'll start the revolution!"

Jarre recognized his stubborn tone, knew it was hopeless to argue. She wasn't certain she wanted to argue anyway. Part of her was stirred at the thought of what Limbeck was doing. It was the beginning of the revolution, really and truly. But he would be leaving her. She hadn't realized, until now, how much she truly loved him.

"I could come too," she offered.

"No, my dear." Limbeck gazed at her fondly. "It wouldn't do for both of us to be gone." He took a step forward, put his hands out to where it looked to his nearsighted eyes her shoulders were. Jarre, used to this, moved up to be right where he thought she was. "You must prepare the people for my return."

"I'll do it!"

The dog, afflicted by a sudden itch, sat down, scratching at its fur with a hind foot.

"You can teach her the song now, sir," said Alfred.

Alfred translating, Hugh gave Jarre his instructions, taught her the song, then bundled her back into the air shaft. Limbeck stood beneath it and, before she left, reached up to hold her hand.

"Thank you, my dear. This will be for the best. I know it!"

"Yes, I know it too."

To hide the trouble in her voice, Jarre leaned down and gave Limbeck a shy kiss on the cheek. She waved her hand to Alfred, who gave her a small solemn bow; then she hastily turned and began to climb through the air shaft.

Hugh and Haplo lifted the grille and put it back in place as best they could, hammering at it with their fists.

"Are you hurt very badly, Alfred?" asked Bane, struggling against sleepiness and an unwillingness to return to bed and possibly miss out on something.

"No, Your Highness, thank you for asking."

Bane nodded and yawned. "I think I'll just lie down, Alfred. Not to sleep, mind you, just to rest."

"Allow me to straighten your blankets, Your Highness." Alfred cast a swift sidelong glance over to Hugh and Haplo, pounding at the grille. "Might I trouble Your Highness with a question?"

Bane yawned until his jaws cracked. Eyelids drooping, he plopped down on the floor of the vat and said sleepily, "Sure."

"Your Highness"-Alfred lowered his voice, keeping his eyes fixed on the blanket that he was, as usual, clumsily twisting and knotting and doing everything but straightening-"when you look at that man Haplo, what do you see?"

"A man. Not very good-looking but not very ugly, not like Hugh. That Haplo's not very much of anything, if you ask me. Here, you're making a mess of that, as usual."

"No, Your Highness. I can manage." The chamberlain continued to maul the blanket. "About my question-that really wasn't what I meant, Your Highness." Alfred paused, licking his lips. He knew that this next question would undoubtedly start Bane thinking. Yet Alfred felt at this juncture he had no choice. He had to know the truth.

"What can you see with your . . . special vision?"

Bane's eyes widened, then narrowed, glistening with shrewdness and cunning. But the intelligence in them was gone so swiftly, masked by the bright gloss of innocence, that Alfred, if he had not seen it before, might not have believed he saw it then.

"Why do you ask, Alfred?"

"Just out of curiosity, Your Highness. Nothing more."

Bane regarded him speculatively, perhaps gauging how much more information he was likely to wheedle from the chamberlain, perhaps wondering whether he could gain more by telling the truth or lying or a judicious mixture of both.

Giving Haplo a wary sidelong glance, Bane leaned confidentially near to Alfred and said softly, "I can't see anything."

Alfred sat back on his heels, his careworn face drawn and troubled. He stared intently at Bane, trying to judge whether or not the child was sincere.

"Yes," continued Bane, taking the man's look for a question. "I can't see anything. And there's only one other person I've met who's the same-you, Alfred. What do you make of that?" The child gazed up at him with bright, shining eyes.

The blanket suddenly seemed to spread itself out, smooth and flat, without a wrinkle. "You can lie down now, Your Highness. We have, it seems, an exciting day tomorrow."

"I asked you a question, Alfred," said the prince, stretching out obediently.

"Yes, Your Highness. It must be coincidence. Nothing more."

"You're probably right, Alfred." Bane smiled sweetly and closed his eyes. The smile remained on his lips; he was inwardly enjoying some private joke.

Alfred, nursing his knee, decided that, as usual, he had made a mush of things. I gave Bane a clue to the truth. And against all express orders to the contrary, I took a being of another race into the Heart and the Brain and brought her back out again. But does it matter anymore? Does it really matter?

He couldn't help himself, his gaze went to Haplo, who was settling down for the night. Alfred knew the truth now, yet he resisted it. He told himself it was coincidence. The boy had not met every person in the world. There might be many whose past lives were not visible to him through the medium of his clairvoyance. The chamberlain watched Haplo lie down, saw him give the dog a pat, saw the dog take up a protective position at the man's side.

I have to find out. I must know for certain. Then my mind will be at rest. I can laugh at my fears.

Or prepare to face them.

No, stop thinking like that. Beneath the bandages, you will find sores, as he said.

Alfred waited. Limbeck and Hugh returned to their beds, Hugh casting a glance in Alfred's direction. The chamberlain pretended to sleep. The prince had drifted off, seemingly, but it might be well to make sure. Limbeck lay awake, staring up into the top of the vat, worrying, afraid, repeating to himself all his resolutions. Hugh leaned back against the vat's side. Taking out his pipe, he stuck it between his teeth and gazed moodily at nothing.

Alfred did not have much time. He propped himself on one elbow, keeping his shoulders hunched, his hand held close to his body, and faced Limbeck. Raising his index and middle fingers, Alfred drew a sigil in the air. Whispering the rune, he drew it again. Limbeck's eyelids lowered, opened, lowered, quivered, and finally shut. The Geg's breathing became even and regular. Turning slightly, keeping his movements smooth and stealthy, Alfred faced the assassin and drew the same sigil. Hugh's head dropped. The pipe slipped from between his teeth and fell into his lap. Alfred's gaze turned to Bane, and he made the same sign; if the child hadn't been asleep before this, he was now.

Then, facing Haplo, Alfred drew the rune and whispered the same words, only now with more concentration, more force.

The dog, of course, was most important. But if Alfred's suspicions were right about the animal, all would be well.

He forced himself to wait patiently a few more moments, letting the magical enchantment draw everyone down into deep sleep. No one moved. All was quiet.

Slowly and cautiously, Alfred crept to his feet. The spell was powerful; he might have run round the vat shouting and screaming, blowing horns and beating drums, and not a person there would have so much as blinked an eye. But his own irrational fears held him back, halted his steps. He sneaked forward, moving easily, without a limp, for he had been shamming the pain in his knee. But as slowly as he moved, the pain might have been real, the injury truly debilitating. His heart pulsed in his throat. Spots burst and danced in his eyes, obscuring his vision.

He forced himself on. The dog was asleep, its eyes closed, or he never would have succeeded in creeping up on its master. Not daring to breathe, fighting suffocating spasms in his chest, Alfred dropped to his knees beside the slumbering Haplo. He reached out a hand that shook so he could hardly guide it to where it must go, and he stopped and would have said a prayer had there been a god around to hear it. As it was, there was only himself.

He shoved aside the bandage that was wound tightly around Haplo's hand.

There were, as he had suspected, the runes.

Tears stung Alfred's eyes, blinding him. It took all his strength of will to draw the bandage back over the tattooed flesh so that the man would not notice it had been disturbed. Barely able to see where he was going, Alfred stumbled back to his blanket and hurled himself down. It seemed that he did not stop falling when his body touched the floor, but that he continued to fall and went spiraling down into a dark well of nameless horror.

## CHAPTER 38

### DEEPSKY, ABOVE THE MAELSTROM

THE CAPTAIN OF THE ELVEN SHIP CARFA'SHON [14] WAS A MEMBER OF THE ROYAL FAMILY. Not a very important member, but a member nonetheless—a fact of which he himself was extraordinarily conscious and expected all others around him to be likewise. There was, however, one small matter of his royal blood that it was never wise to bring up, and this was an unfortunate relationship to Prince Reesh'ahn, the leader of the rebellion among the elves.

In the halcyon days of yore, the captain had been wont to state modestly that he was nothing less than a fifth cousin of the dashing young and handsome elven prince. Now, following Reesh'ahn's disgrace, Captain Zankor'el assured people that he was nothing more than a fifth cousin and that was stretching a cousin or two.

According to the manner and custom of all elven royalty, be they rich or poor, Captain Zankor'el served his people by working hard and energetically during his life. And, again in the manner and custom of those of royal lineage, he expected to continue serving them at the time of his death. The lords and ladies of the royal family are not allowed to slip peacefully into oblivion at their deaths. Their souls are captured before they can flutter away to spend days in eternal spring meadows. The royal souls are then held in stasis by the elven wizards, who draw upon the souls' energy to work their magic.

It is necessary, therefore, that wizards constantly attend the members of the royal family, ready at any time—day or night, in peace or during a raging battle—to grab up souls should death occur. Wizards designated for such duty have a formal title, "weesham," by which they are referred to in

polite society. Generally, however, they are known as "geir"-a word whose ancient meaning is "vulture."

The geir follow the royal elves from childhood to old age, never leaving them. A geir comes to the baby at his birth, watches his first steps, travels with him during the years of his schooling, sits beside the bed-even the bridal bed-every night, and attends him in the hour of his death.

Elven wizards who accept this duty that, to the elves, has become sacred, are carefully trained. They are encouraged to develop a close personal relationship with those over whom their wings spread a dark shadow. A geir is not allowed to marry, and thus the charge becomes his or her entire life, taking the place of husband, wife, and child. Since the geir are older than their charges-generally being in their twenties when they accept responsibility for infants-they frequently assume the additional roles of mentor and confidant. Many deep and abiding friendships grow between shadow and shadowed. In such instances, the geir often does not long outlive his charge, but delivers the soul to the Cathedral of the Albedo and then creeps away himself to die of grief.

And thus those of the royal family live, from birth on, with the constant reminder of their mortality hovering at their shoulders. They have come to be proud of the geir. The black-robed wizards mark royal status and symbolize to the elves that their leaders serve not only in life but also after death. The presence of the geir has the additional effect of increasing royal power. It is hard to refuse the elven king anything he wants with that dark-robed figure standing always at his side.

It is thought by some that the Order of the Kir Monks may have developed among humans as a corrupt form of the Elven Shadows. The Kir Monks, being a secret and closed organization, refuse to discuss their origins. Legend has it, however, that they were founded by a group of human wizards who were endeavoring to discover the secret of soul-capture. The wizards failed to achieve their goal, but the order they founded remained. Ordinary humans-those not possessing magical talents-were allowed to enter, and over the years, the monks gradually turned from the attempt to cheat death to a worship of it.

If the members of the royal family, particularly the younger members, are somewhat wild and foolhardy and live life with a devil-may-care attitude, it is understandable. Royal parties are often chaotic affairs. The wine flows freely and there is a frantic, hysterical edge to the merriment. A glittering, gaily dressed elf maiden dances and drinks and lacks for nothing that will give her joy, but, look where she will, she must see the geir standing, back to the wall, the geir's gaze never leaving the one whose life-and most important, death-is in the geir's trust.

The captain of the elven watership had his attendant geir, and it must be admitted that there were those aboard who wished the captain's geir godspeed in his work; the majority of those serving the captain expressing (quietly) the opinion that the captain's soul would be far more valuable to the elven kingdom if it was no longer attached to the captain's body.

Tall, slender, and handsome, Captain Zankor'el had a great personal regard for himself and none at all for those who had the distinct misfortune not to be of high rank, not to be of royal birth, and-in short-not to be him.

"Captain."

"Lieutenant." This was always spoken with a slight sneer.

"We are entering the Maelstrom."

"Thank you, lieutenant, but I am not blind, nor am I as stupid as perhaps was your last, late captain. Having seen the storm clouds, I was able to deduce almost instantly that we were in a storm. If you like, you may go pass the word around to the rest of the crew, who may, perhaps, not have noticed."

The lieutenant stiffened, his fair-skinned face flushed a delicate crimson. "May I respectfully remind the captain that it is my duty by law to inform him that we have entered dangerous skies?"

"You may remind him if you like, but I wouldn't, for he finds you to be teetering on the edge of insubordination," returned the captain, gazing out the portals of the dragonship, a spyglass to his eye. "Now, go below and take charge of the slaves. That is one duty, at least, you are fit for." These last words were not spoken aloud but, by the captain's tone, they were implied. The lieutenant-and everyone else on the bridge-heard them quite clearly.

"Very good, sir," responded Lieutenant Bothar'in. The crimson had drained from his face, leaving him livid with suppressed anger.

None of the other crew members dared catch the lieutenant's eye. It was absolutely unheard-of for the second in command to be sent down to the galley during a descent. The captain himself always took this hazardous duty, for control of the wings was essential to the ship's safety. It was a dangerous place to be during a descent-their former captain had lost his life down there. But a good captain placed the safety of ship and crew above his own, and the elven crew-seeing their lieutenant descend into the galley, their captain remaining at ease up top- could not forbear exchanging dark looks.

The dragonship dipped down into the storm. The winds began to buffet it about. Lightning flared, partially blinding them; thunder roared, nearly deafening them. Down below, the human galley slaves, wearing the body harnesses that connected them by cables to the wings, fought and wrestled to keep the ship upright and flying through the storm. The wings had been pulled in as far as possible to lessen the magic in order for them to descend. But the wings could not be drawn in completely, or else the magic would cease to work completely and they would plummet down, out of control, to crash upon Drevlin below. A delicate balance had to be maintained, therefore-not a difficult task in fair, clear weather but extremely difficult in the midst of a raging storm.

"Where's the captain?" demanded the overseer.

"I'm taking over down here," answered the lieutenant.

The overseer took one look at the lieutenant's pale, tense face, the clenched jaw and tightly drawn lips, and understood.

"It probably ain't proper to say this, sir, but I'm glad you're here and he ain't."

"No, it is not proper to say that, overseer," replied the lieutenant, taking up his position in the front of the galley.

The overseer wisely said nothing more. He and the ship's wizard, whose job it was to maintain the magic, glanced at each other. The wizard shrugged slightly; the overseer shook his head. Then both went about their business, which was critical enough to demand their full and complete attention.

Up above, Captain Zankor'el stood spread-legged, braced upon the heaving deck, staring through his spyglass down into the swirling mass of black clouds. His geir sat on a deck chair beside him; the wizard-green with sickness and terror-clung for dear life to anything he could get his hands on.

"There, weesham, I believe I can see the Lifalofts. Just a glimpse, in the eye of those swirling clouds." He offered the spyglass. "Do you want to take a look?"

"May the souls of your ancestors forbid!" said the wizard, shuddering. It was bad enough he had to travel in this frail and fragile contraption of skin and wood and magic, without having to look at where he was going. "What was that?"

The wizard reared up his head in alarm, his sharply pointed, beardless chin quivering. A crash had sounded from below. The ship listed suddenly, throwing the captain off his feet.

"Damn that Bothar'in!" Zankor'el swore. "I'll have him brought up on charges!"

"If he's still alive," gasped the pale-faced wizard.

"He better hope for his sake he isn't," snarled the captain, picking himself up.

Swift glances flashed about the crew, and one rash young elf actually opened his mouth to speak, but was nudged in the ribs by a fellow crewman. The midshipman swallowed his mutinous words.

For a terrifying instant the ship seemed to be out of control and at the mercy of the swirling wind. It plunged down sickeningly, was caught by a gust, and nearly flipped over. An updraft swept it high, then dropped it again. The captain screamed curses and contradictory orders in the direction of the galley, but took care never to leave the safety of the bridge. The geir crouched on the deck and seemed, by the expression on his face, to wish he had gone into another line of work.

At last the ship righted itself and sailed into the heart of the Maelstrom, where it was peaceful and calm and the sun shone, making the swirling clouds around it that much blacker and more threatening by contrast. Down below, on Drevlin, the Lifalofts winked brightly in the sunshine.

Having been purposefully built by the Mangers to be always directly in the eye of the ever-raging storm, the Lifalofts were the one place on the continent where the GEGs could look up and see the sparkling firmament and feel the warmth of the sun. Small wonder that, to the GEGs, this was a sacred and holy place, made even holier by the monthly descent of the "Welves."

After a brief interval, during which breath came easier and color returned to pale faces, the lieutenant made his appearance on the bridge. The rash young midshipman actually had the temerity to let out a cheer, which brought a baleful look from the captain, letting the young elf know that he wasn't likely to be a midshipman much longer.

"Well, what havoc have you wreaked down there, besides nearly killing us all?" demanded the captain.

Blood trickled down the lieutenant's face, his fair hair was clotted and matted with red, and his cheeks were ashen, his eyes dark with pain. "One of the cables snapped, sir. The right wing slid out. We have jury-rigged a new cable now, sir, and all is under control."

Not a word said about being slammed down onto the deck, about standing side by side with a human slave, both fighting desperately to drag the wing back in and save all their lives. No words were needed. The experienced crew knew of the life-and-death struggle that had been waged below their feet. Perhaps the captain knew too, despite the fact that he had never previously commanded a ship, or perhaps he saw it reflected in the faces of his crew. He did not launch into a tirade against the lieutenant's incompetence but said only, "Were any of the beasts [15] killed?"

The lieutenant's face darkened. "One human is very seriously injured, sir-the slave whose cable snapped. He was dragged off his feet and hurled into the hull. The cable wrapped around him, nearly cutting him in two before we could free him."

"But he's not dead?" The captain raised a finely plucked eyebrow.

"No, sir. The ship's wizard is treating him now,"

"Nonsense! Waste of time. Toss him overboard. There's plenty more where he came from."

"Yes, sir," said the lieutenant, his eyes fixed on a point somewhere to the left of his captain's shoulder.

Once again, the almond eyes of the elven crew slid glances at each other. In all honesty, it must be admitted that none of them had any love for their human slaves. There was a certain amount of grudging respect for the humans, however, not to mention the fact that the crew perversely decided to like anyone their captain didn't. Everyone on the bridge-including Zankor'el himself- knew that the lieutenant had no intention of carrying out that order.

The ship was nearing its point of rendezvous with the Lifeline. Captain Zankor'el did not have time to make an issue of this now, nor could he really do so except to go below and personally see to it that his order was obeyed. To do that would lessen his dignity, however, and he might get blood on his uniform.

"That will be all, lieutenant. Return to your duties," said the captain, and, spyglass in hand, he turned to look out the portals, gazing upward to see if the waterpipe was in sight. But he had neither forgotten nor forgiven the lieutenant.

"I'll have his head for this," muttered Zankor'el to his geir, who merely nodded, closed his eyes, and thought about being violently ill.

The waterpipe was at last descried, descending from the sky, and the elven ship took up its position as guide and escort. The pipe was ancient, having been built by the Sartan when they first brought the survivors of the Sundering to Arianus, whose water was plentiful in the Low Realm but lacking on the realms above. The pipe was made of metal that never rusted. The alloy remained a mystery to the elven alchemists, who had spent centuries trying to reproduce it. Operated by a gigantic mechanism, the pipe dropped down a shaft that ran through the continent of Aristagon. Once every month, automatically, the pipe descended through Deepsky to the continent of Drevlin.

Although the pipe was capable of lowering itself, an elven ship was necessary to guide the waterpipe down to the Liftalofts, where it had to be connected to a huge waterspout. When the two were hooked up, the Kicksey-Winsey, receiving some sort of mysterious signal, automatically turned on the water. A combination of magical and mechanical forces sent the liquid shooting up the pipe. Up above, on Aristagon, elves guided the flow into vast holding tanks.

Following the Sundering, elves and humans had dwelt in peace on Aristagon and the surrounding isles. Under the guidance of the Sartan, the races shared equally in the life-giving substance. But when the Sartan disappeared, their fond dream of peace shattered. The humans claimed the war was the fault of the elves, who had fallen increasingly under the control of a powerful faction of wizards. The elves claimed it was the fault of the humans, who were notoriously warlike and barbaric.

The elves, with their longer lifespans, larger population, and knowledge of magical mechanics, had proved the stronger. They drove the humans from Aristagon-the Mid Realm source for water. The humans, with the aid of the dragons, fought back, raiding elven towns and stealing water or attacking the elven waterships that ferried the precious liquid to neighboring elven-held isles.

A watership such as the one flown by Captain Zankor'el carried on board eight huge casks made of rare oak (obtained from only the Sartan knew where) and bound by bands of steel. On an isle-run, the ship held the water in these casks. On this trip, however, the casks were filled with the junk that the elves gave as payment [16] to the GEGS.

The elves cared nothing about the GEGS. Humans were beasts. The GEGS were insects.

## CHAPTER 39

### WOMBE, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

#### THE SARTAN BUILT THE KICKSEY-WINSEY; NO ONE KNOWS WHY OR HOW.

Elven wizards did an intensive study on the machine years ago and came up with a lot of theories but no answers. The Kicksey-Winsey had something to do with the world, but what? The pumping of water to the higher realms was important, certainly, but it was obvious to the wizards that such a feat could have been accomplished by a much smaller and less complicated (albeit less marvelous) magical machine.

Of all the constructions of the Sartan, the Liftalofts were the most impressive, mysterious, and inexplicable. Nine gigantic arms, made of brass and steel, thrust up out of the coralite-some of them soaring several menka into the air. Atop each arm was an enormous hand whose thumb and fingers were made of gold with brass hinges at each of the joints and at the wrist. The hands were visible to the descending elven ships and it was obvious to all who saw them that the wrists and fingers-which were large enough to have grasped one of the enormous waterships and held it in a golden palm-were movable.

What were the hands designed to do? Had they done it? Would they do it still? It seemed unlikely. All but one of the hands drooped in limp stiffness, like those of a corpse. The only hand that possessed any life belonged to an arm shorter than all the rest. It stood in a vast circle of arms surrounding an open area corresponding roughly in size to the circumference of the eye of the

storm. The short arm was located near the waterspout. Its hand was spread flat, the fingers together, the palm facing upward, forming a perfect platform on which any so inclined could stand. The interior of the arm was hollow with a shaft running up the center. A doorway at the base of the arm allowed entrance, and hundreds of stairs, spiraling upward around the center shaft, permitted those with long wind and strong legs to ascend to the top.

Apart from the stairs, an ornately carved golden door led into the shaft within the arm, and the Gogs had a legend which told that any who entered this door would be whisked to the top with the speed and force of the water that shot up out of the geyser. Thus the Gog name for the contraptions-Liftaloft-though no Gog in current memory had ever been known to dare open the golden door.

Here, on this arm, every month, the High Froman and the Head Clark and such other Gogs deemed worthy gathered to greet the Welves and receive their payment for services rendered. All the Gogs of the city of Wombe and those making pilgrimages from neighboring sectors in Drevlin ventured out into the raging storm to gather around the base of the arms, watching and waiting for the monna, as it was known, to fall from heaven. Gogs were frequently injured during this ceremony, for there was no telling what might drop out of the barrels of the Welf ships. (An overstuffed velvet sofa with claw legs had once wiped out an entire family.) But all the Gogs agreed it was worth the risk.

This morning's ceremony was particularly well-attended, word having gone out among the newssingers and over the squawky-talk that Limbeck and his gods-who-weren't were going to be given to gods-who-were-the Welves. The High Froman, expecting trouble, was considerably disconcerted when there wasn't any. The crowd that hastened across the coralite in a break during one of the storms was quiet and orderly-too quiet, thought the High Froman, slogging through the puddles.

Beside him marched the Head Clark-his face a picture of self-righteous indignation. Behind him were the gods-who-weren't, taking this rather well, considering. They, too, were silent, even the troublemaker Limbeck. At least he appeared subdued and grave, giving the High Froman the satisfaction of thinking that at last the rebellious youth had learned his lesson.

The arms could just be seen through the break in the scudding clouds, the steel and brass gleaming in the sunlight that shone only on this one place in all of Drevlin. Haplo gazed at them in undisguised wonder.

"What in the name of creation are those?"

Bane, too, was staring at them openmouthed and wide-eyed. Briefly Hugh explained what he knew of them-which was what he'd heard from the elves and amounted to almost nothing.

"You understand now why it's so frustrating," said Limbeck, roused out of his worries, staring almost angrily at the Liftaloft glistening on the horizon. "I know that if we Gogs put our minds together and analyzed the Kicksey-Winsey, we could understand the why and the how. But they won't do it. They simply won't do it."

He irritably kicked a bit of loose coralite and sent it spinning across the ground. The dog, in high spirits, went chasing after it, leaping and bounding gleefully through the puddles and causing the coppers surrounding the prisoners to cast it wary, nervous glances.

"A 'why' is a dangerous thing," said Haplo. "It challenges old, comfortable ways; forces people to think about what they do instead of just mindlessly doing it. No wonder your people are afraid of it."

"I think the danger is not so much in asking the 'why' as in believing you have come up with the only answer," said Alfred, seeming almost to be talking to himself.

Haplo heard him and thought it a strange statement to come from a human, but then, this Alfred was a strange human. The chamberlain's gaze no longer darted to the Patryn's bandaged hands. Instead, he seemed to avoid looking at them and to avoid looking at Haplo if at all possible. Alfred appeared to have aged during the night. Lines of anxiety had deepened, smudges of purple discolored the folds of puffy skin beneath his eyes. He obviously had not slept much, if at all. Not unusual, perhaps, for a man facing a battle for his life in the morning.

Haplo tugged reflexively at the bandages, making certain the telltale sigla tattooed on his flesh were covered. But he was forced to wonder, as he did so, why it now seemed suddenly an empty, wasted gesture.

"Don't worry, Limbeck," shouted Bane, forgetting that they were walking out of range of the thumping and bumping of the great machine. "When we get to my father, the mysteriarch, he'll have all the answers!"

Hugh didn't know what the kid said, but he saw Limbeck wince and look around fearfully at the guards, and saw the guards stare suspiciously at the prince and his companions. Obviously His Highness had said something he shouldn't. Where the hell was Alfred? He was supposed to be watching the kid.

Turning, he thumped Alfred in the arm and, when the man looked up, Hugh gestured toward Bane. The chamberlain blinked at Hugh as if wondering for a moment who he was, then understood. Hurrying forward, slipping and stumbling, his feet going in directions one would not have thought humanly possible, Alfred reached Bane's side and, to divert the boy's attention, began answering His Highness's questions about the steel arms.

Unfortunately, Alfred's mind was intent on last night's horrendous discovery, not on what he was saying. Bane was intent on making a discovery of his own, and using the chamberlain's unthinking answers, he was drawing very near it.

Jarre and the WUPP's marched behind the coppers, who marched behind the prisoners. Hidden beneath cloaks and shawls and long flowing beards were thunderers, jingers, a smattering of toots, and here and there a wheezy-wail [17]. At a meeting of the WUPP's called hurriedly and in secret late last night, Jarre had taught the song. Being a musical race-the newssingers had been keeping the GEGS informed for centuries-the WUPP's learned quickly and easily. They took it home and sang it to wives, children, and trustworthy neighbors, who also picked it up. No one was quite certain why they were singing this particular song. Jarre had been rather vague on this point, being uncertain herself.

Rumor had it that this was the way Welves and humans fought-they sang and tooted and jingled at each other. When the Welves were defeated (and they could be defeated, since they weren't immortal), they would be forced to grant the GEGS more treasure.

Jarre, when she heard this rumor spreading among the WUPP's, didn't deny it. It was, after all, sort of the truth.

Marching along toward the Lofts, the WUPP's appeared so eager and excited that Jarre was certain the coppers must be able to see their plans gleaming brightly in the flashing eyes and smug smiles (to say nothing of the fact that those carrying instruments jingled and rattled and occasionally wailed in a most mysterious manner). There was, the GEGs felt, a certain amount of justice in disrupting this ceremony. These monthly rituals with the Welves were symbolic of their slavish treatment of the GEGs. Those GEGs who lived in Drevlin (mostly of the High Froman's own scrift) were the ones who consistently received the monthly monna, and though the High Froman insisted that all GEGs could come and share in it, he knew as well as the rest of Drevlin that the GEGs were bound to the Kicksey-Winsey and that only a few-and then mostly clarks-could leave their servitude long enough to bask in the Welven eyes and share in the Welven monna. The GEGs, highly elated, marched to battle, their weapons jangling and ringing and wheezing in their hands.

Marching along, Jarre recalled the instructions she had given them.

"When the humans begin to sing, we swarm up the stairs, singing at the top of our lungs. Limbeck will make a speech-

Scattered applause.

"-then he and the gods-who-aren't will enter the ship-

"We want the ship!" cried several WUPP's.

"No, you don't," answered Jarre crossly. "You want the reward. We're going to get the monna this time. All of it."

Tumultuous applause.

"The High Froman won't come back with so much as a hand-knit doily! Limbeck is going to take the ship and sail away to upper worlds, where he will learn the Truth, and come back to proclaim it and free his people!"

No applause. After the promise of treasure (particularly knit doilies, currently much in demand), no one cared about Truth. Jarre understood this and it saddened her, because she knew it would sadden Limbeck if he ever found out.

Thinking about Limbeck, she had gradually moved forward through the crowd until she was walking right behind him. Her shawl thrown over her head so that no one would recognize her, she kept her eyes and her thoughts fixed on Limbeck.

Jarre wanted to go with him-at least she told herself she did. But she hadn't argued very hard and had fallen silent completely when Limbeck told her she must stay behind and lead the movement in his absence.

In reality, Jarre was afraid. She had, it seemed, peeked through a crack and caught a glimpse of Truth down there in the tunnels with Alfred. Truth wasn't something you went out and found. It

was wide and vast and deep and unending, and all you could hope to see was a tiny part of it. And to see that part and to mistake it for the whole was to make of Truth a lie.

But Jarre had promised. She couldn't let Limbeck down, not when this meant so much to him. And then there were her people-living a lie. Surely even a little of the Truth would help and not hurt them.

The Gegg marching around Jarre talked about what they would do with their share of the reward. Jarre was silent, her eyes on Limbeck, wondering if she was hoping they'd succeed or fail.

The High Froman reached the door at the base of the arm. Turning to the Head Clark, he formally accepted a large key, nearly as big as his hand, which he used to open the opener.

"Bring the prisoners," he called, and the coppers herded everyone forward.

"Mind that dog!" snapped the Head Clark, kicking at the animal sniffing with intense interest at his feet.

Haplo called the dog to his side. The High Froman, the Head Clark, several of the High Froman's personal guard, and the prisoners crowded into the Liftaloft. At the last moment, Limbeck halted in the door and turned, his eyes scanning the crowd. Catching sight of Jarre, he looked at her long and earnestly. His expression was calm and resolute. He wasn't wearing his spectacles, but she had the feeling he could see her quite clearly.

Jarre, blinking back her tears, raised one hand in loving farewell. Her other hand, hidden beneath her cloak, clutched her weapon—a tambourine.

## CHAPTER 40

### THE LIFTALOFTS, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

"CAPTAIN," REPORTED THE LIEUTENANT, PEERING AT THE GROUND below, "THERE ARE an unusual number of Gegg waiting for us on the Palm."

"They're not Gegg, lieutenant," said the captain, spyglass to his eyes. "They appear from the looks of them to be human."

"Human!" The lieutenant stared down at the Palm. His hands itched to snatch the spyglass away from his captain and see for himself.

"What do you make of it, lieutenant?" inquired the captain.

"Trouble, I should think, sir. I've served on this run a number of years, and my father served before me, and I've never heard of humans being found on the Low Realm. I might suggest—" The lieutenant caught himself and bit his tongue.

"Might suggest?" repeated Captain Zankor'el in a dangerous tone. "You might suggest to your captain? What might you suggest, lieutenant?"

"Nothing, sir. I was out of line."

"No, no, lieutenant, I insist," returned Zankor'el, with a glance at the geir.

"I might suggest that we do not dock until we find out what's going on."

This was a perfectly reasonable and logical suggestion, as Captain Zankor'el well knew. But it would mean discussion with the Gags, and Zankor'el couldn't speak a word of Geg. The Lieutenant could. Captain Zankor'el immediately came to the conclusion that this was just another trick of the lieutenant's to make a mockery of him-Captain Zankor'el of the royal family- in the eyes of the crew. The lieutenant had done so once already, with his damn-fool heroics. The captain decided he would see his soul in that small lapis-and-chalcedony-inlaid box the geir carried with him at all times before he'd let that happen again.

"I didn't know you were quite so afraid of humans, lieutenant," responded the captain. "I cannot have a frightened man at my side going into what might be a dangerous situation. Report to your quarters, Lieutenant Bothar'in, and remain there for the duration of the voyage. I'll deal with the beasts."

Stunned silence settled over the bridge. No one knew where to look and so avoided looking at anything. A charge of cowardice leveled against an elven officer meant death once they returned to Aristagon. The lieutenant could speak in his own defense at the Tribunal, certainly. But his only defense would be to denounce his captain-a member of the royal family. Whom would the judges believe?

Lieutenant Bothar'in's face was rigid, his almond eyes unblinking. A subdued midshipman said later that he'd seen dead men look more alive.

"As you command, sir." The lieutenant turned on his heel and left the bridge.

"Cowardice-a thing I won't tolerate!" intoned Captain Zankor'el. "You men remember that."

"Yes, sir," was the dazed and halfhearted response from men who had served under their lieutenant in several battles against both humans and rebel elves and who knew, better than anyone, Bothar'in's courage.

"Pass the word for the ship's wizard," commanded the captain, staring through the spyglass at the small group gathered in the palm of the gigantic hand.

The word went out for the ship's wizard, who appeared immediately. Slightly flustered, he glanced around the group on the bridge as if endeavoring to ascertain if a rumor he'd heard on his way forward was true. No one looked at him, no one dared. No one needed to. Seeing the set faces and fixed eyes, the ship's wizard had his answer.

"We're facing an encounter with humans, Magicka." The captain spoke in a bland voice, as if nothing was amiss. "I assume that all aboard have been issued whistles?"

"Yes, captain."

"All are familiar with their use?"

"I believe so, sir," replied the ship's wizard. "The ship's last engagement was with a group of rebel elves who boarded us-"

"I did not ask for a recitation of this vessel's war record, did I, Magicka?" inquired Captain Zankor'el.

"No, captain."

The ship's wizard did not apologize. Unlike the crew, he was not bound to obey the orders of a ship's officer. Since only a wizard could possibly understand the proper use of his arcane art, each wizard was made responsible for the magic aboard ship. A captain dissatisfied with the work of his ship's wizard might bring the wizard up on charges, but the wizard would be tried by the Council of the Arcane, not by the Naval Tribunal. And, in such a trial, it would not matter if the captain was a member of the royal family. Everyone knew who were the true rulers of Aristagon.

"The magic is functional?" pursued the captain. "Fully operational?"

"The crew members have but to put the whistles to their lips." The ship's wizard drew himself up, stared down his nose at the captain. The magus did not even add the customary "sir." His talent was being questioned.

The geir, a wizard himself, could see that Zankor'el had overstepped his authority.

"And you have done quite well, ship's wizard," intervened the geir in soft, oily tones. "I will be certain to pass on my commendation when we return home."

The ship's wizard sneered. As if it mattered to him what a geir thought of his work! Spending their lives running after spoiled brats in hopes of catching a soul. One might as well be a servant running after a pug dog in hopes of catching its droppings!

"Will you join us on the bridge?" asked the captain politely, taking the hint from his geir.

The ship's wizard had no intention of being anywhere else. This was his assigned station during battle, and though in this instance the captain was perfectly correct in making the invitation, the wizard chose to take it as an insult.

"Of course," he stated in clipped and icy tones and, stalking over to the portals, glared out at the Palm and its contingent of Gags and humans. "I believe we should make contact with the Gags and find out what is going on" he added.

Did the ship's wizard know that this had been the lieutenant's suggestion? Did he know that this had precipitated the current crisis? The captain, thin cheeks flushing, glared at him. The ship's wizard, his back turned, did not notice. The captain opened his mouth, but catching sight of his geir shaking his head warningly, snapped it shut again.

"Very well!" Zankor'el was making an obvious effort to contain his anger. Hearing a noise behind him, he whipped around and fixed a baleful eye on the crew, but everyone was apparently engrossed in his duties.

The ship's wizard, bowing stiffly, took up a position in the prow, standing in front of the figurehead. Before him was a speaking cone carved out of the tooth of a grenko [18]. Across one end of this tooth was stretched a diaphragm made of the tier skin and magically enhanced to project a voice spoken into it. The sound boomed forth from the dragon's open mouth and was quite impressive even to those who knew how it worked. The Gogs considered it a miracle.

Bending near the cone, the wizard shouted out something in the uncouth language of the dwarves that sounds to elves like rocks being rattled in the bottom of a barrel. The captain maintained a rigid, stony-faced posture during the entire proceeding, expressing by his attitude that it was all errant nonsense.

From down below came a great squawking bellow-the Gogs were answering. The elven wizard listened and replied. Turning, he faced the captain.

"It is all rather confusing. As near as I can make out, it seems that these humans have come to Drevlin and told the Gogs that we 'Welves' are not gods but slavers, who have been exploiting the dwarves. The Gog king asks that we accept the humans as his gift and that, in return, we do something to reestablish ourselves as divine. He suggests," the wizard added, "doubling the usual amount of treasure."

The elf captain had regained his good humor. "Human prisoners!" He rubbed his hands in satisfaction. "What's more, prisoners who have obviously been attempting to sabotage our water supply. What a valuable find! I shall be decorated for this. Inform the Gogs that we will be happy to comply."

"What about the treasure?"

"Bah! They'll get the same as usual. What do they expect? We don't carry more."

"We could promise to send another ship," stated the wizard, frowning.

The captain's face flushed. "If I made such an agreement, I'd be the laughingstock of the navy! Risk a ship to deliver more treasure to these maggots? Hah!"

"Sir, nothing like this has ever before occurred. It appears to me that the humans have discovered a way to descend safely through the Maelstrom and are endeavoring to disrupt Gog society to their own advantage. If the humans could manage to take control of our water supply . . ." The wizard shook his head, mere words apparently being unable to convey the seriousness of the situation.

"Disrupt Gog society!" Zankor'el laughed. "I'll disrupt their society! I'll go down and take control of their stupid society. It's what we should have done long ago anyway. Tell the grubs we'll take the prisoners off their hands. That should be enough for them."

The ship's wizard glowered, but there was nothing he could do-for the moment, at least. He could not authorize the sending of a treasure ship and he dared not make a promise that he could not keep. That would only make matters worse. He could, however, report this immediately to the Council and advise that action be taken-in regard to both the treasure and this imbecile captain.

Speaking into the cone, the wizard couched the refusal in vague and obscure terms intended to make it sound like an agreement unless anyone actually thought about it. Like most elves, he

considered the Geg mental process to be tantamount to the sound of their language-rocks rattling around in a barrel.

The watership glided down on widespread wings, looking fearsome and majestic. Elven crew members, wielding spars, stood out on the deck and carefully pulled and pushed the descending waterpipe into place above the geyser. When alignment was achieved, the magic was activated. Encased in a conduit of blue light that beamed up from the ground, water shot forth and was sucked into the pipe and carried thousands of menka above to the elves waiting for it on Aristagon. Once this process was begun, the elven ship had completed its primary task. When the holding tanks were full to capacity, the magical flow of water would cease and the waterpipe would be drawn back up. The watership could now drop its treasure and return, or, as in this case, dock and spend a few moments impressing the GEGs.

## CHAPTER 41

### THE LIFTALOFTS, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

THE HIGH FROMAN DIDN'T LIKE IT-ANY OF IT. HE DIDN'T LIKE THE FACT THAT THE prisoners were taking this much too docilely. He didn't like the words that the Welves were dropping on his head instead of more treasure. He didn't like the occasional musical note that emanated from the crowd below the Palm.

Watching the ship, the High Froman thought he had never seen one move so slowly. He could hear the creaking of the cable drawing the gigantic wings inside the huge body, thus speeding the ship's descent, but it wasn't fast enough for Darral Longshoreman. Once these gods and Mad Limbeck were gone, life, he fondly hoped, would return to normal. If he could just get through the next few moments.

The ship settled into place, its wings trimmed so that it maintained enough magic to keep it afloat in the air, hovering near the Palm. The cargo bays opened and the monna fell onto the GEGs waiting below. A few of the GEGs began to clamor for it as it fell, those with keen eyes and good monetary sense latching onto the valuable pieces. But most of the GEGs ignored it. They remained standing, staring up at the top of the arm in tense, eager, (jingling) expectation.

"Hurry, hurry!" muttered the High Froman.

The opening of the hatch took an interminable length of time. The Head Clark, oblivious of everything, was regarding the dragonship with his usual insufferable expression of self-righteousness. Darral longed to shove that expression (along with his teeth) down his brother-in-law's throat.

"Here they come!" The Head Clark chattered excitedly. "Here they come." Whipping around, he fixed a stern eye upon the prisoners. "Mind you treat the Welves with respect. They, at least, are gods!"

"Oh, we will!" piped up Bane with a sweet smile. "We're going to sing them a song."

"Hush, Your Highness, please!" remonstrated Alfred, laying a hand on Bane's shoulder. He added something in human that the High Froman could not understand, and drew the boy back, out of the way. Out of the way of what?

And what was this nonsense about a song?

The High Froman didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

The hatch opened and the gangway slid out from the bulwarks and was fixed firmly to the fingertips of the Palm. The elf captain emerged. Standing in the hatchway, surveying the objects before him, the elf appeared enormous in the ornately decorated iron suit that covered the thin body from toe to neck. His face could not be seen; a helmet shaped like the head of a dragon protected his head. Slung from his shoulder was a ceremonial sword encased in a jeweled scabbard that hung from a belt of frayed embroidered silk.

Seeing that all appeared in order, the elf clunked ponderously across the gangway, the scabbard rattling against his thigh when he walked. He reached the fingers of the Palm, stopped and stood gazing about, the dragon's-head helm lending him a stern and imperious air. The iron suit added an additional foot of height to the elf, who was already tall. He towered over the Glegs and over the humans as well. The helmet was so cunningly and fearsomely carved that even Glegs who had seen it before were awed. The Head Clark sank to his knees.

But the High Froman was too nervous to be impressed.

"No time for that now," snapped Darral Longshoreman, reaching out to grab hold of his brother-in-law and get him back on his feet. "Coppers, bring the gods!"

"Damn!" swore Hugh beneath his breath.

"What is it?" Haplo leaned near.

The captain had clanked his way onto the fingers. The Head Clark had dropped to his knees and the High Froman was tugging at him. Limbeck was fumbling with a sheaf of papers.

"The elf. See that thing he's wearing around his neck? It's a whistle."

"So?"

"Their wizards created it. Supposedly, when the elves blow into it, the sound it makes can magically negate the effects of the song!"

"Which means the elves will fight."

"Yes." Hugh cursed himself. "I knew warriors carried them, but not watership crews! And nothing to fight with except our bare hands and one dagger!"

Nothing. And everything. Haplo needed no weapon. Rip the bandages from his hands, and by his magic alone he could destroy every elf on board that ship or charm them to do his will or send them into enchanted slumber. But he was forbidden to make use of his magic. The first sigil whose fiery

blaze he traced in the air would proclaim him a Patryn-the ancient enemy who had long ago very nearly conquered the ancient world.

Death first, before you betray us. You have the discipline and the courage to make that choice. You have the skill and the wits to make that choice unnecessary.

The High Froman was ordering the coppers to bring the gods. The coppers started toward Limbeck, who firmly and politely elbowed them out of the way. Stepping forward, he rustled his papers and drew in a deep breath.

"Distinguished visitors from another realm. High Froman, Head Clark. My fellow WUPP's. It gives me great pleasure-"

"At least we'll die fighting," said Hugh. "With elves, that's something."

Haplo didn't have to die fighting. He didn't have to die at all. He hadn't expected it would be this frustrating.

The squawky-talk, designed to loudly transmit the blessings of the Welves, was now loudly transmitting Limbeck's speech. "Shut him up!" shouted the High Froman. "-throw up your hackles. No, that can't be right." Limbeck stopped. Peering at the paper, he took out his spectacles and put them over his ears. "Throw off your shackles!" he shouted, now that he could see. The coppers surged forward, grabbed him by the arms.

"Start singing!" Haplo hissed. "I've got an idea!"

Hugh opened his mouth and began to boom out in a deep baritone the first notes of the song. Bane joined in, his shrill voice soaring above Hugh's in an ear-piercing shriek, heedless of tune, but never missing a word. Alfred's voice quavered, almost unheard; the man was pale as bleached bone with fear, and appeared on the verge of collapse.

The Hand that holds the Arc and Bridge, The Fire that rails the Temp'red Span . . .

At the first note, the Gags below let out a cheer and, grabbing their weapons, began to toot and jingle and wheeze and sing with all their might. The coppers above heard the singing below and became flustered and distracted. The elven captain, hearing the notes of the dreaded song, grasped the whistle that hung from around his neck, raised the visor of the helm, and put the whistle to his lips.

Haplo touched the dog lightly on the head, made a sweeping gesture with his hand, and pointed at the elf. "Take him."

All Flame as Heart, surmount the Ridge, All noble Paths are Ellxman.

Sleek and swift and silent as a thrown spear, the dog cut through the tangled crowd and leapt straight at the elf.

The elven iron suit was ancient and archaic, designed primarily to intimidate, a remnant of olden days when such suits had to be worn as protection against the painful affliction known as "the bends" that struck those sailing swiftly up from the Low Realm to realms far above. By the time the

elf captain saw the dog, it was airborne, aiming straight toward him. Instinctively he tried to brace himself for the blow, but his body, encased in the clumsy armor, could not react fast enough. The dog hit him square in the chest and the captain toppled over backward like a felled tree.

Haplo was on the move with the dog, Hugh not far behind. There was no song on the Patryn's lips. The assassin was singing loudly enough for both.

Fire in Heart guides the Will, The Will of Flame, set by Hand,

"Servers unite!" shouted Limbeck, shaking off the annoying coppers. Immersed in his speech, he paid no attention to the chaos around him. "I, myself, ascending to the realms above, there to discover Truth, the most valuable of treasures-"

"Treasures . . ." echoed the squawky-talk.

"Treasure?" The GEGs standing below the Palm looked at each other. "He said treasure. They're giving more away! Up there! Up there!"

The GEGs, still singing, surged toward the door in the base of the arm. A few coppers had been detailed to guard the entrance, but they were overwhelmed by the mob (one was later discovered lying comatose, a tambourine around his neck). The singing GEGs raced up the stairs.

The Hand that moves Ellxman Song, The Song of Fire and Heart and Land . . .

The first GEGs surged through the door at the top of the arm and dashed out onto the base of the golden Palm. The Palm's surface was slippery from the spray of the water shooting into the air. The GEGs slid and slithered and came precariously near hurtling over the edge. Hastening forward, the coppers attempted to stop them, trying without success to herd them back down the stairs. Darral Longshoreman stood in the center of the hooting, clanging crowd and watched, in mute anger and outrage, hundreds of years of peace and tranquillity go up in song.

Before Alfred could stop him, Bane raced excitedly after Hugh and Haplo. Caught up in the melee, Alfred struggled to try to catch the prince. Limbeck's spectacles were knocked off in the tussle. He managed to save them, but-getting knocked about in every direction-couldn't put them on. Blinking, bewildered, he stared around, unable to tell friend from foe, up from down. Seeing the GEG's predicament, Alfred caught hold of Limbeck by the shoulder and dragged him toward the ship.

The Fire born of Journey's End,  
The Flame a part, a lightened call . . .

The elf captain, flat on his back on the Palm's fingers, struggled ineffectively with the dog, whose slashing teeth were trying to find their way between helm and breastplate. Reaching the gangway, Haplo glanced in some concern at an elven wizard hovering over the fallen elf. If the wizard used his magic, the Patryn would have little choice but to respond in kind. Perhaps, in the confusion, he could do it without being seen. But the wizard did not appear interested in fighting. He stood over the elf captain, watching keenly the battle with the dog. The wizard held in his hand a jeweled box; an eager expression lit his face.

Keeping one eye on this strange wizard, Haplo knelt swiftly at the battling elf's side. Making certain he kept clear of the dog's teeth, the Patryn slid his hand beneath the ironclad body, grappling

for the sword. He grasped hold and pulled. The belt to which it was attached gave way and the weapon was his. Haplo considered the sword an instant. The Patryn was loath to kill in this world, particularly elves. He was beginning to see how his lord could make future use of them. Turning, he tossed the weapon to Hugh.

Sword in one hand, his dagger in the other, Hugh dashed across the gangway and through the hatch, singing as he ran.

"Dog! Here! To me!" Haplo called.

Immediately obeying the command, the dog bounded from the chest of the ironclad elf, leaving the captain floundering helplessly on his back, like an overturned turtle. Waiting for the dog, Haplo managed to catch hold of Bane as the child hurtled past him. The prince was in a state of wild excitement, shrieking the song out at the top of his lungs.

"Let me go! I want to see the fight!"

"Where the hell's your keeper? Alfred!"

Searching the crowd for the chamberlain, Haplo got a firm grip on the squirming, protesting boy and held on to him. Alfred was clumsily shepherding Limbeck through the chaos raging on the Palm. The Geg, struggling to keep his feet, was still pouring out his heart.

"And now, distinguished visitors from another realm, I would like to give to you the three tenets of WUPP. First-"

The mob closed around Alfred and Limbeck.

Releasing Bane, Haplo turned to the dog, pointed to the boy, and said, "Watch."

The dog, grinning, sat down on his hind legs and fixed his eyes on Bane. Haplo left them. Bane stared at the dog.

"Good boy," he said, and turned to enter the hatch.

Casually the dog rose to his feet, sank his teeth into the rear end of His Highness's trousers, and held him fast.

Haplo darted back across the gangway to Palm. He extricated Alfred and the speech-making Limbeck from the thick of the crowd and hustled them toward the ship. Several WUPP's, blowing their horns, surged after them, deafening any who tried to stop them. Haplo recognized Jarre among them and tried to catch her eye, but she was bashing a copper with a wheezy-wail and didn't see him.

Despite the confusion, Haplo attempted to keep an ear attuned for fighting on board the ship. He heard nothing except Hugh's singing, however, not even the sound of blowing whistles.

"Here, chamberlain, the kid's your responsibility."

Haplo freed Bane from the dog and thrust the kid toward a shaken Alfred. The Patryn and the dog raced across the gangway; Haplo assumed everyone else was following.

Coming into the dark ship from the sunlight glaring off the golden Palm, the Patryn was forced to pause and wait for his eyes to adjust. Behind him, he heard Limbeck cry out, stumble, and fall to his knees, the sudden absence of light and the loss of his spectacles combining to effectively blind the Geg.

Haplo's vision cleared quickly. He saw now why he had heard no sounds of fighting. Hugh stood facing an elf with a naked sword in his hand. Behind the elf ranged the rest of the ship's crew, armed and waiting. The silver war robes of a ship's wizard caught the sunlight, gleaming brightly from where he stood behind the warriors. No one spoke. Hugh had quit singing. He watched the elf narrowly, waiting for the attack.

"The sullen walk, the flick'ring aim . . ." Bane trilled the words, his voice loud and jarring.

The elf's gaze slid toward the child, the hand grasping the sword shivered slightly, and his tongue flicked over dry lips. The other elves, ranged behind him, were seemingly awaiting his orders, for they kept their eyes fixed on him as their leader.

Haplo swiveled about. "Sing, dammit!" he shouted, and Alfred, jolted into action, raised his voice—a piping tenor. Limbeck was shuffling through his papers, trying to find the place where he'd left off.

There was Jarre, coming across the gangplank, more WUPP's behind her, all gleeful and eager for treasure. Haplo signaled frantically, and finally she saw him.

"Keep away!" he motioned, mouthing the words at the same time. "Keep away!"

Jarre halted her troop and they obediently (and a few literally) fell back at her command. The GEGs craned their heads to see, watching intently to make certain no one got a glass bead ahead of them.

"Fire leads again from futures, all." "

The singing was louder now, Alfred's voice stronger, carrying the tune, Bane growing hoarse but never flagging. Certain now the GEGs would not interfere, Haplo turned from them to Hugh and the elf. Holding the same positions, swords raised, each watched the other warily.

"We mean you no harm," said Hugh in elven.

The elf raised a delicate eyebrow, glanced around at his armed crew, who outnumbered them twenty to one.

"No kidding," replied the elf.

But the Hand knew something of the ways of elves, apparently, for he continued without pause, speaking their language fluently.

"We've been stranded down here. We want to escape. We're bound for the High Realm—"

The elf sneered. "You're lying, human. The High Realm is banned. Ringed round by magical protection."

"Not to us. They'll let us pass," said Hugh. "This child"-he pointed at Bane-"is the son of a mysteriarch. He'll-"

Limbeck found his place. "Distinguished visitors from another realm-"

From outside came a clunking and clattering of iron.

"The whistles! Use the whistles, you fools!"

Two whistles screeched-the elf captain's and that of the wizard holding the box.

The dog growled, its ears pricked, its hackles bristled. Haplo stroked the animal reassuringly, but it wouldn't be calmed and began to howl in pain. The clunking noise and the whistling grew louder. A shadow appeared in the hatchway, blotting out the sunlight.

Alfred shrank back, pulling Bane behind him. Limbeck was reading his speech and didn't see the captain. An ironclad arm shoved the Geg roughly aside, knocking him into a bulkhead. The elf stood in the hatchway, blasting on his whistle. He had removed the helm. The eyes, glaring at his crew, were red with rage.

He took the whistle from his lips long enough to shout savagely, "Do as I command, damn you, lieutenant!" The wizard, box in hand, hovered at his charge's elbow.

The elf facing Hugh lifted the whistle with a hand that seemed to move of its own accord. The lieutenant's eyes went from his captain to Hugh and back to the captain again. The rest of the crew either lifted the whistles or toyed with them. A few blew tentative bleeps.

Hugh didn't understand what was going on, but he guessed that victory hung upon a note, so to speak, and so began to sing hoarsely. Haplo joined in, the captain blasted away on the whistle, the dog howled in pain, and everyone, including Limbeck, came out strong on the last two verses:

The Arc and Bridge are thoughts and heart.

The Span a life, the Ridge a part.

The lieutenant's hand moved and grasped the whistle. Haplo, marking an elven warrior near the officer, tensed, ready to jump the man and try to wrest away his weapon. But the lieutenant did not put the whistle to his lips. He gave the thong on which it hung a vicious jerk, broke it, and hurled it to the deck. There was ragged cheering among the elven crew, and many-including the ship's wizard-followed their lieutenant's example.

The captain's face flushed crimson with rage, blotches of white stood out on his thin cheeks, foam flecked his lips.

"Traitors! Traitors led by a coward! Weesham, you are my witness. They are mutineers, filthy rebels, and when we get back-"

"We're not going back, captain," said the lieutenant, standing straight and tall, his gray eyes cool. "Stop that singing!" he added.

Hugh had only a vague idea of what was going on; apparently they'd stumbled across some sort of private feud among the elves. But he was quick to recognize that it could turn to their advantage, and he made a motion with his hand. Everyone hushed, Alfred ordering Bane twice to keep silent and finally clapping his hand over the boy's mouth.

"I told you this man was a coward!" The captain addressed the crew. "He hasn't the guts to fight these beasts! Get me out of this thing!" The elf captain could not move in the iron suit. His geir laid a hand upon the armor and spoke a word. The iron melted away. Bounding forward, the elf captain put his hand to his side, only to discover his sword was gone. He found it almost immediately; Hugh was pointing it at his throat.

"No, human," cried the lieutenant, moving to block Hugh.

"This is my battle. Twice, captain, you have called me coward and I could not defend my honor. Now you can no longer hide behind your rank!"

"You say that very bravely, lieutenant, considering that you are armed and I am not!"

The lieutenant turned to Hugh. "As you can see, human, this is an affair of honor. I am told you humans understand such things. I ask that you give the captain his sword. That leaves you weaponless, of course, but you didn't have much chance anyway- being one against so many. If I live, I pledge myself to assist you. If I fall, then you must take your chances as before."

Hugh considered the odds, then, shrugging, handed over the sword. The two elves squared off, falling into fighting stance. The crew was intent on watching the battle between their captain and his lieutenant. Hugh edged his way near one of them, and Haplo guessed that the assassin wouldn't be weaponless for long.

The Patryn had his own worries. He had been keeping his eye on the riot raging outside the ship and saw that the WUPP's, having defeated the coppers, were blood-crazed and searching for trouble. Should the GEGs board the ship, the elves would think it was an all-out attack, forget their own differences, and fight back. Already Haplo could see the GEGs pointing at the ship, yammering about treasure.

Sword clashed against sword. The captain and lieutenant thrust and parried. The elf wizard watched eagerly, clutching the inlaid box he held to his breast. Moving swiftly but smoothly, hoping to attract as little attention as possible, Haplo made his way over to the hatch. The dog trotted along at his heels.

Jarre stood on the gangway, her hands grasping a broken tambourine, her eyes fixed on Limbeck. Undaunted, the GEG had climbed to his feet, adjusted his spectacles, found his place, and resumed speaking.

"-a better life for everyone-"

Behind Jarre, the GEGs were rallying, urging each other to go into the ship and grab the spoils of war. Haplo found the mechanism for raising and lowering the gangplank, and quickly studied it to understand how it operated. His only problem now was the female GEG.

"Jarre!" Haplo cried, waving his hand. "Get off the plank! I'm going to raise it! We've got to leave now!"

"Limbeck!" Jarre's voice was inaudible, but he understood the movement of her lips.

"I'll take care of him and bring him back to you safely. I promise!" That was an easy promise to make. Once Limbeck was properly molded, he would be ready to lead the GEGs and develop them into a united fighting force—an army willing to lay down their lives for the Lord of the Nexus.

Jarre took a step forward. Haplo didn't want her. He didn't trust her. Something had changed her. Alfred had changed her. She wasn't the same fiery revolutionary she'd been before she went off with him. That man, meek and inoffensive as he seemed, bore watching.

By this time the GEGs had goaded each other to action and were marching unimpeded toward the ship. Behind him, Haplo could hear the duel between the two elves rage on unabated. He set the mechanism, prepared to raise the gangway. Jarre would slip and fall to her death. It would look like an accident, the GEGs would blame it on the elves. He put his hand on the mechanism, ready to activate it, when he saw the dog dash past him, running across the plank.

"Dog! Get back here!"

But either the animal was ignoring him or, in the midst of the singing and the sword clashing, it couldn't hear him.

Frustrated, Haplo let go of the mechanism and started out onto the gangway after the animal. The dog had latched on to the sleeve of Jarre's blouse and was tugging her off the plank, herding her in the direction of the Palm.

Jarre, distracted, looked down at the dog, and as she did so, saw her people advancing on the ship.

"Jarre!" cried Haplo. "Turn them back! The Welves will kill them! They'll kill all of us if you attack!" She looked back at him, then at Limbeck. "It's up to you, Jarre!" Haplo shouted. "You're their leader now."

The dog had loosed its hold and was gazing up at her, its eyes bright, its tail wagging.

"Good-bye, Limbeck," whispered Jarre. Leaning down, she gave the dog a fierce hug, then turned and, shoulders squared, stepped off the gangway onto the fingers of the Palm. Facing the GEGs, she raised her hands and they halted.

"More treasure is being dropped. You must all go down below! There's nothing up here."

"Below? It's being dropped below?"

Hastily the GEGs whirled around and began to push and shove, trying to reach the stairs.

"Get in here, dog!" Haplo ordered.

The animal gamboled across the deck, its tongue lolling out of its mouth in an irrepressible grin of triumph.

"Proud of yourself, huh?" Haplo said, releasing the mechanism and pulling on the ropes, drawing up the gangplank as swiftly as possible. He heard Jarre's voice raised in command, heard the GEGS shout in support. The gangway slid inside. Closing the hatch, Haplo sealed it tight. The GEGS could no longer be seen or heard.

"Disobedient mutt, I should have you skinned," muttered Haplo, fondling the dog's silky ears.

Raising his voice about the clashing of steel, Limbeck carried on: "And in conclusion, I would like to say..."

## CHAPTER 42

### THE LIFTALOFTS, DREVLIN, LOW REALM

HAPLO TURNED FROM THE HATCH IN TIME TO SEE THE LIEUTENANT THRUST HIS SWORD through the elf captain's body. The lieutenant yanked his weapon free, and the captain slid to the deck. The crew was silent, no sound of either cheering or lamenting. The lieutenant, his face cold and impassive, stood back to allow the wizard room to kneel beside the dying elf. Haplo assumed that this wizard, who had been in attendance upon the captain, was a healer. The Patryn was surprised, therefore, to see the wizard make no gestures toward helping the dying. He held the inlaid box he carried up to the captain's lips.

"Speak the words!" the geir hissed.

The captain made some attempt, but blood gushed out of his mouth.

The wizard appeared angry and, propping up the elf's head, forced the rapidly dimming eyes to look at the box.

"Speak the words! It is your duty to your people!"

Slowly, with an obvious effort, the elf gasped out words that were, to Haplo, unintelligible. The captain sank back, lifeless. The wizard snapped the box shut and, glancing suspiciously at the other elves, guarded it jealously, as if he had just locked away some rare and priceless jewel.

"You dare not harm me!" he whined. "I am a weesham, protected by law! A curse will follow you all your days if you prevent me from carrying out my sacred task!"

"I have no intention of harming you," said the lieutenant, his lip curled in scorn. "Although what possible use the soul of that wretch can be to our people is best known to yourselves. Still, he died with honor, if he did not live with it. Perhaps that counts for something." Reaching down, he picked up the dead elf's sword and, turning, handed it-hilt-first-to Hugh.

"Thank you, human. And you." The elf glanced at Haplo. "I saw the peril we faced from the GEGS. Perhaps, when we have leisure to discuss such things, you can explain to me what is going on in Drevlin. Now we must prepare to swiftly take our leave." The elf turned back to Hugh. "What you said about the High Realm, is that true?"

"Yes." Hugh took the scabbard off the dead elf, thrust the sword into it. "The boy"-he jerked a thumb at Bane, who was standing mute, staring curiously at the corpse-"is the son of one Sinistrad, a mysteriarch."

"How came such a child to be in your care?" The elf was looking at Bane thoughtfully. Bane, his pale face almost translucent, caught the elf's gaze. Meeting the gray eyes, he smiled sweetly, bravely, and made a grave and graceful bow. The lieutenant was charmed.

Hugh's face darkened. "Never mind. It's not your affair. We were attempting to reach the High Realm when our ship was attacked by your people. We fought them off, but my ship was damaged and fell into the Maelstrom."

"Your ship? Humans do not fly dragonships!"

"Humans named Hugh the Hand fly what they please."

The elves murmured, the first sounds they had made since the commencement of the duel. The lieutenant nodded.

"I see. That explains much."

Withdrawing a lace-edged piece of cloth from the pocket of his uniform, the elf used it to wipe blood from his sword blade, then slid the weapon into its sheath. "You are known to be a human of honor-rather peculiar honor, but honor nonetheless. If you will excuse me, humans, I have duties to perform now that I am captain of this vessel. Midshipman Ilth will show you to quarters."

So might slaves be dismissed from the presence of the master, Haplo thought. The elf has chosen to side with us, but he has no love for us and apparently little respect. The elven midshipman motioned them to follow him.

Limbeck was kneeling beside the body of the dead elf.

"I was right," he said when he felt Haplo's hand on his shoulder. "They're not gods."

"No," said Haplo. "They're not. There are no gods in this world, as I've told you."

Limbeck glanced about, looking very much as if he had lost something and hadn't the vaguest idea where to begin searching for it. "Do you know," he said after a moment, "I'm almost sorry."

Following the midshipman off the bridge, Haplo heard one of the elves ask, "What do we do with the body, lieutenant? Throw it overboard?"

"No," said the lieutenant. "He was an officer and his remains will be treated with respect. Place the body in the hold. We will stop in the Mid Realm and deposit it and the gear with it. And from now on, mate, you will address me as captain."

The elf was moving swiftly to command his crew's respect, knowing that he must knit up the threads of discipline he himself had unraveled. Haplo awarded the elf silent commendation, and accompanied the others below.

The young elf placed them in what Hugh said was the shipboard equivalent of a dungeon. The brig was bare and cheerless. There were hooks on the walls where hammocks could be slung up at night for sleeping. During the day, they were stowed away to leave enough space to move about. Small portholes provided a view of outside.

Having informed them that he would return with food and water once the ship was safely through the Maelstrom, the midshipman shut the door and they heard the bolt slide home.

"We're prisoners!" cried Bane.

Hugh settled himself, crouching on his haunches, his back against a bulkhead. He appeared to be in a bad mood. Drawing his pipe out of his pocket, he clamped it between his teeth.

"You want to see prisoners, go take a look at the humans working below deck. They're the reason he's keeping us locked up. We could take over this ship if we freed the slaves, and he knows it."

"Then let's do it!" said Bane, his face flushed with excitement.

Hugh glowered at him. "You think you can fly this ship, Your Highness? Maybe like you flew mine, huh?"

Bane flushed in anger. Hand clutching the feather, the child swallowed his rage and marched across deck to glare out the portholes.

"And you trust him?" Alfred inquired somewhat anxiously. "This elf?"

"No more than he trusts me." Hugh sucked moodily on the empty pipe.

"So are they converted or whatever happens to elves when they hear that song?" asked Haplo.

"Converted?" Hugh shook his head. "I don't think so. Elves truly affected by that song lose all awareness of their surroundings. It's as if they've been transported to another world. This elf's doing what he's doing for himself. The lure of the reputed wealth of the High Realm and the fact that no elves have ever dared travel up there is what's drawing him."

"Wouldn't it occur to him that it would be easier just to toss us out into the storm and keep the kid for himself?"

"Yeah, maybe. But elves have a 'peculiar' honor. In some way-we'll probably never know how-we did this elf a service by delivering his captain into his hands. His crew witnessed it. He'd lose standing in their eyes by slaughtering us just to make things easier on himself."

"Honor, then, is important to the elves?"

"Important!" Hugh grunted. "They'd sell their souls for it, those souls the vultures don't get first."

Interesting to know. Haplo stored up the information. His lord was in the market for souls.

"So we're taking a boatload of elven pirates up to the High Realm." Alfred sighed, then began nervous fussing. "Your Highness, you must be tired. Let me put up one of these hammocks . . ." Tripping over a plank, the chamberlain sprawled facefirst on the deck.

"I'm not tired," protested Bane. "And don't worry about my father and these elves. My father'll take care of them!"

"Don't bother getting up," suggested Hugh to the prostrate chamberlain. "We'll be flying through the Maelstrom and then no one'll be on his feet. Everyone sit down and brace yourself."

Sound advice. Haplo could see the first storm clouds scudding past. Lightning flashed blindingly; thunder boomed. The ship began to pitch and buck. The Patryn relaxed in a corner. The dog curled up, nose to tail, at his feet. Alfred hunched miserably against the bulkhead and pulled a protesting Bane down by the seat of his pants.

Only Limbeck remained standing, staring entranced out the porthole.

"Limbeck," said Haplo. "Sit down. It's dangerous."

"I can't believe it," murmured the Geg, without turning.

"There are no gods . . . and I am going to heaven."

## CHAPTER 43

### DEEPSKY, MID REALM

LIEUTENANT BOTHAR-IN, NOW CAPTAIN BOTHAR'EL [19], SAILED THE DRAGONSHIP SAFELY through the Maelstrom. Keeping clear of encounters with other elven ships, he steered for the Aristagonian port town of Suthnas—a safe haven recommended by Hugh the Hand. Here he planned to stop briefly to take on food and water and to rid his ship of the geir, the former captain's body, and the geir's little box.

Hugh knew Suthnas well; he had put up there when his ship needed the magic strengthened or repairs. He gave the elf captain the name because he, the Hand, intended to leave the ship himself.

The assassin had made up his mind. He cursed the day he met that "king's messenger." He cursed the day he had saddled himself with this contract. Nothing had gone right; now he had lost his own dragonship, almost his life, and damn near his self-respect. His plan to capture the elven ship had worked, but like everything else he touched these days, not the way it was supposed to. He was to have been the captain, not this elf. Why had he let himself get caught up in that damn duel? Why hadn't he just killed them both?

Hugh was shrewd enough to know that if he had fought, he and all the others would probably be dead right now. But he ignored the logic. He refused to admit that he had done what he had done in order to save lives, to protect Alfred, Limbeck . . . the prince.

No! I did it for myself. Not for anyone else. No one else matters and I'll prove it. I'll leave them, disembark at Suthnas, let these fools go on to the High Realm and take their chances with a mysteriarch. Forget it. I'll write off my losses, toss in my cards, get up and leave the table.

The port of Suthnas was run by elves whose purses meant more to them than politics, and it had become a haven for water smugglers, rebels, deserters, and a few renegade humans. The prisoners had a good view of the town from the porthole and most, after seeing it, decided they were better off where they were.

The town was nothing more than a squalid assemblage of inns and taverns built near the harbor; the homes of the town's inhabitants bunched like a flock of sheep on the side of a coralite cliff. The buildings were shabby and run-down; a smell of cooked cabbage-an elven favorite-hung in the air, undoubtedly because mounds of it were rotting in the garbage-infested alleyways. But, because it stood in the sun, with blue sky above it, Suthnas was a beautiful and awe-inspiring sight to the Geg.

Limbeck had never seen streets drenched in sunlight, the firmament glittering like a million jewels in the sky above. He had never seen people strolling about aimlessly, not scurrying hither and yon on some business of the Kicksey-Winsey. He had never felt a gentle breeze upon his cheek or smelled the smells of living, growing things, or even things that were rotting and dying. The houses that Hugh told him were hovels seemed to the Geg to be palaces. Limbeck looked on all this splendor, and it came to him that what he saw had been bought and paid for by the sweat and blood of his people. The Geg's face saddened, he became silent and withdrawn, and Haplo watched with a smile.

Hugh paced about the hold, staring out the portholes, fidgeting and inwardly fuming. Captain Bothar'el had given the assassin permission to leave if he wanted.

"You should all go," the captain said. "Leave now, while you have the chance."

"But we're going to the High Realm! You promised!" Bane cried. "You promised," he repeated, gazing up at the elf with pleading eyes.

"Yes," said the elf, staring at the child. Shaking his head, as if to break a hold, he turned to Alfred. "And you?"

"I stay with my prince, of course."

The elf turned to Limbeck, who, not understanding, looked at Haplo.

"I'm going to see the world, the whole world," said the Geg firmly when he heard the translation. "After all, it exists because of my people."

"I'm with him," said the Patryn, smiling and jerking a bandage-wrapped thumb in the direction of the Geg.

"So," said Bothar'el, turning to Hugh, "only you are leaving?"

"It looks that way."

Hugh didn't leave, however.

While they were docked, one of the midshipmen looked into the brig. "Are you still aboard, human? The captain is returning. You should go now, quickly."

Hugh didn't move.

"I wish you would come with us, Sir Hugh," said Bane, "My father would like very much to meet you and... thank you."

That cinched it. The kid wanted him. He'd leave right now. Right . . . now.

"Well, human?" demanded the midshipman. "Are you coming?"

Hugh fished around in a pocket, dragged out his last coin- payment for assassinating a child. Grunting, he tossed it at the elf. "I've decided to stay and find my fortune. Go buy me some tobacco."

The elves did not linger long in Suthnas. Once the geir reached civilized lands, he would report the mutiny and the Carfa'shon would be sought by all the ships of the line. Once in deepsky, Captain Bothar'el worked the human slaves, the crew, and himself to the point of exhaustion until the ship was, he believed, safely beyond possible pursuit.

Hours later, when the Lords of Night had cast their cloak over the sun, the captain found time to speak to his "guests."

"So, you heard the news," were the captain's first words, addressed to Hugh. "I want you to know that I could have made a nice profit off the lot of you, but I have a debt to repay to you. I consider at least part of it canceled."

"Where's my tobacco?" Hugh demanded.

"What news?" asked Alfred.

The captain raised an eyebrow. "Don't you know? I assumed that was the reason you didn't leave the ship." He tossed a pouch in the assassin's direction.

Hugh caught it handily, opened it, and sniffed. Removing his pipe, he began filling it.

"There's a reward out for your head, Hugh the Hand."

Hugh grunted. "Nothing new."

"A total of two hundred thousand barls."

The Hand looked up and whistled. "Now, that's a fine price. This has to do with the kid?" His glance shifted to Bane. The child had begged pen and paper from the elves and had done nothing but draw ever since he came on board. No one interfered with his latest amusement. It was safer than letting him pick berries.

"Yes. You and this man"-the elf gestured at Alfred-"are reported to have kidnapped the prince of Volkaran. There is a price of one hundred thousand barls on your head," he said to the horrified chamberlain, "two hundred thousand for Hugh the Hand, and the reward is good only if one or both are brought in alive."

"What about me?" Bane raised his head. "Isn't there any reward for me?"

"Stephen doesn't want you back," Hugh growled.

The prince appeared to consider this, then giggled. "Yes, I guess you're right," he said, and returned to his work.

"But this is impossible!" cried Alfred. "I ... I am His Highness's servant! I came with him to protect him-"

"Exactly," said Hugh. "That's just what Stephen didn't want."

"I don't understand any of this," said Captain Bothar'el. "I hope, for your sakes, you are being honest about the High Realm. I need money to run this ship and pay my crew and I've just passed up a lot."

"Of course it's true!" cried Bane, lower lip thrust forward in a charming pout. "I am the son of Sinistrad, Mysteriarch of the Seventh House. My father will reward you well!"

"He had better!" said the captain.

The elf glanced around sternly at his prisoners, then stalked out of the hold. Bane, looking after him, laughed and returned to his scribbling.

"I can never go back to Volkaran!" murmured Alfred. "I'm an exile."

"You're dead unless we can figure some way out of this," said Hugh, lighting his pipe with a coal from the small magepot they used to heat their food and to keep themselves warm at night.

"But Stephen wants us alive."

"Only so that he can have the pleasure of killing us himself."

Bane, looking up at him, smiled slyly. "So if you had gone out there, someone would have recognized you and turned you in. You stayed because of me, didn't you? I saved your life."

Hugh made no comment, preferring to pretend that he hadn't heard. He relapsed into a brooding, thoughtful silence. When his pipe went out, he didn't notice.

Coming back to himself sometime later, he noted that everyone-except Alfred-had fallen asleep. The chamberlain was standing beside the porthole, gazing out into night's gray gloom. The Hand, rising to stretch his stiff legs, wandered over.

"What do you make of this fellow Haplo?" Hugh asked.

"Why?" Alfred jumped, stared at the assassin fearfully. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason. Calm down. I just wanted to know what you made of him, that's all."

"Nothing! I make nothing of him at all! If you will excuse me, sir," Alfred interrupted when Hugh would have spoken, "I'm very tired. I must get some sleep."

Now what was that all about? The chamberlain returned to his blanket. He lay down, but Hugh, watching him, saw that Alfred was far from sleep. He lay stiff and rigid, rubbing his hands, tracing unseen lines upon the skin. His face could have been a mask in a play called Terror and Misery.

Hugh could almost pity him.

Almost, but not quite. No, the walls Hugh'd built around himself were still standing, still strong and unbroken. There had been a tiny crack, letting in a ray of light-harsh and painful to eyes accustomed to darkness. But he'd blocked it up, covered it over. Whatever hold the child had on him was magic-something beyond the assassin's control, at least until they came to the High Realm. Retreating to a corner of his cell, Hugh relaxed and went to sleep.

The flight to the High Realm took the elven dragonship almost two weeks, far longer than it should have, according to Captain Bothar'el's calculations. What he hadn't calculated on was that his crew and slaves all tired far too quickly. Magical spells cast by the ship's wizard enabled them to withstand the reduced air pressure, but he could do nothing to relieve the thinness of the air that left them always feeling as if they were short of breath.

The elven crew grew nervous, sullen, and uneasy. It was eerie, flying through the vast and empty sky. Above them, the firmament glittered and sparkled brightly by day, glistened with a pale sheen at night. Even the most gullible person aboard could see that the mysterious firmament was not made of jewels floating in the heavens.

"Chunks of ice," announced Captain Bothar'el, studying it through the spyglass.

"Ice?" The second in command appeared almost relieved. "That's stopped us, then, hasn't it, captain, sir? We can't fly through ice. We might as well turn back."

"No." Bothar'el snapped his spyglass shut. It seemed he was answering himself, replying to some inner argument rather than to the words of his mate. "We've come this far. The High Realm is up here somewhere. We're going to find it."

"Or die trying," said the second in command, but he said it to himself.

On they sailed, higher and higher, drawing nearer the firmament that hung spanning the sky like a monstrous radiant necklace. They saw no sign of life of any type, let alone a land where dwelt the most highly skilled of human magi.

The air grew colder. They were forced to wear every article of clothing they possessed, and even then it was difficult to keep warm. The crew began to mutter among themselves that this was mad folly, they would all perish up here, either of the cold or stranded in deepsky, lacking the strength to fly back.

After days passed with no sign of life, supplies running short and the cold growing almost unbearable, Captain Bothar'el went below to tell the "guests" he had changed his mind, they were returning to the Mid Realm.

He found the prisoners wrapped in every blanket they could get their hands on, huddled over the magepot. The Geg was deathly ill-either from the cold or the change in air pressure. The captain didn't know what kept him alive. (Alfred did, but took care no one should ask him.)

Bothar'el was just about to make his announcement when a shout hailed him.

"What is it?" The captain ran back to the bridge. "Have we found it?"

"I'd say, sir," said a stammering midshipman, staring with wide eyes out the porthole, "that it's found us!"

## CHAPTER 44

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

IRIDAL STOOD AT THE CASEMENT, GAZING OUT THE CRYSTAL WINDOW. THE BEAUTY OF the sight before her was incomparable. The opal walls of her castle glistened in the sunlight, adding to the shimmering colors of the magical dome that was the High Realm's sky. Below the walls, the castle's parks and forests, carefully sculptured and tended, were traversed by pathways whose crushed marble was pricked by glittering gems. Its beauty could stop the heart. But it was long since Iridal had seen beauty in anything. Her name itself, meaning "of the rainbow," mocked her. All in her world was gray. As for her heart, it seemed to have stopped beating a long time ago.

"Wife." The voice came from behind her.

Iridal shivered. She had supposed she was alone in her room. She had not heard the silent padding of slipped feet or the rustling of silken robes that invariably announced the presence of her husband. He had not entered her room for many years and she felt the chill of his presence grip her heart and squeeze it tightly. Fearfully she turned around and faced him.

"What do you want?" Her hand clutched her gown tightly around her, as if the frail fabric might armor her against him. "Why do you come here to my private quarters?"

Sinistrad glanced at the bed with its flowing curtains and tasseled hangings, its silken sheets, smelling faintly of the lavender leaves scattered on them every morning and carefully brushed away each night.

"Since when is a husband forbidden his wife's bedchamber?"

"Leave me alone!" The chill in her heart seemed to have spread to her lips. She could barely move them.

"Do not worry, wife. For ten cycles I have not come here for the purpose you fear, and I do not intend to resume. Such doings are as repugnant to me as they are you; we might as well all be

beasts, rutting in dark and stinking caves. However, it does bring me around to the subject I came to discuss. Our son is coming at last."

"Our son!" Iridal cried. "Your son. He is none of mine!"

"Let us rejoice," said Sinistrad with a pale, dry smile. "I am glad you take this view of the matter, my dear. I trust you will remember it when the boy arrives and that you will not interfere with our work."

"What could I possibly do?"

"Bitterness does not become you, wife. Remember, I know your tricks. Tears, pouting, little hugs for the child that you think I will not see. I warn you, Iridal, I will see. My eyes are everywhere, even in the back of my head. The boy is mine. You have pronounced it. Never forget it."

"Tears! Don't fear my tears, husband. They dried up long ago."

"Fear? I'm not afraid of anything, least of all you, wife," returned Sinistrad with some amusement. "But you could be an annoyance, confuse the boy's mind. I don't have time to fool with you."

"Why not just lock me up in the dungeon? I am already your prisoner in all but name."

"I had considered it, but the boy would take an undue interest in a mother he is forbidden to see. No, it will be far better if you appear and smile prettily at him, allow him to see that you are weak and spineless."

"You want me to teach him to despise me."

Sinistrad shrugged. "I do not aspire to that much, my dear. It will be far better for my plans if he thinks nothing of you at all. And, by good fortune, we have something that will ensure your proper behavior. Hostages. Three humans and a Geg are his traveling companions. How important it must make you feel, Iridal, to know that you hold so many lives in your hands!"

The woman's face went livid. Her knees gave way, and she sank into a chair. "You have sunk low, Sinistrad, but you have never committed murder! I don't believe your threat!"

"Let us rephrase that statement, wife. You have never known me to commit murder. But then, let us both admit that you have never known me-period. Good day to you, wife. I will give you notice when you are to appear to greet our son."

Bowing, hand over his heart in the time-honored custom of husband and wife, turning even this gesture to one of disdain and mockery, Sinistrad left Iridal's chambers.

Shivering uncontrollably, the woman crouched in her chair and stared out the window with dry, burning eyes. . . .

". . . My father says you are an evil man."

The girl, Iridal, gazed out of a window in her father's dwelling. Standing quite near her, almost touching her, but never coming that close, was a young mysteriarch. He was the handsome, wicked

hero of Iridal's nurse's romantic tales-smooth, pallid skin; liquid brown eyes that always seemed to be the repository of fascinating secrets; a smile that promised to share these secrets, if someone could only draw close enough to him. The black, gilt-edged skullcap that marked his standing as a master of discipline of the Seventh House-the highest rank attainable by wizards-dipped to a sharp point that came to the bridge of his thin nose. Sweeping upward between the eyes, the cap gave him an appearance of wisdom and added expression to his face that might otherwise be lacking-he had no eyebrows or eyelashes. His entire body was hairless, a defect of birth.

"Your father is right, Iridal," said Sinistrad softly. Reaching out his hand, he toyed with a strand of her hair, the nearest move to intimacy he ever made. "I am evil. I do not deny it." There was a touch of melancholy in his voice that melted Iridal's heart as his touch melted her flesh.

Turning to face him, she held out her hands, clasped his, and smiled at him. "No, beloved! The world may call you that, but it is because they don't know you! Not as I know you."

"But I am, Iridal." His voice was gentle and in earnest. "I tell you the truth now because I don't want you to reproach me with it later. Marry me, and you marry darkness."

His finger wound the strand of hair tighter and tighter, drawing her nearer and nearer. His words and the serious tone in which he spoke them made her heart falter painfully, but the pain was sweet and exciting. The darkness that hung over him- dark rumors, dark words spoken about him among the community of mysteriarchs-was exciting too. Her life, all its sixteen years, had been dull and prosaic. Living with a father who doted on her following her mother's death, Iridal had been raised by a grandmotherly nanny. Her father could not bear life's rough winds to blow too harshly against his daughter's tender cheek and he had kept her sheltered and cloistered, wrapped in a smothering cocoon of love.

The butterfly that emerged from that cocoon was bright and shining; its feeble wings carried it straight into Sinistrad's web.

"If you are evil," she said, twining her hands around his arm, "it is the world that has made you so, by refusing to listen to your plans and thwarting your genius at every turn. When I am walking by your side, I will bring you to the sunlight."

"Then you will be my wife? You will go against your father's wishes?"

"I am of age. I can make my own choice. And, beloved, I choose you."

Sinistrad said nothing, but, smiling his secret-promising smile, he kissed the strand of hair wound tightly around his finger. . . .

. . . Iridal lay in her bed, weak from the travails of birth. Her nurse had finished bathing the tiny infant and, wrapping him in a blanket, carried him to his mother. The occasion should have been one of joy, but the old nurse, who had been Iridal's own, wept when she laid the child in his mother's arms.

The door to the bedchamber opened. Iridal made a low moaning sound and clutched the baby so tightly he squaled. The nurse, looking up, smoothed back the woman's sweat-damp curls with gentle hands. A look of defiance hardened the wrinkled face.

"Leave us," said Sinistrad, speaking to the nurse, his gaze fixed upon his wife.

"I will not leave my lamb!"

The eyes of the mysteriarch shifted. The nurse held her ground, though the hand touching Iridal's fair hair trembled. Grabbing hold of the nurse's fingers, Iridal kissed them and bade her leave in a low and tremulous voice.

"I cannot, child!" The nurse began to weep. "It's cruel, what he means to do! Cruel and unnatural!"

"Get out," Sinistrad snarled, "or I will burn you to ashes where you stand!"

The nurse cast him a look of malice, but she withdrew from the room. She knew who would suffer if she did not.

"Now that this is over, she must go, wife," said Sinistrad, coming to stand beside the bed. "I will not be defied in my own house."

"Please, no, husband. She is the only company I have." Iridal's arms clung to her baby. She looked up at her husband pleadingly, one hand plucking at the blanket. "And I will need her help with our son! See!" She drew the blanket aside, exhibiting a red, wrinkled face, eyes squinched shut, small fists bunched lightly together. "Isn't he beautiful, husband?" She hoped desperately, despairingly, that a glimpse of his own flesh and blood would change his mind.

"He suits my purpose," said Sinistrad, reaching out his hands.

"No!" Iridal shrank away from him. "Not my child! Please, don't!"

"I told you my intentions the day you announced your pregnancy. I told you then that I had married you for this purpose and this alone, that I had bedded you for the same reason, and no other. Give me the child!"

Iridal huddled over her baby, her head bowed, her long hair covering the boy in a shining curtain. She refused to look at her husband, as if looking at him gave him power. By shutting her eyes to him, she might make him vanish. But it didn't work, because with her eyes closed, she saw him as he had been that terrible day when her bright illusions of love were completely and irrevocably shattered. The day she had told him her joyous news, that she carried his child within her. That day he had told her, in cold and passionless tones, what he intended to do with the babe.

Iridal should have known he was plotting something. She did know, but wouldn't admit it. On her bridal night, her life had changed from rainbow dreams to gray emptiness. His love-making was without love, without passion. He was brisk, businesslike, keeping his eyes open, staring at her intently, willing her to something that she could not understand. Night after night he came to her. During the day, he rarely saw her, rarely spoke to her. She grew to dread the night visits and had once ventured to refuse him, begging that he treat her with love. He had taken her that night with violence and pain and she had never dared refuse him again. Perhaps that very night their child had been conceived. A month later she knew she was pregnant.

From the day she told him, Sinistrad never came to her bedroom again.

The child in her arms wailed. Strong hands grabbed Iridal by the hair and jerked her head back. Strong hands wrenched her child from her grasp. Pleading, the mother crawled from her bed and stumbled after her husband as he walked away, their crying infant in his arms. But she was too weak. Tangled in the bloodstained bedclothes, Iridal fell to the floor. One hand caught hold of his robes, dragging him back.

"My baby! Don't take my baby!"

He regarded her coldly, with disgust. "I told you the day I asked you to be my wife what I was. I have never lied to you. You chose not to believe me, and that is your own fault. You have brought this upon yourself." Reaching down, he grasped the fabric of his robe and jerked it from her feeble, clutching fingers. Turning, he left the room.

When he came back later that night, he brought another baby-the true child born to the wretched king and queen of Volkaran and Uylandia. Sinistrad handed it to Iridal as one might hand over a puppy found abandoned on the road.

"I want my son!" she cried. "Not the child of some other poor woman!"

"Do what you like with it, then," said Sinistrad. His plan had worked well. He was almost in a good humor. "Suckle it. Drown it. I don't care."

Iridal took pity on the tiny baby and, hoping that the love she lavished on it would be reciprocated on her child so far away, she nursed him tenderly. But the infant could not adapt to the rarefied atmosphere. He died within days, and something within Iridal died too.

Going to Sinistrad a month later in his laboratory, she told him calmly and quietly that she was leaving, returning to the house of her father. In reality, her plan was to go to the Mid Realm and take back her child.

"No, my dear, I think not," replied Sinistrad without looking up from the text he was perusing. "My marriage to you lifted the dark cloud from me. The others trust me now. If our plans to escape this realm are to succeed, I'll need the help of all in our community. They must do my will without question. I cannot afford the scandal of a separation from you."

He looked up at her then, and she saw that he knew her plans, he knew the secrets of her heart.

"You can't stop me!" Iridal cried. "The mysteries I weave are powerful, for I am skilled in magic, as skilled as you, husband, who have devoted your life to your overweening ambition. I will proclaim your evil to the world! They will not follow you, but rise up and destroy you!"

"You're right, my dear. I cannot stop you. But perhaps you'd like to discuss this with your father."

Keeping a finger on his place in the book, Sinistrad raised his head and made a gesture with his hand. A box of ebony drifted up from the table on which it stood, floated through the air, and came to rest near the wizard's book. Opening it with one hand, he lifted out a silver locket hanging from a rope of black velvet. He held out the locket to Iridal.

"What is it?" She stared at it suspiciously.

"A gift, my dear. From loving husband to loving wife." His smile was a knife, twisting in her heart. "Open it."

Iridal took the locket with fingers so numb and cold she nearly dropped it. Inside was a portrait of her father.

"Take care that you do not drop it or break it," said Sinistrad casually, returning to his reading.

Iridal saw, in horror, that the portrait was staring back at her, its trapped, living eyes pitying, helpless. . . .

Sounds outside the window roused Iridal from her melancholy reverie. Rising weakly and unsteadily from the chair, she stared out the casement. Sinistrad's dragon was floating through the clouds, its tail cutting the mist to wispy shreds that trailed away and vanished-like dreams, thought Iridal. The quicksilver dragon had come at Sinistrad's command and now circled round and round the castle, awaiting its master. The beast was huge, with shining silver skin, a sinuous thin body, and flaring red eyes. It had no wings, but could fly faster without them than could its winged cousins of the Mid Realm.

Nervous and unpredictable, the most intelligent of their kind, these quicksilver dragons, as they were known, could be controlled only by the most powerful wizards. Even then, the dragon knew it was enthralled and constantly fought a mental battle with the spell-caster, forcing the magus who enchanted it to be continually on his guard. Iridal watched it out the window. The dragon was always moving-one moment twisting itself into a gigantic coil, rearing its head higher than the tallest castle tower; the next, unwinding itself with lightning speed to wrap its long body around the castle's mist-shrouded base. Once Iridal had feared the quicksilver. If it slipped its magical leash, it would kill them all. Now she no longer cared.

Sinistrad appeared, and Iridal involuntarily drew back away from the window so that he would not see her if he happened to glance up. He did not look up at her chamber, however, being far more concerned with more important matters. The elven ship had been sighted; the ship carrying his son. He and the others in the Council must meet to make final plans and preparations. This was why he was taking the dragon.

As a mysteriarch of the Seventh House, Sinistrad could have transported himself mentally to the guildhall, dissolving his body and reforming it when the mind arrived at its destination. That had been his means of entry into the Mid Realm. Such a feat was taxing, however, and really impressive only if someone was there to see the wizard materialize, supposedly, out of thin air. Elves were much more likely to be terrified by the sight of a gigantic dragon than by the refined and delicate techniques of mental spell-casting.

Sinistrad mounted the quicksilver, which he had named Gorgon, and it soared into the air and out of Metal's sight. Her husband had not once looked back. Why should he? He had no fear that she would escape him. Not anymore. There were no guards posted round the castle. There were no servants posted to watch her and report her doings to their master. He had no need of any, could any have been found. Iridal was her own guard, locked up by her shame, held captive by her terror.

Her hand clasped round the locket. The portrait inside was alive no longer. Her father had died some years ago. His soul trapped by Sinistrad, the body had withered away. But whenever Iridal looked at the image of her father's face, she could still see the pity in his eyes.

The castle was silent, empty, nearly as silent and empty as her heart. She must dress, she told herself drearily, taking off the nightclothes that she wore almost all the time now; the only escape she had was in sleep.

Turning from the window, she saw herself in a mirror opposite. Twenty-six cycles-she looked as if she had lived a hundred. Her hair, that had once been the color of strawberries dipped in golden honey, was now white as the clouds drifting past her window. Lifting a brush, she began to listlessly make some attempt to untangle the matted tresses.

Her son was coming. She must make a good impression. Otherwise, Sinistrad would be displeased.

## CHAPTER 45

### NEW HOPE, HIGH REALM

SWIFT AS ITS NAME, THE QUICKSILVER DRAGON BORE SINISTRAD TO NEW HOPE, THE capital city of the High Realm. The mysteriarch was fond of using the dragon to impress his own people. No other wizard had been able to exert a hold over the highly intelligent and dangerous quicksilver. It would not hurt, in this critical time, to remind the others, once again, why they had chosen him to be their leader.

Sinistrad arrived in New Hope to find that the magic had already been cast. Shining crystal, towering spires, tree-lined boulevards-he barely recognized the place. Two fellow mysteriarchs, standing outside the Council Chamber were looking extremely proud of themselves, also extremely fatigued.

Dipping down from the sky, Sinistrad gave them time to fully appreciate his mount; then he released it, ordering the creature to remain within call and await his summons.

The dragon opened its fanged mouth in a gaping snarl, its red eyes flamed with hatred. Sinistrad turned his back on the creature.

"I tell you, Sinistrad, someday that dragon's going to break free of the spell you've cast over him and then none of us will be safe. It was a mistake to capture it," said one of the wizards-an aged mysteriarch-eyeing the quicksilver askance.

"Have you so little faith in my power?" inquired Sinistrad in a mild voice.

The mysteriarch said nothing, but glanced at his companion.

Noting the look pass between them, Sinistrad guessed correctly that they had been discussing him before he came.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Let us be honest with each other. I have always insisted on that, you know."

"Yes, we know. You rub our noses in your honesty!" said the old man.

"Come, Balthazar, you know me for what I am. You knew what I was when you voted me your leader. You knew I was ruthless, that I would allow nothing to stand in my way. Some of you called me evil then. You call me that now, and it is an appellation I do not deny. Yet I was the only one among you with vision. I was the one who devised the plan to save our people. Isn't that so?"

The mysteriarchs looked at Sinistrad, glanced at each other, then looked away-one turning his gaze on the beautiful city, the other watching the quicksilver dragon vanish into the cloudless sky.

"Yes, we agree," said one.

"We had no choice," added the other.

"Not very complimentary, but then, I can do without compliments. Speaking of which, the work you have done is excellent." Sinistrad gave the spires, the boulevards, the trees a critical inspection. Reaching out his hand, he touched the stone of the building before which they were standing. "So good, in fact, I was forced to wonder if this wasn't all part of it as well! I was half-afraid to enter!"

One of the mysteriarchs smiled bleakly at the wizard's little essay into humor. The other-the old man-scowled, turned, and left him. Gathering his robes about him, Sinistrad followed his companions, ascending the marble stairs and passing through the glittering crystal doors of the Wizards' Guildhall.

Inside the hall, talking in solemn and hushed voices, were gathered about fifty wizards. Male and female, they were clad in robes similar to Sinistrad's in make and design, although widely varying in color. Each hue designated a wizard's particular devotion-green for the land, deep blue for the sky, red for fire (or magic of the mind), light blue for water. A few, such as Sinistrad, wore the black that stood for discipline-iron discipline, the discipline that admitted no weakness. When he strode into the room, those present, who had been conversing together in low, excited voices, fell silent. Each bowed and stepped aside, forming an opening in their ranks through which he walked.

Glancing about him, nodding to friends here, noting enemies there, Sinistrad moved without haste through the large hall. Made of marble, the Guildhall was bleak, empty, and unadorned. No tapestries graced its walls, no statues decorated its doorways, no windows admitted the sunlight, no magic dispelled the gloom. The dwellings of the mysteriarchs in the Mid Realm had been renowned throughout the world as the most marvelous of all human creations. Remembering the beauty from which they had come, the wizards found the starkness and austerity of the Guildhall in the High Realm chilling. Hands thrust into the sleeves of their robes, they stood well away from the walls and appeared to try to avoid looking anywhere except at each other or their leader-Sinistrad.

He was the youngest among them. Every mysteriarch there could remember him first entering the Guildhall-a well-built youth, inclined to be servile and sniveling. His parents had been among the earliest of the exiles to succumb up here, leaving him orphaned. The others felt sorry for the young man, but not unduly. There were, after all, many orphans at that time. Immersed in their own problems-which were monumental-no one had paid much attention to the young wizard.

Human wizards had their own version of history that was, much like any other race's history, distorted by their own perspective. Following the Sundering, the Sartan had brought the people-not first to Aristagon, as the elves would have it-but here, to this realm beneath a magical dome. The humans, particularly the wizards, worked extremely hard to make this realm not only habitable but

beautiful. It seemed to them that the Sartan were never around to help, but were always off somewhere on "important" business.

On the infrequent occasions when the Sartan returned, they lent their assistance, utilizing their rune magic. Thus it was that fabulous buildings were created, the dome was strengthened. The coralite bore fruit, water was in abundance. The human wizards were not particularly grateful. They were envious. They coveted the rune magic.

Then came the day when the Sartan announced the Mid Realm below was suitable for habitation. Humans and elves were transported to Aristagon, while the Sartan remained above in the High Realm. The Sartan gave the reason for the move the fact that the domed land was getting too crowded. The human wizards believed that the Sartan had cast them out because the wizards were becoming too knowledgeable about the rune magic.

Time passed, and the elves grew strong and united under their powerful wizards and the humans turned into barbaric pirates. The human wizards watched the rise of the elves with outward disdain and inward fear.

They said to themselves, "If only we had the rune magic, then we could destroy the elves!"

Instead of helping their own people, therefore, they began to concentrate their magic on finding ways to return to the High Realm. At length, they succeeded and a large force of the most powerful magi-the mysteriarchs-ascended to the High Realm to challenge the Sartan and take back what they had come to see as rightfully their land.

This the humans called the War of Ascension, only it wasn't much of a war. The mysteriarchs woke one morning to find the Sartan gone, their dwellings empty, their cities abandoned. The wizards returned victorious to their people, only to find the Mid Realm in chaos-torn by war. It was all they could do to manage to stay alive, much less try to use their magic to move the people to the Promised Land.

Finally, after years of suffering and hardship, the mysteriarchs were able to leave the Mid Realm and enter the land their legends held was beautiful, bountiful, safe, and secure. Here, too, they hoped to discover at last the secrets of the runes. It all seemed a wonderful dream. It would soon turn to a nightmare.

The runes kept their secrets and the mysteriarchs discovered to their horror how much of the beauty and bounty of the land had depended on the runes. Crops grew, but not in the numbers needed to feed the people. Famine swept the land. Water was scarce and became scarcer-each family having to expend immense amounts of magic in order to produce it. Centuries of inbreeding had already weakened the wizards and further inbreeding in this closed realm produced frightful genetic defects that could not be cured with magic. These children died and, eventually, few children were born. Most horrifying, it became obvious to the mysteriarchs that the magic of the dome was fading.

They would have to leave this realm, yet how could they, without proclaiming their failure, their weaknesses? One man had an idea. One man told them how it could be done. They were desperate, they listened.

As time passed and Sinistrad did well in his magical studies, surpassing many of the elders in his power, he ceased to be servile and began to flaunt his abilities. His elders were displeased and

disgusted when he changed his name to Sinistrad, but they thought little of it at the time. Back in the Mid Realm, a bully might call himself Brute or Thug or some other tough-sounding name in order to garner respect he hadn't earned. It meant nothing.

The mysteriarchs had ignored the name change, just as they had ignored Sinistrad. Oh, a few spoke out-Iridal's father being one of them. A few tried to make their fellows see the young man's overweening ambition, his ruthless cruelty, his ability to manipulate. Those who spoke the warnings were not heeded. Iridal's father lost his only loved daughter to the man, and lost his life in Sinistrad's magical captivity. None of the wizards knew that, however. The prison had been created so skillfully that no one ever noticed. The old wizard walked about the land, visited his friends, performed his duties. If any remarked that he seemed listless and sorrowful, all knew he grieved over his daughter's marriage. None knew that the old man's soul had been held hostage, like a bug in a glass jar.

Imperceptibly, patiently, the young wizard cast his web over all the surviving wizards of the High Realm. The filaments were practically invisible, light to the touch, barely felt. He didn't weave a gigantic web for all to see, but deftly wrapped a line around an arm, wound a coil around a foot, holding them so lightly that they never knew they were held at all until the day came when they couldn't move.

Now they were stuck fast, caught by their own desperation. Sinistrad was right. They had no choice. They had to rely on him, for he was the only one who had been smart enough to plan ahead and make some provision to escape their beautiful hell.

Sinistrad arrived at the front of the hall. He caused a golden podium to spring up from the floor and, mounting it, turned to address his fellows.

"The elf ship has been sighted. My son is aboard. In accordance with our plans, I shall go to meet and guide it-

"We never agreed to allow an elven vessel inside the dome," spoke out a female mysteriarch. "You said it would be a small ship, piloted by your son and his oafish servant."

"I was forced to effect a change in plans," replied Sinistrad, his lips creasing in a thin and unpleasant smile. "The first ship was attacked by elves and crashed on Drevlin. My son was able to take over this elven vessel. The child holds their captain in thrall. There are no more than thirty elves on board the ship, and only one wizard-a very weak wizard, of course. I think we can deal with that situation, don't you?"

"Yes, in the old days," answered a woman. "One of us could have dealt with thirty elves. But now ..." Her voice trailed away as she shook her head.

"That is why we have worked our magic, created the illusions." Sinistrad gestured toward the outside of the Guildhall. "They will be intimidated by the sight alone. We will have no trouble from them."

"Why not meet them at the firmament, take your son, and let them go on their way?" demanded the aged mysteriarch known as Balthazar.

"Because, you doddering fool, we need their vessel!" Sinistrad hissed, clearly growing angry at the questioning. "With it we can transport large numbers of our people back down to the Mid Realm. Before, we would have been forced to wait until we could either acquire vessels or enchant more dragons."

"So what do we do with the elves?" asked the woman.

Everyone looked to Sinistrad. They knew the answer as well as he did; they wanted to hear him say it.

He said it, without pause, without hesitation. "We kill them."

The silence was loud and echoing. The aged mysteriarch shook his head. "No. I won't be a party to this."

"Why not, Balthazar? You killed elves enough back in the Mid Realm."

"That was war. This is murder."

"War is 'us or them.' This is war. It is either us or them!"

The mysteriarchs around him murmured, seeming to agree. Several began to argue with the old wizard, trying to persuade him to change his stance. "Sinistrad is right," they said. "It is war! It can never be anything else between our races." And "After all, Sinistrad's only trying to lead us home."

"I pity you!" Balthazar snarled. "I pity you all! He"-pointing at Sinistrad-"is leading you, all right. Leading you around by the nose like fatted calves. And when he's ready to dine, he'll slaughter the lot of you and feed off your flesh. Bah! Leave me alone! I'll die up here sooner than follow him back there."

The old wizard stalked toward the door.

"And so you will, graybeard," muttered Sinistrad beneath his breath. "Let him go," he said aloud, when some of his fellows would have gone after the wizard. "Unless there are any others who want to leave with him?"

The mysteriarch cast a swift, searching glance around the room, gathering up the tendrils of his web and tugging it tighter and tighter. No one else managed to break free. Those who had once struggled were now so weak with fear, they were eager and ready to do his bidding.

"Very well. I will bring the elven ship through the dome. I will remove my son and his companions to my castle." Sinistrad might have told his people that one of his son's companions was a skilled assassin-a man who could take the blood of the elves on his own hands and leave those of the mysteriarchs clean. But Sinistrad wanted to harden his people, force them to sink lower and lower until they would willingly and unquestioningly do anything he asked. "Those of you who volunteered to learn to fly the elf ship know what you are to do. The rest must work to maintain the city's spells. When the time comes, I will give the signal and we will act."

He gazed at them all, studied each pallid, grim face, and was satisfied. "Our plans are progressing well. Better than we had anticipated, in fact. Traveling with my son are several who may be of use

to us in ways we had not foreseen. One is a dwarf from the Low Realm. The elves have exploited the dwarves for centuries. It is likely we can turn the GEGS, as they call themselves, to war. Another is a human who claims to come from a realm beneath the Low Realm—a realm none of us previously knew existed. This news could be extremely valuable to all of us."

There were murmurs of approval and agreement.

"My son brings information about the human kingdoms and the elven revolution, all of which will be most helpful when we set about to conquer them. And, most important, he has seen the great machine built by the Sartan on the Low Realm. At last we may be able to unravel the mystery of the so-called Kicksey-Winsey and turn it, too, to our use."

Sinistrad raised his hands in a blessing. "Go forth now, my people. Go forth and know that as you do so you are stepping out into the world, for soon Arianus will be ours!"

The meeting broke up with cheering, most of it enthusiastic. Sinistrad stepped down from the podium and it disappeared—magic had to be carefully rationed, expended only on that which was essential. Many stopped him to congratulate him or to ask questions, clearing up small details about the plan of action. Several asked politely after his health, but no one inquired about his wife. Iridal had not been present at a council meeting in ten cycles, ever since the guild voted to go along with Sinistrad's plot—to take her child and exchange it for the human prince. The guild members were just as well pleased Iridal did not attend the meetings. They still, after all this time, found it difficult to look into her eyes.

Sinistrad, mindful of the need to commence his journey, shook off the hangers-on who crowded round him and made his way from the Guildhall. A mental command brought the quicksilver dragon to the very foot of the stairs of the hall. Glowering at the wizard balefully, the dragon nevertheless suffered the mysteriarch to mount its back and command it to do his bidding. The dragon had no choice but to obey Sinistrad; it was enthralled. In this the creature was unlike the wizards standing in the shadowy doorway of the Guildhall. They had given themselves to Sinistrad of their own free will.

## CHAPTER 46

### THE FIRMAMENT

THE ELVEN DRAGONSHIP HUNG MOTIONLESS IN THE THIN, CHILL AIR. HAVING REACHED the floating chunks of ice known as the firmament, it had come to a halt, no one daring to proceed further. Ice floes ten times larger than the vessel loomed above them. Smaller boulders circled the more massive chunks; the air glistened with tiny droplets of frozen water. The sun's glare off the floebergs dazzled the eye; no one could look at them directly without being blinded. How thick the firmament was, how far it reached, was anyone's guess. No one, except the mysteriarchs and the Sartan, had ever flown this high and returned to give an account of their journey. Maps had been drawn from speculation, and now everyone on board ship knew them to be inaccurate. No one had guessed the mysteriarchs had passed through the firmament to build their realm on the other side.

"Natural defense barrier," said Hugh, peering with narrowed eyes at the awful beauty outside the porthole. "No wonder they've kept their wealth undisturbed all these years."

"How do we get through it?" asked Bane. The child was standing on tip-toe to see.

"We don't."

"But we have to!" The prince's voice shrilled. "I have to get to my father!"

"Kid, one of the ice boulders-even a little one-hits us, and our bodies will be just another star twinkling in the daytime sky. Maybe you better tell daddy to come get you."

Bane's face smoothed, the flush of anger faded. "Thank you for the suggestion, Sir Hugh." His hand clasped around the feather. "I'll do just that. And I'll be certain to tell him all you've done for me. All of you." His glance encompassed everyone from Alfred to a beauty-dazed Limbeck, to Haplo's dog. "I'm certain he'll reward you ... as you deserve."

Skipping across the deck, Bane plunked himself down in a corner of the hold and, closing his eyes, apparently began to commune with his father.

"I didn't like that little pause he put in between 'reward' and 'deserve,' " remarked Haplo. "What's to keep this wizard from snatching his kid and sending us up in flames?"

"Nothing, I suppose," answered Hugh, "except that he wants something and it's not just his little boy. Otherwise, why go to all this trouble?"

"Sorry, you've lost me."

"Alfred, come here. Look, you said that this Sinistrad came to the castle at night, switched babies, and then left. How'd he manage that with guards all around?"

"The mysteriarchs have the power to transport themselves through the air. Trian explained it thus to His Majesty the king: the spell is done by means of sending the mind on ahead of the body. Once the mind is firmly established in a particular location, it can call for the body to join it. The only requirement to the spell-caster is that he must have previously visited the place, so that he can mentally call up an accurate picture of where he's going. The mysteriarchs had often visited the Royal Palace on Uylandia, which is nearly as old as the world."

"But he couldn't, for example, send himself to the Low Realm or the elven palace on Aristagon?"

"No, sir, he couldn't. Not mentally, at least. None of them could. The elves hated and feared the mysteriarchs and never allowed them in their kingdom. The wizards couldn't travel to the Low Realm that way either, since they'd never been there before. They'd have to rely on other means of transport . . . Oh, I see your point, sir!"

"Uh-huh. First Sinistrad tried to get my ship. That failed, and now he has this one. If he-"

"Hush, company," murmured Haplo.

The door to the brig opened and Captain Bothar'el, flanked by two crew members, entered. "You"-he pointed to Hugh- "come with me."

Shrugging, the Hand did as he was told, not sorry to get a glimpse of what was going on above. The door slammed shut behind them, the guard locked it, and Hugh followed the elf up the ladder to the top deck. It was not until he arrived on the bridge that he noticed Haplo's dog trotting at his heels.

"Where did that come from?" The captain glared at the animal irritably. The dog gazed up at him, brown eyes shining, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

"I don't know. He followed me, I guess."

"Midshipman, get that thing off the bridge. Take it back to its master and tell him to keep an eye on it or I'll toss it overboard."

"Yes, sir."

The midshipman bent down to pick up the dog. The animal's demeanor changed instantly. Its ears flattened and the tail ceased wagging and began a slow and ominous brush from side to side. The lips parted in a snarl, a low growl rumbled in the chest.

"If you are fond of those fingers," the animal seemed to say, "you better keep them to yourself."

The midshipman took the dog's advice. Putting his hands behind his back, he looked questioningly and fearfully at his captain.

"Dog . . ." tried Hugh experimentally. The animal's ears lifted slightly. It glanced at him, keeping one eye fixed on the midshipman but letting Hugh know it considered him a friend.

"Here, dog," ordered Hugh, clumsily snapping his fingers.

The dog turned his head, asking him if he was sure about this.

Hugh snapped his fingers again, and the dog, with a parting snarl at the hapless elf, ambled over to Hugh, who patted it awkwardly. It sat down at his feet.

"It'll be all right. I'll watch him-"

"Captain, the dragon is closing on us," reported a lookout.

"Dragon?" Hugh looked at the elf.

Captain Bothar'el, in answer, pointed.

Hugh walked over to the ship's porthole and stared out. Threading its way through the firmament, the dragon was barely visible, appearing as a river of silver flowing among the floebergs- a river of silver with two flaming red eyes.

"Do you know its type, human?"

"A quicksilver." Hugh had to pause, to think of the elven word. "Silindistani."

"We can't outrun it," said Captain Bothar'el. "Look at its speed! It is well-named. We'll have to fight."

"I don't think so," offered Hugh. "My guess is we're about to meet the boy's father."

Elves dislike and distrust dragons intensely. The elf wizards' magic cannot control them and the knowledge that humans can has always throbbed like a rotting tooth in the elven mouth. The elves aboard the ship were nervous and ill-at-ease in the presence of the quicksilver dragon. It wound and writhed and twisted its long, shining body around their vessel. The elves shifted their heads constantly to keep the creature in view, or jumped in startlement whenever the head shot up in a place where it had not been two seconds earlier. Such nervous reactions appeared to amuse the mysteriarch standing on the bridge. Though the wizard was graciousness itself, Hugh could see the glint beneath the lashless eyelids, and a small smile flickered occasionally across the thin and bloodless lips.

"I am eternally in your debt, Captain Bothar'el," said Sinistrad. "My child means more to me than all the treasures of the High Realm." Looking down at the boy, who was clinging to his hand and gazing up at him in unfeigned admiration, Sinistrad enlarged his smile.

"I was glad to be of service. As the boy explained, we are now considered outlaws by our people. We must find and join the rebel forces. He promised us payment-"

"Oh, and you will receive it, in abundance, I assure you. And you must see our enchanting realm and meet our people. We have so few guests. We become quite weary of each other. Not that we encourage visitors," Sinistrad added delicately. "But this is a special circumstance."

Hugh glanced at Haplo, who had been brought to the bridge with the other "guests" upon Sinistrad's arrival. The assassin would have liked very much to get some indication of what Haplo thought of all this. They couldn't speak, of course, but even a raised eyebrow or a quick wink would tell Hugh that Haplo wasn't swallowing this honeyed fruit either. But Haplo was staring at Sinistrad so intently the man might have been counting the pores in the wizard's long nose.

"I will not risk flying my ship through that." Captain Bothar'el indicated the firmament with a nod of his head. "Give us what you have"-the elf's gaze fixed on several fine jewels adorning the fingers of the mysteriarch-"and we will return to our realm."

Hugh could have told the elf he was wasting his breath.

Sinistrad would never let this ship slip through his ruby-and-diamond-sparkling hands.

He didn't. "The journey might be the tiniest bit difficult, captain, but not impossible and certainly not dangerous. I will be your guide and show you the safe passage through the firmament." He glanced around the bridge. "Surely you will not refuse to allow your crew the chance to view the wonders of our realm?"

The legendary wealth and splendor of the High Realm, made real by the sight of the jewels the wizard wore with such careless ease, kindled a flame that burned up fear and-so Hugh saw in the crew's eyes-common sense. He felt a cool pity for the elven captain, who knew he was flying into a spiderweb but who could do nothing to stop himself. If he gave the order to leave this place and

return home, he'd be the one returning-the hard way, head over heels through several miles of empty sky.

"Very well," Bothar'el said ungraciously. A cheer from the crew died out with the flash in the captain's eye.

"May I ride with you on the dragon, papa?" asked Bane.

"Of course, my son." Sinistrad ran a hand through the boy's fair hair. "And now, much as I would enjoy staying and talking further with all of you, especially my new friend Limbeck here" - Sinistrad bowed to the Geg, who bobbed awkwardly back- "my wife is waiting most impatiently to see her child. Women. What loving little creatures they are."

Sinistrad turned to the captain. "I have never flown a ship, but it occurs to me that the major problem you will encounter passing through the firmament is ice forming on the wings. I am certain, however, that this most skilled colleague of mine"-he bowed to the ship's wizard, who returned the courtesy respectfully, if guardedly-"can melt it."

His arm around his son, Sinistrad started to leave, using his magic to transport him the short distance back to the dragon. Their bodies had faded to almost nothing when he paused and fixed a glittering-eyed gaze upon the captain. "Follow the path of the dragon," he said, "exactly." And he was gone.

"So what do you think of him?" Hugh asked Haplo in an undertone as both men, plus the dog, Alfred, and Limbeck, were escorted back to the brig.

"The wizard?"

"Who else?"

"Oh, he's powerful," said Haplo, shrugging. "But not as powerful as I'd expected."

Hugh grunted. He'd found Sinistrad daunting. "And what did you expect-a Sartan?"

Haplo glanced sharply at Hugh, saw it was a joke. "Yeah," he answered, grinning.

## CHAPTER 47

### THE FIRMAMENT

THE CARFA'SHON SAILED THROUGH THE ICE FLOES, LEAVING A SPARKLING TRAIL OF crystals swirling and glittering in its wake. The cold was bitter. The ship's wizard had been forced to draw magical heat from the living and working areas of the ship and use it to keep the rigging, the cables, the wings, and the hull free of the ice that rained down on them with a rattling noise, sounding so Limbeck said, like millions of dried peas.

Haplo, Limbeck, Alfred, and Hugh huddled for warmth around the small brazier in the hold. The dog had curled up in a ball, its nose buried in its bushy tail, and was fast asleep. None of the four

spoke. Limbeck was too awed by the sights he had seen and expected to see. What Haplo might be thinking was anybody's guess. Hugh was considering his options.

Murder is out. No assassin worth his dagger takes on the job of killing a wizard, let alone a mysteriarch! This Sinistrad is powerful. What am I saying? This man is power itself! He hums with it like a lightning rod in a thunderstorm. If only I could figure out why he wants me now, when he tried to kill me once before. Why am I suddenly so valuable?

"Why did you make me bring Hugh, father?"

The quicksilver dragon threaded its way through the ice floes. It was moving with unusual slowness, being held back by Sinistrad so that the elven ship could follow. The lethargic pace irritated the dragon, who, in addition, would have liked very much to dine on the sweet-smelling creatures inside the ship.

But it knew better than to challenge Sinistrad. The two had waged numerous magical battles before, and Gorgon had always lost. It hated the wizard with a grudging respect.

"I may need Hugh the Hand, Bane. He is a pilot, after all."

"But we have a pilot-the elf captain."

"My dear child, you have much to learn. So begin learning it now. Never trust elves. Though their intelligence is equal to that of humans, they are longer-lived, and tend to gain in wisdom. In ancient days, they were a noble race and humans were, as the elves are wont to sneer, little more than animals compared to them. But the elf wizards could not leave well enough alone. They were, in fact, jealous of us."

"I saw the wizard take the dead elf's soul," interrupted Bane, hushed with remembered awe.

"Yes." Sinistrad sneered. "That was how they thought to fight us."

"I don't understand, father."

"It is important that you do, my son, and quickly, for we will be dealing with an elven ship's wizard. Let me describe to you, briefly, the nature of magic. Before the Sundering, spiritual and physical magic-like all other elements in the world-were blended together in all people. After the Sundering, the world was split into its separate elements, at least so the legends of the Sartan tell us, and this happened with magic.

"Each race naturally seeks to use the power of magic to make up for its own deficiencies. Thus, elves, tending naturally toward the spiritual, needed magic to help enhance their physical powers. They studied the art of granting magical powers to physical objects that could work for them."

"Like the dragonship?"

"Yes, like the dragonship. Humans, on the other hand, were better able to control the physical world, and so sought additional power through the spiritual. To communicate with animals, to force the wind to do our bidding, the stones to rise up at our command-this became our greatest talent.

And, because of our concern with the spiritual, we developed the ability of mental magic, of training our minds to alter and control physical laws."

"That's why I could fly."

"Yes, and if you had been an elf, you would have lost your life, for they do not possess such power. The elves poured all of their arcane skill into physical objects and studied the art of mental manipulation. An elven wizard with his hands bound is helpless. A human wizard, under the same circumstances, need simply tell himself that his wrists are shrinking in size and it will be true. Thus he can slip out of his bonds."

"Father," said Bane, looking backward, "the ship's stopped."

"So it has." Sinistrad checked an impatient sigh and reined in the dragon. "That ship's wizard of theirs must be nothing more than Second House if he can't keep the ice off their wings any better than this!"

"And so we have two pilots." Bane twisted around in the dragon saddle in order to get a better look at the ship. The elves had been forced to take axes to the ice that had formed on the cables.

"Not for long," said Sinistrad.

If he's going to use this vessel, the wizard needs a pilot. This question settled, Hugh took out his pipe and began to fill it sparingly with his dwindling supply of tobacco. And now the wizard has two pilots-me and the elf. He can keep us both guessing, play us one off the other. Winner lives, loser dies. Or maybe not. Maybe he won't trust the elf at all. Interesting. I wonder if I should tip off Bothar'el?

Lighting his pipe, Hugh gazed at the others from beneath hooded lids. Limbeck. Why Limbeck? And Haplo. Where does he fit in?

"The Geg you've brought, my son. You say he's the leader of his people?"

"Well, sort of." Bane squirmed uncomfortably. "It wasn't my fault. I tried to get their king-they call him the head foreman-"

"High Froman."

"-but that other man wanted this Limbeck to come and" -the boy shrugged-"he came."

"What other man?" Sinistrad asked. "Alfred?"

"No, not Alfred," Bane said scornfully. "The other man. The quiet one. The one with the dog."

Sinistrad cast his mind around the bridge of the ship. He did recall seeing some other human but couldn't bring his face to memory. Nondescript, a kind of gray blur. That must be the one from the newly discovered realm.

"Perhaps you should have cast the enchantment over him, convinced him that he wanted what you wanted. Didn't you try?"

"Of course, father!" Bane said, his cheeks flushed with indignation.

"Then what happened?"

Bane ducked his head. "It didn't work."

"What? Could it be possible that Trian actually managed to disrupt the spell? Or perhaps this man has a charm-"

"No, he doesn't have anything except a dog. I don't like him. He came along and I didn't want him to but I couldn't stop him. When the enchantment went out to him, it didn't work like it does on most people. Everyone else sort of absorbs it, like a sponge sucking up water. With him-that Haplo-it just bounced right back."

"Impossible. He must have a hidden charm, or else it was your imagination."

"No, it wasn't either of those, father."

"Bah! What do you know? You're just a child. This Limbeck is the leader of some sort of rebellion among the people, isn't that right?"

Bane, head down, pouted, refused to answer.

Sinistrad brought the dragon to a halt. The ship was lumbering along behind, its wings brushing the edges of floebergs that could smash its hull into fragments. Twisting in the saddle, the mysteriarch caught hold of his son's jaw with his hand and jerked the boy's face upward. His grip was painful; Bane's eyes filled with tears.

"You will answer promptly any question I put to you. You will do my bidding without argument or back talk. You will, at all times, treat me with respect. I do not blame you for your lack of it now. You have been around those who did nothing to command it, who were not worthy of it. But that has changed. You are with your father now. Never forget that."

"No," whispered Bane.

"No, what?" The grip tightened.

"No, father!" Bane gasped.

Satisfied, Sinistrad released the boy, rewarding Bane with a slight widening of the thin, bloodless lips. He turned back to face forward, ordering the dragon on.

The wizard's fingers left white indentations on the boy's cheek, purplish marks on his jaw. Thoughtful, Bane was silent, trying to rub away the pain with his hand. His tears had not fallen and he blinked them back from his eyes, swallowed those in his throat.

"Now, answer my question. This Limbeck is leader of a rebellion."

"Yes, father."

"And so he could be useful to us. At the very least, he will provide information about the machine."

"I made drawings of the machine, father."

"Did you?" Sinistrad glanced behind him. "Good ones? No, don't take them out. They might blow away. I will look them over when we reach home."

Hugh puffed slowly on his pipe, feeling more relaxed. Whatever the wizard was plotting, Limbeck would provide him information and access to the Low Realm. But Haplo. Try to figure that one. Unless he just came along by accident. No. Hugh gazed at the man intently. Haplo was teasing the sleeping dog, tickling its nose with its tail. The dog sneezed, woke up, looked around irritably for the fly, and, not finding it, went back to sleep. Hugh thought back to their imprisonment on Drevlin, to the riveting shock he'd experienced seeing Haplo standing beside the grille. No, Hugh couldn't imagine Haplo doing anything by accident. This was by design, then. But by whose?

Hugh's gaze shifted to Alfred. The chamberlain was staring into nothing, his face the face of one who walks in a waking nightmare. What had happened to him in the Low Realm? And why was he here, other than that the kid wanted to bring along his servant? But Bane hadn't brought Alfred, Hugh remembered. The chamberlain had tagged along of his own accord. And was still tagging.

"And what about Alfred?" Sinistrad asked. "Why did you bring him?"

The mysteriarch and his son were nearing the edge of the firmament. The bergs were becoming smaller and the distances between them farther apart. Ahead of them, sparkling in the distance, shining through the ice like an emerald set amidst diamonds, was what Sinistrad said was the High Realm. In the distance, behind them, they could hear a ragged cheer lift from the elven ship.

"He found out about King Stephen's plan to have me murdered," Bane answered his father, "and he came along to protect me."

"He doesn't know more than that?"

"He knows I'm your son. He knows about the enchantment."

"All the fools know about it. That's what made it so effective. They were so delightfully aware of their own helplessness. But that wasn't what I meant. Does Alfred know you manipulated your parents and that idiot Trian into thinking that they were the ones responsible for casting you out? Is that why he came?"

"No. Alfred came because he can't help himself. He has to be with me. He's not smart enough to do anything else."

"It will be handy to have him with you when you return. He can verify your story."

"Return? Return where?" Bane looked frightened. He clung to his father. "I'm going to stay with you!"

"Why don't you rest now? We'll be home soon and I want you to make a good impression on my friends."

"And on mother?" Bane settled himself more comfortably in the saddle.

"Yes, of course. Now, hold your tongue. We are nearing the dome and I must communicate with those waiting to receive us."

Bane rested his head against his father's back. He hadn't told quite all the truth about Alfred. There had been that strange occurrence in the forest, when the tree fell on the boy. Alfred thought I was still unconscious, but I wasn't. I saw. Just what it was I saw, I'm not certain. Up here, I'm sure to find out. Perhaps, someday, I'll ask father. But not now. Not until I learn what he meant about "returning." Until then, I'll keep Alfred all to myself.

Bane nestled closer to Sinistrad.

Hugh dumped the tobacco out of his pipe and, wrapping it carefully in its cloth, placed it snugly against his breast. He'd known all along he was making a mistake coming up here. But he couldn't help himself. The kid had ensorceled him. Hugh decided he could, therefore, quit thinking about his options. He didn't have any.

## CHAPTER 48

### NEW HOPE, HIGH REALM

#### GUIDED BY THE MYSTERIARCH AND THE QUICKSILVER DRAGON, THE CARFA'SHON

sailed through the magical dome surrounding the High Realm. Elves, humans, and the Geg pressed their faces against the portholes, staring out at the marvelous world below them. They were dazzled by the extraordinary beauty, awestruck by the magnificence of what they saw, and each reminded himself uneasily just how powerful were the beings who created these marvels. Within seconds they had left behind a world of frozen, glittering ice and entered a sun-warmed green land with a shimmering rainbow-hued sky.

The elves shed the fur coats they had donned to combat the frigid cold. Hugh dumped the charwood out of the brazier into the firebox. The ice began to melt from the ship, pouring off the hull, falling to the ground below them like rain.

All hands not directly involved with the flying of the ship gazed in wide-eyed wonder at this enchanted realm. There must be water in abundance, was almost everyone's first thought. The ground was covered with lush vegetation, tall trees with green leaves dotted a landscape of rolling hills. Here and there, tall pearl spires stood against the sky; broad roads crisscrossed the valleys and vanished over the ridges.

Sinistrad flew before them, the quicksilver dragon streaking like a comet across the sun-drenched sky, making the graceful dragonship seem lumbering and clumsy by comparison. They followed his lead, and ahead of them, on the horizon, a cluster of spires appeared. Sinistrad aimed the dragon's head toward this location, and as the elven ship drew nearer, all on board saw it was a gigantic city.

Hugh had once, during his days as a slave, visited the capital city of Aristagon, of which the elves were very justly proud. The beauty of its buildings, which are made of coralite molded into artistic shapes by skilled elven craftsmen, are legendary. But the jewels of Tribus were common paste and glass when compared to the wondrous city that lay glistening before them—a handful of pearls scattered over green velvet with an occasional ruby or sapphire or diamond set among them.

A silence of profound awe, almost reverence, filled the elven ship. No one spoke, as if fearful of disturbing a lovely dream. Hugh had been taught by the Kir monks that beauty is ephemeral and all man's work will come to naught but dust in the end. He'd seen nothing yet in his lifetime to convince him otherwise, but now he began to think maybe he'd been wrong. Tears ran down Limbeck's cheeks; he was constantly forced to remove his spectacles and wipe them off so that he could see. Alfred appeared to forget whatever inner torment he was suffering and gazed out on the city with a face softened by what one might almost call melancholy.

As for Haplo, if he was impressed, he didn't show it, other than evincing a mild interest as he stared with the rest of them out the porthole.

But then, Hugh thought, scrutinizing the man carefully, that face of his never shows anything—fear, elation, worry, happiness, anger. And yet, if one looked carefully, there were traces, almost like scars, of emotions that had cut deep. The man's will alone had smoothed them out; almost, but not quite, erased them. No wonder he makes me want to keep putting my hand to my sword. I think I'd almost prefer an avowed enemy at my side than Haplo as a friend.

Sitting at Haplo's feet, gazing about with more interest than its master evinced, the dog suddenly ducked its head and gnawed at its flank, apparently driven to search out an elusive itch.

The elven ship entered the city. It drifted low over wide, flower-lined boulevards that wound among tall buildings. What these buildings were made of was anyone's guess. Smooth and sleek, they seemed to be created out of pearls—those gems that are sometimes found among the coralite and are rare and precious as drops of water. The elves sucked in their breaths and glanced at each other out of the corners of their almond eyes. A cornerstone of pearl alone would give them more wealth than their king himself possessed. Hugh, rubbing his hands, felt his spirits lift. If he got out of here alive, his fortune was made.

Dropping lower, they could see, beneath the vessel, upturned faces stare at them curiously as they passed. The streets were crowded; the city's population must number in the thousands, Hugh reckoned. Sinistrad guided the ship to a huge central park and indicated, by hand signals, that here they were to drop anchor. A crowd of wizards had gathered here, gazing at them curiously. Though none of the magi had ever seen a mechanical contraption such as this, they were quick to catch hold of the guy ropes tossed over the side by the elves and fasten them to trees. Captain Bothar'el caused the ship's wings to fold in almost completely, so that only a small bit of magic kept the vessel afloat.

Hugh and his companions were brought to the bridge and arrived there the same moment as Sinistrad and Bane appeared, seeming to step out of the air. The mysteriarch bowed respectfully to the captain.

"I trust your trip was not unduly difficult? Your ship sustained no damage from the ice?"

"Little, thank you," replied Captain Bothar'el, bowing in turn. "What damage we sustained we will be able to repair."

"My people and I will be most happy to furnish you with material: wood, rope-

"Thank you, that will not be necessary. We are accustomed to making do with what we have." It was obvious that the beauty of this realm and all its wealth had not blinded Bothar'el's eyes. He was in alien lands, among an enemy race. Hugh was growing to like this elf. There was, he could see, no need to warn Bothar'el of his danger.

Sinistrad did not seem offended. Smiling a rictus smile, he said he hoped the crew would disembark and take in the pleasures of their city. Several of his people would come aboard and keep an eye on the slaves.

"Thank you. I, myself, and some of my officers may later be pleased to accept your invitation. As for now, we have work to do. And I would not want to burden you with responsibility for our slaves."

Sinistrad, it seemed, might have raised an eyebrow had he had one. As it was, the lines in his forehead lifted slightly, but he said nothing, merely bowed again in acquiescence, the smile deepening and darkening. "I could make this ship mine in five seconds, if I wanted it," said the smile.

Captain Bothar'el bowed, and he, too, smiled.

Sinistrad's gaze slid over Hugh, Limbeck, and Alfred. It seemed they lingered for some time on Haplo, and the slight crease of a thoughtful frown appeared between the eyes. Haplo returned the inspection with his quiet, unassuming expression, and the frown line disappeared.

"You will have no objection, I hope, sir, to my taking these passengers of yours to meet my wife and to stay as guests in my house? We are most beholden to them for saving the life of our only child."

Captain Bothar'el replied that he was certain his passengers would enjoy escaping the dull routine of shipboard life. Hugh, reading between the words, figured that the elf was glad to be rid of them. The hatch opened, a rope ladder was thrown out. Sinistrad and Bane left the bridge in their usual airy style; the others descended via the ladder. Hugh was the last one to leave the ship. Standing in the hatchway, watching the others slowly and clumsily make their way down, he was startled by a light touch on his arm.

Turning, he looked into the eyes of the elf captain.

"Yes," said Bothar'el, "I know what he wants. I'll do my best to make certain he doesn't get it. If you come back with money, we'll get you out of here. We'll wait for you as long as we can hold out." The elf's mouth twisted. "I expect to be paid as promised-one way or the other."

A cry and thud from below announced that Alfred, as usual, had come to grief. Hugh said nothing. There was nothing to say. All was understood. He began to climb down the ladder. The others were on the ground already, Haplo and Limbeck tending a prone and unconscious Alfred. Standing next to Haplo, licking Alfred's face, was the dog, and it occurred to Hugh to wonder, as he descended,

how the animal or its master had managed such a remarkable feat. Hugh had never heard of a four-legged animal being able to climb down a rope ladder. But when he asked the others, no one seemed to have noticed.

A group of twenty mysteriarchs-ten men and ten women-was on hand to welcome them. Sinistrad introduced them as mystagogues, teachers of the arcane and the ruling body of the city. They appeared to be of varying ages, though none were as young as Sinistrad. One couple looked to be ancient, their faces wizened masses of wrinkles nearly hiding eyes that were shrewd and intelligent and held in them knowledge amassed over who knew how many years. The others were in mid-life, with firm, unlined faces, hair thick and richly colored with only a few strands of silver or gray at the temples. They were pleasant and polite, welcoming visitors to their fair city, offering all in their power to make the stay memorable.

Memorable. Hugh had a feeling it would be that, at least. Walking among the wizards, hearing introductions, he looked into eyes that never looked into his, saw faces that might have been carved of the pearl substance around them, devoid of any expression other than polite and proper welcome. His sense of danger and unease grew and was made manifest by a peculiar incident.

"I was wondering, my friends, if you would care to walk about our city and view its wonders. My own dwelling is some distance away, and you may not have another opportunity to see much of New Hope before you have to leave."

All agreed and, having ascertained that Alfred was not injured-beyond a bump on the head-they followed Sinistrad through the park. Crowds of wizards gathered on the grass or sat beneath the trees to stare at them as they passed. But no one said a word, either to them or to a neighbor. The silence was eerie, and Hugh felt that he much preferred the thumping and banging of the Kicksey-Winsey.

Reaching the sidewalk, he and his companions stood among the glittering buildings whose spires soared into the rainbow-shimmering sky. Arched doorways led to cool, shadowy courtyards. Arched windows gave glimpses of fabulous luxuries inside.

"These to your left belong to the college of the arcane, where we teach our young. Across are the dwellings of the students and professors. The very tallest building that you can see from here is the seat of government, where sit the members of the council, whom you have just met. Ah, I must warn you of one thing." Sinistrad, who had been walking with one hand resting lovingly on the shoulder of his son, turned around to face them.

"The material used in our buildings is made magically and therefore is not . . . How shall I put it so that you will understand? Let us say: it is not of this world. And so it would be a good idea if you, being of the world, did not touch it. Ah, there, what did I say?"

Limbeck, ever curious, had reached out his hand to run his fingers over the smooth, pearly stone. There was a sizzle, and the Geg yelped in pain and snatched back burned fingers.

"He doesn't understand your language," said Alfred with a rebuking glance at the wizard.

"Then I suggest that one of you translate," returned Sinistrad. "The next time, it might cost him his life."

Limbeck stared in awe at the buildings, sucking on the tips of his hurt fingers. Alfred imparted the warning to the Geg in a low voice and they continued on down the street, new wonders continually unfolding before their eyes. The sidewalks were massed with people, coming and going on their business, and all staring at them curiously and in silence.

Alfred and Limbeck kept pace with Bane and Sinistrad. Hugh was doing the same until he noticed Haplo lagging behind, walking slowly to assist his dog, which had suddenly developed a limp in one foot. Hugh, answering a silent request, paused to wait for them. They were a long time coming-the dog was in obvious discomfort-and the others drew well ahead. Haplo stopped and knelt down beside the animal, seemingly absorbed in its injury. Hugh joined him.

"Well, what's the matter with the mutt?"

"Nothing, really. I wanted to show you something. Reach out and touch that wall behind me."

"Are you crazy? You want to see me burn my fingers off?"

"Go ahead," said Haplo with his quiet smile. The dog was grinning at Hugh as if sharing a wonderful secret. "You won't get hurt."

Feeling very much like a boy who can't resist a dare though he knows he'll only end up in trouble, Hugh gingerly stretched out his hand toward the pearl-glistening wall. He cringed in expected pain when his fingers touched the surface, but he felt nothing. Absolutely nothing! His fingers went completely through the stone! The building was solid as a cloud.

"What the...?"

"Illusion," said Haplo. He patted the dog on the flank. "Come on, the wizard's looking at us. Thorn in its paw," he called out to Sinistrad. "I removed it. The dog'll be all right now."

Sinistrad regarded them with narrow-eyed suspicion, perhaps wondering where the dog had managed to pick up a thorn in the middle of the city. He continued on, however, though it seemed that his speech about the wonders of New Hope was a bit forced, the descriptions delivered somewhat bitingly.

Hugh, mystified, nudged Haplo. "Why?"

Haplo shrugged. "There's something else, too," he said in a low voice, the words coming out of the corner of his mouth so that, if Sinistrad glanced back, they would not seem to be talking. "Take a close look at all these people around us."

"They're a quiet bunch. I can say that for them."

"Look at them. Closely."

Hugh did as he was told. "There is something strange about them," he admitted. "They look . . ." He paused.

"Familiar?"

"Yeah. Familiar. Like I've seen them somewhere before. But that's not possible."

"Yes, it is. If you're seeing the same twenty people over and over."

At that moment, almost as if he had overheard, Sinistrad brought the tour to an abrupt halt.

"It is time we traveled on to my humble dwelling," he said. "My wife will be waiting."

## CHAPTER 49

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

#### THE QUICKSILVER DRAGON CARRIED THEM TO SINISTRAD'S DWELLING.

They did not travel far. The castle seemed to float on a cloud, and commanded, whenever the mists parted, a view of the city of New Hope that was spectacular, breathtaking, and-to Hugh's mind-disturbing. The buildings, the people-nothing but a dream. If so, whose? And why were they being invited-no, forced-to share it?

Hugh's first action on entering the castle was to take a surreptitious poke at the wall. He noted Haplo doing the same, and both exchanged glances. The castle, at least, was solid. This was real.

And the woman descending the stairs . . . was she real?

"Ah, there you are, my dear. I thought you would be out front, waiting impatiently to greet your son."

The castle's entry hall was enormous, its dominating feature a grand staircase whose marble steps were so wide that a war dragon could have flown up it, wings fully extended, and never touched the sides. The interior walls were made of the same smooth, pearlized opal as the outer, and shimmered in the sunlight shining softly through the shifting mists surrounding the castle. Tapestries of rich and wondrous beauty adorned the walls. Rare and valuable articles of furniture-massive wooden chests, richly carved high-backed chairs-line the hallway. Ancient suits of human armor made of precious metals, inlaid with silver and gold, stood silent guard. The stairs were covered with a thick, smooth carpet made of woven wool.

Halfway down the stairs, dwarfed by their massive size, they could see-once Sinistrad had drawn their attention to her-a woman. She stood frozen, staring at her child. Bane kept very near Sinistrad, the boy's small hand clinging tightly to the wizard's. The woman put her hand to a locket she wore at her throat and clasped her fingers round it. With her other, she leaned heavily against the balustrades. She had not stopped on the stair to make a grand entrance, to draw all eyes to her. She had stopped, Hugh saw, because she could go no farther.

Hugh had wondered, briefly, what kind of woman Bane's mother was. What kind of woman would participate in a baby-switching. He had thought he knew, and would not have been surprised to see someone as treacherous and ambitious as the father. Now, seeing her, he realized she was not a perpetrator but a victim.

"My dear, have you taken root?" Sinistrad appeared displeased. "Why don't you speak? Our guests-"

The woman was going to fall, and without pausing to think, Hugh ran up the stairs and caught the slumping body in his arms.

"So that's mother," said Bane.

"Yes, my son," remarked Sinistrad. "Gentlemen, my wife, Iridal." He waved a negligent hand at her motionless body. "I must apologize for her. She is weak, very weak. And now, sirs, if you will follow me, I will show you to your quarters. I am certain you will want to rest after your fatiguing journey."

"What about her-your wife?" Hugh demanded. He smelled the fragrance of crushed and faded lavender.

"Take her to her room," said Sinistrad, glancing at her without interest. "It's at the top of the stairs, along the balcony, second door to the left."

"Should I call a servant to care for her?"

"We have no servants. I find them . . . disruptive. She must care for herself. As must you all, I'm afraid."

Without looking to see if their guests were following, Sinistrad and Bane turned to the right and walked through a door that appeared, seemingly by the wizard's command, in a blank wall. The others did not immediately go after him-Haplo was idly looking around, Alfred was apparently torn between following his prince and attending to the poor woman in Hugh's arms, Limbeck looked with frightened round eyes at the door that had materialized out of solid rock and kept rubbing his ears, perhaps longing for a whoosh, zuzt, wham to break the oppressive silence.

"I suggest you follow me, gentlemen. You will never find your way alone. There are but few fixed rooms in this castle. The rest come and go as we need them. I deplore waste, you see."

The others, somewhat startled by this pronouncement, made their way through the door, Limbeck holding back until Alfred gently propelled him forward. Hugh wondered where the dog was, then, looking down, saw the animal at his feet.

"Get along!" Hugh snapped, shoving at the dog with a boot.

The animal dodged him neatly and remained standing on the stair, watching him with interest, head cocked to one side, ears erect.

The woman in Hugh's arms stirred faintly and moaned. No other assistance from his companions being forthcoming, the assassin turned and carried the woman up the stairs. The climb to the balcony above was long, but the burden he bore was light, far too light.

He carried her to her room, finding it without difficulty by the half-open door and the faint smell of the same sweet fragrance that clung to her. Inside was a sitting room, beyond that a dressing room, and beyond that her bedchamber. Passing through the various rooms, Hugh was surprised to see that they were almost devoid of furnishings, there were few decorations, and those that were visible

were covered with dust. The atmosphere of these inner, private chambers was chill and barren. Far different from the warm luxury of the entry hall.

Hugh laid Iridal gently upon a bed covered with sheets of finest linen trimmed with lace. He drew a silken coverlet over her thin body and then stood gazing at her.

She was younger than he had first guessed on seeing her. Her hair was white but thick and as finely spun as gossamer. The face in repose was sweet, delicately molded, and unlined. Her skin was pale, so dreadfully pale.

Before Hugh could catch the dog, it slipped past and gave the woman's hand-hanging down beside the bed-a swipe with its tongue. Iridal stirred and woke. Her eyes fluttered open. She looked up at Hugh, and fear contorted her features.

"Go now!" she whispered. "You must go!"

. . . The sound of chanting greeted the sun in the chill morning. It was the song of black-robed monks descending on the village, driving away the other carrion birds:

each new child's birth, we die in our hearts, truth black, we are shown, death always returns,

With . . . with . . . with . . .

Hugh and other boys trudged behind, shivering in their thin clothing, their bare feet stumbling numbly over frozen ground. They had come to look forward to the warmth of the terrible fires that would soon be burning in this village.

There were no living people to be seen; only the dead, lying in the streets where their relatives had tossed the plague-infested bodies, then gone into hiding against the coming of the Kir. At a few doors, however, stood baskets of food or perhaps-more precious-jugs of water, the village's payment for services rendered.

The monks were accustomed to this. They went about their grim business, gathering the bodies, hauling them to the large open area where the orphans they sheltered were already heaping up charcrystal. Other boys, Hugh among them, ran down the street gathering up the thank-offerings that would be carried back to the monastery. Coming to one doorway, he heard a sound and paused in the act of lifting a loaf of bread from a basket. He looked inside.

"Mother," said a little boy, starting to approach a woman lying on the bed. "I'm hungry. Why don't you get out of bed? It's time for our breakfast."

"I can't get up this morning, dear." The mother's voice, though gentle, apparently sounded strange and unfamiliar to the child, because it frightened him. "No, my sweet darling. Don't come near me. I forbid it." She drew a breath and Hugh could hear it wheeze in her lungs. Her face was already as white as those of the corpses lying in the street, but he saw that once she had been pretty. "Let me look at you, Mikal. You will be good while . . . while I'm sick. Do you promise? Promise me," she said weakly.

"Yes, mother, I promise."

"Go now!" the woman said in a low voice. Her hands clenched the blankets. "You must go. Go ... fetch me some water."

The child turned and ran toward Hugh, who was standing in the doorway. Hugh saw the woman's body jerk in agony, then go rigid, then limp. The eyes stared up at the ceiling.

"I must get water, water for mother," the child said, looking up at Hugh. His back was turned; he had not seen.

"I'll help carry it," said Hugh. "You hold this." He handed the boy the bread. Might as well get the child accustomed to his new life.

Taking the little boy by the hand, Hugh led him away from the house. In the child's arms was the loaf of bread, baked by a woman just as she was probably beginning to feel the first symptoms of the disease that would shortly claim her. Behind him, Hugh could still hear the soft echo of the mother's command, sending her child away so that he would not see her die.

"Go now!"

Water. Hugh lifted a carafe and poured a glass. Iridal did not glance at it, but kept her gaze fixed on him.

"You!" Her voice was low and soft. "You are . . . one of them . . . with my son?"

Hugh nodded. The woman rose, half-sitting in bed, propped up on her arm. Her face was pale, there was a fever in her lustrous eyes. "Go!" she repeated, speaking in a low, trembling voice. "You're in terrible danger! Leave this house! Now!"

Her eyes. Hugh was mesmerized by her eyes. They were large and deeply set, the irises every color of the rainbow—a glistening spectrum surrounding the black pupils that shifted and changed as the light struck them.

"Do you hear me?" she demanded.

Hugh hadn't really. Something about danger.

"Here, drink this," he said, thrusting the glass toward her.

Angrily she knocked it aside. The goblet crashed to the floor, water running over the stone tiles. "Do you think I want your deaths, too, on my hands?"

"Tell me the danger, then. Why must we leave?"

But the woman sank back on the pillows and would not answer him. Drawing near, he saw that she was shivering with fear.

"What danger?"

He bent down to pick up the pieces of broken glass, looking at her as he worked.

The woman shook her head frenziedly. Her eyes darted about the room. "No. I've said enough, perhaps too much! He has eyes everywhere, his ears are always listening!" The fingers of her hands curled and closed in on the palms.

It had been a long time since Hugh had felt another's pain. It had been a long time since he'd felt his own. From somewhere buried deep inside him, memories and feelings that had been lying dead came to life, stretched out bony hands, and dug their nails into his soul. His hand jerked; a glass shard drove into his palm.

The pain angered him.

"What do I do with this mess?"

Iridal made a weak gesture with her hand, and the broken glass he was holding in his hands vanished, as if it had never been.

"I'm sorry you hurt yourself," she said in a dull, lifeless voice. "But that is what you must expect if you insist on staying."

Averting his face from her, he turned to stare out the window. Far beneath them, its silvery skin visible through the shifting mists, the dragon had curled its huge body about the castle and lay there murmuring to itself over and over of its hatred for the wizard.

"We can't leave," Hugh said. "That dragon's out there, guarding-"

"There are ways to avoid the quicksilver if you truly want to leave."

Hugh was silent, reluctant to tell her the truth, afraid of what he might hear in return. But he had to know. "I can't leave. I'm enthralled-your son has me under enchantment."

Iridal stirred fitfully, glanced up at him with pitying eyes.

"The enchantment works only because you want it to work. Your will feeds it. You could have broken it long ago, if you truly wanted. So the wizard Trian discovered. You care about the boy, you see. And caring is an invisible prison. I know ... I know!"

The dog, which had stretched out, nose on paws, upon the floor at Hugh's feet, suddenly sat bolt upright and stared around fiercely.

Iridal gasped. "He's coming! Quickly, leave me now. You have been here too long."

Hugh, his face dark and foreboding, did not move.

"Oh, please leave me!" Iridal pleaded, stretching out her hands. "For my sake! I am the one who will be punished!"

The dog was already on its feet and heading for the outer chambers. Hugh, with a final glance back at the stricken woman, thought it best to do as she said—for now, at least. Until he could mull over what she had told him. Going out, he met Sinistrad in the door to the sitting room.

"Your wife is resting." Hugh forestalled any question.

"Thank you. I am certain you made her very comfortable." Sinistrad's lashless eyes flicked over Hugh's muscular arms and body; a knowing smile touched his thin lips.

Hugh flushed in anger. He started to push past the wizard, but Sinistrad moved slightly to block his way.

"You are hurt," said the mysteriarch. Reaching out, he took hold of Hugh's hand and turned it, palm-up, to the light.

"It's nothing. A broken glass, that's all."

"Tsk, tsk. I cannot have my guests injured! Allow me." Sinistrad laid fingers, thin and quivering like the legs of a spider, on Hugh's palm over the wound. Closing his eyes, the mysteriarch concentrated. The jagged cut closed. The pain-of the wound- eased.

Smiling, Sinistrad opened his eyes and looked intently into Hugh's.

"We're not your guests," said the Hand. "We're your prisoners."

"That, my dear sir," replied the mysteriarch, "is entirely up to you."

One of the few rooms of the castle to remain constantly in the castle was the wizard's study. Its location, in relation to other rooms in the dwelling, shifted constantly, depending upon Sinistrad's moods and needs. This day, it was in the upper part of the castle, the curtains drawn to catch the last light of Solarus before the Lords of Night snuffed day's candle.

Spread out on the wizard's large desk were the drawings his son had done of the great Kicksey-Winsey. Some were diagrams of parts of the huge machine that Bane, personally, had seen. Others had been created with Limbeck's help and provided illustrations of the parts of the Kicksey-Winsey that operated on the rest of the isle of Drevlin. The drawings were quite good and remarkably accurate. Sinistrad had instructed the boy on how to use magic to enhance his work. Picturing the image in his mind, Bane had only to connect that image with the motion of his hand to translate what he saw onto paper.

The wizard was studying the diagrams intently when a muffled bark caused him to raise his head.

"What is that dog doing in here?"

"He likes me," said Bane, throwing his arms around the dog's neck and hugging him. The two had been roughhousing on the floor, which tussle had occasioned the bark. "He always follows me around. He likes me better than he does Haplo, don't you, boy?"

The dog grinned, its tail thumping the floor.

"Don't be too certain of that." Sinistrad fixed the animal with a piercing gaze. "I don't trust it. I think we should get rid of it. In ancient times, magi used animals such as this to do their bidding, to go places they could not go and act as spies."

"But Haplo isn't a wizard. He's just a ... a human."

"And one not to be trusted. No man is that quiet and self-assured unless he thinks he has things under his control." Sinistrad glanced sidelong at his son. "I don't like this exhibition of weakness I've discovered in you, Bane. You begin to remind me of your mother."

The child removed his arms slowly from around the dog's neck. Rising to his feet, Bane walked over to stand beside his father.

"We could get rid of Haplo. Then I could keep the dog and you wouldn't have to be nervous about it."

"An interesting idea, my son," answered Sinistrad, preoccupied. "Now, take the beast out of here and run along and play."

"But, papa, the dog's not hurting anything. He'll be quiet if I tell him to. See, he's just lying here."

Sinistrad looked down to see the dog looking up. The animal had remarkably intelligent eyes. The mysteriarch frowned.

"I don't want him in here. He smells. Run along, both of you." Sinistrad lifted one drawing, held it next to another, and regarded both thoughtfully. "What was it originally designed to do? Something this gigantic, this enormous. What did the Sartan intend? Surely not just a means of gathering water."

"It produces the water to keep itself going," said Bane, clambering up on a stool to stand level with his father. "It needs the steam to run the engines to create the electricity that runs the machine. The Sartan probably built this part of the machine" -Bane pointed-"to gather water and send it to the Mid Realm, but it's obvious that this wasn't the machine's central function. You see, I-"

Bane caught his father's eye. The words died on the boy's lips. Sinistrad said nothing. Slowly Bane slid down off the stool.

The mysteriarch, without another word, turned back to his perusing of the drawings.

Bane walked to the door. The dog, rising to its feet, followed eagerly after, evidently thinking it was time to play. In the doorway, the boy halted and turned back.

"I know," he said.

"What?" Sinistrad, irritated, glanced up.

"I know why the Kicksey-Winsey was invented. I know what it was meant to do. I know how it can be made to do it. And I know how we can rule the entire world. I figured it out while I was making the drawings."

Sinistrad stared at the child. There was something of the boy's mother in the sweet mouth and the features, but it was his own shrewd and calculating eyes that stared fearlessly back at him.

Sinistrad indicated the drawings with a negligent wave of his hand. "Show me."

Bane, returning to the desk, did so. The dog, forgotten, plopped itself down at the wizard's feet.

## CHAPTER 50

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

THE TINKLING OF MANY UNSEEN BELLS CALLED SINISTRAD'S GUESTS TO DINNER. THE castle's dining room-no doubt having just been created-was windowless, large, dark, and chill. A long oaken table, covered with dust, stood in the center of the bleak chamber. Chairs draped in cloth ranged round it like guardian ghosts. The fireplace was cold and empty. The room had appeared right in front of the guests' noses, and they gathered within it, most of them ill-at-ease, to await the arrival of their host.

Sauntering over to the table, Haplo ran his finger through an inch of dust and dirt.

"I can hardly wait," he remarked, "to taste the food."

Lights flared above them, hitherto unseen candelabrum flamed to brilliant life. The cloth draped over the chairs was whisked away by unseen hands. The dust vanished. The empty table was suddenly laden with food-roast meat, steaming vegetables, fragrant breads. Goblets filled with wine and water appeared. Music played softly from some unseen source.

Limbeck, gaping, tumbled backward and nearly fell into a roaring fire blazing on the hearth. Alfred nearly leapt out of his skin. Hugh could not repress a start, and backed away from the feast, eyeing it suspiciously. Haplo, smiling quietly, took a bua [20] and bit into it. Its crunch could be heard through the silence. He wiped juice from his chin. A pretty good illusion, he thought. Everyone will be fooled until about an hour from now when they'll begin to wonder why they're still hungry.

"Please, sit down," said Sinistrad, waving one hand. With the other, he led in Iridal. Bane walked at his father's side. "We do not stand on ceremony here. My dear." Leading his wife to the end of the table, he seated her in a chair with a bow. "To reward Sir Hugh for his exertions in caring for you today, wife, I will place him at your right hand."

Iridal flushed and kept her gaze on her plate. Hugh sat where he was told and did not appear displeased.

"The rest of you find chairs where you will, except for Limbeck. My dear sir, please forgive me." Switching to the Geg's language, the wizard made a graceful bow. "I have been inconsiderate, forgetting that you do not speak the human tongue. My son has been telling me of your gallant struggle to free your people from oppression. Pray, take a seat here near me and tell me of it yourself. Do not worry about the other guests, my wife will entertain them."

Sinistrad took his seat at the head of the table. Pleased, embarrassed, and flustered, Limbeck plunked his stout body into a chair at Sinistrad's right. Bane sat across from him, on his father's left. Alfred hastened to secure a seat beside the prince. Haplo chose to seat himself at the opposite end of the long table, near Iridal and Hugh. The dog plopped down on the floor beside Bane.

Taciturn and reticent as ever, Haplo could appear to be absorbed in his meal and could listen equally well to everyone's conversation.

"I hope you will forgive my indisposition this afternoon," said Iridal. Though she spoke to Hugh, her eyes kept sliding, as if compelled to do so, to her husband, seated opposite her at the table's far end. "I am subject to such spells. They come over me at times."

Sinistrad, watching her, nodded slightly. Iridal turned to Hugh and looked at him directly for the first time since he had taken his place beside her. She made an attempt at a smile. "I hope you will ignore anything I said to you. The illness . . . makes me talk about silly things."

"What you said wasn't silly," Hugh returned. "You meant every word. And you weren't sick. You were scared as hell."

There had been color in her cheeks when she entered. It drained as Hugh watched her. Glancing at her husband, Iridal swallowed and reached out her hand for her wine goblet.

"You must forget what I said! As you value your life, do not mention it again!"

"My life is, right now, of very little value." Hugh's hand caught hold of hers beneath the table and held it fast. "Except as it can be used to serve you, Iridal."

"Try some of the bread," said Haplo, passing it to Hugh. "It's delicious. Sinistrad recommends it."

The mysteriarch was, indeed, watching them closely. Reluctantly releasing Iridal's hand, Hugh took a piece of bread and set it down, untasted, on his plate. Iridal toyed with her food and pretended to eat.

"Then for my sake don't refer to my words, especially if you will not act on them."

"I couldn't leave, knowing I left you behind in danger."

"You fool!" Iridal straightened, warmth sweeping her face. "What can you do, a human who lacks the gift, against such as we? I am ten times more powerful than you, ten times better capable of defending myself if need be! Remember that!"

"Forgive me, then." Hugh's dark face flushed. "It seemed you were in trouble-"

"My troubles are my own and none of your concern, sir."

"I will not bother you anymore, madam, you may be certain of that!"

Iridal did not answer, but stared at the food on her plate. Hugh ate stolidly and said nothing.

Things now silent at his end of the table, Haplo turned his attention to the opposite.

The dog, lying by Bane's chair, kept its ears pricked, gazing up at everyone eagerly, as if hoping for a choice bit to fall its direction.

"But, Limbeck, you saw very little of the Mid Realm," Sinistrad was saying.

"I saw enough." Limbeck blinked at him owlshly through His thick spectacles. The Geg had changed visibly during the past few weeks. The sights he had witnessed, the thoughts he had been thinking, had, like hammer and chisel, chipped away at his dreamy idealism. He had seen the life his people had been denied all these centuries, seen the life they were providing, all the while not sharing. The hammer's first blows hurt him. Later would come the rage.

"I saw enough," Limbeck repeated. Overwhelmed by the magic, the beauty, and his own emotions, he could think of nothing else to say.

"Indeed, you must have," answered the wizard. "I am truly grieved for your people; all of us in the High Realm share your sorrow and your very proper anger. I feel we must share in the blame. Not that we ever exploited you. We have no need, as you see around you, to exploit anyone. But still, I feel that we are somewhat at fault." He sipped delicately at his wine. "We left the world because we were sick of war, sick of watching people suffer and die in the name of greed and hatred. We spoke out against it and did what we could to stop it, but we were too few, too few."

There were actually tears in the man's voice. Haplo could have told him he was wasting a fine performance, at least for his end of the table. Iridal had long since given up any pretense of eating. She had been sitting silently, staring at her plate, until it became obvious that her husband's attention was centered on his conversation with the Geg. Then she raised her eyes, but their gaze did not go to her husband or to the man seated beside her. She looked at her son, seeing Bane, perhaps, for the first time since he'd arrived. Tears filled her eyes. Swiftly she lowered her head. Lifting her hand to brush aside a stray lock of hair, she hastily wiped the drops from her cheeks.

Hugh's hand, resting on the table opposite him, clenched in pain and anger.

How had love's gilt-edged knife managed to penetrate a heart as tough as that one? Haplo didn't know and he didn't care. All he knew was that it was damned inconvenient. The Patryn needed a man of action, since he was barred from action himself. It wouldn't do at all for Hugh to get himself killed in some foolish, noble chivalric gesture.

Haplo began to scratch his right hand, digging down beneath the bandages, displacing them slightly. The sigla exposed, he casually reached for more bread, managing-in the same movement-to press the back of his hand firmly against the wine pitcher. Grasping the bread in his right hand, he returned it to his plate, brushed his left hand over the bandages covering the right, and the runes were hidden once again.

"Iridal," Hugh began, "I can't bear to see you suffer-"

"Why should you care about me?"

"I'm damned if I know!" Hugh leaned near her. "You or your son! I-"

"More wine?" Haplo held up the pitcher.

Hugh glowered, annoyed, and decided to ignore his companion.

Haplo poured a glassful and shoved it toward Hugh. The goblet's base struck the man's fingers, and wine-real wine- sloshed on his hand and his shirt sleeve.

"What the devil . . . ?" Hugh turned on the Patryn angrily.

Haplo raised an eyebrow, obliquely nodding his head in the direction of the opposite end of the table. Attracted by the commotion, everyone, including Sinistrad, was staring at them. Iridal sat straight and tall, her face pale and cold as the marble walls. Hugh lifted the goblet and drank deeply. From his dark expression, it might have been the wizard's blood.

Haplo smiled; he hadn't been any too soon. He waved a hunk of bread at Sinistrad. "Sorry. You were saying?"

Frowning, the mysteriarch continued. "I was saying that we should have realized what was happening to your people in the Low Realm and come to your aid. But we didn't know you were in trouble. We believed the stories that the Sartan had left behind. We did not know, then, that they were lying-

A sharp clatter made them all start. Alfred had dropped his spoon onto his plate.

"What do you mean? What stories?" Limbeck was asking eagerly.

"After the Sundering, according to the Sartan, your people- being shorter in stature than humans and elves-were taken to the Low Realm for their own protection. Actually, as is now apparent, what the Sartan wanted was a source of cheap labor."

"That's not true!" The voice was Alfred's. He hadn't spoken a word during the entire meal. Everyone, including Iridal, looked at him in astonishment.

Sinistrad turned to him, his thin lips stretched in a polite smile. "No, and do you know what is the truth?"

Red spread from Alfred's neck to his balding head. "I ... I've made a study of the GEGS, you see . . ." Flustered, he tugged at and twisted the hem of the tablecloth. "Anyway, I ... I think the Sartan intended to do ... what you said about protection. It wasn't so much that the dwarv . . . the GEGS were shorter and therefore in danger from the taller races, but that they-the GEGS-were few in number . . . following the Sundering. Then, the dwarv . . . GEGS are very mechanically minded people. And the Sartan needed that for the machine. But they never meant . . . That is, they always meant to . . ."

Hugh's head slumped forward and hit the table with a thud. Iridal sprang from her chair, crying out in alarm. Haplo was on his feet and moving.

"It's nothing," he said, reaching Hugh's side.

Slipping the assassin's flaccid arm around his neck, Haplo lifted the heavy body from the chair. Hugh's limp hand dragged at the cloth, knocked over goblets, and sent a plate crashing to the floor.

"Good man, but a weak head for wine. I'll take him to his room. No need for the rest of you to be disturbed."

"Are you certain he's all right?" Iridal hovered over them anxiously. "Perhaps I should come-

"A drunk has passed out at your table, my dear. There is hardly any need for concern," Sinistrad said. "Remove him, by all means."

"Can I keep the dog?" asked Bane, petting the animal, which, seeing its master preparing to leave, had jumped to its feet.

"Sure," said Haplo easily. "Dog, stay."

The dog settled happily back down at Bane's side.

Haplo got Hugh to his feet. Weaving drunkenly, the man was just barely able to stagger-with help-toward the door. Everyone else resumed his seat. Alfred's words were forgotten. Sinistrad turned back to Limbeck.

"This Kicksey-Winsey of yours fascinates me. I believe that, since I now have a ship at my disposal, I will journey down to your realm and take a look at it. Of course, I will also be quite pleased to do what I can to help your people prepare for the war-

"War!" The word echoed in the hall. Haplo, glancing back over his shoulder, saw Limbeck's face, troubled and pale.

"My dear Geg, I didn't mean to shock you." Sinistrad smiled at him kindly. "War being the next logical step, I simply assumed that you had come here for this very purpose-to ask my support. I can assure you, the GEGs will have the full cooperation of my people."

Sinistrad's words came through the dog's ears to Haplo, who was carrying a stumbling Hugh into a dark-and-chill corridor. He was just wondering which direction the guest rooms were located from the dining room when a hallway materialized before him. Several doors stood invitingly open.

"I hope no one walks in his sleep," Haplo muttered to his besotted companion.

Back in the dining room, the Patryn could hear the rustle of Iridal's silken gown and her chair scrape against the stone floor. Her voice, when she spoke, was tight with controlled anger. "If you will excuse me, I will retire to my room now."

"Not feeling well, are you, my dear?"

"Thank you, I am feeling fine." She paused, then added, "It is late. The boy should be in his bed."

"Yes, wife. I'll see to it. No need to trouble yourself. Bane, bid your mother good night."

Well, it had been an interesting evening. Fake food. Fake words. Haplo eased Hugh onto his bed and covered him with a blanket. The assassin wouldn't wake from the spell until morning.

Haplo retired to his own room. Entering, he shut the door and slid home the bolt. He needed time to rest and think undisturbed, assimilate all that he had heard today.

Voices continued to come to him, through the dog. Their words were unimportant; everyone was parting to rest for the night. Lying down on his bed, the Patryn sent out a silent command to the animal, then began to sort out his thoughts.

The Kicksey-Winsey. He'd deduced its function from the flickering images portrayed on the eyeball held in the hand of the Manger-the Sartan flouting their power, proudly announcing their grand design. Haplo could see the images again, in his mind. He could see the drawing of the world-the Realm of Sky. He saw the isles and continents, scattered about in disorder; the raging storm that was both death-dealing and life-giving; everything moving in the chaotic manner so abhorrent to the order-loving Sartan.

When had they discovered their mistake? When had they found out that the world they created for the removal of a people after the Sundering was imperfect? After they had populated it? Did they realize, then, that the beautiful floating islands in the sky were dry and barren and could not nurture the life that had been placed in their trust?

The Sartan would fix it. They had fixed everything else, split apart a world rather than let those they considered unworthy rule it. The Sartan would build a machine that, combined with their magic, would align the isles and the continents. Closing his eyes, Haplo saw the pictures again clearly. A tremendous force beaming up from the Kicksey-Winsey catches hold of the continents and the isles, drags them through the skies, and aligns them, one right above the other. A geyser of water, drawn from the constant storm, shoots upward continually, bringing the life-giving substance to everyone.

Haplo had figured out the puzzle. He was rather surprised that Bane had solved it as well. Now Sinistrad knew, and he had, most obligingly, explained his plans to his son-and to the listening dog.

One flick of the Kicksey-Winsey's switch, and the mysteriarch would rule a realigned world.

The dog jumped up on the bed and settled itself at Haplo's side. Lazily, relaxed to the point of sleep, the Patryn stretched out his arm and patted the dog on the flank. With a contented sigh, the animal rested its head on Haplo's chest and closed its eyes.

What criminal folly, Haplo thought, stroking the dog's soft ears. To build something this powerful and then walk away and leave it to fall into the hands of some ambitious mensch. [21] Haplo couldn't imagine why they had done it. For all their faults, the Sartan weren't fools. Something had happened to them before they could finish their project. He wished he knew what. This was the clearest sign he could imagine, however, to prove that the Sartan were no longer in the world.

An echo came to him, words spoken by Alfred during the confusion of Hugh's drunken swoon, words probably heard only by the dog and transferred dutifully to the master.

"They thought they were gods. They tried to do right. But somehow it all kept going wrong."

## CHAPTER 51

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

"PAPA, I'M GOING WITH YOU TO DREVLIN-"

"No, and stop arguing with me, Bane! You must return to the Mid Realm and take your place on the throne."

"But I can't go back! Stephen wants to kill me!"

"Don't be stupid, child. I haven't time for it. In order for you to inherit the throne, Stephen and his queen must be dead. That will be arranged. In essence, of course, I will be the one who is truly ruling the Mid Realm. But I can't be in two places at once. I will be on the Low Realm, preparing the machine. Don't snivel! I can't abide it."

His father's words sounded over and over again in Bane's head like the screeching of some irritating nighttime insect that will not permit sleep.

I will be the one who is truly ruling the Mid Realm.

Yes, and where would you be now, papa, if I hadn't shown you how!

Lying on his back, stiff and rigid in the bed, the boy clutched handfuls of the fleecy blanket that covered him. Bane didn't cry. Tears were a valuable weapon in his fight against adults; he had often found them useful against Stephen and Anne. Tears, alone, in the darkness, were a weakness. So his father would think.

But what did he care what his father thought?

Bane gripped the blanket hard and the tears almost came anyway. Yes, he cared. He cared so much it hurt him inside.

Bane could remember clearly the day he had come to realize that the people he knew as his parents only adored him, they didn't love him. Having escaped from Alfred, he was loitering about the kitchen, teasing the cook for bites of sweet dough, when one of the stableboys ran in, wailing over a scratch from a dragon's claw. It was the cook's son, a lad not much older than Bane, who'd been put to work with his father-one of the dragon tenders. The cut wasn't serious. Cook cleaned it and bound it with a strip of cloth, then, taking the child in her arms, kissed him heartily, hugged him, and sent him back to his chores. The boy ran off with a glowing face, the pain and fright of his injury quite forgotten.

Bane had been watching from a corner. Just the day before, he'd cut his hand on a chipped goblet. There'd been a flurry of excitement. Trian had been summoned. He'd brought with him a solid silver knife passed through flame, healing herbs, and cobweb to stanch the bleeding. The offending goblet had been smashed. Alfred had come near being sacked over the incident; King Stephen shouted at the poor chamberlain for twenty minutes running. Queen Anne had nearly fainted at the sight and been forced to leave the room. His "mother" had not kissed him. She had not taken him into her arms and made him laugh to forget the pain.

Bane had derived a certain satisfaction from beating up the stableboy-a satisfaction compounded by the fact that the stable-boy had been severely punished for fighting with the prince. That night Bane asked the voice of the feather amulet, the soft and whispering voice that often spoke to him during the night, to explain why his parents didn't love him.

The voice told him the truth. Stephen and Anne weren't his real parents. Bane was just using them for a while. His true father was a powerful mysteriarch. His true father dwelt in a splendid castle in a fabulous realm. His true father was proud of his son, and the day would come when he would call his son home and they would be together always.

The last part of the sentence was Bane's addition, not I will be the one who is truly ruling the Mid Realm.

Letting go of the blanket, the boy grasped hold of the feather amulet he wore around his neck and jerked hard on the leather thong. It would not break. Angrily, using words he'd picked up from the stableboy, Bane pulled at it again-harder-and succeeded only in hurting himself. Tears came to his eyes at last, tears of pain and frustration. Sitting up in bed, he pulled and tugged, and finally, after costing himself more pain by getting the thong tangled in his hair, managed to drag it up over and off his head.

Alfred was passing down the hallway, searching for his own bedchamber in the confusing, forbidding palace.

"Limbeck is falling under the sway of the mysteriarch. I can see the bloody conflict into which the Gags will be drawn! Thousands will die, and for what-to gain an evil man control of the world! I should stop it, but how? What can I do alone? Or maybe I shouldn't stop it. After all, it was attempting to control what should have been left alone that brought tragedy on us all. And then there is Haplo. I know for certain who he is, but, again, what can I do? Should I do anything? I don't know! I don't know! Why was I left by myself? Is it a mistake, or am I supposed to be doing something? And if so, what?"

The chamberlain, in his aimless ramblings, found himself near Bane's door. His inner turmoil made the dark and shadowy hall swim before his eyes. Pausing until his vision cleared, wishing desperately his thoughts would do the same, Alfred heard the rustle of bedclothes and the child's voice crying and cursing. Glancing up and down the hall to make certain he was not seen, Alfred raised two fingers on his right hand and traced the sign of a sigil on the door. The wood seemed to disappear at his command, and he could see through it as if it were not there.

Bane hurled the amulet into a corner of the room. "No one loves me and I'm glad of it! I don't love them. I hate them, all of them!"

The boy flung himself down onto the bed, buried his head in the pillow. Alfred drew a deep and shaking breath. At last! It had happened at last, and just when his heart was despairing.

Now was the time to draw the boy back from the edge of Sinistrad's pit. Alfred stepped forward, forgetting the door, and narrowly missed bumping right into it, for the spell he had cast had not removed it, merely let him see through it.

The chamberlain caught himself and, at the same time, thought: No, not me. What am I? A servant, nothing more. His mother. Yes, his mother!

Bane heard a sound in his room and promptly shut his eyes and froze. He had the blanket pulled over his head, and he hastily dried his tears with a quick flick of his hand.

Was it Sinistrad, coming to say he'd changed his mind?

"Bane?" The voice was soft and gentle, his mother's.

The boy pretended to be sleeping. What does she want? he wondered. Do I want to talk to her? Yes, he decided, hearing once again his father's words, I think I do want to speak to mother. All my life people have used me to get what they wanted. Now I'm going to start using them.

Blinking sleepily, Bane raised a tousled head from the depth of the blankets. Iridal had materialized inside his room and was standing at the foot of his bed. Light slowly began to illuminate her, shining from within, and casting a warm and lovely radiance over the boy. The rest of the room remained in darkness. Looking at his mother, Bane knew, from the pitying expression that swept over her face, that she saw he had been crying. This was good. Once again he drew on his arsenal.

"Oh, my child!" His mother came to him. Sitting down on the bed, Iridal slid her arm around him and drew him close, soothing him with her hand.

A feeling of exquisite warmth enveloped the boy. Nestling into that comforting arm, he said to himself: I've given father what he wants. Now it's her turn. What does she want of me?

Nothing, apparently. Iridal wept over him and murmured incoherently about how much she had missed him and how she had longed for him to be with her. This gave the boy an idea.

"Mother," he said, looking up at her with tear-drenched blue eyes, "I want to be with you! But father says he's going to send me away!"

"Send you away! Where? Why?"

"Back to the Mid Realm, back to those people who don't love me!" He caught hold of her hand and hugged it tightly. "I want to stay with you! You and father!"

"Yes," Iridal murmured. Drawing Bane close, she kissed him on the forehead. "Yes ... a family. Like I've always dreamed. Maybe there is a chance. Maybe I can't save him, but his own child. Surely he could not betray such innocent love and trust. This hand"-she kissed the child's fingers, bathing them with tears-"this hand might lead him away from the dark path he walks."

Bane didn't understand. All paths were one to him, neither dark nor light, all leading straight to the same goal-people doing what he wanted them to do.

"You'll talk to father," he said, squirming out of her grasp, feeling that, after all, kissing and hugging might get to be a nuisance.

"Yes, I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"Thank you, mama." Bane yawned.

"You should be sleeping," Iridal said, rising. "Good night, my son." She gently drew the blanket up snug around him and, leaning down, kissed his cheek. "Good night."

The magical radiance began to fade from her face. She raised her hands and closed her eyes, concentrating, and disappeared from his room.

Bane grinned into the darkness. He had no idea what kind of influence his mother might be able to exert; he could only judge by Queen Anne, who had generally been able to get what she wanted from Stephen.

But if this didn't work, there was always the other plan. In order to make that plan work, he would have to give away for free something he guessed was of inestimable value. He would be circumspect, of course, but his father was smart. Sinistrad might guess and rob him of it. Still, spend nothing, gain nothing.

Likely, he wouldn't have to give it up. Not yet. He wouldn't be sent away. Mama would see to that.

Gleefully Bane kicked off the smothering covers.

## CHAPTER 52

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, IRIDAL ENTERED HER HUSBAND'S STUDY. SHE FOUND HER

son there with Sinistrad, the two of them seated at her husband's writing desk, poring over drawings made by Bane. The dog, lying at her son's feet, lifted its head when it saw her, its tail thumping the floor.

Iridal paused a moment in the doorway. All her fantasies had come true. Loving father, adoring son; Sinistrad patiently devoting his time to Bane, studying whatever the boy had done with an assumed gravity that was quite endearing. In that instant, seeing the skullcapped head bent so near the fair-haired one, hearing the murmur of the voices-one young and one old- caught up in the excitement of what she could only think was some childish project of her son's, Iridal forgave Sinistrad everything. Her years of terror and suffering she would gladly erase, banish from her memory, if only he would grant her this.

Stepping forward almost shyly-it had been many years since she had set foot in her husband's sanctum-Iridal tried to speak but couldn't find her voice. The choked sound caught the attention of both son and father, however. One looked up at her with a radiant, charming smile. The other appeared annoyed.

"Well, wife, what do you want?"

Iridal's fantasies wavered, their bright mist shredded by the chill voice and the icy gaze of the lashless eyes.

"Good morning, mama," said Bane. "Would you like to see my drawings? I made them myself."

"If I am not disturbing-" She looked hesitantly at Sinistrad.

"Come in, then," he said ungraciously.

"Why, Bane, these are marvelous." Iridal lifted a few pages and turned them to the light of the sun.

"I used my magic. Like father taught me. I thought of what I wanted to draw, and my hands took over and did it. I learn magic very quickly," said the boy, gazing up at his mother with wide-eyed charm. "You and father could teach me in your spare time. I wouldn't be any trouble."

Sinistrad sat back in his chair, the robes of heavy watered silk rustling dryly, like bat wings. His lips creased in a chill smile that blew the tattered remnants of Iridal's fancies from the skies. She would have fled to her chambers had not Bane been watching her hopefully, silently pleading with her to continue. The dog laid its head back down between its paws, its eyes moving alertly to whoever spoke.

"What . . . are these drawings?" She faltered. "The great machine?"

"Yes. Look, this is the part they call the wombay. Papa says that means 'womb' and it's where the Kicksey-Winsey was born. And this part activates the great force that will pull all of the isles-"

"That will do, Bane," interrupted Sinistrad. "We mustn't keep your mother from the entertaining of our . . . guests." He lingered over the word. The look he gave her made her skin flush crimson and scattered her thoughts in confusion. "I assume you came here for some purpose, wife. Or perhaps it was just to make certain that my time was occupied so that you and the dark and handsome assassin-"

"How dare . . . ? What? What did you say?"

Iridal's hands began to shake. Hurriedly she laid the pages of drawings she'd been holding back on the desk.

"Didn't you know, my dear? One of your guests is a professional knife-man. Hugh the Hand is what he calls himself-a Hand stained in blood, if you will forgive my small jest. Your gallant champion was hired to murder a child." Sinistrad ruffled Bane's hair. "But for me, wife, your boy would never have come home to you. I thwarted Hugh's design-"

"I don't believe you! It's not possible!"

"I know it's shocking for you, my dear, to discover that we have a house guest who might murder us all in our beds. But I have taken every precaution. He did me a favor by drinking himself into a blind stupor last night. It was quite simple to transfer his wine-soaked body to a place of safekeeping. My son tells me that there is a price on the man's head, as well as that of the boy's treacherous servant. The amount will be just enough to finance my project in the Low Realm. And now, my dear, what was it you wanted?"

"Don't take my son from me!" Iridal gasped for breath, feeling as if cold water had been dashed over her. "Do whatever you want. I will not stop you. Just leave me my son!"

"Only the other morning, you disclaimed him. Now you say you want him." Sinistrad shrugged. "Really, madam, I can't subject the boy to your idle whims that change daily. He must return to the Mid Realm and take up his duties. And now I think you had better go. So nice that we could have this little chat, wife. We must do it more often."

"I do think, mama, that you might have talked this over with me first," interjected Bane. "I want to go back! I'm certain father knows what's best for me."

"I'm certain he does," said Iridal.

Turning, she walked with quiet dignity out of the study and managed to make it down the chill, shadowy hallway before she wept for her lost child.

"As for you, Bane," said Sinistrad, returning each of the drawings Iridal had disturbed to its proper place, "never try that with me again. This time I punished your mother, who should have known better. Next time, it will be you."

Bane accepted the rebuke in silence. It was refreshing to play the game with an opponent as skilled as himself for a change. He began to deal out the next hand, moving swiftly so that his father would not notice the cards were coming from the bottom of a prearranged deck.

"Father," said Bane, "I have a question about magic."

"Yes?" Now that discipline had been restored, Sinistrad was pleased at the boy's interest.

"One day I saw Trian drawing something on a sheet of paper. It was a letter of the alphabet, but yet it wasn't. When I asked him, he crumpled it up and looked embarrassed and threw it away. He said it was magic and I mustn't bother him about it."

Sinistrad turned his attention from the drawing he was perusing to his son. Bane returned the sharp-eyed, curious gaze with the ingenuous expression the child knew so well how to assume. The dog sat up and shoved his nose in the child's hand, wanting to be petted.

"What did the symbol look like?"

On the back of one of the drawings, Bane traced a rune.

"That?" Sinistrad snorted. "That is a sigil, used in rune magic. This Trian must be more of a fool than I thought, to be dabbling in that arcane art."

"Why?"

"Because only the Sartan were skilled in the use of runes."

"The Sartan!" The child appeared awed. "No others?"

"Well, it was said that in the world which existed before the Sundering, the Sartan had a mortal enemy—a group as powerful and more ambitious, a group who wanted to use their godlike powers to rule instead of to guide. They were known as the Patrins."

"And you're certain. No one else can use this magic?"

"Haven't I said so once? When I say a thing, I mean it!"

"I'm sorry, father."

Now that he was certain, Bane could afford to be magnanimous to a losing opponent.

"What does the rune do, father?"

Sinistrad glanced at it. "A rune of healing, I believe," he said without interest.

Bane smiled and petted the dog, which gratefully licked his fingers.

## CHAPTER 53

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

THE EFFECTS OF THE SPELL WERE SLOW TO WEAR OFF. HUGH COULD NOT DISTINGUISH between dream and reality. One moment the black monk was standing at his side, taunting him.

"Death's master? No, we are your masters. All your life, you have served us."

And then the black monk was Sinistrad.

"Why not serve me? I could use a man of your talents. Stephen and Anne must be dealt with. My son must sit on the throne of both Volkaran and Uylandia, and these two stand in his way. A clever man like you could figure out how their deaths could be accomplished. I've work to do, but I'll return later. Remain here and think about it."

"Here" was a dank cell that had been created out of nothing and nowhere. Sinistrad had carried Hugh to this place-wherever it was. The assassin had resisted, but not much. It's difficult to fight when you can barely tell the floor from the ceiling, your feet seem to have multiplied and your legs lost their bones.

Of course it was Sinistrad who cast the spell on me.

Hugh could vaguely remember trying to tell Haplo he wasn't drunk, that this was some terrible magic, but Haplo had only smiled that infuriating smile of his and said he'd feel better when he'd slept it off.

Maybe when Haplo wakes up and discovers I'm gone, he'll come looking for me.

Hugh held his pounding head in his hands and cursed himself for a fool. Even if Haplo does go looking for me, he'll never find me. This prison cell isn't located in the bowels of the castle, placed conveniently at the bottom of a long and winding stair. I saw the void out of which it sprang. It's at the bottom of night, the middle of nowhere. No one will ever find me. I'll stay here until I die ...

... or until I call Sinistrad master.

And why not? I've served many men; what's one more? Or better yet, maybe I'll just stay where I am. This cell isn't much different from my life-a cold, bleak, and empty prison. I built the walls myself-made them out of money. I shut myself in and locked the door. I was my own guard, my own jailer. And it worked. Nothing has touched me. Pain, compassion, pity, remorse-they couldn't get past the walls. I even considered killing a child for the money.

And then the child got hold of the key.

But that had been the enchantment. It was his magic that made me pity him. Or was that my excuse? Certainly the enchantment didn't conjure up those memories-memories of myself before the prison cell.

The enchantment works only because you want it to work. Your will feeds it. You could have broken it long ago, if you truly wanted to. You care about him, you see. And caring is an invisible prison.

Perhaps not. Perhaps it was freedom.

Dazed, half-waking, half-dreaming, Hugh rose from where he'd been sitting on the stone floor and walked to the cell door. He reached out his hand . . . and stopped and stared. His hand was covered with blood. The wrist, forearm-he was smeared in blood to the elbow. And as he saw himself, so must she see him.

"Sir."

Hugh started and turned his head. Was she real or was she only a trick of his throbbing mind that had been thinking about her? He blinked, and she did not go away.

"Iridal?"

Seeing in her eyes that she knew the truth about him, he glanced down self-consciously at his hands.

"So Sinistrad was right," Iridal said. "You are an assassin."

The rainbow eyes were gray and colorless; there was no light shining behind them.

What could he say? She spoke the truth. He could excuse himself, tell her about Three-Chop Nick. He could tell her how he had decided he couldn't harm the boy. He could tell her that he had planned to take the boy back to Queen Anne. But none of it made different the fact that he had agreed; he had taken the money; he had known, in his heart, he could kill a child.

And so he simply and quietly said, "Yes."

"I don't understand! It's evil, monstrous! How could you spend your life murdering people?"

He could say that most of the men he'd killed deserved to die. He could tell her that he had probably saved the lives of those who would have become their next victims.

But Iridal would ask him: Who are you to judge?

And he would answer: Who is any man? Who is King Stephen, that he can proclaim, "That man is an elf and therefore he must die"? Who are the barons, that they can say, "That man has land I want. He won't give it to me and therefore he must die"?

Fine arguments, but I agreed. I took the money. I knew, in my heart, I could kill a child. And so he said, "It doesn't matter now."

"No, except that I am alone. Again."

Iridal spoke softly. Hugh knew he hadn't been meant to hear. She stood in the center of the cell, her head bowed, the long white hair falling forward, hiding her face. She had cared for him. Trusted him. She had, perhaps, been going to ask him for help. His cell door swung slowly open, sunlight flooding into his soul.

"Iridal, you're not alone. There's someone you can trust. Alfred's a good man, he's devoted to your son." Far more than Bane deserves, Hugh thought, but didn't say. Aloud he continued, "Alfred saved the boy's life once when a tree fell on him. If you want to escape-you and your son-Alfred could help you. He could take you to the elven ship. The elf captain needs money. He'd give you passage in return for that and safe guidance out of the firmament."

"Escape?" Iridal glanced frantically around the cell walls, and then she buried her face in her hands. It was not Hugh's cell walls she saw, but her own.

So she, too, is a prisoner. I opened her cell door, offered her a glimpse of light and air. And now she sees it swinging shut.

"Iridal, I'm a murderer. Worse, I've murdered for money. I make no excuses for myself. But what I've done is nothing to what your husband's plotting!"

"You're wrong! He's never taken a life. He couldn't do such a thing."

"He's talking about world war, Iridal! Sacrificing the lives of thousands to put himself into power!"

"You don't understand. It's our lives he's trying to save. The lives of our people."

Seeing his puzzled expression, she made an impatient gesture, angry at being forced to explain what she thought must be obvious.

"Surely you've wondered why the mysteriarchs left the Mid Realm, left a land where we had everything-power, wealth. Oh, I know what is said of us. I know because we were the ones who said it. We had grown disgusted with the barbaric life, with the constant warring with the elves. The truth is, we left because we had to, we had no choice. Our magic was dwindling. Intermarriage with ordinary humans had diluted it. That's why there are so many wizards in this world of yours. Many, but weak. Those of us of pure blood were few but strong. To ensure the continuation of our race, we fled to someplace where we would not be-

"Contaminated?" suggested Hugh.

Iridal flushed and bit her lip. Then, raising her head, she faced him with pride.

"I know you say that with contempt, but, yes, that is true. Can you blame us?"

"But it didn't work."

"The journey was difficult, and many died. More succumbed before the magical dome that protects us against the bitter cold and gives us air to breathe could be stabilized. At last all seemed well and children were born to us, but not many, and most of those died." Her pride drained from her, her head drooped. "Bane is the only child of his generation left alive. And now the dome is collapsing. That shimmer in the sky that you find so beautiful is, to us, deadly."

"The buildings are illusion, the people pretend to be a large population, so that you won't guess the truth."

"You have to return to the world below, but you're afraid to go back and reveal how weak you've grown," finished Hugh. "The changeling became the prince of Volkaran. And now he's going back as king!"

"King? That's impossible. They already have a king."

"Not impossible, madam. Your husband's planning to hire me to get rid of their king and queen, and then Bane-their son-will inherit the throne."

"I don't believe you! You're lying!"

"Yes, you believe me. I see it in your face. It's not your husband you're defending, it's yourself. You know what your husband's capable of doing. You know what he's done and what you haven't! Maybe it wasn't murder, but he would have caused two people down there in the Mid Realm less pain if he'd driven knives into them instead of taking their baby."

The dark, colorless eyes tried to meet his, but they faltered and fell. "I grieved for them. I tried to save their child ... I would have given my life if their baby could have lived. And then there are the lives of so many others-"

"I've done evil. But it seems to me, Iridal, that there is equal evil in not doing. Sinistrad is returning to conclude his deal with me. Listen to what he has planned and judge for yourself."

Iridal stared at him, started to speak. Then, shaking her head, she shut her eyes and, in an instant, was gone. Her chains were too heavy. She couldn't break free.

Hugh sank back down, alone in his cell within a cell. Pulling out his pipe, he clamped it between his teeth and glared at the prison walls.

Walk the dragon wing.

If Sinistrad intended to startle him by his sudden appearance, the mysteriarch must have been disappointed. Hugh glanced up at him, but neither moved nor spoke.

"Well, Hugh the Hand, have you decided?"

"It wasn't much of a decision." Rising stiffly to his feet, Hugh carefully wrapped the pipe in its cloth and tucked it away near his breast. "I don't want to spend the rest of my life in this place. I'll work for you. I've worked for worse. After all, I once took money to kill a child."

## CHAPTER 54

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

WANDERED THE CORRIDORS OF THE CASTLE, IDLY WASTING TIME, OR SO IT SEEMED when anyone paid any attention to him. When no one was around, he continued searching, keeping account of everyone, as best he could.

The dog was with Bane. Haplo had overheard every word of the conversation between father and son. The Patryn had been caught off-guard by Bane's strange question about the sigil. Scratching the skin beneath his bandages, Haplo wondered if the child could have seen the runes. The Patryn tried to think back to a time when he might have slipped up, made a mistake. Finally, he decided he hadn't. It would have been impossible. What, then, was the boy talking about? Surely not some mensch wizard trying his hand at runes. Even a mensch had more sense.

Well, there's no use wasting brain power speculating. I'll find out soon enough. Bane-dog faithfully trotting along at the boy's side-had recently passed him in the hallway, searching for Alfred. Perhaps that conversation will give me a clue. Meanwhile, there's Limbeck to check up on.

Pausing before the door of the Geg's room, Haplo glanced up and down the hall. No one was in sight. He traced a sigil upon the door and the wood disappeared-at least to his eyes. To the Geg, sitting disconsolately at a desk, the door seemed as solid as ever. Limbeck had asked his host for writing materials and seemed to be absorbed in his favorite pastime-speech-composing. But Haplo saw that very little composing was being accomplished. Spectacles pushed up on his forehead, the Geg sat, head in hand, staring into a tapestry-covered stone wall that for him was a multicolored blur.

"My fellow Workers United . . .' No, that's too restricting. 'My fellow WUPP's and GEGs . . .' But the High Froman might be there. High Froman, Head Clark, fellow WUPP's, brother GEGs . . . brother and sister GEGs, I have seen the world above and it is beautiful" -Limbeck's voice softened- "more beautiful and wondrous than anything you can imagine. And I . . . I . . .' No!" He tugged violently on his own beard. "There," he said, wincing at the pain and blinking the tears from his eyes. "As Jarre would say, I'm a drugal. Now, maybe I can think better. 'My dear WUPP's . . .' No, there I go again. I've left out the High Froman . . ."

Haplo removed the sigil, and the door took shape and form again. He could hear, as he continued down the corridor, Limbeck reciting to his crowd of one. The Geg knows what he has to say, thought Haplo. He just can't bring himself to say it.

"Oh, Alfred, here you are!" It was Bane's voice, coming to Haplo through the dog. "I've been searching all over for you." The child sounded petulant, put-out.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness, I was looking for Sir Hugh . . ."

He wasn't the only one.

Stopping at the next door, Haplo glanced inside. The room was empty-Hugh was gone. Haplo was not particularly surprised. If Hugh was even still alive, it was only because Sinistrad intended to make him suffer. Or, better yet, use him to make Iridal suffer. This jealousy Sinistrad was exhibiting over his wife was strange, considering he obviously didn't care for her.

"She's his possession," said Haplo to himself, turning back down the hallway and heading for Limbeck's room. "If Hugh'd been discovered making off with the spoons, Sinistrad would probably have been just as mad. Well, I tried to protect him. Pity. He was a bold fellow. I could have used him. Now, however, while Sinistrad is preoccupied with Hugh, would be an excellent time for the rest of us to leave."

"Alfred . . ." Bane was speaking in sugared tones. "I want to have a talk with you."

"Certainly, Your Highness."

The dog settled itself on the floor between them.

Time to leave, Haplo repeated. I'll collect Limbeck, we'll get back to the elf ship and take it, and leave this mensch wizard stranded on his realm. I don't have to put up with his meddling.

I'll transport the Geg back to Drevlin. Once that's done, I will have accomplished my lord's goals, except for bringing him back someone from this world to train as a disciple. I'd considered Hugh, but he's out, apparently.

Still, my lord should be satisfied. This world is wobbling about on the brink of disaster. If all goes well, I can nudge it over the edge. And I believe that I can safely say that there are no longer any Sartan-

"Alfred," said Bane, "I know you're a Sartan."

Haplo came to a dead stop.

It must be a mistake. He hadn't heard right. He'd been thinking the word and therefore heard it when in reality the boy had said something else. Holding his breath, almost wishing impatiently he could still the pounding of his heart so that he could hear more clearly, Haplo listened.

Alfred felt the world slide out beneath his feet. Walls expanded, the ceiling seemed to be falling down on top of him, and he thought for an awful, blessed moment that he might faint. But this time his brain refused to shut down. This time he would have to face the peril and deal with it as best he could. He knew he should be saying something, denying the boy's statement, of course, but he honestly didn't know whether or not he could talk. His face muscles were paralyzed.

"Come, Alfred," said Bane, regarding him with smug self-assurance, "there's no use denying it. I know it's true. Do you want to know how I know?"

The child was enjoying this immensely. And there was the dog, its head raised, watching him intently, as if it understood every word and it, too, was awaiting his reaction. The dog! Of course, it was understanding every word! And so was its master.

"You remember the time when the tree fell on me," Bane was saying. "I was dead. I knew I was dead because I was floating away and I looked back and saw my body lying on the ground, with the crystal pieces sticking right through me. But suddenly it was like a great big mouth opened and sucked me back. And I woke up and there weren't any crystals hurting me anymore. I looked down,

and there on my chest I saw this." Bane held up the piece of paper he had removed from his father's desk. "I asked my father about it. He said it was a sigil, a rune. A rune of healing."

Deny it. Laugh lightly. What an imagination you have, Your Highness! You dreamed it, of course. That bump on your head.

"And then there was Hugh," Bane continued. "I know that I gave him enough hethbane to kill him. When he fell over, all in a heap, he was dead, just like me. You brought him back to life!"

Come, now, Your Highness. If I was a Sartan, what would I be doing earning my living as a servant? No, I'd live in a grand palace and you mensch would all flock to see me and fall at my feet and beg me to give you this and give you that and raise you up and cast your enemies down and offer me whatever I wanted except peace.

"And now that I know you're a Sartan, Alfred, you've got to help me. And the first thing we're going to do is kill my father." Bane reached into his tunic, pulled out a dagger that Alfred recognized as belonging to Hugh. "Look, I found this in my father's desk. Sinistrad's going to go down to the Low Realm and send the Gags to war and fix the Kicksey-Winsey and make it align all the isles, and then he'll control the water supply. All the wealth and power will go to him, and that's not fair! It was my idea! I was the one who figured out how the machine worked. And of course, Alfred, you probably know all about running the machine, since you and your people built it, and you can help me with that too."

The dog, with its far-too-intelligent eyes, was looking at Alfred, looking straight through him. Too late to deny. He'd missed his chance. He'd never been quick-thinking, quick-reacting. That was why his brain had taken to shutting down when confronted with danger. It couldn't cope with the constant war that raged inside him, the instinctive urge to use his wondrous powers to protect himself and others versus the terrible knowledge that if he did so he would be exposed for the demigod he was-and wasn't.

"I cannot help you, Your Highness. I cannot take a life."

"Oh, but you'll have to. You won't have any choice. If you don't, I'll tell my father who you are, and once my father finds out, he'll try to use you himself."

"And, Your Highness, I will refuse."

"You can't! He'll try to kill you if you don't obey him! Then you'll have to fight, and you'll win, because you're stronger."

"No, Your Highness. I will lose. I will die."

Bane was startled, perplexed. Obviously this was one move that had never occurred to him. "But you can't! You're a Sartan!"

"We are not immortal-something I think we forgot."

It was the despair that had killed them. The despair he was feeling now; a great and overwhelming sadness. They had dared to think and act as gods and had ceased to listen to the true gods. Things had begun to go wrong-as the Sartan saw it-and they had taken it upon themselves to decide what

was best for the world and act accordingly. But then something else went wrong and they had to step in and fix it, and every time they fixed one thing, it caused something else to break. And soon the task became too large; there were too few of them. And they had realized, finally, that they had tampered with what should have been left undisturbed. But by then it was too late.

"I will die," repeated Alfred.

The dog rose to its feet, came over to him, and laid its head on his knee. Slowly, hesitantly, he reached out his hand to touch it, and felt its warmth, the well-shaped bones of the head hard beneath the silky fur.

And what is your master doing now? What is Haplo thinking, knowing that his ancient enemy is within his grasp? I can't begin to guess. It all depends, I suppose, on what Haplo is doing in this world in the first place.

The chamberlain smiled, much to Bane's frustration and ire. Alfred was wondering what Sinistrad would do if he knew he had two demigods under his roof.

"You might be ready to die, Alfred!" said Bane with sudden sly cunning. "But what about our friends-the Geg and Hugh and Haplo?"

At the sound of its master's name, the dog's plummy tail brushed slowly from side to side.

Bane came forward to stand at the chamberlain's side, the child's small hands clasped earnestly on his servant's shoulder. "When I tell father who you are and when I prove to him how I know who you are, he'll realize-like I do now-that we won't need any of these others. We won't need the elves or their ship, because your magic can take us where we want to go. We won't need Limbeck because you can talk to the Glegs and convince them to go to war. We don't need Haplo-we never did need Haplo. I'll take care of his dog. We don't need Hugh. Father won't kill you, Alfred. He'll control you by threatening to kill them! So you can't die!"

What he says is true. And Sinistrad would certainly realize it.

Expendable. I make them all expendable. But what can I do to save them, except kill?

"The truly wonderful part," said Bane, giggling, "is that at the end of it all, we won't even need father!"

It is the old curse of the Sartan, coming back to me at last. If I had allowed the child to die, as, perhaps, he was meant to, then none of this would have happened. But I had to meddle. I had to play god. I believed that there was good in the child, that he would change-because of me! I believed that I could save him! I, I, I! All we Sartan ever thought about was ourselves. We wanted to mold the world in our image. But perhaps that wasn't what was intended.

Slowly, gently thrusting aside the dog, Alfred rose to his feet. Walking to the center of the room, he lifted his arms into the air and began to move in a solemn and strangely graceful- for his ungainly body-dance.

"Alfred, what the hell are you doing?"

"I am leaving, Your Highness," said Alfred.

The air around him began to shimmer as his dancing continued. He was tracing the runes in the air with his hands and drawing them on the floor with his feet.

Bane's mouth gaped open. "You can't!" he gasped. Running forward, he tried to grab hold of the Sartan, but the magical wall Alfred had built around himself was now too powerful. There was a crackle when Bane's hand touched it, and the child, wailing, snatched back burned fingers.

"You can't leave me! No one can leave me unless I want them to!"

"Your enchantment doesn't work on me, Bane." Alfred spoke almost sadly, his body beginning to fade away. "It never did."

A large furry shape plummeted past Bane. The dog bounded through the shimmering shell and landed lightly at Alfred's side. Leaping, teeth snapping, the dog caught the chamberlain's ankle in its mouth and held on tightly.

A startled expression crossed Alfred's now-ghostlike face. Frantically he kicked his leg, trying to jerk it from the dog's mouth.

The dog, grinning, seemed to consider this a great game. It held on more tightly and began to growl playfully and tug back. Alfred pulled harder. His body had ceased to fade and was now gradually starting to regain its solidity. Going round and round in a circle, the chamberlain begged and pleaded, threatened and scolded the dog to let go. The dog followed him around and around, feet skidding as it sought to get a grip on the stone floor with its claws, its jaws clamped firmly around Alfred's leg.

The door to the room slammed open. The dog, looking over, wagged its tail furiously, but continued to keep its grip on Alfred.

"So you're leaving us behind, are you, Sartan?" inquired Haplo. "Just like the old days, huh?"

## CHAPTER 55

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

IN A ROOM DOWN THE CORRIDOR, LIMBECK FINALLY PUT HIS PEN TO PAPER.

"My people . . ." he began.

Haplo had long imagined meeting a Sartan, meeting someone who had sealed his people in that hellish place. He imagined himself angry, but now even he could not believe his fury. He stared at this man, this Alfred, this Sartan, and he saw the chaodyn attacking him, he saw the dog's body lying broken, bleeding. He saw his parents dead. It was suddenly hard to breathe. He was suffocating. Veins, red against fiery yellow, webbed his vision, and he had to close his eyes and fight to catch his breath.

"Leaving again!" He gasped for air. "Just like you jailers left us to die in that prison!"

Haplo forced the last word out between gritted teeth. Bandaged hands raised like striking talons, he stood quite close to Alfred and stared into the face of the Sartan that seemed surrounded by a halo of flame. If this Alfred smiled, if his lips so much as twitched, Haplo would kill him. His lord, his purpose, his instructions-he couldn't hear any of them for the pounding waves of rage in his head.

But Alfred didn't smile. He didn't blench in fright or draw back or even move to defend himself. The lines of the aged, careworn face deepened, the mild eyes were shadowed and red-rimmed, shimmering with sorrow.

"The jailer didn't leave," he said. "The jailer died."

Haplo felt the dog's head press against his knee, and reaching down, he caught hold of the soft fur and gripped it tightly. The dog gazed up with worried eyes and pressed closer, whimpering. Haplo's breathing came easier, clear sight returned to his eyes, clear thought to his mind.

"I'm all right," said Haplo, drawing a shivering breath. "I'm all right."

"Does this mean," asked Bane, "that Alfred's not leaving?"

"No, he's not leaving," said Haplo. "Not now, at least. Not until I'm ready."

Master of himself once more, the Patryn faced the Sartan. Haplo's face was calm, his smile quiet. His hands rubbed slowly, one against the other, displacing slightly the bandages that covered the skin. "The jailer died? I don't believe that."

Alfred hesitated, licked his lips. "Your people have been . . . trapped in that place all this time?"

"Yes, but you knew that already, didn't you? That was your intent!"

Limbeck, hearing nothing of what was happening two doors down from him, continued writing:

"My people, I have been in the realms above. I have visited the realms our legends tell us are heaven. And they are. And they aren't. They are beautiful. They are rich-rich beyond belief. The sun shines on them throughout the day. The firmament sparkles in their sky. The rain falls gently, without malice. The shadows of the Lords of Night soothe them to sleep. They live in houses, not in cast-off parts of a machine or in a building the Kicksey-Winsey decided it didn't need at the moment. They have winged ships that fly through the air. They have tamed winged beasts to take them anywhere they want. And all of this they have because of us.

"They lied to us. They told us that they were gods and that we had to work for them. They promised us that if we worked hard, they would judge us worthy and take us up to live in heaven. But they never intended to make good that promise."

"That was never our intent!" Alfred answered. "You must believe that. And you must believe that I- we-didn't know you were still there! It was only supposed to be a short time, a few years, several generations-"

"A thousand years, a hundred generations-those that survived! And where were you? What happened?"

"We . . . had our own problems." Alfred's gaze lowered, his head bowed.

"You have my deepest sympathy."

Alfred glanced up swiftly, saw the Patryn's curled lip, and, sighing, looked away.

"You're coming with me," said Haplo. "I'm going to take you back to see for yourself the hell your people created! And my lord will have questions for you. He'll find it hard to believe-as I do-that 'the jailer died.' "

"Your lord?"

"A great man, the most powerful of our kind who has ever lived. He has plans, many plans, which I'm certain he'll share with you."

"And that's why you're here," Alfred murmured. "His plans? No, I won't go with you." The Sartan shook his head. "Not voluntarily." Deep within the mild eyes, a spark kindled.

"Then I'll use force. I'll enjoy that!"

"I've no doubt. But if you're trying to conceal your presence in this world"-his gaze fixed on the bandaged hands-"then you know that a fight between us, a duel of that magnitude and magical ferocity, could not be hidden and would be disastrous to you. The wizards in this world are powerful and intelligent. Legends exist about Death Gate. Many, like Sinistrad or even this child"-Alfred's hand stroked Bane's hair-"could figure out what had occurred and would eagerly start to search for the entry into what is held to be a wondrous world. Is your lord prepared for that?"

"Lord? What lord? Look here, Alfred!" Bane burst out impatiently. "None of us are going anywhere as long as my father's alive!" Neither of the two men answered him or even looked at him. The boy glared at them. Adults, absorbed in their own concerns, they had, as usual, forgotten his.

"At last our eyes have been opened. At last we can see the truth." Limbeck found his spectacles irritating and pushed them back up on top of his head. "And the truth is that we no longer need them ..."

"I don't need you!" Bane cried. "You weren't going to help me anyway. I'll do it myself." Reaching into his tunic, he drew out Hugh's dagger and gazed at it admiringly, running his finger carefully over the rune-carved blade. "Come on," he said to the dog, still standing beside Haplo. "You come with me."

The dog looked at the boy and wagged his tail but did not move.

"Come on!" Bane coaxed. "Good dog!"

The dog cocked his head, then turned to Haplo, whining and pawing. The Patryn, intent on the Sartan, shoved the dog aside. Sighing, with a final, pleading glance back at its master, the dog-head down, ears flat-padded slowly over to Bane's side.

The child shoved the dagger in his belt and patted the dog's head. "That's a good boy. Let's go."

"And so, in conclusion ..." Limbeck paused. His hand trembled, his eyes misted over. A blot of ink fell upon the paper. Pulling his spectacles down from on top of his head, he adjusted them on his nose and then sat unmoving, staring at the blank spot where the final words would be written.

"Can you truly afford to fight me?" Alfred persisted.

"I don't think you'll fight," answered Haplo. "I think you're too weak, too tired. That kid you pamper is more-

Reminded, Alfred glanced around.

"Bane? Where is he?"

Haplo made an impatient gesture. "Gone somewhere. Don't try to-

"I'm not 'trying' anything! You heard what he asked me. He has a knife. He's gone to murder his father! I've got to stop-!"

"No, you don't." Haplo caught hold of the Sartan's arm. "Let the mensch murder each other. It doesn't matter."

"It doesn't matter to you at all?" Alfred gave the Patryn a peculiar, searching look.

"No, of course not. The only one I care about is the leader of the GEGS' revolt, and Limbeck's safely shut up in his room."

"Then where's your dog?" asked Alfred.

"My people"-Limbeck's pen slowly and deliberately wrote down the words-"we are going to war."

There. It was done. Pulling off his spectacles, the Geg tossed them down upon the table, put his head in his hands, and wept.

## CHAPTER 56

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

#### SINISTRAD AND HUGH WERE SEATED IN THE STUDY OF THE MYSTERIARCH.

It was nearly midday. Light streamed in through a crystal window. Seeming to float on the mist outside the window were the glittering spires of the city of New Hope-the city that, according to what Iridal had told him, might as well be called No Hope. Hugh wondered if the buildings had been placed there for his benefit. Outside, coiled around the castle, dozing in the sun, was the quicksilver dragon.

"Let us see, what would be best?" Sinistrad tapped thoughtfully on the desk with his thin fingers.

"We will transport the child back to Djern Volkain on the elven ship-taking care, of course, to make

certain that the ship is seen by the humans. Then, when Stephen and Anne are discovered dead, it will be blamed on elves. Bane can tell them some rigmarole about how he was captured and escaped and the elves followed him and killed his loving parents as they tried to rescue him. You can make it appear that the elves murdered them, I suppose?"

The air around Hugh stirred, a cold breath swept over him, and icy fingers seemed to touch his shoulder. Iridal was working her own magic against her husband. She was here. She was listening.

"Sure, nothing's easier. Will the boy cooperate?" asked Hugh, tensing, yet doing his best to seem at ease. Now that she was faced with inescapable truth, what would she do? "The kid seems less than enthusiastic."

"He will cooperate. I have only to make him understand that this is to his advantage. Once he knows how he can profit by this action, he will be eager to undertake it. The boy is ambitious, and rightfully so. After all, he is my son."

Invisible to all eyes, Iridal stood behind Hugh, watching, listening. She felt nothing at hearing Sinistrad plot murder; her mind, her senses, had gone numb. Why did I bother to come? she asked herself. There's nothing I can do. It's too late for him, for me. But not too late for Bane. How did the ancient saying go? "A little child shall lead them." Yes, there is hope for him. He is still innocent, unspoiled. Perhaps someday he will save us.

"Ah, here you are, father."

Bane entered the study, coolly ignoring Sinistrad's glaring frown. The child's color was heightened, and he seemed to glow with an inner radiance. His eyes gleamed with a feverish luster. Walking behind the boy, its nails clicking against the stone floor, the dog appeared worried and unhappy. Its eyes went to Hugh, pleading; its gaze shifted to a point behind the assassin, staring at Iridal so intently that she felt a panicked qualm and wondered if her spell of invisibility had ceased to work.

Hugh shifted uneasily in his chair. Bane was up to something. Probably-from that beatific expression on his face-no good.

"Bane, I'm busy. Leave us," said Sinistrad.

"No, father. I know what you're talking about. It's about me going back to Volkaran, isn't it? Don't make me, father." The child's voice was suddenly sweet and soft. "Don't make me go back to that place. No one likes me there. It's lonely. I want to be with you. You can teach me magic, like you taught me to fly. I'll show you all I know about the great machine, and I can introduce you to the High Froman-"

"Stop whining!" Sinistrad rose to his feet. His robes rustled around him as he moved out from behind his desk to confront his son. "You want to please me, don't you, Bane?"

"Yes, father . . ." The boy faltered. "More than anything. That's why I want to be with you! Don't you want to be with me? Isn't that why you brought me home?"

"Bah! What nonsense. I brought you home so that we could put into action the second phase of our plan. Certain things have changed now, but only for the better. As for you, Bane, as long as I am

your father, you will go where I tell you to go and do what I tell you to do. Now, leave us. I will send for you later."

Sinistrad turned his back on the child.

Bane, a strange smile on his lips, thrust his hand into his tunic. It came out holding a knife.

"I guess you won't be my father long, then!"

"How dare you-" Sinistrad whirled around, saw the dagger in the child's hand, and sucked in a seething breath. Pale with fury, the mysteriarch raised his right hand, prepared to cast the spell that would dissolve the child's body where he stood. "I can get more sons!"

The dog leapt, hit Bane square in the back, and knocked the child to the floor. The dagger flew from the boy's hand.

Something unseen struck Sinistrad; invisible hands clutched at his. Raging, he grappled with his wife, whose spell crumbled as she fought, revealing her to her husband.

Hugh was on his feet. Snatching up his dagger from the floor, he watched for his opportunity. He'd free her, free her child.

The wizard's body crackled with blue lightning. Iridal was flung aside in a thunderous shock wave that hurled her, dazed, against the wall. Sinistrad turned upon his child, only to find the dog standing above the terrified boy.

Teeth bared, hackles raised, it growled low in its throat.

Hugh struck, driving the dagger deep into the wizard's body. Sinistrad screamed in fury and in pain. The assassin jerked his dagger free. The body of the mysteriarch shimmered and faded and Hugh thought his foe was dead. Suddenly, the wizard returned, only now his body was that of an enormous snake.

The snake's head darted at Hugh. The assassin drove his knife again into the reptilian body, but too late. The snake sank its fangs into the back of Hugh's neck. The assassin cried out in agony, the poison surging through his body. He managed to retain his grip on the knife, and the snake-twisting and coiling- drove the blade deeper. It lashed out in its death throes, wrapped its tail around the assassin's legs, and both crashed to the floor.

The snake disappeared. Sinistrad lay dead, his legs wrapped around the feet of his killer.

Hugh stared at the corpse and tried feebly to rise. The assassin felt no pain, but he had no strength left in him, and he collapsed.

"Hugh."

Weakly he turned his head. It was pitch dark in the cell. He couldn't see.

"Hugh! You were right. Mine is the sin of not doing. And now it is too late . . . too late!"

There was a crack in the wall. A thin shaft of light gleamed brightly; he could smell fresh air, perfumed with the scent of lavender. Slipping his hand through the bars of his cell, Hugh held it out to her. Reaching out as far as she could from behind her own walls, Iridal touched the tips of his fingers.

And then the black monk came and set Hugh free.

## CHAPTER 57

### CASTLE SINISTER, HIGH REALM

A LOW RUMBLING SOUND CAUSED THE STONES OF THE PALACE TO QUIVER ON THEIR foundation. It grew louder, like thunder heard in the distance, marching toward them, shaking the ground. The castle shifted; stone quaked and shuddered. A triumphant howl split the air.

"What the . . . ?" Haplo stared around him.

"The dragon's free!" murmured Alfred, eyes widening in awe. "Something's happened to Sinistrad!"

"It'll kill every living thing in this castle. I've fought dragons before. They're numerous in the Labyrinth. You?"

"No, never." Alfred glanced at the Patryn, caught the bitter smile. "It will take both of us to fight it, in the might of our power."

"No." Haplo shrugged. "You were right. I don't dare reveal myself. I'm not permitted to fight, not even to save my life. I guess it's up to you, Sartan."

The floor shook. A door down the corridor opened and Limbeck looked out. "This is more like home," he shouted cheerfully over the rumbling and thudding and cracking. Walking easily across the trembling floor, he waved a sheaf of papers. "Do you want to hear my spee-"

The outer walls split asunder. Alfred and Limbeck were flung from their feet, Haplo slammed up against a door that gave way behind him with a crash. A gleaming red eye the size of the sun peered through the ruptured wall at the victims trapped inside. The rumbling changed to a roar. The head reared back, jaws opening. White teeth flashed.

Haplo staggered to his feet. Limbeck was lying flat on his back, his spectacles smashed on the stone floor. Groping for them, the Geg stared up helplessly at the red-eyed silver blur that was the dragon. Near Limbeck lay Alfred, fainted.

Another roar shook the building. A silver tongue flickered like lightning. If the dragon destroyed them, Haplo would lose not only his life but also his purpose for coming here. No Limbeck to lead the revolution among the Gags. No Limbeck to start the war that would lead to worldwide chaos.

Haplo ripped the bandages from his hands. Standing over the fallen, he crossed his arms and raised sigla-tattooed fists above his head. He wondered, briefly, where the dog had gone. He couldn't hear

anything from it, but then, he couldn't hear much of anything at all over the bellowings of the dragon.

The creature dived for him, mouth open wide to snatch up the prey.

Haplo was right: he'd fought dragons before-dragons in the Labyrinth, whose magical powers made this quicksilver look like a mudworm. The hardest part was standing there, braced to take the blow, when every instinct in the body shrieked for him to run.

At the last instant, the silver head veered aside, jaws snapping on empty air. The dragon pulled back, eyeing the man suspiciously.

Dragons are intelligent beings. Coming out of enthrallment leaves them furious and confused. Their initial impulse is to strike back at the magus who ensorcelled them. But even raging, they do not attack mindlessly. This one had experienced many types of magical forces in its lifetime, but never anything quite like what it faced now. It could feel, if it could not see, power surround the man like a strong metal shield.

Steel, the dragon could pierce. It might even pierce this magic, if it had time to work on it and unravel it. But why bother? There were other victims. It could smell hot blood. Casting Haplo a last curious, baleful glance, the dragon slid out of his view.

"But it'll be back, especially if it gets a taste of fresh meat." Haplo lowered his hands. "And what do I do? Take my little friend here and leave. My work in this realm is completed-or almost so."

He could hear, at last, and he heard what his dog was hearing. His brow furrowed, he absently rubbed the skin on his hands. From the sounds of it, the dragon was smashing in another part of the castle. Iridal and the boy were still alive, but they wouldn't be for long.

Haplo looked down at the unconscious Sartan. "I could send you into a faint that would last as long as I needed it to last, and transport you to my lord. But I've a better idea. You know where I've gone. You'll figure out how to get there. You'll come to me of your own accord. After all, we have the same goal-we both want to find out what happened to your people. So, old enemy, I'll let you cover my retreat."

Kneeling beside Alfred, he grabbed hold of the Sartan and shook him roughly.

"Come out of it, you craven scum."

Alfred blinked and groggily sat up. "I fainted, didn't I? I'm sorry. It's a reflex action. I can't control-

"I don't want to hear about it," Haplo interrupted. "I've driven the dragon off for the time being, but it's only gone looking for a meal that won't fight back."

"You . . . you saved my life!" Alfred stared at the Patryn.

"Not your life. Limbeck's. You just happened to be in the way."

A child's thin wail of terror rose in the air. The dragon's howl cracked solid stone.

Haplo pointed in the creature's direction. "The boy and his mother are still alive. You'd better hurry."

Alfred swallowed hard, sweat beading on his forehead. Shakily he rose to his feet and, with a trembling hand, traced a sigil on his chest. His body began to fade.

"Good-bye, Sartan!" called Haplo. "For the time being. Limbeck, are you all right? Can you walk?"

"My . . . my spectacles!" Limbeck picked up bent frames, poked his fingers through the empty rims.

"Don't worry," said Haplo, helping the Geg to his feet. "You probably don't want to see where we're going anyway."

The Patryn paused a moment to run through everything in his mind.

Foment chaos in the realm.

His rune-covered hand closed fast over Limbeck's. I've done that, my lord. I'll transport him back to Drevlin. He will be the leader of the revolt among his people, the one who will plunge this world into war!

Bring me someone from this realm who will be my disciple. Someone who will spread the word-my word-to the people. Someone who will lead the people like sheep to my fold. It should be someone intelligent, ambitious, and . . . pliable.

Haplo, with his quiet smile, whistled for the dog.

Iridal had tamed dragons before in her girlhood, but only gentle creatures that would have almost done her bidding without enchantment. The dragon she faced now had always terrified her, perhaps as much because Sinistrad had ridden it as the dragon itself. She longed to be able to crawl into the corner of that safe, secure cell in which she had been hiding, but the prison was gone. The walls were beaten down, the door had swung open, the bars fallen from the windows. A chill wind tore at her; the light was blinding to eyes long accustomed to shadow.

The sin of not doing. Now it was too late for her, for the child. Death was their only freedom.

The dragon's roarings thundered above her. Iridal watched impassively as the ceiling split wide open. Dust and rock cascaded down around her. A fiery red eye peered in at them, a lightninglike tongue flicked in desire. The woman did not move.

Too late. Too late.

Crouched behind his mother, his arm clasped tightly around the dog's neck, Bane stared round-eyed. After his first cry of fear, he'd fallen silent, watching, waiting. The dragon couldn't reach them yet. It couldn't get its huge head into the small hole it had created, and was forced to rip more blocks from the castle walls. Driven by rage and a hunger for the blood it could smell, it was working rapidly.

The dog suddenly turned its head, looked back over its shoulder at the door, and whined.

Bane followed the dog's gaze and saw Haplo standing in the doorway, beckoning to him. Beside Haplo was Limbeck, peering dimly through the dust and rubble, gazing benignly at a horror he could not see.

The child looked up at his mother. Iridal was staring fixedly at the dragon. Bane tugged at her skirt.

"Mother, we must leave. We can hide somewhere. They'll help us!"

Iridal did not turn her head. Perhaps she had not heard him.

The dog whimpered and, gripping hold of Bane's tunic in his teeth, attempted to tug the boy toward the door.

"Mother!" the boy cried.

"Go along, child," said Iridal. "Hide somewhere. That's a good idea."

Bane grasped hold of her hand. "But . . . aren't you coming, mother?"

"Mother? Don't call me that. You're not my child." Iridal gazed at him with a strange and dreamlike calm. "When you were born, someone switched the babies. Go along, child." She spoke to someone else's son. "Run away and hide. I won't let the dragon harm you."

Bane stared at her. "Mother!" he cried out again, but she turned from him.

The boy grasped for the amulet around his neck. It was gone. He remembered: he had torn it off.

"Bring him!" Haplo shouted.

The dog got a grip on the boy's shirt and pulled. Bane saw the dragon thrust a taloned claw through the hole it had created in the ceiling and make a grab for its prey. Stone walls crashed down. Dust rose, obliterating his mother from his sight.

The claw groped, feeling for the warm flesh it could smell. A red eye peered inside, searching for its prey. Iridal fell back, but there was nowhere to hide in the rubble-strewn, partially collapsed chamber. She was trapped in a small area beneath the hole in the ceiling. When the dust cleared and the creature could see, it would have her.

She tried desperately to concentrate on her magic. Closing her eyes to blot out the fearsome sight, she formed mental reins and tossed them over the dragon's neck.

The infuriated creature roared and tossed its head. Jerking the reins out of her mental grasp, the dragon's opposing magic came near overthrowing the woman's reason. A claw slashed at Iridal's arm, tearing her flesh.

The ceiling gave way. Shards of stone fell all around her, striking her, knocking her down. The dragon, screeching in triumph, swooped on her. Gasping, choking in the dust, she crouched on the floor, her face averted from death.

Iridal waited almost impatiently to feel the sharp, searing pain, the talons piercing her flesh. Instead, she felt a gentle hand on her arm.

"Don't be afraid, child."

Incredulously, she raised her head. Bane's servant stood before her. Stoop-shouldered, his bald head covered with marble dust, the fringes of gray hair sticking out ludicrously, he smiled reassuringly at her, then turned to face the dragon.

Slowly, solemnly, and gracefully, Alfred began to dance.

His voice raised in a thin, high-pitched chant to accompany himself. His hands, his feet, traced unseen sigla, his voice gave them names and power, his mind enhanced them, his body fed them.

Burning acid dripped from the dragon's flicking tongue. Momentarily startled, feeling the man's magic and uncertain what it was, the creature drew back to consider the matter. But it had already been thwarted once. The lure of flesh and the memory of what it had endured at the hands of the detested wizard drove it on. Snapping jaws dived down, and Iridal shivered in terror, certain the man must be bitten in two.

"Run!" she screamed at him.

Alfred, looking up, saw his danger, but he merely smiled and nodded almost absentmindedly, his thoughts concentrating on his magic. His dance increased in tempo, the chanting grew a little louder-that was all.

The dragon hesitated. The snapping jaws did not close, but remained poised over their victim. The creature's head swayed slightly, in time to the rhythm of the man's voice. And suddenly the dragon's eyes widened and began to stare about in wonder.

Alfred's dance grew slower and slower, the chanting died away, and soon he came to a weary halt and stood gasping for breath, watching the dragon closely. The quicksilver didn't seem to notice him. Its head, thrust through the gaping hole in the castle wall, gazed at something only it could see.

Turning to Iridal, Alfred knelt beside her. "He won't harm you now. Are you hurt?"

"No." Keeping a wary eye on the dragon, Iridal took hold of Alfred's hand and held it fast. "What have you done to it?"

"The dragon thinks that it is back in its home, its ancient home-a world only it can remember. Right now it sees earth below and sky above, water in the center, and the sun's fire giving life to all."

"How long will the enchantment last? Forever?"

"Nothing lasts forever. A day, two days, a month, perhaps. It will blink, and all will be gone and it will see only the havoc that it wreaked. By that time, perhaps, its anger and pain will have subsided. Now, at least, it is at peace."

Iridal gazed in awe at the dragon, whose giant head was swaying back and forth, as if it heard a soothing, lulling voice.

"You've imprisoned it in its mind," she said.

"Yes," Alfred agreed. "The strongest cage ever built."

"And I am free," she said in wonder. "And it isn't too late. There is hope! Bane, my son! Bane!"

Iridal ran toward the door where she'd last seen him. The door was gone. The walls of her prison had collapsed, but the rubble blocked her path.

"Mother! I am your son! I-"

Bane tried to cry out again to her, but a sob welled up in his throat, shutting it off. He couldn't see her; the falling stone blocked his view.

The dog, barking frantically, ran around him in circles, nipping at his heels, trying to herd him away. The dragon gave a dreadful shriek and, terrified, Bane turned and ran. Halfway to the door, he nearly fell over Sinistrad's body.

"Father?" Bane whispered, reaching out a trembling hand. "Father, I'm sorry . . ."

The dead eyes stared at him, unseeing, uncaring.

Bane stumbled back and tripped over Hugh-the assassin paid to kill him, who had died to give him life.

"I'm sorry!" The child wept. "I'm sorry! Don't leave me alone! Please! Don't leave me alone!"

Strong hands-with blue sigla tattooed on the backs-caught hold of Bane and lifted him up out of the wreckage. Carrying him to the doorway, Haplo set the stunned and shaken boy on his feet next to the Geg.

"Both of you, keep near me," the Patryn ordered.

He lifted his hands, crossed his arms. Fiery runes began to burn in the air, one appearing after another. Each touched, yet never overlapped. They formed a circle of flame that completely encompassed the three of them, blinded them with its brilliance, yet did not harm them.

"Here, dog." Haplo whistled. The dog, grinning, leapt lightly through the fire and came to stand at his side. "We're going home."

## EPILOGUE

"AND SO, LORD OF THE NEXUS, THAT'S THE LAST I SAW OF THE SARTAN.

I know you're disappointed, perhaps even angry, that I didn't bring him back. But I knew Alfred would never allow me to take the boy or the Geg, and as he said himself, I could not risk fighting

him. It seemed to me to be a splendid irony that he should be the one to cover my escape. Alfred will come to us of his own accord, my lord. He can't help himself, now that he knows Death Gate swings open.

"Yes, my lord, you are correct. He has another incentive-his search for the child. Alfred knows I took the boy. I heard, before I left Drevlin, that the Sartan and the boy's mother, Iridal, had joined together to look for her son.

"As for the boy, I think you'll be pleased with Bane, my lord. There is potential in him. Naturally, he was shaken by what happened in the castle at the last-the death of his father, the horror of the dragon. It's made him thoughtful, so if you find him quiet and subdued, be patient with him. He is an intelligent boy and will soon learn to honor you, lord, as we all do.

"And now, to finish my story. When I left the castle, I took the boy and the Geg with me to the elven ship. Here we discovered that the elf captain and his crew were being held prisoners by the mysteriarchs. I made a deal with Bothar'el. In return for his freedom, he would take us back to Drevlin. Once there, he would hand over his ship to me.

"Bothar'el had little choice but to agree. He either accepted my terms or met death at the hands of the wizards-the mysteriarchs are powerful and desperate to escape their dying realm. I was, of course, forced to use my magic to free us. We could not have fought them successfully otherwise. But I was able to work my magic without the elves seeing me, they didn't notice the runes. In fact, they now believe that I'm one of the mysteriarchs myself. I didn't disillusion them.

"The assassin was correct in his estimation of the elves, my lord. You will find that they are people of honor, as are the humans in their own curious way. As he had agreed, Bothar'el flew us to the Low Realm. The Geg, Limbeck, was greeted by his people as a hero. He is High Froman of Drevlin now. His first act was to launch an attack against an elven ship attempting to dock and take on water. In this, he was helped by Captain Bothar'el and his crew. A combined force of elves and dwarves attacked the ship and, singing that strange song I told you about, they managed to convert all the elves on it. Bothar'el told me before he left that he intended to take the ship to this Prince Reesh'ahn, leader of the rebellion. He hopes to form an alliance between the rebel elves and the dwarves against the Tribus Empire. It is rumored that King Stephen of the Uylandia Cluster will join them.

"Whatever the outcome, world war rages in Arianus, my lord. The way is prepared for your coming. When you choose to enter the Realm of Sky, the war-weary people will look upon you as a savior.

"As for Limbeck, he-as I predicted-has become a powerful leader. Because of him, the dwarves have rediscovered their dignity, their courage, their fighting spirit. He's ruthless, determined, not afraid of anything. His dreamy-eyed idealism broke with those spectacles of his, and he sees more clearly now than ever before. He has, I'm afraid, lost a girlfriend. But then, Jarre spent time alone with the Sartan. Who can say what strange notions he put into her head?

"As you can imagine, my lord, it took me some time to prepare the elven ship for its journey into Death Gate. I transported it and Bane down to the Steps of Terrel Fen, near where my own ship had crashed, so that I could work undisturbed. It was while I was performing the necessary modifications-using the Kicksey-Winsey to assist me-that I heard about the Sartan and the boy's mother and their search. They had traveled as far as Drevlin. Fortunately, I was ready to leave.

"I sent the boy into a deep slumber, and made my way back through Death Gate. This time, I knew the perils I faced and was prepared for them. The ship sustained only minor damage, and I can have it repaired and refitted in time for the next journey. That is, my lord, if I have earned the right to be sent on another such mission?"

"Thank you, my lord. Your praise is my greatest reward. And now I propose a salute. This is bua wine, a gift from Captain Bothar'el. I think you will find its taste extremely interesting, and it seemed to me fitting that we should drink to the success of our next mission in what we might call the blood of Arianus.

"To Death Gate, my lord, and our next destination-the Realm of Fire."

1 The barl is the main standard of exchange in both elven and human lands. It is measured in the traditional barrel of water. An equivalent exchange for a barrel of water is one barl.

2 All the floating isles in the Realm of Sky are composed of coralite. The excretion of a small, harmless, snake-shaped creature known as the coral grubb, coralite is spongelike in appearance. When it hardens, it is as strong as granite, though it cannot be cut and polished. Coralite forms very fast; structures made of the substance are not built so much as grown. Coral grubbs give off a gas that is lighter than air. This keeps the isles suspended in the sky, but can be a nuisance when attempting to construct buildings. The magic of first-house land wizards is necessary to remove it.

Occasionally, deposits of iron and other minerals have been discovered embedded in the coralite. How they got there is not known, but it is presumed to have been a phenomenon that occurred during the Sundering.

3 Navigational term used in the Tribus Standard. The center for all navigation is the Imperial Palace in Tribus, from which-since early days when the races were at peace-all navigational readings are referenced. A negative rydai refers to moving closer to the current position of Tribus, while a positive rydai refers to heading in the opposite direction.

4 Sterego is a fungus found on the isle of Tytan. Humans of that land have long used crushed sterego as a healing balm. Elven explorers during the First Expansion noticed that the slow-burning, pungent sterego was far superior to their own pipethorn plant, and was less expensive to grow. They transported it to their own plantations, but there is apparently something special about Tytan. No other variety can match the original in flavor and aroma.

5 Water was scarce in the Mid Realm. Rain fell infrequently and, when it did fall, was immediately soaked up and retained by the porous coralite. No rivers or streams ran through the coralite isles. Various plant life growing there trapped water. The cultivation of crystal trees and cupplants was an expensive, laborious means of obtaining the precious liquid, but it was the main source (other than stealing from the elves) of water for the humans of the Mid Realm.

6 Menka or, more precisely, menkarias rydai, is the elven standard form of measurement. Classically, it was said to be "one thousand elf hunters high." In modern times, this has been standardized by establishing that elf hunters are six feet tall, thus making the menka equal to six thousand feet. This has led to considerable confusion between the races, due to the fact that elven feet are somewhat smaller than those of humans.

7 Female GEGS wear skirts-traditional dress-only on formal occasions and only when the whirling gears of the Kicksey-Winsey are far away. At all other times female GEGS wear loose-fitting trousers bound by bright-colored ribbons.

8 Backtrack, trackward, kiratrack, and kanatrack are terms used in the isles to indicate direction. Track refers to the Mean Cluster Track or the path which the cluster takes in its orbit through the sky. To move trackward is to travel in the same direction; backtrack, in the direction precisely opposite. Kiratrack and kanatrack refer to moving at right angles to the track.

9 Much as two words, each with its own definition, can be combined to form a third word with a meaning all its own, yet deriving from the other two. This is a very crude explanation of the rune language of the Patryns, who can create a wide variety of magical effects with the placement of each sigil in relationship to others.

10 Patryns in the Labyrinth measure age in terms of "gates." This probably began in the early days of their imprisonment, when a person's age was determined by the number of gates through which he or she had passed- this passage being the most important symbol in their society.

When the Lord of the Nexus eventually returned to the Labyrinth to gain partial control over it with his magic, he established a standardized system of timekeeping (based on the regular sun cycles in the Nexus) to which the term "gate" now applies.

11 Elven word for "elf." The x is a guttural sound, pronounced "ich."

12 trees grow in the forests of Aristagon and several of the islands in the Tribus Marches and may reach heights of over three hundred feet. The trees are similar to hargast in that they are of the metallic/organic class of plant life, taking the natural minerals from the soil and using a chemothermal process for their growth. They differ from hargast in that they are supple and their trunks grow straight and round, with a hollow core. This makes them ideal for airship construction.

13 A hot drink concocted by boiling the bark from a ferben bush in water for about half an hour. To elves, the drink is mildly narcotic, acting as a sedative, but to humans and dwarves it merely brings on a feeling of restful relaxation.

14 Meaning, in elven, "at harmony with the elements."

15 A term used by elves to denote humans.

16 Every month all the rubbish accumulated throughout the elven lands is transported by tier-drawn carts to the harbor. Here it is loaded on board the ship and sent down to reward the faithful, long-suffering Gags without whom those in the Mid Realm would not long survive.

17 Known to humans as bagpipes.

18 Difficult to find, the grenko are large and savage beasts much prized for their teeth. Because of the animal's rarity, they are protected from hunting by strict elven law. Grenko shed their teeth annually. The teeth can be found strewn about the floor of any grenko cave. The challenge in gathering the teeth lies in the fact that the grenko leaves its cave only once yearly to go in search of a mate, and generally returns within a day's timespan. Highly intelligent, with a keen sense of smell, grenko will instantly attack anything found in their caves.

19 Suffixes attached to a name indicate rank. A captain's name ends with "el." A lieutenant's name ends with "in." A prince, such as Prince Reesh, adds the suffix "ahn" to his name.

20 Fruit of which humans are particularly fond. Its tart purple skin covers an almost sickeningly sweet pink meat inside. Those with educated palates believe nothing compares to the subtle blending of flavors when skin and meat are consumed simultaneously. The wine made from this fruit is much coveted by the elves, who, however, scorn eating the bua itself.

21 A word used by both Patryns and Sartan to refer to those less gifted with power than themselves. It is applied equally to elves, humans, and dwarves.

## PROLOGUE

". . .WORLD DOMINATION WAS WITHIN OUR GRASP. OUR ANCIENT ENEMY, THE Sartan, was powerless to prevent our ascendancy. The knowledge that they would be forced to live under our rule was galling to them, bitter as wormwood. The Sartan determined to take drastic measures, committing an act of desperation almost impossible to conceive. Rather than permit us to take over the world, the Sartan destroyed it.

"In its place, the Sartan created four new worlds, formed out of the elements of the old: Air, Fire, Stone, and Water. The peoples of the world who survived the holocaust were transported by the Sartan to live in these new worlds. We, their ancient enemy, were cast into a magical prison known as the Labyrinth.

"According to their records that I discovered in the Nexus, the Sartan hoped that prison life would 'rehabilitate' us, that we would emerge from the Labyrinth chastened, our domineering and, what they term 'cruel,' natures softened. But something went wrong with their scheme. Our Sartan jailers, those who were to control the Labyrinth, disappeared. The Labyrinth itself took over, and turned from prison to executioner.

"Countless numbers of our people have died in that fearsome place. Entire generations have been wiped out, destroyed. But, before it died, each generation sent its children forward, each succeeding generation drew nearer and nearer to freedom. At last, through my extraordinary powers of magic, I was able to defeat the Labyrinth, the first to escape its toils. I passed through the Last Gate and emerged into this world, known as the Nexus. Here, I discovered what had been done to us by the Sartan. More importantly, I discovered the existence of four new worlds and the connections between the worlds. I discovered Death's Gate.

"I returned to the Labyrinth-I return frequently-and used my magic to fight and stabilize parts of it, providing safe havens for the rest of my people still struggling to free themselves from their bonds. Those who have succeeded come to the Nexus and work for me, building up the city, making ready for the day when, once again, we will take our rightful place as rulers of the universe. To this end, I am sending explorers through the Death's Gate into each of the four worlds."

"... I chose Haplo from the large number of people in my service for several reasons: his cool headedness, his quick thinking, his ability to speak fluently the various languages, and his skill in magic. Haplo proved himself in his first journey to the Air World of Arianus. Not only did he do what he could to disrupt the world and plunge it into a devastating war, he also provided me with much valuable information, as well as a young disciple-a remarkable child known as Bane.

"I am quite pleased with Haplo and his accomplishments. If I keep a sharp eye on him, it is because he has an unfortunate tendency to be an independent thinker. I say nothing to him; this trait is invaluable to me at the moment. In fact, I do not believe that he himself is even aware of his flaw. He imagines himself to be dedicated to me. He would sacrifice his life for me without hesitation. But it is one thing to offer up one's life, it is another to offer up one's soul.

"Reuniting the four worlds, defeating the Sartan-these will be sweet victories. But how much sweeter will be the sight of Haplo and those like him kneeling before me, acknowledging me, in their hearts and in their minds, their absolute lord and master."

Haplo, my dear son.

I hope I may term you thus. You are as dear to me as the children I have fathered. Perhaps that is because I feel that I played a role in your birth-or rebirth. Certainly I plucked you from the jaws of death and gave you back your life. And, after all, what does a natural father do to get himself a son except spend a few pleasurable moments with a woman?

I had hoped to be able to speed you on your journey to Pryan, Realm of Fire. Unfortunately, I received word from the watchers that the magical field is crumbling somewhere near the four hundred and sixty-third gate. The Labyrinth has unleashed a swarm of flesh-devouring ants that have killed several hundreds of our people. I must go in and do battle and will, therefore, be absent when you leave. Needless to say, I wish you were at my side as you have been through countless other fights, but your mission is urgent, and I will not take you from your dune;

My instructions to you are similar to those you received setting off for Arianus. You will, of course, keep your magical powers hidden from the populace. As in Arianus, we must keep our return to the world secret. If the Sartan discover me before I am ready to proceed with my plans, they would move heaven and earth (as they did once before) to stop me.

Remember, Haplo, that you are an observer. If possible, take no direct action to alter events in the world, act through indirect means only. When I enter these worlds myself, I do not want to face accusations that my agents committed atrocities in my name. You did an excellent job in Arianus, my son, and I mention this precaution only as a reminder.

About Pryan, the World of Fire, we know little except that its area is purportedly vast. The model left behind by the Sartan pictures a gigantic ball of stone surrounding a core of fire, similar to the ancient world but far, far larger. It is the size that puzzles me. Why did the Sartan feel the need to make this planet so incredibly immense? Something else I do not quite understand and that is-where is its sun? These are among the many questions you will endeavor to answer.

Because of the enormous amount of land space on Pryan, I can only assume that its population must tend to be scattered about in small groups, isolated from each other. I base this on knowledge of the estimated number of people the Sartan transported to Pryan. Even with an unprecedented population explosion, the elves, humans, and dwarves could never have expanded to cover such a large land mass. A disciple to draw the people together, such as you brought me from Arianus, will be of no use to me under such circumstances.

You are being sent to Pryan primarily as investigator. Learn all you can about this world and its inhabitants. And, as in Arianus, search diligently for some sign of the Sartan. Although you did not (with one exception) discover them living in the World of Air, it is possible that they may have fled that world and sought exile on Pryan.

Be careful, Haplo, be circumspect. Do nothing to draw attention to yourself. I embrace you in my heart. I look forward to embracing you in my arms on your safe and successful return. Your lord and father.

'The Lord of the Nexus, History of the Patryns Following the Destruction of the World. Excerpt from the private diaries of the Lord of the Nexus.

## CHAPTER 1

### EQUILAN, TREETOP LEVEL

Pryan, World of Fire, vol. 2 of Death Gate journals.

CALANDRA QUINDINIAR SAT AT THE HUGE POLISHED SCROLL DESK ADDING up the last month's earnings. Her white fingers darted rapidly over the abacus, sliding the beads up and down, muttering the figures aloud to herself as she wrote them in the old leather-bound ledger. Her handwriting was much like herself: thin, upright, precise, and easy to read.

Above her head whirled four plumes made of swans' feathers, keeping the air moving. Despite the suffocating midcycle heat outside, the interior of the house was cool. It stood on the highest elevation in the city and so obtained the breeze that otherwise was often lost in the jungle vegetation.

The house was the largest in the city, next to the royal palace. (Lenthian Quindiniar had the money to build his house larger than the royal palace, but he was a modest elf and knew his place.) The rooms were spacious and airy with high ceilings and numerous windows and the magical system of flutterfans, at least one in every room. The living rooms were on the second floor and were open and beautifully furnished. Drawn shades darkened and cooled them during bright hours of the cycle. During stormtime, the shades were raised to catch the refreshing, rain-drenched breezes.

Calandra's younger brother, Paithan, sat in a rocking chair near the desk. He rocked lazily back and forth, a palm fan in his hand, and watched the rotation of the swans' wings above his sister's head. Several other fans were visible to him from the study—the fan in the living room and beyond that the fan in the dining area. He watched them all waft through the air and between the rhythmic flutter of the wings and the clicking of the beads of the abacus and the gentle creaking of his chair, he fell into an almost hypnotic trance.

A violent explosion that shook the three-level house jolted Paithan upright.

"Damn," he said, looking irritably at a fine sifting of plaster [1] that was falling from the ceiling into his iced drink.

His sister snorted and said nothing. She had paused to blow plaster off the page of the ledger, but did not miss a figure. A wail of terror could be heard, coming from the level down below.

"That'll be the new scullery maid," said Paithan, rising to his feet. "I better go and comfort her, tell her it's only father—"

"You'll do no such thing," snapped Calandra, neither raising her head nor ceasing to write. "You'll sit right there and wait until I'm finished so that we can go over your next trip norinth. It's little enough you do to earn your keep, idling about with your noble friends, doing Orn knows what. Besides, the new girl's a human and an ugly one at that."

Calandra returned to her addition and subtraction. Paithan subsided good-naturedly back into his chair.

I might have known, he reflected, that if Calandra'd hire a human at all the girl'd be some little pig-faced wretch. That's sisterly love for you. Ah, well, I'll be on the road soon and then what dear Cal doesn't know won't hurt her.

Paithan rocked, his sister muttered, the fans whirred contentedly.

The elves revere life and so magically endow it on nearly all their creations. The feathers were under the illusion that they were still attached to the swan. Paithan, watching them, thought that this might be a good analogy for their entire family. They were all under the illusion that they were still attached to something, perhaps even each other.

His peaceful reverie was interrupted by the appearance of a charred, singed, and disheveled man, who bounded into the room, rubbing his hands.

"That was a good one, don't you think?" he said.

The man was short, for an elf, and had obviously once been robustly plump. The flesh had begun to sag lately; the skin had turned sallow and slightly puffy. Though it could not be told beneath the soot, the gray hair standing up around a large bald spot on his head revealed that he was in his middle years. Other than his graying hair, it might have been difficult to guess the elf's age because his face was smooth and

unwrinkled-too smooth. His eyes were bright-too bright. He rubbed his hands and looked anxiously from daughter to son.

"That was a good one, wasn't it?" he repeated.

"Sure, Guvnor," said Paithan in good-humored agreement. "Nearly knocked me over backward."

Lenthian Quindiniar smiled jerkily.

"Calandra?" he persisted.

"You've sent the kitchen help into hysterics and put new cracks in the ceiling, if that's what you mean, Father," retorted Calandra, snapping the beads together viciously.

"You've made a mistake!" squeaked the abacus suddenly.

Calandra glared at it, but the abacus held firm. "Fourteen thousand six hundred eighty-five add twenty-seven is not fourteen thousand six hundred twelve. It's fourteen thousand seven hundred twelve. You've neglected to carry the one."

"I'm surprised I can still reckon at all! See what you've done, Father?" Calandra demanded.

Lenthian appeared rather downcast for a moment, but he cheered up almost immediately.

"It won't be long now," he said, rubbing his hands. "That last one lifted the rocket above my head. I think I'm close to discovering the proper mixture. I'll be in the laboratory, my dears, if anyone needs me."

"That's likely!" muttered Calandra.

"Oh, ease up on the guvnor," said Paithan, watching with some amusement as the elf wound his way vaguely around the assortment of fine furnishings to disappear through a door at the back of the dining area. "Would you rather have him the way he was after Mother died?"

"I'd rather have him sane, if that's what you mean, but I suppose that's too much to ask! Between Thea's gallivanting and Papa's idiocy, we're the laughing stock of the city."

"Don't worry, Sister dear. The people may snigger but, with you scooping up the money of the Lords of Thillia, they do so behind their hands. Besides, if the guvnor was sane he'd be back in the business."

"Humpf," snorted Calandra. "And don't use that slang talk. You know I can't abide it: It's what comes of hanging around with that crowd of yours. Idle, time-wasting bunch of--"

"Wrong!" informed the abacus. "It's supposed to be--"

"I'll do it!" Calandra frowned over her latest entry and irritably went back to add up her figures again.

"Let that. . . that thing there do the work," suggested Paithan, motioning to the abacus.

"I don't trust machines. Hush up!" Calandra snarled when her brother would have spoken.

Paithan sat quietly for several moments, fanning himself and wondering if he had the energy to call for the servant to bring him a fresh glass of vindrech-one that didn't have plaster in it. But it was against the young elf's nature to be silent for long.

"Speaking of Thea, where is she?" he asked, peering about as if he expected to see her emerge from under one of the antimacassars.

"In bed, of course. It's not winetime yet," returned his sister, referring to that period late in the cycle [2] known as "storm" when all elves cease their work and relax over a glass of spiced wine.

Paithan rocked. He was getting bored. Lord Durndrun was having a group over for sailing on his treepond and a picnic supper after, and if Paithan was planning to attend it was high time he set about getting dressed and on his way. Although not of noble birth, the young elf was rich enough, handsome enough, and charming enough to make his way into the society of the gently bred. He lacked the education of the nobility but was smart enough to admit it and not try to pretend he was anything other than what he was-the son of a middle-class businessman. The fact that his middle-class businessman father happened to be the wealthiest man in all of Equilan, wealthier even (so it was rumored) than the queen herself, more than made up for Paithan's occasional lapses into vulgarity.

The young elf was a good-hearted companion who spent his money freely and, as one of the lords said, "He is an interesting devil-can tell the wildest tales ..."

Paithan's education came from the world, not from books. After his mother's death, some eight years previous, and his father's subsequent descent into madness and ill-health, Paithan and his elder sister had taken over the family business. Calandra stayed at home and handled the monetary side of the prosperous weapons company. Although the elves hadn't gone to war in more than a hundred years, the humans were still fond of the practice and even fonder of the magical elven weapons created to wage it. It was Paithan's job to go out into the world, negotiate the deals, make certain that shipments were delivered, and keep the customers happy.

Consequently, he had traveled over all the lands of Thillia and had once ventured as far as the realm of the SeaKings to the norinth. Noble elves, on the other hand, rarely left their estates high in the treetops. Many had never been to the lower parts of Equilan, their own queendom. Paithan was, therefore, looked upon as a marvelous oddity and was courted as such.

Paithan knew the lords and ladies kept him around much as they kept their pet monkeys-to amuse them. He was not truly accepted into higher elven society. He and his family were invited to the royal palace once a year-the queen's concession to those who kept her coffers full-but that was all. None of which bothered Paithan in the least.

The knowledge that elves who weren't half as smart or one-fourth as rich looked down on the Quindiniars because they couldn't trace their family back to the Plague rankled like an arrow wound in Calandra's breast. She had no use for the "peerage" and made her disdain plain, at least to her younger brother. And she was extremely put out that Paithan didn't share her feelings.

Paithan, however, found the noble elves nearly as amusing as they found him. He knew that if he proposed marriage to any one of ten dukes' daughters there would be gasps and wailings and tears at the thought of the "dear child" marrying a commoner-and the wedding would be held as fast as decently possible. Noble houses, after all, are expensive to maintain.

The young elf had no intention of marrying, at least not yet. He came of an exploring, wandering family-the very elven explorers who had discovered omite. He had been home for nearly a full season now and it was time he was on his way again, which was one reason he was sitting here with his sister when he should be out rowing around some charming young woman in a scull. But Calandra, absorbed in her calculations, appeared to have forgotten his very existence. Paithan decided suddenly that if he heard one more bead click he would go "potty"-a slang expression of "his crowd" that would have set Calandra's teeth on edge,

Paithan had some news for his sister that he'd been saving for just such an occasion. It would cause an explosion akin to the one that had rocked the house previously, but it might shake Calandra loose and then he could escape.

"What do you think of Father's sending for that human priest?" he asked.

For the first time since he entered the room, his sister actually stopped her calculations, lifted her head, and looked at him. "What?"

"Father's sending for the human priest. I thought you knew." Paithan blinked rapidly, to appear innocent.

Calandra's dark eyes glinted. The thin lips pursed. Wiping the pen with careful deliberation on an ink-stained cloth used expressly for this purpose, she laid it down carefully in its proper place on the top of the ledger and turned to give her full attention to her brother.

Calandra had never been pretty. All the beauty in the family, it was said, had been saved up and given to her younger sister. Cal was thin to the point of boniness. (Paithan, when a child, had once been spanked for asking if his sister's nose had been caught in a winepress.) Now, in her fading youth, it appeared as if her entire face had been caught and pinched. She wore her hair pulled back in a tight knot at the top of her head, held in place by three lethal-looking, sharp-pointed combs. Her skin was dead white, because she rarely went out of doors and then carried a parasol to protect her from the sun. Her severe dresses were made after the same pattern-buttoned to her chin, her skirts trailing the floor. Calandra had never minded that she wasn't pretty. Beauty was given a woman so that she could trap a man, and Cal had never wanted a man.

"What are men, after all," Calandra was fond of saying, "but creatures who spend your money and interfere in your life?"

All except me, thought Paithan. And that's because Calandra's brought me up properly.

"I don't believe you," said his sister.

"Yes, you do." Paithan was enjoying himself. "You know the guv-sorry, slip of the tongue-Father's crazy enough to do just about anything."

"How did you find out?"

"I popped-stopped in at old Rory's last suppertime for a quick one before going to Lord-"

"I'm not interested in where you were going." A line had appeared in Calandra's forehead. "You didn't hear this rumor from old Rory, did you?"

"'Fraid so, Sister dear. Our batty papa had been in the pub, talkin' about his rockets and comes out with the news that he's sent for a human priest."

"In the pub!" Calandra's eyes widened in horror. "Were there . . . many who heard him?"

"Oh, yes," said Paithan cheerfully. "It was his usual time, you know, right during winetime and the place was packed."

Calandra emitted a low groan, her fingers curled around the frame of the abacus, which protested loudly.

"Maybe he ... imagined it." Her tone sounded hopeless, however. Their father was sometimes all too sane in his madness.

Paithan shook his head. "Nope. I talked to the birdman. His faultless [3] carried the message to Lord Gregory of Thillia. The note said that Lenthon Quindiniar of Equilan wanted to consult with a human priest about travel to the stars. Food and lodging provided and five hundred stones." [4]

Calandra groaned again. "We'll be besieged!" She gnawed her lip.

"No, no, I don't think so." Paithan felt somewhat remorseful at being the cause of such agony. He reached out and patted his sister's clenched hand. "We may be lucky this time, Callie. Human priests live in monasteries and take strict vows of poverty and such like. They couldn't accept the money. And they have life pretty good in Thillia, not to mention the fact that they have a strongly organized hierarchy. They're all answerable to some soft of father superior, and one couldn't just pack up and head out for the wilds."

"But the chance to convert an elf?"

"Pooh! They're not like our priests. They haven't time to convert anybody. They're mainly concerned with playing politics and trying to bring back the Lost Lords."

"You're certain?" Calandra had regained some color in the pale cheeks.

"Well, not certain," Paithan admitted. "But I've been around humans a lot and I know them. They don't like coming into our lands, for one thing. They don't like us, for another. I don't think we have to worry about this priest turning up."

"But why?" Calandra demanded. "Why would Papa do such a thing?"

"Because of the human belief that life came from the stars, which are really and truly cities, and that someday, when our world here below is in chaos, the Lost Lords will return and lead us back."

"That's nonsense!" Calandra said crisply. "All know life came from Peytin Sartan, Matriarch of Heaven, who created this world for her mortal children. The stars are her immortal children, watching over us." She looked shocked, the full implication dawning on her. "You don't mean to say that Father actually believes this? Why that...that's heresy!"

"I think he's beginning to," said Paithan, more somberly. "It makes sense for him, Callie, when you think about it. He was experimenting with using rockets to transport goods before Mother died. Then, she leaves and our priests tell him that Mother's gone to heaven to be one of the immortal children. His mind slips one little cog and he lights on the idea of using rockets to go find Mother. Now he misses the next cog and decides that maybe she's not immortal but is living up there, safe and well, in some sort of city."

"Blessed Orn!" Calandra groaned again. She sat silent for several moments, staring at the abacus, her fingers twitching one of the beads back and forth, back and forth. "I'll go talk to him," she said at last.

Paithan carefully kept his face under control. "Yes, that might be a good idea, Callie. You go talk to him."

Calandra rose to her feet, her skirts rustling stiffly about her. She paused, and looked down at her brother. "We were going to discuss this next shipment--"

"That can wait until tomorrow. This is much more important."

"Humpf. You needn't pretend to look so concerned. I know what you're up to, Paithan. You'll be off on some scatter-brained outing with your fine friends instead of staying home, minding your business as you ought. But you're right, though you probably don't have brains enough to know it. This is more important." A muffled explosion came from below, a crash of falling plates, and a scream from the kitchen. Calandra sighed. "I'll go talk with him, though I'm bound to say I doubt if it'll do much good. If I could just get him to keep his mouth shut!"

She slammed down the ledger. Lips compressed, back straight as a bridgepole tree, she marched in the direction of the door at the far end of the dining area. Her hips were straight as her back; no alluring swaying of skirt for Calandra Quindiniar.

Paithan shook his head. "Poor Guvnor," he said with a moment's feeling of true pity. Then, flipping the palm frond fan in the air, he went to his room to get dressed.

## CHAPTER 2

### EQUILAN, TREETOP LEVEL

DESCENDING THE STAIRS, CALANDRA PASSED THROUGH THE KITCHEN, LOCATED on the first floor of the house. The heat increased noticeably as she moved from the airy upper regions into the more closed and steamy lower part. The scullery maid-eyes red rimmed and a mark on her face from the cook's broad hand-was sullenly sweeping up broken crockery. The maid was an ugly human, as Calandra had said, and the red eyes and swollen lip did nothing to enhance her appearance.

But then Calandra considered all humans ugly and boorish, little more than brutes and savages. The human girl was a slave, who had been purchased along with a sack of flour and a stonewood cooking pot. She would work at the most menial tasks under a stern taskmaster-the cook-for about fifteen of the twenty-one-hour day. She would share a tiny room with the downstairs maid, have no possessions of her own, and earn a pittance by which she might, by the time she was an old woman, buy her way out of slavery. And yet Calandra firmly believed that she had done the human a tremendous favor by bringing her to live among civilized people.

Seeing the girl in her kitchen fanned the coals of Calandra's ire. A human priest! What madness. Her father should have more sense. It was one thing to be insane, quite another to abandon all sense of proper decorum. Calandra marched through the pantry, yanked open the cellar door, and proceeded down the cobwebby steps into the cool darkness below.

The Quindiniar house was built on a moss plain that grew among the upper levels of vegetation of the world of Pryan. The name Pryan meant Realm of Fire in a language supposedly used by those first people who came to the world. The nomenclature was appropriate, because Pryan's sun shone constantly. A more apt name for the planet might have been "Realm of Green," for due to the continual sunshine and frequent rains-Pryan's ground was so thickly covered with vegetation that few people currently living on the planet had ever seen it.

Huge moss plains spanned the branches of gigantic trees, whose trunks at the base were sometimes wide as continents. Level after level of leaves and various plant life extended upward, many levels existing on top of levels beneath them. The moss was incredibly thick and strong; the large city of Equilan was built on a moss bed. Lakes and even oceans floated on top of the thick, brownish green mass. The topmost branches of the trees poked out above it, forming tremendous, junglelike forests. It was here, in the treetops or on the moss plains, that most civilizations on Pryan built their cities.

The moss plains didn't completely cover the world. They came to end in frightful places known as dragonwalls. Few ventured near these chasms. Water from the moss seas leapt over the edge and cascaded down into the darkness with a roar that shook the mighty trees. Any person standing on the edge of the land, staring into that limitless mass of jungle beneath his feet, felt small and puny and fragile as the newest unfurled leaf.

Occasionally, if the observer managed to gather his courage and spend some time staring into the jungle below, he might see ominous movement-a sinuous body jumping up among the branches and slithering away, moving among the deep green shadows so swiftly that the brain wondered if the eye was lying. It was these creatures that gave the dragonwalls their name-the dragons of Pryan. Few had ever seen them, for the dragons were as wary of the tiny strange beings inhabiting the tops of the trees as the humans, dwarves, and elves were wary of the dragons. It was believed, however, that the dragons were enormous, wingless beasts of great intelligence who carried on their lives far, far below, perhaps even living on the fabled ground.

Lenthon Quindiniar had never seen a dragon. His father had; he'd seen several. Quintain Quindiniar had been a legendary explorer and inventor. He had helped establish the elven city of Equilan. He had invented numerous weapons and other devices that were immediately coveted by the human settlers in the area. He had used the already considerable family fortune, founded in omite, [5] to establish a trading company that

grew more prosperous every year. Despite his success. Quintain had not been content to stay quietly at home and count his coins. When his only son, Lenthian, was old enough. Quintain turned over the business to his son and went back out into the world. He'd never been heard from again, and all assumed, after a hundred years had passed, that he was dead.

Lenthian had the family's wandering blood in his veins but was never allowed to indulge in it, having been forced to take over the affairs of the business. He also had the family gift for making money, but it didn't seem to Lenthian as if the money he made was his money. He was, after all, simply carrying on the trade built up by his father. Lenthian had long sought a way to make his own mark in the world, but, unfortunately, there wasn't much of the world left to explore. The humans held the lands to the north, the Terinthian Ocean prohibited expansion to the east and west and the dragonwall blocked the south. As far as Lenthian was concerned, he had nowhere to go but up.

Calandra entered the cellar laboratory, holding her skirts out of the dirt; the look on her face would have curdled milk. It came near curdling her father. Lenthian, seeing his daughter here in this place he knew she abhorred, blanched and moved nervously nearer another elf who was present in the laboratory. This other elf smiled and bowed officiously. The expression on Calandra's face darkened at the sight.

"How nice-nice to see you down here, m-my dear," stammered poor Lenthian, dropping a crock of some foul-smelling liquid onto a filthy tabletop. Calandra wrinkled her nose. The moss walls and floor gave off a pungent musky odor that blended ill with the various chemical smells-most notably sulfur-drifting about the laboratory.

"Mistress Quindiniar," said the other elf in greeting. "I trust I find you in health?"

"You do, sir, thank you for asking. And I trust you are the same, Master Astrologer?"

"A slight touch of rheumatism, but that is to be expected at my age."

"I wish your rheumatism would carry you off, you old charlatan!" muttered Calandra beneath her breath.

"Why is this witch down here meddling?" muttered the astrologer into the high, pointed collar that stood up from his shoulders and almost completely surrounded his face.

Lenthian stood between the two, looking forlorn and guilty, though he had no idea, as yet, what he had done.

"Father," said Calandra in a severe voice, "I want to speak to you. Alone."

The astrologer bowed and started to sidle off. Lenthian, seeing his prop being knocked out from beneath him, grabbed hold of the wizard's robes.

"Now, my dear, Elixnoir is part of the family-"

"He certainly eats enough to be part of the family," Calandra snapped, her patience giving way under the crushing blow of the terrible news of the human priest. "He eats enough to be several parts."

The astrologer drew himself up tall and stared down his long nose that was nearly as sharply pointed as the tips of the night Hue collar through which it was seen.

"Callie, remember, he is our guest!" said Lenthian, shocked enough to rebuke his eldest child. "And a master wizard!"

"Guest, yes, I'll give him that. He never misses a meal Or a chance to drink our wine or sleep in our spare bedroom. But master wizard I much doubt. I've yet to see him do anything but mumble a few words over that stinking gunk of yours, Father, and then stand back and watch it fizzle and smoke. You two will likely burn

the house down around our ears someday! Wizard! Hah! Egging you on, Papa, with blasphemous stories about ancient people traveling to the stars in ships with sails of fire-

"That is scientific fact, young woman," struck in the astrologer, the tips of his collar quivering in indignation. "And what your father and I are doing is scientific research and has nothing at all to do with religion-

"Oh, it doesn't, does it?" cried Calandra, hurling her verbal spear straight for her victim's heart. "Then why is my father importing a human priest?"

The astrologer's eyes widened in shock. The high collar turned from Calandra to the wretched Lenthian, who found himself much disconcerted by it.

"Is this true, Lenthian Quindiniar?" demanded the incensed wizard. "You have sent for a human priest?"

"I-I-I-" was all Lenthian could manage.

"I have been deceived by you, sir," stated the astrologer, his dignity increasing every moment and so, it seemed, the length of his collar. "You led me to believe that you shared our interest in the stars, in their cycles and their places in the heavens."

"I was! I am!" Lenthian wrung his soot-blackened hands.

"You professed to be interested in the scientific study of how these stars rule our lives-

"Blasphemy!" cried Calandra with a shudder of her bony frame.

"And yet now I find you consorting with-with-

Words failed the wizard. His pointed collar appeared to close around him so that all that could be seen above it were his glittering, infuriated eyes.

"No! Please let me explain!" gabbled Lenthian. "You see, my son, Paithan, told me about the belief the humans have that there are people living in those stars and I thought-

"Paithan told you!" gasped Calandra, pouncing on a new culprit.

"People living there!" gasped the astrologer, his voice muffled by the collar.

"But it does seem likely . . . and certainly explains why the ancients traveled to the stars and it fits with what our priests teach us that when we die we become one with the stars and I truly do miss Elithenia. . . ."

The last was said in a wretched, pleading tone that moved Lenthian's daughter to pity. In her own way, Calandra loved her father, just as she loved her brother and younger sister. It was a stern and unbending and impatient kind of love, but love it was and she moved over to put thin, cold fingers on her father's arm.

"There, Papa, don't upset yourself. I didn't mean to make you unhappy. It's just that I'd think you would have discussed this with me instead of . . . instead of the crowd at the Golden Mead!" Calandra could not forebear a sob. Pulling out a prim-and-proper lace-edged handkerchief, she clamped it over her nose and mouth.

His daughter's tears had the effect (not unintended) of completely crushing Lenthian Quindiniar into the mossy floor and burying him twelve hands [6] down. Her weeping and the wizard's trembling collar points were too much for the middle-aged elf.

"You're both right," said Lenthian, glancing from one to the other sorrowfully. "I can see that now. I've made a terrible mistake and when the priest comes, I'll tell him to go away immediately."

"When he comes!" Calandra raised dry eyes and stared at her father. "What do you mean 'when he comes'? Paithan said he wouldn't come!"

"How does Paithan know?" Lenthon asked, considerably perplexed. "Did he talk to him after I did?" The elf thrust a waxen hand into a pocket of his silk vest and dragged out a crumpled sheet of foolscap. "Look, my dear." He exhibited the letter.

Calandra snatched it and read it, her eyes might have burned holes in the paper.

" 'When you see me, I'll be there. Signed, Human Priest.' Bah!" Calandra thrust the letter back at her father. "That's the most ridiculous- Paithan's playing a joke. No person in his right mind would send a letter like that, not even a human. 'Human Priest indeed!'"

"Perhaps he's not in his right mind," said the Master Astrologer in ominous tones.

A mad human priest was coming to her house.

"Orn have mercy!" Calandra murmured, gripping the edge of the laboratory table for support.

"There, there, my dear," said Lenthon, putting his arm around his daughter's shoulders. "I'll take care of it. Just leave everything to me. You shan't be bothered in the slightest."

"And if I can be of any help"-the Master Astrologer sniffed the air; the smell of roast targ was wafting down from the kitchen-"I shall be happy to lend my aid. I shall even overlook certain things that were said in the heat of emotional distress."

Calandra paid no attention to the wizard. She had recovered her self-possession and her one thought now was to find her worthless brother and wring a confession out of him. She had no doubt-well, she had little doubt-that this was Paithan's doing, his idea of a practical joke. He was probably laughing heartily at her right now. How long would he laugh when she cut his allowance in half?

Leaving the astrologer and her father to blow themselves to smithereens in the cellar if they liked, Calandra stormed up the stairs. She marched through the kitchen where the scullery maid hid behind a dish towel until the awful specter was gone. Ascending to the third level of the house-the sleeping level- Calandra halted outside her brother's door and banged on it loudly.

"Paithan! Open your door this instant!"

"He's not there," called a sleepy voice from down the hallway.

Calandra glowered at the door, knocked again, and rattled the wooden handle. No sound. Turning, Cal stalked down the hall and entered the room of her younger sister.

Clad in a frilly nightdress that left both white shoulders exposed and just enough of her breasts to make things interesting, Aleatha lounged in a chair before her dressing table, lazily brushing her hair and admiring herself in the mirror. Magically enhanced, the mirror whispered compliments and offered the occasional suggestion as to the correct amount of rouge.

Calandra paused in the doorway, shocked almost beyond words. "What do you mean! Sitting there half-naked in broad daylight with the door wide open! What if one of the servants came by?"

Aleatha raised her eyes. She performed this motion slowly and languorously, knowing and enjoying full well the effect it had. The young elfmaid's eyes were a clear, vibrant blue, but- shadowed over by heavy lids and long, thick lashes-they darkened to purple. Opening them wide, therefore, had the effect of seeming to completely change their color. Numerous elven men had written sonnets to those eyes, and one was rumored to have died for them.

"Oh, one servant has already been past," said Aleatha without the slightest perturbation. "The footman. He's been up and down the hall three times at least in the last half-hour." She turned from her sister and began arranging the ruffles of her nightdress to show off her long, slender neck.

Aleatha's voice was rich, throaty, and sounded perpetually as if she were just about to sink into a deep slumber. This, combined with the heavy-lidded eyes, gave an impression of sweet languor no matter where the young woman went or what she was doing. During the fevered gaiety of a royal ball, Aleatha- ignoring the rhythm of the music-would dance slowly, in an almost dreamlike state, her body completely surrendered to her partner, giving him the delightful impression that without his strong support she would sink to the floor. The languid eyes stared into his, with just a tiny sparkle of fire deep in the purple depths, leading a man to think of what he might do that would cause those sleepy eyes to open wide.

"You are the talk of Equilan, Thea!" snapped Calandra, holding the handkerchief to her nose. Aleatha was spraying perfume over her neck and breast. "Where were you last darktime?" [7]

The purple eyes opened wide, or at least wider. Aleatha would never waste their full effect on a mere sister.

"Since when do you care where I was? What wasp's gotten into your corset this gentle-time, Callie?"

"Gentle-time! It's nearly winetime! You've slept away half the day!"

"If you must know, I was with Lord Kevanish and we went down to the Dark-"

"Kevanish!" Calandra drew a seething breath. "That blackguard! He's being refused admittance to every proper house over that affair of the duel. It was because of him that poor Lucillia hung herself, and he as much as murdered her brother! And you, Aleatha ... to be seen publicly with him-" Calandra choked.

"Nonsense. Lucillia was a fool for thinking that a man like Kevanish could really be in love with her. Her brother was a bigger fool in demanding satisfaction. Kevanish is the best boltarcher in Equilan."

"There is such a thing as honor, Aleatha!" Calandra stood behind her sister's chair, her hands gripping the back of it, the knuckles white with the strain. It seemed that with very little prompting, she might grip her sister's fragile neck in the same manner. "Or has this family forgotten that?"

"Forgotten?" murmured Thea in her sleepy voice. "No, dear Callie, not forgotten. Simply bought and paid for it long ago."

With a complete lack of modesty, Aleatha rose from her chair and began to untie the silken ribbons that almost held the front of her nightdress closed. Calandra, looking at her sister's reflection in the mirror, could see reddish bruise marks on the white flesh of shoulders and breast-the marks of the lips of an ardent lover. Sickened, Calandra turned her back and walked swiftly across the room to stand staring out the window.

Aleatha smiled lazily at the mirror and allowed the nightdress to slip to the floor. The mirror was rapturous in its comments.

"You were looking for Paithan?" she reminded her sister. "He flew into his room like a bat from the deep, dressed in his lawn suit, and flew out. I think he's gone to Lord Durmdrun's. I was invited, but I don't know if I shall go or not. Paithan's friends are such bores."

"This family is falling apart!" Calandra pressed her hands together. "Father sending for a human priest! Paithan a common tramp, caring for nothing except roaming! You! You'll end up pregnant and unwed and likely hang yourself like poor Lucillia."

"Oh, hardly, Callie, dear," said Aleatha, kicking aside the nightdress with her foot. "Hanging oneself takes such a lot of energy." Admiring her slender body in the mirror, which admired it right back, she frowned,

reached out and rang a bell made out of the shell of the egg of the carol bird. "Where is that maid of mine? Worry less about your family, Callie, and more about the servants. I never saw a lazier lot."

"It's my fault!" Calandra sighed and clasped her hands together tightly, pressing them against her lips. "I should have made Paithan go to school. I should have supervised you and not let you run wild. I should have stopped Father in this nonsense of his. But who would have run the business? It was sliding when I took it over! We would have been ruined! Ruined! If it had been left up to Father-

The maid hurried into the room.

"Where have you been?" asked Aleatha sleepily.  
"I'm sorry, mistress! I didn't hear you ring."

"Well, I did. But you should know when I want you. Lay out the blue. I'm staying home this darktime. No, don't. Not the blue. The green with the moss roses. I think I'll attend Lord Durndrun's outing, after all. Something amusing might occur. If nothing else, I can at least torment the baron, who's simply dying of love for me. Now, Callie, what's this about a human priest? Is he good looking?"

Calandra gave a strangled sob and clenched her teeth over the handkerchief. Aleatha glanced at her. Accepting the flimsy robe the maid draped over her shoulders, Thea crossed the room to stand behind her sister. Aleatha was as tall as Calandra, but her figure was soft and curved where her sister's was bony and angular. Masses of ashen hair framed Aleatha's face and tumbled down her back and around her shoulders. The elfmaid never "dressed" her hair as was the style. Like the rest of Aleatha, her hair was always disheveled, always looked as if she had just risen from her bed. She laid soft hands on her sister's quivering shoulders.

"The hour flower has closed its petals on those times, Callie. Keep longing uselessly for it to open again and you'll soon be insane as Father, if Mother had lived, things might have been different"-Aleatha's voice broke, she drew nearer her sister- "but she didn't. And that's that," she added, with a shrug of her perfumed shoulders. "You did what you had to do, Callie. You couldn't let us starve."

"I suppose you're right," said Calandra briskly, recalling that the maid was in the room and not wanting their affairs discussed in the servant's hall. She straightened her shoulders and smoothed out imaginary wrinkles from her stiff, starched skirts. "So you won't be in to dinner?"

"No, I'll tell the cook, if you like. Why don't you come to Lord Durndrun's, Sister?" Aleatha walked to the bed, where her maid was laving out silken undergarments. "Randolphus will be there. He's never married, you know, Callie. You broke his heart."

"Broke his purse is more like it," said Calandra severely, looking at herself in the mirror, patting her hair where a few wisps had come undone, and stabbing the three lethal combs back into place. "He didn't want me, he wanted the business,"

"Perhaps." Aleatha paused in her dressing, the purple eyes going to the mirror and meeting the reflected eyes of her sister. "But he would have been company for you, Callie. You're alone too much."

"And so I'm to let a man step in and take over and ruin what it's cost me years to build just for the sake of seeing his face every morning whether I like it or not? No, thank you. There are worse things than being alone. Pet."

Aleatha's purple eyes darkened almost to wine. "Death, maybe."

Her sister didn't hear her.

The elfmaid shook back her hair, shaking off the gloomy shadow at the same time. "Shall I tell Paithan you're wanting to see him?"

"Don't bother. He must be near to running out of money by now. He'll be around to see me in the toilitime." Calandra marched toward the door. "I have the books to balance. Try to come home at a reasonable hour. Before tomorrow, at least."

Aleatha smiled at her sister's sarcasm and lowered the sleep-heavy eyelids modestly. "If you like, Callie, I won't see Lord Kevanish anymore."

Her sister paused, turned. Calandra's stern face brightened, but she only said, "I should hope not!" Stalking out of the room, she slammed the door shut behind her.

"He's getting to be a bore anyway," remarked Aleatha to herself. She lounged back down at her dressing table and studied her flawless features in the effusive mirror.

### CHAPTER 3

#### GRIFFITH, TERNCIA, THILLIA

CALANDRA RETURNED TO HER WORK ON THE ACCOUNT BOOKS AS A SOOTHING antidote to the wild vagaries of her family. The house was quiet. Her father and the astrologer puttered about in the cellar but, knowing that his daughter was more near exploding than his magical powder, Lenthon thought it wise to refrain from any further experiments along those lines.

After dinner, Calandra performed one more act related to the business. She sent a servant with a message for the birdman, addressed to Master Roland of Griffith, Jungleflower Tavern.

Shipment will arrive in early Fallow. [8] Payment expected on delivery.  
Calandra Quindiniar.

The birdman attached the message to the foot of a faultless that had been trained to fly to Terncia and cast the brightly colored bird in the air.

The faultless glided effortlessly through the sky, riding the air currents that ebbed and flowed among the towering trees.

The bird had her mind strictly on her destination, where her mate, locked in a cage, awaited her. She kept no watch for predators, there was nothing living that wanted her for food. The faultless secretes an oil that keeps its feathers dry during the frequent rainstorms. This oil is deadly poison to all species of life except the faultless.

The faultless winged its way norinth-vars, a route that took it over the grounds and mansions of the elven peerage and across Lake Enthial.

The bird dipped low over the elven farmlands that grew in the upper moss beds, forming a patchwork of unnaturally straight lines. Human slaves toiled in the fields, tending the crops. The faultless wasn't particularly hungry; she'd been fed before starting, but a mouse would top off her dinner nicely. She couldn't see one, however, and continued on, disappointed.

The carefully cultivated elven lands soon disappeared into the jungle wild. Streams, fed by the daily rains, gathered into rivers atop the moss beds. Winding their way through the jungle, the rivers occasionally found a break in the upper layers of the moss and cascaded down into the dark depths below.

Wisps of clouds began to drift before the bird's eyes, and she flew higher, gaining altitude, climbing above the storms of rain's hour. Eventually the thick, black, lightning-shot mass completely blocked her view of the land. She knew where she was, however, instinct guiding her. The Lord Marcins Forests lay below her; they

were named by the elves but claimed by neither elves nor human due to the fact that their jungle growth was impenetrable.

The storm came and went, as it had done time out of mind since the creation of the world. The sun shone brightly, and the bird could see settled lands-Thillia, realm of the humans. From her great height, the bird noted three of the sparkling, sunlit towers that marked the five divisions of the Thillian kingdom. The towers, ancient by human standards, were built of crystal bricks, the secret of whose making had been known to human wizards during the reign of King George the Only. The secret, as well as many of the wizards, had been lost in the devastating War for Love that followed the old king's death.

The faultless used the towers to mark her destination, then swooped down, flying low over the humans' lands. Built on a broad moss plain, dotted here and there with trees that had been left standing for their shade, the country was flat, criss-crossed with roads and pockmarked with small towns. The roads were well traveled; humans having a curious need to be constantly on the move, a need the sedentary elves could never understand and one that they considered barbaric.

The hunting was far more favorable in this part of the world, and the faultless took a brief moment to fortify herself on a largish rat. Meal finished, she cleaned her claws on her beak, preened her feathers, and took to the air. When she saw the flat lands begin to give way to thick jungle, the bird felt cheered, for she was nearing the end of her long journey. She was over Terncia, the kingdom farthest north. Arriving at the walled city surrounding the crystal brick tower that marked the capital of Terncia, the bird heard the rough call of her mate. She dove from the sky, spiraling down into the city's heart, and landed on the leather-covered arm of a Thillian birdman. He removed the message, noted the designation, and placed the weary faultless into the cage with her mate, who greeted her with tiny nips of his beak.

The birdman handed the message to a circuit rider. Several days later, the rider entered a crude and half-thought-through village standing on the very edges of the jungle and dropped the message off at the village's only inn.

Seated in his favorite booth in the Jungliflower, Master Roland of Griffith studied the fine quin scroll. Grinning, he shoved it across the table to a young woman who sat across from him.

"There! What did I tell you, Rega?"

"Thank Thillia, that's all I can say." Rega's tone was grim, she wasn't smiling. "Now you at least have something to show old Blackbeard and maybe he'll leave us be for a stretch!"

"I wonder where he is?" Roland glanced at the hour flower [9] that stood in a pot on the bar. Almost twenty petals were folded down. "It's past his usual time."

"He'll be here. This is too important to him."

"Yeah, and that makes me nervous."

"Developing a conscience?" Rega drained her mug of kegrot and glanced about for the barmaid.

"No, I just don't like doing business here, in a public place-"

"All the better. Everything's aboveboard and out in the open. No one could have any suspicions of us. Ah, here he is. What did I tell you?"

The inn's door opened and a dwarf stood bathed in the dicing hour's bright sunlight. He was an imposing sight, and nearly everyone in the inn paused in their drinking, gambling, and conversing to stare at him.

Slightly above average height for his people, he had ruddy brown skin and a shaggy mane of curly black hair and beard that gave him his nickname among humans. Thick black brows meeting over a hooked nose and flashing black eyes gave him a perpetually fierce expression that served him well in alien lands. Despite the heat, he wore a red-and-white striped silken shirt and over that the heavy leather armor of his people, with bright red pants tucked into tall, thick boots.

Those in the bar sniggered and exchanged grins at the dwarf's garish clothing. If they had known anything at all about dwarven society and what the bright colors of his clothing portended, they wouldn't have laughed.

The dwarf paused in the doorway, blinking his eyes, half-blinded from the bright sun.

"Blackbeard, my friend," Roland called, rising from his seat. "Over here!"

The dwarf clumped into the inn, the black eyes darting here and there, staring down any who seemed too bold. Dwarves were a rarity in Thillia. The dwarven kingdom was far to the north-est of the humans and there was little contact between the two. But this particular dwarf had been in town for five days now and his appearance had ceased to be a novelty. Griffith was a squalid place located on the borders of two kingdoms, neither of which claimed it. The inhabitants did what they liked—an arrangement that suited most of them, because most of them had come from parts of Thillia where doing what they liked generally got them hung. The people of Griffith might wonder what a dwarf was up to in their town, but no one would wonder aloud.

"Barkeep, three more!" called Roland, holding aloft his mug.

"We have cause to celebrate, my friend," he said to the dwarf, who slowly took a seat.

"Ya?" grunted the dwarf, regarding the two with dark suspicion.

Roland, grinning, ignored his guest's obvious animosity and handed over the message.

"I cannot read these words," said the dwarf, tossing the quin scroll back across the table. The arrival of the barmaid with the kegrot interrupted them.

Mugs were distributed. The slovenly barmaid gave the table a quick, disinterested swipe with a greasy rag, glanced curiously at the dwarf, and slouched away.

"Sorry, I forgot you can't read elvish. The shipment's on its way, Blackbeard," said Roland in a casual undertone. "It will be here within the Fallow."

"My name is Drugar. And that is what this paper says?" The dwarf tapped it with a thick-fingered hand.

"Sure is, Blackbeard, my friend."

"I am not your friend, human," muttered the dwarf, but the words were in his language and spoken to his beard. His lips parted in what might almost have been a smile. "That is good news." He sounded grudging.

"We'll drink to it." Roland raised his mug, nudging Rega, who had been eyeing the dwarf with a suspicion equal to that with which Blackbeard was eyeing them. "To business."

"I will drink to this," said the dwarf, after appearing to consider the matter. He raised his mug. "To business."

Roland drained his noisily. Rega took a sip. She never drank to excess. One of them had to remain sober. Besides, the dwarf wasn't drinking. He merely moistened his lips. Dwarves don't care for kegrot, which is, admittedly, weak and flat tasting compared to their own rich brew.

"I was just wondering, partner," said Roland, leaning forward, hunching over his drink, "just what you're going to be using these weapons for?"

"Acquiring a conscience, human?"

Roland cast a wry glance at Rega, who-hearing her words repeated-shrugged and looked away, silently asking what other answer he might have expected to such a stupid question.

"You are being paid enough not to ask, but I will tell you anyway because my people are honorable."

"So honorable you have to deal with smugglers, is that it, Blackbeard?" Roland grinned, paying the dwarf back.

The black brows came together alarmingly, the black eyes flared. "I would have dealt openly and legitimately, but the laws of your land prevent it. My people need these weapons. You have heard about the peril coming from the norinth?"

"The SeaKings?"

Roland gestured to the barmaid. Rega laid her hand on his, warning him to go slowly, but he shoved her away.

"Bah! No!" The dwarf gave a contemptuous snort. "I mean norinth of our lands. Far norinth, only not so far anymore."

"No. Haven't heard a thing, Blackbeard, old buddy. What is it?"

"Humans-the size of mountains. They are coming out of the norinth, destroying everything in their path."

Roland choked on his drink and started to laugh. The dwarf appeared to literally swell with rage, and Rega dug her nails into her partner's arm. Roland, with difficulty, stifled his mirth.

"Sorry, friend, sorry. But I heard that story from my dear old dad when he was in his cups. So the tytans are going to attack us. I suppose the Five Lost Lords of Thillia will come back at the same time." Reaching across the table, Roland patted the angry dwarf on the shoulder. "Keep your secret, then, my friend. As long as we get our money, my wife and I don't care what you do or who you kill."

The dwarf glowered, jerked his arm away from the human's touch.

"Don't you have somewhere to go, Husband, dear?" said Rega pointedly.

Roland rose to his feet. He was tall and muscular, blond and handsome. The barmaid, who knew him well, brushed against him when he stood up.

" 'Scuse me. Gotta pay a visit to a tree. Damn kegrot runs right through me." He made his way through the common room that was rapidly growing more crowded and more noisy.

Rega put on her most winning smile and came around the table to seat herself beside the dwarf. The young woman was almost exactly opposite in appearance from Roland. Short and full-figured, she was dressed both for the heat and for conducting business, wearing a linen blouse that revealed more than it covered. Tied in a knot at her breasts, it left her midriff bare. Leather pants, cut off at the knees, fit her legs like a second skin. Her flesh was tanned a deep golden brown and, in the heat of the tavern, glistened with a fine sheen of sweat. Her brown hair was parted in the center of her head and hung straight and shining as rain-soaked tree bark down her back.

Rega knew the dwarf wasn't the slightest bit attracted to her physically. Probably because I don't have a beard, she reflected, grinning to herself, remembering what she'd heard about dwarven women. He did

seem eager to discuss this fairy tale his people'd dreamed up. Rega never liked to let a customer go away angry.

"Forgive my husband, sir. He's had a little too much to drink. But I'm interested. Tell me more about the tytans."

"Tytans." The dwarf appeared to taste the strange word. "That is what you call them in your language?"

"I guess so. Our legends tell of gigantic humans, great warriors, formed by the gods of the stars long ago to serve them. But no such beings have been seen in Thillia since before the time of the Lost Lords."

"I do not know if these . . . tytans . . . are the same or not." Blackbeard shook his head. "Our legends do not speak of such creatures. We are not interested in the stars. We who live beneath the ground rarely see them. Our legends tell of the Forgers, the ones who, along with the father of all dwarves, Drakar, first built this world. It is said that someday the Forgers will return and enable us to build cities whose size and magnificence are beyond belief."

"If you think these giants are the-er-Forgers, then why the weapons?"

Blackboard's face grew shadowed, the lines deepened. "That is what some of my people believe. There are others of us who have talked to the refugees of the norinth lands. They tell of terrible destruction and killings. I think perhaps the legends have got it wrong. That is why the weapons."

Rega had, at first, thought the dwarf was lying. She and Roland had decided that Blackbeard meant to use the weapons to attack a few scattered human colonies. But, seeing the black eyes grow shadowed, hearing the heaviness in the dwarf's voice, Rega changed her mind. Blackbeard, at least, believed in this fantastic enemy and that was truly why he was buying the weapons. The thought was comforting. This was the first time she and Roland had ever smuggled weapons, and-no matter what Roland might say-Rega was relieved to know that she wouldn't be responsible for the deaths of her own people.

"Hey, Blackbeard, what are you doing-getting cozy with my wife, huh?" Roland eased himself back down at the table. Another mug awaited him, and he drank deeply.

Noting the shocked and darkening scowl on Blackbeard's face, Rega gave Roland a swift and painful kick beneath the table. "We were discussing legends, dear. I've heard it said that dwarves are fond of songs. My husband has an excellent voice. Perhaps, sir, you would like to hear the 'Lay of Thillia'? It tells the story of the lords of our land and how the five kingdoms were formed."

Blackbeard's face brightened, "Ya, I would like to hear it"

Rega thanked the stars she had spent time digging up everything she could about dwarven society. Dwarves do not have a fondness for music. They have an absolute passion for it. All dwarves play musical instruments, most of them have excellent singing voices and perfect pitch. They have only to hear a song once to catch the melody and need hear it only a second time to pick up the words.

Roland had an excellent tenor voice, and he sang the hauntingly beautiful lay with exquisite feeling. The people in the bar hushed to hear him, and there were many among the rough crowd who wiped their eyes when the song came to the end. The dwarf listened with rapt attention and Rega, sighing, knew that they had another satisfied customer.

From thought and love all things once born, earth, air, and sky, and knowing sea. From darkness old, all light is shorne, and rise above, forever free.

In reverent voice, five brothers spoke of sire's duty and wondered fare. Their king dying 'neath fortune's yoke, from each demand their landed care.

Five kingdoms great, born of one land. To each fair prince his parcel part. Dictates of will and dead sire's hand, for each to rule, with just' and heart.

The first the fields, fair flowing flight, whisp'ring winds the rushes calm move. Another to sea, ships to right, and crashing waves, the shorelines soothe.

The third of boles and gentlest sward, crack of twig and shades darkling eye. The fourth, the hills and valleys' lord, where grazing plain and resting lie.

The last, the sun made shining home, high seething heat, would ever last. All five in wrote his true heart's tone, true to all word and great kings past.

Each child did rule with true intent, Embrac'ng demesne, all ruling fair. Justice and strength, wisdom full lent, each mouth to voice a grateful aire.

Yet fates' cruel games their pure hearts waste, and each to arms this tryst above. Five men consumed for woman chaste, and all lives touch'd for strident love.

As gentle as a poem's heart, was the beauteous woman born.

As subtle as all nature's art, her wondrous heart all lives did warm.

When five proud men, all brothers born, beheld this dam, their loves did soar. For sweet Thillia, five loves sworn, a handful of kingdoms, to war.

Five armies clashed, their plows to swords, farmers from fields, passion's commands. Brothers once fair and loving wards, sent salt to sea and wounded th' lands.

Thillia stood on bloodied plain, her arms outstretched, hands open wide. Her griev'ed heart, cast down from shame, fled far beneath lake's loving tide.

Perfection mourned her passing soul, five brothers ceased their hollow fight. They cried above, their hearts held whole, and vowed to rise 'neath warrior's night.

In faith they walked with modest stride, to sleeping Thillia beneath. The crashing waves their virtue cried, the kingdoms wept their wat'ry wreath.

From thought and love all things once born, stone, air, and sky, and knowing sea. From darkness old, all light is shorne, and rise above, forever free.

Rega concluded the story. "Thillia's body was recovered and placed in a sacred shrine in the center of the realm in a place that belongs equally to all five kingdoms. The bodies of her lovers were never recovered, and from this sprang the legend that some day, when the, nation is in dire peril, the brothers will come back and save their people."

"I liked that!" shouted the dwarf, thumping the table with his hand to express his appreciation. He actually went so far as to tap Roland on the forearm with a stubby finger; the first time in five days the dwarf had ever touched either human. "I like that very much- Have I got the tune?" Blackbeard hummed the melody in a deep bass.

"Yes, sir! Exactly!" cried Roland, much amused. "Would you like me to teach you the words?"

- "I have them. Up here." Blackbeard tapped his forehead. "I am a quick student."

"I guess so!" said Roland, winking at the woman.

Rega grinned back.

"I would like to hear it again, but I must be going," said Blackbeard with true regret, shoving himself up from the table. "I must tell my people the good news." Sobering for a moment, he added, "They will be greatly relieved." Putting his hands on a belt around his waist, the dwarf unbuckled it and flung it on the table. "There is half the money, as we agreed. The other half on delivery."

Roland's hand closed swiftly over the belt and pushed it across to Rega. She opened it, glanced inside, made a swift eye count, and nodded.

"Fine, my friend," said Roland, not bothering to stand up. "We'll meet you at the agreed-on place in late Fallow."

Afraid that the dwarf might be offended, Rega rose to her feet and extended her hand-palm open to show there was no Weapon-in the age-old human gesture of friendship. The dwarves have no such custom; there had never been a time when dwarves fought each other. Blackbeard had been around humans long enough to know that this pressing together of palms was significant. He did what was expected of him and hurriedly left the tavern, wiping his hand on his leather jerkin and humming the tune to the "Lay of Thillia" as he walked.

"Not bad for a night's work," said Roland, buckling the money belt around his waist, cinching it in, for his waist was torn and the dwarf was robust.

"No thanks to you!" Rega muttered. The woman drew the raztar [10] from its round scabbard she wore on her thigh and made a show of sharpening all seven blades, glancing meaningfully at those in the inn who were taking just a bit too much interest in their affairs. "I pulled your fat out of the fire. Blackbeard would've walked out, if it hadn't been for me."

"Ah, I could've cut his beard off and he wouldn't have dared take offense. He can't afford to."

"You know," added Rega in an unusually somber and reflective mood, "he was really, truly frightened."

"So he was frightened? All the better for business. Sis," said Roland briskly.

Rega glanced around sharply, then leaned forward. "Don't call me 'Sis'! Soon we'll be traveling with that elf, and one little slip like that will ruin everything!"

"Sorry, 'Wifey, dear.' " Roland finished off the kegrot, and shook his head regretfully when the barmaid glanced his way. Carrying this much money, he needed to remain relatively alert. "So the dwarves are planning an attack on some human settlement. Probably the SeaKings. I wonder if we couldn't sell our next shipment to them."

"You don't think the dwarves will attack Thillia?"

"Now who's getting a conscience? What's it matter to us? If the dwarves don't attack Thillia, the SeaKings will. And if the SeaKings don't attack Thillia, Thillia will attack itself. Whatever happens, as I said, it's good for business."

Depositing a couple of wooden lord's crowns on the table, the two left the tavern. Roland walked in front, his hand on the hilt of his bladewood sword. Rega followed a pace or two behind him to guard his back as was their custom. They were a formidable-looking pair and had lived long enough in Griffith to establish the reputation of being tough, quick, and not much given to mercy. Several people eyed them, but no one troubled them. The two and their money arrived safely at the shack they called home.

Rega pulled shut the heavy wooden door and bolted it carefully from the inside. Peering outdoors, she drew dosed the rags that she'd hung over the windows and gave Roland a nod. He lifted a three-legged wooden table and set it against the door. Kicking aside a rag rug lying on the floor, he revealed a trapdoor in the floor

and, beneath it, a hole that had been dug in the moss. Roland tossed the money belt into the hole, shut the trapdoor, and arranged the rug and the table over it.

Rega put out a hunk of stale bread and a round of moldy cheese. "Speaking of business, what do you know about this elf, this Paithan Quindiniar?"

Roland tore off a piece of bread with strong teeth, forked a bite of cheese into his mouth. "Nothing," he mumbled, chewing steadily. "He's an elf, which means he'll be a wilting lily, except where it comes to you, my charming sister."

"I'm your charming wife. Don't forget that." Rega playfully poked her brother in the hand with one of the wooden blades of her razzar. She hacked off another slice of cheese. "Do you really think it will work?"

"Sure. The guy who told me about it says the scam never fails. You know elves are mad about human women. We introduce ourselves as husband and wife, but our marriage isn't exactly a passionate one. You're starved for affection. You flirt with the elf and lead him on and when he lays a hand on your quivering breast, you suddenly remember that you're a respectable married lady and you scream like a banshee.

"I come to the rescue, threaten to cut off the elf's pointed . . . um . . . ears. He buys his life by giving us the goods for half price. We sell them to the dwarves at full price, plus a little extra for our 'trouble' and we're set up for the next few seasons."

"But after that, we'll need to deal with the Quindiniar family again--"

"And we will. I've heard that this female elf who runs the business and the family is a pickle-faced old prude. Baby brother won't dare tell his sister he tried to break up our 'happy home.' And we can make certain he gets us an extra-good price the next time."

"It sounds easy enough," admitted Rega. Hooking a wineskin with her hand, she tilted the liquid into her mouth, then shoved it across to her brother. "Here's to wedded bliss, my beloved 'Husband.' "

"Here's to infidelity, my dear 'Wife.' "

The two, laughing, drank.

Drugar left the Jungleflower Tavern but the dwarf did not immediately leave Griffith. Slipping into the shadows cast by a gigantic tentpalm plant, he waited and watched until the man and the woman came outside. Drugar would have liked very much to follow them, but he knew his own limitations. The clumsy-footed dwarves are not made for stealthy sneaking. And, in the human city of Griffith, he couldn't simply lose himself in a crowd.

He contented himself with eyeing the two carefully as they walked away. Drugar didn't trust them, but he wouldn't have trusted Saint Thillia had she appeared before him. He hated having to depend on a middle man and would much rather have dealt with the elves directly. That was impossible, however. The current Lords of Thillia had made an agreement with the Quindiniars that they would not sell their magical, intelligent weapons to the dwarves or the barbaric SeaKings. In return, the Thillians agreed to purchase a guaranteed number of weapons per season.

Such an arrangement suited the elves. And if elven weapons found their way into the hands of SeaKings and dwarves, it certainly wasn't the fault of the Quindiniars. After all, as Calandra was wont to state testily, how could she be expected to tell a human razzar runner from a legitimate representative of the Lords, of Thillia? All humans looked alike to her. And so did their money.

Just before Roland and Rega vanished from Drugar's sight, the dwarf lifted a black rune-carved stone that hung from a leather thong around his neck. The stone was smooth and rounded, worn down from loving handling, and it was old- older than Drugar's father, who was one of the oldest living inhabitants on Pryan.

Lifting the stone, Drugar held it up in the air so that, from his viewpoint, the stone appeared to cover Roland and Rega. The dwarf moved the rock in a pattern, muttered words accompanied the tracing of the sigil that copied the rune carved into the stone. When he was finished, he slipped the stone reverently back into the folds of his clothing and spoke aloud to the two, who were Founding a corner and would soon be lost to the dwarf's sight.

"I did not sing the rune for you because I have a liking for you-either of you. I put the charm of protection on you so that I may be certain of getting the weapons my people need. When the deal is done, I will break the rune. And Drakar take you both."

Spitting on the ground, Drugar plunged into the jungle, tearing and hacking a path through the thick undergrowth.

## CHAPTER 4

### EQUILAN, LAKE ENTHIAL

CALANDRA QUINDINIAR HAD NO MISCONCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE NATURE OF the two humans with whom she was dealing. She guessed they were smugglers but that was no concern of hers. It was impossible for Calandra to consider any human capable of running a fair and honest business. As far as she was concerned, humans were all smugglers, crooks, and thieves.

It was with some amusement therefore-as much amusement as she ever allowed herself-that Calandra watched Aleatha leave her father's house and walk across the moss yard toward the carriage. Her sister's delicate dress was lifted by the winds rustling among the treetops and billowed around her in airy green waves. Elven fashion at the moment dictated long, cinched-in waists; stiff, high collars; straight skirts. The fashion did not suit Aleatha and, therefore, she ignored fashion. Her dress was cut low to show off her splendid shoulders, the bodice softly gathered to cup and highlight beautiful breasts. Falling in soft folds, the layers of filmy fabric enveloped her like a primrose-stitched cloud, accentuating her graceful movements.

The fashion had been popular in her mother's time. Any other woman-like myself, thought Calandra grimly-wearing that dress would have appeared dowdy and out of current style. Aleatha made current style appear dowdy.

She had arrived at the carriage house. Her back was turned toward Calandra, but the older sister knew what was going on.

Aleatha would be smiling at the human slave who was handing her into the carriage.

Aleatha's smile was perfectly ladylike-eyes cast down as was proper, her face almost hidden by her wide-brimmed, rose-trimmed hat- her sister could never fault her. But Calandra, watching from the upstairs window, was familiar with Aleatha's tricks. Her eyelids might be lowered, but the purple eyes weren't and flashed beneath the long black lashes. The full lips would be parted slightly, the tongue moving slowly against the upper lip to keep it continually moist. The human slave was tall and well muscled from hard labor. His chest was bare in the midcycle heat. He was clad in the tight-fitting leather pants humans favored. Calandra saw his smile flash in return, saw him take an inordinate amount of time helping her sister into the carriage, saw her sister manage to brush against the man's body as she stepped inside. Aleatha's gloved hand even lingered for a moment on the slave's! Then she had the brazen nerve to lean slightly out of the carriage, her hat brim uptilted, and wave at Calandra!

The slave, following Aleatha's gaze, suddenly remembered his duty and hastened to take up his position. The carriage was made of the leaves of the benthan tree, woven to form a round basket open at the front end. The top of the basket was held in the grip of several drivehands attached to a strong rope running from Aleatha's father's house down into the jungle. Prodded from their drowsy, constant lethargy, the drivehands crawled up the rope, pulling the carriage to the house. Allowed to drift back into slumber, the drivehands

would slide down the rope, bringing the carriage to a junction, where Aleatha would transfer to another carriage whose drivehands would carry her to her destination.

The slave, pushing the carriage, started it on its way and Calandra watched her sister-green skirts fluttering in the wind- swoop down into the lush jungle vegetation.

Calandra smiled disdainfully at the slave, who was lounging at his post, gazing admiringly after the carriage. What fools these humans are. They don't even know when they're being teased. Aleatha was wild, but at least her dalliances were with men of her own kind. She flirted with humans because it was enjoyable to watch their brutish reactions. Aleatha, like her older sister, would sooner let the family dog kiss her as she would a human.

Paithan was another story. Settling down to her work, Calandra decided she would send the scullery maid to work in the boltarch shop.

Leaning back in the carriage, enjoying the cool wind blowing against her face as she descended rapidly through the trees, Aleatha foresaw regaling a certain person at Lord Durndrun's with her tale of arousing the human slave's passion. Of course, her story would be told from a slightly different angle.

"I swear to you. My Lord, that his great hand closed over mine until I thought he would crush it, and then the beast had the nerve to press his sweat-covered body up against me!"

"Dreadful!" Lord Someone would say, his pale elven face flushed with indignation ... or was it with the thought of bodies pressing together. He would lean nearer. "What did you do?"

"I ignored him, of course. That's the best way to handle the brutes, besides the lash, that is. But, of course, I couldn't beat him, could I?" -

"No, but I could!" the lord would cry gallantly. "Oh, Thea, you know you tease the slaves to distraction." Aleatha gave a slight start. Where had that disturbing voice come from? An imagined Paithan . . . invading her reverie. Catching hold of her hat that was about to be whisked off her head by the breeze, Aleatha made a mental note to make certain her brother was off playing the fool somewhere else before she began relating her enticing little story. Paithan was a good fellow and wouldn't deliberately ruin his sister's fun, but he was simply too guileless to live-The carriage reached the end of its rope, arriving at the junction. Another human slave-an ugly one, Aleatha didn't bother with him-handed her out.

"Lord Durndrun's," she informed him coolly, and the slave helped her into one of several carriages waiting at the junction, each attached to a rope that headed off into a different part of the jungle. The slave gave the drivehands a prod, they flapped to life, and the carriage sailed off into the gradually darkening shadows, carrying its passenger down deeper into the city of Equilan.

The carriages were for the convenience of the wealthy, who paid a subscription to the city fathers for their use. Those who couldn't afford to subscribe to the carriage system made do with the swinging bridges spanning the jungle. These bridges led from house to house, shop to shop, house to shop, and back again. They had been constructed at the time the early elven settlers founded Equilan, connecting those few houses and businesses that had been built in the trees for defense purposes. As the city grew, so did the bridge system, without any particular order or thought, keeping the houses connected with their neighbors and the heart of the city.

Equilan had flourished and so had its people. Thousands of elves lived in the city and there were nearly as many bridges. Making one's way on foot was extraordinarily confusing, even for those who had lived there all their lives. No one who was any one in elven society walked the bridges, except for possibly a daring foray during darktime. The bridges were, however, an excellent defense against the elves' human neighbors, who had looked-in days long gone by-on the elven treeholdings with covetous eyes.

As time passed, and Equilan grew wealthier and more secure, her human neighbors to the north decided it would be wiser to leave the elves alone and fight each other. Thillia was divided into five kingdoms, each one an enemy of the other four, and the elves lived well by supplying weapons to all sides of the conflict. The elven royal families and those of the middle class who had risen to wealth and power moved higher into the trees. Lenthon Quindiniar's home was located on the highest "hill" [11] in Equilan—a mark of status among his fellow middle class but not among the royalty, who built their homes on the shores of Lake Enthial. No matter that Lenthon could buy and sell most of the homes on the lakeshore, he would never be allowed to live there.

To be honest, Lenthon didn't want to. He was quite content living where he was, with a fine view of the stars and a clear place amid the jungle's vegetation for the launching of his rockets.

Aleatha, however, had made up her mind to dwell by the lake. Nobility would be purchased with her charm and her body and her share of her father's money when he died. But just which duke or earl or baron or prince Aleatha was going to buy hadn't been decided yet. They were all such bores. The task before Aleatha was to shop around, find one less boring than the rest.

The carriage gently set down Aleatha in Lord Durndrun's ornate receiving house. A human slave started to hand her out, but a young lord, arriving at the same time, beat him to the honor. The young lord was married; Aleatha favored him with a sweet, charming smile anyway. The young lord was fascinated and walked off with Aleatha, leaving his wife to be handed down by the slave.

Running through the annotated list of elven royalty she kept in her head, Aleatha recognized the young lord as a near cousin to the queen, with the fourth finest house on the lake. She permitted him to present her to her host and hostess, asked him to give her a tour of the house (she'd been there many times previous), and was blushing enthusiastically about a more intimate tour of the lush and shadowy garden.

Lord Durndrun's house, as were all others on Lake Enthial, was constructed on the top edge of a large moss bowl. The houses of the nobility of elven society stood scattered around the "rim" of the bowl. The dwelling of Her Majesty, the queen, was located at the very farthest end, away from the crowded city of her subjects. The other homes were all built facing the palace, as if they were continually paying homage. In the center of the bowl was the lake, supported on a thick bed of moss, cradled in the arms of gigantic trees. Most lakes in the area were, because of their moss beds, a clear, crystalline green color. Due to a rare species of fish that swam in the lake (a gift to Her Majesty from the father of Lenthon Quindiniar) the water of Lake Enthial was a vibrant, stunning blue and was considered one of the wonders of Equilan.

The view was wasted on Aleatha, who had seen it all before and whose primary goal was to make it her own. She had been introduced to Lord Daidlus before, but had not noticed until now that he was witty and intelligent and moderately handsome. Seated next to the admiring young man on a teakwood bench, Aleatha was just about to tell him her story of the slave when, as in her reverie, a cheerful voice interrupted her.

"Oh, there you are, Thea. I heard you'd come. Is that you, Daidlus? Did you know your wife's searching for you? She doesn't look pleased, either."

Lord Daidlus did not look pleased himself. He glowered at Paithan, who returned the glare with the innocent and slightly anxious expression of one whose only desire is to help a friend.

Aleatha was tempted to hang on to the lord and get rid of Paithan, but she reflected that there was a certain merit in allowing the pot to simmer before bringing it to a boil. Besides, she needed to talk to her brother.

"I'm ashamed of myself, My Lord," Aleatha said, flushing prettily. "I'm keeping you from your family. It was thoughtless and selfish of me, but I was so enjoying your company. . ."

Paithan, crossing his arms, leaned back against the garden wall and watched with interest. Lord Daidlus protested that he could stay with her forever.

"No, no, My Lord," Aleatha said with an air of noble self-sacrifice. "Go to your wife. I insist."

Aleatha extended her hand to be politely kissed. The young lord did so with rather more ardor than society would have considered proper.

"But I do so want to hear the end of your story," said the besotted Daidlus.

"You shall. My Lord," answered Aleatha, with downcast eyelashes through which glinted sparkles of blue-purple. "You shall."

The young lord tore himself away. Paithan sat down on the bench beside his sister, and Aleatha took off her hat and fanned herself with the brim.

"Sorry, Thea. Did I interrupt something?"

"Yes, but it was all for the best. Things were moving too fast."

"He's quite happily married, you know. Got three little ones."  
Aleatha shrugged. The matter didn't interest her.

"Divorce would be a tremendous scandal," Paithan continued, sniffing at a flower he'd stuck in the buttonhole of his long, white linen lawn suit. Loosely made, the coat flowed over white linen pants, gathered at the ankles.

"Father's money would hush it up."

"The queen would have to grant it."

"Father's money would buy it."

"Callie'd be furious."

"No, she wouldn't. She'd be too happy I was finally respectably married. Don't worry about me, Brother, dear. You have worries of your own. Callie was looking for you this afternoon."

"Was she?" Paithan asked, trying to appear unconcerned.

"Yes, and the expression on her face could have launched one of Father's infernal devices."

"Worse luck. Been talking to the guvnor, had she?"

"Yes, I think so. I didn't say much. I didn't want to get her started. I'd be there still. Something about a human priest? I- What in Orn's name was that?"

"Thunder." Paithan glanced up into the thick vegetation through which it was impossible to see the sky.  
"Storm must be coming. Drat. That means they'll cancel the boating."

"Nonsense. It's far too early. Besides, I felt the ground tremble. Didn't you?"

"Maybe it's Callie, stalking me." Paithan removed the flower from his buttonhole and began playfully tearing it up, tossing the petals in his sister's lap.

"I'm so glad you find this amusing, Pait. Wait until she cuts your allowance. What is this about a human priest, anyway?"

Paithan settled himself on the bench, his eyes on the flower he was decapitating, his youthful face unusually serious. "When I came back from that last trip, Thea, I was shocked to see the change in Father. You and Callie don't notice. You're around him all the time. But ... he looked so ... I don't know . . . gray, I guess. And woebegone."

Aleatha sighed. "You caught him in one of his more lucid moments."

"Yes, and those damn rockets of his aren't clearing the treetops, let alone coming close to the stars. He was going on and on about Mother . . . and you know how that is!"

"Yes. I know how that is." Aleatha gathered the flower petals in her lap, unconsciously forming them into a miniature grave.

"I wanted to cheer him up, so I said the first jolly thing that popped into my mind. 'Why not send for a human priest?' I said. They know an awfully lot about the stars, 'cause that's where they think they come from. Claim that the stars are really cities and all that rot. Well"-Paithan appeared modestly pleased with himself-"it perked the old boy right up. I hadn't seen him so excited since the day his rocket flew into the city and blew up the garbage dump."

"It's all very well for you, Pait!" Aleatha irritably scattered her flowers to the wind. "You get to go off on another one of your trips. But Callie and I will have to live with the brute! That lecherous old astrologer of Father's is bad enough without this."

"I'm sorry, Thea. I really didn't think." Paithan sounded and felt truly ashamed. The one bright spark that burned in all of Quindiniars was their love and affection for each other- an affection that, unfortunately, did not extend to the rest of the world.

Reaching out, Paithan took his sister's hand in his and squeezed it. "Besides, no human priest will ever come. I know them, you see and-"

The moss bed rose up suddenly beneath their feet and then settled back down. The bench on which they were sitting shook and shivered, a pronounced rippling effect marred the smooth and placid surface of the lake. A rumbling sound like thunder, which came from below rather than above, accompanied the ground's shudder.

"That wasn't a storm," said Aleatha, looking about in alarm.

Shouts and screams could be heard in the distance.

Paithan rose to his feet, his expression suddenly grave. "I think, Thea, that we had better move back to the house." He gave his hand to his sister. Aleatha moved with calm alacrity, gathering her flowing skirts around her in unruffled haste.

"What do you think it is?"

"I haven't the vaguest idea," Paithan answered, hurrying through the garden. "Ah, Durndrun! What's this? Some new form of party game?"

"I only wish it were!" The lord appeared considerably harried. "It's sent a big crack through the dining room wall and frightened Mother into hysterics."

The rumbling began again, this time stronger. The ground bucked and quivered. Paithan staggered back against a tree. Aleatha, pale but composed, clung to a hanging vine. Lord Durndrun toppled over, and was almost struck by a falling piece of statuary. The quake lasted for as long as a man might draw three deep breaths, then ceased. A strange smell wafted up from the moss-the smell of chill, dank dampness. The smell of darkness. The smell of something that lives in the darkness.

Paithan moved to help the lord to his feet.

"I think," said Durndrun in an undertone meant for Paithan's ears alone, "that we should arm ourselves."

"Yes," agreed Paithan, glancing askance at his sister and keeping his voice low. "I was about to suggest that myself."

Aleatha heard and understood. Fear tingled through her, a rather pleasant sensation. It was certainly adding interest to what she had expected to be an otherwise boring evening.

"If you gentlemen will excuse me," she said, adjusting the brim of her hat to best advantage, "I will go to the house and see if I may be of assistance to the dowager."

"Thank you, Mistress Quindiniar. I would appreciate it. How brave she is," Lord Durndrun added, watching Aleatha walking fearlessly alone toward the house. "Half the other women are shrieking and flinging themselves about and the other half have dropped over in a dead faint. Your sister is a remarkable woman!"

"Yes, isn't she," said Paithan, who saw that his sister was enjoying herself immensely. "What weapons have you got?"

Hastening toward the house, the lord glanced at the young elf running along beside him. "Quindiniar"- Durndrun edged nearer, took him by the arm-"you don't think this has anything to do with those rumors you told us of the other night. You know, the ones about ... er ... giants?"

Paithan appeared slightly shamefaced. "Did I mention giants? By Orn, that was strong wine you were serving that night, Durndrun!"

"Perhaps those rumors aren't rumors, after all," said Durndrun grimly.

Paithan considered the nature of the rumbling sounds, the smell of darkness. He shook his head. "I think we're going to wish we were facing giants, my lord. I'd enjoy a human bedtime story right about now."

The two arrived at the house, where they began going over the catalog of his lordship's armaments. Other male members of the party joined them, shouting and proclaiming and carrying on in an hysterical manner not much better than that of their women, to Paithan's mind. He was regarding them with a mixture of amusement and impatience when he became aware that they were all regarding him and they were extraordinarily serious.

"What do you think we should do?" asked Lord Durndrun.

"I-I-really-" Paithan stammered, looking around at the group of thirty members of the elven nobility in confusion. "I mean, I'm certain you-"

"Come, come, Quindiniar!" snapped Lord Durndrun. "You're the only one of us who's been in the outside world. You're the only one with experience in this sort of thing. We need a leader and you're it."

And it's something happens, you'll have me to blame for it, Paithan thought but didn't say, though a wry smile flitted across his lips.

The rumbling began again, strong enough this time to knock many of the elves to their knees. Screams and wails came from the women and children who had been herded into the house for safety. Paithan could hear crashing and breaking tree limbs in the jungle, the raucous cawing of startled birds.

"Look! Look at that! In the lake!" came a hoarse cry from one of the lords standing on the fringes of the crowd.

All turned and stared. The lake's waters were heaving and boiling and, out of the middle, snaking upward, could be seen the shining scales of an enormous green body. A portion of the body surfaced, then slithered under.

"Ah, I thought so," murmured Paithan.

"A dragon!" cried Lord Durndrun. He clutched at the young elf. "My god, Quindiniar! What do we do?"

"I think," said Paithan with a smile, "that we should all go inside and have what will probably be our last drink."

## CHAPTER 5

### EQUILAN, LAKE ENTHIAL

ALEATHA WAS IMMEDIATELY SORRY SHE'D JOINED THE WOMEN. FEAR IS A contagious disease and the parlor stank of it. The men were probably every bit as frightened as the women but they were maintaining a bold front-if not for themselves, at least for each other. The women were not only able to indulge their terror, they were expected to. Even fear, however, has socially defined limits.

The dowager-Lord Durndrun's mother and reigning mistress of the house since her son was not yet married-had the priority on hysteria. She was the eldest, the highest in status, and it was her house. No one else present, therefore, had the right to be as panic-stricken as the dowager. (A mere duke's wife, who had fainted in a corner, was being ostracized.)

The dowager lay prostrate on a couch, her maid weeping at her side and applying various restoratives-bathing the dowager's temples in lavender water, dabbing tincture of rose on the dowager's ample bosom, which was heaving and fluttering as she sought vainly to catch her breath.

"Oh ... oh ... oh!" she gasped, clutching her heart.

The various wives of the guests hovered about her, wringing their hands, occasionally grasping each other with stifled sobs. Their fear was inspirational to their children, who had previously been mildly curious, but who were now wailing in concert and getting under everyone's feet.

"Oh ... oh ... oh!" wheezed the dowager, turning slightly blue.

"Slap her," suggested Aleatha coolly.

The maid seemed tempted, but the wives managed to emerge from their panic long enough to look shocked. Aleatha, shrugging, turned away and walked toward the tall windows that doubled as doors and opened out onto the spacious porch overlooking the lake. Behind her, the dowager's spasms appeared to be easing. Perhaps she had heard Aleatha's suggestion and seen the twitching hand of her maid.

"There's been no sound in the last few minutes," gasped an earl's wife. "Perhaps it's over."

An uneasy silence met the comment. It wasn't over. Aleatha knew it and every woman in the room knew it. For the moment, it was quiet, but it was a heavy, horrible quiet that made Aleatha long for the dowager's wailing. The women shrank together, the children whimpered.

The rumbling struck again. The house shook alarmingly. Chairs skittered across the floor, small ornaments fell off tables and crashed on impact. Those who could, hung onto something; those who couldn't, stumbled and fell. From her vantage point at the window, Aleatha saw the green, scaly body rise up from the lake.

Fortunately, none of the women in the room behind her noticed the creature. Aleatha bit her lips to keep from crying out. Then it was gone-so swiftly that she wondered if she had seen something real or something bred of her fear.

The rumbling ceased. The men were running toward the house, her brother in the lead. Aleatha flung open the doors and dashed down the broad staircase.

"Paithan! What was it?" She caught hold of the sleeve of his coat.

"A dragon, I'm afraid, Thea," answered her brother.

"What will happen to us?"

Paithan considered. "We'll all die, I should imagine."

"It's not fair!" Aleatha raved, stamping her foot.

"No, I suppose not." Paithan considered this a rather odd view of the desperate situation, but he patted his sister's hand soothingly. "Look, Thea, you're not going to go off like those others in there, are you? Hysteria's not becoming."

Aleatha put her hands to her cheeks, felt her skin flushed and hot. He's right, she thought. I must look a fright. Drawing a deep breath, she forced herself to relax, smoothed her hair, and rearranged the disheveled folds of her dress. The surging blood drained from her cheeks.

"What should we do?" she asked in a steady voice.

"We're going to arm ourselves. Om knows it's hopeless, but at least we can hold the monster off for a short time."

"What about the queen's guards?"

Across the lake, the palace regiment could be seen turning out, the men dashing to their posts.

"They're guarding Her Majesty, Thea. They can't leave the palace. Here's an idea, you take the other women and the children down to the cellar-"

"No! I won't die like a rat in a hole!"

Paithan looked at his sister closely, measuring her courage. "Aleatha, there is something you can do. Someone has to go into the city and alert the army. We can't spare any of the men, and none of the other women here are fit to travel. It'll be dangerous. The fastest way is the carriage and if this beast gets past us-

Aleatha envisioned clearly the dragon's huge head rising up, thrashing about, snapping the cables that held the carriage high above the ground. She pictured the plummeting fall. . . .

She pictured herself locked up in a dark, stuffy cellar with the dowager.

"I'll go." Aleatha gathered up her skirts.

"Wait, Thea! Listen. Don't try to go down into the city proper. You'd get lost. Make for the guard post on the var side. The carriages'll take you partway and then you'll have to walk, but you can see it from the first junction. It's a lookout built in the branches of a karabeth tree. Tell them-"

"Paithan!" Lord Durndrun came running out of the house, railbow and quiver in hand. He pointed. "Who the devil is that walking around down there by the lake? Didn't we bring everyone up here with us?"

"I thought so." Paithan stared, squinting. The sunlight off the water was blinding, it was difficult to see. Yet, sure enough, he could make out a figure moving about down by the water's edge. "Hand me that railbow. I'll go. We could have easily lost someone in the confusion."

"Down . . . down there . . . with the dragon?" The lord stared at Paithan in amazement.

Much as he did everything else in his life, Paithan had volunteered without thinking. But before he could announce that he'd suddenly remembered a previous engagement, Lord Durndrun was pressing the bow in the young elf's hands and murmuring something about a medal of valor. Posthumous, no doubt.

"Paithan!" Aleatha caught hold of him.

The elf took his sister's hand in his, squeezed it, then transferred it to Lord Durndrun's. "Aleatha has offered to go and bring the Shadowguard [12] to our rescue."

"Brave heart!" murmured Lord Durndrun, kissing the hand that was cold as ice. "Brave soul." He gazed at Aleatha in fervent admiration.

"Not braver than those of you staying behind, My Lord. I feel like I'm running away." Aleatha drew a deep breath, gave her brother a cool glance. "Take care of yourself, Pait."

"You, too, Thea,"

Arming himself, Paithan headed down toward the lake at a run.

Aleatha watched him go, a horrible, smothering feeling in her breast—a feeling she had experienced once before, the night her mother died.

"Mistress Aleatha, let me escort you." Lord Durndrun kept hold of her hand.

"No, My Lord. That's nonsense!" Aleatha answered sharply. Her stomach twisted, bowels clenched. Why had Paithan gone? Why had he left her? She wanted only to escape from this horrid place. "You're needed here."

"Aleatha! You are so brave, so beautiful!" Lord Durndrun clasped her close, his arms around her waist, his Hps on her hand. "If, by some miracle, we escape this monster, I want you to marry me!"

Aleatha started, jolted from her fear. Lord Durndrun was one of the highest ranking elves at court, one of the wealthiest elves in Equilan. He had always been polite to her, but cool and withdrawn. Paithan had been kind enough to inform her that the lord thought her "too wild, her behavior improper." Apparently, he had changed his mind.

"My Lord! Please, I must go!" Aleatha struggled, not very hard, to break the grip of the arm around her waist.

"I know. I will not stop your courageous act! Promise me you'll be mine, if we survive."

Aleatha ceased her struggles, shyly lowered the purple eyes. "These are dreadful circumstances, My Lord. We are not ourselves. Should we survive, I could not hold your lordship to such a promise. But"—she drew nearer him, whispering—"I do promise your lordship that I will listen if you want to ask the question again."

Breaking free, Aleatha sank in a low courtesy, turned and ran swiftly, gracefully across the moss lawn toward the carriage house. She knew he was following her with his eyes.

I have him. I will be Lady Durndrun-supplanting the dowager as first handmaiden to the queen.

Aleatha smiled to herself as she sped across the moss, holding her skirts high to avoid tripping. The dowager'd had hysterics over a dragon. Wait until she heard this news! Her only son, nephew of Her Majesty, joined in marriage with Aleatha Quindiniar, wealthy trollop. It would be the scandal of the year.

Now, pray the blessed Mother, we just live through this!

Paithan made his way down across the sloping lawn toward the lake. The ground began to rumble again, and he paused to glance about hastily, searching for any signs of the dragon. But the rolling ceased almost as soon as it had started, and the young elf took off again.

He wondered at himself, wondered at his courage. He was skilled in the use of the railbow, but the puny weapon would hardly help him against a dragon. Orn's blood! What am I doing down here? After some serious consideration, given while he was skulking behind a bush to get a better view, he decided it wasn't courage at all. Nothing more than curiosity. It had always landed his family in trouble.

Whoever the person was wandering down around the lake's edge, he was beginning to puzzle Paithan immensely. He could see now that it was a man and that he didn't belong to their party. He didn't even belong to their race! It was a human-an elderly one, to judge by appearances: an old man with long white hair straggling down his back and a long white beard straggling down his front. He was dressed in long, bedraggled mouse-colored robes. A conical, shabby hat with a broken point teetered uncertainly on his head. And he seemed-most incredibly-to have just stepped out of the lake! Standing on the shoreline, oblivious to the danger, the old man was wringing water out of his beard, peering into the lake, and muttering to himself.

"Someone's slave, probably," said Paithan. "Got muddled and wandered off. Can't think why anyone would keep a slave as old and decrepit as that, though. Hey, there! Old man!" Paithan threw caution to Orn and careened down the hill.

The old man paid no attention. Picking up a long, wooden walking staff that had clearly seen better days, he began poking around the water!

Paithan could almost see the scaly body writhing up from the depths of the blue lake. His chest constricted, his lungs burned. "No! Old man! Father," he shouted, switching to human, which he spoke fluently, using the standard form of human address to any elderly male. "Father! Come away from there! Father!"

"Eh?" The old man turned, peering at Paithan with vague eyes. "Sonny? Is that you, boy?" He dropped the staff and flung wide his arms, the motion sending him staggering. "Come to my breast, Sonny! Come to your papa!"

Paithan tried to halt his own forward momentum in time to catch hold of the old man, toddling precariously on the shore. But the elf slipped in the wet grass, slid to his knees, and the old man, arms swinging wildly, toppled backward into the lake, landing with a splash.

Slavering jaws, lunging out of the water, snapping them both in two . . . Paithan plunged in after the old man, caught hold of him by something-perhaps his beard, perhaps a mouse-colored sleeve-and dragged him, sputtering and blowing, to the shore. "Damn fine way for a son to treat his aged parent!" The old man glared at Paithan. "Knocking me into the lake!"

"I'm not your son. Fa- I mean, sir. And it was an accident." Paithan tugged the old man along, pulling him up the hillside. "Now, we really should get away from here! There's a dragon-"

The old man came to a dead stop. Paithan, caught off balance, almost fell over. He jerked on the thin arm, to get the old man moving again, but it was like trying to budge a wortle tree.

"Not without my hat," said the old man.

"To Orn with your hat!" Paithan ground his teeth. He looked fearfully back into the lake, expecting at any moment to see the water start to boil. "You doddering idiot! There's a drag-" He turned back to the old man, stared, then said in exasperation, "Your hat's on your head!"

"Don't lie to me, Sonny," said the old man peevishly. He leaned down and picked up his staff, and the hat slipped over his eyes. "Struck blind, by god!" he said in awed tones, stretching out groping hands.

"It's your hat!" Paithan leaped forward, grabbed the old man's hat and yanked it off his head. "Hat! Hat!" he cried, waving it in front of the old man's face.

"That's not mine," said the old man, staring at it suspiciously. "You've switched hats on me. Mine was in much better condition-"

"Come on!" cried Paithan, righting back a crazed desire to laugh.

"My staff!" shrieked the old man, planting his feet firmly, refusing to move.

Paithan toyed with the idea of leaving the old man to take root in the moss if he wanted, but the elf couldn't watch a dragon devour anyone-even a human. Running back, Paithan retrieved the staff, stuck it in the old man's hand, and began to pull him toward the house.

The elf feared the old human might have difficulty making it back, for the way was long and uphill. Paithan heard the breath begin to whistle in his own lungs and his legs ached with the strain. But the old man appeared to have incredible stamina; he tottered along gamely, his staff thumping holes in the moss.

"I say, I think something's following us!" cried the old man, suddenly.

"There is?" Paithan whirled around.

"Where?" The old man swung his staff, narrowly missing knocking down Paithan. "I'll get him, by the gods-"

"Stop! It's all right!" The elf caught hold of the wildly swinging staff. "There's nothing there. I thought you said . . . something was following us."

"Well, if there isn't why in the name of all that's holy are you making me run up this confounded hill?"

"Because there's a dragon in the la-"

"The lake!" The old man's beard bristled, his bushy eyebrows stuck out in all directions. "So that's where he is! He dunked me in there deliberately!" The old man raised a clenched hand, shook his fist at the air in the direction of the water. "I'll fix you, you overgrown mud worm! Come out! Come out where I can get a look at you!" Dropping his staff, the old man began rolling up the sleeves of his sodden robes. "I'm ready. Yes, sirree-bob, I'm gonna cast a spell this time that'll knock out your eyeballs!"

"Wait a minute!" Paithan felt the sweat begin to chill on his body. "Are you saying, old man, that this dragon's . . . yours?"

"Mine! Of course, you're mine, aren't you, you slithering excuse for a reptile?"

"You mean, the dragon's under your control?" Paithan began to breathe more easily. "You must be a wizard."

"Must I?" The old man appeared highly startled at the news.

"You have to be a wizard and a powerful one at that to control a dragon."

"Well ... er ... you see. Sonny." The old man began to stroke his beard in some embarrassment. "That's sort of a question between us-the dragon and me."

"What's a question?" Paithan felt his stomach muscles begin to tighten.

"Er-who's in control. Not that I have any doubts, mind you! It's the-uh-dragon who keeps forgetting."

I was right. The old man's insane. I've got a dragon and an insane human on my hands. But what in Mother Peyton's holy name was this old fool doing in the lake?

"Where are you, you elongated toad?" The wizard continued to shout. "Come out! It's no use hiding! I'll find you-"

A shrill scream cut through the tirade.

"Aleatha!" cried Paithan, turning, staring up the hill.

The scream ended in a strangled choke.

"Thea, I'm coming!" The elf broke loose of his momentary paralysis and tore for the house.

"Hey, Sonny!" shouted the old man, glaring after him, arms akimbo. "Where do you think you're going with my hat?"

## CHAPTER 6

### EQUILAN, LAKE ENTHIAL

PAITHAN JOINED A STREAM OF MEN, LED BY LORD DURNDRUN, RUSHING IN THE direction of the cry. Rounding the northern wing of the house, they came to a skidding halt. Aleatha stood immobile on a small mossy knoll. Before her, its huge body between the woman and the carriage house, was the dragon.

He was enormous. His head towered above the trees. His body's full length was lost in the shadowy depths of the jungle. He was wingless, for he lived all of his life in the dark depths of the jungle floor, slithering around the boles of Pryan's gigantic trees. Strong, taloned feet could tear through the thickest vegetation or strike down a man at a blow. His long tail whipped behind him as he moved, cutting swaths through the jungle, leaving trails that were well-known (and immensely feared) by adventurers. His intelligent red eyes were fixed on the woman.

The dragon was not threatening Aleatha; his great jaws had not parted, though the upper and lower fangs could be seen protruding from the front of the mouth. A red tongue flicked in and out between the teeth. The armed men watched, unmoving, uncertain. Aleatha held very still.

The dragon cocked its head, gazing at her.

Paithan shoved his way to the front of the group. Lord Durndrun was stealthily releasing the catch on a railbow. The weapon awoke as Durndrun began raising the stock to his shoulder. The bolt in the rail was screeching, 'Target? Target?'

"The dragon," Durndrun ordered.

"Dragon?" The bolt appeared alarmed, and was inclined to argue, a problem with intelligent weapons. "Please refer to owner's manual, section B, paragraph three. I quote, 'Not to be used against any foe larger than-'"

"Just go for the heart!" - "Which one?"

"What the devil do you think you're doing?" Paithan caught hold of the lord's elbow.

"I can get a good shot at the eyes-"

"Are you insane? You miss, and the dragon'll go for Aleatha!"

The lord was pale, his expression troubled, but he continued to make ready his railbow. "I'm an excellent shot, Paithan. Stand aside."

"I won't!"

"It's the only chance we have! Damn it, man, I don't like this any more than you do, but-"

"Excuse me, Sonny," came an irritated voice from behind. "But you're crumpling my hat!"

Paithan swore. He'd forgotten the old man, who was shoving his way through the crowd of tense, glowering men. "No respect for the elderly! Think we're all doddering old fools, don't you? Why I had a spell once that would have fried your socks off. Can't think of the name offhand. Fire bell? No that's not quite it. I have it-tire sale! No, doesn't sound right, either. I'll come up with it. And you. Sonny!" The old man was highly incensed. "Look what you've done to my hat!"

"Take the damn hat and-"

"Hush!" breathed Durndrun.

The dragon had slowly turned its head and was focusing on them. The red eyes narrowed.

"You!" the dragon snarled in a voice that rocked the foundations of the lord's house.

The old man was attempting to beat some sort of shape back into his battered hat. At the sound of the thundering "You!" he peered around bleary-eyed and eventually caught sight of the gigantic green head rearing upward, level with the treetops.

"Ah ha!" cried the old man, staggering backward. He pointed a shaking, accusing finger. "You overgrown frog! You tried to drown me!"

"Frog!"

The dragon's head shot upward, its front feet dug deep into the moss, shaking the ground. Aleatha stumbled and fell with a scream. Paithan and Lord Durndrun took advantage of the dragon's distraction to run to the woman's aid. Paithan crouched by her side, his arms around her- Lord Durndrun stood above her, his weapon raised. From the house came the wails of the women, certain that this was the end.

The dragon's head dove downward, the wind of its passing ripped the leaves from the trees. Most of the elves hurled themselves flat; a few of the bravest held their ground. Lord Durndrun fired a bolt. Shrieking in protest, it struck the green, iridescent scales, bounced off, landed on the moss, and slithered away in the undergrowth. The dragon, seemingly, didn't notice. His head stopped only a few feet from that of the old man.

"You sorry excuse for a wizard! You're damn right I tried to drown you! But now I've changed my mind. Drowning's too good for you, you moth-eaten relic! After I've dined on elf flesh, beginning with that toothsome blond appetizer over there, I'm going to rip the bones out of your skin one by one, starting with your little finger-"

"Oh, yeah?" shouted the old man. He jammed his hat on his head, threw his staff to the ground, and once again began rolling up his sleeves. "We'll see about that!"

"I'll fire now, while he's not looking," whispered Lord Durndrun. "Paithan, you and Aleatha make a run for it-"

"You're a fool, Durndrun! We can't fight that beast! Wait and see what the old man can do. He told me he controls the dragon!"

"Paithan!" Aleatha dug her nails into his arm. "He's a crazy old human. Listen to his lordship!"

"Shhh!"

The old man's voice was rising in a high-pitched quaver. Closing his eyes, he wiggled his fingers in the dragon's general direction and began to chant, swaying back and forth in time to the rhythm of his words.

The dragon's mouth parted, the wickedly sharp teeth glistened in the twilight, the tongue flicked dangerously.

Aleatha closed her eyes and buried her head in Lord Durndrun's shoulder, jostling the railbow, which squeaked in annoyance. The lord juggled the weapon, clumsily clasped his arm around the woman and held her tightly.

"You speak human! What's he saying, Paithan?"

When young I started seeking, for love and things in dreaming I set out with clouds a'streaming and a hat upon my head. I began with grave intention hoping for divine intervention; nothing could prepare me for the things I learned instead.

At first I looked for battle seeking mail and sword to rattle but they herded us like cattle and we never did see a fight. I stood in fields for hours, among the pikes and flowers; I decided it was time to go and snuck away at night.

I've been roamin' five and twenty, seen war and king and shanty, I've known handsome men aplenty who've yet to kiss a girl. Yes, I've roamed the whole world over, seen men both drunk and sober but I've never seen a man can drink as much as Bonnie Earl.

Paithan gasped, gulped. "I'm-I'm not certain. I suppose it must-er-be magic!" He began looking around on the ground for a large tree branch, anything he could use as a weapon. He didn't think this was the time to tell the lord that the old man was attempting to spellbind a dragon by singing one of Thillia's most popular drinking songs.

I moved in royal places a king took me to 's spaces,

To master courtly graces and to learn of lordly might.

I took the good king's offer, but emptied out his coffer,

And with loaded bags a'weigh with gold I disappeared from sight.

In time I met a lady in a spot all dark and shady, with words I was quite handy and we talked long into night. That eve she let me bed her, her fam'ly said to wed her, so with a price put on my head I left with morning's light.

I've been roamin' five and twenty, seen war and king and shanty. I've known handsome men aplenty who've yet to kiss a girl. Yes, I've roamed the whole world over, seen men both drunk and sober but I've never seen a man can drink as much as Bonnie Earl.

"Blessed Orn!" breathed Lord Durndrun. "It's working!"

Paithan lifted his head, looked up in astonishment. The dragon's snout had begun to bob up and down in time to the music.

The old man continued singing, taking Bonnie Earl through innumerable verses. The elves remained frozen, afraid to move, afraid to break the spell. Aleatha and Lord Durndrun held each other a little closer. The dragon's eyelids drooped, the old man's voice softened. The creature seemed almost asleep when suddenly its eyes flew open, its head reared up.

The elves grabbed their weapons. Lord Durndrun pushed Aleatha behind him. Paithan lifted a tree branch.

"My god, sir!" cried the dragon, staring at the old man. "You're soaked through! What have you been doing?"

The old man looked sheepish. "Well, I-"

"You must change those wet clothes, sir, or you'll catch your death. A warm fire and a hot bath are requisite."

"I've had enough water-"

"If you please, sir. I know what's best." The dragon glanced about. "Who is the master of this fine house?"

Lord Durndrun shot a swift, questioning look at Paithan.

"Go along with it!" the young elf hissed.

"That-that would be me." The lord seemed considerably at a loss, wondering vaguely if etiquette dictated the proper way to introduce oneself to a large and slavering reptile. He decided to keep it short and to the point. "I-I'm Durndrun. L-lord Durndrun."

The red eyes fixed on the stammering knight. "I beg your pardon. My Lord. I apologize for interrupting your jollifications, but I know my duty and it is imperative that my wizard receive immediate attention. He's a frail old man-"

"Who're you calling frail, you fungus-ridden-"

"I trust my wizard is to be a guest in your house. My Lord?"

"Guest?" Lord Durndrun blinked, dazed. "Guest? Why, uh-"

"Of course, he's a guest!" snapped Paithan in a furious undertone.

"Oh, yes. I see your point," murmured the lord. He bowed. "I will be most honored to entertain-uh- What's his name?" he muttered aside.

"Blessed if I know!"

"Find out!"

Paithan sidled over to the old man. "Thank you for rescuing us-"

"Did you hear what he called me?" demanded the old man. 'Frail! I'll frail him! I'll-"

"Sir! Please listen. Lord Durndrun, the gentleman standing over there, would like to invite you to stay with him at his house. If we knew your name-

"Can't possibly."

Paithan was confused. "Can't possibly what?"

"Can't possibly stay with that fellow. I've made prior commitments."

"What is the delay?" demanded the dragon.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" Paithan cast an uneasy glance back at the beast. "I'm afraid I don't understand and, you see, we don't want to upset the-

"Expected," stated the old man. "I'm expected somewhere else. Chap's house. I promised. And a wizard never breaks his word. Does terrible things to your nose."

"Perhaps you could tell me where. It's your dragon, you see. He seems-

"Overprotective? A butler in a grade-B movie? Someone's Jewish mother? You got it," said the old man in gloomy tones. "Always happens when he's spellbound. Drives me crazy. I like him better the other way, but he has an irritating habit of eating people if I don't keep a leash on him."

"Sir!" cried Paithan desperately, seeing the dragon's eyes begin to glow red. "Where are you staying?"

"There, there, Sonny. Don't work yourself into a lather. You young people, always in a rush. Why didn't you just ask? Quindiniar. Some fellow calls himself Lenthon Quindiniar. He sent for me," added the old man with a lofty air. "Wanted-a human priest. Actually I'm not a priest. I'm a wizard. Priests were all out fund-raising when the message came through-

"Orn's ears!" murmured Paithan. He had the strangest feeling that he was wandering about in a dream. It's so, it was high time Calandra threw a glass of water in his face. He turned back to Lord Durndrun. "I'm-I'm sorry, My Lord. But the-er- gentleman has already made a prior commitment. He's going to be staying with . . . my father."

Aleatha began to laugh. Lord Durndrun patted her shoulder anxiously, for there was an hysterical edge to her laughter, but she only threw back her head and laughed louder.

The dragon decided apparently that the laughter pertained to him. The red eyes narrowed alarmingly.

"Thea! Stop it!" ordered Paithan. "Pull yourself together! We're not out of danger! I don't trust either of 'em. And I'm not sure who's crazier-the old man or his dragon!"

Aleatha wiped her streaming eyes. "Poor Callie!" She giggled. "Poor Callie!"

"I beg to remind you, gentlemen, that my wizard is standing around in wet clothing!" thundered the dragon. "He will likely take a chill and he is subject to a weakness in the lungs."

"There's not a thing wrong with my lungs-

"If you'll provide me with directions," continued the dragon, looking martyred, "I will go on ahead and draw a hot bath."

"No!" Paithan shouted. "That is-" He tried to think, but his brain was having a difficult time adjusting to the situation. Desperately, he turned to the old man. "We live on a hill overlooking the city. The sight of a dragon, coming on our people suddenly like this! ... I don't mean to be rude, but couldn't you tell him to ... well . . ."

"Go stick his head in the pantry?" The old man sighed. "It's worth a try. Here, you! Dragon."

"Sir."

"I can draw my own bath. And I never catch cold! Besides, you can't go galumping around the elves' city in that scaly carcass of yours. Scare the bejeebers outta them."

"Bejeebers, sir?" The dragon glared, tilted his head slightly.

"Never mind! Just"-the old man waved a gnarled hand- "take yourself off somewhere until I call for you."

"Very good, sir," the dragon answered in hurt tones. "If that is what you truly want."

"I do. I do. Now, go along."

"I have only your best interests at heart, sir."

"Yes, yes. I know."

"You mean a great deal to me, sir." The dragon began to move ponderously off into the jungle. Pausing, he swung his gigantic head around to face Paithan. "You will see to it, sir, that my wizard puts on his overshoes before going out in the damp?"

Paithan nodded, tongue-tied.

"And that he bundles up well and winds his scarf around his neck and keeps his hat pulled low over his ears? And that he has his warming drink first thing on awakening? My wizard, you see, suffers from irregularity-"

Paithan stiff-armed the old man, who was howling imprecations and making a run for the dragon. "My family and I will take good care of him. He is, after all, our honored guest."

Aleatha had buried her face in a handkerchief. It was difficult to tell if she was laughing or sobbing.

"Thank you, sir," said the dragon gravely. "I leave my wizard in your hands. Mind you take good care of him, or you won't enjoy the consequences."

The dragon's great forefeet dug downward into the moss, sending it rolling, and slowly slithered into the hole it had created. They could hear, from far below, the rending and snapping of huge tree limbs and, finally, a thud. The rumbling continued for several more moments, then all was still and silent. Hesitantly, tentatively, the birds began to chirp.

"Are we safe from him if he's down there?" Paithan asked the old man anxiously. "He isn't likely to break loose from the spell and come looking for trouble, is he?"

"No, no. No need to worry, Sonny. I'm a powerful wizard. Powerful! Why I had a spell once that..."

"Did you? How interesting. If you'll just come along with me, now, sir." Paithan steered the old man to the carriage house. The elf thought it best to leave this place as soon as possible. Besides, it seemed likely that the party was over. But, he had to admit, it'd been one of Durndrun's best. Sure to be talked about the rest of the social season.

The lord himself moved over to Aleatha, who was dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief. He extended his arm.

"May I escort you to the carriage?"

"If you like. My Lord," answered Aleatha, a pretty flush mantling her cheeks, sliding her fingers through the crook of his elbow.

"What would be a convenient time for me to call?" asked Durndrun in an undertone.

"Call, My Lord?"

"On your father," said the lord gravely. "I have something to ask him." He laid his hand over hers, pulled her close. "Something that concerns his daughter."

Aleatha glanced out of the corner of her eye back at the house. The dowager was standing in the window, watching them. The old lady had looked more pleased to see the dragon. Aleatha lowered her eyes, smiled coyly.

"Any time, My Lord. My father is always home and would be very honored to see you."

Paithan was assisting the old man into the carriage.

"I'm afraid I still don't know your name, sir," said the elf, taking a seat next to the wizard.

"You don't?" the old man asked, looking alarmed.

"No, sir. You haven't told me."

"Drat." The wizard stroked his beard. "I was rather hoping you would. You're sure you don't?"

"Yes, sir." Paithan glanced back uneasily, wishing his sister would hurry up. She and Lord Durndrun were, however, taking their time.

"Ah, well. Let's see." The old man muttered to himself. "Fiz-No, I can't use that. Furball. Doesn't seem quite dignified enough. I have it!" he shouted, smiting Paithan on the arm. "Zifnab!"

"Bless you!"

"No, no! My name! Zifnab! What's the matter, Sonny?" The old man glared, eyebrows bristling. "Something wrong with it?"

"Why, er, certainly not! It's ... uh ... a nice name. Really . . . nice. Oh, here you are, Thea!"

"Thank you, My Lord," she said, allowing Durndrun to hand her into the carriage. Taking her seat behind Paithan and the old man, she favored the knight with a smile.

"I would escort you to your home, my friends, but I fear I must go and look for the slaves. It seems that the cowardly wretches took off at the sight of the dragon. May dreams light your darktime. My respects to your father and your sister."

Lord Durndrun woke the drivehands, prodding them himself, and-with his own hands-gave the carriage a shove that started it on its way. Aleatha, glancing back, saw him standing, staring after her with a goggle-eyed gaze. She settled herself more comfortably in the carriage, smoothed out the folds of her dress.

"It looks as if you've done well for yourself, Thea," said Paithan, grinning, leaning over the seat to give his sister an affectionate jab in the ribs.

Aleatha reached up to arrange her disheveled hair. "Drat, I've left my hat behind. Ah, well. He can buy me a new one."

"When's the wedding?"

"As soon as possib-"

A snore interrupted her. Pursing her lips, she glanced in some disgust at the old man, who had fallen fast asleep, his head lolling against Paithan's shoulder.

"Before the dowager has time to change her son's mind, eh?" The elf winked.

Aleatha arched her eyebrows. "She'll try, no doubt, but she won't succeed. My wedding will be-"

"Wedding?" Zifnab woke up with a violent start. "Wedding, did you say? Oh, no, my dear. I'm afraid that won't be possible. No time, you see."

"And why not, old one?" Aleatha asked, teasing, amusing herself. "Why won't there be time for a wedding?"

"Because, children," said the wizard and his tone suddenly changed, darkened, became sadly gentle, "I've come to announce the end of the world."

## CHAPTER 7

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

"DEATH!" SAID THE OLD MAN, SHAKING HIS HEAD. "DOOM AND-ER-

whatever comes after. Can't quite think . . ."

"Destruction?" suggested Paithan.

Zifnab gave him a grateful look. "Yes, destruction. Doom and destruction. Shocking! Shocking!" Reaching out a gnarled hand, the old man gripped Lenthian Quindiniar by the arm. "And you, sir, will be the one who leads his people forth!"

"I-I will?" said Lenthian, with a nervous glance at Calandra, positive she wouldn't let him. "Where shall I lead them?"

"Forth!" said Zifnab, gazing hungrily at a baked chicken. "Do you mind? Just a tad? Dabbling in the arcane, you know. Whets the appetite-"

Calandra sniffed, and said nothing.

"Callie, really." Paithan winked at his irate sister. "This man's our honored guest. Here, sir, allow me to pass it to you. Anything else? Some tohahs?"

"No, thank you-"

"Yes!" came a voice that was like the rumble of thunder stalking the ground.

The others at the table appeared alarmed. Zifnab cringed.

"You must eat your vegetables, sir." The voice seemed to rise up from the floor. "Think of your colon!"

A scream and piteous wailing emanated from the kitchen.

"There's the maid. Hysterics again," said Paithan, tossing aside his lapcloth and rising to his feet. He intended to escape before his sister figured out what was going on. "I'll just go-"

"Who said that?" Calandra grabbed his arm.

"-have a look, if you'd let loose-"

"Don't get so worked up, Callie," said Aleatha languidly. "It's only thunder."

"My colon's none of your damn business!" The old man shouted down at the floor. "I can't abide vegetables-"

"If it was only thunder"-Calandra's voice was heavily ironic- "then the wretch is discussing his colon with his shoes. He's a lunatic. Paithan, throw him out."

Lenthon shot a pleading glance at his son. Paithan looked sidelong at Aleatha, who shrugged and shook her head. The young elf picked up his lapcloth and subsided back into his chair.

"He's not crazy, Cal. He's talking to ... uh ... his dragon. And we can't throw him out, because the dragon wouldn't take it at all well."

"His dragon." Calandra pursed her lips, her small eyes narrowed. The entire family, as well as the visiting astrologer, who was seated at the far end of the table, knew this expression, known privately to younger brother and sister as "pinch-face." Calandra could be terrible, when she was in this mood.

Paithan kept his gaze on his plate, gathering together a small mound of food with his fork and punching a hole in it. Aleatha stared at her own reflection in the polished surface of the porcelain teapot, tilting her head slightly, admiring the sunlight on her fair hair. Lenthon attempted to disappear by ducking his head behind a vase of flowers. The astrologer comforted himself with a third helping of tohahs.

"That beast that terrorized Lord Durndrun's?" Calandra's gaze swept the table. "Do you mean to tell me you've brought it here? To my house?" Ice from her tone seemed to rime her face with white, much as the magical ice rimmed the frosted wineglasses.

Paithan nudged his younger sister beneath the table with his foot, caught her eye. "I'll be leaving this soon, back on the road," he muttered beneath his breath.

"Soon I'll be mistress of my own house," Aleatha returned softly.

"Stop that whispering, you two. We'll all be murdered in our beds," cried Calandra, her fury mounting. The warmer her anger, the colder her tone. "I hope then, Paithan, you'll be pleased with yourself! And you, Thea, I've overheard you talking this nonsense about getting married . . ."

Calandra deliberately left the sentence unfinished.

No one moved, except the astrologer (shoveling buttered tohah into his mouth) and the old man. Apparently having no idea he was a bone of contention, he was calmly dismembering a baked chicken. No one spoke. They could hear, quite clearly, the musical chink of a mechanical petal "unfolding" the hour.

The silence grew uncomfortable. Paithan saw his father, hunched miserably in his chair, and thought again how feeble and gray he looked. Poor old man, he's got nothing else but his wacky delusions. Let him have 'em, after all. What harm is it? He decided to risk his sister's wrath.

"Uh, Zifnab, where did you say father was leading . . . er ... his people?"

Calandra glared at him, but, as Paithan had hoped, his father perked up. "Yes, where?" Lenthon asked shyly, blushing.

The old man raised a chicken leg toward heaven.

"The roof?" Lenthon was somewhat confused.

The old man raised the chicken leg higher.

"Heaven? The stars?"

Zifnab nodded, momentarily unable to speak. Bits of chicken dribbled down his beard. •

"My rockets! I knew it! Did you hear that, Elixnoir?" Lenthon turned to the elven astrologer, who had left off eating and was glowering at the human.

"My dear Lenthon, please consider this rationally. Your rockets are quite marvelous and we're making considerable progress in sending them above treetop level but to talk of them carrying people to the stars! Let me explain. Here is a model of our world according to the legends handed down to us by the ancients and confirmed by our own observations. Hand me that pricklepear. Now, this"-he held up the pricklepear-"is Pryan and this is our sun."

Elixnoir glanced about, momentarily at a loss for a sun.

"One sun," said Paithan, picking up a kumquat.

"Thank you," said the astrologer. "Would you mind-I'm running out of hands."

"Not at all." Paithan was enjoying himself hugely. He didn't dare look at Aleatha, or he knew he'd break out laughing. Acting on Elixnoir's instructions, he gravely positioned the kumquat a short distance from the pricklepear.

"Now this"-the astrologer lifted a sugar cube. Holding it a long distance from the kumquat, he began to rotate it around the pricklepear-"represents one of the stars. Just look at how far it is from our world! You can imagine what an enormous amount of distance you would have to travel ..."

"At least seven kumquats," murmured Paithan to his sister.

"He was quick enough to believe in Father when it meant a free meal," Aleatha returned coolly.

"Lenthon!" The astrologer looked severe, pointed at Zifnab. "This man is a humbug! I-"

"Who are you calling humbug?"

The dragon's voice shook the house. Wine sloshed from glasses, spilling over the lace tablecloth- Small, fragile items slid from end tables and tumbled to the floor. From the study came a thud, a bookcase toppling. Aleatha glanced out a window, saw a girl running, shrieking, from the kitchen.

"I don't believe you'll have to worry about the scullery maid any longer, Cal."

"This is intolerable." Calandra rose to her feet. The frost that rimed her nose had spread across her face, freezing the features and freezing the blood of those who saw her. Her thin, spare body seemed all sharp angles and every angle liable to hurt anyone who got near her. Lenthon cowered visibly. Paithan, lips twitching, concentrated on folding his lapcloth into a cocked hat. Aleatha sighed and drummed her nails on the table.

"Father," spoke Calandra in awful tones, "when dinner is concluded I want that old man and his ... his ..."

"Careful, Cal," suggested Paithan, not looking up. "You'll have the house down around our ears-"

"I want them out of my house!" Calandra's hands gripped the back of her chair, the knuckles white. Her body shook with the chill wind of her ire, the only chill wind that blew in the tropical land. "Old man!" Her voice rose shrilly. "Do you hear me?"

"Eh?" Zifnab glanced around. Seeing his hostess, he smiled at her benignly and shook his head. "No, thank you, my dear. Couldn't possibly eat another bite. What's for dessert?"

Paithan gave a half-giggle, smothered the other half in his lapcloth.

Calandra turned, and stormed from the room, her skirts crackling about her ankles.

"Now, Cal," Paithan called in conciliatory tones. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to laugh-"

A door slammed.

"Actually, you know, Lenthon, old fellow," said Zifnab, gesturing with the chicken leg, which he had picked clean, "we won't be using your rockets at all. No, they're not nearly big enough. We'll have a lot of people to transport, you see, and that'll take a large vessel. Very large." He tapped himself thoughtfully on the nose with the bone. "And, as what's-his-name with the collar says, it's a long way to the stars."

"If you will excuse me, Quindiniar," said the elven astrologer, rising to his feet, his eyes flashing fire. "I will be taking my leave, as well."

"-especially since it looks as if dessert's canceled," said Aleatha, her voice pitched so that the astrologer would be certain to hear. He did; his collar tips quivered, his nose achieved a seemingly impossible angle.

"But don't worry," continued Zifnab, placidly ignoring the commotion around him. "We'll have a ship-a big sucker. It'll land right smack-dab in the backyard and it'll have a man to fly ft. Young man. Owns a dog. Very quiet-not the dog, the man. Something funny about his hands, though. Always keeps them bandaged. That's the reason why we have to continue firing off the rockets, you see. Most important, your rockets."

"They are?" Lenthon was still confused.

"I'm leaving!" stated the astrologer.

"Promises, promises." Paithan sighed, sipped at his wine.

"Yes, of course, rockets are important. Otherwise how's he going to find us?" demanded the old man.

"He who?" inquired Paithan.

"The he who has the ship. Pay attention!" snapped Zifnab testily.

"Oh, that he who." Paithan leaned over to his sister. "He owns a dog," he said confidentially.

"You see, Lenthon-may I call you Lenthon?" inquired the old man politely. "You see, Lenthon, we need a big ship because your wife will want to see all the children again. Been a long time, you know. And they've grown so much."

"What?" Lenthon's eyes flared open, his cheeks paled. He clasped a trembling hand over his heart. "What did you say? My wife!"

"Blasphemy!" cried the astrologer.

The soft whir of the fans and the slight rustling of the feathery blades were the room's only sounds. Paithan had set his lapcloth on his plate and was staring down at it, frowning.

"For once I agree with that fool." Aleatha rose to her feet and glided over to stand behind her father's chair, her hands on his shoulders.

"Papa," she said, a tenderness in her voice that no one else in the family ever heard, "it's been a tiring day. Don't you think you should go to bed?"

"No, my dear. I'm not the least bit tired." Lenthana had not taken his eyes from the old man. "Please, sir, what did you say about my wife?"

Zifnab didn't appear to hear him. During the ensuing quiet, the old man's head had slumped forward, his bearded chin rested on his breast, his eyes dosed. He gave a muffled snore.

Lenthana reached out his hand. "Zifnab-"

"Papa, please!" Aleatha dosed her soft fingers over her father's blacked and bum-scarred hand. "Our guest is exhausted. Paithan, call for the servants to help the wizard to his room."

Brother and sister exchanged glances, both having the same idea. With any luck we can smuggle him out of the house tonight. Maybe feed him to his own dragon. Then, in the morning, when he's gone, we'll be able to convince Father that he was nothing but an insane old human.

"Sir ..." said Lenthana, shaking off his daughter's hand and catching hold of the old man's. "Zifnab!"

The old man jerked awake. "Who?" he demanded, glancing around bleary-eyed. "Where?"

"Papa!"

"Hush, my dear. Go run along and play, there's a good girl. Papa's busy, right now. Now, sir, you were talking about my wife-"

Aleatha looked pleadingly at Paithan. Her brother could only shrug. Biting her lip, fighting back tears, Aleatha gave her father's shoulder a gentle pat, then fled from the room. Once out of sight in the drawing room, she pressed her hand over her mouth, sobbing. . . .

. . . The child sat outside the door to her mother's bedchamber. The little girl was alone; she'd been alone for the last three days and she was growing more and more frightened. Paithan'd been sent away to stay with relatives.

"The boy is too rambunctious," Aleatha had heard someone say. "The house must be kept quiet." And so Paithan had gone.

Now there was no one for her to talk to, no one to pay any attention to her. She wanted her mother-the beautiful mother, who played with her and sang to her-but they wouldn't let her go inside her mother's room. Strange people filled the house- healers with their baskets of funny-smelling plants, astrologers who stood staring out the windows into the sky.

The house was quiet, so dreadfully quiet. The servants wept while they worked, wiping their eyes on the tips of their aprons. One of them, seeing Aleatha sitting in the hallway, said that someone should really be doing something about the child, but no one ever did.

Whenever the door to her mother's room opened, Aleatha jumped to her feet and hied to go inside, but whoever was coming out-generally a healer or his assistant-would shoo the girl back.

"But I want to see Mama!"

"Your mama is very sick. She must stay quiet. You don't want to worry her, do you?"

"I wouldn't worry her." Aleatha knew she wouldn't. She could be quiet. She'd been quiet for three days. Her mother must miss her terribly. Who was combing out Mama's lovely flaxen hair? That was Aleatha's special task, one she performed every morning. She was careful not to tug on the tangles, but unraveled them gently, using the tortoiseshell comb with the ivory rosebuds that had been Mama's wedding present.

But the door remained shut and always locked. Try as she might, Aleatha couldn't get inside.

And then one darktime the door opened, and it didn't shut again. Aleatha knew, now, she could go inside but now she was afraid.

"Papa?" She questioned the man standing in the door, not recognizing him.

Lenthán didn't look at her. He wasn't looking at anything. His eyes were dull, his cheeks sagged, his step faltered. Suddenly, with a violent sob, he crumpled to the floor, and lay still and unmoving. Healers, hurrying out the door, lifted him in their arms and carried him down the hall to his own bedchamber.

Aleatha pressed back against the wall.

"Mama!" she whimpered. "I want Mama!"

Callie stepped out into the hall. She was the first to notice the child.

"Mama's gone, Thea," Calandra said. She was pale, but composed. Her eyes were dry. "We're alone. . . ."

Alone. Alone. No, not again. Not ever. Aleatha glanced frantically around the empty room in which she was standing, hurried back into the dining room, but no one was there.

"Paithan!" she cried, running up the stairs. "Calandra!" Light from her sister's study streamed out beneath the door.

Aleatha made a dart for it. The door opened, and Paithan stepped out. His usually cheerful face was grim. Seeing Aleatha, he smiled ruefully.

"I ... I was looking for you, Pait." Aleatha felt calmer. She put her chilly hands to her burning cheeks to cool them, bring back the becoming pallor. "Bad time?"

"Yeah, pretty bad." Paithan smiled wanly.

"Come take a walk with me. Through the garden."

"Sorry, Thea. I've got to pack. Cal's sending me off tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Aleatha frowned, displeased. "But, you can't! Lord Durndrun's coming to talk to Papa and then there'll be the engagement parties and you simply have to be here-"

"Can't be helped, Thea." Paithan leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Business's business, you know." He started off down the hall, heading for his room.

"Oh," he added, turning back. "A word to the wise. Don't go in there now." He nodded his head in the direction of Calandra's study.

Aleatha withdrew her hand slowly from the door handle. Hidden beneath the silky folds of her gown, the fingers clenched.

"Sweet somber time, Thea," said Paithan. He entered his room and shut the door.

An explosion, coming from the back of the house, set the windows rattling. Aleatha looked out, saw her father and the old man in the garden, gleefully setting off rockets. She could hear, from behind the closed door of her sister's study, the rustle of Cal's skirts, the tap, tap of her high-heeled, tight-laced shoes. Her sister was pacing. A bad sign. No, as Paithan said, it would not do to interrupt Calandra's thoughts.

Moving over to the window, Aleatha saw the human slave, lounging at his post near the carriage house, enjoying the rocket bursts. As she watched, she saw him stretch his arms above his head, yawning. Muscles rippled across his bare back. He began to whistle, a barbaric habit among humans. No one would use the carriage this late into shadow hour. He was due to go off-duty soon, when the storm began.

Aleatha hurried down the hall to her own room. Stepping inside, she glanced into her mirror, smoothing and arranging the luxuriant hair. Catching up a shawl, she draped it over her shoulders and, smiling once again, lightly glided down the stairs.

Paithan started on his journey early the following mistymorne. He was setting off alone, planning to join up with the baggage train on the outskirts of Equilan. Calandra was up to see him away. Arms folded tightly across her chest, she regarded him with a stern, cold, and forbidding air. Her humor had not improved during the night. The two were alone. If Aleatha was ever up at this time of day, it was only because she hadn't yet been to bed.

"Now, mind, Paithan. Keep an eye on the slaves when you cross the border. You know those beasts will run the moment they get a whiff of their own kind. I expect we'll lose a few; can't be helped. But keep our losses to the minimum. Follow the back routes and stay away from civilized lands if possible. They'll be less likely to run if there's no city within easy reach."

"Sure, Callie." Paithan, having made numerous trips to Thillia, knew more about the matter than his sister. She gave him this same speech every time he departed, until it had become a ritual between them. The easygoing elf listened and smiled and nodded, knowing that giving these instructions eased his sister's mind and made her feel that she retained some control over this end of the business.

"Keep sharp watch on this Roland character. I don't trust him."

"You don't trust any humans, Cal."

"At least I knew our other dealers were dishonest. I knew how they'd try to cheat us. I don't know this Roland and his wife. I'd have preferred doing business with our regular customers but these two came in with the highest bid. Make certain you get the cash before you turn over one single blade, Pait, and check to see that the money's real and not counterfeit."

"Yes, Cal." Paithan relaxed, and leaned on a fence post. This would go on for some time. He could have told his sister that most humans were honest to the point of imbecility, but he knew she'd never believe him.

"Convert the cash into raw materials as soon as you can. You've got the list of what we need, don't lose it. And make certain the bladewood is good quality, not like that stuff Quintin brought in. We had to throw three-fifths of it out."

"Have I ever brought you a bad shipment, Cal?" Paithan smiled at his sister.

"No. Just don't start," Calandra felt imaginary strands of hair coming loose from their tight coil. She smoothed them back into place, giving the hair pins a vicious jab. "Everything's going wrong these days. It's

bad enough that I have Father on my hands, now I've got some insane old human, too! To say nothing of Aleatha and this travesty of a wedding-

Paithan reached out, put his hands on his older sister's bony shoulders. "Let Thea do what she wants, Cal. Durndrun's a nice enough chap. At least he's not after her for her money-

"Humpf!" Calandra sniffed, twitching away from her brother's touch.

"Let her marry the fellow, Cal-

"Let her!" Calandra exploded. "I'll have little enough to say about it, you can be sure of that! Oh, it's all very well for you to stand there and grin, Paithan Quindiniar, but you won't be here to face the scandal. This marriage will be the talk of the season. I hear the dowager's taken to her bed over the news. I've no doubt she'll drag in the queen. And I'll be the one to deal with it. Father, of course, is less than useless."

"What's that, my dear?" came a mild voice behind them.

Lenthon Quindiniar stood in the doorway, the old man beside him.

"I said you'll be less than useless in dealing with Aleatha and this insane notion of hers-marrying Lord Durndrun," Calandra snapped, in no mood to humor her parent.

"But why shouldn't they get married? If they love each other-

"Love! Thea?" Paithan burst out laughing. Noting the confused look on his father's face and the scowl on his sister's, the young elf decided it was high time to hit the bridges. "I've got to run. Quintin'll think I've fallen through the moss or been eaten by a dragon." Leaning over, the elf kissed his sister on her cold and withered cheek. "You will let Thea have her way in this, won't you?"

"I don't see that I've much choice. She's been having her way in everything since Mother died. Remember what I've told you and have a safe trip." Calandra pursed her lips, pecked Paithan's chin. The kiss was nearly as sharp as a bird's beak, and he had to restrain himself from rubbing his skin.

"Father, good-bye." The elf shook hands. "Good luck with the rockets."

Lenthon brightened visibly. "Did you see the ones we set off last night? Brilliant bursts of fire above the treetops. I attained real altitude. I'll bet people could see the blasts all the way to Thillia."

"I'm sure they could, sir," agreed Paithan. He turned to the old man. "Zifnab-

"Where?" The old man whipped about.

Paithan cleared his throat, kept a straight face. "No, no, sir. I mean you. Your name." The elf held out his hand. "Remember? Zifnab?"

"Ah, pleased to meet you, Zifnab," said the old man, shaking hands. "You know, though, that name sure sounds familiar. Are we related?"

Calandra gave him a shove with her hand. "You better get going, Pait."

"Tell Thea good-bye for me!" Paithan said.

His sister snorted, shook her head, her face grim.

"Have a good trip, Son," said Lenthon in a wistful tone. "You know, sometimes I think maybe I should go out on the road. I think I might enjoy it. . . ."

Seeing Calandra's eyes narrow, Paithan struck in hastily, "You let me handle the travel for you. Father. You've got to stay here and work on your rockets. Leading the people forth, and all that."

"Yes, you're right," said Lenthon with an air of self-importance. "I had better get started working on that, right now. Are you coming, Zifnab?"

"What? Oh, you talking to me? Yes, yes, my dear fellow. Be along in a jiffy. You might want to increase the amount of sinktree ash. I think we'll achieve greater lift."

"Yes, of course! Why didn't I think of that!" Lenthon beamed, waved vaguely at his son, and hurried into the house.

"Probably won't have any eyebrows left," muttered the old man. "But we'll achieve greater lift. Well, you're off, are you?"

"Yes, sir." Paithan grinned, and whispered confidentially, "Mind you don't let any of that death, doom, and destruction start without me."

"I won't." The old man gazed at him with eyes that were suddenly, unnervingly, shrewd and cunning. He jabbed a gnarled finger in Paithan's chest. "Doom will come back with you!"

## CHAPTER 8

### THE

### NEXUS

HAPLO WALKED SLOWLY AROUND THE SHIP, INSPECTING IT CAREFULLY TO MAKE certain all was in readiness for his flight. He did not, as had the original builders and masters of the dragonship, inspect the guide ropes and the rigging, the cables that controlled the gigantic wings. He looked intently at the wooden hull, but he wasn't checking the caulking. He ran his hands over the skin on the wings, but he wasn't searching for rips or tears. He studied, instead, strange and elaborate symbols that had been carved, burned, stitched, and painted on the wings and the outside of the ship.

Every conceivable inch was covered with the fantastic designs-whorls and spirals; straight lines and curved; dots and dashes; zigzags, circles, and squares. Passing his hand over the sigla, the Patryn murmured to himself, reciting the runes. The sigla would not only protect his ship, the sigla would fly it.

The elves who had built the vessel-named Dragon Wing in honor of Haplo's journey to the world of Arianus-would not have recognized their handiwork. Haplo's own ship had been destroyed on his previous entry through Death's Gate. He had commandeered the elven ship on Arianus. Due to pursuit by an ancient foe, he had been forced to leave Arianus in haste and had inscribed only those runes absolutely necessary to his survival (and that of his young passenger) through Death's Gate.

Once safely in the Nexus, however, the Patryn had been able to expend both time and magic on modifying the vessel to his own specifications.

The ship, designed by the elves of the Tribus Empire, had originally utilized elven magic combined with mechanics. Being extraordinarily strong in his own magic, the Patryn did away completely with the mechanics. Haplo cleared the galley of the confused tangle of rigging and the harnesses worn by the slaves who operated the wings. He left the wings themselves outspread, and embroidered and painted runes on the dragonskin to provide lift, stability, speed, and protection. Runes strengthened the wooden hull; no force existed that was strong enough to crush it or stave it in. Sigla etched into the glass windows of the bridge prevented the glass from cracking while, at the same time, permitting an unobstructed view of the world beyond.

Haplo moved inside through the aft hatch, walked the ship's passageways until he came to the bridge. Here, he gazed about in satisfaction, sensing the full power of the runes come to a focus, converge at this point.

He had junked all the elaborate machines devised by the elves to aid in navigation and steering. The bridge, located in the dragon's "breast," was now a large, spacious chamber, empty except for a comfortable chair and a round, obsidian globe resting on the deck.

Haplo walked over to the globe, crouched down to inspect it critically. He was careful not to touch it. The runes carved into the obsidian's surface were so extremely sensitive that even a whisper of breath across them might activate the magic and launch the vessel prematurely.

The Patryn studied the sigla, going over the magic in his mind. The flight, navigation, and protection spells were complex. It took him hours to run through the entire recitation, and he was stiff and sore from lack of movement at the conclusion, but he was satisfied. He had not found a single flaw.

Haplo stood up, grunting, and flexed his aching muscles. Seating himself in the chair, he looked out upon the city he would soon be leaving. A tongue swiped wetly across his hand.

"What is it, boy?" Haplo glanced down at a nondescript, gangly black dog with white markings. "Think I forgot you?"

The dog grinned and wagged its tail. Bored, it had fallen asleep during the inspection of the steering stone and was pleased to have its master pay attention to it again. White eyebrows, slanting above clear brown eyes, gave the animal an unusually intelligent expression. Haplo stroked the dog's silky ears, gazed unseeing out at the world spread before him. . . .

.. . The Lord of the Nexus walked the streets of his world—a world built for him by his enemies, precious to him because of that very fact. Every finely chiseled marble pillar, every towering granite spire, every graceful minaret or sleek temple dome was a monument to the Sartan, a monument to irony. The lord was fond of walking among them and laughing silently to himself.

The lord did not often laugh aloud. It is a noticeable trait among those imprisoned in the Labyrinth that they rarely laugh and when they do, the laughter never brightens their eyes. Even those who have escaped the hellish prison and have entered the wondrous realm of the Nexus do not laugh. Upon their arrival through the Last Gate, they are met by the Lord of the Nexus, who was the first to escape. He says to them only two words.

"Never forget."

The Patrins do not forget. They do not forget those of their race still trapped within the Labyrinth. They do not forget friends and family who died by the violence of magic gone paranoid. They do not forget the wounds they themselves suffered. They, too, laugh silently when they walk the streets of the Nexus. And when they meet their lord, they bow before him in reverence. He is the only one of them who dares go back into the Labyrinth.

And even for him, the return is not easy.

No one knows the lord's background. He never speaks of it, and he is a man not easily approached or questioned. No one knows his age, although it is speculated, from certain things he has said, to be well beyond ninety gates. [13] The lord is a man of keen, cold, sharp intelligence. His skills in magic are held in awe by his people, whose own skills would rank them as demigods in the worlds beyond. He has been back to the Labyrinth many, many times since his escape, reentering that hell to carve out safe havens for his people with his magic. And each time, before he enters, this cold and calculating man feels a tremor shake his body. It takes an effort of will for him to go back through that Last Gate. There is always the fear, deep in

his mind, that this time the Labyrinth will win. This time it will destroy him. This time, he will never find his way back out.

That day, the lord stood near the Last Gate. Surrounding him were his people, Patryns who had already escaped. Their bodies covered with the tattooed runes that were shield, armor, and weapon, a few had decided that this time they would reenter the Labyrinth in company with their lord.

He said nothing to them, but accepted their presence. Walking to the Gate that was carved of jet, he placed his hands upon a sigil he himself had inscribed. The rune glowed blue at his touch, the sigla tattooed upon the backs of his hands glowed blue in answer and the Gate, that was never meant to open inward but only outward, fell back at the lord's command.

Ahead lay the weird and warped, ever-changing, deadly vistas of the Labyrinth.

The lord glanced around at those who stood near him. All eyes were fixed on the Labyrinth. The lord saw faces lose the color of life, he saw hands clench to fists, sweat trickle down rune-covered skin.

"Who will enter with me?" he asked.

He looked at each one. Each person tried to meet the lord's eyes, each person failed and eventually lowered his gaze. Some sought valiantly to step forward, but muscle and sinew cannot act without the mind's will, and the minds of those men and women were overcome with remembered terror. Shaking their heads, many of them weeping openly, they turned away.

Their lord walked up to them and laid his hands soothingly upon them. "Do not be ashamed of your fear. Use it, for it is strength. Long ago, we sought to conquer the world, to rule over those weak races not capable of ruling themselves. Our strength and our numbers were great and we had nearly succeeded in our goal. The only way the Sartan could defeat us was to sunder the world itself, sundering it into four separate parts. Divided by the chaos, we fell to the Sartan's might, and they locked us away in a prison of their own creation-the Labyrinth. Their 'hope' was that we would come out of it 'rehabilitated.'

"We have come out, but the terrible hardships we endured did not soften and weaken us as our enemies planned. The fire through which we passed forged us into sharp, cold steel. We are a blade to cut through our enemies, we are a blade that will win a crown.

"Go back. Go back to your duties. Keep always before you the thought of what will come when we return to the worlds. Keep always behind you the memory of what was."

The Patryns, comforted, were no longer ashamed. They watched their lord enter the Labyrinth, watched him enter the Gate with firm, unfaltering step, and they honored and worshipped him as a god.

The Gate started to swing shut on him. The lord halted it with a sharp command. He had found, lying near the Gate, stretched prone on the ground, a young man. The muscular, sigil-tattooed body bore the marks of terrible wounds-wounds that the young man had healed by his own magic, apparently, but which had almost drained him of his life. The lord, examining the young Patryn anxiously, could not see any sign that he was breathing.

Stooping, reaching out his hand to the young man's neck to feel for a pulse, the lord was brought up short by a low growling sound. A shaggy head rose up from near the young man's shoulder.

A dog, the lord saw in astonishment.

The animal itself had suffered serious injury. Though its growl was menacing and it was attempting valiantly to protect the young man, it could not hold up its head. The muzzle sank down feebly onto bloodied paws, But the growl continued.

"If you harm him," it seemed to say, "somehow, somehow, I'll find the strength to tear you apart."

The lord, smiling slightly—a rare thing for him—reached out gently and stroked the dog's soft fur.

"Be at ease, small brother. I mean your master no harm."

The dog allowed itself to be persuaded and, crawling on its belly, managed to lift its head and nuzzle the young man's neck. The touch of the cold nose roused the Patryn. He glanced up, saw the strange man bending over him and, with the instinct and will that had kept him alive, struggled to stand.

"You need no weapon against me, my son," said the lord. "You stand at the Last Gate. Beyond is a new world, one of peace, one of safety. I am its lord. I welcome you."

The young man had made it to his hands and knees. Swaying weakly, he lifted his head and stared through the Gate. His eyes were glazed, he could see little of the wonders of the world. But a slow smile spread across his face.

"I've made it!" he whispered hoarsely, through blood-caked lips. "I've beaten them!"  
"Such were my words when I stood before this Gate. What are you called?"

The young man swallowed, coughed before he could reply. "Haplo."

"A fitting name." The lord put his arms around the young man's shoulders. "Here, let me help you."

To the lord's amazement, Haplo thrust him away. "No. I want to walk . . . through ... on my own."

The lord said nothing, his smile broadened. He rose to his feet and stood aside. Gritting his teeth against the pain, Haplo struggled to stand upright. He paused a moment, swaying with dizziness. The lord, fearing he would fall, took a step forward, but Haplo warded him off with outstretched hand.

"Dog," he said in a cracked voice. "To me."

The animal rose weakly and limped over to its master. Haplo placed his hand upon the animal's head, steadying himself. The dog stood patiently, its eyes fixed upon Haplo.

"Let's go," said the young man.

Together, step by faltering step, they walked toward the Gate. The Lord of the Nexus, marveling, came behind. The Patrins on the other side, seeing the young man emerge, did not applaud or cheer, but awarded him respectful silence. None offered to help him, though each saw that every movement caused the young man obvious pain. They all knew what it meant to walk through that last gate by oneself, or aided only by a trusted friend.

Haplo stood in the Nexus, blinking under the dazzling sun. Sighing, he keeled over. The dog, whimpering, licked his master's face.

Hastening to the young man's side, the lord knelt down. Haplo was still conscious. The lord took hold of the pale, cold hand.

"Never forget!" whispered the lord, pressing the hand close to his chest.

Haplo looked up at the Lord of the Nexus and grinned. . . .

"Well, dog," said the Patryn, glancing around, giving his ship one last inspection, "I think we're ready. How about it, boy? You ready?"

The animal's ears pricked. It barked once, loudly.

"Good, good. We have My Lord's blessing and his final instructions. Now, let's see how this bird flies."

Reaching out, he held his hands over the steering stone and began to recite the first runes. The stone rose up from the deck, supported by magic, and came to rest beneath Haplo's palms. Blue light welled up through his fingers, matched by red light glowing from the runes on his hands.

Haplo sent his being into the ship, poured his magic into the hull, felt it seep like blood into the dragonskin sails, carrying life and power to guide and control. His mind lifted and it brought the ship with him. Slowly, the vessel began to rise from the ground.

Guiding it with his eyes, his thoughts, his magic, Haplo set sail into the air, granting the ship more speed than its original builders had ever imagined, and flew up and over the Nexus. Crouched at its master's feet, the dog sighed and resigned itself to the journey. Perhaps it remembered its first trip through Death's Gate, a trip that had very nearly proved fatal.

Haplo tested his craft, experimented with it. Flying leisurely over the Nexus, he enjoyed the unusual view of the city from a bird's eye (or dragon's eye) vantage.

The Nexus was a remarkable creation, a marvel of construction. Broad, tree-lined boulevards stretched out like spokes of a wheel from a center point to the dimly seen horizon of the far-off Boundary. Fabulous buildings of crystal and marble, steel and granite, adorned the streets. Parks and gardens, lakes and ponds provided places of quiet beauty in which to walk, to think, to reflect. Far away, near the Boundary, stretched green, rolling hills and fields, ready for the planting.

No farmers plowed that soil, however. No people lingered in the parks. No traffic filled the city streets. The fields, the parks, the avenues, the buildings stood empty, lifeless, waiting.

Haplo steered the ship around the center point of the Nexus, a crystal-spired building-the tallest in the land-which his lord had taken for his palace. Within the crystal spires, the Lord of the Nexus had come across the books left behind by the Sartan, books that told of the Sundering, the forming of the four worlds. Books that spoke of the imprisoning of the Patryns, of the Sartan's hope for their enemies' "salvation." The Lord of the Nexus had taught himself to read the books and so had discovered the Sartan's treachery that had doomed his people to torment. Reading the books, the lord had developed his plan of revenge. Haplo dipped the ship's wings in a gesture of respect to his lord.

The Sartan had intended the Patryns to occupy this wondrous world-after their "rehabilitation," of course. Haplo smiled, settled himself more comfortably in his chair. He let go of the steering stone, allowing the ship to drift with his own thoughts. Soon the Nexus would be populated, but not only by Patryns. Soon the Nexus would be home to elves, humans, and dwarves-the lesser races. Once these people had been transported back through the Death's Gate, the Lord of the Nexus would destroy the four misbegotten worlds created by the Sartan, return everything to the old order. Except, that the Patryns would rule, as was their right.

One of Haplo's tasks on his journeys of investigation was to see if any of the Sartan inhabited the four new worlds. Haplo found himself hoping he discovered more of them-more at least than Alfred, that one pitiful excuse for a demigod he'd confronted on Arianus. He wanted the entire race of Sartan alive, witnesses to their own crushing downfall.

"And after the Sartan have seen all they built fall into ruin, after they have seen the people they hoped to rule come under our sway, then will come the time of retribution. We will send them into the Labyrinth."

Haplo's gaze shifted to the red-streaked, black swirl of chaos just visible out the far side of the window. Horror-tinged memories reached out from the clouds to touch him with their skeletal hands. He beat them

back, using hatred for his weapon. In place of himself, he watched the Sartan struggle, saw them defeated where he had triumphed, watched them die where he had escaped alive.

The dog's sharp, warning bark shook him from his grim reverie. Haplo saw that, absorbed in his thoughts of revenge, he'd almost flown into the Labyrinth. Hastily, he placed his hands on the steering stone and wrenched the ship around. Dragon Wing sailed into the blue sky of the Nexus, free of the grasping tendrils of evil magic that had sought to claim it.

Haplo turned his eyes and thoughts ahead to the starless sky, steering for the place of passage, steering for Death's Gate.

## CHAPTER 9

### CAHNDAR TO ESTPORT, EQUILAN

PAITHAN HAD A GREAT DEAL OF WORK TO DO MAKING HIS CARAVAN READY FOR travel, and the old man's words of doom slipped from his mind. He met Quintin, his foreman, at the city limits of Cahndar-the Queen's City. The two elves inspected the baggage train, making certain the railbows, boltarches, and razzars, packed away in baskets, were attached securely to the tyros. [14] Opening the packs, Paithan inspected the toys that had been spread over the top, taking care to note if he could see any sign of the weapons hidden beneath. Everything appeared satisfactory. The young elf congratulated Quintin on a job well done and promised to recommend the foreman to his sister.

By the time Paithan and his caravan were ready to start, the hour flowers were indicating that fovertime was well advanced and it would soon be midcycle. Taking his place at the head of the line, Paithan told the overseer to begin the march. Quintin mounted the lead tyro, climbing into the saddle between the horns. With much cajoling and flattering, the slaves persuaded the other tyros to crawl into line behind their leader, and the caravan plunged into the jungle lands, soon leaving civilization far behind.

Paithan set a swift pace and the caravan made good traveling time. The trails between the human and elven lands are well tended, if somewhat treacherous. Trade between the realms is lucrative business. Human lands are rich in raw materials- teakwood, bladewood, cutvine, foodstuffs. The elves are adept at turning these resources into useful goods. Caravans between the realms came and went daily.

The greatest dangers to caravans were human thieves, jungle animals, and the occasional sheer drops between moss bed and moss bed. The tyros, however, were particularly effective in navigating difficult terrain-the main reason Paithan chose to use them, despite their shortcomings. (Many handlers, particularly humans, cannot deal with the sensitive tyro, who will curl into a ball and pout if its feelings are hurt.) The tyro can crawl over moss beds, climb trees, and span ravines by spinning its webs across the gap and swinging over. So strong are the tyro webs that some have been turned into permanent bridges, maintained by the elves.

Paithan had been over this route many times previously. He was familiar with the dangers, he was prepared for them. Consequently, he didn't worry about them. He wasn't particularly concerned with thieves. His caravan was large and well armed with elven weapons. Thieving humans tended to prey on lone travelers, particularly their own kind. He knew, though, that if thieves became aware of the true nature of his merchandise, they would risk much to acquire it. Humans have a high regard for elven weaponry-particularly those that are "intelligent."

The railbow, for example, is similar to a human crossbow- being a missile weapon consisting of a bow fixed across a wooden stock, having a mechanism for holding and releasing the string. The "rail" it fires is an arrow magically gifted with intelligence, able to visually sight a target and guide itself toward it. The magical boltarch, a much smaller version of the railbow, can be worn in a scabbard on the hip and is fired with one

hand. Neither human nor dwarven magic is capable of producing intelligent weaponry; thieves selling these on the black market could name their price.

But Paithan had taken precautions against being robbed.

Quintin (an elf who had been with the family since Paithan was a baby) had packed the baskets by hand, and only he and Paithan knew what really lay beneath the dolls and sailing ships and jack-in-the-boxes. The human slaves, whose duty it was to guide the tyros, thought they were carrying a load of toys for tots, not the deadlier toys of grown men.

Secretly, Paithan considered it all an unnecessary nuisance. Quindiniar weapons were high quality, a cut above those of ordinary elven manufacture. The owner of a Quindiniar railbow had to be given a special code word before he could activate the magic, and only Paithan had this information, which he would pass on to the buyer. But Calandra was convinced that every human was a spy, a thief, and a murderer just waiting to rob, rape, pillage, and plunder.

Paithan had tried to point out to his sister that she wasn't being rational-she gave the humans credit for a phenomenal and cunning intellect on one hand, while maintaining that they were little better than animals on the other.

"Humans really aren't too different from us, Cal," Paithan had said on one memorable occasion.

He had never tried that logic again. Calandra had been so alarmed by this liberal attitude that she had seriously considered forbidding him to venture again into human lands. The awful threat of having to stay home had been enough to silence the young elf on the subject forever.

The first stage of the journey was easy. Their only obstacle would be the Kithni Gulf, the large body of water that divided the elven and human lands, and that lay far to the vars. Paithan fell into the rhythm of the road, enjoying the exercise and the chance to be his own person once again. The sun lit the trees with jewel-like tones of green, the perfume of myriad flowers scented the air, frequent small showers of rain cooled the warmth built up from walking. Sometimes he heard a slink or a slither alongside the path, but he didn't pay much attention to the jungle wildlife. Having faced a dragon, Paithan decided he was equal to just about anything. But it was during this quiet time that the old man's words began buzzing in his head.

Doom will come back with you!

One time, when Paithan had been small, a bee had flown into his ear. The frantic buzzing the creature made had nearly driven him wild until his mother had been able to extricate it. Like that bee, Zifnab's prophecy had become trapped inside Paithan's skull, repeating itself over and over, and there seemed little he could do to rid himself of it.

He tried shrugging it off, laughing. After all, the old man was leaky as a cracked gourd. But just when he had convinced himself, Paithan saw the wizard's eyes-shrewd, knowing, and inexpressibly sad. It was the sadness that bothered Paithan, gave him a chill that his mother would have said came from someone standing on his grave. And that brought memories of his mother; Paithan also remembered that the old man had said that Mother wanted to see her children again.

The young elf felt a pang that was partly sweet, partly remorseful and uneasy. What if his father's beliefs were true? What if Paithan could actually meet his mother after all these years? He gave a low whistle and shook his head.

"Sorry, Mama. Guess you wouldn't be too pleased."

His mother had wanted him to be educated, she'd wanted all her children educated. Elithenia had been a factory wizardess when Lenthon Quindiniar saw her and lost his heart to her. Reputedly one of the most

beautiful women in Equilan, Elithenia hadn't been at ease among the high born of the land; a feeling Lenthian had never been able to understand.

"Your dresses are finer, my dear. Your jewels are more costly. What do these lords and ladies have that ranks them higher than the Quindiniars? Tell me, and I'll go out today and buy it!"

"What they have, you can't buy," his wife had told him with wistful sorrow.

"What is it?"

"They know things."

And she had been determined that her children would know things.

To this end, she hired a governess to give her children schooling such as only the high born received. The children had proved a disappointment. Calandra, even at a young age, knew exactly what she wanted out of life and she took from the governess what she needed-the knowledge necessary to manipulate people and numbers. Paithan didn't know what he wanted but he knew what he didn't want-boring lessons. He escaped the governess when he could, dawdled his time away when he couldn't. Aleatha, learning her powers early, smiled prettily, snuggled in the governess's lap, and was never required to learn to do more than read and write.

After their mother had died, their father kept the governess on. It had been Calandra who let the woman go, to save money, and that was the end of their schooling.

"No, Mother won't be pleased to see us, I'm afraid," Paithan mused, feeling unaccountably guilty. Realizing what he'd been thinking, he laughed-somewhat shamefacedly-and shook his head. "I'll be getting daft as poor Father if I don't cut it out."

To clear his mind and rid it of unwelcome memories, Paithan climbed up on the horns of the lead tyro and began to chat with the overseer-an elf of much sense and worldly experience. It wasn't until sorrowtime that night, the first cycle following torrent's hour, that Paithan would again think of Zifnab and the prophecy-and then only right before he fell asleep.

The journey to Estport, the ferry landing, was peaceful, without incident, and Paithan forgot the prophecy completely. The pleasure of traveling, the heady awareness of his freedom after the stifling atmosphere of home lifted the young elf's spirits. After a few cycles on the road, he could laugh heartily at the old man and his crazy notions, and he regaled Quintin with tales of Zifnab during their rest breaks. When they finally arrived at the Kithni Gulf, Paithan could hardly believe it. The trip had seemed far too short.

The Kithni Gulf is a huge lake that forms the border between Thillia and Equilan, and here Paithan encountered his first delay. One of the ferries had broken down, leaving only one in operation. Caravans were lined up all along the moss shore, waiting to cross.

Upon their arrival, Paithan sent the overseer to find out how long they would have to wait. Quintin returned with a number that marked their place in line and said that they might be able to cross over some time the following cycle.

Paithan shrugged. He wasn't in any particular hurry, and it appeared that people were making the best of a bad situation. The ferry landing had come to resemble a tent city. Caravaners strode about, visiting, trading news, discussing current trends in the marketplace. Paithan saw his slaves settled and fed, his tyros petted and complimented, and the baggage secure. Leaving everything in the capable hands of the overseer, the young elf left to join in the fun.

An enterprising elven farmer, hearing of the plight of the caravanners, had hastened down to the landing with several barrels of homemade vingin packed in a wagon, cooled by ice. [15] Vingin is a strong drink

made of crushed grapes, fortified by a liquid derived from fermented tohahs. Its fiery taste is favored by elves and humans alike. Paithan was particularly fond of it and, seeing a crowd gathered around the barrel, he joined them.

Several old friends of Paithan's were among the crowd, and the young elf was welcomed with enthusiasm. Caravanners get to know each other on the trail, sometimes banding together for both safety and companionship. Humans and elves alike made room for Paithan and a cool, frothy mug was thrust into his hand.

"Pundar, Ulaka, Gregor, good to see you again." The elf greeted long-time associates and was introduced to those he didn't know. Seating himself on a crate next to Gregor—a large, redheaded human with a bristling beard—Paithan sipped his vinigin and took a brief moment to be thankful Calandra couldn't see him.

Several polite inquiries about his health and that of his family followed, which Paithan answered and returned in kind.

"What are you carrying?" asked Gregor, downing a mug in one long swallow. Belching in satisfaction, he passed his mug to the farmer for a refill.

"Toys," said Paithan, with a grin.

Appreciative laughter and knowing winks.

"You'll be taking them up norinth, then," said a human, who had been introduced as Hamish.

"Why, yes," said Paithan. "How did you know?"

"They've a need for 'toys' up that way, so we hear," said Hamish.

The laughter died, and there was gloomy nodding among the humans. The elven traders, looking perplexed, demanded to know what was amiss.

"War with the SeaKings?" guessed Paithan, handing over his empty mug. This news would make Calandra's day. He would have to send a faultless back with it. If anything could put his sister in a good mood, it would be war among the humans. He could almost see her counting the profits now.

"Naw," said Gregor. "The SeaKings has got their own problems, if what we hear be true. Strange humans, coming across the Whispering Sea in crude ships, have been washing up on the SeaKings' shores. At first, the SeaKings took in the refugees, but more and more kept coming and now they are finding it difficult to feed and house so many."

"They can keep 'em," said another human trader. "We've enough problems of our own in Thillia, without taking in strangers."

The elven traders smiled, listening with the smug complacency of those who are completely unaffected, except as it might concern their business. An influx of more humans into the region could only send profits soaring.

"But . . . where are these humans coming from?" asked Paithan.

There was heated discussion among the traders, the argument at last being settled by Gregor stating, "I know. I have talked to them myself. They say they are from a realm known as Kasnar, that is far norinth of us, across the Whispering Sea."

"Why are they fleeing their homeland? Are there great wars being fought there?" Paithan was wondering how difficult it would be to hire a ship to take him and a load of weapons that far.

Gregor shook his head, his red beard brushing against his massive chest. "Not war," he said in grave tones. "Destruction. Total destruction."

Doom, death, and destruction.

Paithan felt footsteps crossing his grave, his blood tingled in his feet and hands. It must be the vingin, he told himself, and set his mug down hastily.

"What is it, then? Dragons? I can't believe that. Since when have dragons attacked a settlement?"

"No, even the dragons flee this menace."

"Then, what?"

Gregor looked around solemnly. "Tytans."

Paithan and the other elves gaped, then burst out laughing.

"Gregor, you old liar! You had me going there for a while!" Paithan wiped tears from his eyes. "I'll buy the next round. Refugees and wrecked ships!"

The humans sat silent, their faces growing dark and shadowed. Paithan saw them exchange grim glances and checked his mirth.

"Come now, Gregor, a joke's a joke. You caught me. I'll admit I was already counting up the coins." He waved his hand toward his compatriots. "We all were. So enough already."

"It is no joke, I am afraid, my friends," said Gregor. "I have talked to these people. I have seen the terror on their faces and heard it in their voices. Gigantic creatures with the bodies and faces of our kind, but who stand taller than the trees came to their land from far norinth. Their voices alone can split rock. They destroy all in their path. They snatch up people in their hands and fling them to their deaths or crush them with their fists. There is no weapon that can stop them. Arrows are to them like gnats to us. Swords will not penetrate their thick hide, nor would blades do any damage, if they did."

The weight of Gregor's words oppressed everyone. All listened in hushed and attentive silence, though there was still some unbelieving shaking of heads. Other caravanners, noting the solemn gathering, came up to see what was going on and added their own dire rumors to those already spreading.

"The Kasnar Empire was great," said Gregor. "Now it is gone. Completely destroyed. All that is left of a once mighty nation are a handful of people who escaped in their boats across the Whispering Sea."

The farmer, noting his sales dropping off, tapped a fresh barrel. Everyone rose to refill their mugs, and began talking at once.

"Tytans? The followers of San? That's only myth."

"Don't speak sacrilege, Paithan. If you believe in the Mother [16] you must believe in San and his followers, who rule the Dark."

"Yeah, Umbar, we all know how religious you are! If you walked into one of the Mother's temples it'd probably fall down on top of you! Look, Gregor. You're a sensible man. You don't believe in goblins and ghoulies."

"No, but I believe in what I see and hear. And I've seen, in the eyes of those people, terrible things."

Paithan gazed steadily at the man. He'd known Gregor a number of years and had always found the big human reliable, dependable, and fearless. "All right. I'll buy the notion that these people fled something. But why are we all in a dither? Whatever it is couldn't possibly cross the Whispering Sea."

"The tytans-

"Whatever-

"-could come down through the dwarven kingdoms of Grish and Klag and Thum," continued Gregor gloomily, "fn fact, we have heard rumors that the dwarves are preparing for war."

"Yeah. War against you, not giant demons. That's why your lords slapped on that arms embargo."

Gregor shrugged his shoulders, nearly bursting the seams on his tight-fitting shirt, and then grinned, his red-bearded face seeming to split wide apart. "Whatever happens, Paithan, you elves won't have to worry. We humans will stop them. Our legends say that the Horned God constantly tests us, by sending warriors worthy of us to fight. Perhaps, in this battle, the Five Lost Lords will return to help us."

He started to drink, looked disappointed, and upended his mug. It was empty. "More vingin!"

The elven fanner turned the spigot, nothing came out. He knocked on the barrels. All gave forth a dismal, hollow sound. Sighing, the caravanners stood and stretched.

"Paithan, my friend," said Gregor. "There's the tavern near the ferry landing. It's packed, just now, but I think I could get us a table." The big human flexed his muscles and laughed.

"Sure," agreed Paithan readily. His overseer was a good man, the slaves were exhausted. He didn't expect any trouble. "You find us a place to sit, and I'll buy the first two rounds."

"Fair enough."

The two, swaying slightly, threw their arms around each Other-Gregor's arm nearly engulfing the slender elf and tottered off toward the Land's End.

"Say, Gregor, you get around a lot," said Paithan. "Ever hear of a human wizard name of Zifnab?"

## CHAPTER 10

### VARSPORT, THILLIA

PAITHAN AND HIS CARAVAN WERE ABLE TO CROSS OVER ON THE FERRY THE following cycle. The crossing took an entire cycle, and the elf did not enjoy the trip, due to the fact that he was suffering from the after-effects of vingin.

Elves are notoriously bad drinkers, having no head at all for alcohol, and Paithan knew at the time he shouldn't be attempting to keep pace with Gregor. But he reminded himself that he was celebrating-no Calandra to glare at him sternly for taking a second glass of wine with dinner. The vingin also conveniently fogged up Paithan's remembrance of the daft old wizard, his stupid prophecy, and Gregor's gloomy stories about giants.

The constant clatter of the turning capstan, the snorting and squeals of the five harnessed wild boar who drove it, and the constant urgings of their human driver blasted through the elf's head. The guck-covered, slimy vine cable that drew the ferry over the water slid past him and disappeared, winding around the

capstan. Leaning up against a bundle of blankets in the shade of an awning, a wet compress over his aching head, Paithan watched the water slip away beneath the boat and felt extremely sorry for himself.

The ferry had been operating across the Kithni Gulf for about sixty years. Paithan could remember seeing it as a small child, traveling in company with his grandfather-the last journey the two'd made before the old elf vanished into the wilderness. Then Paithan had thought the ferryboat the most wonderful invention in the world and had been extremely upset to find out that humans had been responsible for inventing it.

His grandfather had patiently explained the human thirst for money and power known as ambition-a result of their pitifully short life spans-that led them to all sorts of energetic undertakings. The elves had been quick to take advantage of the ferry service, since it markedly increased trade between the two realms, but they viewed it with suspicion. The elves had no doubt that the ferry-like most other human endeavors-would somehow lead to a bad end. In the meantime, however, the elves magnanimously allowed the humans to serve them.

Soothed by the lapping of the water and the fumes of the vingin lingering in his brain, Paithan grew drowsy in the heat. He had the vague memory of Gregor having become embroiled in a brawl and nearly getting him-Paithan-killed. The elf drifted off to sleep. He woke to Quintin, his overseer, shaking him by the shoulder.

"Auanal Auanal [17] Quindiniar! Wake up. The boat is docking."

Paithan groaned and sat up. He felt somewhat better. Though his head still throbbed, at least he didn't feel like he was about to tumble over in a dead faint when he moved. Staggering to his feet, he lurched across the crowded deck to where his slaves crouched on the wood planking, out in the open, with no shelter from the blazing sun. The slaves didn't appear to mind the heat. They wore nothing but loin cloths. Paithan, who kept every inch of his fair skin covered, looked at the deep brown or black skin of the humans and was reminded of the vast gulf that lay between the two races.

"Callie's right," he muttered to himself. "They're nothing but animals and all the civilizing in the world won't change that. I should have known better than to go off with Gregor last night. Stick to my own kind."

This firm resolve lasted all of, say, an hour, by which time Paithan, feeling much better, was visiting with a bruised, swollen, and grinning Gregor while both stood in line, waiting their turns to present their papers to the port authority. Paithan remained cheerful during the long wait. When Gregor left for his turn at customs, the elf amused himself by listening to the chatter of his human slaves, who appeared ridiculously excited at seeing their homeland again.

If they're so fond of it, why did they let themselves get sold into slavery? Paithan wondered idly, standing in a line that moved with the speed of a mosslug while human customs officials asked innumerable, inane questions and pawed over the goods of his fellow caravanners. Altercations broke out, generally between humans, who-when caught smuggling-seemed to take the attitude that the law applied to everyone else but them. Elven merchants rarely had any trouble at the borders. They either studiously obeyed the laws or, like Paithan, devised quiet and subtle means to evade them.

At last, one of the officials motioned to him. Paithan and his overseer herded the slaves and the tyros forward.

"What're you haulin'?" The official stared hard at the baskets.

"Magical toys, sir," said Paithan, with a charming smile.

The official's gaze sharpened. "Seems a queer time to be bringing in toys."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Why, the talk of war! Don't tell me you haven't heard it?"

"Not a word, sir. Who are you fighting this month? Strethia, perhaps, or Dourglasia?"

"Naw, we wouldn't waste our arrows on that scum. There's rumors of giant warriors, coming out of the norinth."

"Oh, that!" Paithan shrugged gracefully. "I did hear of something of the sort, but I discounted it. You humans are well prepared to face such a challenge, aren't you?"

"Of course we are," said the official. Suspecting he was being made the butt of a joke, he stared hard at Paithan.

The elf's face was smooth as silk and so was his tongue.

"The children love our magical toys so much. And Saint Thillia's Day will be coming up soon. We wouldn't want to disappoint the little tykes, now, would we?" Paithan leaned forward confidentially. "I'll bet you're a grandfather, aren't you? How about letting me go on through without the usual rigamorole?"

"I'm a grandfather all right," said the official, scowling darkly. "I got ten grandkids, all of 'em under the age of four and they're all livin' at my house! Open those baskets."

Paithan saw that he had made a tactical error. Heaving the sigh of an innocent wrongfully condemned, he shrugged his shoulders and led the way to the first basket. Quintin—all officious, servile politeness—undid the straps. The slaves, standing nearby, were watching with what Paithan noted were expressions of suppressed glee that made the elf extremely uneasy. What the devil were they grinning about? It was almost as if they knew . . .

The customs official lifted the lid of the basket. An array of brightly colored toys sparkled in the sunlight. Casting a sidelong glance at Paithan, the official thrust his hand deep inside.

He withdrew it immediately with a yelp, waving his fingers. "Something bit me!" he accused.

The slaves roared with laughter. The overseer, shocked, began laying about him with his whip, and soon restored order.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir." Paithan slammed shut the lid of the basket. "It must have been the jack-in-the-boxes. They're notoriously bad about biting. I really do apologize."

"You're giving those fiends to children?" demanded the official, sucking his injured thumb.

"Some parents like a certain amount of aggressive spirit in a toy, sir. Don't want the little tykes to grow up soft, do we? Uh ... sir ... I'd be particularly careful with that basket. It's carrying the dollies."

The customs official stretched out his hand, hesitated, and thought better of it. "Go on with you then. Get outta here."

Paithan gave the order to Quintin, who immediately set the slaves to work, hauling at the reins of the tyros. Some of the slaves, despite the fresh lash marks on the skin, were still smirking, and Paithan wondered at the strange human trait that led them to enjoy the sight of another's suffering.

His bill of lading was hastily inspected and passed. Paithan tucked it in the pocket of his belted traveling coat and, bowing politely to the official, was starting to hurry after his baggage train when he felt a hand on his arm. The elf's good humor was rapidly evaporating. He felt a throbbing in his temples.

"Yes, sir?" he said, turning, forcing a smile.

The customs official leaned close. "How much for ten of them jacks?"

The journey through the human lands was uneventful. One of Paithan's slaves escaped, but he'd planned for such an eventuality by bringing along extra hands, and he wasn't overly concerned about many of the others. He'd deliberately chosen men with families left behind in Equilan. Apparently one slave thought more of his freedom than he did of his wife and children.

Under the influence of Gregor's tales, Zifnab's prophecy began to gnaw again at the elf's mind. Paithan tried to discover all he could about the approaching giants and in every tavern, he found someone with something to say on the subject. But he gradually became convinced that it was rumor, nothing more. Outside of Gregor, he couldn't find one other human who had actually talked directly to any of the refugees.

"My mother's uncle ran across three of 'em and they told him and he told my mother that-"

"My second cousin's boy was in Jendi last month when the ships was coming in and he told my cousin to tell his dad who told me that-"

"I heard it from a peddler who'd been there-"

Paithan decided at length, with some relief, that Gregor'd been feeding him some candy. [18] The elf put Zifnab's prophecy completely, finally, irrevocably out of his mind.

Paithan crossed the border of Marcinia into Temcia without a border guard so much as glancing into his baskets. They gave his bill of lading-signed by the Varsport official-a bored glance and waved him on. The elf was enjoying his journey, and he took his time. The weather was particularly fine. The humans, for the most part, were friendly and well mannered. Of course, he did encounter the occasional remark about "woman stealers" or "filthy slavers" but Paithan, not one to be hotheaded, either ignored these epithets or passed them off with a laugh and an offer to buy the next round.

Paithan was as fond of human women as the next elf, but- having traveled extensively in human lands-he knew nothing could get your ears (and perhaps other portions of one's anatomy) cut off sooner than dallying with human females. He was able to curb his appetite, therefore, contenting himself with admiring stares or snatching a quick kiss in an extremely dark corner. If the innkeeper's daughter came to his door in the dead of night, wanting to test the legendary erotic skill of elven men, Paithan was always careful to bundle her out in the mistymorne, before anyone else was up and stirring.

The elf reached his destination-the small and unsavory town of Griffith-a few weeks past his scheduled arrival. He thought that pretty good, considering how chancy travel was through the constantly warring Thillian states. Arriving at the Jungleflower Tavern, he saw his slaves and the tyros settled in the stable, found a place for his overseer in the loft, and took a room in the inn for himself.

The Jungleflower was apparently not much in the custom of housing elves, for the proprietor looked a long time at Paithan's money and rapped the coin on the table, wanting to make certain mat it had the sound of hardwood. Hearing it thump true, he became somewhat more polite.

"What did you say your name was?"

"Paithan Quindiniar."

"Huh." The man grunted. "Got two messages for you. One came by hand, the other by faultless."

"Thanks very much," said Paithan, handing over another coin.

The proprietor's politeness increased markedly.

"You must be thirsty. Seat yourself in the common room, and I'll be bringing you something to wet your throat."

"No vingin," said Paithan and sauntered off, the missives in his hand.

One he recognized as human in origin—a bit of cheap parchment that had been used before. Some attempt had been made to efface the original writing, but that hadn't succeeded well. Untying a frayed and dirty ribbon, Paithan unrolled it and read the message with some difficulty around what apparently had once been a tax notice.

Quindiniar. You're late. This'll ... .. you. We've had

to make . . . trip , . . keep customer happy. Back. . . .

Paithan walked over to the window and held the parchment to the light. No, he couldn't make out when they said they were returning. It was signed with a crude scrawl—Roland Redleaf. Fishing out the worn bill of lading, Paithan looked for the name of the customer. There it was, in Calandra's precise, up-right hand. Roland Redleaf. Shrugging, Paithan tossed the scroll in the slop bucket and carefully wiped his hands after. No telling where it had been.

The proprietor hurried in with a foaming mug of ale. Tasting it, Paithan pronounced the brew excellent and the highly gratified innkeeper was now his slave for life or at least as long as his money held out. Settling down in a booth, propping his feet up on the chair opposite him, Paithan lounged back and opened the other scroll, preparing to enjoy himself. It was a letter from Aleatha.

## CHAPTER 11

HOUSE OF QUINDINIAR,

EQUILAN

My dear Paithan,

You're probably astonished to hear from me. I'm not one for writing. However, I'm certain you won't be offended if I tell you the truth and that is that I'm writing to you out of sheer boredom. I certainly hope this engagement doesn't last too long or I shall go out of my mind.

Yes, dear brother, I've given up my "wild and wicked ways." At least temporarily. When I'm a "staid old married woman" I intend to pursue a more interesting life; one only needs to be discreet.

As I had foreseen, there is a bit of scandal over the impending marriage. The dowager is a snobbish old bitch who came near to ruining everything. She had the nerve to inform Durndrun that I had been having an affair with Lord K---, that I frequented certain establishments Below and that I even carried on with the human slaves! In short, I was a slut, not worthy of being honored with the Durndrun money, the Durndrun house, and the Durndrun name.

Fortunately, I had foreseen something like this happening and had procured a promise from my "beloved" that he was to inform me of any allegations made by his dear mama and allow me to refute them. He did so, coming to see me in the mistymorne of all times. That's one habit of which I shall have to break him! By Orn!

What does one do at such an ungodly hour? There was no help for it. I had to make an appearance. Fortunately, unlike some women, I always look well on arising.

I found Durndrun in the parlor, looking extremely serious and stern, being entertained by Calandra, who was enjoying the whole thing immensely.

She left us alone-quite proper between engaged couples, you know-and, if you will believe this, my dear brother, the man began heaping his mother's accusations upon my head!

I was, of course, prepared.

Once I understood the precise nature of his complaints (and their source), I tumbled down upon the floor in a swoon. (In passing, there is a true art to that. One must fall without doing damage and preferably without any unsightly bruises on the elbows. It is not as easy as it looks.) Anyway, Durndrun was quite alarmed and was obliged-of course-to lift me in his arms and place me on the sofa.

I came to myself just in time to prevent him ringing for help and, seeing him bending over me, called him a "cad" and burst into tears.

He was again obliged to take me in his arms. Sobbing incoherently about my besmirched honor and how I could never love a man who didn't trust me, I attempted to push him away, making certain that in the ensuing struggle my gown tore and the lord discovered that his hand had wandered to a place where it should not have been.

"Ah, so this is what you think of me!" I flung myself on the sofa, taking care that in my frantic attempts to repair the damage, I simply made it worse. My only worry was that he should ring for the servants. I, therefore, did not allow my tears to degenerate into hysterics.

He rose to his feet and I could see, out of the corner of my eye, the struggle ensuing in his breast. I quieted my sobs and turned my head, looking up at him through a veil of golden hair, my eyes shimmering quite prettily.

"I admit that I have been what some might call irresponsible," I said in a choked voice, "but then I never had a mama to guide me! I've been searching so long for someone to love and honor with all my heart, and now that I've found you ..."

I couldn't go on. Turning my face to the tear-soaked pillow, I stretched out my arm. "Go!" I told him. "Your mama is right! I am not worthy of such love!"

Well, Pait, I'm sure you must have guessed the rest. Before you could say "matrimony," Lord Durndrun was at my feet, begging my forgiveness! I allowed him another kiss and a long, lingering glance before I modestly covered the "treasures" he won't acquire until our wedding night.

He was so carried away by his passion he even spoke of turning his mother out of his house! It took a great deal of persuading to convince him that the dowager would be as dear to me as the mother I never knew. I have plans for the old lady. She doesn't know it, but she will cover my little "escapes" when married life becomes too boring.

And so I am well on the way to the altar. Lord Durndrun laid down the law to the dowager, informing her that he would wed me and that if she didn't like it we would live somewhere else. That wouldn't do at all, of course. The house is the main reason I'm marrying him. But I wasn't too afraid. The old woman simply dotes on her son and she gave way, as I knew she must.

The wedding will be in about four months time. I had hoped it would be sooner, but there are certain formalities that must be observed, and Callie is insisting on everything being very proper. In the meantime, I have no choice but to give the appearance that I am a modest, well-bred maiden and stay prudently at

home. You will laugh, I'm certain, Paithan, when you read this. But I assure you I have not been with a man this past month. By the time the wedding night comes around, Durndrun himself will look good to me!

(I'm not at all certain I can hold out that long. I don't suppose you've noticed, but one of the human slaves is quite a pretty specimen. He's very interesting to talk to and has even taught me some of that beastly language of theirs. Speaking of beasts, do you suppose it's true what they say about human males?)

Sorry about the blurred text on that last part. Callie came into my room and I was forced to slip this in among my undergarments before the ink was dry. Can you imagine what she would have done if she'd read that last part?

Fortunately, she needn't worry. Thinking about it, I don't believe I could bring myself to form a liaison with a human. No offense, Pait, but how can you stand to touch them? I suppose it's different for a man.

You're wondering what Callie was doing in here at this hour of stormtime? The rockets were keeping her awake.

Speaking of rockets, home life has gone from bad to worse since you left. Papa and that crazy old wizard spend all toilttime down in the cellar preparing rockets and all darktime out in the backyard, firing them off. We've set a record, I do believe, in the number of servants who've left us. Cal's been forced to pay out large sums to several families in the town below, whose houses caught fire. Papa and the wizard are sending the rockets up, you see, so that this "man with the bandaged hands" will see them and know where to land!

Oh, Paithan, I'm sure you're laughing now, but this is serious. Poor Callie's about to tear the hair off her head in frustration, and I'm afraid I'm not much better. Of course, she's worried about the money and the business and the mayor coming by with a petition to get rid of the dragon.

I'm worried about poor Papa. The crafty old human has Papa completely convinced in this nonsense about a ship and going to see Mama in the stars. It's all Papa talks about. He's so excited he won't eat and he's getting thinner by the day. Callie and I know that old wizard must be up to something-maybe making off with all Papa's fortune. But, it's so, he's shown no signs of it.

Cal tried twice to buy Zifnab-or whatever he calls himself-off, offering him more money than most humans would see in a lifetime to go away and leave us alone. The old man took her by the hand and, with a sad look on his face, told her, "But my dear, soon the day will come when money won't matter."

Won't matter! Money won't matter! Callie thought he was crazy before but now she's convinced he's a raving maniac and should be locked up somewhere. I think she'd do it, too, but she's afraid how Papa might react. And then there was the day the dragon almost got loose.

You remember how the old man keeps the creature under enchantment? (Orn knows how or why.) We were sitting down to breakfast when suddenly there was a terrible commotion outside, the house shook like it would fall apart, tree limbs cracked and thudded into the moss and a fiery red eye appeared, staring into our dining room window.

"Have another muffin, old man!" came this dreadful, hissing voice. "With lots of honey on it. You need fattening, fool. Like the rest of the plump, juicy meat around you!"

Its teeth flashed, saliva dripped from its forked tongue. The old man went pale as a ghost. What few servants we had left ran screaming out the door.

"Ah, ha!" shouted the dragon. "Fast food!"

The eye disappeared. We ran to the front door and saw the dragon's head diving down, its jaws ready to close over the cook!

"No, not her!" shouted the old man. "She does the most wonderful things to a chicken! Try the butler. Never did like him," he said, turning to Father. "Uppity chap."

"But," said poor Papa, "you can't let him eat the staff!"

"Why not?" Cal screamed. "Let him eat all of us! What does it matter to you?"

You should have seen Callie, Brother. It was frightening. She went all stiff and rigid and just stood there on the front porch, her arms crossed over her chest, her face set hard as rock. The dragon seemed to be toying with his victims, driving them like sheep, watching them duck behind trees, lunging at them when they came out in the open.

"What if we let him have the butler," said the old man nervously, "and maybe a footman or two? Take the edge off, so to speak?"

"I-I'm afraid not," answered poor Papa, who was shaking like a leaf.

The old man heaved a sigh. "You're right, I suppose. Mustn't abuse your hospitality. Seems a pity. Elves are so easily digestible. Slide right down. He always feels hungry right after, though." The old man began rolling up his sleeves. "Dwarves, now. I never let him eat a dwarf. Not since the last time. Up with him all night. Let's see. How did that spell go? Let's see, I need a ball of bat guano and a pinch of sulfur. No, wait. I've got my spells muddled."

The old man strolled out on the lawn, cool as you please, in the midst of the chaos, talking to himself about bat dung! By now, some of the townspeople had arrived, carrying weapons. The dragon was delighted to see them, shouting about "all-you-can-eat buffets." Callie was standing on the porch, screeching, "Eat us all!" Papa was wringing his hands until he collapsed into a chaise lounge.

I hate to admit this, Pait, but I started to laugh. Why is that? It must be some horrible flaw in me that makes me start giggling during disaster. I wished with all my heart you'd been there to help us, but you weren't. Papa was useless, Cal wasn't much better. In desperation, I ran down onto the lawn and caught hold of the old man's arm just as he raised it in the air.

"Aren't you supposed to sing?" I asked. "You know, 'something, something Bonnie Earl!'"

It was all I could understand of the damn song. The old man blinked and his face brightened. Then he whirled around and glared at me, his beard bristling. The dragon, meanwhile, was chasing the townspeople across the lawn.

"What are you trying to do?" the old man demanded angrily. "Take over my job?"

"No, I-"

" 'Don't meddle in the affairs of wizards,' " he said in lofty tones, " 'for they are subtle and quick to anger.' A fellow sorcerer said that. Good at his job, knew a lot about jewelry. Not bad at fireworks, either. Wasn't the snappy dresser Merlin was, though. Let's see, what his name? Raist-no, that was the irritating young chap, kept hacking and spitting up blood all the time. Disgusting. The other's name was Gand-something or other . . ."

I began laughing wildly, Pait! I couldn't help it. I had no idea what he was yammering about. It was just all so ludicrous! I must be a truly wicked person.

"The dragon!" I grabbed the old man and shook him until his teeth rattled. "Stop him!"

"Ah, yes. It's easy for you to say." Zifnab gave me a hunted look. "You don't have to live with him afterward!"

Heaving another sigh, he began to sing in that high-pitched quavery voice of his that goes right through your head. Just like before, the dragon jerked his head up, and stared at the old man. The creature's eyes glazed over and pretty soon he was swaying in time to the music. Suddenly, the dragon's eyes popped open wide and he stared at the old man in shock.

"Sir!" the creature thundered. "What are you doing out on the front lawn in your nighty? Have you no shame?"

The dragon's head snaked across the lawn and loomed over poor Papa, who was huddled underneath the chaise lounge. The townspeople, seeing the creature distracted, began raising their weapons and creeping up on it.

"Forgive me. Master Quindiniar," said the dragon in a deep, booming voice. "This is my fault entirely. I was not able to catch him before he left this morning." The dragon's head swiveled around to the old man. "Sir, I had laid out the mauve morning coat with the pin-striped pants and the yellow weskit-

"Mauve morning coat?" screeched the old man. "Did you ever see Merlin strolling around Camelot, casting spells in a mauve morning coat? No, by hoppy toads, you didn't! And you won't catch me in one-

I missed the rest of the conversation because I had to convince the townsfolk to go home. Not that I would have minded so much getting rid of the dragon, but it was perfectly obvious to me that their puny weapons couldn't do it any serious harm and might only break the spell, it was shortly after this, by the way, around luncheon, that the mayor arrived with the petition.

Something seemed to snap inside Callie after that, Pait. Now she completely ignores the wizard and his dragon. She simply behaves as if they aren't there. She won't look at the old man; she won't speak to him. She spends all her time either at the factory or locked up in her office. She'll barely speak to poor Papa. Not that he notices. He's too busy with his rockets.

Well, Pait, the barrage has ceased for the moment. I must close and go to bed. I'm taking tea with the dowager tomorrow. I believe I'll switch cups with her, just in case she's slipped a little poison in mine.

Oh, I almost forgot. Callie says to tell you that business has really picked up. Something about rumors of trouble coming out of the norinth. Sorry I wasn't paying more attention, but you know how talking about business bores me. I guess it means more money, but, like the old man says, what does that matter?

Hurry home. Pait, and save me from this madhouse!

Your loving sister, Aleatha

## CHAPTER 12

### GRIFFITH, TERNCIA, THILLIA

INVOLVED IN HIS SISTER'S LETTER, PAITHAN WAS AWARE OF FOOTSTEPS entering the tavern, but he didn't pay any attention until the chair he was using for a footstool was kicked violently out from underneath his legs.

"About time!" said a voice, speaking human.

Paithan looked up. A human male stood staring down at him. The man was tall, muscular, well built, with long blond hair that he wore tied with a leather thong at the back of his head. His skin was deeply tanned, except where his clothes covered it, and then Paithan could see that it was white and fair as any elf's. The blue eyes were frank and friendly, his lips curved in an ingratiating smile. He was dressed in the fringed leather breeches and sleeveless leather tunic popular among humans.

"Quincejar?" said the human, thrusting out a hand. "I'm Roland. Roland Redleaf. Pleased to meet you."

Paithan glanced at the chair, which had been knocked over and kicked halfway across the common room. Barbarians. Still, it didn't do any good to get angry. Standing up, he stretched out his hand, clasping the human's in the odd custom that both elves and dwarves found so ridiculous.

"The name's Quindiniar. And please join me," said Paithan, retrieving his chair. "What will you have to drink?"

"You speak our language pretty good, without that silly lisp you hear with most elves." Roland yanked over another chair and sat down. "What are you drinking?" Grabbing Paithan's almost full mug, he sniffed at it. "Stuff any good? Usually the ale around here tastes like monkey piss. Hey, bar keep! Bring us another round!"

"Here's to the toys," Roland said, lifting his mug.

Paithan took a swallow. The human downed his at one gulp. Blinking, wiping his eyes, he said moistly, "Not bad. You going to finish yours? No? I'll take care of it for you. Can't let it go to waste." He drained the other mugful, slamming it down upon the table when he was finished.

"What were we drinking to? Ah, I remember. The toys. 'Bout time, as I said." Roland leaned across the table, breathing beer fumes into Paithan's face. "The children were getting impatient! It was all I could do to placate the little darlings ... if you know what I mean?"

"I'm not certain that I do," said Paithan mildly. "Will you have another?"

"Sure. Barkeep! Two more."

"It's on me," said the elf, noting the proprietor's frown.

Roland lowered his voice. "The children-the buyers, the dwarves. They're getting real impatient. Old Blackbeard like to took my head off when I told him the shipment was going to be late."

"You're selling the ... er ... toys to dwarves?"

"Yeah, you got a problem with that, Quinpar?"

"Quindiniar. No, it's just that now I understand how you were able to pay top price."

"Between you and me, the bastards would've paid double that to get these. They're all worked up over some kid's fairy tale about giant humans. But you'll see for yourself." Roland took a long pull at the ale.

"Me?" said Paithan, smiling and shaking his head. "You must be mistaken. Once you've paid me the money, the 'toys' are yours. I've got to return home. This is a busy time for us, now."

"And how are we supposed to transport these babies?" Roland brushed his arm across his mouth. "Carry them on our heads? I saw your tyros in the stables. Everything's packed up neat. We'll make the trip and be back in no time."

"I'm sorry, Redleaf, but that wasn't part of the deal. Pay me the money and-"

"But don't you think you'd find the dwarven kingdom fascinating?"

The voice was a woman's, and it came from behind Paithan.

"Quincetart," said Roland, gesturing with his mug. "Meet my wife."

The elf, rising politely to his feet, turned around to face a human female.

"My name's Quindiniar."

"Glad to meet you. I'm Rega."

She was short, dark haired and dark eyed. Her well-muscled body was scantily clad, like Roland's, in fringed leather, leaving little of her figure to the imagination. Her brown eyes, shadowed by long black lashes, seemed filled with mystery. Her full lips kept back untold secrets. She extended her hand. Paithan took it in his. Instead of shaking it, as the woman apparently expected, he carried the hand to his lips and kissed it.

The woman's cheeks flushed. She allowed her hand to linger a moment in Paithan's. "Look here. Husband. You never treat me like this!"

"You're my wife," said Roland, shrugging, as if that settled the matter. "Have a seat, Rega. What'll you have to drink? The usual?"

"A glass of wine for the lady," ordered Paithan. Crossing the common room, he brought a chair back to the table, holding it for Rega to sit down. She slid into it with animallike grace, her movements clean, quick, decisive.

"Wine. Yeah, why not?" Rega smiled at the elf, her head tilting slightly, her dark, shining hair falling over a bare shoulder.

"Talk Quinspar here into coming with us, Rega."

The woman kept her eyes and her smile fixed on the elf. "Don't you have somewhere to go, Roland?"

"You're right. Damn beer runs right through me."

Rising to his feet, Roland sauntered out of the common room, heading for the tavern's backyard.

Rega's smile widened. Paithan could see sharp teeth, white against lips that appeared to have been stained red with some kind of berry juice. Whoever kissed those lips would taste the sweetness . . .

"I wish you would come with us. It's not that far. We know the best route, it cuts through SeaKing lands but on the wilderness side. No border guards the way we go. The path's occasionally treacherous, but you don't look like the type to be bothered by a little danger." She leaned closer, and he was aware of a faint, musky odor that clung to her sweat-sheened skin. Her hand crept over Paithan's. "My husband and I get so bored with each other's company."

Paithan recognized deliberate seduction. He should have; his sister Aleatha could have taught it on a university level and this crude young human could certainly benefit from a few courses. The elf found it all highly amusing and certainly entertaining after long days on the road. He did wonder, though, why Rega was going to all this trouble and he also wondered, somewhere in the back of his mind, if she might be prepared to deliver what she was offering.

I've never been to the dwarven kingdom, Paithan reflected. No elf has. It would be worthwhile going.

A vision of Calandra-mouth pursed, nose bone white, eyes flaring-rose up before Paithan. She'd be furious-He'd lose a season, at least, in getting back home.

But Cal, look, he heard himself saying. I've established trade with the dwarves. Direct trade. No middle men to take a cut. . .

"Say you'll come with us." Rega squeezed his hand. The elf noted that the woman possessed an unladylike strength, the skin of her palm was rough and hardened.

"The three of us couldn't handle all these tyros-" he hedged.

"We don't need all of them." The woman was practical, businesslike. She let her hand linger in the elf's grasp. "You've packed toys for cover, I assume? Get rid of them. Sell them. We'll repack the ... er ... more valuable merchandise on three tyros."

Well, it would work. Paithan had to admit it. Plus, the sale of the toys would more than pay for the trip back for his foreman Quintin. The profits might moderate Calandra's fury.

"How can I refuse you anything?" Paithan answered, holding the warm hand a little tighter.

A door from the rear of the tavern slammed. Rega, flushing, snatched her hand away.

"My husband," she murmured. "He's frightfully jealous!"

Roland came strolling back into the common room, lacing up the leather thong on the front of his trousers. Passing by the bar he appropriated three mugs of ale that had been set out for other customers and carried them over to the table. He slammed them down, sloshing ale over everything and everyone, and grinned. "Well, Queesinard, my lovely wife talk you into coming with us?"

"Yes," answered Paithan, thinking that Redleaf didn't act like any jealous husband the elf had ever known. "But I've got to send the overseer and my slaves back. They'll be needed at home. And the name's Quindiniar."

"Good idea. The fewer who know about our route the better. Say, you mind if I call you Quin?"

"My given name's Paithan."

"Sure thing, Quin. A toast to the dwarves, then. To their beards and their money. They keep one and I'll take the other!" Roland laughed. "Here, now, Rega. Quit drinking that grape juice. You know you can't stand it."

Rega flushed again. With a deprecating glance at Paithan, she thrust aside the glass of wine. Lifting a mug of ale to her berry-stained lips, she quaffed it skillfully.

What the hell? thought Paithan, and downed his ale in a gulp.

## CHAPTER 13

### SOMEWHERE OVER PRYAN

#### THE FLICK OF A WET, ROUGH TONGUE AND AN INSISTENT WHINING NUDGED

Haplo to wakefulness. He sat up immediately, reflexively, his senses attuned to the world around him-though his mind still fought off the effects of whatever it was that had knocked him out.

He was in his ship, he recognized, lying in the captain's berth-a mattress spread over a wooden bed frame built into the ship's hull. The dog crouched on the bed near him, eyes bright, tongue lolling. Apparently, the animal had become bored and had decided that its master had been out long enough.

They had made it, seemingly. They had, once again, passed through Death's Gate.

The Patryn didn't move. He slowed his breathing, listening, feeling. He sensed nothing wrong, unlike the last time he'd come through Death's Gate. The ship was on an even keel. He had no sensation of movement,

but assumed it was flying because he had not made the alterations in the magic needed to land the craft. Certain runes on the inside of the hull were glowing, meaning they had activated. He studied them, saw that they were sigla having to do with air, pressure, and maintaining gravity. Odd- He wondered why.

Haplo relaxed, fondled the dog's ears. Brilliant sunshine poured through the hatch above his bed. Turning over lazily, the Patryn stared curiously out a porthole into this new world he had entered.

He saw nothing except sky and, far distant, a circle of bright flame burning through the haze, the sun. At least the world had a sun-it had four, in fact. He remembered his lord's questioning that particular point and wondered, briefly, why the Sartan hadn't thought to include the suns on their charts. Perhaps because, as he had discovered, the Death's Gate was located in the center of the solar cluster.

Haplo climbed out of bed and made his way to the bridge. The runes on the hull and wings would prevent his ship from crashing into anything, but it would be wise to make certain he was not hovering in front of a gigantic granite cliff.

He wasn't. The view from the bridge provided another vast expanse of wide-open sky as far as he could see-up, down, sideways.

Haplo crouched down on his haunches, absently scratching the dog's head to keep the animal quiet. He had not reckoned on this and wasn't certain what to do. In its own way, this slightly green-tinted blue, hazy emptiness was as frightening as the ferocious, perpetually raging storm into which he'd flown entering Arianus. The silence around him now echoed loudly as the booming thunder had then. Admittedly his ship wasn't being tossed about like a toy in the hands of an obstreperous child, rain wasn't lashing the hull-already damaged by his passage through Death's Gate. Here the sky was cloudless, serene . . . and not a single object, except the blazing sun, in sight.

The cloudless sky had a sort of mesmerizing effect on Haplo. He tore his gaze from it, and moved over to the steering stone on the bridge. He placed his hands on it, one on either side, and the action completed the circle-his right hand on the stone, the stone between his hands, his left hand on the stone, his left hand attached to his arm, arm to body, body to arm, and back to his right hand again. Aloud, he spoke the runes. The stone began to gleam blue beneath his hands, light welled up from underneath his fingers; he could see the red veins of his own life. The light grew brighter so that he could barely stand to look at it, and he squinted his eyes. Brighter still and suddenly beams of radiant blue shot out from the stone, extending out in all directions.

Haplo was forced to avert his gaze, half-turning his head against the brilliance. He had to keep looking at the stone, keep watching. When one of the navigational beams encountered solid mass-hopefully land-it would bounce back, return to his ship, and light another rune on the stone, turning it red. Haplo could then steer in that direction.

Confidently, expectantly, he waited.

Nothing.

Patience was one virtue the Patrins had learned in the Labyrinth, learned by having it beaten and twisted and bashed into them. Lose your temper, act impulsively, irrationally and the Labyrinth would claim you. If you were lucky, you died. If not, if you survived, you carried with you a lesson that would haunt the rest of your days. But you learned. Yes, you learned.

Hands on the steering stone, Haplo waited.

The dog sat beside him, ears up, eyes alert, mouth open in an expectant grin. Time passed. The dog eased himself down on the floor, front feet extended, head up, still watching, its plummy tail brushing the floor. More time. The dog yawned. Its head sank beneath its paws; his eyes, on Haplo, became reproachful. Haplo

waited, hands on the stone. The blue beams had long since ceased to shoot out. The only object he could see were the suns, gleaming like a superheated coin.

Haplo began to wonder if the ship was still flying. He couldn't tell. Magically controlled, the cables didn't creak, the wings didn't move, the ship made no sound. Haplo had no point of reference, he couldn't see clouds scudding past, he couldn't see land drawing near or receding, there was no horizon.

The dog rolled over on its side and went to sleep.

The runes beneath his hands remained dark and lifeless. Haplo felt fear's small sharp teeth start to gnaw at him. He told himself he was being foolish, there was absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

That's just the point, something inside him answered. There's nothing.

Perhaps the stone was malfunctioning? The thought crossed Haplo's mind, but he immediately banished it. Magic was never fallible. Those using it might be, but Haplo knew he had activated the beams correctly. He envisioned them in his mind, traveling with incredible speed into the void. Traveling, traveling, an immense distance. What did it mean, if the light didn't come back?

Haplo pondered. A beam of light, shining in the darkness of a cave, lights your way a certain distance, then eventually grows dim and finally fades out completely. The beam is bright, concentrated around its source. But as it travels farther away from the source, it begins to break apart, diffuse. A shiver prickled Haplo's skin, the hair on his arms rose. The dog sat up suddenly, teeth bared, a low growl rumbling in its throat.

The blue beams were incredibly powerful. They would have to travel an immense distance before they weakened to the point where they could not return. Or perhaps they had encountered some sort of obstacle? Haplo slowly withdrew his hands from the stone.

He eased himself down beside the dog, soothing it with his hand. The animal, sensing his master's trouble, gazed at him anxiously, tail thumping against the deck, asking what to do.

"I don't know," Haplo murmured, staring out into the dazzling, empty sky.

For the first time in his life, he felt completely helpless. He'd waged a desperate battle for his life on Arianus and he hadn't experienced the terror he was beginning to feel now. He'd faced countless enemies in the Labyrinth-foes many times his size and strength and sometimes intelligence-and he'd never succumbed to the panic starting to bubble up within him.

"This is nonsense!" he said aloud, leaping to his feet with a suddenness that unnerved the dog and caused it to scramble back, out of his way.

Haplo ran through the ship, staring out every portal, peering through every crack and cranny, hoping desperately to see some sign of something-anything-except endless blue-green sky and those damn, brightly shining suns. He climbed up top, moved out onto the ship's huge wings. The sensation of wind blowing against his face gave him his first impression that they were indeed moving through the air. Grasping onto the rail, he stared out over the ship's hull, stared down, down, down into an endless blue-green void. And he wondered suddenly if he was looking down. Perhaps he was looking up. Perhaps he was flying upside down. He had no way to tell.

The dog stood at the foot of the ladder, gazing up at its master and whining. The animal was afraid to come topside. Haplo had a sudden vision of falling over the hull, falling and falling endlessly, and he didn't blame the dog for not wanting to risk it. The Patryn's hands, gripping the rail, were wet with sweat. With an effort, he pried them loose and hurried back down below.

Once on the bridge, he paced its length, back and forth, and cursed himself for a coward. "Damn!" he swore and slammed his fist hard into the solid wood bulkhead.

The runes tattooed on his skin protected him from damage, the Patryn didn't even have the satisfaction of feeling pain. Furious, he was about to hit the hull again when a sharp, imperative bark halted him. The dog stood on its hind legs, pawing at him frantically, begging him to stop. Haplo saw himself reflected in the animal's liquid eyes, saw a man frantic, on the verge of madness.

The horrors of the Labyrinth had not broken him. Why should this? Just because he had no idea where he was going, just because he couldn't tell up from down, just because he had the horrible feeling he was going to drift endlessly through this empty blue-green sky . . . Stop it!

Haplo drew a deep, shivering breath and patted the dog on the flank.

"It's all right, boy. I'm better now. It's all right." The dog, eyeing his master uneasily, fell back down on all fours.

"Control," said Haplo. "I've got to get control of myself." The word struck him. "Control. That's what's the matter with me. I've lost control. Even in the Labyrinth, I was in control. I was able to do something to affect my own fate. Fighting the chaodyn's, I was outnumbered, defeated before I started, yet I had a chance to act. At the end, I chose to die. Then you came"-he stroked the dog's head-"and I chose to live. But here, I've got no choice, it seems. There's nothing I can do. . . ."

Or was there? Panic subsided, terror was banished. Cool, rational thought poured into the void left behind. Haplo crossed to the steering stone. He put his hands upon it a second time, placing them over a different set of runes. Hand, stone, hand, body, hand. Again the circle was complete. He spoke the runes, and the beams shot out in all directions, this time with a different purpose.

They weren't seeking mass-land or rock. This time he sent them seeking life.

The wait seemed endless, and Haplo began to feel himself sliding into the dark abyss of fear when suddenly the lights returned. Haplo stared, puzzled, confused. The lights were coming from every direction, bombarding him, streaming down onto the stone from above, below, all around him.

That was impossible, it didn't make sense. How could he be surrounded-on all sides-by life? He pictured the world as he had seen it in the Sartan's diagram-a round ball, floating in space. He should be getting readings from only one direction. Haplo concentrated, studied the lights, and decided finally that the beams slanting over his left shoulder were stronger than any of the others. He felt relieved; he would sail in that direction.

Haplo moved his hands to another point on the stone, the ship slowly began to turn, altering course. The cabin that had before been drenched in bright sunlight began to darken, shadows crept across the floor. When the beam was aligned with the proper point on the stone, the rune flashed a bright red. Course was set. Haplo removed his hands.

Smiling, he sat down beside the dog and relaxed. He'd done all he could. They were sailing toward life, of some sort. As for whatever those other confusing signals had been, Haplo could only assume he'd made an error.

Not something he did often. He could forgive himself one, he decided, considering the circumstances.

## CHAPTER 14

### SOMEWHERE, GUNIS

"WE KNOW THE BEST TRAILS," REGA HAD TOLD PAITHAN.

As it turned out, there was no best trail. There was one trail. And neither Rega nor Roland had ever seen it. Neither brother nor sister had ever been to the dwarven kingdom, a fact they took care to keep from the elf.

"How tough can it be?" Roland had asked his sister. "It'll be just like all the other trails through the jungle."

But it wasn't, and after a few cycles' travel, Rega was beginning to think they'd made a mistake. Several mistakes, in fact.

The trail, such as it existed and where it existed, was quite new. It had been carved through the jungle by dwarven hands, which meant that it wended its way far beneath the upper levels of the huge trees where humans and elves were more comfortable. It meandered and turned and twisted through dark, shadowy regions. Sunlight, when it could be seen at all, appeared reflected through a roof of green.

The air this far below the upper reaches seemed to have been trapped here for centuries. It was stagnant, hot, and humid. The rains that fell in torrents above trickled below, filtered through innumerable branches and leaves and moss beds. The water was not clear and sparkling, but had a brownish cast to it and tasted strongly of moss. It was a different, dismal world and after a penton's [19] traveling, the humans in the party grew heartily sick of it. The elf, always interested in new places, found it rather exciting and maintained his usual cheerful demeanor.

The trail had not been built to accommodate loaded caravans, however. Often, the vines, trees, and brush were so thick that the tyros could not crawl through with the packs on their hard-shelled backs. This meant that the three had to remove the loaded baskets, lug them through the jungle by hand, all the while cajoling the tyros into following them.

Several times, the path came to a halt at the edge of a bed of shaggy gray moss and plunged downward into even deeper darkness; no bridges had been built connecting the way. Again, the tyros had to be unloaded so that they could spin their webs and float down. The heavy baskets had to be lowered by hand.

Up above, the two men-arms nearly breaking-braced themselves and slowly paid out the rope, lowering the baggage through the air. Most of the heavy work fell to Roland. Paithan's slender body and light musculature were of little help. Eventually he took the job of fixing the rope around a tree limb and holding it fast, while Roland-with a strength that seemed marvelous to the elf-handled the lowering by himself.

They dropped Rega down first, to be on hand to untie the baskets as they were lowered and to keep an eye on the tyros to be certain they didn't crawl off. Standing at the bottom of the cliff in the stagnant gray-green darkness, alone, hearing growls and snufflings and the sudden, hair-raising call of the vampire sloth, Rega gripped her raztar and cursed the day she'd let Roland talk her into this. Not only because of the danger, but because of another reason-something completely unforeseen, unexpected. Rega was falling in love.

"Dwarves really live in places like this?" asked Paithan, looking up, up, up and still not being able to see the sun through the tangled, dark mass of moss and tree limbs overhead.

"Yeah," said Roland shortly, not particularly eager to discuss the issue, afraid that the elf might ask more questions about the dwarves than he-Roland-was prepared to answer.

The three were resting after encountering the steepest drop yet. Their hempen ropes had barely been long enough, and even then Rega'd been forced to climb up a tree and untie the baskets, which were left hovering some three feet off the ground.

"Why, your hands are covered with blood!" Rega exclaimed.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Paithan, looking ruefully at his palms. "I slipped coming down that last length of rope."

"It's this damn wet air," muttered Rega. "I feel like I'm living under the sea. Here, let me treat those for you. Roland, dear, can you bring me some fresh water."

Roland, slumped wearily on the gray moss, glared at his "wife": Why me?

Rega shot her "husband" a vicious, sidelong look. Getting me alone with him was your idea.

Roland, glowering, rose to his feet and stomped off into the jungle, carrying the waterskin with him.

Now was the perfect time for Rega to continue her seduction of the elf. Paithan obviously admired her, treating her with unfailing courtesy and respect. In fact, she had never met a man who treated her so well. But holding the slim white hands with long graceful fingers in her own short, stubby-fingered brown hands, Rega felt suddenly shy and awkward as a young girl at her first village dance.

"Your touch is very gentle," said Paithan.

Rega blushed hotly and glanced up at him from beneath her long, black eyelashes. Paithan was regarding her with an unusual expression for the carefree elf-his eyes were grave, serious.

I wish you weren't another man's wife.

I'm not! Rega wanted to scream.

Her fingers began to tremble, and she snatched them away, fumbling in her kit. What's wrong with me? He's an elf! His money, that's what we're after. That's all that's important.

"I've got some salve, made of spom bark. It's going to sting, I'm afraid, but you'll be healed by morning."

"The wound I'm suffering will never heal." Paithan's hand slid over Rega's arm, his touch soft and caressing.

Rega held perfectly still, allowing his hand to glide over her skin, up her arm, lighting fires as it passed. Her skin burned, the flames spread to her chest and constricted her breathing. The elf's hand slid around to the small of her back, he drew her near. Rega, holding onto the bottle of salve tightly, let herself be pulled to him. She didn't look at him, she couldn't. This will work out fine, she told herself.

The elf's arms were slender and smooth skinned, his body lithe. She tried to ignore the fact that her heart was beating so she thought it might crash through her chest.

Roland will come back and find us ... kissing . . . and he and I will take this elf ... for everything . . .

"No!" Rega gasped and broke away from Paithan's embrace. Her skin burned, inexplicably she shook with chills. "Don't . . . do that!"

"I'm sorry," said Paithan, immediately drawing away. His breathing, too, was coming in short, deep gasps. "I don't know what came over me. You're married. I must accept that."

Rega didn't answer. She kept her back to him, wishing more than anything that he'd hold her in his arms, knowing that she'd pull away from him again if he did.

This is insane! she told herself, wiping a tear from her eye with the heel of her hand. I've let men I don't care two stone for put their hands all over me. Yet this one ... I want him . . . and I can't . . .

"It won't happen again, I promise you," said Paithan.

Rega knew he meant it and cursed her heart for shriveling up and dying at the thought. She'd tell him the truth. The words were on her lips, then she paused.

What would she say? Tell him that she and Roland weren't husband and wife, that they were really brother and sister, that they'd lied in order to trap the elf into an improper liaison, that they were planning to blackmail him? She could see his look of disgust and hatred. Maybe he'd leave!

It would be better if he did, whispered the cold, hard voice of logic. What chance for happiness do you have with an elf? Even if you found a way to tell him you were free to accept his love, how long would it last? He doesn't love you, no elf could truly love a human. He's amusing himself. That's all it would be. A dalliance, lasting a season or two. Then he'll leave, return to his people, and you'll be an outcast among your own kind for having submitted to an elf's caresses.

No, Rega answered stubbornly. He does love me. I've seen it in his eyes. And I've proof of it-he didn't try to force his advances on me.

Very well, then, said that irritating voice, so he loves you. What now? You marry. You're both outcasts. He can't go home, you can't either. Your love is barren, for elves and humans can't reproduce. You wander the world in loneliness, years pass. You grow old and haggard, while he remains young and vital . . .

"Hey, what's going on here?" demanded Roland, leaping unexpectedly out of the brush. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Nothing," said Rega coldly.

"I can see that," murmured Roland, edging dose to his sister. She and the elf were standing at opposite edges of the small clearing in the jungle growth, as far apart as possible. "What's going on, Rega? You two have a fight?"

"Nothing! All right! Just leave me alone!" Rega glanced up into the dark and twisted trees, clasped her arms around her and shivered. "This isn't the most romantic spot, you know," she said in a low voice.

"C'mom, Sis." Roland grinned. "You'd make love to a man in a pigsty if he paid you well enough."

Rega slapped him. The blow was hard, well aimed. Roland, his hand to his aching jaw, stared at her in amazement.

"What'd you do that for? I meant it as a compliment!"

Rega turned on her heel and stalked out of the clearing. At the edge, she half-turned again and tossed something toward the elf. "Here, rub that on the sores."

You're right, she told herself, hurrying into the jungle where she could have her cry out in private. I'll leave things just the way they are. We'll deliver the weapons, he'll leave, and that'll be an end of it. I'll smile and tease him and never let him see he meant anything more to me than just a good time.

Paithan, taken by surprise, just barely caught the thrown bottle before it smashed on the ground. He watched Rega plunge into the brush, he could hear her crashing through the undergrowth.

"Women," said Roland, rubbing his bruised cheek and shaking his head. He took the waterskin over to the elf and dropped it at his feet. "Must be her time of season."

Paithan flushed a deep red and gave Roland a disgusted look.

The human winked. "What's the matter, Quin, I say something to embarrass you?"

"In my land, men don't talk about such things," Paithan rebuked.

"Yeah?" Roland glanced back toward where Rega had disappeared, then looked over at the elf and his grin widened. "I guess in your land men don't do a lot of things."

Paithan's flush of anger deepened to guilt. Did Roland see Rega and me together? Is this his way of letting me know, warning me to keep my hands off?

Paithan was forced, for Rega's sake, to swallow the insult. Sitting down on the ground, he began to spread the salve on his skinned and bloody palms, wincing as the brown-colored gunk bit into raw flesh and exposed nerves. He welcomed the pain. At least it was better than the one biting at his heart.

Paithan had enjoyed Rega's mild flirtations the first cycle or two on their journey until it had suddenly occurred to him that he was enjoying them too much. He found himself watching intently the play of the smooth muscles in her shapely legs, the warm glow of the firelight in her brown eyes, the trick she had of running her tongue across her berry-stained lips when she was deep in thought.

The second night on the trail, when she and Roland had taken their blanket to the other side of the glade and laid down next to each other in the shadowed sunlight of rain's hour, Paithan had thought his insides would twist out of him in jealousy. No matter that he never saw the two kissing or even touching affectionately. Indeed, they treated each other with a casual familiarity he found quite astonishing, even in husband and wife. He had decided, by the fourth cycle on the trail, that Roland-though a good enough fellow as humans go-didn't appreciate the treasure he had for a wife.

Paithan felt comforted by this knowledge, it gave him an excuse to let his feelings for the human woman grow and blossom, when he knew very well he should have ripped them up by the roots. Now the plant was in full bloom, the vine twining around his heart. He realized now, too late, the harm that had been done ... to them both.

Rega loved him. He knew, he'd felt it in her trembling body, he'd seen it in that one, brief look she'd given him. His heart should have been singing with joy. It was dumb with sick despair. What folly! What mad folly! Oh, sure, he could have his moments of pleasure. He'd done that with countless human women. Love them, then leave them. They expected nothing more, they wanted nothing more. And neither had he. Until now.

Yet, what did he want? A relationship that would cut them both adrift from their lives? A relationship looked upon with abhorrence by both worlds? A relationship that would give them nothing, not even children? A relationship he would have to watch come at last and inevitably to a bitter end?

No, nothing good can come of it. I'll leave, he thought. Go back home. I'll give them the tyros. Callie'll be mad at me anyway. I might as well be hung for a sheep as a goat, as the saying goes. I'll leave now. This very moment.

But he continued sitting in the clearing, absently spreading salve on his palms. He thought he could hear, far away, the sound of someone weeping. He tried to ignore it, but eventually he could stand it no longer.

"I think I hear your wife crying," he said to Roland. "Maybe something's wrong."

"Rega?" Roland glanced up from feeding the tyros. He appeared amused. "Crying? Naw, must be a bird you're hearing. Rega never cries, not even the time when she got stabbed in the raztar fight. Did you ever notice the scar? It's on her left thigh, about here . . ."

Paithan rose to his feet and stalked off into the jungle, moving in a direction opposite to that which Rega had taken.

Roland watched the elf leave out of the corner of his eye and hummed a bawdy song currently making the rounds of the taverns.

"He's fallen for her like a rotten tree limb in a storm," he told the tyros. "Rega's playing it cooler than usual, but I guess she knows what she's doing. He's an elf, after all. Still, sex is sex. Little elves come from somewhere and I don't think it's heaven.

"But, ugh! Elven women! Skinny and bony-you might as well take a stick to bed. No wonder poor old Quin's following Rega around with his tongue hanging out. It's only a matter of time. I'll catch him with his pants down in a cycle or two, and then we'll fix him! Too bad, though." Roland reflected. Tossing the waterskin on the ground, he leaned wearily back against a tree and stretched, easing the stiffness from his limbs. "I'm beginning to kind of like the guy."

## CHAPTER 15

### THE DWARVEN KINGDOM

#### THURN

FOND OF DARKNESS AND OF DELVING AND TUNNELING, THE DWARVES OF PRYAN did not build their cities in the treetops, as did the elves, or on the moss plains, as did the humans. The dwarves carved their way downward through the dark vegetation, seeking the dirt and stone that was their heritage, though that heritage was little more than a dim memory of an ancient past in another world.

The kingdom of Thurn was a vast cavern of vegetation. The dwarves dwelt and worked in homes and shops that had been bored deep and straight into the boles of gigantic chimney trees, so called because the wood did not burn easily and the smoke of dwarven fires was able to rise up through natural shafts in the tree's center. Branches and plant roots formed walkways and streets lit by flickering torchlight. The elves and humans lived in perpetual day. The dwarves lived in endless night-a night they loved and found blessed, but a night that Drugar feared was about to become permanent.

He received the message from his king during the dinner hour. It was a mark of the message's importance that it was delivered to him at mealtime, a time when one's full and complete attention is to be devoted to food and the all-important digestive process afterward. Talking is forbidden during the eating of the food and only pleasant subjects are discussed during the time following, to prevent the stomach's juices from turning rancid and causing gastric upset.

The king's messenger was profuse in his apologies for taking Drugar from his dinner but added that the matter was quite urgent. Drugar bolted from his chair, scattering crockery, causing his old manservant to grumble and predict dire things occurring in the young dwarf's stomach.

Drugar, who had a dark feeling he knew the purport of the message, almost told the old servant that they'd be fortunate indeed if all the dwarves had to worry about was indigestion. But he kept silent. Among the dwarves, the elderly were treated with respect.

His father's bore-hole house was located next to his [20] and Drugar didn't have far to go. He ran this distance, but then stopped when he reached the door, suddenly reluctant to enter, reluctant to hear what he knew he must. Standing in the darkness, fingering the rune-stone he wore around his neck, he asked for courage of the One Dwarf. Drawing a deep breath, he opened the door and entered the room.

His father's house was exactly the same as Drugar's house, which was exactly the same as every other dwarven house in Thurn. The tree's wood had been smoothed and polished to a warm, yellowish color. The floor was flat, the walls rising to an arched ceiling. It was plainly furnished. Being king gave his father no special privileges, only additional responsibility. The king was the One Dwarf's head and the head, though it thinks for the body, certainly isn't any more important to the body than, say, the heart or (most important to many dwarves) the stomach.

Drugar found his father sitting at his meal, the half-full plates shoved aside. In his hand he held a piece of bark whose smooth side was thickly covered with the strong, angular letters of the dwarven language.

"What is the news. Father?"

"The giants are coming," said the old dwarf. "The scouts have watched them. The giants wiped out Kasnar-the people, the cities, everything. And they are coming this way."

"Perhaps," said Drugar, "they will be stopped by the sea."

"They will stop at the sea, but not for long," said the old dwarf. "They are not skilled with tools, say the scouts. What tools they use, they use to destroy, not to create. It will not occur to them to build ships. But they will go around, come by land."

"Maybe they will turn back. Maybe all they wanted was to take over Kasnar."

His words were spoken from hope, not belief. And once the words left his lips he knew even his hope was false.

"They did not take over Kasnar," said his father, with a heavy sigh. "They destroyed it-utterly. Their aim is not to conquer, but to kill."

"Then you know what we must do. Father. We must ignore the fools who say that these giants are our brothers! We must fortify our city and arm our people. Listen, Father." Drugar leaned near, lowering his voice, though the two were the only ones present in the old dwarfs dwelling. "I have contacted a human weapons dealer. Elven railbows, boltarches! They will be ours!"

The old dwarf looked at his son, a flame flickered deep in the eyes that had been dark and lackluster. "That is good!" Reaching across, he laid one gnarled hand on his son's strong one. "You are quick thinking and daring, Drugar. You will make a good king." He shook his head, stroked the iron gray beard that flowed almost to his knees. "But I do not believe the weapons will come in time."

"They had better," growled Drugar, "or someone will pay!" The dwarf rose to his feet, began pacing the small, dark room built far below the moss surface, as far from the sun as the dwarves could get. "I will call out the army-"

"No," said the old dwarf.

"Father, you are being stubborn-"

"And you are a khadak!" [21] The old dwarf raised a walking stick, gnarled and twisted as his own limbs, and pointed it at his son. "I said you would make a good king. And so you will. IF you will keep the fire under control! The flame of your thoughts burns dear and rises high, but instead of keeping the fire banked, you let it flare up, blaze out of control!"

Drugar's face darkened, his thick brows came together. The fire of which his father spoke burned within him, heated scorching words. Drugar fought his temper, the words seared his lips but He kept them inside. He loved and honored his father, though he thought the old man was caving in beneath this terrible blow.

He forced himself to try to speak calmly. "Father, the army-"

"-will turn on itself and fight each other!" the old dwarf said in a quiet voice, "is that what you want, Drugar?"

The old dwarf drew himself up. His height was no longer impressive: the bowed back would not straighten, the legs could no longer support the body without assistance. But Drugar, towering over his father, saw the dignity in the trembling stance, the wisdom in the dimming eyes, and felt himself a child again.

"Half the army will refuse to bear arms against their 'brothers,' the giants. And what will you do, Drugar? Order them to go to war? And how will you enforce that order, son? Will you command the other half of the army to pick up arms against their brothers?"

"No!" cried the old king, slamming the walking stick against the floor. The thatched walls quivered at his wrath. "Never will there come a day when the One Dwarf are divided! Never will come a day when the body sheds the blood of itself!"

"Forgive me, Father. I did not think."

The old king sighed, his body shriveled and collapsed in upon itself. Tottering, he grasped his son's hand. With Drugar's aid and that of the walking stick, the old dwarf resumed his chair. "Keep the flames in check son. Keep them in check. Or they will destroy all in their path, including you, Drugar. Including you. Now go, return to your meal. I am sorry I had to interrupt it."

Drugar left and returned to his house, but did not finish his meal. Back and forth, back and forth he stumped across his room. He tried hard to bank his inner fire, but it was useless. The flames of fear for his people, once kindled, would not readily die down. He could not and would not disobey his father. The man was not only his father but also his king. However, Drugar decided, he wouldn't let the fire die completely. When the enemy came, they would find scorching flame, not cold, dark ash.

The dwarven army was not mobilized. But Drugar privately (and without his father's knowledge) drew up battle plans and informed those dwarves who believed as he did to keep their weapons close to hand. He kept in close contact with the dwarven scouts, followed through their reports the progress of the giants. Thwarted by the Whispering Sea, the giants turned to the east, traveling overland, moving relentlessly toward their goal-whatever goal that was.

Drugar did not think it was to ally themselves with the dwarves. Dark rumors came to Thurn of massacres of dwarves in the northern settlements of Grish and Klag, but the giants were difficult to track and the reports of the scouts (those reports that came through) were garbled and made little sense.

"Father," pleaded Drugar, "you must let me call out the army now! How can anyone discount these messages!"

"Humans," said his father, sighing. "The council has decided that it is the human refugees, fleeing the giants, who are committing these crimes! They say that the giants will join us and then we will have our revenge!"

"I've interviewed the scouts personally. Father," said Drugar with rising impatience. "Those who are left. Fewer and fewer come in every day. Those who do are scared out of their wits!"

"Indeed?" said his father, eyeing his son shrewdly. "And what do they tell you they've seen?"

Drugar hesitated, frustrated. "All right, Father! So they've not actually seen anything!"

The old dwarf nodded wearily. "I've heard them, Drugar. I've heard the wild tales about 'the jungle moving.' How can I go to the council with such elf-krat?"

It was on Drugar's lips to tell his father what the council could do with its own krat but he knew that such a rude outburst wouldn't help matters any and would only anger his father. It wasn't the king's fault. Drugar knew his father had said much the same to the Council as his son had said to him. The council of the One Dwarf, made up of the elders in the tribe, didn't want to hear.

Clamping his mouth shut so that no hot words might escape him, Drugar stomped out of his father's house and made his way through the vast and complex series of tunnels carved through the vegetation to the top. Emerging, blinking, into the sunlight, he stared into the tangle of leaves.

Something was out there. And it was coming his way. And he didn't believe it was coming in the spirit of brotherly love. He waited, with a sense of increasing desperation, for the arrival of the magical, intelligent, elven weapons.

If those two humans had double-crossed him, he vowed by the body, mind, and soul of the One Dwarf that he would make them pay-with their lives.

## CHAPTER 16

### SOMEWHERE ELSE, GUNIS

"I HATE THIS," SAID REGA

Two more cycles' traveling took them farther down into the depths of the jungle, down far below the top level, far below bright sunshine and fresh air and cool rain. They had come to the edge of a moss plain. The trail dropped off into a deep ravine that was lost in shadow. Lying flat on top of the moss cliff, peering down into the depths, they couldn't see what was below them. The thick leaves of the tree branches above and ahead of them completely cut off sunlight. Going below, they would be traveling in almost total darkness.

"How far away are we?" asked Paithan.

"From the dwarves? About two cycles' journey, I should think," remarked Roland, peering into the shadows.

"You think? Don't you know?"

The human heaved himself to his feet. "You lose all sense of time down there. No hour flowers, no flowers of any sort."

Paithan didn't comment. He stared over the edge, as if fascinated by the darkness.

"I'm going to go check on the tyros."

Rega stood up, gave the elf a sharp, meaningful glance, and motioned to her brother. Together, silently, the two walked away from the edge, returning to a small glade where the tyros had been tethered.

"This isn't working. You've got to tell him the truth," Rega said, her fingers tugging on the strap of one of the baskets.

"Me?" said Roland.

"Keep your voice down! Well, we have to, then."

"And just how much of the truth do you plan to tell him, Wife, dear?"

Rega shot her brother a vicious sidelong glance- Sullenly, she looked away. "Just . . . admit that we've never been on this trail before. Admit we don't know where the hell we are or where the hell we're going."

"He'll leave."

"Good!" Rega gave the strap a violent jerk that made the tyro bleat in protest. "I hope he does!"

"What's got into you?" Roland demanded.

Rega glanced and shivered. "It's this place. I hate it. And" -she turned back, staring at the strap, her fingers absently stroking it-"the elf. He's different. Not like what you told me. He's not smug and overbearing. He isn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He's not a coward. He stands his share of the watch, he's ripped his palms to shreds on those ropes. He's cheerful and funny. He even cooks, which is more than you've ever done, Roland! He's . . . nice, that's all. He doesn't deserve . . . what we were planning."

Roland stared at his sister, saw a faint flush of crimson creep up from her brown throat to her cheeks. She kept her eyes lowered. Reaching out his hand, Roland caught hold of Rega's chin and turned her face toward him. Shaking his head, he let out a low whistle.

"I believe you've fallen for the guy!"

Angrily, Rega struck his hand away.

"No, I haven't! He's an elf, after all."

Frightened by her own feelings, nervous and tense, furious at herself and at her brother, Rega spoke with more force than she intended. Her lips curled at the word "elf," she seemed to spit it out in disgust, like she'd tasted something foul and nasty.

Or at least that's what it sounded like to Paithan.

The elf had risen from his place overlooking the drop and gone back to report to Roland that he thought their ropes were too short, there was no way they could lower the baggage. Moving with elven lightness and grace, he hadn't intentionally planned to sneak up on the two. That was just the way it turned out. Hearing clearly Rega's last statement, he crouched in the shadows of a dangling evir vine, hidden by its broad, heart-shaped leaves, and listened.

"Look, Rega, we've come this far, I say we carry the plan out to the end. He's wild about you! He'll tumble. Just get him alone in some dark patch, maneuver him into a clinch. I'll rush in and save your honor, threaten to tell all. He forks over the cash to keep us quiet and we're set. Between that and this sale, we'll live high for the next season." Roland reached out his hand, affectionately stroked Rega's long, dark hair. "Think about the money, kid. We've gone hungry too many times to pass up this chance. Like you said, he's only an elf."

Paithan's stomach clenched. Hastily, he turned away, moving silently through the trees, not particularly watching or caring where he was going. He missed Rega's response to her husband, but that was just as well. If he had seen her look up at Roland, grinning conspiratorially; if he had heard her pronounce the word elf in that tone of loathing one more time, he would have killed her.

Falling against a tree, suddenly dizzy and nauseous, Paithan gasped for breath and wondered at himself. He couldn't believe he was acting like this. What did it matter, after all? So the little slut had been playing with him? He'd noticed her game in the tavern before they ever left on this journey! What had blinded him?

She had. He'd actually been fool enough to think she was falling in love with him! Those conversations they'd had along the trail. He'd told her stories about his homeland, about his sisters, his father, and the crazy old wizard. She'd laughed, she'd seemed interested. Her admiration had shone in her eyes.

And then there had been all those times they'd touched, just by accident, bodies brushing against each other, hands meeting when they reached for the same waterskin. Then there'd been the trembling, quivering eyelids, heaving breasts, flushed skin.

"You're good, Rega!" he whispered through clenched teeth. "Really good. Yes, I'm 'wild about you!' I would have 'tumbled.' But not now! Now that I know you, little whore!" Closing his eyes tightly, squeezing back tears, the elf sagged against the tree. "Blessed Peytin, Holy Mother of us all, why did you do this to me?"

Perhaps it was the prayer-one of the few the elf had ever bothered to make-but he felt a jab of conscience. He'd known she belonged to another man. The elf had flirted with the woman in Roland's very presence. Paithan had to admit to himself that he'd found it exhilarating, seducing the wife beneath the husband's nose.

"You got what you deserved," Mother Peyton seemed to be saying to him. The goddess's voice bore an unfortunate resemblance to Calandra's, however, and it only made Paithan angrier.

"It was all in fun" he justified himself. "I would never have let it go too far, not really. And I certainly never meant to ... to fall in love."

That last statement, at least, was true and it made Paithan believe profoundly in all the rest.

"What's wrong? Paithan? What's the matter?"

The elf opened his eyes, turned around. Rega stood before him, her hand reaching for his arm. He drew back, away from her touch.

"Nothing," he said, swallowing.

"But you look terrible! Are you sick?" Rega reached for him again. "Do you have a fever?"

He took another step back. If she touches me, I'll strike her!

"Yeah. No, uh . . . no fever. I've been . . . sick. Maybe the water. Just. . . leave me alone for a bit."

Yes, I'm better now. Practically cured. Little whore. He found it difficult not to let his hatred and disgust show and so he kept his eyes averted, staring fixedly into the jungle.

"I think I should stay with you," said Rega. "You don't look good at all. Roland's gone off scouting around for another way down, maybe a shorter drop. He'll be gone for quite a while, I imagine-"

"Will he?" Paithan looked at her, a look so strange and piercing that it was Rega who now fell back a step before him. "Will he be gone a long, long time?"

"I don't-" Rega faltered.

Paithan lunged at her, grabbed the woman by the shoulders and kissed her, hard, his teeth cutting her soft lips. He tasted berry-juice and blood,

Rega struggled, squirming in his grasp. Of course, she'd have to put up a token resistance.

"Don't fight it!" he whispered. "I love you! I can't live without you!"

He expected her to melt, to moan, to cover him with kisses. And then Roland would come along, shocked, horrified, hurt. Only money would ease the pain of betrayal.

And I'll laugh! I'll laugh at both of them! And I'll tell them where to stick their money . . .

One arm around her back, the elf pressed the woman's half-naked body up against his. His other hand sought soft flesh.

A violent kick to the groin sent a flash of pain through Paithan. The elf doubled over. Strong hands hit him on the collar bone, knocking him backward, sending him crashing into the underbrush.

Face flushed, eyes flaring, Rega stood over him. "Don't you ever touch me again! Don't come near me! Don't even talk to me!"

Her dark hair rose, ruffled like the fur of a scared cat. She turned on her heel and stalked off.

Paithan, rolling on the ground in agony, had to admit he was now extremely confused.

Returning from his search for a more suitable way down onto the trail below, Roland crept back stealthily over the moss, hoping-once again-to catch Rega and her "lover" in a compromising position. He reached the place on the trail where he'd left his sister and the elf, drew in a breath to yell the outrage of an offended husband, and peeped out from the cover of a gigantic shadowcove plant. He exhaled in disappointment and exasperation.

Rega was sitting on the edge of the moss bank, huddled up in a ball very much like a bristle-back squirrel, her back hunched, her arms wrapped tightly around her legs. He could see her face from the side and, by her dark and stormy expression, could almost imagine the quills standing up all over her. His sister's "lover" stood as far from her as possible, on the other edge of the bank's lip. The elf was leaning at rather an odd angle, Roland noticed, almost as if favoring some tender part of himself.

"Strangest damn way to conduct a love affair I ever saw!" Roland muttered. "What do I have to do for that elf-draw him a picture? Maybe baby elves are slipped under the cracks of the doors at night! Or maybe that's what he thinks. We're going to have to have a little man to man talk, looks like.

"Hey," he called aloud, making a great deal of noise plunging out of the jungle, "I found a place, a ways down, where there's what looks like a rock ledge that sticks out of the moss. We can lower the baskets onto that, then drop 'em down the rest of the way. What happened to you?" he added, looking at Paithan, who was walking hunched over and moving gingerly. "He fell," said Rega.

"He did?" Roland-who had felt much the same way once after an encounter with an unfriendly barmaid-glanced at his sister in some suspicion. Rega hadn't exactly refused to go ahead with the plan to seduce the elf. But, the more Roland thought about it, he recalled that she hadn't exactly said she would, either. He didn't dare say anything more, however. Rega's face might have been frozen by a basilisk, and the look she cast him might have turned her brother to stone, as well.

"I fell," agreed Paithan, voice carefully expressionless. "I-uh- straddled a tree limb coming down." "Ouch!" Roland winced in sympathy.

"Yeah, ouch," repeated the elf. He didn't look at Rega. Rega wasn't looking at Paithan. Faces set, jaws rigid, both stared straight at Roland. Neither actually saw him.

Roland was completely at a loss. He didn't believe their story and he would have liked very much to question his sister and worm the truth out of her. But he couldn't very well drag Rega off for a chat without making the elf suspicious.

And then, when Rega was like this, Roland wasn't certain he wanted to be alone with her anyway. Rega's father had been the town butcher. Roland's father had been the town baker. (Their mother, for all her faults, had always seen to it that the family was well fed-) There were times when Rega bore an uncanny resemblance to her father. One of those times was now. He could almost see her standing over a freshly butchered carcass, a bloodthirsty gleam in her eye.

Roland stammered and waved his hand vaguely. "The . . . uh , . . spot I found is in that direction, a few hundred feet. Can you make it that far?"

"Yes!" Paithan grit his teeth.

"I'll go see to the tyros," stated Rega.

"Quin, here, can help-"

"I don't need any help!" Rega snapped.

"She doesn't need any help!" Paithan muttered.

Rega went one way, the elf went the opposite, neither looking at the other. Roland stood in the middle of the empty clearing, rubbing his stubbly brownish blond growth of beard.

"You know, I think I was mistaken. She really doesn't like him. And I think her hate's beginning to rub off on the elf! Things between them were going so well, too. I wonder what went wrong? It's no good talking to Rega, not when she's in this mood. There must be something I can do." He could hear his sister pleading, flattering, trying to get the reluctant tyros to move. Paithan, hobbling along the edge of the moss bank, cast a disgusted glance in Rega's direction.

"There's only one thing I can think of to do," Roland mused. "Just keep throwing them together. Sooner or later, something's bound to happen."

## CHAPTER 17

### IN THE SHADOWS, GUNIS

"ARE YOU SURE THAT-S ROCK?" PAITHAN ASKED. PEERING DOWN INTO THE gloom at a patch of grayish white beneath them, barely visible through a tangle of vines and leaves.

"Sure, I'm sure," answered Roland. "Remember, we've traveled this route before."

"It's just that I've never heard of rock formations this far up in the jungle."

"We're not exactly that far up anymore, remember? We've dropped quite a ways down."

"Well, we're not getting anywhere standing here staring at it!" put in Rega, hands on her hips. "We're cycles late with the delivery as it is. And you mark my words, Blackbeard'll try to shave off the price. I'll go down, if you're afraid, elf!"

"I'll go," countered Paithan. "I don't weigh as much as you do and if the outcrop is unstable, I'll-"

"Weigh as much! Are you saying that I'm fa-"

"You both go," interrupted Roland in soothing tones. "I'll lower you and Rega down there, Quin, then you lower Rega on down to the bottom. I'll send the packs to you and you can pass them on down to my sis-er-my wife."

"Look, Roland, I think the elf should lower you and I down-"

"Yes, Redleaf, that does, indeed, seem to me to be a much better solution-"

"Nonsense!" Roland interrupted, pleased with his own deviousness, further plots fomenting in his mind. "I'm the strongest and from here down to that outcrop is the longest haul. Any arguments there?"

Paithan glanced at the human male-with his square-jawed handsome face and his rippling biceps-and clamped his mouth shut. Rega didn't look at her brother at all. Biting her lip, she crossed her arms over her chest and glared down into the shadowy gloom of the jungle below.

Paithan fixed a rope around a tree limb, cinched it tight around himself and hopped over the edge of the moss bank almost before Roland was there to steady him. He rappelled himself easily off the steep sides of the bank, Roland holding the line to keep the elf steady.

The line suddenly went slack.

"All right!" came a shout from below. "I'm here!" There was a moment's silence, then the elf's voice echoed upward, filled with disgust. "This isn't rock! It's a damn fungus!"

"A what?" Roland yelled, leaning as far over the edge as he dared.

"A fungus! A giant mushroom!"

Catching his sister's fiery-eyed glance, Roland shrugged. "How was I supposed to know?"

"I think it's stable enough to use for a landing anyway," Paithan returned, after a moment's pause. The two humans caught something additional about being "damn lucky," but the words were lost in the vegetation.

"That's all I needed to know," said Roland cheerfully. "All right. Sis-

"Stop calling me that! You've done it twice now today! What are you trying to do?"

"Nothing. Sorry. Just a lot on my mind. Over you go."

Rega tied the rope around her waist, but she didn't lower herself over the edge. Looking out into the jungle, she shivered and rubbed her arms. "I hate this."

"You keep saying that, and it's getting boring. I'm not wild about it either. But the sooner finished the sooner ended, as the saying goes. Hop on over."

"No, it's not just ... the darkness down there. It's something else. Something's wrong. Can't you feel it? It's too . . . too quiet."

Roland paused, looked around and listened. He and his sister had been together through tough times. The outside world had been against them since they'd been born, they'd learned to rely on and trust only each other. Rega had an intuitive, almost animal-like sense about people and nature. The few times Roland- the elder of the two- had ignored his sister's advice or warnings, he'd regretted it. He was a skilled woodsman and, now that she drew his attention to it, he, too, noticed the uncanny silence.

"Maybe it's always quiet down this far," he suggested. "There's not a breath of air stirring. We're just used to hearing the wind in the trees and all that."

"It's not just that. There's no sound or sign of animals and hasn't been for the last cycle or so. Not even at night. And the birds are silent." Rega shook her head. "It's as if every wild creature in this jungle is hiding."

"Maybe it's because we're near the dwarven kingdom. That's got to be it, kid. What else would it be?"

"I don't know," Rega said, staring intently into the shadows. "I don't know. I hope you're right. Come on!" she added suddenly, "Let's end this."

Roland lowered his sister over the edge of the moss bank. She rappelled skillfully down the side. Paithan, waiting below, reached up his hands to steady her landing. The look she gave him from her dark eyes warned him to stand clear. Rega landed tightly on the wide ledge formed by the fungus, her lips curling slightly as she eyed the ugly gray and white mass below her feet. The rope, tossed over the edge by Roland, snaked down and landed in a coil at her feet. Paithan began attaching his own length of rope to a branch.

"What's this fungus attached to?" Rega asked, her tone cool and business-only.

"The bole of a tree," said Paithan, his tone the same. He pointed out the striations of the bark, wider than both elf and human standing side by side.

"Is it stable?" she asked, looking over the rim uneasily. Another moss bank was visible below, not that far if you had a rope tied securely around your waist, but a long and unpleasant drop if you didn't.

"I wouldn't jump up and down on it," suggested Paithan.

Rega heard his sarcasm, cast him an angry glance, and then turned to shout above. "Hurry up, Roland! What are you doing?"

"Just a minute, dear!" he called down. "Having a little trouble with one of the tyros."

Roland, grinning, sat down on the edge of the moss bank, leaned up against a tree limb and relaxed. Occasionally he poked at one of the tyros with a stick, to make it bellow.

Rega scowled, bit her lip, and moved to stand on the edge of the fungus, as far from the elf as she could possibly get. Paithan, whistling to himself, fixed his rope tightly around the tree limb, tested it, then began to fasten Rega's.

He didn't want to look at her, but he couldn't help it. His eyes kept darting glances in her direction, kept pointing out things to his heart that his heart wasn't the least bit interested in hearing.

Look at her. We're out in the middle of this Orn-cursed land, alone, standing on a fungus with a twenty-foot drop beneath us and she's as cool as Lake Enthial. I never met a woman like her!

With luck, whispered a certain vicious part of him, you'll never meet one again!

Her hair is so soft. I wonder what it looks like when she lets it down out of that braid, falling over her bare shoulders, tumbling around her breasts. . . . Her lips, her kiss was just as sweet as I'd imagined . . .

Why don't you just throw yourself off the edge! The nasty voice advised him. Save yourself a lot of agony. She's out to seduce you, blackmail you. She's playing you for a foo-

Rega sucked in her breath and backed up involuntarily, hands clutching at the tree trunk behind her.

"What is it?" Paithan dropped the rope, sprang over to her.

She was staring intently straight ahead, straight out into the jungle. Paithan followed her gaze.

"What?" he demanded.

"Do you see it?"

"What!"

Rega blinked and rubbed her eyes. "I-I don't know." She sounded confused. "It seemed ... as if the jungle was . . . moving!"

"Wind," said Paithan, almost angrily, not wanting to admit how frightened he'd been, or the fact that the fear hadn't been for himself.

"Do you feel any wind?" she demanded.

No, he didn't. The air was still, hot, oppressive. His thoughts went uneasily to dragons, but the ground wasn't shaking. He didn't hear the rumbling sound the creatures made moving through the undergrowth. Paithan didn't hear anything. It was quiet, too damn quiet.

Suddenly, above them, came a shout. "Hey! Come back here! You blasted tyro-"

"What is it?" Rega yelled, turning, standing back on the ledge as far as she dared, trying hopelessly to see. "Roland!" Her voice cracked with fear. "What's the matter?"

"These stupid tyros! They've all bolted!"

Roland's bellow faded into the distance. Rega and Paithan heard the sound of crashing, tearing leaves and vines, felt the pounding of his feet shiver the tree, and then silence.

"Tyros are tractable beasts. They don't panic," said Paithan, Swallowing to moisten his dry throat. "Not unless something really terrifies them."

"Roland!" Rega yelled. "Let them go!"

"Hush, Rega. He can't! They're carrying the weapons-"

"I don't give a damn!" she cried frantically. "The weapons and the dwarves and the money and you can go to the pit for all I care! Roland, come back!" She beat on the tree trunk with clenched fists. "Don't leave us trapped down here! Roland!"

"What was that-"

Rega whirled around, panting. Paithan, face ashen, stared out into the jungle.

"Nothing," he said, lips stiff.

"You're lying. You saw it!" she hissed. "You saw the jungle move!"

"It's impossible. It's a trick of our eyes. We're tired, not enough sleep ..."

A terrifying cry split the air above them.

"Roland!" Rega screamed. Pressing her body against the tree trunk, hands scrabbling at the wood, she tried to crawl up it. Paithan caught hold of her, dragged her down. Furiously, she fought and struggled in his arms.

Another hoarse scream and then there came a cry of "Reg-" The word broke off with a strangled choke.

Rega went suddenly limp, collapsing against Paithan. He held her fast, his hand on her head, pressing her face against his breast. When she was calmer, he backed her up against the tree trunk and moved to stand in front of her, shielding her with his body. Once she realized what he was doing, she tried to shove him aside.

"Rega, don't. Stay where you are."

"I want to see, damn it!" Her razzar flashed in her hand. "I can fight-"

"I don't know what," Paithan whispered. "And I don't know how!"

He stood aside. Rega emerged from behind him, her eyes wide and staring. She shrank against him, her arm stealing around his waist. Paithan put his arm around her and held her tight. Clinging to each other, they watched the jungle move in silently, surrounding them.

They could see no heads, no eyes, no arms, no legs, no body, but they each had the intense impression that they were being watched and listened to and sought out by extremely intelligent, extremely malevolent beings.

And then Paithan saw them. Or rather, he didn't see them. He saw what appeared to be a part of the jungle separate itself from its background and move toward him. Only when it was quite near him, when its head was almost level with his own, did he realize that he was confronting what appeared to be a gigantic human. He could see the outline of two legs and two feet that walked the ground. Its head was even with his. It moved straight up to them, stared straight at them. A simple act, but the creature made this simple action horrible by the fact that it apparently couldn't see what it stalked.

It had no eyes; a large hole surrounded by skin in the center had seemingly been bored into the center of its forehead.

"Don't move!" Rega panted. "Don't talk! Maybe it won't find us."

Paithan held her close, not answering, not wanting to destroy her hope. A moment before, they'd been making so much noise that a blind, deaf, and drunken elflord could have found them.

The giant approached, and now Paithan could see why it had seemed the jungle was moving. Its body was covered from head to toe with leaves and vines, its skin was the color and texture of tree bark. Even when the giant was extremely close, Paithan had difficulty separating it from its background. The bulbous head was bare and the crown and forehead, that were a whitish color and bald, stood out against the surroundings.

Glancing around swiftly, the elf saw that there were twenty or thirty of the giants emerging from the jungle, gliding toward them, their movements graceful and perfectly, unnaturally silent.

Paithan shrank back against the tree trunk, dragging Rega with him. It was a hopeless gesture, there was obviously no escape. The heads, with their awful dark and empty holes, stared straight at them. The one nearest put his hands upon the edge of the fungus and jerked on it.

The ledge trembled beneath Paithan's feet. Another giant joined its fellow, large fingers grabbing, gripping. Paithan looked down at the huge hands with a terrible kind of fascination, saw that the fingers were stained red with dried blood.

The giants pulled, the fungus shivered, and Paithan heard it ripping away from the tree. Almost losing their balance, the elf and human clung to each other.

"Paithan!" Rega cried, her voice breaking, "I'm sorry! I love you. I truly do!"

Paithan wanted to answer, but he couldn't. Fear had closed off his throat, stolen his breath.

"Kiss me!" Rega gasped. "That way, I won't see-"

He caught hold of her head in his hands, blocking her vision. Closing his own eyes, he pressed his lips against hers.

The world dropped out from underneath them.

CHAPTER 18

SOMEWHERE ABOVE PRYAN

HAPLO, DOG AT HIS FEET, SAT NEAR THE STEERING STONE ON THE BRIDGE

and gazed wearily, hopelessly out the window of the Dragon Wing. They had been flying for how long?

"A day," Haplo answered with bitter irony. "One long, stupid, dull, everlasting day."

The Patryns had no timekeeping devices, they did not need them. Their magical sensitivity to the world around them kept them innately aware of the passage of time in the Nexus. But Haplo had learned by previous experience that the passage through the Death's Gate and entering into another world altered the magic. As he became acclimated to this new world, his body would realign itself to it. But for right now, he had no idea how much time had truly passed since he had entered Pryan.

He wasn't accustomed to eternal sunshine, he was used to natural breaks in the rhythm of his life. Even in the Labyrinth there was day and night. Haplo had often had reason to curse the coming of night in the Labyrinth, for with night came darkness and, under the cover of darkness came your enemies. Now he would have fallen on his knees and begged for the blessed respite from the blazing sun, for the blessed shadow that brought rest and sleep-no matter how guarded.

The Patryn had been alarmed to catch himself, after another sleepless sun-lit "night," seriously considering gouging out his own eyes.

He knew, then, that he was going mad.

The hellish terror of the Labyrinth had not been able to defeat him. What another might consider heaven-peace and quiet and eternal light-would be his downfall.

"It figures," he said, and he laughed and felt better. He had staved away insanity for the time being, though he knew it wasn't far off.

Haplo had food and he had water. As long as he had some left of either, he could conjure more. Unfortunately, the food was always the same food, for he could only reproduce what he had, he couldn't alter its structure and come up with something new. He soon grew so sick of dried beef and peas that he had to force himself to eat. He hadn't thought to bring a variety. He hadn't expected to be trapped in heaven.

A man of action, forced to inactivity, he spent much of his time staring fixedly out the windows of his ship. The Patryns do not believe in God. They consider themselves (and grudgingly their enemies, the Sartan) the nearest to divine beings existent. Haplo could not pray for this to end, therefore. He could only wait.

When he first sighted the clouds, he didn't say anything, refusing to admit even to the dog that they might be able to escape their winged prison. It could have been an optical illusion, a trick of the eyes that will see water in a desert. It was, after all, nothing more than a slight darkening of the green-blue sky to a whitish gray.

He took a quick walk around the ship, to compare what he saw ahead of him with what lay behind and all around.

And then it was, staring up into the sky from the ship's top deck, that he saw the star.

"This is the end," he told the dog, blinking at the white light Sparkling above him in the hazy, blue-green distance. "My eyes are going." Why hadn't he noticed stars before? If it was a star.

"Somewhere on board, there's a device the elves used to see long distances."

The Patryn could have used his magic to enhance his vision, but that would have meant again relying on himself. He had the feeling, however confused, that if he put a purely disinterested object between himself and the star, the object would reveal to him the truth.

Rummaging through the ship, he found the spyglass, tucked away in a chest as a curiosity. He put it to his eye, and focused on the sparkling, twinkling light, half-expecting it to vanish. But it leapt into view, larger, brighter, and pure white.

If it was a star, why hadn't he seen it earlier? And where were the others? According to his lord, the ancient world had been surrounded by countless stars. But during the sundering of the world by the Sartan, the stars had vanished, disappeared. According to his lord, there should be no stars visible on any of the new worlds.

Troubled, thoughtful, Haplo returned to the bridge. I should change course, fly toward the light, investigate it. After all, it can't be a star. My Lord has said so.

Haplo put his hands upon the steering stone, but he didn't say the words, he didn't activate the runes. Doubt crept into his mind.

What if My Lord is wrong?

Haplo gripped the stone hard, the sharp edges of the runes bit into the soft, unprotected flesh of his palms. The pain was fitting punishment for doubting his lord, doubting the man who had saved them from the hellish Labyrinth, the man who had established their home in the Nexus, the man who would lead them forth to conquer worlds.

His lord, with his knowledge of astronomy, had said there could be no stars. I will fly toward this light and investigate it. I will have faith. My Lord has never failed me.

But still Haplo didn't speak the runes.

What if he flew toward the light, and his lord was wrong about this world? What if it turned out to be like their ancient world—a planet orbiting a sun set in cold, black and empty space? I could end up flying into a void, flying on and on until death claimed me. At least now, I have sighted what I hope and believe are clouds and where there are clouds there might be land.

My Lord is my master. I will obey him unquestioningly in all things. He is wise, intelligent, all-knowing. I will obey. I will. . .

Haplo lifted his hands from the steering stone. Turning away moodily, he walked over to the window and stared outside.

"There it is, boy," he murmured.

The dog, hearing the troubled tone of his master's voice whined in sympathy and brushed his tail against the floor to indicate he was there if Haplo needed him.

"Land. At last. We've made it!"

He was certain beyond a doubt. The clouds had parted. He could see dark green beneath them. Flying nearer, he saw the dark green separate into varying shades of green—patches that ranged from a light grayish green to a deep blue-green to a mottled, yellow and emerald green.

"How can I turn back?"

To do so would be illogical, a part of him reasoned. You will land here, make contact with the people as you have been ordered to do, then, upon leaving, you can fly out and investigate the sparkling light.

That made sense, and Haplo was relieved. Never one to waste his time in useless self-recrimination or self-analysis, the Patryn went about his duties calmly, making the ship ready for landing. The dog, sensing his master's growing excitement, jumped about him, nipped at him playfully.

But beneath the excitement and sense of victory and elation ran an undercurrent of darkness. These last few moments had been a dreadful epiphany. Haplo felt unclean, unworthy. He had dared admit to himself that his lord might be fallible.

The ship sailed nearer to the land mass and Haplo realized, for the first time, how fast he'd been traveling. It seemed the ground was hurtling toward him, and he was forced to rechannel the magic in the runes on the wings—a maneuver that reduced the speed and slowed his descent. He could actually make out trees and broad, empty expanses of green that appeared to be suitable for landing. Flying over a sea, he discerned in the distance other bodies of water—lakes and rivers, which he could only barely see for the thick growth of vegetation surrounding them. But he found no signs of civilization.

On and on he flew, skimming over the treetops, and saw no cities, no castles, no walls. At length, weary of watching the endless expanse of green unroll beneath him, Haplo slumped down on the floor in front of the tall windows. The dog had gone to sleep. No ships upon the seas or boats upon the lakes. No roads crisscrossed the open expanses, no bridges spanned the rivers.

According to the records left in the Nexus by the Sartan, this realm should be peopled by elves and humans and dwarfs and perhaps even the Sartan themselves. But if so, where were they? Surely he would have seen some sign of them by now! Or maybe not.

Haplo began, for the first time, to truly envision and understand the enormity of this world. Tens of millions could inhabit it, and he might never find them, though he spent a lifetime in the search. Entire cities might lurk beneath the dense covering of trees and remain invisible to the eye peering down from above. No way to find them, no way to detect their existence except by landing and trying to penetrate that thick green mass.

"This is impossible!" Haplo muttered.

The dog woke up and nuzzled his master's hand with a cold nose. Haplo stroked the soft fur, absently ruffled the silky ears. The dog, sighing, relaxed and closed its eyes.

"It would take an army of us to search this land! And then maybe we wouldn't find anything. Perhaps we shouldn't bother. I— What the— Stop! Wait a minute!"

Haplo jumped to his feet, startling the dog, who leapt up and began to bark. Hands on the steering stone, Haplo sent the ship into a slow turn, staring down below him into a small, light-colored patch of grayish green.

"Yes! There it is!" he cried wildly, pointing out the window, as though exhibiting his discovery to an audience of hundreds instead of one black-and-white dog.

Tiny bursts of light, all different colors, followed by small puffs of black, were plainly visible against the green. He had caught sight of them out of the corner of his eye and turned back to make sure. A moment's pause, and they appeared again. It could be a natural phenomenon, he told himself, forcing himself to calm down, appalled at his own lack of control.

No matter. He would land and check it out. At least he'd get off this blasted ship, breathe fresh air.

Haplo circled, descending, the bursts of light guiding him. Coming down below the level of the very tallest trees, he saw a sight that would have caused him to thank his god for a miracle, if he had believed in any god to thank.

A structure, obviously built by hands guided by a brain, stood next to the open area. The bursts of light were coming from that particular spot. And now he could distinguish people.

Small forms, like bugs standing in the gray-green expanse. The bursts of light began appearing with more frequency now, as if in excitement. It looked as if the lights were shooting forth from out of the midst of the group of people.

Haplo was prepared to meet the inhabitants of this new world. He had his story ready, one similar to that which he'd told the dwarf, Limbeck, on Arianus.

I'm from another part of Pryan, my people (depending on circumstances as he found them) are exactly like you-fighting for their freedom from oppressors. We have won our battle and I have gone forth to help free others.

Of course, there was always the possibility that these people- elves, humans, and dwarves-were living in peace and tranquility with each other, that they had no oppressors, that all was progressing nicely under the rule of the Sartan and they didn't need freeing, thank you. Haplo considered this possibility and, grinning, rejected it. Worlds changed, one factor remained constant. It simply wasn't a mensch's nature to live in harmony with his fellow mensch [22].

Haplo could see the people on the ground clearly now and he knew that they could see him. People were rushing out of the structure, peering up into the sky. Others were running up the hillside toward the bursts of light. He could begin to make out what appeared to be a large city hidden beneath the overspreading tree branches. Through a break in the jungle growth, he saw a lake surrounded by enormous structures with cultivated gardens and vast expanses of smooth green lawn.

Closer still, and he saw the people staring up at his winged dragonship, its body and head painted so cunningly that it might appear to those below to be a real dragon. He noted that many people were refusing to venture into the open area where it must by now be obvious that Haplo was going to land. They huddled in the shelter of trees, curious, but too prudent to move any closer.

Haplo was, in fact, rather astonished to note that all the people weren't fleeing in panic at his approach. But several of them, two in particular, stood right underneath him, heads tilted upward, hands lifted to shield their eyes from the rays of the blazing sun. He could see one of them-a figure clad in flowing, mouse-colored robes-making gestures with his arms, pointing out a cleared area. If it hadn't been too impossible to even consider, Haplo might have supposed he was expected!

"I've been up here too long," he said to the dog. Feet planted firmly, the animal was staring out the ship's large windows, barking frantically at the people below.

Haplo had no time to continue watching. Hands on the steering stone, he called upon the runes to slow Dragon Wing, keep the ship steady, and bring it safely to rest. He could see, out of the corner of his eye, the robed figure hopping up and down, waving a disreputable old hat in the air.

The ship touched ground and, to Haplo's alarm, kept going! It was sinking! He saw then, that he wasn't on firm ground but had landed on a bed of moss that was giving way beneath the ship's weight. He was just about to act to halt the ship's descent when it settled itself with an almost cradling motion, burrowing into the moss like the dog into a thick blanket. At last, after perhaps eons of traveling, Haplo had arrived.

He glanced out the windows, but they were buried beneath the moss. He could see nothing but a gray-green leafy mass pressed up against the glass. He would have to leave by the top deck.

Faint voices were coming from up above, but Haplo figured they would be so awed by his ship that they wouldn't come near. If they did, they would get a shock. Literally. He had activated a magical shield around the ship. Anyone touching it would think, for a split instant, that they'd been struck by lightning.

Now that he had reached his destination, Haplo was himself again. His brain was thinking, guiding, directing. He dressed himself so that every part of his rune-tattooed body was covered by cloth. Soft, supple boots fit over leather trousers. A long-sleeved shirt, gathered tightly at the wrists and at the neck, was covered by a leather doublet. He tied a scarf around his neck, tucking the ends into the shirt.

The sigla did not extend up over the head or onto the face- their magic might interfere with the thought process. Starting from a point on the breast above the heart, the runes traced over the body, running down the trunk to the loins, the thighs, the legs, the tops of the feet but not the soles. Whirls and whorls and intricate designs done in red and blue wrapped around the neck, spread across the shoulder blades, entwined the arms and traveled over the tops and palms of the hands, but left bare the fingers. The brain was left free of magic so that it could guide the magic, the eyes and ears and mouth were left free to sense the world around, the fingers and soles of the feet were left free to touch.

Haplo's last precaution, once his ship was landed and he no longer needed the runes to guide it, was to wrap thick bandages around his hands. He wound the linen around the wrist, covering the palm, lacing it through the bottoms of the fingers; the fingers and thumb he left bare.

A skin disease, he'd told the mensch on Arianus. It is not painful, but the red, puss-filled pustules the disease forms are a sickening sight. Everyone on Arianus, after hearing that story, had taken care to avoid Haplo's bandaged hands.

Well, almost everyone.

One man had guessed he was lying, one man-after casting a spell on Haplo-had looked beneath the bandages and seen the truth. But that man had been Alfred, a Sartan, who had suspected in advance what he might find. Haplo had noticed Alfred paying an unusual amount of attention to his hands, but he'd ignored it-a mistake almost fatal to his plans. Now he knew what to watch for, now he was prepared.

Haplo conjured up an image of himself and inspected himself carefully, walking completely around the illusionary Haplo. At length, he was satisfied. No trace of a rune showed. He banished the illusion. Tugging the bandages over his hands into place, he ascended to the top deck, threw open the hatch, and emerged, blinking, into the bright sun.

The sound of voices hushed at the sight of him. He pulled himself up on the deck and glanced around, pausing a moment to draw a deep breath of fresh, if extremely humid, air. Below, he saw faces, upturned, mouths open, eyes wide.

Elves, he noted, with one exception. The figure in the mouse-colored robes was human-an old man, with long white hair and long white beard. Unlike the others, the old man wasn't gazing at Haplo in awe and wonder. Beaming, stroking his beard, the old man turned this way and that.

"I told you," he was shouting. "Didn't I tell you? By cracky, I guess now you believe me!"

"Here, dog!" Haplo whistled and the animal appeared on deck, trotting along at his heels, to the added astonishment of all observers.

Haplo didn't bother with the ladder; the ship had settled so deeply into the moss-its wings resting on top-that he could jump lightly from the top deck to the ground. The elves gathered around Dragon Wing backed up hurriedly, regarding the ship's pilot with suspicious incredulity. Haplo drew in a breath, and was about to launch into his story, his mind working rapidly to provide him with the elven language.

He never got a chance to speak.

The old man rushed up to him, grabbed him by the bandaged hand.

"Our savior! Right on time!" he cried, pumping Haplo's arm vigorously. "Did you have a nice flight?"

## CHAPTER 19

### THE BORDER, THURN

ROLAND SQUIRMED, TRYING TO EASE HIS CRAMPED MUSCLES BY MOVING INTO another position. The maneuver worked for a few moments, then his arms and buttocks began aching again, only in different places. Grimacing, he tried surreptitiously to twist his wrists out of the vines that bound him. Pain forced him to quit. The vines were tough as leather; he'd rubbed his skin raw.

"Don't waste your strength," came a voice.

Roland looked around, twisting his head to see.

"Where are you?"

"The other side of this tree. They're using pythavine. You can't break it. The more you try, the tighter the pytha'll squeeze you."

Keeping one eye on his captors, Roland managed to worm his way around the large tree trunk. He discovered, on the other side, a dark-skinned human male clad in bright-colored robes. A gold ring dangled from his left ear lobe. He was securely tied, vines wrapped around his chest, arms, and wrists.

"Andor," he said, grinning. One side of his mouth was swollen, dried blood caked half his face.

"Roland Redleaf. You a SeaKing?" he added, with a glance at the earring.

"Yeah. And you're from Thillia. What are you people doing in Thurn territory?"

"Thurn? We're nowhere near Thurn. We're on our way to the Fartherness."

"Don't play dumb with me, Thillian. You know where you are. So you're trading with the dwarves ..." Andor paused, and licked his lips. "I could sure use a drink about now."

"I'm an explorer," said Roland, casting a wary glance at their captors to see if they were being observed.

"We can talk. They don't give a damn. There's no need to lie, you know. We're not going to live long enough for it to matter."

"What? What do you mean?"

"They kill everyone and everything they come across . . . twenty people in my caravan. All dead, the animals, too. Why the animals? They hadn't done anything. It doesn't make any sense, does it?"  
Dead? Twenty people dead? Roland stared hard at the man, thinking perhaps he was lying, trying to scare the Thillian away from SeaKing trade routes. Andor leaned back against the tree trunk, his eyes closed. Roland saw sweat trickle down the man's forehead, the dark circles beneath the sunken eyes, the ashen lips. No, he wasn't lying. Fear constricted Roland's heart. He remembered hearing Rega's frantic scream, crying his name. He swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth.

"And . . . you?" he managed.

Andor stirred, opened his eyes, and grinned again. It was lopsided, because of his damaged mouth, and seemed ghastly to Roland.

"I was away from camp, answering nature's call. I heard the fighting ... I heard the screams. That darktime . . . God of the Waters, I'm thirsty!" He moistened his lips with his tongue again. "I stayed put. Hell, what could I do? That darktime, I circled back. I found them-my business partners, my uncle . . ." He shook his head. "I ran. Kept going. But they caught me, brought me here right before they brought you in. It's weird, the way they can see you without eyes."

"Who . . . what the hell are they?" Roland demanded.

"You don't know? They're tytans."

Roland snorted. "Kids' stories-"

"Yeah! Kids." Andor began to laugh. "My little nephew was seven. I found his body. His head had been split wide open, like someone had stomped on it." His laughter shrilled and broke; he coughed painfully.

"Take it easy," Roland whispered.

Andor drew a shuddering breath. "They're tytans, all right; the ones who destroyed the Kasnar Empire. Wiped it out. Not a building left standing, a person left alive except those who managed to flee ahead of them. And now they're moving south, coming down through the dwarven kingdoms."

"But the dwarves'll stop them, surely . . . ?"

Andor sighed, grimaced, and twisted his body. "Word is that the dwarves are in league with 'em, that they worship these bastards. The dwarves plan to let the tytans march right through and destroy us, then the dwarves'll take over our lands."

Roland recalled vaguely Blackbeard saying something about his people and the tytans, but it was too long ago, swimming in ale.

Movement glimpsed from a corner of his eye caused him to turn. More of the giants appeared, gliding into the large open space where the two humans lay bound, moving more silently than the wind, never fluttering a single leaf.

Roland eyed these new creatures warily, saw that they carried bundles in their arms. He recognized a fall of dark hair. . . .

"Rega!" He sat up, struggling wildly against his bonds.

Andor smiled, his mouth twisting. "More of you, huh? And an elf with you! God of the Waters, if we had caught you . . ."

The tytans carried their captives to the base of Roland's tree and laid them down. His heart rose when he saw that they were gentle with their prisoners, taking care to ease them to the ground. Both Paithan and Rega were unconscious, their clothes covered with what looked like pieces of broken fungus. But neither appeared to be injured. Roland could see no blood, no signs of braising or broken bones. The tytans bound their captives skillfully and efficiently, stared down at them a moment, as if studying them, then left them. Gathering in the center of the clearing, the tytans formed a circle and their heads turned toward the others,

"Spooky bunch," Roland decided. Edging his body as near Rega's as possible, he laid his head down on her chest. Her heart beat was strong and regular. He nudged her with an elbow.

Her eyelids fluttered. She opened them, saw Roland and blinked, startled and confused. Remembered terror flooded her eyes. She tried to move, discovered she was bound, and caught her breath in a fearful gasp.

"Rega! Hush! Lie still. No, don't try! These damn vines tighten if you struggle."

"Roland! What happened? Who are these-" Rega looked at the tytans and shuddered.

"The tyros must have caught wind of these things and bolted. I was chasing after them when the jungle came alive all around me. I had time to scream and that was it. They caught me, knocked me out."

"Paithan and I were standing on the ... the ledge. They came up and put their hands on it and began to shake it . . ."

"Shhh, there. It's over now. Quin all right?"

"I-I think so." Rega glanced down at her spore-covered clothes. "The fungus must have broken our fall." Leaning near the elf, she spoke softly. "Paithan! Paithan, can you hear me?"

"Ayyyy!" Paithan woke with a cry. "Shut him up!" growled Andor.

The tytans had ceased observing each other and transferred their sightless gaze to their captives. One by one, moving slowly, gliding gracefully over the jungle floor, the tytans came toward them.

"This is it!" said Andor grimly. "See you in hell, Thillian."

Someone made a whimpering sound. Whether it was Rega or the elf, Roland couldn't tell. He couldn't take his eyes from the giants long enough to find out. He felt Rega's shivering body press against his. Movement in the undergrowth indicated that Paithan, bound like the rest of them, was attempting to wriggle his way over near Rega.

Keeping his eyes on the tytans, Roland saw no reason to be afraid. They were big, but they didn't act particularly menacing or threatening.

"Look, Sis," he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, "if they'd wanted to kill us, they would've done it before this. Just keep calm. They don't look too bright. We can bluff our way outta this."

Andor laughed, a horrible, bone-chilling sound. The tytans- ten of them-had gathered around their captives, forming a semicircle. The eyeless heads faced them. A very soft, very quiet, very gentle voice spoke.

Where is the citadel?

Roland gazed up at them, puzzled. "Did you say something?" He could have sworn that their mouths never moved.

"Yes, I heard them!" Rega answered in awe.

Where is the citadel?

The question was repeated, still spoken quietly, the words whispering through Roland's mind.

Andor laughed again, manically. "I don't know!" he shrieked suddenly, tossing his head back and forth. "I don't know where the goddamn citadel is!"

Where is the citadel? What must we do?

The words were urgent now, no longer a whisper but a cry that was like a scream trapped in the skull.

Where is the citadel? What must we do? Tell us! Command us!

At first annoying, the screaming inside Roland's head became rapidly more painful. He wracked his burning brain, trying desperately to think, but he'd never heard of any "citadel," at least not in Thillia.

"Ask . . . the . . . elf!" he managed, forcing the words out between teeth clenched against the agony.

A terrifying scream behind him indicated that the tytans had taken his advice. Paithan lurched over, rolling on the ground, writhing in pain, shouting something in elven.

"Stop it! Stop it!" Rega begged, and suddenly the voices ceased.

It was quiet inside his head. Roland sagged weakly against his bonds. Paithan lay, sobbing, on the moss. Rega, arms tightly bound, crouched near him. The tytans gazed at their captives and then one of them, without the slightest warning, lifted a tree branch and slammed it into Andor's bound and helpless body.

The SeaKing couldn't cry out; the blow crushed his rib cage, punctured his lungs. The tytan raised the branch and struck again. The blow split the man's skull.

Warm blood splashed on Roland. Andor's eyes stared fixedly at his murderer; the SeaKing had died with that ghastly grin on his face, as if laughing at some terrible joke. The body twitched in its death throes.

The tytan struck again and again, wielding the gore-covered branch, beating the corpse to a bloody pulp. When the body had been mangled beyond recognition, the tytan turned to Roland.

Numb, horrified, Roland summoned adrenaline-fed strength and plunged backward, knocking Rega to the ground. Wriggling around, he hunched over her, shielding her body with his own. She lay quietly, too quietly, and he wondered if she had fainted. He hoped she had. It would be easier . . . much easier. Paithan lay nearby, staring wide-eyed at what was left of Andor. The elf's face was ashen. He seemed to have quit breathing.

Roland braced himself for the blow, praying that the first killed him swiftly. He heard the scabbling sound in the moss below him, felt the hand grab onto the buckle of his belt, but the hand wasn't real to him, not as real as the death that loomed above him. The sudden jerk and the plunge down through the moss brought him sharply to his senses. He gasped and spluttered and floundered, as a sleepwalker who stumbles into an icy lake.

His fall ended abruptly and painfully. He opened his eyes. He wasn't in water, but in a dark tunnel that seemed to have been hollowed out of the thick moss. A strong hand shoved him, a sharp blade sliced through his bonds.

"Go! Go! They are thick witted, but they will follow!"

"Rega," Roland mumbled and tried to get back.

"I have her and the elf! Now go!"

Rega fell against him, propelled from behind. Her cheekbone struck his shoulder, and her head snapped up.

"Go!" shouted the voice.

Roland caught hold of his sister, dragged her alongside him. Ahead of them stretched a tunnel, leading deeper into the moss. Rega began to crawl down it. Roland followed, fear dictating to his body what it must do to escape because his brain seemed to have shut down.

Dazed, groping through the gray-green darkness, he crawled and lurched and sprawled clumsily headlong in his mad dash. Rega, her body more compact, moved through the tunnel with ease. She paused occasionally, to look back, her gaze going past Roland to the elf behind him.

Paithan's face glimmered an eerie white, he looked more like a ghost than a living man, but he was moving, slithering through the tunnel on hands and knees and belly like a snake. Behind him was the voice, urging them on.

"Go! Go!"

Before long, the strain told on Roland. His muscles ached, his knees were scraped raw, his breath burned in his lungs. We're safe now, he told himself. This place is too narrow for those fiends - - .

A rending and tearing sound, as if the ground were being ripped apart by gigantic hands, impelled Roland forward. Like a mongoose hunting a snake, the tytans were digging for them, widening the tunnel, intending to ferret them out.

Down and down the captives traveled, sometimes falling or rolling where the tunnel turned steep and they couldn't see their way in the darkness. The fear of pursuit and the gruff "Go! Go!" drove them on past the limit of endurance. And then a whoosh of exhaled breath and a crash coming from behind him told Roland that the elf's strength had given out.

"Rega!" Roland called, and his sister halted, turning slowly, peering at him wearily. "Quin's had it. Come help me!"

She nodded, having no breath left to speak, and crawled back. Roland reached out a hand, caught hold of her arm, felt her trembling with fatigue.

"Why have you stopped?" demanded the voice.

"Take a look . . . elf!" Roland gasped for breath. "He's . . . finished ... All of us. ... Rest. Must. . . rest."

Rega sagged against him, her muscles twitching, her chest heaving. Blood roared in Roland's ears, he couldn't tell if they were still being pursued. Not, he thought, that it mattered.

"We rest a little," said the gruff voice. "But not long. Deep. We must go deep."

Roland gazed around him, blinking back fiery spots that were bursting before his eyes, obscuring his vision. He couldn't see much anyway. The darkness was thick, intense.

"Surely . . . they won't come . . . this far."

"You don't know them. They are terrible."

The voice-now that he could hear it more clearly-sounded familiar.

"Blackbeard? That you?"

"I told you before. My name is Drugar. Who is the elf?"

"Paithan," said Paithan, easing himself to a crouched position, bracing himself against the sides of the tunnel. "Paithan Quindiniar. I am honored to meet you, sir, and I want to thank you for-"

"Not now!" growled Drugar. "Deep! We must go deep!"

Roland flexed his hands. The palms were torn and bleeding where he'd scraped them against the moss tunnel's rough sides.

"Rega?" he said, concerned.

"Yeah. I can make it." He heard her sigh. Then she left him, and began to crawl again.

Roland drew a breath, wiped the sweat from his eyes, and followed, plunging down into the darkness.

## CHAPTER 20

### THE TUNNELS, THURN

THE ESCAPING CAPTIVES CRAWLED THROUGH THE TUNNEL, DELVING DEEPER and deeper, the voice behind them urging, "Go! Go!" The mind soon lost all awareness of where it was or what it was doing. They became automatons, moving through the darkness like windup toys with no thought of where they were or where they were going, too exhausted, too dazed to care.

Then came an impression of vastness. Reaching out their hands, they could no longer feel the tunnel's sides. The air, though it was still, was surprisingly cool and smelled of dampness and of growth.

"We have reached the bottom," said the dwarf. "Now, you may rest."

They collapsed, rolling over on their backs, gasping for breath, stretching, easing cramped and aching muscles. Drugar said nothing else to them. They might have thought he'd left them, except that they could hear his stentorian breathing. At length, rested, they grew more cognizant of their surroundings. Whatever it was on which they were lying was hard and unresilient, slick and slightly gritty feeling to the touch.

"What is this stuff?" Roland asked, propping himself up. He dug at a handful, ran it through his fingers.

"Who cares?" said Rega. Her voice had a shrill edge, she was panting. "I can't take this! The dark. It's awful. I can't breathe! I'm smothering!"

Drugar spoke words in dwarven, that sounded like rocks clashing together. A light flared, the brilliance painful to the eyes. The dwarf held a torch in his hand.

"Is that better, human?"

"No, not much," said Rega. Sitting up, she looked around fearfully. "It just makes the darkness darker. I hate it down here! I can't stand it!"

"You want to go back up there?" Drugar pointed.

Rega's face paled, her eyes widened. "No," she whispered, and slid over to be near Paithan.

The elf started to put his arm around her, to comfort her, then he glanced at Roland. His face flushing, Paithan stood up and walked away. Rega stared after him.

"Paithan?"

He didn't look around. Burying her face in her hands, Rega began to sob bitterly.

"What you are sitting on," said Drugar, "is dirt."

Roland was at a loss, uncertain what to do. He knew-as her "husband" he should go comfort Rega, but he had a feeling that his presence would only make matters worse. Besides, he felt in need of comforting himself. Looking down at his clothes, he could see, by the torchlight, splotches of red-blood, Andor's blood.

"Dirt," said Paithan. "Ground. You mean we're actually on ground level?"

"Where are we?" Roland demanded.

"We are in a k'tark, meaning 'crossroad' in your language," answered Drugar. "Several tunnels come together here. We find it is a good meeting place. There is food and water." He pointed to several shadowy shapes barely visible in the flickering torchlight. "Help yourself."

"I'm not all that hungry," mumbled Roland, rubbing frantically at the bloodstains on his shirt. "But I could use some water."

"Yes, water!" Rega lifted her head, the tears on her cheeks sparkled in the firelight.

"I'll get it," offered the elf.

The shadowy shapes turned out to be wooden barrels. The elf removed a lid, peered inside, sniffed. "Water," he reported. He carried a gourd filled with the liquid to Rega.

"Drink this," he said to her gently, his hand touching her shoulder.

Rega cupped the gourd in her hands, drank thirstily. Her eyes were on the elf, his were on her. Roland, watching, felt something dark twist inside him. I made a mistake. They like each other, like each other a lot. And that's not in the plans. I don't care two sticks if Rega seduces an elf. I'll be damned if she's going to fall in love with one.

"Hey," he said. "I could use some of that."

Paithan rose to his feet. Rega handed back the empty gourd with a wan smile. The elf headed for the water barrel. Rega flashed Roland a piercing, angry glance. Roland returned it, scowling. Rega flipped her dark hair over her shoulder.

"I want to leave!" she said. "I want out of here!"

"Certainly," said Drugar. "Like I said, crawl back up there. They are waiting for you."

Rega shuddered. Forcing back a cry, she hid her face in her folded arms.

"There's no need to be so rough on her, dwarf. That was a pretty awful experience up there! And if you ask me"-Paithan cast a grim look at their surroundings-"things down here don't look much better!"

"The elf's got a point," struck in Roland. "You saved our lives. Why?"

Drugar fingered a wooden ax that he wore thrust through his wide belt. "Where are the railbows?"

"I thought so." Roland nodded. "Well, if that was why you saved us, you wasted your time. You'll have to ask those creatures for them. But maybe you've already done that! The SeaKing told me you dwarves worship these monsters. He said you and your people are going to join these tytans and take over the human lands. That true, Drugar? Is that why you needed the weapons?"

Rega raised her head, stared at the dwarf. Paithan slowly sipped water from the gourd, his eyes on Drugar. Roland tensed. He didn't like the glitter in the dwarf's dark eyes, the chill smile that touched the bearded lips.

"My people ..." said Drugar softly, "my people are no more."

"What? Make sense, damn it, Blackbeard!"

"He is," said Rega. "Look at him! Blessed Thillia! He means his people are all dead!"

"Orn's blood," swore Paithan, in elven, with reverence.

"Is that it?" demanded Roland. "Is that the truth? Your people . . . dead?"

"Look at him!" Rega cried, almost hysterically.

Minds confused, blinded by their own fears, they had none of them really seen the dwarf. Eyes open, they saw that Drugar's clothes were torn and stained with blood. His beard, of which he had always taken great care, was matted and tangled; his hair wild and uncombed. A large and ugly gash had opened the skin on his forearm, blood had dried on his forehead. His large hands fingered the ax.

"If we'd had the weapons," said Drugar, his gaze fixed black and unblinking, on the shadows moving in the tunnels, "we could have fought them. My people would still be alive."

"It isn't our fault." Roland raised both hands, palms outward. "We came as fast as we could. The elf"-he pointed at Paithan-"the elf was late."

"I didn't know! How was I supposed to know? It was that damn trail of yours, Redleaf, up and down hundred-foot cliffs that led us right into the bastards-"

"Oh, so now you're going to blame it all on me-"

"Stop arguing!" Rega's voice screeched. "It doesn't matter whose fault it is! The only thing that matters is getting out of here!"

"Yes, you're right," said Paithan, calming down, subdued. "I must return and warn my people."

"Bah! You elves don't have to worry. My people will deal with these freaks!" Roland glanced at the dwarf and shrugged. "No offense, Blackbeard, old boy, but warriors-real ones, not a bunch who've been sawed off at the knees-won't have any problem destroying the monsters."

"What about Kasnar?" said Paithan. "What happened to the human warriors in that empire?"

"Peasants! Farmers." Roland dismissed them with a gesture. "We Thillians are fighters! We've had experience."

"In bashing each other, maybe. You didn't look so great up there!"

"I was caught off-guard! What do you expect, elf? They were on me before I could react. All right, so we won't bring these giants down with one arrow, but I'll guarantee you that when they've got five or six spears through those holes in their heads, they won't be asking any more of their stupid questions about citadels!"

. . . Where are the citadels?

The question reverberated through Drugar's mind, beat and hammered and pounded, each syllable physically painful. From his vantage point in one of the myriad dwarven dwellings, Drugar stared down upon the vast moss plain where his father and most of his people had gone to meet the giants vanguard.

No, vanguard wasn't the correct word. A vanguard implies order, directed movement. To Drugar it appeared that this small group of giants had stumbled over the dwarves, coming across them by accident not design, taking a brief moment away from their larger quest to ... ask directions?

"Don't go out there. Father!" Drugar had been tempted to plead with the old man. "Let me talk to them if you insist on such folly! Stay behind, where it's safe!"

But he knew that if he had said such words to his father, he might very well feel the lash of that walking stick across his back. And he would have had reason to beat me, Drugar admitted. He is, after all, king. And I should be at his side!

But he wasn't.

"Father, order the people to stay indoors. You and I will treat with these-

"No, Drugar. We are the One Dwarf. I am king, but I am only the head. The entire body must be present to hear and witness and share in the discussion. That is the way it has been since the time of our creation." The old man's face softened, saddened. "If this is, indeed, our end, let it be said that we fell as we lived-as one."

The One Dwarf was present, streaming up out of their dwellings far beneath the ground, coming to stand on the vast moss plain that formed the roof of their city, blinking and winking and cursing the bright sunlight. In the excitement of welcoming their "brothers" whose huge bodies were almost the size of Drakar, the dwarven god, the dwarves did not notice that many of their number stayed behind, standing near the entrance to their city.

Here Drugar had posted his warriors, hoping to be able to cover a retreat.

The One Dwarf saw the jungle move onto the plain. Half-blinded by the unaccustomed sunlight, the dwarves saw the shadows between the trees or maybe even the trees themselves glide with silent feet onto the moss. Drugar squinted, staring hard, trying to count the giants' numbers but it was like counting the leaves in the forest. Awed, appalled, he wondered fearfully how you fought something you couldn't see.

With magic weapons, elven weapons, intelligent weapons that sought their prey, the dwarves might have had a chance. What must we do?

The voice in his head wasn't threatening. It was wistful, sad, frustrated.

Where is the citadel? What must we do?

The voice demanded an answer. It was desperate for an answer. Drugar experienced an odd sensation-for a brief moment, despite his fear, he shared the sadness of these creatures. He truly regretted not being able to help them.

"We have never heard of any citadels, but we will be glad to join you in your search, if you will-

His father never had a chance to say another word. Moving silently, acting without apparent anger or malice, two of the giants reached down, grabbed the old dwarf in their large hands, and rent him asunder. They tossed the bloody pieces of the carcass to the ground casually, as one tossed aside garbage. Systematically, again without anger or malice, they started to kill.

Drugar watched, appalled, helpless. His mind numbed by the horror of what he had witnessed and been unable to prevent, the dwarf acted on instinct, his body doing what he'd prepared it to do without conscious thought. Grabbing up a kurth horn, he put his lips to it and blew a loud, wailing blast, calling his people back to their dwellings, back to safety.

He and his warriors, some posted high in the trees, fired their arrows at the giants. The sharp wooden points, that could skewer the biggest human, bounced off the thick hide of the giants. They treated the flights of arrows like flocks of stinging gnats, brushing them away with their hands when they could take time from their butchery to remove them.

The dwarves' retreat was not panicked. The body was one- anything that happened to a single dwarf happened to all dwarves. They stopped to assist those who fell. The older lagged behind, urging the younger forward to safety. The strong carried the weak. Consequently, the dwarves were easy prey.

The giants pursued them, caught them easily, destroyed them without mercy. The moss plain grew soggy with blood. Bodies lay piled on top of each other, some hung from trees into which they'd been hurled. Most had been battered beyond recognition.

Drugar waited until the last moment to seek safety, making certain that those few left alive on that ghastly plain made it back. Even then, he didn't want to leave. Two of his men had to literally drag him down into the tunnels.

Up above, they could hear the rending and breaking of tree limbs. Part of the "roof" of the underground city caved in. When the tunnel behind him collapsed, Drugar and what was left of his army turned to face their foe. There was no longer a need to run to reach safety. No safety existed.

When Drugar came to, he found himself lying in a partially collapsed section of tunnel, the bodies of several of his men lying on top of him. Shoving the corpses aside, he paused to listen, to see if he could hear any sign of life.

There was only silence, dreadful, ominous. For the rest of his life, he would hear that silence and with it the words that whispered in his heart.

"No one ..."

"I will take you to your people," said Drugar suddenly, the first words he'd spoken in a long, long while.

The humans and the elf ceased their bickering, turned, and looked at him.

"I know the way." He gestured into the deeper darkness. "These tunnels . . . lead to the border of Thillia. We will be safe if we stay down here."

"All that way! Under . . . down here!" Rega blanched.

"You can go back up!" Drugar reminded, gesturing.

Rega looked up, gulped. Shivering, she shook her head.

"Why?" Roland demanded.

"Yes," said Paithan. "Why would you do this for us?"

Drugar stared up at them, the flame of hatred burning, consuming him. He hated them, hated their skinny bodies, their clean-shaven faces; hated their smell, their superiority; hated their tallness.

"Because it is my duty," he said.

Whatever happens to a single dwarf, happens to all.

Drugar's hand, hidden beneath his flowing beard, slipped inside his belt, the fingers closed over a sloth-bone hunting dagger. Terrible joy flared up in the dwarf's heart.

## CHAPTER 21

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

"AND HOW MANY PEOPLE DO YOU THINK YOUR SHIP WILL CARRY?" INQUIRED Zifnab.

"Carry where?" asked Haplo, cautiously.

"Come fly with me. Up, up, and away in my beautiful baboon. Gone with the wind. Somewhere over the rainbow. I get no kick from champagne. . . . No, wrong verse."

"Look, sir, my ship isn't going anywhere-"

"Well, of course it is, dear boy. You're the savior. Now, let's see." Zifnab began to count on his fingers, muttering to himself. "The Tribus elves had a flight crew of mpfpt and you add the galley slaves and that's mrrk and any passengers would be mpfpt plus mrrk, carry the one-"

"What do you know about Tribus elves?" demanded Haplo.

"-and the answer is . . ." The old wizard blinked. "Tribus elves? Never heard of 'em."

"You brought them up-"

"No, no, dear boy. Your hearing's gone. Such a young man, too. Pity. Perhaps it was the flight. You must have neglected to pressurize the cabin properly. Happens to me all the time. Deaf as a doorknob for days. I distinctly heard myself say 'tribe of elves'. Pass the brandywine, please."

"No more for you, sir," intoned a voice, rumbling through the floor. The dog, lying at Haplo's feet, lifted its head, hackles raised, fur bristling, growling in its throat.

The old man hastily dropped the decanter. "Don't be alarmed," he said, somewhat shamefacedly. "That's just my dragon. He thinks he's Ronald Coleman."

"Dragon," repeated Haplo, looking around the parlor, glancing out the windows. The runes on his skin itched and tingled with danger. Surreptitiously, keeping his hands hidden beneath the white linen tablecloth, he slid aside the bandages, prepared to use his magic to defend himself.

"Yes, dragon," snapped an elven woman peevisly. "The dragon lives beneath the house. Half the time he thinks he's the butler and the other half he's terrorizing the city. Then there's my father. You've met him. Lenthian Quindiniar. He's planning to take us all to the stars to see my mother, who's been dead for years. That's where you come in, you and your winged contraption of evil out there."

Haplo glanced at his hostess. Tall and thin, she was straight up and down, all angles, no curves, and stood and sat and walked stiff as a Volkaran knight in full armor.

"Don't talk like that about Papa, Callie," murmured another elven woman, who was admiring her reflection in a window. "It isn't respectful."

"Respectful!" Calandra rose from her seat. The dog, nervous already, sat up and growled again. Haplo laid a soothing hand on the animal's head. The woman was so furious she never noticed. "When you are 'Lady Durndrun' miss, you can tell me how to talk, but not before!"

Calandra's flashing-eyed gaze flared around the room, visibly scorching her father and the old man. "It is bad enough that I must put up with entertaining lunatics, but this is the house of my father and you are his 'guests'! Therefore, I will feed you and shelter you but I'll be damned if I have to listen to you or look at you! From now on, Papa, I will take my meals in my room!"

Calandra whirled, skirts and petticoats rustled like the leaves in a wind-tossed tree. She stormed from the parlor and into the dining room, her passing creating a ripple of destruction- overturning a chair, sweeping

small fragile objects off a table-She slammed the door to the hall shut with such force the wood nearly splintered. When the whirlwind had blown over, quiet descended.

"I don't believe I have ever been treated to such a scene in my eleven thousand years," intoned the voice beneath the floor in shocked tones. "If you want my advice-

"We don't," said Zifnab hastily.

"-that young woman should be soundly spanked," stated the dragon.

Haplo unobtrusively replaced the bandages.

"It's my fault." Lenthon hunched miserably into his chair. "She's right. I am crazy. Dreaming about going to the stars, finding my beloved again."

"No, sir, no!" Zifnab slammed his hand on the table for emphasis. "We have the ship." He gestured at Haplo. "And the man who knows how to operate it. Our savior! Didn't I tell you he'd come? And isn't he here?"

Lenthon lifted his head, his mild, vague-looking eyes staring at Haplo. "Yes. The man with the bandaged hands. You said that, but-

"Well, then!" said Zifnab, beard bristling in triumph. "I said I'd be here and I came. I said he'd be here and he came. I say we're going to the stars and we'll go. We haven't much time," he added, his voice lowering. His expression saddened. "Doom is coming. Even as we sit here, it's getting closer."

Aleatha sighed. Turning from the window, she walked over to her father, put her hands gently on his shoulders, and kissed him. "Don't worry about Callie, Papa. She's working too hard, that's all. You know she doesn't mean half what she says."

"Yes, yes, my dear," said Lenthon, patting his daughter's hand absently. He was gazing with renewed eagerness at the old wizard. "So you really, honestly believe we can take this ship and sail to the stars?"

"Not a doubt. Not a doubt." Zifnab glanced nervously about the room. Leaning over to Lenthon, the wizard whispered loudly, "You wouldn't happen to have a pipe and a bit of tobacco about, would-"

"I heard that!" rumbled the dragon.

The old man cringed. "Gandalf enjoyed a good pipe!"

"Why do you think he was called Gandalf the Grey? It wasn't for the color of his robes," the dragon added ominously.

Aleatha walked from the room.

Haplo rose to follow, making a quick gesture to the dog, who rarely took its eyes off his master. The dog obediently stood up, trotted over to Zifnab, and settled down at the wizard's feet. Haplo found Aleatha in the dining room, picking up broken knickknacks.

"Those edges are sharp. You'll cut yourself. I'll do it."

"Ordinarily the servants would clean up the mess," Aleatha said, with a rueful smile. "But we don't have any left. Just the cook, and I think she stays because she wouldn't know what to do with herself if she didn't have us. She's been with us since Mother died."

Haplo studied the smashed figurine he held in his hand. The figure of a woman, it appeared to be a religious icon of some sort, because she was holding her hands up, palm outward, in a ritual expression of blessing.

The head had been broken from the body in the fall. Fitting it back into place, Haplo saw the hair was long and white, except for where it turned dark brown at the tips.

"That's the Mother, goddess of the elves. Mother Peyton. Or perhaps you already know that," said Aleatha, sitting back on her heels. Her filmy dress was like a rose cloud around her, her blue-purple eyes, gazing into Haplo's, were alluring, enchanting.

He smiled back, a quiet smile, unassuming. "No, I didn't. I don't know anything about your people."

"Aren't there elves where you come from? Where do you come from, by the way. You've been here several cycles now, and I don't recall hearing you say."

Now was the time for the speech. Now was the time for Haplo to tell her the story he'd arranged during his voyage. Behind, in the parlor, the old man's voice was going on and on.

Aleatha, making a pretty grimace, rose and shut the door between the two rooms. Haplo could still hear the wizard's words quite distinctly, coming to his ears through those of his dog.

". . . the heat-resistant tiles kept falling off. Big problem in reentry. Now this ship that's docked out here is made of a material that is more reliable than tiles. Dragon scales," he said in a piercing whisper. "But I wouldn't let word of that get around. Might upset. . . you know who."

"Do you want to try to fix this?" Haplo held up the two pieces of the broken icon.

"So you intend to remain a mystery," said Aleatha. Reaching out her hands, she took the pieces from Haplo, letting her fingers brush against his ever so lightly. "It doesn't matter, you know. Papa would believe you if you told him you fell from heaven. Callie wouldn't believe you if you said you walked over from next door. Whatever story you do come up with, try to make it entertaining."

Idly, she fit the pieces of the statue together and held it up to the light. "How do they know what she looked like? I mean, her hair, for example. No one has hair like this—white on top and brown at the tips." The purple eyes gathered Haplo inside, held him fast. "I take that back. It's almost like your hair, except that it's reversed. Yours is brown with white on the edges. Odd, isn't it?"

"Not where I come from. Everyone has hair like mine."

That, at least, was a truthful statement. The Patryns are born with brown hair. When they attain puberty, the tips of the hair begin to turn white. What Haplo did not add was that with the Sartan, it is different. They are born with white hair, the tips eventually turning brown. He looked at the goddess the elven woman held in her hand. Here was proof that the Sartan had been to this world. Were they here now?

His thoughts went to the old man. Zifnab hadn't fooled Haplo. The Patryn's hearing was excellent. The old man had said "Tribus" elves—the elves who lived in Arianus, the elves who lived in another world, far and apart from this one.

". . . solid fuel rocket booster. Blew up on the launch pad. Horrible. Horrible. But they wouldn't believe me, you see. I told them magic was much safer. It was the bat guano they couldn't handle. Need tons of it, you know, to achieve lift-off. . . ."

Not that what the old man was saying now made much sense. Still, there was undoubtedly method in his madness. The Sartan, Alfred, had seemed nothing but a bumbling servant.

Aleatha deposited the two halves of the goddess in a drawer. The remains of a broken cup and saucer ended up in the wastebasket.

"Would you like a drink? The brandy is quite fine."

"No, thank you," said Haplo.

"I thought maybe you might need one, after Callie's little scene. Perhaps we should rejoin the others-"

"I'd rather talk to you alone, if it's allowed."

"You mean can we be alone together without a chaperone? Of course." Aleatha laughed, light, rippling. "My family knows me. You won't damage my reputation with them! I'd invite you out to sit on the front porch, but the crowd's still there, staring at your 'evil contraption.' We can go into the drawing room. It's cool in there."

Aleatha led the way, her body rippling like her laughter. Haplo was protected against feminine charms-not by magic, for not even the most powerful runes ever traced upon a body could guard against love's insidious poison. He was protected by experience. It is dangerous to love, in the Labyrinth. But the Patryn could admire female beauty, as he had often admired the kaleidoscopic sky in the Nexus.

"Please, go in," Aleatha said, extending her hand.

Haplo entered the drawing room. Aleatha came behind him, shut the door, and leaned up against it, studying him.

Located in the center of the house, away from the windows, the room was secluded and private. The fan on the ceiling above rotated with a soft whirring noise-the only sound. Haplo turned to his hostess, who was regarding him with a playful smile,

"If you were an elf, it would be dangerous for you to be alone with me."

"Pardon me, but you don't look dangerous."

"Ah, but I am. I'm bored. I'm engaged. The two are synonymous. You're extremely well built, for a human. Most of the human males I've seen are so big, with hulking bodies. You're slender." Aleatha reached out, laid her hand on his arm, caressing. "Your muscles are firm, like a tree branch. That doesn't hurt you when I touch you, does it?"

"No," said Haplo with his quiet smile. "Why? Should it?"

"The skin disease, you know."

The Patryn remembered his lie. "Oh, that. No, it's only on my hands."

He held them out. Aleatha gave the bandages a look of faint disgust.

"A pity. I am frightfully bored." She leaned up against the door again, studying him languidly. "The man with the bandaged hands. Just like that old looney predicted. I wonder if the rest of what he said will come true." A slight frown marred the smooth, white forehead.

"He really said that?" Haplo asked.

"Said what?"

"About my hands? Predicted ... my coming?"

Aleatha shrugged. "Yes, he said it. Along with a lot of other nonsense, about my not being married. Doom and destruction coming. Flying a ship to the stars. I'm going to be married." Her lips tightened. "I've worked too hard, gone through too much. And I won't stay in this house any longer than I have to."

"Why would your father want to go to the stars?" Haplo recalled the object he'd seen from his ship, the twinkling light, sparkling brightly in the sun-drenched sky. He'd only seen one. There were more, apparently. "What does he know about them?"

". . . lunar rover! Looked like a bug." The old man's voice rose shrill and querulous. "Crawled around and picked up rocks."

"Know about them!" Aleatha laughed again. Her eyes were warm and soft, dark and mysterious. "He doesn't know anything about them! No one does. Do you want to kiss me?"

Not particularly. Haplo wanted her to keep talking.

"But you must have some legends about the stars. My people do."

"Well, of course." Aleatha moved nearer. "It depends on who is doing the telling. You humans, for example, have the silly notion that they're cities. That's why the old man-

"Cities!"

"Goodness! Don't bite me! How fierce you look!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. My people don't believe that."

"Don't they?"

"No. I mean, it's silly," he said, testing. "Cities couldn't rotate around the sky like stars."

"Rotate! Your people must be the ones rotating. Our stars never change position. They come and go, but always in the same place."

"Come and go?"

"I've changed my mind." Aleatha leaned closer. "Go ahead. Bite me."

"Maybe later," said Haplo politely. "What do you mean, the stars come and go?"

Aleatha sighed, fell back against the door, and gazed at him from beneath black eyelashes. "You and the old man. You're in this together, aren't you? You're going to swindle my father out of his fortune. I'll tell Callie-

Haplo stepped forward, reached out his hands.

"No, don't touch me," Aleatha ordered- "Just kiss me."

Smiling, Haplo held his bandaged hands up and out to the side, leaned down, and kissed the soft lips. He took a step back. Aleatha was eyeing him speculatively.

"You weren't much different than an elf."

"Sorry. I'm better when I can use my hands."

"Maybe it's just men in general. Or maybe it's poets, yammering about burning blood, melting heart, skin on fire. Did you ever feel like that when you were with a woman?"

"No," Haplo lied. He could remember a time when the flame had been all he lived for.

"Well, never mind." Aleatha sighed. Turning to go, she placed her hand on the wooden doorknob. "I'm growing rather fatigued. If you'll excuse me-

"About the stars?" Haplo put his hand on the door, keeping it shut.

Pressed between the door and Haplo's body, Aleatha looked up into the man's face. He smiled into the purple eyes, edged his body nearer, hinting that he was prolonging the conversation for one reason only. Aleatha lowered her eyelashes, but kept close watch from beneath.

"Perhaps I underrated you. Very well, if you want to discuss stars ..."

Haplo wound a strand of the ashen hair around his finger. "Tell me about the ones that 'come and go.' "

"Just that." Aleatha caught hold of the strand of hair, pulled it, drawing him closer to her, reeling him in like a fish. "They shine for so many years, then they go dark and stay dark for so many years."

"All of them at once?"

"No, silly. Some wink on and others wink off. I really don't know much about it. That lecherous old astrologer friend of father's could tell you more if you're truly interested." Aleatha glanced up at him. "Isn't it odd how your hair grows like that, just the opposite of the goddess. Perhaps you are a savior-one of Mother Peytin's sons come to rescue me from my sins. I'll give your kiss another try, if you like."

"No, you wounded me deeply. I'll never be the same."

Haplo gave a silent whistle. The woman's aimless throws were hitting their target too near center. He needed to get rid of her, needed to think. There came a scratching sound at the door.

"My dog," said Haplo, removing his hand.

Aleatha made a face. "Ignore it."

"That wouldn't be wise. He probably has to go out."

The scratching sound grew louder, more insistent. The dog began to whine.

"You wouldn't want him to ... uh ... well, you know . . . in the house."

"Callie would stew your ears for breakfast. Take the mutt out, then." Aleatha opened the door, and the dog bounded inside. Jumping up on Haplo, it planted its paws on his chest.

"Hi, boy! Did you miss me?" Haplo ruffled the dog's ears, patted its flanks. "Come on, let's go for a walk."

The dog leapt down, yelping gleefully, darting off, then dashing back to make certain Haplo was serious about his offer.

"I enjoyed our conversation," he said to Aleatha.

She had moved aside, standing against the open door, her hands behind her back. "I was less bored than usual."

"Perhaps we could discuss stars again?"

"I don't think so. I've reached a conclusion. Poets are liars. You better get that beast out of here. Callie won't put up with that howling."

Haplo walked past her, turned to add something about poets. She slammed the door shut in his face.

He led the dog outside, sauntered around to the open area where his ship was moored, and stood staring up into the sunlit sky. He could see the stars clearly. They burned bright and steadily, not "twinkling" as the poets were wont to say.

He tried to concentrate, tried to consider the confusing tangle in which he'd found himself-a savior who had come to destroy. But his mind refused to cooperate.

Poets. He had been going to reply to Aleatha's final comment. She was wrong. Poets told the truth.

It was the heart that lied. . .

. . . Haplo was in his nineteenth year in the Labyrinth when he met the woman. Like him, she was a runner, almost his age. Her goal was the same as his-to escape. They traveled together, finding pleasure in each other's company. Love, if not unknown in the Labyrinth, is not admitted. Lust is acceptable-the need to procreate, to perpetuate the species, to bring children into the world to fight the Labyrinth. By day the two traveled, seeking the next Gate. By night, their rune-tattooed bodies twined together.

And then one day, the two came upon a group of squatters- those in the Labyrinth who travel in packs, who move slowly and represent civilization as far as anything can in that hellish prison. As was customary, Haplo and his companion brought a gift of meat and, as was customary, the squatters invited them to accept the use of their crude lodgings and find a measure of peace and security for a few nights.

Haplo, sitting at ease by the fire, watched the woman play with the children. The woman was lithe and lovely. Her thick chestnut hair fell over firm, round breasts, tattooed with the magical runes that were both shield and weapon. The baby she held in her arms was likewise tattooed-every child was from the day it was born. She looked up at Haplo and something special and secret was shared between them- his pulse quickened.

"Come on," he whispered, kneeling beside her. "Let's go back to the hut."

"No," she said, smiling and looking at him from a veil of thick hair. "It's too early. It would offend our hosts."

"The hell with our hosts!" Haplo wanted her in his arms, wanted to lose himself in the warmth and the sweet darkness.

She ignored him, singing to the baby, teasing him throughout the remainder of the evening until his blood was on fire. When they eventually sought the privacy of their hut, there was no sleep for either of them that night.

"Would you like a baby?" she asked, in one of their quiet moments after the transports of pleasure.

"What does that mean?" He looked at her with a fierce, hungry eagerness.

"Nothing. Just . . . would you want one? You'd have to become a squatter, you know."

"Not necessarily. My parents were runners and they had me."

Haplo saw his parents dead, bodies hacked to pieces. They'd clouted him on the head, knocked him out so that he wouldn't see, so that he wouldn't scream. He said nothing more about babies that night.

The next morning, the squatters had news-a Gate up ahead had supposedly fallen. The way was still dangerous, but if they could get through, it would mean another step nearer to escape, another step nearer reaching the rumored safe haven of the Nexus. Haplo and the woman left the squatters' village.

They made their cautious, wary way through the thick forest. Both were expert fighters-the only reason they had lived this long-and they recognized the signs, the smell, and the prickling of the runes upon their flesh. They were, therefore, almost prepared.

A huge, furry shape, man size, leapt from the leafy darkness. It caught Haplo around the shoulders, trying to sink its teeth in his neck for a quick kill. Haplo grabbed the shaggy arms and jerked it over his head, letting the beast's own momentum carry it forward. The wolfen crashed to the ground, but twisted around and was on its feet before Haplo could drive his spear into its body. Wild yellow eyes fixed on his throat. It jumped again and hauled him to the ground. Grappling for his dagger, he saw-as he fell-the woman's runes on her skin glow bright blue. He saw one of the creatures dive for her, heard the crackle of magic, and then his vision was blocked by a hairy body trying to tear out his life.

The wolfen's fangs slashed at his neck. The runes protected him and he heard the creature snarl in frustration. Lifting his dagger, he stabbed the body on top of his and heard it grunt in pain, saw its yellow eyes blaze in anger. Wolfen have thick hides and are tough to kill. Haplo had done little more than infuriate it. It was after his face, now-the one place on his body not protected by runes.

He blocked it with his right arm, struggling to push it away, and kept stabbing at it with his left. The wolfen's claw-fingered hands grasped his head. One twist, and it would break his neck.

Claw-fingers dug into his face. Then the creature's body stiffened, it gave a gurgling scream, and slumped over his. Haplo heaved the corpse off of his body, found the woman standing over him. The blue glow was fading from her runes. Her spear was in the wolfen's back. She gave Haplo a hand, helped him to stand. He didn't thank her for saving his life. She didn't expect it. Today, maybe the next, he'd return the favor. It was that way ... in the Labyrinth.

"Two of them," he said, looking down at the corpses.

The woman yanked out her spear, inspected it to make certain it was still in good condition. The other had died from the electricity she'd had time to generate with the runes. Its body still smoldered.

"Scouts," she said. "A hunting party." She shook her chestnut hair out of her face. "They'll be going for the squatters."

"Yeah." Haplo glanced back they way they'd come.

Wolfen hunted in packs of thirty, forty creatures. There were fifteen squatters, five of them children.

"They don't stand a chance." It was an off-hand remark, accompanied by a shrug. Haplo wiped the blood and gore from his dagger.

"We could go back, help fight them," the woman said.

"Two of us wouldn't do that much good. We'd die with them. You know that."

In the distance, they could hear hoarse shouts-the squatters calling each other to the defense. Above that, the higher pitched voices of the women, singing the runes. And above that, higher still, the scream of a child.

The woman's face darkened, she glanced in that direction, irresolute.

"C'mon," urged Haplo, sheathing his dagger. "There may be more of them around here."

"No. They're all in on the kill."

The child's scream rose to a shrill shriek of terror.

"It's the Sartan," said Haplo, his voice harsh. "They put us in this hell. They're the ones responsible for this evil."

The woman looked at him, her brown eyes flecked with gold. "I wonder. Maybe it's the evil inside us."

Hefting her weapon, she started to walk. Haplo remained standing, looking after her. She was moving down a different path than the one they'd been walking. He could hear, behind them, the sounds of battle lessening. The child's scream abruptly ended, mercifully cut short.

"Are you carrying my baby?" Haplo called after her.

If the woman heard him, she didn't answer, but kept walking. The dappled shadows of the leaves closed over her. She was lost to his sight. He strained to listen, to hear her moving through the brush. But she was a runner, she was good. She was silent.

Haplo glanced at the bodies lying at his feet. The wolves would be occupied with the squatters for a long time, but eventually they'd smell fresh blood and come looking for it.

After all, what did it matter? A kid would only slow him down. He left, heading alone down the path he'd chosen, the path that led to the Gate, to escape.

## CHAPTER 22

### THE TUNNELS, THURN TO THILLIA

THE DWARVES HAD SPENT CENTURIES BUILDING THE TUNNELS. THE passageways branched out in all directions, the major routes extending north to the dwarven realms of Klag and Grish- realms now ominously silent-and south, to the land of the SeaKings and beyond to Thillia. The dwarves could have traveled overland; the trade routes to the south, particularly, were well established. But they preferred the darkness and privacy of their tunnels. Dwarves dislike and distrust "light seekers" as they refer disparagingly to humans and elves.

Traveling the tunnels made sense, it was plainly safer; but Drugar took grim delight in the knowledge that his "victims" hated the tunnels, hated the smothering, closed-in feeling, hated- above all-the darkness.

The tunnels were built for people of Drugar's height. The humans and the taller elf had to hunch over when they walked, sometimes even crawl on hands and knees. Muscles rebelled, bodies ached, knees were bruised, palms were raw and bleeding. In satisfaction, Drugar watched them sweat, heard them pant for air and groan in pain. His only regret was that they were moving much too swiftly. The elf, in particular, was extremely anxious to reach his homeland. Rega and Roland were just anxious to get out.

They paused only for short rests, and then only when they were near collapsing from exhaustion. Drugar often stayed awake, watching them sleep, fingering the blade of his knife. He could have murdered them at any time, for the fools trusted him now. But killing them would be a barren gesture. He might as well have let the tytans kill them. No, he hadn't risked his own life to save these wretches just to knife them in their sleep. They must first watch as Drugar had watched, they must first witness the slaughter of their loved ones. They must experience the horror, the helplessness. They must battle without, hope, knowing that their entire race was going to be wiped out. Then, and only then, would Drugar permit them to die. Then he could die himself.

But the body cannot live on obsession alone. The dwarf had to sleep himself, and when he could be heard loudly snoring, his victims talked.

"Do you know where we are?" Paithan edged his way painfully over to where Roland was sitting, nursing torn hands.

"No."

"What if he's leading us the wrong way? Up norinth?"

"Why should he? I wish we had some of that ointment stuff of Rega's."

"Maybe she had it with her-"

"Don't wake her. Poor kid, she's about done in." Roland wrung his hands, wincing. "Ouch, damn that stings."

Paithan shook his head. They couldn't see each other, the dwarf had insisted the torch be doused when they weren't moving. The wood used to make it burned long, but they had traveled far, and it was rapidly being consumed.

"I think we should risk going up," said Paithan, after a moment's pause. "I have my etherilite [23] with me. I can tell where we are."

Roland shrugged. "Suit yourself. I don't want to meet those bastards again. I'm considering staying down here permanently. I'm getting kind of used to it."

"What about your people?"

"What the hell can I do to help them?"

"You could warn them ..."

"As fast as those bastards travel, they're probably already there by now. Let the knights fight 'em. That's what they're trained for."

"You're a coward. You're not worthy of-" Paithan realized what he had been about to say, snapped his mouth shut on the words.

Roland kindly finished his sentence for him. "Not worthy of who? My wife? Save-her-skin Rega?"

"Don't talk about her like that!"

"I can talk about her any damn way I feel like, elf. She's my wife, or have you forgotten that little fact? You know, by god, I think you have forgotten."

Roland was glib, talked tough. The words were a shell, meant to hold in his quivering guts. He liked to pretend he lived a danger-filled life, but it wasn't true. Once he'd nearly been knifed in a barroom scuffle and another time he'd been mauled by an enraged wildeboar. Then there was the time he and Rega had fought fellow smugglers during a dispute over free trade. Strong and powerful, quick and cunning, Roland had emerged from these adventures with a couple of bruises and a few scratches.

Courage comes easy to a person in a fight. Adrenaline pumps, bloodlust burns. Courage is hard to find, however, when you're tied to a tree and you've been splattered with the blood and brains of the man tied next to you.

Roland was shaken, unnerved. Every time he fell asleep he saw that horrible scene again, played out before his closed eyes. He grew to bless the darkness, it hid his shivering. Time and again he'd caught himself waking with a scream on his lips.

The thought of leaving the security of the tunnels, of facing those monsters was almost more than he could bear. Like a wounded animal who fears to betray its own weakness lest others come and tear it apart, Roland went into hiding behind the one thing that seemed to him to offer shelter, the one thing that promised to help him forget-money.

It'd be a different world up there once the tytans passed through. People dead, cities destroyed. Those who survived would have it all, especially if they had money-elven money.

He'd lost all he'd planned to make on the weapons sale. But there was always the elf. Roland was fairly certain, now, of Paithan's true feelings for Rega. He planned to use the elf's love to squeeze him, wring him dry.

"I've got my eye on you, Quin. You better keep clear of my wife or I'll make you wish the tytans had battered in your head like they did poor Andor." Roland's voice caught, he hadn't meant to bring that up. It was dark, the elf couldn't see. Maybe he'd chalk the quiver up to righteous anger.

"You're a coward and a bully," said Paithan, teeth clenched, his entire body clenched to keep from throttling the human. "Rega is worth ten of you! I-" But he was too furious, he couldn't go on, perhaps he wasn't certain what he'd say. Roland heard the elf move over to the opposite side of the tunnel, heard him throw himself down onto the floor.

If that doesn't force him to make love to her, nothing will, thought Roland. He stared into the darkness and thought desperately about money.

Lying apart from both her brother and the elf, Rega kept very still, pretended to sleep, and swallowed her tears.

"The tunnels end here," announced Drugar.

"Where is 'here'?" demanded Paithan.

"We are at the border of Thillia, near Griffith."

"We've come that far?"

"The way through the tunnels is shorter and easier than the way above. We have traveled in a straight line, instead of being forced to follow the winding trails of the jungle."

"One of us should go up there," said Rega, "see what . . . see what's happening."

"Why don't you go, Rega? You're so all fired hot to get out of here," suggested her brother.

Rega didn't move, didn't look at him. "I... I thought I was. I guess I'm not."

"I'll go," offered Paithan. Anything to get away from the woman, to be able to think clearly without the sight of her scattering his thoughts around like the pieces of a broken toy.

"Take this tunnel to the top," instructed the dwarf, holding the torch high and pointing. "It will bring you out in a femmoss cavern. The town of Griffith is about a mile on your right. The path is plainly marked."

"I'll go with you," offered Rega, ashamed of her fear. "We both will, won't we, Roland?"

"I'll go alone!" Paithan snapped.

The tunnel wound upward through the bole of a huge tree, twisting round and round like a spiral staircase. He stood, looking up it, when he felt a hand touch his arm.

"Be careful," said Rega softly.

The tips of her fingers sent ripples of heat through the elf's body. He dared not turn, dared not look into the brown, fire-lit eyes. Leaving her abruptly, without a word or a glance, Paithan began to crawl up the tunnel.

He was soon beyond the light of the torch and had to feel his way, making the going slow and arduous. He didn't mind. He both longed for and dreaded reaching the world again. Once he emerged into the sun, his questions would be answered, he'd be forced to take decisive action.

Had the tytans reached Thillia? How many of the creatures were there? If no more than they had encountered in the jungle, Paithan could almost believe Roland's boast that the human knights of the five kingdoms could deal with them. He wanted very much to believe in that. Unfortunately, logic kept sticking its sharp point into his rainbow-colored bubbles.

These tytans had destroyed an empire. They had destroyed the dwarven nation. Doom and destruction, said the old man. You will bring it with you.

No, I won't. I'll reach my people in time. We'll be prepared. Rega and I will warn them.

Elves are, in general, strict observers of the law. They abhor chaos and rely on laws to keep their society in order. The family unit and the sanctity of marriage were held sacred. Paithan was different, however. His entire family was different. Calandra held money and success sacred, Aleatha believed in money and status, Paithan believed in pleasing himself. If at any time society's rules and regulations interfered with a Quindinair belief, the rules and regulations were conveniently swept into the wastebasket.

Paithan knew he should feel some sort of qualm at asking Rega to run away with him. He was satisfied to discover that he didn't. If Roland couldn't hang onto his own wife, that was his problem, not Paithan's. The elf did remember, now and then, the conversation he'd overheard between Rega and Roland; the one in which it had seemed Rega was plotting to blackmail him. But he remembered, too, Rega's face when the tytans were dosing in on them, when they were facing certain death. She'd told him she loved him. She wouldn't have lied to him then. Paithan concluded, therefore, that the scheme had been Roland's, and that Rega had never truly had any part in it. Perhaps he was forcing her, threatening her with physical harm.

Absorbed in his thoughts and the difficult climb, Paithan was startled to find himself at the top sooner than he'd expected. It occurred to him that the dwarven tunnel must have been sloping upward during the last few cycles' travel and that he hadn't noticed. He poked his head cautiously out of the tunnel opening. He was somewhat disappointed to find himself surrounded by darkness, then he remembered that he was in a cavern. Eagerly he gazed around and-some distance from him-he could see sunlight. He drew in a deep breath, tasted fresh air.

The elf's spirits rose. He could almost believe the tytans had been nothing but a bad dream. It was all he could do to contain himself and not leap up out of the tunnel and dash into the blessed sunlight. Paithan pulled himself cautiously up over the lip of the tunnel and, moving quietly, crept through the cavern until he reached the opening.

He peered outside. All seemed perfectly normal. Recalling the terrible silence in the jungle just before the tytans appeared, he was relieved to hear birds squawking and cawing, animals rustling through- the trees on their own private business. Several greevils popped up out of the undergrowth, staring at him with their four eyes, their legendary curiosity banishing fear. Paithan grinned at them and, reaching into a pocket, tossed them some crumbs of bread.

Emerging from the cavern, the elf stretched to his full height, bending backward to relieve muscles cramped from traveling stooped and hunched over. He looked carefully in all directions, though he didn't expect to see the jungle moving. The testimony of the animals was clear to him. The tytans were nowhere around.

Perhaps they've been here and moved on. Perhaps when you walk into Griffith, you'll find a dead city.

No, Paithan couldn't believe it. The world was too bright, too sunny and sweet smelling. Maybe it had all been just a bad dream.

He decided he would go back and tell the others. There was no reason all of them couldn't travel to Griffith together. He turned around, dreading going back into the tunnels again, when he heard a voice, echoing in the cavern.

"Paithan? Is everything all right?"

"All right?" cried Paithan. "Rega, it's beautiful! Come out and stand in the sunshine! Come on. It's safe. Hear the birds?"

Rega ran through the cavern. Bursting into the sun, she lifted her upturned face to the heavens and breathed deeply.

"It's glorious!" she sighed. Her gaze went to Paithan. Before either quite knew how it happened, they were in each other's arms, holding each other tightly, lips searching, meeting, finding.

"Your husband," said Paithan, when he could catch his breath. "He might come up, might catch us-"

"No!" Rega murmured, clinging to him fiercely. "No, he's down there with the dwarf. He's going to wait ... to keep an eye on Drugar. Besides"-she drew a deep breath, moved back slightly so that she could look into Paithan's face-"it wouldn't matter if he did catch us. I've made a decision. There's something I have to tell you."

Paithan ran his hand through her dark hair, entangling his fingers in the thick, shining mass. "You've decided to run away with me. I know. It will be for the best. He'll never find us in my country-"

"Please listen to me and don't interrupt!" Rega shook her head, nuzzling it beneath Paithan's hand like a cat wanting to be stroked. "Roland isn't my husband." The words came out in a gasp, forced up from the pit of her stomach.

Paithan stared at her, puzzled. "What?"

"He's . . . my brother. My half-brother." Rega had to swallow, to keep her throat moist enough to talk.

Paithan continued to hold her, but his hands were suddenly cold. He recalled the conversation in the glade; it took on a new and more sinister meaning.

"Why did you lie to me?"

Rega felt his hands tremble, felt the chill in his fingers, saw his face pale and grow cold as his hands. She couldn't meet his intense, searching gaze. Her eyes lowered, sought her feet.

"We didn't lie to you," she said, trying to make her voice light. "We lied to everyone. Safety, you see. Men don't . . . bother me if they think ... I'm married ..." She felt him stiffen, and looked at him. Her words dried up, cracked. "What's wrong? I thought you'd be pleased! Don't . . . don't you believe me?"

Paithan shoved her away. Tripping over a vine, Rega stumbled and fell. She started to get up, but the elf stood over her, his frightening gaze pinned her to the moss.

"Believe you? No! Why should I? You've lied to me before! And you're lying now. Safety! I overheard you and your brother"-he spit the word-"talking. I heard about your little scheme to seduce me and then blackmail me! You bitch!"

Paithan turned his back on her, stalked over to the path that led into town. He set his foot on it; kept walking, determined to leave the pain and the horror of this trip behind him. He didn't move very fast, however, and

his walk slowed further when he heard a rustling in the undergrowth and the sound of light footfalls hurrying after him.

A hand touched his arm. Paithan continued walking, didn't look around.

"I deserved that," said Rega. "I am ... what you said. I've done terrible things in my life. Oh, I could tell you"- her grip on Paithan tightened-"I could tell you that it wasn't my fault. You might say life has been like a mother to Roland and me: every time we turn around, it smacks us in the face. I could tell you that we live the way we do because that's how we survive. But it wouldn't be true.

"No, Paithan! Don't look at me. I want to say one more thing and then you can go. If you know about the plan we had to blackmail you, then you know that I didn't go through with it. I wasn't being noble. I was being selfish. Whenever you look at me, I feel . . . ugly. I meant what I said. I do love you. And that's why I'm letting you go. Good-bye, Paithan." Her hand slid from his arm.

Paithan turned, captured the hand and kissed it. He smiled ruefully into the brown eyes. "I'm not such a prize, you know. Look at me. I was ready to seduce a married woman, ready to carry you off from your husband. I love you, Rega. That was my excuse. But the poets say that when you love someone, you want only the best for the other person. That means you come out ahead in our game, because you wanted the best for me." The elf's smile twisted. "And so did I."

"You love me, Paithan? You truly love me?"

"Yes, but-"

"No." Her hand covered his lips. "No, don't say anything else. I love you and if we love each other, nothing else matters. Not then, not now, not whatever comes."

Doom and destruction. The old man's words echoed in Paithan's heart. He ignored the voice. Taking Rega in his arms, he shoved his fear firmly back into the shadows, along with various other nagging doubts such as "where will this relationship lead?" Paithan didn't see why that question needed to be answered. Right now their love was leading to pleasure, and that was all that mattered.

"I warned you, elf!"

Roland had apparently grown tired of waiting. He and the dwarf stood before them. The human yanked his razer from his belt. "I warned you to keep away from her! Blackbeard, you're a witness-"

Rega, snuggled in Paithan's embrace, smiled at her brother. "It's over, Roland. He knows the truth."

"He knows?" Roland stared, amazed.

"I told him," sighed Rega, looking back up into Paithan's eyes.

"Well, that's great! That's just dandy!" Roland hurled the razer blades-down into the moss, rage conveniently masking his fear. "First we lose the money from the weapons, now we lose the elf. Just what are we supposed to live on-"

The boom of a huge, snakeskin drum rolled through the jungle, scaring the birds, sending them flapping and shrieking up from the trees. The drum boomed out again and yet again. Roland hushed, listening, his face gone pale. Rega tensed in the elf's arms, her gaze going to the direction of the town.

"What is it?" asked Paithan.

"They're sounding the alarm. Calling out the men to defend the village against an attack!" Rega looked around fearfully. The birds had risen into the air with the sound of the drum, but they had ceased their raucous protest. The jungle was suddenly still, deathly quiet.

"You wanted to know what you were going to live on?" Paithan glanced at Roland. "That might not be much of an issue."

No one was paying any attention to the dwarf, or they would have seen Drugar's lips, beneath the beard, part in a rictus grin.

## CHAPTER 23

### GRIFFITH, THILLIA

THEY RAN DOWN THE TRAIL, HEADING FOR THE SECURITY OF THE VILLAGE. THE path was clear, well traveled, and flat. Adrenaline pumped, lending them impetus. They were in sight of the village when Roland came a halt.

"Wait!" he gasped. "Blackbeard."

Rega and Paithan stopped, hands and bodies coming together, leaning on each other for support.

"Why-?"

"The dwarf. He couldn't keep up," said Roland, catching his breath. "They won't let him inside the gates without us to vouch for him."

"Then he'd just go back to the tunnels," said Rega. "Maybe that's what he did anyway. I don't hear him." She crowded closer to Paithan. "Let's keep moving!"

"Go ahead," said Roland harshly. "I'll wait."

"What's got into you?"

"The dwarf saved our lives."

"Your hus-brother's right," said Paithan. "We should wait for him."

Rega shook her head, frowning. "I don't like it. I don't like him. I've seen him look at us, sometimes, and I-

The sound of booted feet and heavy breathing interrupted her. Drugar stumbled along the path, head down, feet and arms pumping. He was watching the path, not where he was going and would have plowed right into Roland, if the man hadn't reached out a restraining hand.

The dwarf looked up, dizzily, blinking back the sweat that was running into his eyes. "Why . . . stopped?" he demanded when he could spare breath to talk.

"Waiting for you," said Roland.

"All right, he's here. Let's get going!" said Rega, glancing around uneasily. The sound of the drumbeats pounded like their hearts, the only sounds in the jungle.

"Here, Blackbeard, I'll give you a hand," offered Roland.

"Leave me alone!" Drugar snarled, jerking back. "I can keep up."

"Suit yourself." Roland shrugged, and they started off again, pace slightly slower, to accommodate the dwarf.

When they arrived at Griffith, they not only found the gates closed, they discovered the citizens erecting a barricade in front of them. Barrels, pieces of furniture, and other junk were being hastily thrown down from the walls by the panic-stricken populace.

Roland waved and shouted, and finally someone looked over the edge.

"Who goes there?"

"It's Roland! Harald, you jackass, if you don't recognize me, you must recognize Rega! Let us in!"

"Who's that with you?"

"An elf, name's Quin. He's from Equilan and a dwarf, name of Blackbeard, from Thurn ... or what's left of it. Now are you going to let us in or stand here and jaw all day?"

"You and Rega can come in." The crown of a balding head appeared over the top of an overturned barrel. "But not the other two."

"Harald, you bastard, once I get in there I'm gonna break-"

"Harald!" Rega's clear voice rang over her brother's. "This elf is a weapons dealer! Elven weapons! Magical! And the dwarf has information about the . . . the . . ."

"Enemy," said Paithan quickly.

"Enemy." Rega swallowed, her throat gone dry.

"Wait here," said Harald. The head disappeared. Other heads replaced it, staring out at the four standing in the path.

"Where the hell else does he think I'm gonna go?" muttered Roland. He kept glancing back, over his shoulder. "What was that? Over there?"

All of them turned fearfully, stared.

"Nothing! Just the wind," said Paithan, after a moment.

"Don't do that, Roland!" Rega snapped. "You nearly scared me to death."

Paithan was eyeing the barricade. "That won't keep them out, you know ..."

"Yes, it will!" whispered Rega, twining her fingers with the elf's. "It has to!"

A head and shoulders appeared, looking at them over the barricade. The head was encased in brown, highly polished, tyro-shell armor, matching armor gleamed on the shoulders.

"You say these people are from the village?" the armored head asked the balding one next to it.

"Yes. Two of them. Not the dwarf and the elf-"

"But the elf is a weapons dealer. Very well. Let them inside. Bring them to headquarters."

The armored head left. There was a momentary delay, barrels and crates had to come down, carts had to be pushed aside. Finally the wooden gates swung open only far enough to permit the four to squeeze their bodies through. The stocky dwarf, encased in his heavy leather armor, got stuck in the middle and Roland was forced to push him through from behind, while Paithan pulled from the front.

The gate was swiftly shut behind them.

"You're to go see Sir Lathan," instructed Harald, jerking a thumb at the inn. Several armored knights could be seen pacing about, testing their weapons, or clustered in groups, talking, keeping themselves aloof from the crowd of worried townspeople.

"Lathan?" said Rega, lifting her eyebrows. "Reginald's younger brother? I don't believe it!"

"Yeah, I didn't think we were worth that much to him," added Roland.

"Reginald who?" asked Paithan. The three moved toward the inn, the dwarf following, staring around him with his dark, shadowed gaze.

"Reginald of Tercia. Our liege lord. Apparently he's sent a regiment of knights down here under his little brother's command. I guess they figure on stopping the tytans here, before they reach the capital."

"It may not be those . . . those creatures that brought them," said Rega, shivering in the bright sunlight. "It could be anything. A raid by the SeaKings. You don't know, so just shut up about it!"

She stopped walking, stared at the inn, the people milling about, frightening themselves and each other. "I'm not going in there. I'm going home to . . . to . . . wash my hair." Rega flung her arms around Paithan's neck, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed him on the lips. "I'll see you tonight," she said breathlessly.

He tried to stop her, but she left too quickly, practically running, shoving her way through the milling crowd.

"Perhaps I should go with her-"

Roland put his hand on the elf's arm. "Just leave her alone. She's scared, scared as hell. She wants time to get a grip on herself."

"But I could help her-"

"No, she wouldn't like that. Rega's got a lot of pride. When we were kids, and Ma'd beat her till the blood ran, Rega never let anyone see her cry. Besides, I don't think you've got a choice."

Roland gestured to the knights. Paithan saw that they had ceased their discussions and were staring straight at him. The human was right, if the elf left now, they would think he was up to no good.

He and Roland continued their walk toward the inn, Drugar tramping noisily behind them. The town was in chaos, some hurrying toward the barricade, weapons in their hands, others hurrying away from it, families moving out, abandoning their homes. Suddenly Roland stepped in front of him, halting him with outstretched arm. Paithan was forced to either back up or run the man down.

"See here, Quindiniar, after we talk to this knight and we convince him that you aren't in league with the enemy, why don't you just head out for home . . . alone."

"I won't leave without Rega," said Paithan quietly.

Roland squinted up at him, smiled. "Oh? You going to marry her?"

The question caught Paithan by surprise. He firmly intended to answer yes but a vision of his older sister rose up before him. "I . . . I-"

"Look, I'm not trying to protect Rega's 'honor.' We never had any, either of us; couldn't afford it. Our ma was the town whore. Rega's done her share of bed hopping, but you're the first man she's ever cared about. I won't let her get hurt. You understand?"

"You love her very much, don't you?"

Roland shrugged, turned abruptly, and resumed walking. "Our ma ran off when I was fifteen. Rega was twelve. All we had left was each other. We've made our own way in this world, never asking help from anybody. So you just clear off and leave us alone. I'll tell Rega you had to go on ahead to see about your family. She'll be hurt some, but not as much as if you . . . well . . . you know."

"Yes, I know," said Paithan. Roland's right. I should leave, leave immediately, go on by myself. This relationship can come to nothing but heartache. I know that, I've known it from the beginning. But I never felt about any woman the way I feel about Rega!

Paithan's desire ached and burned inside him. When she'd said that about seeing him tonight, when he'd looked into her eyes and seen the promise there, he hadn't thought he could bear it. He could hold her tonight, sleep with her tonight.

And leave tomorrow?

So I'll take her with me tomorrow. Take her home, take her to ... Calandra. He could picture his sister's fury, hear her scathing, flesh-stripping remarks. No, it wouldn't be fair, wouldn't be fair to Rega.

"Hey." Roland punched him in the side with his elbow.

Paithan glanced up, saw that they'd reached the inn. A knight stood guarding the door. His gaze flicked over Roland, fixed earnestly on Paithan, then on Drugar, standing behind them.

"Go on in," said the knight, throwing open the door.

Paithan walked inside, stared. He wouldn't have recognized the inn. The common room had been transformed into an arsenal. Shields decorated with each knight's device stood against the walls, each knight's weapons stacked neatly in front. Additional arms had been piled in the center of the floor, presumably to be distributed to the general populace in time of need. Paithan noted some magical elven weapons among the knights' retinue, but not many.

The room was empty, except for a knight, seated at a table, eating and drinking.

"That's him," said Roland, out of the corner of his mouth.

Lathan was young, no more than twenty-eight years old. He was handsome, with the black hair and black mustache of the Thillian lords. A jagged battle scar cut into his upper lip, giving him a slight, perpetual sneer.

"Excuse me if I am so unmannerly as to dine in front of you," said Sir Lathan. "I've had nothing to eat or drink the last cycle."

"We haven't had much to eat ourselves," said Paithan.

"Or drink," Roland added, eyeing the knight's full mug.

"There are other taverns in this town," said Sir Lathan. "Taverns that serve your kind." He looked up from his plate long enough to fix his eyes on the elf and the dwarf, then returned his attention to his food. He forked meat into his mouth, and washed it down with a drink, "More ale," he shouted, looking around for the innkeeper. He banged his mug on the table and the innkeeper appeared, a sullen look on his face.

"This time," said Sir Lathan, flinging the mug at the man's head, "draw it from the good barrel. I won't drink slop."

The innkeeper scowled.

"Don't worry. It will be paid for out of the royal treasury," said the knight. The innkeeper's scowl deepened. Sir Lathan stared coldly at the man. Retrieving the mug, which had clattered to the floor, the innkeeper vanished.

"So, you've come from the norinth, have you, elf. What were you doing there, with that." The knight gestured with his fork in the direction of the dwarf.

"I'm an explorer," said Paithan. "This man, Roland Redleaf, is my guide. This is Blackbeard. We met-

"Drugar," growled the dwarf. "My name is Drugar."

"Uh, huh." Sir Lathan took a bit, chewed, then spit the meat back into his plate. "Pah! Gristle. So what's an elf doing with the dwarves? Forging alliances, perhaps?"

"If I was, it's my business."

"The lords of Thillia could make it their business. We've let you elves live in peace a long time. Some are thinking it's been too long. My Lord among them."

Paithan said nothing, merely cast a significant glance at the elven weapons standing among the knights' own. Sir Lathan saw the glance, understood, and grinned. "Think we can't get along without you? Well, we've come up with some devices that'll make you elves sit up and take notice." He pointed. "See that? It's called a crossbow. Drive an arrow through any type of armor you name. Even send it through a wall."

"It will do you no good against the giants," said Drugar. "It will be like throwing sticks at them."

"How would you know? You met up with them?"

"They wiped out my people. Slaughtered them."

Sir Lathan paused in the act of lifting a piece of bread to his mouth. He looked at the dwarf intently, then tore off a bit of bread with his teeth.

"Dwarves," he muttered disparagingly, his mouth full.

Paithan glanced swiftly at Drugar, interested in the dwarf's reaction. Drugar was eyeing the knight with a strange expression; the elf could have sworn it was glee. Startled, Paithan began to wonder if the dwarf was insane. Considering this, he lost the thread of the conversation and only picked it up again when he heard the word SeaKings.

"What about the SeaKings?" he asked.

Sir Lathan grunted. "Keep awake, elf. I said that the tytans have attacked them. They've been routed, seemingly. The bastards actually had the nerve to beg us for help."

The innkeeper returned with the ale, set the mug down in front of the knight.

"Back off," Lathan commanded, waving a greasy hand.

"And did you send aid?" Paithan inquired.

"They're the enemy. It could have been a trick."

"But it wasn't, was it?"

"No," the knight admitted. "I guess not. They were soundly trounced, according to some of the refugees we talked to before we turned them away from the walls-

"Turned them away!"

Sir Lathan lifted the mug, drank long and deep, wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, "What would happen if we sent sorinth for aid, elf. What would happen if we asked your people for help?"

Paithan felt a hot flush spread from his neck to his cheeks. "But you and the SeaKings are both human." It was lame, but all he could think of to say.

"Meaning you'd help us if we were your kind? Well, you can make good on that one, elf, because we've heard rumors that your people in the Fartherness Reaches have been attacked, as well."

"That means," said Roland, quickly calculating, "that the tytans are spreading out, moving est and vars, surrounding us, surrounding Equilan," he said with emphasis.

"I've got to go! Got to warn them," murmured Paithan. "When do you expect them to reach Griffith?"

"Any day now," said Lathan. Wiping his hands on the table-doth, he rose to his feet, the tyro armor making a clattering sound. "The flood of refugees has stopped, which means they're all probably dead. And we've heard nothing from our scouts, which means they're probably dead, too."

"You're being awfully cool about this."

"We'll stop them," said Sir Lathan, buckling on his sword belt.

Roland stared at the sword, with its honed, wooden blade and suddenly began to laugh, a high-pitched, shrill cackle that made Paithan shudder. By Orn, maybe the dwarf wasn't the only one going crazy.

"I've seen them!" cried Roland, in a low, hollow voice. "I saw them beat a man. ... He was tied up. They hit him and hit him"-his voice rose, fists clenched-"and hit him and-"

"Roland!"

The human was curling up, body hunching over, fingers twitching spasmodically. He seemed to be falling apart.

"Roland!" Paithan flung his arms around the man, gripped the shoulders hard, fingers digging into the flesh.

"Get him out of here," said Sir Lathan, in disgust. "I've no use for cowards." He paused a moment, considering his words, Tolling them in his mouth as if they tasted bad. "Could you get weapons to us, elf?" He asked the question grudgingly.

No, Paithan was on the verge of saying. But he stopped the words, nearly biting off his tongue to keep them from blurting out. I need to reach Equilan. Fast. And I can't if I'm going to be stopped and questioned at every border between here and Varsport.

"Yes, I'll get you weapons. But I'm a long way from home-"

Roland lifted a ravaged face. "You're going to die! We're all going to die!"

Other knights, hearing the commotion, peered in the window. The innkeeper's face had gone livid. He began to babble, his wife started to wail. Sir Lathan put his hand on his sword, loosened the blade in its scabbard. "Shut him up before I run him through!"

Roland shoved the elf aside, bolted for the door. Chairs toppled, he overturned a table, and nearly knocked down two knights trying to stop him. At Lathan's gesture, they let him pass. Glancing through a window, Paithan saw Roland staggering down the street, weaving on unsteady feet like a drunken man.

"I'll give you a permit," said Lathan.

"Cargans as well." The elf pictured the puny barricades, imagined the tytans smashing through them, walking over them as if they were nothing but piles of leaves thrown in their path. This town was dead.

Paithan made up his mind. I'll take Rega to Equilan-with me. She won't go without Roland, so I'll take him back, too. He's not a bad fellow. Not really.

"Cargans [24] enough to carry me and my friends."

Sir Lathan was scowling, obviously not pleased.

"That's the deal," Paithan said.

"What about the dwarf? He one of your friends, too?"

Paithan had forgotten about Drugar, standing silently beside him the entire time. He looked down, to see the dwarf looking up, the black eyes flickering with that queer, gleeful gleam.

"You're welcome to come with us, Drugar," said Paithan, trying to sound as if he meant it. "But you don't have to-"

"I'll come," said the dwarf.

Paithan lowered his voice. "You could go back to the tunnels. You'd be safe there."

"And what would I go back to, elf?"

Drugar spoke quietly, one hand toyed with his long, flowing beard. The other hand was hidden, thrust into his belt.

"If he wants to come with us, he can," said Paithan. "We owe him. He saved our lives."

"Pack your gear then and make ready. The cargans will be saddled and waiting in the yard out there. I'll give the orders." Lathan picked up his helm, and prepared to walk out the door.

Paithan hesitated, conflicting emotions tugging at him. He caught hold of the knight's arm as Lathan passed him.

"My friend isn't a coward," said the elf. "He's right. Those giants are deadly. I-"

Sir Lathan leaned near, his voice low and quiet, for the elf alone. "The SeaKings are fierce warriors. I know. I've fought them. From what we heard, they never had a chance. Like the dwarves, they were destroyed. One word of advice, elf." The knight's eyes gazed steadily into Paithan's. "Once you're gone, keep going."

"But . . . the weapons?" Paithan stared, confused.

"Just talk. To keep up appearances. For my men and the people around here. You couldn't get back here fast enough. And I don't think weapons-magical or not-will make any difference anyway. Do you?"

Slowly, Paithan shook his head. The knight paused, his face grave and thoughtful. He seemed, when he spoke, to be talking to himself.

"If ever there was a time for the Lost Lords to return, that time is now. But they won't come. They're asleep beneath the waters of the Kithni Gulf. I don't blame them for leaving us to fight this alone. Theirs was an easy death. Ours won't be."

Lathan straightened, glowering at the elf. "Enough haggling!" the knight said loudly, rudely shoved his way past. "You'll get your blood money." He tossed the words over his shoulder. "That's all you blasted elves care about, isn't it? You there, boy! Saddle three--"

"Four," corrected Paithan, following Sir Lathan out the door.

The knight frowned, appeared displeased. "Saddle four cargans. They'll be ready in half a petal's fold, elf. Be here on time."

Paithan, confused, didn't know what to say and so he said nothing. He and Drugar started off down the street, following after Roland, who could be seen in the distance, leaning weakly against a building.

The elf halted then, half-turned. "Thanks," he called back to the knight.

Lathan brought his hand to the visor of his helm in a solemn, grim salute.

"Humans," muttered Paithan to himself, heading after Roland. "Try to figure them."

## CHAPTER 24

### SORINTH, ACROSS THILLIA

"THE KNIGHT AS MUCH AS ADMITTED TO ME THAT HE AND HIS MEN CAN'T HOLD out against these monsters. We've got to head sorinth, to the elven lands. And we've got to leave now!" Paithan stared out the window, eyes on the eerily silent jungle. "I don't know about you, but the air feels or smells strange, like that time the tytans caught us. We can't stay here!"

"What makes you think it'll make any difference where we go?" Roland demanded in a dull voice. He sat in a chair, his head in his hands, elbows leaning on the crude table. By the time Drugar and Paithan had managed to get the human to his home, he was in a sorry state. His terror, so long held inside, had exploded, piercing his spirit with its deadly fragments. "We might as well stay, die with the rest."

Paithan's lips tightened. He was embarrassed by the man, probably because he knew the wreck huddled at the table could very well be him. Every time the elf thought about facing those terrible, eyeless beings, fear shriveled his stomach. Home. The thought was a knife's prod to his back, keeping him moving.

"I'm going. I have to go, back to my people--"

The sound of the snakeskin drums began again, the beating louder, more urgent. Drugar, watching out the window, turned.

"What does that mean, human?"

"They're coming," Rega said, lips stiff. "That's the alarm that means the enemy's in sight."

Paithan stood, irresolute, divided between his loyalty to his family and his love for the human woman. "I've got to go," he said finally, abruptly. The cargans, tethered outside the door, were nervous, tugging against their reins, growling in fright. "Hurry! I'm afraid we'll lose the animals!"

"Roland! Come on!" Rega's grip tightened on her brother.

"Why bother!" He shoved her away.

Drugar clomped across the room, leaned over the table where Roland sat, shivering. "We must not separate! We go together. Come! Come! It is our only hope." Pulling a flask from out of his wide belt, the dwarf thrust it at Roland. "Here, drink this. You will find courage in the bottom."

Roland reached out his hand, snatched the flask, and put it to his lips. He drank deeply, choked, coughed. Tears glistened in his eyes, rolled down his cheeks, but a faint flush of blood stained the pallid skin.

"All right," said Roland, breathing heavily. "I'll come." He picked up the flask, took another swallow, and cradled it close.

"Roland-"

"Let's go sis. Can't you see your elf lover waiting? He wants to take you home, to the bosom of his family. If we ever make it that far. Drugar, old buddy, old pal. Got any more of this stuff?"

Roland flung his arm around the dwarf, the two of them headed for the door. Rega was left standing alone in the center of the small house. She gazed around, shook her head, and followed, nearly running into Paithan, who had come back, searching for her.

"Rega! What's wrong?"

"I never thought it would hurt me to leave this hovel, but it does. I guess it's because it was all I ever had."

"I can buy you whatever you want! You'll have a house a hundred times this big!"

"Oh, Paithan! Don't lie to me! You don't have any hope. We can run"-she looked up into the elf's eyes-"but where will we go?"

The sound of the drums grew more urgent, the rhythm thumping through the body.

Doom and destruction. You'll bring it with you.

And you, sir, shall be the one who leads his people forth!

Heaven. The stars!

"Home," said Paithan, holding Rega close. "We're going home."

They left the sound of the drumbeats behind, riding through the jungle, urging the cargans as fast as they dared. Riding cargans takes skill and practice, however. When the creature spreads its batlike wings to take off, to glide through the trees, it is necessary to cling with the hands, grip with the knees, and almost bury one's head in the animal's furry neck-or risk being brushed off by hanging vines and branches.

Paithan was a skilled corgan rider. The two humans, though not as easy in their saddles as the elf, had ridden before, and knew the technique. Even Roland, dead drunk, managed to hang on to his corgan for dear life. But they nearly lost the dwarf.

Never having seen such an animal, Drugar had no idea that the corgan was capable of nor had any inclination toward flight. The first time the corgan leapt from a tree branch, it sailed gracefully outward, the dwarf fell like a rock.

By some miracle-Drugar's boot becoming entangled in the stirrup-the corgan and the dwarf managed to land in the next tree almost together. But it took precious time assisting the shaken Drugar back into the saddle, more time convincing the corgan it still wanted to carry the dwarf as a passenger.

"We've got to go back to the main highway. We'll make better time," said Paithan.

They reached the main highway, only to discover it was almost a solid mass of people-refugees, fleeing sorinth. Paithan reined in, staring. Roland, having drained the flask, began to laugh.

"Damn fools!"

The humans flowed sluggishly down the road that had become a river of fear. Bent beneath bundles, carrying children too young to walk, they pulled those too old along in carts. Their path was strewn with flotsam, washed up along the shore- household goods that had become too heavy, valuables that had lost their value when life was at stake, vehicles that had broken down.

Here and there, fallen by the wayside, human jetsam-people too exhausted to walk farther. Some held out their hands, pleading to those with wagons to take them up. Others, knowing what the answer would be, sat, staring about them with dull, fear-glazed eyes, waiting for their strength to return.

"Back to the woods," said Rega, riding up beside Paithan. "It's the only way. We know the paths. This time, we really do," she added, flushing slightly.

"Smuggler's Road," slurred Roland, weaving in his saddle. "Yes, we know them."

Paithan couldn't move. He sat, staring. "All these humans, heading for Equilan. What will we do?"

"Paithan?"

"Yes, I'm coming."

They left the broad trails of the moss plains, taking to the jungle trails. "Smuggler's Road" was thin and twisting, difficult to traverse, but far less crowded. Paithan forced them to ride hard, driving their animals, driving themselves-cycle after cycle- until they dropped from exhaustion. Then they slept, often too tired to eat. The elf allowed them only a few hours before he had them up and traveling again. They met other people on the trails-people like themselves, living on society's fringes, who were well acquainted with these dark and hidden paths. They, too, were fleeing sorinth. One of these, a human, stumbled into their camp, three cycles into their journey.

"Water," he said, and collapsed.

Paithan fetched water. Rega lifted the man's head, and held the drinking gourd to his lips. He was middle-aged, his face gray with fatigue.

"That's better. Thanks."

Some color returned to the sagging cheeks. He was able to sit up on his own, and let his head sink between his knees, drawing deep breaths.

"You're welcome to rest here with us," offered Rega. "Share our food."

"Rest!" The man lifted his head, gazed at them in astonishment. Then he glanced around the jungle, shivering, and staggered to his feet. "No rest!" he muttered. "They're behind me! Right behind me!"

His fear was palpable. Paithan jumped up, regarding the man in alarm.

"How far behind you?"

The man was fleeing the campsite, taking to the trail on legs that could barely support him. Paithan ran after him, caught hold of his arm.

"How far?"

The man shook his head. "A cycle. Not more."

"A cycle!" Rega sucked her breath through her teeth.

"The man's crazed," muttered Roland. "You can't believe him."

"Griffith destroyed! Temcia burning! Lord Reginald, dead! I know." The man ran a trembling hand through, grizzled hair. "I was one of his knights!"

Looking at the man more closely, they could see he was dressed in the quilted cotton undergarments worn beneath the tyro shell armor. It was no wonder they had not recognized it earlier. The fabric was ripped and stained with blood, hanging from the man's body in tattered, filthy fragments.

"I got rid of it," he said, his hands plucking at the cloth covering his chest. "The armor. It was too heavy and it didn't do any good. They died in it. The fiends caught them and crushed them . . . arms wrapping around them. The armor cracked, blood . . . came out from between. Bones stuck through . . . and the screams . . ."

"Blessed Thillia!" Roland was white, shuddering.

"Shut him up!" Rega snapped at Paithan.

No one noticed Drugar, sitting alone as he always did, the slight, strange smile hidden by his beard.

"Do you know how I escaped?" The man clutched Paithan by the front of his tunic. The elf, glancing down, saw the man's hand was dappled with splotches of reddish brown. "The others ran. I was ... too scared! I was scared stiff!" The knight began to giggle. "Scared stiff! Couldn't move. And the giants went right by me! Isn't that funny! Scared stiff!" His laughter was shrill, unnerving. It ended in a choked cough. Roughly, he shoved Paithan backward, away from him.

"But now I can run. I've been running . . . three cycles. Not stop. Can't stop." He took a step forward, paused, turned and glared at them with red-rimmed, wild eyes. "They were supposed to come back!" he said angrily. "Have you seen them?"

"Who?"

"Supposed to come back and help us! Cowards. Bunch of damn, good-for-nothing cowards. Like me!" The knight laughed again. Shaking his head, he lurched off into the jungle.

"Who the hell's he talking about?" Roland asked.

"I don't know." Rega began packing their equipment, throwing food into leather pouches. "And I don't care. Crazed or not, he's right about one thing. We've got to keep moving."

In faith they walked with modest stride, to sleeping Thillia beneath. The crashing waves their virtue cried, the kingdoms wept their watery wreath.

The dwarf's rich bass voice rose in song. "You see," said Drugar, when the verse ended, "I have learned it."

"You're right," said Roland, making no move to help pack. He sat on the ground, arms dangling listlessly between his knees. "That's who the knight meant. And they didn't come back. Why not?" He looked up, angry. "Why didn't they? Everything they worked for-destroyed! Our world! Gone! Why? What's the sense?"

Rega's lips tightened, she was flinging packs onto the corgan. "It was only a legend. No one really believed it."

"Yeah," muttered Roland. "Nobody believed in the tytans either."

Rega's hands, tugging at the straps, started to shake. She lowered her head onto the corgan's flank, gripping the leather hard, until it hurt, willing herself not to cry, not to give way.

Paithan's hand closed over hers.

"Don't!" she said in a fierce tone, elbowing him aside. She lifted her head, shook her hair around her face, and gave the strap a vicious tug. "Go on. Leave me alone." Surreptitiously, when the elf wasn't looking, she wiped her hand across wet cheeks.

They started on their way, disheartened, dispirited, fear driving them on. They had traversed only a few miles when they came upon the knight, lying face down across the trail.

Paithan slid from the corgan, knelt beside the man, his hand on the knight's neck.

"Dead."

They traveled two more cycles, pressing the weary corgans to their limit. Now, when they halted, they didn't unpack, but slept on the ground, the reins of the corgans wrapped around their wrists. They were giddy with exhaustion and lack of food. Their meager supplies had run out and they dared not take time to hunt. They talked little, saving their breath, riding with slumped shoulders, bent heads. The only thing that could rouse them was a strange sound behind them.

The breaking of a tree limb would cause them to jerk up, swinging around fearfully in the saddle, peering into the shadows. Often the humans and the elf fell asleep while riding, swaying in the saddle until they slumped sideways and came to themselves with a start. The dwarf, riding last, bringing up the rear, watched all with a smile.

Paithan marveled at the dwarf, even as the elf's uneasiness over Drugar grew. He never appeared fatigued; he often volunteered to keep watch while the others slept.

Paithan woke from terrifying dreams in which he imagined Drugar, dagger in hand, slipping up on him as he slept. Starting awake, the elf always found Drugar sitting patiently beneath a tree, hands folded across the beard that fell in long curls over his stomach. Paithan might have laughed at his fear. After all, the dwarf had saved their lives. Looking back at Drugar, riding behind them, or glancing at him during the few times they stopped to rest, the elf saw the gleam in the watchful black eyes, eyes that seemed to be always waiting, and Paithan's laughter died on his lips.

Paithan was thinking about the dwarf, wondering what drove him, what terrible fuel kept such a fire burning, when Rega's shout roused him from his bleak reverie.

"The ferry!" She pointed at a crude sign, tacked up onto a tree trunk. "The trail ends here. We have to go back to the-"

Her voice was cut off by a horrible sound, a wail that rose from hundreds of throats, a collective scream.

"The main highway!" Paithan clutched his reins with sweating, trembling hands. "The tytans have reached the main highway."

The elf saw in his mind the stream of humanity, saw the giant, eyeless creatures come upon it. He saw the people scatter, try to flee, but there was nowhere to go on the wide-open plains, no escape. The stream would turn to a river of blood.

Rega pressed her hands against her ears. "Shut up!" she was screaming over and over, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!"

As if in answer, a sudden, eerie silence fell over the jungle, silence broken only by the not-too-distant cries of the dying.

"They're here," said Roland, a half-smile playing on his lips.

"The ferry!" Paithan gasped. "The creatures may be giants, but they're not tall enough to wade the Kithni Gulf! That will stop them, for a time at least." He spurred his corgan on. The startled animal, terrified itself, leapt forward in panic.

The others followed, flying through the jungle, ducking overhanging limbs, vines slapping them in the face. Breaking out into the open, they saw ahead of them the sparkling, placid surface of the Kithni Gulf, a startling contrast to the chaos erupting on the water's edge.

Humans were running madly down the main highway that led to the ferry, fear stripping them of any consciousness they might have had for their fellows. Those who fell were trampled beneath pounding feet. Children were swept from their parents' arms by the crush of the mob, small bodies hurled to the ground. Those who stopped to try to help the fallen never rose again. Looking far back, on the horizon, Paithan saw the jungle moving.

"Paithan! Look!" Rega clutched at him, pointing.

The elf shifted his gaze back to the ferry. The pier was mobbed, people pushing and shoving. Out in the water, the boat, overloaded, was riding too low and sinking deeper by the minute. It would never make it across. And it wouldn't matter if it did.

The other ferry boat had put out from the opposite shore. It was lined with elven archers, railbows ready, arrows pointing toward Thillia. Paithan assumed at first that the elves were coming to the aid of the humans, and his heart swelled with pride. Sir Lathan had been wrong. The elves would drive the tytans back!

A human, attempting to swim the gulf, came near the boat, stretched out with his hand for help.

The elves shot him. His body slid down beneath the water and vanished. Sickened, disbelieving, Paithan saw his people turn their weapons not on the coming tytans, but on the humans trying to flee the enemy.

"You bastard!"

Paithan turned to see a wild-eyed man attempting to drag Roland from his saddle. People on the highway, seeing the corgans, realized that the animals offered escape. A frenzied mob started toward them. Roland beat the man off, clouting him to the moss with his strong hand. Another came at Rega, a branch in his hand. She kicked him in the face with her boot, sending him reeling backward. The corgans, already panicked, began to leap and buck, striking out with their sharp claws. Drugar, cursing in dwarven, was using his reins as a lash to keep the mob at bay.

"Back to the trees!" Paithan cried, wheeling his animal.

Rega galloped beside him, but Roland was caught, unable to extricate himself from grasping hands. He was nearly pulled from the saddle. Drugar, seeing the human in trouble, forced his corgan between Roland and the mob. The dwarf grabbed hold of Roland's reins and yanked the corgan forward, joining up with Paithan and Rega. The four galloped back into the shelter of the jungle.

Once safe, they paused to catch their breath. They avoided looking at each other, none of them wanting to see the inevitable in his companion's face.

"There must be a trail that leads to the gulf!" said Paithan. "The cargan can swim."

"And get shot by elves!" Roland wiped blood from a cut lip.

"They won't shoot me."

"A lot of good that does us!"

"They won't harm you if you're with me." Paithan wished he was certain of that fact, but right now he supposed it didn't matter.

"If there is a trail ... I don't know it," said Rega. A tremor shook her body, she gripped the saddle to keep from falling. Paithan plunged off the path, heading in the direction of the gulf. Within moments, he and the cargan became hopelessly entangled in the thick undergrowth. The elf fought on, refusing to admit defeat, but he saw that even if they did manage to hack their way through, it would take hours. And they did not have hours. Warily, he rode back.

The sounds of death from the highway grew louder. They could hear splashes, people hurling themselves into the Kithni.

Roland slid from his saddle. Landing on the ground, he gazed around. "This looks as good a place to die as any."

Slowly, Paithan climbed from his cargan and walked over to Rega. He held out his arms. She slipped into them, and he clasped her tightly.

"I can't watch, Paithan," she said. "Promise me I won't have to see them!"

"You won't," he whispered, smoothing the dark hair. "Keep your eyes on me."

Roland stood squarely on the path, facing the direction in which the tytans must come. His fear was gone, or perhaps he was just too tired to care anymore.

Drugar, a ghastly grin on his bearded face, put his hand to his belt and drew the bone-handle knife.

One stroke for each of them, and a final for himself.

## CHAPTER 25

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

HAPLO LAY FLAT ON HIS BACK ON THE MOSS, SHIELDING HIS EYES FROM THE sun, counting stars.

He had come up with twenty-five bright lights that he could see clearly from this vantage point. Lenthon Quindiniar had assured him that all told the elves had counted ninety-seven. Not all of these were visible all the time, of course. Some of them winked out and stayed out for a number of seasons before returning. Elven astronomers had also calculated that there were Stars near the horizon that could not be seen due to the atmosphere. They had estimated, therefore, that there might be anywhere from 150 to 200 stars total in the heavens.

Which was certainly different from any stars Haplo'd ever heard about. He considered the possibility of moons. There had been a moon in the ancient world, according to his lord's research. But there had been no moon in the Sartan rendering of this world and Haplo hadn't seen any moonlike objects during his flight. Again, he thought it likely that moons would revolve around the world and these lights were, apparently, stationary. But then the sun was stationary. Or rather the planet of Pryan :was stationary. It didn't revolve. There was no day or night. And then there was the strange cycle of the stars-burning brightly for long periods of time, then going dark, then reappearing.

Haplo sat up, glanced about for the dog, discovered it wandering about the yard, sniffing at the strange smells of people and other animals it didn't recognize. The Patryn, alone in the yard, everyone else asleep, scratched at his bandaged hands. The binding always irritated his skin the first few days he wore it.

Maybe the lights are nothing more than a natural phenomenon peculiar to this planet. Which means I'm wasting my time, speculating about them and the sun. After all, I wasn't sent here to study astronomy. I've got more important problems. Like what to do about this world.

Last evening, Lenthian Quindiniar had drawn Haplo a picture of the world as the elves viewed it. The drawing was similar to the drawing Haplo'd seen in the Nexus-a round globe with a ball of fire in the center. Above the world, the elf added the "stars" and the sun. He pointed out their own location on this world-or what the elven astrologers had plotted was their location-and told him how the elves had, centuries ago, crossed the Paragna Sea to the east and arrived at the Fartherness Reaches.

"It was the plague," Lenthian had explained. "They were fleeing it. Otherwise they never would have left their homes."

Once they reached the Fartherness, the elves burned their ships, severing all contact with their former life. They turned their backs on the sea and looked inland. Lenthian's great-great grandfather had been one of the few willing to explore the new territory to the east and, in doing so, came across ornite, the navigational stone that was to make his fortune. [25] Using the stone, he was able to return to the Fartherness. He informed the elves of his discovery, and offered jobs to those willing to venture into the wilderness.

Equilan had started out as a small mining community. It might have remained no more than that, but for the development of the human realms to the east. The humans of what was now known as Thillia traveled there, by their own account, through a passage that led beneath the Terinthian Ocean. King George the Only-the father of the five brothers of legendary fame-led his people to this new land, supposedly running from a terror, whose name and face had been lost in the past.

Elves are not a race who must constantly expand. They feel no driving urge to conquer other people, to gobble up land. Having established a hold on Equilan, the elves had all the land they wanted. What they needed was trade-The elves welcomed the humans who, in turn, were extremely pleased to acquire elven weapons and other goods. As time went by and the human population grew, they were less happy about the elves taking up so much valuable land on their southern border. The Thillians tried to expand north, but ran into the SeaKings-a fierce warrior people who had crossed the Sea of Stars during a time of war in the Kasnar Empire. Farther north and east were the dark and gloomy strongholds of the dwarves. By this time, the elven nation had grown strong and powerful. The humans were weak, divided, and dependent on the elves. The Thillians could do nothing but grumble and regard their neighbor's land with envy.

As for the dwarves, Lenthian knew little, except that it was said that they had been well established in their kingdoms, long before his grandfather's time.

"But where did you all come from originally?" Haplo had asked. He knew the answer, but was curious to see what, if anything, these people knew about the Sundering, hoping such information might give him a clue to the whereabouts and doings of the Sartan. "I mean, way, way, way back in time."

Lenthán had launched into a long and involved explanation and Haplo soon became lost in the complex myths. It depended on who you asked, apparently. Among the elves and humans, creation had something to do with being cast out of paradise. Orn-only-knew-what the dwarves believed in.

"What's the political situation in the human realm?" Lenthán had looked downcast. "I'm afraid I really can't tell you. My son is the explorer in the family. Father never thought I was quite suited..."

"Your son? Is he here?" Haplo had glanced about, wondering if the elf might be hiding in a closet-which, considering this wacky household, might not be at all unusual. "Can I talk to him?"

"Paithán. No, he's not here. Traveling in the human realm. He won't be back for some time, I'm afraid."

All of this had been little help to Haplo. The Patryn was beginning to feel that his mission here was a lost cause. He was supposed to foment chaos, make it easy for his lord to step in and take over. But on Pryan, the dwarves asked nothing more than to be let alone, the humans fought each other, and the elves supplied them. Haplo didn't stand much chance of urging the humans to war against the elves-it's difficult to attack someone who's providing you with the only means you have of attacking. No one wanted to fight the dwarves-no one wanted anything the dwarves had. The elves couldn't be stirred to conquest, apparently because the word simply wasn't in their vocabulary. "Status quo," Lenthán Quindiniar had said. "It's an ancient word meaning . . . well . . . 'status quo.' "

Haplo recognized the word and knew what it meant. Unchanging. Far different from the chaos he'd discovered (and helped along) in Arianus.

Watching the bright lights shining in the sky, the Patryn grew more annoyed, more perplexed. Even if I manage to stir up trouble in this realm, how many more realms am I going to have to visit to do the same thing? There could be as many realms as ... as there are shining lights in the sky. And who knows how many more beyond that? It might take me a lifetime just to find all of them! I don't have a lifetime. And neither does My Lord.

It didn't make sense. The Sartan were organized, systematic, and logical. They would never have scattered civilizations around at random like this and then left them to survive on-their own. There had to be some unifying something. Haplo didn't have a clue, at this moment, how he was going to find it.

Except possibly the old man. He was crazy, obviously. But was he crazy as a gatecrasher [26] or crazy as a wolfen? The first meant he was harmless to everyone except perhaps himself, the second meant he needed to be watched. Haplo remembered his mistake in Arianus, when he'd thought a man a fool who had turned out to be anything but. He wouldn't make the same mistake again. He had a lot of questions about the old man. And as if thinking of him had conjured him (as occasionally happened in the Labyrinth), Haplo looked up to discover Zifnab looking down.

"Is that you?" came the old man's quavering voice.

Haplo rose to his feet, brushing off bits of moss.

"Oh, no, it isn't," said Zifnab in disappointment, shaking his head. "Still"-he peered closely at Haplo-"I seem to remember looking for you, too. Come, come." He took hold of Haplo's arm. "We've got to take off- Go to the rescue! Oh, dear! Nice Doggie. N-nice doggie."

Seeing a stranger accost its master, the dog left off its pursuit of nonexistent game and dashed over to confront live quarry. The animal stood in front of the wizard, bared its teeth, and growled menacingly.

"I suggest you let go of my arm, old man," advised Haplo.

"Uh, yes." Zifnab removed his hand hastily. "Fine . . . fine animal." The dog's growls ceased, but it continued to regard the old man with deep suspicion.

Zifnab felt in a pocket. "I had a milk bone in here a few weeks ago. Left over from lunch. I say, have you met my dragon?"

"Is that a threat?" Haplo demanded.

"Threat?" The old wizard seemed staggered, so completely taken aback that his hat fell off. "No, of ... of course not! It's just that ... we were comparing pets ..." Zifnab lowered his voice, glanced around nervously. "Actually, my dragon's quite harmless. I've got him under this spell-"

"Come on, dog," said Haplo in disgust, and headed for his ship.

"Great Gandalf's ghost!" shouted Zifnab. "If he had a ghost. I doubt it. He was such a snob . . . Where was I? Yes, rescue! Almost forgot." The old man gathered up his robes and began running along at Haplo's side. "Come on! Come on! No time to waste. Hurry!"

His white hair stood up all over his head, his beard stuck out in all directions. Zifnab clashed past Haplo. Looking back, he put his finger to his lips. "And keep it quiet. Don't want him"-he pointed downward, grimacing-"along."

Haplo came to a halt. Crossing his arms over his chest, he waited with some amusement to see the old man come crashing up against the magical barrier the Patryn had established around his vessel.

Zifnab reached the hull, laid a hand on it. Nothing happened.

"Hey, stay away from there!" Haplo broke into a run. "Dog, stop him!"

The dog sped ahead, flying over the mossy ground on silent paws, and caught hold of the old man's robes just as Zifnab was attempting to climb up over the ship's rail.

"Get back! Get back!" Zifnab flapped his hat at the dog's head. "I'll turn you into a piglet! Ast a bula- No, wait. That turns me into a piglet. Unhand me, you beast!"

"Dog, down!" ordered Haplo, and the dog obediently dropped to a sitting position, releasing the old man, keeping a watchful eye on him. "Look you, old man. I don't know how you managed to break through my magic, but I'm giving you fair warning. Stay off my ship-"

"We're going off on a trip? Well, of course we are." Zifnab reached out, gingerly patted Haplo's arm. "That's why we're here. Nice young man you've got," he added, speaking to the dog, "but addled."

The wizard hopped over the rail and proceeded across the top deck, moving toward the bridge with surprising speed and agility for one of 'advanced years.'

"Damn!" swore Haplo, bounding after him. "Dog!"

The animal leapt ahead, sped across the deck. Zifnab had already disappeared down the ladder leading to the bridge. The dog jumped after him.

Haplo followed. Sliding down the ladder, he ran after and onto the bridge, Zifnab was staring curiously at the rune-covered steering stone. The dog stood beside him, watching. The old man stretched out a hand to touch. The dog growled, and Zifnab quickly snatched his hand back.

Haplo paused in the hatchway, considering. He was a passive observer, not supposed to directly interfere with life in this world. But now he had no choice. The old man had seen the runes. Not only that, he had unraveled them. He knew, therefore, who the Patryn was. He couldn't be allowed to spread that knowledge further. Besides, he was-he must be-a Sartan.

Circumstances on Arianus prevented me from avenging myself on our ancient enemy. Now, I've got another Sartan, and this time it won't matter. No one will miss crazy Zifnab. Hell, that Quindiniar woman will probably give me a medal!

Haplo stood in the hatchway, his body blocking the bridge's only exit. "I warned you. You shouldn't have come down here, old man. Now you've seen what you shouldn't have seen." He began to unwind the bandages. "Now you're going to have to die. I know you're a Sartan. They're the only ones who have the power to unravel my magic. Tell me one thing. Where are the rest of your people?"

"I was afraid of this," said Zifnab, gazing at Haplo sadly. "This is no way for a savior to behave, you know that."

"I'm no savior. In a way, you might say I'm the opposite. I'm supposed to bring trouble, chaos, to prepare for the day when my Lord will enter this world and claim it for his own. We will rule who, by rights, should have ruled long ago. You must know who I am, now. Take a look around you, Sartan. Recognize the runes? Or maybe you've known who I was all along. After all, you predicted my coming. I'd like to know how you did that."

Unwinding the bandages, revealing the sigla tattooed on his hands, Haplo advanced on the old man.

Zifnab did not back up, did not retreat before him. The old man stood his ground, facing the Patryn with an air of quiet dignity. "You've made a mistake," he said, his voice quiet, his eyes suddenly sharp and shrewd. "I'm not a Sartan."

"Uh, huh." Haplo tossed the bandages onto the deck, rubbing the runes on his skin. "Just the fact that you're denying it proves my point. Except the Sartan were never known to lie. But then, they were never known to go senile either."

Haplo grabbed hold of the old man's arm, feeling the bones fragile and brittle in his grasp. "Talk, Zifnab, or whatever your real name is. I have the power to rupture the bones, one by one, inside your flesh. It's an extremely painful way to die. I'll start on the hands, work my way down your body. By the time I reach your spine, you'll be begging me for release."

At his feet, the dog whined and rubbed against the Patryn's knee. Haplo ignored the animal, his grip tightened around Zifnab's wrist. He placed his other hand, palm down, directly over the old man's heart. "Tell me the truth, and I'll end it quickly. What I do to bones, I can do to organs. The heart bursts. It's painful, but fast."

Haplo had to give the old man credit. Stronger men than Zifnab had trembled in the Patryn's grasp. The old man was calm. If he was afraid, he controlled his fear well.

"I am telling you the truth. I'm not a Sartan."

Haplo's grip tightened. He made ready to speak the first rune, the rune that would send a jolt of agony through the frail body. Zifnab held perfectly still.

"As for how I undid your magic, there are forces in this universe of which you have no knowledge." The eyes, never leaving Haplo's face, narrowed. "Forces that have remained hidden because you have never searched for them."

"Then why don't you use these forces to save your life, old man?"

"I am."

Haplo shook his head in disgust and spoke the first rune. The sigla on his hand glowed blue. The power flowed from his body into the old man's. Haplo could feel wrist bones burst and turn to mush in his grip. Zifnab gave a suppressed groan.

Haplo barely saw, out of the corner of his eye, the dog hurtling through the air toward him. He had time to raise his arm to block the attack. The force of the blow knocked him to the deck, slammed the air from his body. He lay gasping, trying to catch his breath. The dog stood over him, licking his face.

"Dear, dear. Are you hurt, my boy?" Zifnab leaned over him solicitously, offering a hand to help him up-the same hand Haplo had crushed.

Haplo stared at it, saw the wrist bones standing out clearly beneath the stretched, aged skin. They appeared whole and intact. The old man had not spoken any runes, traced any in the air. Haplo, studying the field of magic around him, could detect no sign that it had been disturbed. But he had felt the bone break!

Shoving the old man's hand aside, Haplo regained his feet. "You're good," he acknowledged. "But how long can you keep it up? An old geezer like you." He took a step toward the old man and halted. The dog stood between them.

"Dog! Get!" ordered Haplo.

The animal held its ground, gazed up at its master with unhappy, pleading eyes.

Zifnab, smiling gently, patted the black-furred head. "Good boy. I thought so." He nodded wisely, solemnly. "I know all about the dog, you see."

"Whatever the devil that means!"

"Precisely, dear boy," said the old man, beaming at him. "And now that we're all nicely acquainted, we'd best be on our way." Zifnab turned around, hovered over the steering stone, rubbing his hands eagerly. "I'm really curious to see how this works." Reaching into a pocket of his mouse-colored robes, he pulled out a chain to which nothing was attached, and stared at it. "My ears and whiskers! We're late."

Haplo glared at the dog. "Get!"

The dog slunk down on its belly, crawled across the deck and took refuge in a corner. Head lying on its paws, the animal whimpered. Haplo took a step toward the old man.

"Let's get this show on the road!" Zifnab stated emphatically, snapping shut nothing and slipping the chain back in his pocket. "Paithan's in danger-"

"Paithan." Haplo paused.

"Quindiniar's son. Fine lad. You can ask him those questions you've been wanting to ask: all about the political situation among the humans, what it would take to make the elves go to war, how to stir up the dwarves. Paithan knows all the answers. Not that it will make much difference now." Zifnab sighed, shook his head. "Politics don't matter to the dead. But we'll save some of them. The best and the brightest. And, now, we really must be going." The old man gazed around with interest. "How do you fly this contraption anyway?"

Irritably scratching the tattoos on the back of his hand, Haplo stared at the old wizard.

A Sartan-he has to be! That's the only way he could heal himself. Unless he didn't heal himself. Maybe I made a mistake in the rune-twining, maybe I only thought I crushed his wrist. And the dog, protecting him. That doesn't mean much.

The animal takes strange likings. There was that time on Arianus when the mutt saved the life of that dwarven woman I was going to have to kill.

Destroyer, savior . . .

"All right, old man. I'll go along with whatever game you're playing." Haplo knelt down, scratched the dog's silky ears. The animal's tail brushed the floor, pleased that all was forgiven. "But just until I figure out the rules. When I do, it's winner take all. And I intend to win."

Straightening, he placed his hands upon the steering stone. "Where are we headed?"

Zifnab blinked, confused. "I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea," he admitted. "But, by god!" he added solemnly. "I'll know when I get there!"

## CHAPTER 26

### VARSPORT, THILLIA

THE DRAGONSHIP SKIMMED OVER THE TOPS OF THE TREES. HAPLO FLEW IN the direction according to what he'd been told were the human landholdings. Zifnab peered out the window, anxiously watching the landscape slide away beneath them.

"The gulf!" the old man cried out suddenly. "We're close. Ah, dear, dear."

"What's going on?"

Haplo could make out a line of elves drawn up in military formation along the shore. He sailed out farther over the water. Smoke from distant fires obscured his view momentarily. A gust of wind blew the smoke apart, and Haplo could see a burning city, masses of people swarming onto the beach. A few hundred feet from shore, a boat was sinking, to judge by the number of black dots visible in the water.

"Terrible, terrible," Zifnab ran a trembling hand through his sparse white hair. "You'll have to fly lower. I can't see."

Haplo was interested in having a closer look himself. Maybe he'd been wrong about the peaceful situation in this realm. The dragonship swooped low. Many on the shore, feeling the dark shadow pass over them, looked up, pointed. The crowd wavered, some starting to run from what might be a new threat, others milling about aimlessly, realizing that there was no place to go.

Wheeling Dragon Wing around, Haplo made another pass. Elven archers on a boat in the middle of the gulf lifted their bows, turned their arrows on the ship. The Patryn ignored them, soared low to get a better view. The runes protecting his ship would protect them against the puny weapons of this world.

"There! There! Turn! Turn!" The old man clutched at Haplo, almost dragging him off his feet. Zifnab pointed into a densely wooded area, not far from the shoreline where the crowds of people were massed. The Patryn steered the ship in the direction indicated.

"I can't see a thing, old man."

"Yes! Yes!" Zifnab was hopping up and down in anxiety. The dog, sensing the excitement, leapt about the deck, barking frantically.

"The grove, down there! Not much room to land, but you can make it."

Not much room. Haplo bit back the words he would have liked to use to describe his opinion of their landing site—a small clearing, barely visible beneath a tangle of trees and vines. He was about to tell the wizard that it would be impossible to set his ship down, when a closer, grudging look revealed that—if he altered the magic and pulled the wings in tight—there might be a chance.

"What do we do once we get down there, old man?"

"Pick up Paithan, the two humans, and the dwarf."

"You still haven't told me what's going on."

Zifnab turned his head, regarded Haplo with a shrewd look. "You must see for yourself, my boy. Otherwise, you wouldn't believe."

At least that's what Haplo thought he said. He couldn't be sure, over the dog's barking. Undoubtedly I'm about to put my ship down in the middle of a raging battle. Coming in low, he could see the small group in the clearing, see their faces staring up at him.

"Hold on!" he shouted to the dog . . . and the old man, if he was listening. "It's going to be rough!"

The ship smashed through the tops of the trees. Limbs dragged at them, snapped and broke apart. The view out the window was obscured by a mass of green, the ship lurched and pitched. Zifnab fell forward, ended up straddle-legged against the glass. Haplo hung on to the steering stone. The dog spread its legs, fighting for purchase on the canting deck.

A grinding crash, and they broke through, swooping into the clearing. Wrestling with the ship, Haplo caught a glimpse of the mensch he was going to rescue, huddled together at one edge of the jungle, apparently uncertain if this was salvation or more trouble.

"Go get them, old man!" Haplo told the wizard. "Dog, stay."

The animal had been about to bound gleefully after Zifnab, who had unpeeled himself from the window and was tottering toward the ladder leading to the upper deck.

The dog obediently sank back down, gazing upward with intense eagerness, tail wagging. Haplo silently cursed himself and this crazy situation. He would have to keep his hands bare to fly and was wondering how he would explain the sigla tattooed on his skin when a sudden blow against the hull sent a shudder through the ship.

Haplo almost lost his footing. "No," he muttered to himself. "It couldn't be."

Holding his breath, every sense alert, the Patryn held perfectly still and waited.

The blow came again, stronger, more powerful. The hull shivered, the vibrations tore into the magic, tore into the wood, tore into Haplo.

The rune structure was unraveling.

Haplo turned in upon himself, centered himself, body reacting instinctively to a danger his mind told him was impossible. On the deck above, he could hear feet pounding, the old man's shrill voice, screeching, yelling something.

Another blow shook the ship. Haplo heard the old man cry out for help, but ignored his pleas. The Patryn was tasting, smelling, listening, stretching out with all his senses. The rune's magic was being unraveled, slowly, surely. The blows hadn't hurt his ship, not yet. But they had weakened his magic. The next strike or the one after would break through, deal damage, destroy.

The only magic strong enough, powerful enough to oppose his own was the rune-magic of the Sartan.

A trap! The old man baited me! I was fool enough to fly right into the net!

Another blow rocked the ship; Haplo thought he heard wood splinter. The dog's teeth bared, the fur rose on its neck.

"Stay, boy," said Haplo, stroking the head, bidding it stay with the pressure of his hand. "This is my fight."

He had long wanted to meet, to battle, to kill a Sartan.

Haplo vaulted up to the top deck. The old man was scrambling to his feet. Leaping for him, Haplo was brought to a halt by the look of sheer terror on Zifnab's face. The old man was yelling frantically, pointing up, over Haplo's head.

"Behind you!"

"Oh, no, I'm not falling for that-"

Another blow threw Haplo to his knees. The blow had come from behind. He steadied himself, glanced around.

A creature, standing some thirty feet tall, was bashing what appeared to be a small tree trunk into the hull of the dragonship. Several creatures, standing near it, were watching. Others were completely ignoring the attack, advancing with single-minded purpose on the small group crouched at the edge of the glade.

Several planks on the hull had already been staved in, protecting sigla smashed, useless, broken.

Haplo traced the runes in the air, watched them multiply with lightning speed, and zip away from him toward their target. A ball of blue flame exploded on the tree branch, jarring it from the creature's hands. The Patryn wouldn't kill, not yet. Not until he found out what these beings were.

He knew what they weren't. They weren't Sartan. But they were using Sartan magic.

"Nice shot!" yelled the old man. "Wait here. I'll get our friends."

Haplo couldn't turn to look, but he heard feet clattering off behind him. Presumably the wizard was going to try to bring the elf and his trapped companions on board. Seeing in his mind's eye more of these beings descending on them, Haplo wished the old man luck. The Patryn couldn't help. He had his own problems.

The creature stared dazedly at its empty hands, as if trying to comprehend what had happened. Slowly it turned its head toward its assailant. It had no eyes, but Haplo knew it could see him, perhaps see him better than he himself could see the creature. The Patryn felt waves of sensing streak out from the being, felt them touch him, sniff at him, analyze him. The creature wasn't using magic now. It was relying on its own senses, odd as those might be.

Haplo tensed, waiting for an attack, his mind devising the rune structure that would entrap the creature, paralyze it, leave it subject to the Patryn's interrogation.

Where is the citadel? What must we do?

The voice startled Haplo, speaking to his mind, not his ears. It wasn't threatening. The voice sounded frustrated, desperate, almost wistfully eager. Other creatures in the grove, hearing the silent question of their companion, had ceased their murderous pursuit to turn to watch.

"Tell me about the citadel," said Haplo cautiously, spreading his hands in a gesture of appeasement. "Perhaps I can-"

Light blinded him, concussive thunder blasted him from his feet. Lying face down on the deck, dazed and stunned, Haplo fought to retain consciousness, fought to analyze and understand.

The magical spell had been crude—a simple elemental configuration calling upon forces present in nature. A child of seven could have constructed it, a child of seven should have been able to protect himself against it. Haplo hadn't even seen it coming. It was as if the child of seven had cast the spell using the strength of seven hundred. His own magic had shielded him from death, but the shield had been cracked. He was hurt, vulnerable.

Haplo enhanced his defenses. The sigla on his skin began to glow blue and red, creating an eerie light that shone through his clothing. He was vaguely aware that the being had retrieved its tree trunk and lifted it high, preparing to smash it down on him. Rolling to a standing position, he cast his spell. Runes surrounded the wood, caused the trunk to disintegrate in the creature's hand.

Behind him came shouts and the thudding of feet, panting breath. His diversion of the creature's attention must have given the old man time to rescue the elf and his friends. Haplo felt, more than saw or heard, one of them come creeping up to him.

"I'll help-" offered a voice, speaking in elven.

"Get below!" the Patryn snarled, enraged, the interruption unweaving an entire fabric of runes. He didn't see whether the elf obeyed him or not. Haplo didn't care.

He was intent upon the creature, analyzing it. It had ceased using its potent magic, turned again to brute force. Dull-witted, stupid, Haplo decided. Its reactions had been instinctive, animal-like, unthinking.

Perhaps it couldn't consciously control the magic— He started to stand up.

The blast of wind hit him with hurricane force. Haplo struggled against the spell, creating dense and complex rune constructs to surround him, protect him.

He might have built a wall of feathers. The raw power of the crude magic seeped through minuscule cracks in the sigla and blew them to tatters. The wind battered him to the deck. Branches and leaves hurtled past him, something struck him in the face, nearly knocking him senseless. He fought against the pain, clinging to the wooden rails with his hands, the gusts pummeling, hammering. He was helpless against the magic, he couldn't reason with it, speak to it. His strength was seeping from him rapidly, the wind increasing in force.

A grim joke among the Patryns purports that there are only two kinds of people in the Labyrinth: the quick and the dead, and advises, "When the odds are against you, run like hell."

It was definitely time to get out of here.

Every move taking a supreme effort against the force of the wind, Haplo managed to turn his head and look behind him. He spotted the open hatch, saw the elf crouched, waiting there, his head poking up. Not a hair on the elf's head was ruffled. The full force of the magic was being expended against Haplo alone.

That might end soon.

Haplo released his hold on the rail. The wind blew him across the deck, toward the hatch. Making a desperate lunge, he grabbed the rim of the hatch as he slithered past, and held on. The elf grasped him by the wrists and fought to drag him below. The wind fought them. Blinding, stinging, it howled and pounded at them like a live thing who sees its prey about to escape.

The elf's grip loosened, suddenly broke. The elf disappeared.

Haplo felt his hold on the rim weakening. Inwardly cursing, he concentrated all his strength, all his magic into just hanging on. Down below, he heard the dog barking frantically, and then hands had hold of him again-not slender elf hands, but strong human hands. Haplo saw a human face-grim, determined, flushed red with the effort the man was expending. Haplo, with his failing energy, wove his magic around the man. Red and blue sigla from the runes on his own arms and hands twisted and twined around the human's arms, lending him Haplo's strength.

Muscles bunched, jerked, heaved, and Haplo was flying head first down the hatch. He landed heavily on top of the human, heard the breath leave the man's body in a whoosh and a grunt of pain.

Haplo was on his feet, moving, reacting, ignoring the part of his mind that was trying to draw his attention to his own injuries. He didn't glance at the human who had saved his life. He rudely shoved aside the old man who was yammering something in his ear. The ship shuddered; he heard timber cracking. The creatures were venting their rage against it or perhaps endeavoring to crack open the shell protecting the fragile life inside.

The steering stone was the only object in Haplo's line of sight. All else disappeared, was swallowed up in the black fog that was slowly gathering about him. He shook his head, fought the darkness back. Sinking to his knees before the stone, he placed his hands upon it, summoning from the deep well within him the strength to activate it.

He felt the ship shudder beneath him, but it was a different type of shudder than the one the creatures were inflicting. Dragon Wing rose slowly off the ground.

Haplo's eyes were gummed almost completely shut with something, probably his own blood. He peered through them, struggled to see out the window. The creatures were behaving as he had anticipated. Amazed, startled by the ship's sudden lift into the air, they had fallen back away from it.

But they weren't frightened. They weren't fleeing from it in panic. Haplo felt their senses reaching out, smelling, listening, seeing without eyes. The Patryn fought back the black haze and concentrated his energy on keeping the ship floating up higher and higher.

He saw one of the creatures lift its arm. A giant hand reached out, grabbed hold of one of the wings. The ship lurched, throwing everyone to the deck.

Haplo held onto the stone, concentrated his magic. The runes flared blue, the creature snatched its hand back as if in pain. The ship soared into the air. Looking out from beneath his gummed eyelashes, Haplo saw green treetops and the hazy blue-green sky and then everything was covered by a dense black, pain-tinged fog.

## CHAPTER 27

### SOMEWHERE ABOVE EQUILAN

"WHAT ... WHAT IS HE?" ASKED REGA, STARING AT THE UNCONSCIOUS MAN LYING on the deck. The man was obviously seriously injured- his skin was burned and blackened, blood oozed from a wound on his head. But the woman held back, afraid to venture too close. "He ... he glowed! I saw him!"

"I know it's been a difficult time for you, my dear-" Zifnab gazed at her in deep concern.

"I did!" Rega faltered. "His skin glowed! Red and blue!"

"You've had a hard day," said Zifnab, patting her solicitously on the arm.

"I saw it, too," added Roland, rubbing his solar plexus and grimacing. "And what's more, I was about to lose my hold on him, my arms were getting weak, and those . . . those markings on his hand lit up like a torch. Then my hands lit up, and suddenly I had enough strength to drag him down through the hatch."

"Stress," said the old man. "Does queer things to the mind. Proper breathing, that's the key. All together, with me. Good air in. Bad air out. Good air in."

"I saw him standing out there on the deck, fighting those creatures," murmured Paithan, awed. "His entire body radiated light! He is our savior! He is Orn! Mother Peytin's son, come to lead us to safety!"

"That's it!" said Zifnab, mopping his brow with his beard. "Orn, favors his mother-"

"No, he doesn't," argued Roland, gesturing. "Look! He's human. Wouldn't Mother what's-her-name's kid be an elf- Wait! I know! He's one of the Lords of Thillia! Come back to us, like the legend foretold!"

"That, too!" said the old wizard hastily. "I don't know why I didn't recognize him. The spitting image of his father."

Rega appeared skeptical. "Whoever he is, he's in pretty bad shape." Cautiously approaching him, she reached out a hand to his forehead. "I think he's dying-Oh!"

The dog glided between her and its master, its glance encompassing all of them, saying plainly, We appreciate the sympathy. Just keep your distance.

"There, there, good boy," said Rega, moving a little nearer. The dog growled, bared its sharp teeth. The plumed tail began to slowly brush from side to side.

"Let him alone. Sis."

"I think you're right." Rega edged back, came to stand beside her brother.

Crouched in the shadows, forgotten, Drugar said nothing, might not have even heard the conversation. He was staring intently at the markings on the back of Haplo's hands and arms. Slowly, making certain no one was looking at him, Drugar reached within his tunic and drew forth a medallion that he wore around his neck. Holding it up to the light, he compared the rune carved into the obsidian with the sigla on the man's skin. The dwarf's brow furrowed in puzzlement, his eyes narrowed, his lips tightened.

Rega turned slightly. The dwarf thrust the medallion beneath his beard and shirt.

"What do you think, Blackbeard?" the woman asked.

"My name is Drugar. And I think I do not like being up here in the air in this winged monster," stated the dwarf. He gestured toward the window. The vars shore of the gulf was sliding beneath them. The tytans had attacked the humans on the bank. Around the shore's edge, crowded with helpless people, the gulf water was beginning to darken.

Roland looked out, said grimly, "I'd rather be up here than down there, dwarf."

The slaughter was progressing swiftly. A few of the tytans left it to their fellows and were attempting to wade into the deep gulf water, their eyeless heads staring in the direction of the opposite shore.

"I've got to get back to Equilan," said Paithan, drawing out his etherilite and studying it intently. "There isn't much time. And I think we're too far north."

"Don't worry." Zifnab rolled up his sleeves, rubbed his hands together eagerly. "I'll take over. Highly competent. Frequent flyer. Over forty hours in the air. DC-three. First class, of course. I had a superb view of the control panel every time the stewardess opened the curtain. Let's see." The wizard took a step toward the steering stone, hands outstretched. "Flaps up. Nose down. I just-"

"Don't touch it, old man!"

Zifnab started, snatched his hands back, and attempted to look innocent. "I was just-"

"Not even the tip of your little finger. Unless you think you'd enjoy watching your flesh melt and drop off your bones."

The old man glowered at the stone fiercely, eyebrows bristling. "You shouldn't leave a thing that dangerous lying around! Someone could get hurt!"

"Someone nearly did. Don't try that again, old man. The stone's magically protected. I'm the only one who can use it."

Groggy, Haplo sat up, stifling a groan. The dog licked his face, and he put his arm around the animal's body for support, hiding his weakness. The urgency had subsided, his injuries needed healing-not a difficult task for his magic, but one that he preferred undertaking without an audience.

Fighting dizziness and pain, he buried his face in the dog's flank, the animal's body warm beneath his hands. What did it matter if they saw? He'd already revealed himself to them, revealed to them the use of rune magic, of Patryn rune magic, that had been absent from their world for countless generations. These people might not recognize it, but a Sartan would. A Sartan . . . like the old man. . . .

"Come, come. We're most grateful that you rescued us and we're all extremely sorry for-your suffering but we don't have time to watch you wallow in it. Heal yourself, and let's get this ship back on the right heading," stated Zifnab.

Haplo looked up, fixed the old man with a narrow-eyed stare.

"After all, you are a god!" Zifnab winked several times.

A god? Hell, why not. Haplo was too tired, too drained to worry about where deification might lead him.

"Good boy." He patted the dog, eased the animal away from him. The dog looked around worriedly, and whined. "It'll be all right." Haplo lifted his left hand, placed it-runes down-over his right hand. He closed his eyes, relaxed, let his mind flow into the channels of renewal, revival, rest.

The circle was formed. He felt the sigla on the back of his hands grow warm to the touch. The runes would glow as they did their work, smoothing, healing. The glow would spread over his entire body, replacing damaged skin with whole. A murmur of voices told him that this sight was not lost on the audience.

"Blessed Thillia, look at that!"

Haplo couldn't think about the mensch, couldn't deal with them now. He didn't dare break the concentration.

"Quite well done," crowed Zifnab, beaming at Haplo as if the Patryn were a work of art he, the wizard, had conjured. "The nose could use a little touching up."

Lifting his hands to his face, Haplo examined himself with his fingers. His nose was broken, a cut on his forehead dripped blood into his eye. One cheekbone appeared to be fractured. He would have to perform superficial repair for the moment. Anything more would send him into a healing sleep.

"If he is a god," questioned Drugar suddenly, only the second time the dwarf had spoken since the rescue, "then why couldn't he stop the tytans? Why did he run away?"

"Because those creatures are spawns of evil," answered Paithan. "All know that Mother Peytin and her sons have spent eternity battling evil."

Which puts me on the side of good, thought Haplo, with weary amusement.

"He fought them single-handedly, didn't he?" the elf was continuing. "He held them off so that we could escape, and now he's using the power of the wind to fly us to safety. He has come to save my people--"

"Why not my people?" demanded Drugar, angrily. "Why didn't he save them?"

"And ours," Rega said, lips trembling. "He let our people all die--"

"Everyone knows elves are the blessed race," snapped Roland, casting Paithan a bitter glance.

Paithan flushed, faint red staining the delicate cheek bones. "I didn't mean that! It's just--"

"Look, be quiet a minute! All of you!" Haplo ordered. Now that his pain had eased and he was able to think clearly, he decided he was going to have to be honest with these mensch, not because he was any great believer in honesty, but because lying looked as if it was going to be a damn nuisance. "The old man's got it wrong. I'm not a god."

The elf and the humans began babbling at once, the dwarf's scowl grew darker. Haplo raised a tattooed hand for silence. "What I am, who I am, doesn't matter. Those tricks you saw me do were magic. Different from your own wizards', but magic just the same."

He shrugged, wincing. His head throbbed. He didn't think the mensch would use this information to figure out he was the enemy--the ancient enemy. If this world was in any way similar to Arianus, the people had forgotten all about the dark demigods who had once sought to rule them. But if they figured it out and came to realize who he was, that was their hard luck. Haplo was too hurt and too tired to care. It would be easy to get rid of them before they did his cause any harm. And right now, he needed answers to his questions.

"Which way?" he demanded, not the most pressing question, but one that should keep everyone occupied.

The elf lifted some sort of device, fiddled with it, and pointed. Haplo steered the ship in the direction indicated. They left the Kithni Gulf and the slaughter on its banks far behind. The dragonship cast its shadow over the trees beneath them, sailing through the variegated shades of green--a dark reflection of the real ship.

The humans and the elf remained standing, huddled together in the same spot, staring with rapt fascination out the window. Every once in a while, one of them would cast Haplo a sharp, darting glance. But he noted that they would occasionally look at each other with the same suspicion. The three had not moved since coming aboard, not even when arguing, but held themselves tense, rigid. They were probably afraid that any sort of movement might send the ship spinning out of control, crashing to the trees below. Haplo could have reassured them, but he didn't. He was content to let them stay where they were, frozen to the deck, where he could keep an eye on them.

The dwarf remained crouched in his corner. He, too, had not moved. But Drugar kept his dark-eyed gaze fixed on Haplo, never once looking out the window. Knowing that dwarves always preferred being underground when they could, the Patryn understood that flying through the air like this must be a traumatic experience for the dwarf. Haplo didn't notice fear or uneasiness in Drugar's expression, however. What he saw, oddly enough, was confusion and bitter, smoldering anger. The anger was directed, seemingly, at Haplo.

Reaching out his hand, ostensibly to stroke the dog's silky ears, the Patryn turned the animal's head, aiming the intelligent eyes at the dwarf. "Watch him," Haplo instructed softly. The dog's ears pricked, the tail brushed slowly side to side. Settling down at Haplo's feet, the animal laid its head on its paws, gaze fixed, focused.

That left the old man. A snore told Haplo he didn't have to worry about Zifnab for the moment. The wizard, his battered hat stuck over his face, lay flat on his back on the deck, hands crossed over his chest, sound asleep. Even if he was shamming, he wasn't up to anything. Haplo shook his aching head.

"Those . . . creatures. What did you call them? Tytans? What are they? Where did they come from?"

"I wish to Orn we knew," said Paithan.

"You don't?" Haplo stared suspiciously at the elf, certain he was lying. He switched his gaze to the humans. "Either of you?"

Both shook their heads. The Patryn looked to Drugar, but the dwarf apparently wasn't talking.

"All we know," said Roland, elected to speak by his sister's poke in the ribs, "is that they came down from the norinth. We heard they destroyed the Kasner Empire there, and now I believe it."

"They wiped out the dwarves," added Paithan, "and . . . well . . . you saw what they did to the Thillian realm. And now they're moving into Equilan."

"I can't believe they came out of nowhere!" Haplo persisted. "You must have heard of them before this?"

Rega and Roland looked at each other, the woman shrugged helplessly. "There were legends. Old wives' tales-the kind you tell when it's darktime and you're sitting around, trying to see who can come up with the scariest story. There was one about a nursemaid-"

"Tell me," urged Haplo.

Rega, pale, shook her head and turned her face away.

"Why don't you drop it, all right?" Roland said harshly.

Haplo glanced at Paithan. "How deep's the gulf, elf? How long will it take them to cross it?"

Paithan licked dry lips, drew a shivering breath. "The gulf is very deep, but they could go around it. And we've heard they're coming from other directions, from the est as well."

"I think you had better tell me all you know. Old wives have been known to hold onto the wisdom of generations."

"All right," said Roland, in resigned tones. "There was an old woman who came to stay with the king's children while the king and queen were off doing whatever it is kings and queens do. The children were spoiled brats, of course. They tied the nursemaid up in a chair, and proceeded to wreck the castle.

"After a while, though, the children got hungry. The old woman promised that, if they let her loose, she'd bake them some cookies. The children untied the nursemaid. The old woman went to the kitchen and baked cookies that she made in the shape of men. The old woman was, in reality, a powerful wizardess. She took one of the man-shaped cookies and breathed life into it. The cookie grew and grew until it was larger than the castle itself. The nursemaid set the giant to watch the children while she took a nap. She called the giant a tytan-"

"That word, tytan," Paithan interrupted. "It's not an elven word, it's not human. Is it dwarven?" He glanced at Drugar.

The dwarf shook his head.

"Then where does that word come from? Maybe knowing its original meaning and source would tell us something?"

It was an arrow shot at random, but it might land too close to the bull's eye. Haplo knew the word, knew its source. It was a word from his language and that of the Sartan. It came from the ancient world, referring originally to that world's ancient shapers. Over time, its meaning had broadened, eventually becoming synonymous with giant. But it was an unsettling notion. The only people who could have called these monsters tytans were the Sartan . . . and that opened up entire realms of possibility.

"It's just a word," Haplo said. "Go on with the story."

"The children were afraid of the tytan, at first. But they soon found out it was gentle and kind and loving. They began to tease it. Snatching up the man-shaped cookies, the children would bite the heads off and threaten to do the same to the giant. The tytan grew so upset that it ran away from the castle and ..." Roland paused, frowning thoughtfully. "That's odd. I didn't think of it before now. The tytan in the story loses his way and goes around asking people-

"Where is the castle!" Paithan murmured.

"Where is the citadel," Haplo echoed.

Paithan nodded, excited. "Where is the citadel? What must we do?"

"Yes, I heard it. What's the answer? Where is the citadel?"

"What is a citadel?" Paithan asked, gesturing wildly. "Nobody even knows for certain what the word means!"

"Anyone who knows the answer to their questions would truly be a savior," said Rega, her voice low. Her fist clenched. "If only we knew what they wanted!"

"Rumor has it that the wisest men and women in Thillia were spending day and night studying the ancient books, searching desperately for a clue."

"Maybe they should have asked the old wives," said Paithan.

Haplo rubbed his hands absently over the rune-covered steering stone. Citadel, meaning "little city." Another word in his language, and that of the Sartan. The path before him stretched smooth and clear, leading one direction. Tytans-a Sartan word. Tytans-using Sartan magic. Tytans-asking about Sartan citadels. And here the path led him slam-up against a stone wall.

The Sartan would never, never have created such evil, brutal beings. The Sartan would never have endowed such beings with magic . . . unless, perhaps, they knew for certain that they could control them. The tytans, running amok, running out of control- was it a clear indication that the Sartan had vanished from this world as they had vanished (with one exception) from Arianus?

Haplo glanced at the old man. Zifnab's mouth gaped wide open, his hat was slowly slipping down past his nose. A particularly violent snore caused the old man to inhale the battered brim, nearly strangling himself. He sat up, coughing and spluttering and glaring about suspiciously.

"Who did that?"

Haplo glanced away. He was beginning to reconsider. The Patryn had met only one Sartan before-the bumbling man of Arianus who called himself Alfred Montbank. And though Haplo hadn't recognized it at the time, he came to realize that he felt an affinity for Alfred. Deadly enemies, they were strangers to the rest of the world-but they were not strangers to each other.

This old man was a stranger. To put it more precisely, he was strange. He was probably nothing more than a crackpot, another crazy, bug-eating prophet. He had unraveled Haplo's magic, but the insane had been known to do a lot of bizarre, inexplicable things.

"What happened at the end of the story," he thought to ask, guiding the ship in for a landing.

"The tytan found the castle, came back, and bit off the children's heads," answered Roland.

"You know," said Rega, softly, "when I was little and I heard that story, I always felt sorry for the tytan. I always thought the children deserved such a horrible fate. But now-" She shook her head, tears slid down her cheeks.

"We're nearing Equilan," said Paithan, leaning forward gingerly to look out the window. "I can see Lake Enthial. At least I think that's it, shining in the distance? The water looks odd, seen from above."

"That's it," said Haplo without interest, his thoughts on something else.

"I didn't catch your name," said the elf. "What is it?"

"Haplo."

"What does it mean?"

The Patryn ignored him.

"Single," said the old man.

Haplo frowned, cast him an irritated glance. How the devil did he know that?

"I'm sorry," said Paithan, ever courteous. "I didn't mean to pry." He paused a moment, then continued hesitantly. "I... uh...that is Zifnab said . . . you were a savior. He said you could take . . . people to the ... uh ... stars. I didn't believe it. I didn't think it would be possible. Doom and destruction. He said I'd bring it back with me. Orn help me, I am!" He gazed a moment out the window, to the land below. "What I want to know is ... can you do it? Will you do it? Can you save us from . . . those monsters?"

"He can't save all of you," said Zifnab sadly, twisting his battered hat in his hands, finishing it off totally. "He can only save some. The best and the brightest."

Haplo glanced around, saw eyes-slanted elf eyes, the human woman's wide dark eyes, the human male's bright blue eyes, even the dwarf's black, shadowed eyes, Zifnab's crazed, shrewd eyes. All of them staring at him, waiting, hoping.

"Yeah, sure," he answered.

Why not? Anything to keep peace, keep people happy. Happy and ignorant.

In point of fact, Haplo had no intention of saving anyone except himself. But there was one thing he had to do first. He had to talk to a tytan.

And these people were going to be his bait. After all, the children had asked for exactly what they got.

## CHAPTER 28

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

"SO," SAID CALANDRA, LOOKING FROM PAITHAN TO REGA, STANDING BEFORE her on the porch, "I might have known."

The elf woman started to slam the front door. Paithan interposed his body, preventing the door from shutting, and forced his way inside the house. Calandra backed up a pace, holding herself tall and straight, her hands clasped, level with her cinched-in waist. She regarded her brother with cold disdain.

"I see you have adopted their ways already. Barbarian! Forcing your way into my home!" [27]

"Excuse me," began Zifnab, thrusting in his head, "but it's very important that I-

"Calandra!" Paithan reached out to his sister, grasped hold of her chill hands. "Don't you understand? It doesn't matter anymore? Doom is coming, like the old man said! I've seen it, Callie!" The woman attempted to pull away. Paithan held onto her, his grip tightening with the intensity of his fear. "The dwarven realm is destroyed! The human realm dying, perhaps dead, right now! These three"-he cast a wild-eyed glance at the dwarf and the two humans standing, ill-at-ease and uncomfortable, in the doorway-"are perhaps the only ones left of their races! Thousands have been slaughtered! And it's coming down on us next, Callie! It's coming on us!"

"If I could add to that-" Zifnab raised a forefinger.

Calandra snatched her hands away and smoothed the front of her skirt. "You're certainly dirty enough," she remarked, sniffing. "You've gone and tracked filth all over the carpet. Go to the kitchen and wash up. Leave your clothes down there. I'll have them burned. I'll have clean ones sent to your room. Then sit down and have your dinner. Your friends"-sneering, she cast a scathing glance at the group in the doorway-"can sleep in the slave quarters. That goes for the old man. I moved his things out last night."

Zifnab beamed at her, bowed his head modestly. "Thank you for going to the trouble, my dear, but that really wasn't neces-"

"Humpf!" Turning on her heel, the elf woman headed for the stairway.

"Calandra, damn it!" Paithan grabbed his sister's elbow and spun her around. "Didn't you hear me?"

"How dare you speak to me in that tone!" Calandra's eyes were colder and darker than the depths of the dwarven underground. "You will behave in a civilized manner in this house, Paithan Quindiniar, or you can join your barbaric companions and bed with the slaves." Her lip curled, her gaze went to Rega. "Something you must be used to! As for your threats, the queen received news of the invasion some time ago. If it is true-which I doubt, since the news came from humans-then we are prepared. The royal guard is on alert, the shadowguard is standing by if they are needed. We've supplied them with the latest in weaponry. I must say," she added grudgingly, "that all this nonsense has, at least, been good for business."

"The market opened bullish," offered Zifnab to no one in particular. "Since then, the Dow's been steadily dropping-"

Paithan opened his mouth, but couldn't think of anything to say. Homecoming was like a dream to him, like falling asleep after grappling with terrible reality. Not longer than the turning of a few petals, he had been facing a gruesome death at the rending hands of the tytans. He had experienced unnamable horrors, had seen dreadful sights that would haunt him for the rest of his life. He had changed, sloughed off the carefree, indolent skin that had covered him. What had emerged was not as pretty, but it was tougher, resilient, and he hoped-more wise. It was a reverse metamorphosis, a butterfly transformed into a grub.

But nothing here had changed. The royal guard on alert! The shadowguard standing by, if they are needed! He couldn't believe it, couldn't comprehend it. He had expected to find his people in turmoil, sounding alarms, rushing hither and thither. Instead, all was peaceful, calm, serene. Unchanged. Status quo.

The peace, the serenity, the silence was awful. A scream welled up inside him. He wanted to shriek and ring the wooden bells, he wanted to grab people and shake them and shout, "Don't you know! Don't you know what's coming! Death! Death is coming!" But the wall of calm was too thick to penetrate, too high to climb. He could only stare, stammering in tongue-tied confusion that his sister mistook for shame.

Slowly, he fell silent, slowly loosened his grip on Calandra's arm.

His elder sister, without a glance at any of them, marched stiffly out of the room.

Somehow I've got to warn them, he thought confusedly, somehow make them understand.

"Paithan ..."

"Aleatha!" Paithan turned, relieved to find someone who would listen to reason. He held out his hand-

Aleatha slapped him across the face.

"Thea!" He put his hand over his stinging cheek.

His sister's face was livid, her eyes feverish, the pupils dilated. "How dare you? How dare you repeat these wicked human lies!" She pointed at Roland. "Take this vermin and get out! Get out!"

"Ah! Charmed to see you again, my-" began Zifnab.

Roland couldn't hear what was being said but the hatred in the blue eyes staring at him spoke for her. He raised his hands in apology. "Listen, lady, I don't know what you're saying, but-"

"I said get out!"

Fingers curled to claws, Aleatha flew at Roland. Before he could stop her, sharp nails dug into his cheek, leaving four long bleeding tracks. The startled man tried to fend the elf woman off without hurting her, tried to grasp the flailing arms.

"Paithan! Get her off me!"

Caught flat-footed by his sister's sudden fury, the elf jumped belatedly after her. He grasped Aleatha around the waist, Rega tugged at her arms and, together, they managed to drag the spitting, clawing woman away from Roland.

"Don't touch me!" Aleatha shrieked, striking out impotently at Rega.

"Better let me handle her," gasped Paithan, in human.

Rega backed off, moved to her brother's side. The human dabbed at his injured cheek with his hand, glared at the elf woman sullenly.

"Damn bitch!" he muttered in human, seeing blood on his fingers.

Not understanding his words, but fully comprehending their tone, Aleatha lunged at him again. Paithan held her, wrestling her back, until suddenly her anger was spent. She went limp in her brother's grip, breathing heavily.

"Tell me it's all a lie, Paithan!" she said in a low, passionate voice, resting her head on his chest. "Tell me you've lied!"

"I wish to Orn I could, Thea," Paithan answered, holding her, stroking her hair. "But I can't. I've seen . . . oh, blessed Mother, Aleatha! What I've seen!" He sobbed, clasped his sister convulsively.

Aleatha put both hands on his face, lifted his head, stared into his eyes. Her lips parted in a slight smile, her eyebrows lifted. "I am going to be married. I am going to have a house on the lake. No one, nothing can stop me." She squirmed out of his embrace. Smoothing back her hair, she arranged the curls prettily over her shoulders. "Welcome home, Paithan, dear. Now that you're back, take the trash out, will you?"

Aleatha smiled at Roland and Rega. She had spoken the last words in crude human. Roland put his hand on his sister's arm.

"Trash, huh? Come on. Sis. Let's get out of here!"

Rega cast a pleading glance at Paithan, who stared at her helplessly. He felt like a sleeper who, on first awakening, can't move his limbs.

"You see how it is!" Roland snarled. "I warned you!" He let loose of her, took a step off the porch. "Are you coming?"

"Pardon me," said Zifnab, "but I might point out that you haven't really any place to go-"

"Paithan! Please!" Rega begged.

Roland stomped down the stairs onto the mossy lawn. "Stay here!" he shouted back over his shoulder. "Warm the elf's bed! Maybe he'll give you a job in the kitchen!"

Paithan flushed in anger, took a step after Roland. "I love your sister! I-"

The sound of horns trumpeted through the still, morning air. The elf's gaze turned in the direction of Lake Enthial, his lips tightened. Reaching out, he caught hold of Rega, drew her close. The moss began to rumble and quake beneath their feet. Drugar, who had said no word, made no movement the entire time, slid his hand into his belt.

"Now!" cried Zifnab testily, clinging to the porch railing for support. "If I may be allowed to finish a sentence, I'd like to say that-"

"Sir," intoned the dragon, its voice rising from beneath the moss, "they're here."

"That's it," muttered Haplo, hearing the horn calls. He looked up from his hiding place in the wilderness, made a gesture to the dog. "All right. You know what to do. Remember, I just want one!"

The dog bounded off into the jungle, disappearing from sight in the thick foliage. Haplo, tense with anticipation, glanced around the coppice where he lay hidden. All was ready. He had only to wait.

The Patryn had not gone to the elven house with the rest of his shipboard companions. Making some excuse about performing repairs on his vessel, he had stayed behind. When he had seen them cross the large backyard, its moss blackened and charred from Lenthian's rocketry experiments, Haplo had climbed over the ship's hull to walk along the wooden "bones" of the dragon wing.

To walk the dragon wing. To risk everything, life included, to gain your goal. Where had he heard that saying? He seemed to recall Hugh the Hand mentioning it. Or had it been the elf captain whose ship the Patryn had "acquired"? Not that it mattered. The saying didn't count for much with the ship parked securely

on the ground, the drop beneath only about three feet instead of three thousand. Still, Haplo had thought, jumping down lightly to the ground, the sense of the saying was, at this moment, appropriate.

To walk the dragon wing.

He crouched in his hiding place, waiting, running over the runes he would use in his mind, fingering each like an elven jeweler searching for flaws in a string of pearls. The construct was perfect. The first spell cast would trap the creature. The second hold it, the third bore into its mind-what mind there was.

In the distance, the horn bleats grew louder and more chaotic, sometimes one would end in a horrible, gurgling cry. The elves must be battling their enemy, and the fighting was drawing near his position from the sounds of it. Haplo ignored it. If the tytans handled the elves the way they had handled the humans- and Haplo didn't have any reason to suppose the elves would do any better-the fight wouldn't last long.

He listened, straining, for another sound. There it came-the dog's barking. It, too, was moving in his direction. The Patryn heard nothing else, and at first he was worried. Then he remembered how silently the tytans moved through the jungle. He wouldn't hear the creature, he realized, until it was on him. He licked his dry lips, moistened his throat.

The dog bounded into the coppice. Flanks heaved, tongue lolled from its mouth, its eyes were wide with terror. Wheeling, it turned in the middle of the grove and barked frantically.

The tytan came close behind. As Haplo had hoped, the creature had been lured away from its fellows by the pesky animal. Entering the grove, it stopped, sniffed. The eyeless head revolved slowly. It smelled or heard or "saw" man.

The tytan's giant body towered over Haplo, the eyeless head stared directly at the Patryn. When the tytan ceased movement, its camouflaged body blended almost perfectly into the background of the jungle. Haplo blinked, almost losing sight of it. For a moment, he panicked, but he calmed himself. No matter. No matter. If my plan works, the creature'll be moving, all right. No doubt about that!

Haplo began to speak the runes. He raised his tattooed hands. The sigla seemed to glide off his skin and dance into the air. Flashing fiery blue and flaming red, the runes built upon themselves, multiplying with extraordinary speed.

The tytan gazed at the runes without interest, as if the creature had seen all this before and found it intensely boring. The tytan moved toward Haplo, the incessant question rattled in his head.

"Citadel, right. Where is the citadel? Sorry, I can't take time to answer you right now. We'll talk in just a few moments," Haplo promised, backing up.

The rune construct was complete, and he could only hope it was working. He eyed the tytan closely. The creature continued coming toward him, its wistful pleading changing instantly to violent frustration. Haplo felt a qualm, his stomach clenched. Beside him, the dog whined in terror. The tytan paused, turned its head, slavering mouth gaped open in confusion. Haplo began to breathe again.

Sigla, glowing red and blue, had twined together, draping themselves like huge curtains over the jungle trees. The spell wrapped completely around the coppice, surrounding the tytan. The creature turned this way and that. The runes were reflecting its own image back to it, flooding its brain with pictures and sensations of itself.

"You're all right. I'm not going to hurt you," said Haplo soothingly, speaking in his own language-the language of the Patryns, similar to that of the Sartan. "I'll let you go, but first we're going to talk about the citadel. Tell me what it is."

The tytan lunged in the direction of Haplo's voice. The Patryn moved, darting aside. The tytan grabbed wildly at air.

Haplo, having expected this attack, repeated his question patiently.

"Tell me about the citadel. Did the Sartan-"

Sartan!

The tytan's fury struck, astonishing in its raw power, a stunning blow to Haplo's magic. The runes wavered, crumbled. The creature-freed from the illusion-turned its head toward Haplo.

The Patryn fought to regain his control, and the runes strengthened. The tytan lost him, groped blindly for its prey.

You are Sartan!

"No," replied Haplo. Praying his strength held, he wiped sweat from his face. "I am not a Sartan. I am their enemy, like yourself!"

You lie! You are Sartan! You trick us! Build the citadel, then steal our eyes! Blind us to the bright and shining light!

The tytan's rage hammered at Haplo, he grew weaker with every blow. His spell wouldn't hold much longer. He had to escape now, while the creature was, for the moment, still confused. But it had been worth it. He had gained something. Blind us to the bright and shining light. He thought he might be starting to understand. Bright and shining . . . before him . . . above him. . . .

"Dog!" Haplo turned to run, stopped dead. The trees had vanished. Standing before him, all around him, everywhere he looked, he saw himself.

The tytan had turned the Patryn's own magical spell against him.

Haplo fought to quell his fear. He was trapped, no escape. He could shatter the spell surrounding him, but that would shatter the spell surrounding the tytan at the same time. Drained, exhausted, he didn't have the strength to weave another rune fabric, not one that would stop the creature. The Patryn turned to his right, saw himself. He turned left, faced himself-wide-eyed, pale. The dog, at his feet, dashed about in frantic circles, barking wildly.

Haplo sensed the tytan, blundering about, searching for him. Sooner or later, the creature would stumble into him. Something brushed against him, something warm and living, perhaps a gigantic hand . . .

Blindly, Haplo hurled himself to one side, away from the creature, and slammed into a tree. The impact bruised him, drove the breath from his body. He gasped for air, and realized suddenly that he could see! Trees, vines! The illusion was ending. Relief flooded him, banished instantly by fear.

That meant the rune spell was unwinding. If he could see where he was, then so could his enemy.

The tytan loomed over him. Haplo lunged, diving into the moss, scrabbling to escape. He heard the dog behind him, valiantly trying to defend its master, heard a sharp, pain-filled whine. A dark, furry body crashed to the ground beside him.

Grabbing a tree branch, Haplo staggered to his feet.

The tytan plucked the weapon from his grip, reached down, grabbed his arm. The tytan's hand was enormous, the palm engulfed the bone and muscle, fingers squeezed. The tytan pulled, wrenched Haplo's arm from the socket. He sagged to the ground.

The tytan jerked him back up, tightened its grip. Haplo fought the pain, fought gathering darkness. The next tug would rip the limb from his body.

"Pardon me, sir, but may I be of any service?"

Fiery red eyes poked up out of the moss, almost on a level with Haplo.

The tytan pulled; Haplo heard cracking and snapping, the pain nearly made him lose consciousness.

The red eyes flared, a scaly green head, festooned with vines, thrust up from the moss. A red-rimmed mouth parted, shining white teeth glistened, the black tongue flickered.

Haplo felt himself released, hurled to the ground. He clasped his shoulder. The arm was dislocated, but it was still attached. Gritting his teeth against the pain, afraid to draw attention to himself, he lay on the moss, too weak to move, and watched.

The dragon spoke. Haplo couldn't understand what it said, but he sensed the tytan's rage seeping away, replaced by awe and fear. The dragon spoke again, tone imperative, and the tytan fled back into the jungle, its green, dappled body moving swiftly and silently, making it seem to the Patryn's dazed eyes as if the trees themselves were running away. Haplo rolled over, and blacked out.

## CHAPTER 29

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

"ZIFNAB, YOU'RE BACK!" CRIED LENTHAN QUINDINIAR.

"I am?" said the old man, looking extremely startled.

Running out onto the porch, Lenthán grabbed Zifnab's hand and shook it heartily. "And Paithan!" he said, catching sight of his son. "Blessed Orn! No one told me. Do your sisters know?"

"Yes, Guvnor. They know." The elf gazed at his father in concern. "Have you been well, sir?"

"And you brought guests?" Lenthán switched his vague, shy smile to Roland and Rega. The one, nursing his injured cheek, nodded sullenly. The other, moving to stand near Paithán, clasped hold of his hand. The elf put his arm around her and the two stood together, staring at Lenthán defiantly.

"Oh, my," murmured Lenthán, and began to pluck at the tails of his topcoat. "Oh, my."

"Father, listen to the trumpet calls." Paithán placed a hand on his father's thin shoulder. "Terrible things are happening. Did you hear? Did Callie tell you?"

Lenthán glanced around, as if he would be very glad to change the subject, but Zifnab was staring off into the wilderness with a pensive frown. And there was a dwarf, crouched in a corner, chewing on bread and cheese that Paithán had gone into the kitchen to acquire. (It had become fairly obvious that no one intended inviting them in for luncheon.)

"I ... believe your sister mentioned something-but the army has everything under control."

"They don't, Father. It's impossible. I've seen these fiends! They destroyed the dwarven nation. Thillia is gone, Father! Gone! We're not going to stop them. It's like the old man said-doom and destruction."

Lenthán squirmed, twisting his coattails into knots. He lowered his eyes to the wooden slats of the porch. Those, at least, were safe, weren't going to spring any surprises on him.

"Father, are you listening?" Paithán gave his father a slight shake.

"What?" Lenthán blinked up at him, smiled anxiously. "Oh, yes. A fine adventure you've had. That's very nice, dear boy. Very nice, indeed. But now why don't you come in and talk to your sister. Tell Callie you're home."

"She's knows I'm home!" Paithán exclaimed, frustrated. "She forbid me the house, Father. She insulted me and the woman who is going to be my wife! I will not enter that house again!"

"Oh, dear." Lenthán looked from his son to the humans to the dwarf to the old man. "Oh, dear."

"Look, Paithán," said Roland, coming to stand beside the elf, "you've been home, you've seen your family. You did your best to warn them. What happens now isn't any of your concern. We've got to hit the trail, if we're going to clear out of here ahead of the tytans."

"And where will you go?" demanded Zifnab, head snapping up, chin jutting forward.

"I don't know!" Roland shrugged, glanced at the old man, irritated. "I'm not that familiar with this part of the world. Maybe the Fartherness Reaches. That's to the est, isn't it? Or Sinith Paragna-

"The Farthemess Reaches have been destroyed, its people massacred," stated Zifnab, eyes glittering beneath his white bushy brows. "You might elude the tytans for a time in the jungles of Sinith Paragna but eventually they would find you. And then what would you do, boy? Keep running? Run until you're backed up against the Terinthian Ocean? Will you have time to build yourself a ship to cross the water? And even then it would be only a matter of time. Even then they will follow you."

"Shut up, old man! Just shut up! Either that, or tell us how we're going to get out of here!"

"I will," snapped Zifnab. "There's only one way out." He lifted a finger. "Up."

"To the stars!" At last it seemed to Lenthán that he understood. He clasped his hands together. "It's like you said? I lead my people-

"-forth!" Zifnab carried on enthusiastically. "Out of Egypt! Out of bondage! Across the desert! Pillar of fire-

"Desert?" Lenthán looked anxious again. "Fire? I thought we were going to the stars?"

"Sorry." Zifnab appeared distraught. "Wrong script. It's all these last-minute changes they make in the text. Gets me quite muddled."

"Of course!" Roland exclaimed. "The ship! To hell with the stars! It will fly us across the Terinthian Ocean. ..."

"But not away from the tytans!" struck in the old man testily. "Haven't you learned anything, child? Wherever you go on land in this world, you will find them. Or rather they will find you. The stars. That is the only place of safety."

Lenthán stared up into the sun-drenched sky. The bright fights shone steadfastly, serenely, far above blood and terror and death. "I won't be long, my dear," he whispered.

Roland plucked Paithán by the sleeve, drew him aside, over to the house, near an open window.

"Look," he said. "Humor the crazy old geezer. Stars! Pah! Once we get inside that ship, we'll take it wherever we want to go!"

"You mean we'll take it wherever that Haplo wants to go." Paithan shook his head. "He's strange. I don't know what to make of him."

Absorbed in their worries, neither man noticed a delicate white hand lay hold of the window curtain, draw it slightly to one side.

"Yeah, well, neither do I," Roland admitted. "But-"

"And I don't want to tangle with him! I saw him knock that tree trunk out of that tytan's hand like it was nothing but a piece of straw! And I'm worried about my father. The guvnor's not well. I'm not sure he can make this crazy trip."

"We don't have to tangle with Haplo! All right, then we'll just go wherever he takes us! My bet is he's not going to be all-fired hot to chase off to the stars."

"I don't know. Look, maybe we won't have to go anywhere. Maybe our army can stop them!"

"Yeah, and maybe I'll sprout wings and fly up to the stars myself!"

Paithan cast the human a bitter, angry glance and stalked off, moving down to the end of the porch. Standing by himself, he pulled a flower from a hibiscus bush and began ripping the petals apart, moodily tossing them into the yard. Roland, intent on his argument, started to go after him. Rega caught hold of her brother's arm.

"Let him alone for a little while."

"Bah, he's talking nonsense-"

"Roland, don't you understand? He has to leave all this behind! That's what's bothering him."

"Leave what? A house?"

"His life."

"You and I didn't have much trouble doing that."

"That's because we've always made up our lives as we went along," said Rega, her face darkening. "But I can remember when we left home, the house where we'd been born."

"What a dump!" Roland muttered.

"Not to us. We didn't know any better. I remember that time, the time Mother didn't come home." Rega drew near her brother, rested her cheek on his arm. "We waited . . . how long?"

"A cycle or two." Roland shrugged.

"And there was no food and no money. And you kept making me laugh, so I wouldn't be frightened." Rega twined her hand in her brother's, held it fast. "Then you said, 'Well, Sis, it's a big world out there and we're not seeing any of it cooped up inside this hovel.' We left then and there. Walked out of the house and into the road and followed it where it led us. But I remember one thing, Roland. I remember you stopping there, on the path, and turning around to look back at the house. And I remember that, when you came back to me, there were tears-"

"I was a kid, then. Paithan's an adult. Or passes for one. Yeah, all right. I won't bother him. But I'm getting on board that ship whether he does or not. And what are you going to do if he decides to stay behind?"

Roland walked away. Rega remained standing near the window, her troubled gaze on Paithan. Behind her, inside the house, the hand slipped from the curtain, letting the lacy fabric fall gently, softly back in place.

"When do we go?" Lenthana asked the old man eagerly. "Now? I just have to get a few things to pack . . ."

"Now?" Zifnab looked alarmed. "Oh, no, not now. Not time yet. Got to get everyone rounded up. We've got time, you see. Not much, but some."

"Look, old man," said Roland, breaking in on the discussion. "Are you sure this Haplo's going to go along with your plan?"

"Why, yes, of course!" stated Zifnab confidently.

Eyes narrowing, Roland gazed at him.

"Well," the old man faltered, "maybe not right at first."

"Uh, huh." Roland nodded, lips tightening.

"In fact," Zifnab appeared more uncomfortable, "he doesn't really want us along at all. We may ... er ... sort of have to sneak on board."

"Sneak on board."

"But leave that to me!" the old man said, nodding his head wisely. "I'll give you the signal. Let's see." He mulled it over in his mind. "When the dog barks! That's the signal. Did you hear that everyone!" Zifnab raised his voice querulously. "When the dog barks! That's when we board the ship!"

A dog barked.

"Now?" said Lenthana, nearly leaping out of his shoes.

"Not now!" Zifnab appeared highly put out. "What's the meaning of this? It's not time!"

The dog came dashing around the side of the house. Running up to Zifnab, it caught hold of the old man's robes in its teeth, and began to tug.

"Stop that! You're tearing out the hem. Let go!" The animal growled and pulled harder, its eyes fixed on the old man.

"Great Nebuchadnezzar! Why didn't you say so in the first place? We've got to go! Haplo's in trouble. Needs our help!"

The dog let loose of the old man's robes, raced away, heading in the direction of the jungle. Gathering his skirts, hiking them up above his bare, bony ankles, the old wizard ran off after the animal.

The rest stood, staring, ill-at-ease, suddenly remembering what it was like to face the tytans.

"Hell, he's the only one knows how to fly that ship!" said Roland, and started off after the old man.

Rega raced after her brother. Paithan was about to follow when he heard a door slam. Turning, he saw Aleatha.

"I'm coming, too."

The elf stared. His sister was clad in his old clothes-leather pants, white linen tunic, and leather vest. The clothes didn't fit her, they were too tight. The pants strained to cover the rounded thighs, the seams seeming likely to split apart. The fabric of the shirt stretched taut over the firm, high breasts. So closely did everything fit, she might well have been naked. Paithan felt hot blood seep into his cheeks.

"Aleatha, get back in the house! This is serious-"

"I'm going. I'm going to see for myself." She cast him a lofty glance. "I'm going to make you eat those lies!"

His sister walked past him, striding purposefully after the others. She had bundled the beautiful hair up in a crude bun at the back of her neck. In her hand she carried a wooden walking stick, holding it awkwardly like a club, perhaps with some idea of using it for a weapon.

Paithan heaved a frustrated sigh. There would be no arguing with her, no reasoning. All her life she had done exactly as she pleased; she wasn't going to stop now. Catching up with her, he noticed, somewhat to his consternation, that Aleatha's gaze was fixed on the man running ahead of her, on the strong back and rippling muscles of Roland.

Left alone, Lenthian Quindiniar rubbed his hands, shook his head, and muttered, "Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

High above, standing in her office, Calandra glanced out her window, saw the procession straggling across the smooth lawn, hastening for the trees. In the distance, the trumpets were blowing wildly. Snorting, she turned to the figures in her books, noting, with a tight-lipped smile, that they were likely to beat last year's profit by a considerable margin.

## CHAPTER 30

### TREETOPS, EQUILAN

HAPLO REGAINED CONSCIOUSNESS TO FIND HIMSELF SURROUNDED-NOT BY tytans-but by everyone he'd met in this world, plus what appeared to be half the elven army. Groaning, he glanced at the dog.

"This is all your doing."

The dog wagged its tail, tongue lolling, grinning, relishing the praise, not realizing it wasn't. Haplo stared at those hovering above him. They stared back-their gazes suspicious, dubious, expectant. The old man, alone, regarded him with intense anxiety.

"Are . . . are you all right?" asked the human woman-he couldn't remember her name. Her gaze went to his shoulder. Timidly, she reached out a hand. "Can we do ... anything!"

"Don't touch!" Haplo said, through clenched teeth.

The woman's hand darted back. Of course, that was an open invitation for the elf female to kneel down beside him. Sitting up painfully, he thrust her aside with his good hand.

"You!" he said, looking at Roland. "You've got to help me . . . put this back!" Haplo indicated his dislocated shoulder, hanging at an odd angle from the rest of his body.

Roland nodded, crouched down on his knees. His hands moved to take off Haplo's shirt, the leather vest he wore over it. The Patryn caught hold of the human's hand in his own.

"Just set the shoulder."

"But the shirt's in the way-"

"Just the shoulder."

Roland looked into the man's eyes, looked hurriedly away. The human began to gently probe the injured area. More elves moved closer to watch; Paithan among them. He had been standing on the fringes of the group surrounding Haplo, conversing with another elf dressed in the torn and bloody remnants of what must have been an elegant dress uniform. Hearing Haplo's voice, the two elves broke off their conversation.

"Whatever's underneath that shirt of yours must be something special," said the elf woman. Aleatha. "Is it?"

Roland cast her a dark glance. "Don't you have somewhere else to go?"

"Sorry," she answered coolly, "I didn't understand what you said. I don't speak human."

Roland scowled. He'd been speaking elven. He tried to ignore her. It wasn't easy. She was leaning over Haplo, exposing the full curve of her round breasts.

For whose benefit, the Patryn wondered. He would have been amused if he hadn't been so angry at himself. Looking at Roland, Haplo thought that this time Aleatha might have met her match. The human was strictly business. The human's strong hands grasped Haplo's arm firmly.

'This is going to hurt."

"Yeah." Haplo's jaw ached from gritting his teeth. It didn't need to hurt. He could use the magic, activate the runes. But he was damn sick and tired of revealing his power to one-fourth the known universe! "Get on with it!"

"I think you should hurry," said the elf standing near Paithan. "We've beaten them back, but it's only for the time being, I'm afraid."

Roland glanced around. "I need one of you men to hold him-"

"I can do it," answered Aleatha.

"This is important," Roland snapped. "I don't need some female who's going to pass out-"

"I never faint . . . without a good reason." Aleatha favored him with a sweet smile. "How's your cheek? Does it hurt?"

Roland grunted, keeping his eyes on his patient. "Hold him fast, brace him back against this tree so that he doesn't twist when I pop the bone in place."

Aleatha grasped hold of him, ignoring Haplo's protests.

"I don't need anyone to hold me!" He brushed aside the woman's hands. "Wait a minute, Roland. Not yet. Let me ask . . ." He twisted his head, trying to see the elf in the elegant uniform, interested in what he had said. "Beat them! What- How? . . ."

Pain flashed through his arm, shoulder, down his back, up his head. Haplo sucked in a breath that caught and rattled in his throat.

"Can you move it now?" Roland sat back on his haunches, wiped sweat from his face.

The dog, whimpering, crept to Haplo's side and licked his wrist. Gingerly, biting his teeth against the agony, Haplo moved his arm in the shoulder socket.

"I should bandage it," protested Roland, seeing Haplo struggling to stand. "It could go back out again, real easy. Everything's all stretched inside."

"I'll be all right," Haplo said, holding his injured shoulder, fighting back the temptation to use the runes, complete the healing. When he was alone . . . and that would be soon, if all went well! Alone and away from this place! He leaned back against the tree trunk, closed his eyes, hoping the man and the elf woman would take the hint and leave him to himself. He heard footsteps walking away, he didn't care where. Paithan and the elflord had resumed their conversation.

"... scouts reported that conventional weapons had no effect on them. The humans' defeat in Thillia made that obvious. Humans using our magical weapons proved somewhat more effective, but were eventually beaten. That's to be expected. They can use the magic that is in the weapon, but they can't enhance it, as we can. Not that enhancing helped us much. Our own wizards were completely at a loss. We threw everything we had at them and only one proved successful."

"The dracos, my lord?" said Paithan.

"Yes, the dracos."

What the devil was a draco? Haplo opened his eyes, peered through half-closed lids. The elflord held one in his hands, apparently. Both he and Paithan were studying it intently. So did Haplo.

The draco was similar in appearance to a railbow, except that it was considerably larger. The projectiles it fired were carved out of wood, fashioned to resemble small dragons.

"It's effectiveness doesn't appear to be in the wounds the draco inflicts. Most didn't get close enough to the tytans to inflict any," the lord added ruefully. "It's -the look of the draco itself that frightens them. Whenever we loose the dracos, the monsters don't try to fight. They simply turn and run!" The elflord glared at the weapon in frustration, shaking it slightly. "I wish I knew what it was about this particular weapon that frightens them off! Maybe we could defeat them!"

Haplo stared at the draco, eyes narrowed. He knew why! He presumed that when it was fired at the enemy, it came to life- elven weapons sometimes operated that way. It would appear to the tytans' senses as if they were being attacked by a small dragon. He recalled the sensation of overwhelming terror emanating from the tytan when the dragon had appeared in the glade. So, the dragons could conceivably be used to control the monsters.

My lord will find that most interesting, thought Haplo, smiling quietly and rubbing his shoulder.

A nudge at his belt drew his attention. Looking down, he saw the dwarf, Blackbeard or Drugar or whatever he was called. How long has he been standing there? Haplo hadn't noticed, and he cursed himself for not noticing. One tended to forget the dwarf and, from the look in the dark eyes, that tendency could be fatal.

"You speak my language." It wasn't a question. Drugar already knew the answer. Haplo wondered briefly, how?

"Yes." The Patryn didn't think it necessary to lie.

"What are they saying?" Drugar nodded a shaggy head at Paithan and the elflord. "I speak human, but not elven."

"They're talking about that weapon the elf's holding in his hand. It apparently has some effect on the tytans. It makes them run away."

The dwarf's brows beetled, his eyes seemed to sink back into his head, practically invisible except for the sparkling hate in their black depths. The Patryn knew and appreciated hatred- hatred kept those trapped in the Labyrinth alive. He had been wondering why Drugar was traveling with people the dwarf made no secret of despising. Haplo thought suddenly that he understood.

"Elven weapons"-Drugar spoke into his thick beard-"drive them away! Elven weapons could have saved my people!"

As if in response, Paithan's grim voice rose, "But it didn't drive them far, Durndrun."

The lord shook his head. "No, not far. They came back, attacked us from behind, using that deadly elemental magic of theirs-hurling fire, rocks dragged from the Mother-knows-where. They took care not to come within sight of us and, when we fled, they didn't follow."

"What do they say?" Drugar asked. His hand was beneath his beard; Haplo could see the fingers moving, grasping at something.

"The weapons stopped them, but not for long. The tytans hit them with elemental magic."

"But they are here, they are alive!"

"Yeah. The elves retreated, the tytans apparently didn't go after them." Haplo saw the elflord cast a glance around the group assembled in the coppice, saw him draw Paithan farther into the trees, apparently for private conversation.

"Dog," Haplo said. The animal lifted its head. A gesture from its master sent the dog padding swiftly, silently after the two elves.

"Pah!" The dwarf spit on the ground at his feet.

"You don't believe them?" Haplo asked, interested. "You know what elemental magic is?"

"I know," grunted Drugar, "though we do not use it ourselves. We use"-he pointed a stubby finger at the Patryn's sigla-covered hands-"that magic."

Haplo was momentarily confounded, stared dumbly at the dwarf.

Drugar didn't appear to notice the man's discomfiture. Fumbling at his throat, the dwarf drew out an obsidian disk worn on a leather thong, and held it up for the Patryn's inspection. Haplo leaned over it, saw carved on the rare stone a single rune-a Sartan rune. It was crudely drawn; by itself it possessed little power. Yet he had only to look on his arms to see its counterpart tattooed on his own skin.

"We cannot use them as you do." The dwarf stared at Haplo's hands, his gaze hungry and yearning. "We do not know how to put them together. We are like little children: We can speak words, but we don't know how to string the words into sentences."

"Who taught you ... the rune magic?" Haplo asked when he had recovered sufficiently from his shock to be able to speak.

Drugar lifted his eyes, stared far off, into the jungle. "Legend says . . . they did."

Haplo was confused, thought at first he meant the elves. The dwarf's black eyes were focused higher, almost to the tops of the trees, and the Patryn understood. "The tytans."

"Some of us believed they would come to us again, help us build, teach us. Instead ..." Drugar's voice rumbled to silence, like thunder fading in the distance.

Another mystery to ponder, to consider. But not here. Not now. Alone . . . and far away. Haplo saw Paithan and the elflord returning, the dog trotting along unnoticed at their heels. Paithan's face reflected some internal struggle; an unpleasant one, to judge by his expression. The elflord walked straight to Aleatha who, after assisting Roland with Haplo, had been left standing aloof, alone, at the edge of the copse.

"You've been ignoring me!" she stated.

Lord Durndrun smiled faintly. "I'm sorry, my dear. The gravity of the situation-"

"But the situation's over," said Aleatha lightly. "And here am I, in my 'warrior maid' costume, dressed to kill, so to speak. But I've missed the battle seemingly." Raising her arms, she presented herself to be admired. "Do you like it? I'll wear it after we're married, whenever we have a fight. Though I dare say your mother won't approve-"

The elflord blanched, covered his pain by averting his face. "You look charming, my dear. And now I have asked your brother to take you home."

"Well, of course. It's almost dinnertime. We're expecting you. After you've cleaned up-"

"There won't be time, I'm afraid, my dear." Taking the woman's hand. Lord Durndrun pressed it to his lips. "Good-bye, Aleatha." It seemed he meant to release her hand, but Aleatha caught hold of his, held him fast.

"What do you mean, saying 'good-bye' in that tone?" She tried to sound teasing, but fear tightened, strained her voice.

"Quindiniar." Lord Durndrun gently removed the woman's hand from his.

Paithan stepped forward, caught Aleatha by the arm. "We've got to go-"

Aleatha shook herself free. "Good-bye, My Lord," she said coldly. Turning her back, she stalked off into the jungle.

"Thea!" Paithan called, worried. She ignored him, kept going. "Damn, she shouldn't be wandering around alone-" He looked at Roland.

"Oh, all right," muttered the man, and plunged into the trees.

"Paithan, I don't understand. What's going on?" asked Rega.

"I'll tell you later. Somebody wake up the old man." Paithan gestured irritably to Zifnab, who lay comfortably beneath a tree, snoring loudly. The elf glanced back at Lord Durndrun. "I'm sorry. My Lord. I'll talk to her. I'll explain."

The elflord shook his head. "No, Quindiniar. It's best you don't. I'd rather she didn't know."

"My Lord, I think I should come-"

"Good-bye, Quindiniar," Lord Durndrun said firmly, cutting off the young man's words. "I'm counting on you." Gathering his weary troops around him with a gesture, the lord turned and led his small force back into the jungle.

Zifnab, assisted by the toe of Rega's boot, woke with a snort. "What? Huh? I heard every word! Just resting my eyes. Lids get heavy, you know." Joints popping and creaking, he rose to his feet, sniffing the air. "Dinnertime. The cook said something about tangfruit. That's good. We can dry 'em and eat the leftovers on our journey."

Paithan gave the old man a troubled look, switched his gaze to Haplo. "Are you coming?"

"Go on. I've got to take it easy. I'd only slow you down."

"But the tytans-"

"Go on," said Haplo, in pain, beginning to lose patience.

Taking hold of Rega's hand, the elf followed after Roland and his sister, who already had a considerable head start.

"I have to go!" said Drugar and hurried to catch up with Paithan and Rega. Once he was even with them, however, he fell about a pace behind, keeping them constantly in his sight.

"I suppose I'll be forced to walk all that way!" muttered Zifnab peevishly, tottering off. "Where's that dratted dragon? Never around when I want him, but the moment I don't, there he is, leaping up, threatening to eat people or making rude remarks about the state of my digestion."

Turning, he peered around at Haplo. "Need any help?"

The Labyrinth take me if I see you again! Haplo told the old man's retreating back. Crazy old bastard.

Beckoning to the dog, the Patryn motioned the animal close and rested his hand on its head. The private conversation, held between Paithan and the elflord, overheard by the dog, came to Haplo clearly.

It wasn't much-the Patryn was disappointed. The elflord had said simply that the elves didn't have a chance. They were all going to die.

"You're a real bitch, aren't you?" said Roland.

He'd had a difficult time catching up with the elf woman. He didn't like crossing the narrow, swinging, ropevine bridges that stretched from treetop to treetop. The jungle floor was far beneath him, the bridge swayed alarmingly whenever he moved. Aleatha, accustomed to walking the bridges, moved across them with ease. She could, in fact, have escaped Roland completely, but that would have meant walking the jungle alone.

Hearing him right behind her, she turned and faced him.

"Kitkninit. [28] You are wasting your breath conversing with me. You even talk like a barbarian!" Aleatha's hair had come completely undone; it billowed around her, swept back by the speed of her movement along the bridge. A flush of exertion stained her cheeks.

"Like hell you kitkninit. You were quick enough to follow my instructions when I told you to hold onto our patient."

Aleatha ignored him. She was tall, almost as tall as Roland. Her stride-in the leather pants-was long and unencumbered.

They left the bridge, striking a trail through the moss. The path was narrow and difficult to traverse, made no easier by the fact that Aleatha increased Roland's difficulty whenever possible. Drawing aside branches, she let them go, snapping them in his face. Taking a sharp turn, she left him floundering in a bramble bush. But if Thea was hoping to make Roland angry, she didn't succeed. The human seemed to take a perverse pleasure in the trouble she was causing him. When they emerged onto the sweeping lawn of the Quindiniar mansion, she discovered Roland strolling along easily by her side.

"I mean," he said, picking up the conversation where he had left off, "you treated that elf pretty badly. It's obvious the guy would give his life for you. In fact, he's going to give his life, that is—and you treat him like he's—"

Aleatha whirled, turning on him. Roland caught her wrists, her nails inches from his face. "Listen, lady! I know you'd like to tear my tongue out so you don't have to hear the truth. Didn't you see the blood on his uniform? That came from dead elves! Your people! Dead! Just like mine! Dead!"

"You're hurting me." Aleatha's voice was cool, calming Roland's fever. He flushed, and slowly released her wrists. He could see the livid marks of his hand—the marks of his fear—imprinted on the fair skin.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. It's just—"

"Please excuse me," said Aleatha. "It's late, and I must dress for dinner."

She left him and walked over the smooth expanse of green moss, heading for the house. Horn calls rose again, sounding flat and lifeless in the still, muggy air. Roland was still standing in the same place, staring after the woman, when the others caught up with him.

"That's the signal for the city guard to turn out," said Paithan. "I'm part of it. I should go fight with them." But he didn't move. He stared down at the house, at Dragon Wing behind it.

"What'd the elflord tell you?" Roland asked.

"Right now, people think that our army's driven the tytans off, defeated them. Durndrun knows better. That was only a small force. According to our scouts, after the monsters attacked the dwarves, they split up—half went west to deal with Thillia, half went east, to the Fartherness Reaches. The two armies of tytans are rejoining for an all-out assault on Equilan."

Paithan put his arm around Rega, drew her close. "We can't survive. The lord ordered me to take Aleatha and my family and flee, to get out while we can. He meant, of course, to travel overland. He doesn't know about the ship."

"We've got to get out of here tonight!" said Roland.

"If that Haplo plans to take any of us. I don't trust him," said Rega.

"Which means I run away, leave my people to perish ..." murmured Paithan.

No, said Drugar silently, his hand on his knife. No one will leave. Not this night, not ever.

"When the dog barks," announced the old man, panting, toddling up from behind. "That's the signal. When the dog barks."

## CHAPTER 31

### TREETOPS,

### EQUILAN

HAPLO TOOK A LAST WALK AROUND THE SHIP, INSPECTING THE REPAIRS HE'D made with a critical eye. The damage had not been extensive; the protective runes had, for the most part, served him well. He'd been able to heal the cracks in the planking, reestablish the rune magic. Satisfied that the ship would hold together throughout its long voyage, Haplo climbed back up on the top deck and paused to rest.

He was exhausted. The repairs to his ship and the repairs to himself after the fight with the tytan had drained his energy. He knew he was weak because he was in pain; his shoulder ached and throbbed. If he had been able to rest, to sleep, to let his body renew itself, the injury would, by now, have been nothing more than a bad memory. But he was running out of time. He could not withstand a tytan assault. His magic had to be spent on the ship, not on himself.

The dog settled itself beside him. Haplo rubbed his hand against the animal's muzzle, scratching its jowls. The dog leaned into the caress, begging for more. Haplo thumped it on the flanks.

"Ready to go back up there again?"

The dog rolled over, stood, and shook itself.

"Yeah, me too." Haplo tilted his head back, squinting against the brilliance of the sun. The smoke of the fires, burning in the elven city, kept him from seeing the stars.

Steal our eyes! Blind us to the bright and shining light!

Well, why not? It makes sense. If the Sartan . . .

The dog growled, deep in its throat. Haplo, alert, wary, glanced swiftly down at the house. They were all inside, he'd seen them go in after their return from the jungle. He'd been somewhat surprised they hadn't come to the ship. The first thing he'd done on his own return had been to strengthen the magical field surrounding it. On sending the dog to reconnoiter, however, he'd discovered them doing what he should have guessed they'd be doing-arguing vehemently among themselves.

Now that the dog had drawn his attention to it, he could hear voices, loud, strident, raised in anger and frustration.

"Mensch. All the same. They should welcome a strong ruler like My Lord-someone to enforce peace, bring order to their lives. That is, if any of them will be left in this world when My Lord arrives." Haplo shrugged, rose to his feet, heading for the bridge.

The dog began barking, a warning. Haplo's head jerked around. Beyond the house, the jungle was moving.

Calandra stormed up to her office, slammed the door shut, and locked it. Drawing out her ledger, she opened it, sat rigidly in her straight-backed chair, and began to go over the previous cycle's sales figures.

There was no reasoning with Paithan, absolutely none. He had invited strangers into her house, including the human slaves, telling them that they could take refuge inside! He had told the cook to bring her family up from the town. He'd whipped them into a state of panic with his gruesome tales. The cook was in hysterics. There'd be no dinner this night! It grieved Calandra to say it, but her brother had obviously been stricken with the same madness that plagued their poor father.

"I've put up with Papa all these years," Calandra snapped at the inkwell. "Put up with the house being nearly burned down around our ears, put up with the shame and humiliation. He is, after all, my father, and I owe him. But I owe you nothing, Paithan! You'll have your share of the inheritance and that's all. Take it and take your human trollop and the rest of your scruffy followers and try to make your way in this world! You'll be back. On your knees!"

Outside, a dog began to bark. The noise was loud and startling. Calandra let fall a drop of ink on the ledger sheet. A burst of noise, shouts and cries, came from downstairs. How did they expect her to get any work done! Angrily grabbing the blotter, Calandra pressed it over the paper, soaking up the ink. It hadn't ruined her figures, she was still able to read them-the neat, precise numbers marching in their ordered rows, figuring, calculating, summing up her life.

She replaced the pen, with care, in its holder, and walked over to the window, prepared to slam it shut. Calandra caught her breath, stared. It seemed the trees themselves were creeping up on her house.

She rubbed her eyes, squinching them shut and massaging the lids with her fingers. Sometimes, when she worked too long and too late, the numbers swam before her vision. I'm upset, that's all. Paithan has upset me. I'm seeing things. When I open my eyes, everything will be as it should be.

Calandra opened her eyes. The trees no longer appeared to be moving. What she saw was the advance of a horrible army.

Footsteps came thudding up the stairs, clattered down the hall. A fist began to pound on the door. Paithan's voice shouted, "Callie! They're coming! Callie, please! You have to leave, now!"

Leave! And go where?

Her father's wistful, eager voice came through the keyhole. "My dear! We're flying to the stars!" Shouting from below drowned him out, then, when Callie could hear, there came something about "your mother."

"Go on downstairs, Father. I'll talk to her. Calandra!" Beating on the door. "Calandra!"

She stared out the window in a kind of hypnotic fascination. The monsters seemed uncertain about venturing into the open expanse of green, smooth lawn. They hung about the fringes of the jungle. Occasionally one lifted its eyeless head- they looked like sloths, sniffing the air and not much liking whatever it was they smelled.

A thud shook the door. Paithan was trying to break it down! That would be difficult. Because Calandra often counted money in this room, the door was strong, specially designed, reinforced.

He was pleading with her to open it, to come with them, to escape.

Unaccustomed warmth stole over Calandra. Paithan cared about her. He truly cared.

"Perhaps, Mother, I haven't failed, after all," said Calandra. She pressed her cheek against the cool glass, stared down at the expanse of moss and the frightful army below.

The thudding against the door continued. Paithan would hurt his shoulder. She'd better put an end to it. Walking stiff, erect, Calandra reached up her hand and threw the bolt, locked it fast. The sound could be heard clearly on the other side, and it was met with shocked silence.

"I'm busy, Paithan," Calandra said firmly, speaking to him as she had spoken when he was a child, teasing her to come play. "I have work to do. Run along, and leave me alone."

"Calandra! Look out the window!"

What did he take her for-a fool?

"I've looked out the window, Paithan," Calandra spoke calmly. "You've caused me to make a mistake in my figures. Just take yourselves off to wherever it is you're going and leave me in peace!"

She could almost see the look on his face, the expression of hurt, bewilderment. So he'd looked the cycle they'd brought him home from that trip with his grandfather, the day of Elithenia's funeral.

Mother's not here, Paithan. She won't be here, ever again.

The shouts from below grew louder. A shuffling sound came outside the door-another one of Paithan's bad habits. She could almost see him, head bent, staring at the floor, kicking moodily at the baseboards.

"Good-bye, Callie," he said, his voice so soft she could barely hear it above the whirring of the fan blades. "I think I understand."

Probably not, but it didn't matter. Good-bye, Paithan, she told him silently, placing her ink-stained, work-calloused fingers gently on the door, as she might have placed them gently on a child's smooth cheek. Take care of Papa . . . and Thea.

She heard footsteps, running rapidly down the hall.

Calandra wiped her eyes. Marching to the window, she slammed it shut, returned to her desk, and sat down-back stiff and straight. She lifted her pen, dipped it carefully and precisely in the inkwell, and bent her head over the ledger.

\*

"They've stopped," said Haplo to the dog, watching the movements of the tytans, seeing them keep to the jungle. "I wonder why-"

The ground rumbled beneath the Patryn's feet and he had his answer. "The old man's dragon. . . . They must smell it. Come on, dog. Let's get out of here before those creatures make up their minds and realize that there are too many of them to be scared of just one dragon."

Haplo had almost reached the ladder leading to the bridge when he looked down and discovered that he was talking to himself.

"Dog? Blast it! Where-"

The Patryn glanced back over his shoulder, saw the dog leap from the deck of the ship onto the mossy lawn.

"Dog! Damn it!" Haplo ran back across the deck, peered down over the ship's rail. The animal stood directly beneath him, facing the house. Legs stiff, fur bristling, it barked and barked. "All right! You've warned them! You've warned everybody in three kingdoms! Now get back up here!"

The dog ignored him, perhaps it couldn't hear over its own barking.

Grumbling, dividing his attention between the monsters still lurking in the jungle and the house, Haplo jumped down onto the moss.

"Look, mutt, we don't want company-"

He made a grab for the animal, intending to grasp hold of it by the scruff of its neck. The dog didn't turn its head, didn't once look back at him. But the moment Haplo drew near, the animal leapt forward and went speeding over the lawn, galloping toward the house.

"Dog! Get back here! Dog! I'm leaving now! You hear me?" Haplo took a step toward the ship. "Dog, you worthless, flea-ridden- Oh, hell!" Breaking into a run, the Patryn dashed across the lawn after the animal.

"The dog's barking," shouted Zifnab. "Run! Flee! Fire! Famine! Fly!"

No one moved, except Aleatha, who cast a bored glance over her shoulder.

"Where's Callie?"

Paithan avoided his sister's eyes. "She's not coming."

"Then I'm not either. It's a stupid notion anyway. I'll wait here for My Lord."

Keeping her back to the window, Aleatha walked to the mirror and studied her hair, her dress, her adornments. She was wearing her finest gown and the jewels that had been part of her inheritance from her mother. Her hair was artfully arranged in a most becoming style. She had, the mirror assured her, never looked more beautiful.

"I can't imagine why he hasn't come. My Lord is never late."

"He hasn't come because he's dead, Thea!" Paithan told her, fear and grief shredding him, leaving him raw, burning. "Can't you understand?"

"And we're going to be next!" Roland gestured outside. "Unless we get to the ship! I don't know what's stopping the tytans, but they won't be stopped for long!"

Paithan looked around the room. Ten humans, slaves who had braved the dragon to stay on with the Quindiniars, and their families had taken refuge in the house. The cook was sobbing hysterically in a corner. Numerous adult and several half-grown elves-perhaps the cook's children, Paithan wasn't certain-were gathered around her. All of them were staring at Paithan, looking for leadership. Paithan avoided their eyes.

"Go on! Run for it!" Roland shouted, speaking in human, gesturing to the slaves.

They needed no urging. The men lifted small children, the women hitched up their skirts and raced out the door. The elves didn't understand Roland's words, but they read the look on his face. Catching hold of the sobbing cook, they hustled her out the door and ran after the humans across the lawn, up the slight rise to where the ship stood on the top of the hill.

Human slaves. The elven cook and her family. Ourselves. The best and the brightest . . .

"Paithan?" Roland urged. The elf turned to his sister.

"Thea?"

Aleatha grew paler, the hand that smoothed her hair trembled slightly. She clamped her teeth over her lower lip, and when she knew she could speak without her voice breaking, she said, "I'm staying with Callie."

"If you're staying, I'm staying."

"Paithan!"

"Let him go, Rega! He wants to commit suicide that's his-"

"They're my sisters! I can't run away!"

"If he stays, Roland, then I'm staying-" Rega began.

The dog bounded up on the porch, shot into the hallway, gave a loud, sharp, single "Whuf!"

"They're on the move!" cried Roland, from his vantage point by the window.

"When My Lord comes, tell him that I will be in the parlor," said Aleatha, calmly gathering her skirts, turning her back, and walking away.

Paithan started after her, but Roland caught hold of his arm. "You take care of Rega."

The human strode after Aleatha. Catching hold of her, Roland scooped the elfmaid up in his arms, tossed her over his shoulder and carried her-head down, kicking and screaming and pummeling him on the back-out the door.

Haplo rounded a corner of the house and skidded to a halt, staring in disbelief at the swarm of elves and humans suddenly appearing before him, all bound for his ship!

Savior.

Ha! Wait until they hit the magical barricade.

Haplo ignored them, chased after the dog, and saw the animal leap up onto the porch.

"We're coming!" shouted Paithan.

"You're not the only ones," Haplo muttered.

The tytans had begun their advance, moving with their silent, incredible speed. Haplo looked at the dog, looked at the large group of elves and the humans hastening toward his ship. The first few had already reached it, were endeavoring to get close, had discovered it was impossible. Runes on the outside hull glowed red and blue, their magic guarding against intruders. The mensch were shouting, clasping their arms around each other. Some turned, prepared to fight to the death.

Savior.

Haplo heaved an exasperated sigh. Swearing beneath his breath, he lifted his hand and swiftly traced several runes in the air. They caught fire, glowed blue. The sigla on the ship flickered in answer, their flames died. His defenses were lowered.

"You better hurry up," he shouted, giving the leaping, dancing dog a swift kick that landed nowhere near its target.

"We're going to have to run for it, Quindiniar!" shouted Zifnab, hiking up his robes, revealing a broad expanse of bony leg. "By the way, you were wonderful, Lenthon, my friend. Superb speech. I couldn't have done better myself." He laid his hand on Lenthon's arm. "Ready?"

Lenthon blinked at Zifnab in confusion. The elf's ancestors drifted back to a time beyond memory, leaving behind the wreck of a middle-aged man. "I'm ready," he said vaguely. "Where are we going?" He allowed Zifnab to propel him along.

"To the stars, my dear fellow!" cackled the wizard. "To the stars!"

Drugar ran after the others. The dwarf was strong, his endurance was great. He could have gone on running long after the humans and the elves had collapsed by the wayside. But with his short, stocky legs and heavy leather armor and boots, he was no match for them in a race. They had all soon outdistanced him in their mad dash for the ship, leaving him far behind.

The dwarf pressed on stubbornly. He could see the tytans without turning his head; they were behind him, but fanning out on either side, hoping to capture their prey by enclosing it in a huge circle. The monsters were gaining slowly on the elves and humans, more rapidly on the dwarf. Drugar increased his speed, running desperately, not out of fear of the tytans, but out of fear that he would lose his chance for revenge.

The toe of his thick boot caught on his heel. The dwarf stumbled, lost his balance, and pitched face first into the moss. He struggled to stand, but his boot had slipped down halfway over his foot. Drugar hopped on one

foot, fighting to pull the boot on, his hands slippery with sweat. Smoke stung his nostrils. The tytans had set fire to the jungle.

"Paithan! Look!" Rega glanced behind. "Blackbeard!"

The elf skidded to a halt. He and Rega were within a few strides of the ship. The two had stayed behind the others to act as rear guard, protecting Zifnab, Haplo, and Lenthan, pounding ahead of them, and Roland and the furious Aleatha. They had, as usual, forgotten about the dwarf.

"You go on." Paithan started back down the slight slope. He saw the flames shoot up out of the trees, the black smoke swirl into the sky. It was spreading fast, toward the house. He wrenched his gaze away, kept it on the floundering dwarf, the approaching tytans.

Movement at his side caused him to glance around. "I thought I told you to go to the ship."

Rega managed a twisted smile. "Make up your mind, elf! You're stuck with me!"

Paithan smiled wearily back, shaking his head, prevented from saying anything by the fact that he had no more breath with which to say it.

The two reached the dwarf, who had, by this time, torn the boot off and was hobbling forward-one boot on and one boot off. Paithan caught hold of him by one shoulder, Rega grabbed the other.

"I don't need your help!" growled Drugar, glaring at them with startling vehemence. "Let me go!"

"Paithan, they're gaining!" Rega shouted, nodding over her shoulder at the tytans.

"Shut up and quite fighting us!" Paithan told the dwarf. "You saved our lives, after all"

Drugar began to laugh-a deep, wild bellow. Paithan wondered again if the dwarf was going mad. The elf didn't have time to worry about it. He could see, out of the corner of his eye, the tytans getting nearer. They didn't stand a chance. He glanced at Rega, she glanced at him, shrugged slightly. Both tightened their hold on the heavy dwarf, and started running.

Haplo reached the ship ahead of the others, the runes traced on his body doing what they could to bolster his flagging strength, tent speed to his stride. Men, women, and shrieking children straggled over the deck. A few had found the hatchway and had gone down into the ship. More were standing at the rail, staring at the tytans.

"Get below!" Haplo shouted, pointing at the hatch. He pulled himself up over the railing and was starting-again-for the bridge when he heard a frantic whimper and felt a tug at his heel.

"What now?" he snarled, whirling to confront the dog, who had nearly pulled him over backward. Looking out over the lawn, peering through the gathering smoke, he saw the human, the elf, and the dwarf surrounded by tytans.

"What do you want me to do? I can't- Oh, for-!" Haplo caught hold of Zifnab, who was trying unsuccessfully to pull himself and Lenthan Quindiniar up over the railing. "Where's that dragon of yours?" The Patryn demanded, yanking the old man around to face him.

"Flagon?" Zifnab blinked at Haplo like a stunned owl. "Good idea! I could use a snort-"

"Dragon, you doddering idiot! Dragon!"

"Dragon? Where?" The old wizard looked highly alarmed. "Don't tell him you saw me, there's a good chap. I'll just go below-"

"Listen to me, you worthless old geezer, that dragon of yours is the only thing that's going to save them!" Haplo pointed at the small group struggling valiantly to reach the ship.

"My dragon? Save anybody?" Zifnab shook his head sadly. "You must have him confused with someone else-Smaug, perhaps? No? Ah, I've got it! That lizard who gave Saint George such a nasty time of it! What was his name, now there was a dragon!"

"And you are implying that I'm not?" The voice split the ground. The dragon's head shoved up through the moss. Shock waves rolled, rocking the ship, throwing Haplo back into a bulkhead. Lenthon clung to the railing for dear life.

Pulling himself up, Haplo saw the tytans come to a halt, their eyeless heads swiveling toward the gigantic beast.

The dragon's body slid up out of the hole it had created in the moss. It moved rapidly, green scaly skin rippling, glistening in the sunlight. "Smaug!" the dragon thundered. "That vain-glorious fop! And as for that sniveling worm who took on St. George-

Roland reached the ship, lifted Aleatha up over the railing to Haplo, who caught hold of the woman, dragged her on board, and turned her over to the care of her father.

"Get up here!" Haplo offered his hand.

Roland shook his head, turned, and ran back to help Paithan, disappearing in the gathering smoke. Haplo peered after him, cursing the delay. It was difficult to see now-much of the jungle was completely engulfed in flames-but Haplo had the impression that the tytans were falling back, milling about in confusion, caught between their own flame and the dragon.

"And to think I ended up with a worthless old faker like you!" the dragon was shouting. "I could have gone someplace where I would have been appreciated! Pern, for example! Instead, I-

Coughing, tears streaming down their cheeks, the small party made its way through the smoke. It was difficult to tell who was carrying whom; they all seemed to be leaning on each other. With Haplo's help, they managed to climb up over the railing and collapsed on the deck.

"Everybody below!" the Patryn snapped. "Hurry up. It's not going to take the tytans long to figure out they're not as frightened of the dragon as they think they are!"

Wearily, they made their way forward, stumbled down the hatch to the bridge. Haplo was about to turn and follow when he saw Paithan, standing at the railing, staring through the smoke, blinking back tears. His hands clenched the wood.

"Come on, or you're riding out here!" Haplo threatened.

"The house . . . can you see it?" Paithan wiped his eyes with an impatient gesture.

"It's gone, elf, burning! Now will you-" Haplo paused. "There was someone in there. Your sister."

Paithan nodded, slowly turned away. "I guess it was better that way than . . . the other."

"We're likely to find out if we don't get out of here ourselves! Sorry, but I've got no time for condolences." Haplo grabbed hold of the elf, hustled him down below.

Inside, it was deathly quiet. The magic protected the ship from the smoke and flame, the dragon outside guarded it from the tytans. The humans and elves and the dwarf had taken refuge in whatever open spaces they could find, huddled together, their eyes fixed on Haplo. He glanced around grimly, not liking his passengers, not liking the situation. His gaze flicked over the dog, lying nose on paws on the deck.

"You happy?" he muttered.

The animal thumped its tail wearily on the boards.

Haplo put his hands on the steering stone, hoping he had strength enough left to take the ship aloft. The sigla began to glow blue and red on his skin, the runes on the stone lit in response. A violent shudder shook the vessel, the boards creaked and shivered.

"Tytans!"

This was the end. He couldn't fight them, didn't have the strength. My Lord will know, when I fail to return, that something must have gone wrong. The Lord of the Nexus will be wary, when he comes to this world.

Green scales covered the window, almost completely blocking the view. Haplo started, recovered. He knew now what was causing the ship to quake and creak like a rowboat in a storm—a large, scaly body, winding itself round and round.

A fiery eye glared through the window at the Patryn.

"Ready when you are, sir," the dragon announced.

"Ignition! Blast off!" said the old man, settling himself on the deck, his battered hat sliding down over one ear. "The vessel needs a new name! Something more appropriate to a starship. Apollo? Gemini? Enterprise. Already taken. Millennium Falcon. Trade-marked. All rights reserved. No! Wait, I have it! Dragon Star! That's it! Dragon Star!"

"Shit," muttered Haplo, and put his hands back on the steering stone.

The ship rose slowly, steadily, into the air. The mensch stood up, stared out the small portholes that lined the hull, watched their world fall away from them.

The dragonship flew over Equilan. The elven city could not be seen for the smoke and flames devouring it and the trees in which it had been built.

The dragonship flew over the Kithni Gulf, red with human blood. It flew over Thillia—charred, blackened. Here and there, crouched alongside the broken roads, a dazed, lone survivor could be seen, wandering forlornly through a dead land.

Rising steadily, gaining altitude, the ship passed over the dwarven homeland—dark, deserted. The ship sailed into the green-blue sky, left the ruined world behind, and headed for the stars.

## CHAPTER 32

### DRAGON STAR

THE FIRST PART OF THE VOYAGE TO THE STARS WAS RELATIVELY PEACEFUL. Awed and frightened by the sight of the ground sliding beneath them, the mensch-elven and human-huddled together, pathetically eager for each other's company and support. They talked repeatedly of the catastrophe that had struck them. Wrapped in the warm blanket of shared tragedy, they attempted to draw even the dwarf into their circle of good fellowship. Drugar ignored them. He sat morose and melancholy in a corner of the bridge, moving from it infrequently, and then only under the duress of dire need.

They spoke eagerly about the star to which they were sailing, about their new world and new life. Haplo was amused to observe that, once they were actually on their way to a star, the old man became extremely evasive in describing it.

"What is it like? What causes the light?" asked Roland.

"It is a holy light," said Lenthon Quindiniar in mild rebuke. "And shouldn't be questioned."

"Actually, Lenthon's right . . . sort of," said Zifnab, appearing to grow extremely uncomfortable. "The light is, one might say, holy. And then there's night."

"Night? What's night?"

The wizard cleared his throat with a loud harrumph and glanced around as if for help. Not finding any, he plunged ahead. "Well, you remember the storms you have on your world? Every cycle at a certain time it rains? Night's similar to that, only every cycle, at a certain time, the light. . . well... it disappears."

"And everything's dark!" Rega was appalled.

"Yes, but it's not frightening. It's quite comforting. That's the time when everyone sleeps. Makes it easy to keep your eyelids shut."

"I can't sleep in the dark!" Rega shuddered, and glanced at the dwarf, sitting silently, ignoring them all. "I've tried it. I'm not sure about this star. I'm not sure I want to go."

"You'll get used to it." Paithan put his arm around her. "I'll be with you."

The two snuggled close. Haplo saw looks of disapproval on the faces of the elves, who were watching the loving couple. He saw the same expressions mirrored on the faces of the humans.

"Not in public," Roland said to his sister, jerking her away from Paithan.

There was no further conversation among the mensch about the star.

Trouble, Haplo foresaw, was coming to paradise.

The mensch found that the ship was smaller than it had first appeared. Food and water supplies disappeared at an alarming rate. Some of the humans began to remember they had been slaves, some of the elves recalled that they had been masters.

The convivial get-togethers ended. No one discussed their destination-at least as a group. The elves and humans met to talk over matters, but they met separately now and kept their voices low.

Haplo sensed the growing tension and cursed it and his passengers. He didn't mind divisiveness. He was, in fact, intent on encouraging it. But not on his ship.

Food and water weren't a problem. He had laid in stores for himself and the dog-making certain he had a variety this time- and he could easily replicate what he had. But who knew how long he would have to feed these people and put up with them? Not without a certain amount of misgiving, he had set his course based on the old man's instructions. They were flying toward the brightest star in the heavens. Who knew how long it would take them to reach it?

Certainly not Zifnab.

"What's for dinner?" asked the old wizard, peering down into the hold, where Haplo stood, pondering these questions. The dog, standing at Haplo's side, looked up and wagged his tail. Haplo glanced at it irritably. "Sit down!" he muttered.

Noting the relatively small amount of supplies remaining, Zifnab appeared slightly crestfallen, also extremely hungry.

"Never mind, old man. I can take care of the food!" said Haplo. It would mean using his magic again, but at this point, he didn't suppose it mattered. What interested him more was their destination and how long it would be before he could rid himself of his refugees. "You know something about these stars, don't you?"

"I do?" Zifnab was wary.

"You claim you do. Talking to them about"-he jerked a thumb in the direction of the main part of the ship where the mensch generally gathered-"this 'new' world ..."

"New? I didn't say anything about 'new,' " Zifnab protested. The old man scratched his head, knocking his hat off. It tumbled down into the hold, landed at Haplo's feet.

"New world . . . being reunited with long-dead wives." Haplo picked up the battered hat, toyed with it.

"It's possible!" cried the wizard shrilly. "Anything's possible." He reached out a tentative hand for the hat. "Mind you don't crush the brim."

"What brim? Listen, old man, how far are we away from this star? How many days of travel to get there?"

"Well, er, I suppose." Zifnab gulped. "It all depends ... on ... on how fast we're traveling! That's it, how fast we're traveling." He warmed to his subject. "Say that we're moving at the speed of light. . . . Impossible, of course, if you believe physicists. Which I don't, by the way. Physicists don't believe in wizards-a fact that I, being a wizard, find highly insulting. I have taken my revenge, therefore, by refusing to believe in physicists. What was the question?"

Haplo started over again, trying to be patient. "Do you know what these stars really are?"

"Certainly," Zifnab replied in lofty tones, staring down his nose at the Patryn.

"What are they?"

"What are what?"

"The stars?"

"You want me to explain them?"

"If you wouldn't mind."

"Well, I think the best way to put this"-sweat broke out on the old man's forehead-"in layman's terms, to be concise, they're ... er ... stars."

"Uh huh," said Haplo grimly. "Look, old man, just how close have you actually been to a star?"

Zifnab mopped his forehead with the end of his beard, and thought hard. "I stayed in the same hotel as Clark Gable once," he offered helpfully, after an immense pause.

Haplo gave a disgusted snort, sent the hat spinning up and out of the hatchway. "All right, keep playing your game, old man."

The Patryn turned back, studying the supplies—a barrel of water, a cask of salted targ, bread and cheese, and bag of tangfruit. Sighing, scowling, Haplo stood staring moodily at the water barrel.

"Mind if I watch?" asked Zifnab politely.

"You know, old man, I could end this real quick. Jettison the 'cargo'-if you take my meaning. It's a long way down."

"Yes, you could," said Zifnab, easing himself onto the deck, letting his legs dangle over the edge of the hatch. "And you'd do it in a minute, too. Our lives mean nothing to you, do they, Haplo? The only one who has ever mattered to you is you."

"You're wrong, old man. For what it's worth, one person has my allegiance, my loyalty. I'd lay down my life to save his and feel cheated that I couldn't do more for him."

"Ah, yes," Zifnab said softly. "Your lord. The one who sent you here."

Haplo scowled. How the hell did the old fool know that? He must have inferred it from things I've let drop. It was careless, very careless. Damn! Everything's going wrong! The Patryn gave the water barrel a vicious kick, splitting the staves, sending a deluge of tepid liquid over his feet.

I'm used to being in control; all my life, every situation, I've been in control. It was how I survived the Labyrinth, how I completed my mission successfully on Arianus. Now I'm doing things I never meant to do, saying things I never meant to say! A bunch of mutants with the intelligence of your average rutabaga nearly destroy me. I'm hauling a group of mensch to a star and putting up with a crazy old man, who's crazy like a fox.

"Why?" Haplo demanded aloud, shoving aside the dog, who was eagerly lapping up the spill. "Just tell me why?"

"Curiosity," said the old man complacently. "It's killed more than a few cats in its day."

"Is that a threat?" Haplo glanced up from beneath lowered brows.

"No! Heavens, no!" Zifnab said hastily, shaking his head. "Just a warning, dear boy. Some people consider curiosity a very dangerous concept. Asking questions oftentimes leads to the truth. And that can get you into a great deal of trouble."

"Yeah, well, it depends on what truth you believe in, doesn't it, old man?"

Haplo lifted a piece of wet wood, traced a sigla on it with his finger, and tossed it back into the comer. Instantly, the other pieces of broken barrel leapt to join it. Within the space of a heartbeat, the barrel stood intact. The Patryn drew runes on both the barrel and in the empty air next to it. The barrel replicated itself, and soon numerous barrels, all filled with water, occupied the hold. Haplo traced fiery runes in the air, causing tubs of salted targ meat to join the ranks of water barrels. Wine jars sprang up, clinking together musically. Within a few short moments, the hold was loaded with food.

Haplo climbed the ladder leading up out of the hold. Zifnab moved aside to let him past.

"All in what truth you believe in, old man," the Patryn repeated.

"Yes. Loaves and fishes." Zifnab winked slyly. "Eh, Savior?"

Food and water led, somewhat indirectly, to the crisis that came near solving all of Haplo's problems for him.

"What is that stench?" demanded Aleatha. "And are you going to do something about it?"

It was about a week into their journey; time being estimated by a mechanical hour flower the elves had brought aboard. Aleatha had wandered up to the bridge, to stand and stare out at the star that was their destination.

"The bilge," stated Haplo absently, trying to devise some method of measuring the distance between themselves and their destination. "I told you, you're all going to have to take turns pumping it out."

The elves of Arianus, who had built and designed the ship, had devised an effective system of waste management, utilizing elven machinery and magic. Water is scarce and extremely valuable on the air world of Arianus. As the basis for monetary exchange, not a drop is wasted. Some of the first magicks created on Arianus dealt with the conversion of waste water back into pure liquid. Human water wizards dealt directly with nature's elements, obtaining pure water from foul. Elven wizards used machines and alchemy to achieve the same effect, many elves swearing that their chemical wizardry produced better-tasting water than the humans' elemental magic.

On taking over the ship, Haplo had removed most of the elven machinery, leaving only the bilge pump in case the ship took on rainwater. The Patrins, through their rune magic, have their own methods of dealing with bodily waste, methods that are highly secret and protected-not out of shame, but out of simple survival. An animal will bury its droppings to keep an enemy from tracking it.

Haplo had not, therefore, been overly worried about the problem of sanitation. He'd checked the pump. It worked. The humans and the elves aboard ship could take turns at it. Preoccupied with his mathematical calculations, he thought no more of his conversation with Aleatha, other than making a mental note to set everyone to work.

His figuring was interrupted by a scream, a shout, and the sounds of voices raised in anger. The dog, dozing beside him, leapt to its feet with a growl.

"Now what?" Haplo muttered, leaving the bridge, descending to the crew's quarters below.

"They're not your slaves any longer, Lady!"

The Patryn entered the cabin, found Roland-red-faced and shouting-standing in front of a pale, composed, and icily calm Aleatha. The human contingent was backing up their man. The elves were solidly behind Aleatha. Paithan and Rega, looking distraught, stood, hand in hand, in the middle. The old man, of course-when there was trouble-was nowhere to be found.

"You humans were born to be slaves! You know nothing else!" retorted a young elf, the cook's nephew-a particularly large and strong specimen of elven manhood. Roland surged forward, fist clenched, other humans behind.

The cook's nephew leaped to the challenge, his brothers and cousins behind him. Paithan jumped in, attempted to keep the elf off Roland, and received a smart rap on the head from a human who had been a slave of the Quindiniar family since he was a child and who had long sought an opportunity to vent his frustrations. Rega, going in to help Paithan, found herself caught in the middle.

The melee became general, the ship rocked and lurched and Haplo swore. He'd been doing that a lot lately, he noticed. Aleatha had withdrawn to one side, watching with detached interest, keeping her skirt clear of possible blood.

"Stop it!" Haplo roared. Wading into the fight, he grabbed bodies, flung them apart. The dog dashed after him, snapping and growling and nipping painfully at ankles. "You'll knock us

out of the air!"

Not exactly true, the magic would hold the ship up, but it was certainly a frightening concept and one that he calculated would end the hostilities.

The fight came to a reluctant halt. Opponents wiped blood from split lips and broken noses and glowered at each other.

"Now what the hell is going on?" Haplo demanded.

Everyone started to talk at once. At the Patryn's furious gesture, everyone fell silent. Haplo fixed his gaze on Roland. "All right, you started it. What happened?"

"It's Her Ladyship's turn to pump out the bilge," said Roland, breathing heavily and rubbing bruised abdominal muscles. He pointed at Aleatha. "She refused to do it. She came in here and ordered one of us to do it for her."

"Yeah! That's right!" The humans, male and female, agreed angrily.

Haplo had a brief and extremely satisfying vision of using his magic to part the ship's staves and send all these wretched and irritating creatures plummeting down however many hundreds of thousands of miles to the world below.

Why didn't he? Curiosity, the old man had said. Yes, I'm curious, curious to see where the old man wants to take these people, curious to see why. But Haplo could foresee a time-and it was rapidly approaching-when his curiosity would begin to wane.

Something of his ire must have been visible on his face. The humans hushed and fell back a pace before him. Aleatha, seeing his gaze come to focus on her, paled, but held her ground, regarding him with cold and haughty disdain. Haplo said nothing. Reaching out, he caught hold of the elf woman's arm and hauled her from the cabin.

Aleatha gasped, screamed, and held back. Haplo jerked her forward, dragging her off her feet. Aleatha fell to the deck. The Patryn yanked her back up, and kept going.

"Where are you taking her?" Paithan cried, real fear in the elf's voice. From out of the corner of his eye, Haplo saw Roland's face drain of color. From his expression, it looked as if he thought Haplo were going to hurl the woman from the top deck.

Good, he thought grimly, and continued on.

Aleatha soon had no breath left to scream; she had to cease her struggles and concentrate on keeping on her feet or be pulled along the deck. Haplo descended a ladder, the elf woman in tow, and stood between decks in the small, smelly, dark part of the ship where the bilge pump stood. Haplo shoved Aleatha forward. She stumbled headlong into the apparatus.

"Dog," he said to the animal, who had either followed him or materialized beside him, "watch!"

The dog sat obediently, head cocked, eyes on the elf woman.

Aleatha's face was livid. She glared at Haplo through a mass of disheveled hair. "I won't!" she snarled and took a step away from the pump.

The dog growled, low in its throat.

Aleatha glanced at it, hesitated, took another step.

The dog rose to its feet, the growl grew louder.

Aleatha stared at the animal, her lips tightened. Tossing her ashen hair, she walked past Haplo, heading for the passage that led out.

The dog covered the distance between them in a jump, planted itself in front of the woman. Its growl rumbled through the ship. Its mouth parted, showing sharp, curved, yellow-white teeth. Aleatha stepped backward hastily, tripped on her skirt, and nearly fell.

"Call him off!" she screamed at Haplo. "He'll kill me!"

"No, he won't," said the Patryn coolly. He pointed to the pump. "Not so long as you work."

Casting Haplo a look that the woman obviously wished was a dagger, Aleatha swallowed her rage, turned her back on the dog and the Patryn. Head held high, she walked over to the pump. Grasping the handle in both delicate, white hands, she lifted it up, shoved it down, lifted it up; shoved it down. Haplo, peering out a porthole, saw a spew of foul-smelling water gush out over the ship's hull, spray into the atmosphere below.

"Dog, stay. Watch," he instructed, and left.

The dog settled down, alert, vigilant, never taking its eyes from Aleatha.

Emerging from below deck, Haplo found most of the mensch gathered at the top of the ladder, waiting for him. He drew himself up level with them.

"Go back about your business," he ordered, and watched them slink off. He left them, returning to the bridge and his attempts to fix their position.

Roland massaged his aching hand, injured when he'd delivered a hard right to the elf. The human tried to tell himself Aleatha got just what she deserved, it served her right, it wouldn't hurt the bitch to turn her hand to a little work. When he found himself walking the passageway, heading for the pumping room, he called himself a fool.

Pausing in the hatchway, Roland stood silently and watched.

The dog lay on the deck, nose on paws, eyes on Aleatha. The elf woman paused in her work, straightened and bent backward, trying to ease the stiffness and pain in a back unaccustomed to bending to hard labor. The proud head drooped, she wiped sweat from her forehead, looked at the palms of her hands. Roland recalled-more vividly than he'd expected-the delicate softness of the small palms. He could imagine the woman's skin, raw and bleeding. Aleatha wiped her face again, this time brushing away tears.

"Here, let me finish," offered Roland gruffly, stepping over the dog.

Aleatha whirled to face him. To his amazement, she stiff-armed him out of the way and began to work the pump with as much speed as the weariness of her aching arms and the smarting of her stinging palms would allow.

Roland glared at her. "Damn it, woman! I'm only trying to help!"

"I don't want your help!" Aleatha shook the hair out of her face, the tears out of her eyes.

Roland intended to turn on his heel, walk out, and leave her to her task. He was going to turn and go. He was leaving. He was . . . putting his arm around her slender, waist and kissing her.

The kiss was salty, tasting of sweat and tears. But the woman's lips were warm and responsive, her body yielded to him; she was softness and fragrant hair and smooth skin-all tainted faintly by the foul reek of the bilge.

The dog sat up, a slightly puzzled expression in its eyes, and glanced around for its master. What was it supposed to do now?

Roland drew back, releasing Aleatha, who staggered slightly when his arms were withdrawn.

"You are the most pig-headed, selfish, irritating little snot I ever met in my life! I hope you rot down here!" said Roland coldly. Turning on his heel, he marched out. Eyes wide in wonder, mouth parted, Aleatha stared after him.

The dog, confused, sat down to scratch an itch.

Haplo had finally almost figured it out. He had developed a crude theodolite that used the stationary position of the four suns and the bright light that was their destination as common reference points. By checking daily the positions of the other stars visible in the sky, the Patryn observed that they appeared to be changing their position in relationship to Dragon Star.

The motion was due to the motion of his ship, the consistency of his measurements led to a model of amazing symmetry. They were nearing the star, no doubt about it. In fact, it appeared . . .

The Patryn checked his calculations. Yes, it made sense. He was beginning to understand, beginning to understand a lot. If he was correct, his passengers were going to be in for the shock of their-

"Excuse me, Haplo?"

He glanced around, angry at being interrupted. Paithan and Rega stood in the doorway, along with the old man. Blast it- Zifnab'd show up now that the trouble was settled.

"What do you want? And make it quick," Haplo muttered.

"We ... uh ... Rega and I ... we want to be married."

"Congratulations."

"We think it will draw the people together, you see-"

"I think it'll more likely touch off a riot, but that's your problem."

Rega appeared a bit downcast, looked at Paithan uncertainly. The elf drew a deep breath, carried on.

"We want you to perform the ceremony."

Haplo couldn't believe he'd heard right. "You what?"

"We want you to perform the ceremony."

"By ancient law," struck in Zifnab, "a ship's captain can marry people when they're at sea."

"Whose ancient law? And we're not at sea."

"Why ... uh ... I must admit, I'm rather vague on the precise legal-"

"You've got the old man." The Patryn nodded. "Get him to do it."

"I'm not a cleric," protested Zifnab, indignant. "They wanted me to be a cleric, but I refused. Party needed a healer, they said. Hah! Fighters with all the brains of a doorknob attack something twenty times their size, with a bizillion hit points, and they expect me to pull their heads out of their rib cages! I'm a wizard. I've the most marvelous spell. If I could just remember how it went. Eight ball! No, that's not it. Fire something. Fire . . . extinguisher! Smoke alarm. No. But I really think I'm getting close."

"Get him off the bridge." Haplo turned back to his work.

Paithan and Rega edged in front of the old man, the elf put his hand gingerly on the Patryn's tattooed arm. "Will you do it? Will you marry us?"

"I don't know anything about elven marriage ceremonies."

"It wouldn't have to be elven. Or human, either. In fact it would be better if it weren't. That way no one would get mad."

"Surely your people have some kind of ceremony," suggested Rega. "We could use yours. . . ."

. . . Haplo didn't miss the woman.

Runners in the Labyrinth are a solitary lot, relying on their speed and strength, their wits and ingenuity to survive, to reach their goal. Squatters rely on numbers. Coming together to form nomadic tribes, the squatters move through the Labyrinth at a slower pace, often following the routes explored by the runners. Each respects the other, both share what they have: the runners, knowledge; the squatters, a brief moment of security, stability.

Haplo entered the squatter camp in the evening, three weeks after the woman had left him. The headman was there to greet him on his arrival; the scouts would have sent word of his coming. The headman was old, with grizzled hair and beard, the tattoos on his gnarled hands were practically indecipherable. He stood tall, though, without stooping. His stomach was taut, the muscles in the arms and legs lean and well defined. The headman clasped his hands together, tattooed backs facing outward, and touched his thumbs to his forehead. The circle was joined.

"Welcome, runner."

Haplo made the same gesture, forced himself to keep his gaze fixed on the squatter's leader. To do anything else would be taken for insult, perhaps would even be dangerous. It might appear that he was counting the squatter's numbers.

The Labyrinth was tricky, intelligent. It had been known to send in imposters. Only by adhering strictly to the forms would Haplo be allowed to enter the camp. But he couldn't help darting a furtive glance around the people gathered to inspect him. Particularly, he looked at the women. Not catching, right off, a glimpse of chestnut hair, Haplo wrenched his attention back to his host.

"May the gates stand open for you, headman." Hands to his forehead, Haplo bowed.

"And for you, runner." The headman bowed.

"And your people, headman." Haplo bowed again. The ceremony was over.

Haplo was now considered a member of the tribe. The people continued on about their business as if he were one of themselves, though sometimes a woman paused to stare, give him a smile, and nod toward her hut. At another time in his life, this invitation would have sent fire through his veins. A smile back and he would have been taken into the hut, fed and accorded all the privileges of a husband. But Haplo's blood

seemed to run cold these days. Not seeing the smile he wanted to see, he kept his expression carefully guarded, and the woman wandered away in disappointment.

The headman had waited politely to see if Haplo accepted any of these invitations. Noting that he did not, the headman graciously offered his own dwelling place for the evening. Haplo accepted gratefully and, seeing the surprise and somewhat suspicious glint in the headman's eyes, added, "I am in a purification cycle."

The headman nodded, understanding, all suspicion gone. Many Patryns believed, rightly or wrongly, that sexual encounters weakened their magic. A runner planning on entering unknown territory often entered a purification cycle, abstaining from the company of the opposite sex several days before venturing out. A squatter going out on a hunting expedition or facing a battle would do the same thing.

Haplo, personally, didn't happen to believe in such nonsense. His magic had never failed him, no matter what pleasures he had enjoyed the night before. But it made a good excuse.

The headman led Haplo to a hut that was snug and warm and dry. A fire burned brightly in the center, smoke trailing up from the hole in the top. The headman settled himself near it. "A concession to my old bones. I can run with the youngest of them and keep pace. I can wrestle a karkan to the ground with my bare hands. But I find I like a fire at night. Be seated, runner."

Haplo chose a place near the hut entryway. The night was warm, the hut was stifling.

"You come upon us at a good time, runner," said the headman. "We celebrate a binding this night."

Haplo made the polite remark without thinking much about it. His mind was on other matters. He could have asked the question at any time now; all the proper forms had been observed. But it stuck in his throat. The headman asked about the trails, and they fell into talk about Haplo's journeying, the runner providing what information he could about the land through which he'd traveled.

When darkness fell, an unusual stir outside the hut reminded Haplo of the ceremony about to take place. A bonfire turned night to day. The tribe must feel secure, Haplo thought, following the headman out of the hut. Otherwise they would never have dared. A blind dragon could see this blaze. He joined the throng around the fire.

The tribe was large, he saw. No wonder they felt secure. The scouts on the perimeters would warn them in case of attack. Their numbers were such that they could fend off most anything, perhaps even a dragon. Children ran about, getting in everyone's way, watched over by the group.

The Patryns of the Labyrinth share everything-food, lovers, children. Binding vows are vows of friendship, closer akin to a warrior's vows than marriage vows. A binding may take place between a man and a woman, between two men, or between two women. The ceremony was more common among squatters than runners, but occasionally runners bound themselves to a partner. Haplo's parents had been bound. He himself had considered binding. If he found her ...

The headman raised his arms in the air, the signal for silence. The crowd, including the youngest baby, hushed immediately. Seeing all was in readiness, the headman stretched his hands out and took hold of the hands of those standing on either side of him. The Patryns all did the same, forming a gigantic circle around the fire. Haplo joined them, clasping hands with a well-formed man about his age on his left and a young woman barely into her teens (who blushed deeply when Haplo took her hand) on his right.

"The circle is complete," said the headman, looking around at his people, an expression of pride on the lined and weathered face. "Tonight we come together to witness the vows between two who would form their own circle. Step forward."

A man and a woman left the circle, that instantly closed behind them, and came to stand in front of the headman. Leaving the circle himself, the old man extended his hands. The two clasped them, one on either side, then the man and the woman took hold of each other's hands.

"Again, the circle is complete," said the old man. His gaze on the two was fond, but stern and serious. The people gathered around, watching in solemn silence.

Haplo found that he was enjoying himself. Most of the time, particularly the last few weeks, he'd felt hollow, empty, alone. Now he was warm, with a sense of being filled. The cold wind didn't howl through him so dismally anymore. He found himself smiling, smiling at everything, everyone.

"I pledge to protect and defend you." The couple was repeating the vows, one immediately after the other in an echoing circle. "My life for your life. My death for your life. My life for your death. My death for your death."

The vows spoken, the couple fell silent. The headman nodded, satisfied with the sincerity of the commitment. Taking the hands he held in his, he placed the two hands together.

"The circle is complete," he said, and stepped back into the circle, leaving the couple to form their own circle inside the larger community. The two smiled at each other. The outer circle gave a cheer and broke apart, separating to prepare for the feast.

Haplo decided he could ask the question now. He sought out the headman, standing near the roaring blaze.

"I'm looking for someone, a woman," said Haplo, and described her. "Stands so tall, chestnut hair. She's a runner. Has she been here."

The headman thought back. "Yes, she was here. Not more than a week ago."

Haplo grinned. He had not meant to follow her, not intentionally. But it seemed that they were keeping to the same trail. "How is she? Did she look well?"

The headman gave Haplo a keen, searching gaze. "Yes, she looked well. But I didn't see that much of her. You might ask Antius, over there. He spent the night with her."

The warmth vanished. The air was chill, the wind cut through him. Haplo turned, saw the well-formed young man with whom he had held hands walking across the compound.

"She left in the morning. I can show you the direction she traveled."

"That won't be necessary. Thank you, though," Haplo added, to ease the coldness of his reply. He looked around, saw the young girl. She was staring at Haplo, and blushed up to the roots of her hair when her gaze was returned.

Haplo returned to the headman's hut, began gathering up his meager belongings; runners traveled light. The headman followed, stared at him in astonishment.

"Your hospitality has saved my life," the Patryn gave the ritual farewell. "Before I leave, I will tell you what I know. Reports say to take the west trail to the fifty-first Gate. Rumor has it that the powerful One, who first solved the secret of the Labyrinth, has returned with his magic to clear certain parts and make them safe ... at least temporarily. I can't say if this is true or not, since I have come from the south."

"You're leaving? But it is perilous to travel the Labyrinth after dark!"

"It doesn't matter," said Haplo. He put his hands together, pressed them against his forehead, made the ritual gesture of farewell. The headman returned it, and Haplo left the hut. He paused a moment in the

doorway. The bonfire's glow lit all around it, but it made the darkness beyond that much darker by contrast. Haplo took a step toward that darkness when he felt a hand upon his arm.

"The Labyrinth kills what it can-if not our bodies, then our spirit," said the headman. "Grieve for your loss, my son, and never forget who is responsible. The ones who imprisoned us, the ones who are undoubtedly watching our struggle with pleasure."

It's the Sartan. . . . They put us in this hell. They're the ones responsible for this evil.

The woman looked at him, her brown eyes flecked with gold. I wonder. Maybe it's the evil inside us.

Haplo walked away from the squatter's camp, continued his solitary run. No, he didn't miss the woman. Didn't miss her at all. . . .

In the Labyrinth, a certain type of tree, known as the waranth, bears a particularly luscious and nourishing fruit. Those who pick the fruit, however, run the risk of being stabbed by the poisoned thorns surrounding it. Attacking the flesh left necessarily unprotected by the runes, the thorns burrow deep, seeking blood. If allowed to get into the blood stream, the poison can kill. Therefore, although the thorns are barbed and rip flesh coming out, they must be extracted immediately-at the cost of considerable pain.

Haplo had thought he'd extracted the thorn. He was surprised to find it still hurt him, its poison was still in his system.

"I don't think you'd want my people's ceremony." His voice grated, the furrowed brows shadowed his eyes. "Would you like to hear our vows? 'My life for your life. My death for your life. My life for your death. My death for your death.' Do you really want to take those?"

Rega paled. "What-what does it mean? I don't understand."

"'My life for your life.' That means that while we live, we share the joy of living with each other. 'My death for your life.' I would be willing to lay down my life to save yours. 'My life for your death.' I will spend my life avenging your death, if I can't prevent it. 'My death for your death.' A part of me will die, when you do."

"It's not . . . very romantic," Paithan admitted.

"Neither's the place I come from."

"I guess I'd like to think about it," said Rega, not looking at the elf.

"Yes, I suppose we better," Paithan added, more soberly.

The two left the bridge, this time they weren't holding hands. Zifnab, looking after them fondly, dabbed at his eyes with the end of his beard.

"Love makes the world go round!" he said happily.

"Not this world," replied Haplo with a quiet smile. "Does it, old man?"

## CHAPTER 33

### DRAGON STAR

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT," SNORTED ZIFNAB AND STARTED to walk off the bridge.

"Yes, you do." Haplo's hand closed over the wizard's thin, brittle arm. "You see, I know where we're going and I've got a pretty clear idea of what we're going to find when we get there. And you, old man, are in for a hell of a lot of trouble."

A fiery eye peered suddenly in the window, glaring ominously. "What have you done now?" demanded the dragon.

"Nothing. Everything's under control!" Zifnab protested.

"Under appears to be the operative word! I just want you to know, I'm getting extremely hungry." The dragon's eye closed and vanished. Haplo felt the ship shudder, the dragon's coils dosing around it ominously.

Zifnab crumpled, the thin frame caved in on itself. He gave the dragon a nervous glance. "Did you notice-he didn't say, 'sir.' A bad sign. A very bad sign."

Haplo grunted. All he needed was an enraged dragon. Furious shouting had erupted from down below, followed by a crash, a thud, and a scream. "My guess is that they've announced the wedding plans."

"Oh, dear." Removing his hat, Zifnab began to twist it between trembling fingers and shot Haplo a pleading glance. "What am I going to do?"

"Maybe I can help you. Tell me who you are, what you are. Tell me about the 'stars.' Tell me about the Sartan."

Zifnab mulled it over, then his eyes narrowed. He lifted a bony finger, jabbed it in Haplo's chest.

"Mine to know. Yours to find out. So there!" Chin jutting, he smiled benignly at the Patryn and gave a brief, sharp chuckle. Jamming his maltreated hat back on his head, the old man patted Haplo solicitously on the arm and tottered off the bridge.

Haplo stood staring, wondering why he hadn't ripped off the old man's head-hat and all. Scowling, the Patryn rubbed the place on his chest where the wizard's finger had rested, trying to rid himself of the touch.

"Just wait, old man, until we reach the star."

"Our wedding was supposed to bring everyone together!" said Rega, wiping away tears of frustration and anger. "I can't think what's gotten into Roland!"

"Do you want to go through with it?" Paithan asked, massaging a bump on the brow.

Both stared dismally around the crew's quarters. Blood spattered the floor. Haplo had not appeared to break this one up, and numerous humans and elves had been carried feet first from the cabin. In a corner, Lenthon Quindiniar stood staring out a porthole at the brightly shining star that seemed to grow larger every cycle. The elf had never appeared to notice the altercation raging around him.

Rega thought a moment, then sighed. "If we could just get our people to join together again! Like they were after the tytans attacked!"

"I'm not sure that's possible. Hatred and mistrust has been building for thousands of years. The two of us aren't likely to have any effect on that."

"You mean you don't want to get married?" Rega's dusky skin flushed, the dark eyes glinted through her tears.

"Yes, of course, I do! But I was thinking about those vows. Maybe now's not the time-"

"And maybe what Roland said about you was right! You're a spoiled brat who's never done an honest cycle's work in your life! And on top of that you're a coward and- Oh, Paithan! I'm sorry!" Rega threw her arms around him, nestled her head on his chest.

"I know." Paithan ran his hand through the long, shimmering hair. "I said a few things to your brother I'm not exactly proud of."

"The words just came out, from some ugly part inside me! It's like you said, the hate's been there for so long!"

"We'll have to be patient with each other. And with them." Paithan glanced out the porthole. The star shone serenely, with a pure, cold light. "Maybe in this new world we'll find everyone living together in peace. Maybe then the others will see and understand. But I'm still not certain getting married's the right thing to do now. What do you think, Father?"

Paithan turned to Lenthian Quindiniar, staring raptly out the porthole at the star.

"Father?"

Eyes vacant, shining with the star's light, Lenthian glanced around vaguely at his son. "What, my boy?"

"Do you think we should be married?"

"I think ... I think we should wait and ask your mother." Lenthian sighed happily, and gazed back out the porthole. "We'll see her, when we reach the star."

Drugar had not been involved in the fight. He was not involved in anything on board the ship. The others, immersed in their own troubles, ignored the dwarf. Huddled in his corner, terrified by the idea that they were higher than the clouds above his beloved ground, the dwarf tried to use his lust for vengeance to burn away the fear. But the fire of his hate had dwindled to coals.

They saved your life. The enemy you swore to kill saved your life at the risk of their own.

"I swore an oath, on the bodies of my people, to kill those who were responsible for their deaths." Feeling the flames die, feeling himself cold without their comforting blaze, the dwarf stoked the furnace of his rage. "These three knew the tytans were coming to destroy us! They knew! And they conspired together, took our money, and then deliberately kept their weapons from reaching my people! They wanted us to be destroyed! I should have killed them when I had the chance."

It had been a mistake, not murdering them in the tunnels. The fire had burned bright within him. But they would have died without the knowledge of their own terrible losses, they would have died peacefully. No, he shouldn't second-guess himself. It was better this way. They would arrive on this star of theirs, they would think that all was going to end happily.

Instead, it would end.

"They saved my life. So what? It only proves what fools they are! I saved their lives first. We're even now. I owe them nothing, nothing! Drakar is wise, the god watches over me. He has held back my hand, prevented me from striking until the time is right." The dwarf's fingers clenched over the bone handle of his knife. "When we reach the star."

"So, are you going to go through with this farce? Are you going to marry the elf?"

"No," said Rega.

Roland smiled grimly. "Good. You thought over what I said. I knew you'd come to your senses!"

"We're only postponing the wedding! Until we reach the star. Maybe by then you'll have come to your senses!"

"We'll see," muttered Roland, trying clumsily to wrap a bandage around his split and bleeding knuckles. "We'll see."

"Here, let me do that." His sister took over. "What do you mean? I don't like the way you look."

"No, you'd prefer it if I had slanted eyes and soft little hands and skin the color of milk!" Roland snatched his hand away. "Get out of here. You stink of them! Elves! They trick you into loving them, wanting them! And all the time they're laughing at you!"

"What are you talking about?" Rega stared at her brother, amazed. "Tricking us? If anything I tricked Paithan into loving me, not the other way around! And, Thillia knows, no one's laughing on this ship-"

"Oh, yeah?" Roland kept his eyes averted from his sister. He spoke the next words below his breath, to her back. "We'll deal with the elves. Just wait until we reach the star."

Aleatha wiped her hand across her mouth, for the twentieth time. The kiss was like the stench of the bilge that seemed to cling to everything-her clothes, her hair, her skin. She couldn't get the taste and the touch of the human off her lips.

"Let me see your hands," said Paithan.

"Why should you care?" Aleatha demanded, but allowing her brother to examine her cracked, bleeding and blistered palms. "You didn't defend me. You took their part, all because of that little whore! You let that man drag me off to that hellhole!"

"I don't think I could have stopped Haplo from taking you," said Paithan quietly. "From the look on his face, I think you were lucky he didn't throw you off the ship."

"I wish he had. It would be better to be dead! Like My Lord and . . . and Callie ..." Aleatha hung her head, tears choked her. "What kind of life is this!" She clutched at the skirt of her tattered and torn, dirty and stained dress, shook it, sobbing. "We're living in filth like humans! No wonder we're sinking to their level! Animals!"

"Thea, don't say that. You don't understand them." Paithan sought to comfort her. Aleatha shoved him away.

"What do you know? You're blinded by lust!" Aleatha wiped her hand across her lips. "Ugh! Savages! I hate them! I hate all of them! No, don't come near me. You're no better than they are now, Paithan."

"You better get used to it, Thea," said her brother, irritated. "One of them's going to be your sister."

"Hah!" Raising her head, Aleatha fixed him with a cold stare, her mouth pursed-prim and tight. Her resemblance to her older sister was suddenly frightening. "Not me! If you marry that whore, I have no brother. I will never see you or speak to you again!"

"You can't mean that, Thea. We're all each of us has left. Father. You've seen Father. He's . . . he's not well."

"He's insane. And it's going to get worse when we reach this 'star' you've dragged us off to and Mother's not there to greet him! It will kill him, most likely. And whatever happens to him will be all your fault!"

"I did what I thought was best." The elf's face was pale, his voice, in spite of himself, trembled and broke.

Aleatha gave him a remorseful look, reached up and smoothed back his hair with gentle fingers. She drew near him. "You're right. All we have now is each other, Pait. Let's keep it that way. Stay with me. Don't go back to that human. She's just toying with you. You know how human men are. I mean"-she flushed-"I mean, you know how their women are. When we reach the star, we'll start our lives all over again.

"We'll take care of Papa and we'll live happily. Maybe there'll be other elves there. Rich elves, richer than any in Equilan. And they'll have magnificent houses and they'll welcome us to their homes. And the nasty, savage humans can crawl back into their jungle." She rested her head on her brother's chest. Drying her tears, she drew her hand, once again, across her mouth.

Paithan said nothing, but let his sister dream. When we reach the star, he thought. What will happen to us when we reach the star?

The mensch took Haplo's threat about the ship falling out of the skies seriously. An uneasy peace descended on the ship—a peace differing from war only in that it was less noisy and no blood was shed. If looks and wishes had been weapons, however, hardly anyone aboard would have been left alive.

Humans and elves pointedly ignored each other's existence. Rega and Paithan kept apart, either acting wisely, out of mutual consent, or because the barriers being erected by their people were becoming too thick and too high for them to surmount. The occasional fight broke out among the more hotheaded of the youth and was halted quickly by their elders. But the promise was in the eyes, if not on the lips, that it would be only a matter of time.

"When we reach the star . . ."

There was no more talk of a wedding.

## CHAPTER 34

### THE STAR

A SHARP BARK, WARNING OF AN INTRUDER, BROUGHT HAPLO TO HIS FEET, waking him out of a deep sleep. His body and instincts were fully awake, if his mind wasn't. Haplo slammed the visitor against the hull, pinned him across the chest with one arm, damped his fingers on the man's jaw.

"One twist of my wrist and I break your neck!"

A gasp of breath, the body beneath Haplo's went rigid as a corpse.

Haplo blinked the sleep from his eyes, saw who his captive was. Slowly, he released his grip. "Don't try slipping up on me again, elf. It's not conducive to a long and healthy life."

"I ... I didn't mean to!" Paithan massaged his bruised jaw, darting wary glances at Haplo and the growling, bristling dog.

"Hush." Haplo stroked the animal. "It's all right."

The dog's growls lessened, but it continued to keep an eye on the elf. Haplo stretched to ease the kinks in his muscles and walked over to look out the window. He paused, staring, and whistled softly.

"That's . . . that's what I came up here to ask you about." The shaken elf left the hull, detoured warily around the watchful dog, and cautiously approached the window.

Outside, everything had disappeared, swallowed up in what appeared to be a blanket of thick, moist wool pressed against the glass. Beads of water rolled down the panes and glistened on the scales of the dragon, whose body hugged the ship.

"What is it?" Paithan tried hard to keep his voice calm. "What's happened to the star?"

"It's still there. In fact, we're close. Very close. This is a rain cloud, that's all."

The elf exhaled in relief. "Rain clouds! Just like our old world!"

"Yeah," said Haplo. "Just like your old world."

The ship descended, the clouds flew past in wispy shreds, the rain streaked across the window in long rivulets. Then the cloud cover drifted past. Dragon Star plunged into sunlight once again. Land could be seen clearly below.

The runes on the hull that had been glowing, monitoring air and pressure and gravity, slowly faded out. The mensch pressed close to the portholes, their gazes fixed eagerly on the ground rolling beneath them.

The old man was nowhere to be found.

Haplo listened to the conversations being carried around him; he watched the expression on the faces of the mensch.

First-joy. The voyage was over, they had reached the star safely. Second-relief. Lush green forests, lakes, seas, similar to home.

The ship sailed nearer. A tremor of confusion passed among the mensch-brows contracted, lips parted. They leaned closer, pressing their faces flat against the panes. Eyes widened.

At last-realization, understanding.

Paithan returned to the bridge. Delicate crimson stained the elf's pale cheeks. He pointed out the window.

"What's going on? This is our world!"

"And there," said Haplo, "is your star."

Light welled up from out the variegated greens of moss and jungle. Brilliant, bright, white, pulsating, the light hurt the eyes-it was truly like staring into a sun. But it wasn't a sun, it wasn't a star. The light slowly began to dim and fade, even as they watched. A shadow moved across its surface and they could see, at last, when the shadow had nearly covered it, the light's source.

"A city!" Haplo murmured in astonishment, in his own language. Not only that, but there was something familiar about it!

The light winked out, the city disappeared into darkness.

"What is it?" Paithan demanded, hoarsely.

Haplo shrugged, irritated at the interruption. He needed to think, he needed to get a closer look at that city. "I'm just the pilot. Why don't you go ask the old man."

The elf shot the Patryn a suspicious glance. Haplo ignored him, concentrated on his flying. "I'll look for a clear place to land."

"Maybe we shouldn't land. Maybe there's tytans-"

A possibility. Haplo would have to deal with that when the time came. "We're landing," he stated.

Paithan sighed, stared back out the window. "Our own world!" he said bitterly. Putting his hands against the glass, he leaned against the panes and gazed out at the trees and mossy landscape that seemed to be leaping up to grab him and pull him down. "How could this have happened? We've traveled all this time! Maybe we veered off course? Flew in a circle?"

"You saw the star shining in the sky. We flew straight as an arrow, right to it. Go ask Zifnab what happened."

"Yes." The elf's face was strained, grim, resolute. "You're right. I'll go ask the old man."

Haplo saw the dragon's body, visible outside the window, contract. A shudder passed through the ship. A fiery red eye peered for a brief instant in the window, then suddenly the body uncoiled.

The frame shook, the ship listed precariously. Haplo clung to the steering stone for support. The ship righted itself, sailed gracefully downward, a heavy weight lifted. The dragon was gone.

Staring down, watching for a landing site, Haplo thought He caught a glimpse of a massive green body plunging into the jungle, he was too preoccupied with his own problems at the moment to notice where. The trees were thick and tangled; the patches of moss were few. Haplo scanned the area below, trying to see through the strange darkness that appeared to emanate from the city, as if it had cast a gigantic shadow over the land.

That was impossible, however. To create night, the suns would have had to have disappeared. And the suns were right above them, their position fixed, unchanging. Light shone on Dragon Star, glistened off the wings, beamed in the window. Directly below the ship, all was dark.

Angry accusations, a shrill protest, and a cry of pain-the old man. Haplo smiled, shrugged again. He'd found a clear spot, large enough for the ship, close to the city, but not too close.

Haplo brought Dragon Star down. Tree branches reached out for them, snapped off. Leaves whipped past the window. The ship landed belly first on the moss. The impact, from the sounds of it, knocked everyone below off their feet.

The Patryn looked out into pitch darkness.

They had reached the star.

Haplo had marked the location of the city in his mind before the ship set down, determining the direction he would need to travel to reach it. Working as swiftly as possible in the darkness, not daring to risk a light, he wrapped up a bite of food and filled a skin with water. Scrip packed, Haplo gave a low whistle. The dog leapt to its feet, padded over to stand near its master.

The Patryn moved stealthily to the hatchway leading off the bridge and listened. The only sounds he heard were panicked voices coming from the mensch's quarters. No one breathing softly in the passageway, no one spying. Not that he expected it. Darkness had swallowed the ship whole, sending most of the passengers-who had never viewed such a phenomenon-from rage into terror. Right now they were venting their fear and fury by yelling at the old man. But it wouldn't be long before the mensch came traipsing up to Haplo, demanding explanations, answers, solutions.

Salvation.

Moving silently, Haplo crossed over to the ship's hull. Resting the scrip on the floor, he laid his hands upon the wooden planks. The runes on his skin began to glow red and blue, the flame running along his fingers,

extending to the wood. The planks shimmered and slowly began to dissolve. A large hole, wide enough for a man, opened up.

Haplo shouldered the supplies, stepped onto the moss embankment on which he landed. The dog jumped out after him, tagging along at its master's heels. Behind them, the red-blue glow enveloping the hull faded, the wood returned to its original form.

The Patryn crossed the open mossy area swiftly, losing himself in the darkness. He heard enraged shouts in two languages, human and elven. The words were different, but their meaning was the same-death for the wizard.

Haplo grinned. The mensch seemed to have found something to unite them at last.

"Haplo, we- Haplo?" Paithan groped his way onto the bridge into the darkness, came to a dead stop. The runes' glow faded slowly; by its light, he could see the bridge was vacant.

Roland burst through the hatch, shoving the elf aside. "Haplo, we've decided to dump the old man, then leave this- Haplo? Where is he?" he demanded, glaring at Paithan accusingly.

"I haven't made off with him, if that's what you're thinking. He's gone . . . and the dog, too."

"I knew it! Haplo and Zifnab are in on this together! They tricked us into coming to this awful place! And you fell for it!"

"You were welcome to stay back in Equilan. I'm sure the tytans would have been pleased to entertain you."

Frustrated, angry, feeling an unaccountable guilt that somehow this was his fault, Paithan stared gloomily at the runes glimmering on the wooden planks. "That's how he did it, obviously. More of his magic. I wish I knew who or what he was."

"We'll get answers out of him."

Blue light flickered on Roland's clenched fists and scowling features. Paithan looked at the human, and laughed. "If we ever see him again. If we ever see anything again! This is worse than being down in the dwarven tunnels."

"Paithan?" Rega's voice called. "Roland?"

"Here, Sis."

Rega crept onto the bridge, clutched at her brother's outstretched hand. "Did you tell him? Are we going to leave?"

"He's not here. He's gone."

"And left us here ... in the dark!"

"Shhh, calm down."

The light of the sigla was fading. The three could see each other only by a faint blue glow that grew dim, flickered briefly to fife, dimmed again. The magical light glittered in sunken, fearful eyes and emphasized drawn, fear-strained mouths.

Paithan and Roland each avoided the other's direct gaze, darted suspicious glances when the other wasn't looking.

"The old man says this darkness will pass in half a cycle," Paithan muttered at last, defiant, defensive.

"He also said we were going to a new world!" Roland retorted. "C'mon, Rega, let me take you back-"

"Paithan!" Aleatha's frantic voice tore through the darkness. Lunging onto the bridge, she grasped at her brother just as the sigla's light failed, leaving them blind.

"Paithan! Father's gone! And the old man!"

The four stood outside the ship, staring into the jungle. It was light again, the strange darkness had lifted, and it was easy to see the path someone-Lenthon, Zifnab, Haplo, or maybe all three-had taken. Vines had been severed by the sharp blade of a bladewood sword, huge dumau leaves, cut from their stalks, lay limply on the mossy ground.

Aleatha wrung her hands. "It's all my fault! We landed in this horrible place and Papa began babbling about Mother being here and where was she and what was taking so long and on and on. I ... I shouted at him, Paithan. I couldn't stand it anymore! I left him alone!"

"Don't cry, Thea. It's not your fault. I should have been with him. I should have known. I'll go after him."

"I'm going with you."

Paithan started to refuse, looked into his sister's tear-streaked, pale face and changed his mind. He nodded wearily. "All right. Don't worry, Thea. He can't have gone very far. You better fetch some water." Aleatha hastened back onto the ship. Paithan walked over to Roland, who was carefully scrutinizing the ground near the fringes of the jungle, searching for tracks. Rega, tense and sorrowful, stood near her brother. Her eyes sought Paithan's, but the elf refused to meet her gaze.

"You find anything?"

"Not a trace."

"Haplo and Zifnab must have left together. But why take my father?"

Roland straightened, glanced around. "I don't know. But I don't like it. Something's wrong with this place. I thought the land near Thurn was wild! It was a king's garden compared to this!"

Tangled vines and tree limbs were so thickly massed and intertwined that they might have formed the thatched roof of a gigantic hut. A gray, sullen light struggled through the vegetation. The air was oppressive and humid, tainted with the smell of rot and decay. The heat was intense. And though the jungle must be teeming with life, Roland, listening closely, couldn't hear a sound. The silence might be amazement at the sight of the ship, it might be something far more ominous.

"I don't know about you, elf, but I don't want to stay around here any longer than necessary."

"I think we can all agree on that," said Paithan quietly.

Roland cast him a narrow-eyed glance. "What about the dragon?"

"It's gone.

"You hope!"

Paithan shook his head. "I don't know what we can do about it if it isn't." He was bitter, tired.

"We're coming with you." Rega's face was wet with sweat, her damp hair clung to her skin. She was shivering.

"That's not necessary."

"Yes, it is!" Roland said coldly. "For all I know you and the old man and the tattooed wonder are in this together. I don't want you flying off, leaving us stranded."

Paithan's face paled with anger, his eyes flashed. He opened his mouth, caught Rega's pleading gaze, and snapped his lips shut on the words. Shrugging, he muttered, "Suit yourself," and walked over to the ship to wait for his sister.

Aleatha emerged from the ship, lugging a waterskin. Her once gaily billowing skirts hung tattered and limp around her lithe figure. She had tied the cook's shawl around her shoulders, her arms were bare. Roland looked down at the white feet covered by thin, worn slippers.

"You can't go into the jungle dressed like that!"

He saw the woman's eyes go to the shadows thickening around the trees, to the vines that twisted like snakes over the ground. Her hands twisted over the leather handle of the waterskin. She clutched it tightly, her chin lifted.

"I don't recall asking your opinion, human."

"Fool bitch!" Roland snarled.

She had guts, he had to give her that. Drawing his blade, he charged into the undergrowth, hacking furiously at the vines and heart-shaped leaves that seemed the very embodiment of his admiration and desire for this maddening female.

"Rega, are you coming?"

Rega hesitated, looked behind her at Paithan. The elf shook his head. Can't you understand? Our love has been a mistake. All, a terrible mistake.

Shoulders slumping, Rega followed her brother.

Paithan sighed, turned to his sister.

"The human's right, you know. It could be dangerous and-"

"I'm going after Father," said Aleatha, and by the tilt of her head and the glint in her eye, her brother knew it was useless to argue. He took the waterskin from her, slung it over his shoulder. The two hurried into the jungle, moving swiftly, as if to outwalk their fear.

Drugar stood in the hatchway, whetting his knife against the wood. The heavy-footed dwarves are clumsy when it comes to stalking prey. Drugar knew it was impossible for him to sneak up on anything. He would let his victims get a long head start before he went in after them.

## CHAPTER 35

### SOMEWHERE ON PRYAN

"I WAS RIGHT. IT'S THE SAME! WHAT DOES IT MEAN? WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?"

Before him stood a city crafted of starlight. At least, that's how it appeared until Haplo drew closer. Its radiant beauty was incredible. He might not have believed in it, might have feared it was a trick of a mind gone stir-crazy from being cooped up with the mensch for lord knew how long. Except that he had seen it all before.

Only not here. In the Nexus.

But there was a difference, a difference that Haplo found grimly ironic. The city in the Nexus was dark-a star, perhaps, whose light had died. Or had never been born.

"What do you think, dog?" he said, patting the animal's head. "It's the same, isn't it? Same exactly."

The city was built up off the jungle floor, rising from behind an enormous wall, rising taller than the tallest trees. A towering, pillared, crystal spire balanced on a dome formed of marble arches stood in the city's center. The top of the spire must be one of the highest points in this world, thought Haplo, gazing up. It was from this center spire that the light beamed most brightly. The Patryn could barely look at it for the dazzling gleam. Here, in the spire, the light had been deliberately concentrated, sent beaming out into the sky.

"Like the light of a guide fire," he said to the dog. "Only who or what is it supposed to be guiding?"

The animal glanced about uneasily, not interested. The skin of its neck twitched, causing the dog to lift its hind leg and start to scratch, only to decide that maybe the itch wasn't the problem. The dog didn't know what the problem was. It knew only that there was one. It whined, and Haplo petted it to keep it still. The center spire was framed by four other spires, duplicates of the first, and stood on the platform holding the dome. On a level beneath that, stood eight more identical spires. Gigantic marble steppes lifted up from behind these spires. Similar to land steppes that had undoubtedly been their models, they supported buildings and dwelling places. And finally, at each end of the guard wall stood another pillar. If this city was built on the same plan as the city in the Nexus-and Haplo had no reason to think otherwise-there would be four such pillars, located at the cardinal direction points.

Haplo continued on through the jungle, the dog trotting along at his heels. Both moved easily and silently amid the tangled undergrowth, leaving no trace of their passage except the faint, swiftly fading glow of runes on the leaves.

And then the jungle ended, abruptly, as if someone had plowed it under. Ahead, drenched in bright sunlight, a path cut into jagged rock. Keeping to the shadows of the trees, Haplo leaned out, put his hand on the stone. It was real, hard, gritty, warm from the sun, not an illusion as he had first suspected.

"A mountain. They built the city on the top of a mountain." He gazed upward, saw the path snake across the rock.

The trail was smooth, clearly marked, and anyone walking it would be highly visible to eyes watching from the city walls.

Haplo took a swig of water from the skin, shared it with the dog, and gazed thoughtfully, intently, at the city. The Patryn thought back to the crude homes of the mensch, made of wood, perched in trees.

"There's no question. The Sartan built this. And they may be up there now. We may be walking into a couple of thousand of them."

He bent down, examined the path, though he knew it was a futile gesture. Wind whistling mournfully through the boulders would blow away any trace he might have found of people passing.

Haplo took out the bandages he had stuffed into a pocket and began to wind them slowly and deliberately around his hands. "Not that this disguise will do us much good," he advised the dog, who appeared disturbed at the thought. "Back on Arianus, that Sartan who called himself Alfred caught onto us quickly enough. But we were careless, weren't we, boy?"

The dog didn't seem to think so, but decided not to argue.

"Here, we'll be more alert."

Haplo hefted the waterskin, stepped out of the jungle and onto the rock-strewn path that wound among boulders and a few scrubby pine trees clinging tenaciously to the sides. He blinked in the brilliant sunlight, then started forward.

"Just a couple of travelers, aren't we, boy? A couple of travelers . . . who saw their light."

"It's quite kind of you to come with me," said Lenthian Quindinair.

"Tut, tut. Think nothing of it," answered Zifnab.

"I don't believe I could have made it alone. You have a really remarkable way of moving through the jungle. It's almost as if the trees step aside when they see you coming."

"More like they run when they see him coming," boomed a voice from far below the moss.

"That'll be enough from you!" growled Zifnab, glaring down, stomping at the ground with his foot.

"I'm getting extremely hungry."

"Not now. Come back in an hour."

"Humpf." Something large slithered through the undergrowth.

"Was that the dragon?" Lenthian asked, looking slightly worried. "He won't harm her, will he? If they should happen to meet?"

"No, no," said Zifnab, peering about. "He's under my control. Nothing to fear. Absolutely nothing. You didn't happen to notice which way he went? Not that it matters." The old man nodded, beard wagging. "Under my control. Yes. Absolutely." He glanced nervously over his shoulder.

The two men sat, resting, on the branches of an ancient tree, overgrown with moss, that stood in a cool, shady clearing, sheltered from the sweltering sun.

"And thank you for bringing me to this star. I truly appreciate it," continued Lenthian. He looked about him in quiet satisfaction, hands resting on his knees, gazing at the twisted trees and clinging vines and flitting shadows. "Do you think she's far from here? I'm feeling rather tired."

Zifnab observed Lenthian, smiled gently. His voice softened. "No, not far, my friend." The old man patted Lenthian's pale, wasted hand. "Not far. In fact, I don't think we need travel any farther. I think she will come to us."

"How wonderful!" A flush of color crept into the elf's pallid cheeks. He stood up, searching eagerly, but almost immediately sank back down. The color in the cheeks faded, leaving them gray and waxy. He gasped for air. Zifnab put his arm around the elf's shoulders, held him comfortingly.

Lenthian drew a shivering breath, attempted a smile. "I shouldn't have stood up so fast. Made me extremely dizzy." He paused, then added, "I do believe I'm dying."

Zifnab patted Lenthian's hand. "There, there, old chap. No need to jump to conclusions. Just one of your bad spells, that's all. It will pass . . ."

"No, please. Don't lie to me." Lenthana smiled wanly. "I'm ready. I've been lonely, you see. Very lonely."

The old man dabbed at his eyes with the tip of his beard. "You won't be lonely again, my friend. Not ever again."

Lenthana nodded, then sighed.

"It's just that I'm so weak. I'll need my strength to travel with her when she comes. Would . . . would you mind terribly if I leaned up against your shoulder? Just for a little while? Until everything stops spinning around?"

"I know just how you feel," said Zifnab. "Confounded ground won't stay put like it did when we were young. I blame a lot of it on modern technology. Nuclear reactors."

The old man settled back against the tree's broad trunk, the elf leaned his head on the wizard's shoulder. Zifnab prattled on, something about quarks. Lenthana liked the sound of the old man's voice, though he wasn't listening to the words. A smile on his lips, he watched the shadows patiently and waited for his wife.

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"Now what do we do?" Roland demanded, glaring at Aleatha in anger. He gestured ahead of them, at the murky water that blocked that path. "I told you she shouldn't have come, elf. We'll have to leave her behind."

"No one's leaving me behind!" returned Aleatha, but she hung back behind the others, taking care not to get too near the dark, stagnant pool. She spoke her own tongue, but she understood the humans. The elves and humans might have spent their time on board ship fighting, but at least they'd learned to insult each other in each other's language.

"Maybe there's a way around it," said Paithan.

"If there is"-Rega wiped sweat from her face-"it'll take us days to cut through the jungle to find it! I don't know how those old men are making it through this tangle so swiftly."

"Magic," muttered Roland. "And it was probably magic got them over this filthy water. It's not going to help us, though. We'll have to wade it or swim it."

"Swim!" Aleatha recoiled, shuddering.

Roland said nothing, but he flashed her a glance-and that glance said it all. Pampered, spoiled brat . . .

Tossing her hair, Aleatha ran forward and, before Paithan could stop her, waded into the pond.

She sank to her shins. The water spread out in sullen, oily ripples-ripples suddenly parted by a sinuous shape sliding rapidly on top of the water toward the elf woman.

"Snake!" Roland cried, plunging into the water in front of Aleatha, slashing wildly with his raztar.

Paithan dragged Aleatha back onto the bank. Roland fought furiously, churning up the water. Losing sight of his prey, he stopped, staring around.

"Where did it go? Do you see it?"

"I think it went over there, into the reeds." Rega pointed.

Roland clamored out, keeping a sharp watch, his raztar ready. "You idiot!" He could barely speak for rage. "It could have been poisonous! You nearly got yourself killed!"

Aleatha stood shivering in her wet clothes, her face deathly pale, gaze defiant. "You're not . . . leaving me behind," she said, barely able to talk for her chattering teeth. "If you can cross ... so can I!"

"We're wearing leather boots, leather clothes! We have a chance- Oh, what's the use!" Grabbing hold of Aleatha, Roland lifted her-gasping and spluttering-in his arms.

"Put me down!" Aleatha squirmed, kicked. She spoke human inadvertently, without thinking.

"Not yet. I'll wait until I reach the middle," muttered Roland, wading into the water.

Aleatha stared into the water, remembering, and shuddered. Her hands stole around his neck, clasping him closely. "You won't, will you?" she said, clinging to him.

Roland glanced at the face so near his. The purple eyes, wide with terror, were dark as wine and far more intoxicating. Her hair floated around him, tickling his skin. Her body was light in his arms, warm and trembling. Love flashed through him, surging in his blood, more painful than any poison the snake might have inflicted.

"No," he said, his voice harsh from being forced past the ache of desire constricting his throat. His grip on her tightened.

Paithan and Rega waded in after them.

"What was that?" Rega gasped and whirled around.

"Fish, I think," said Paithan, moving swiftly to her. He took her arm and Rega smiled up at him, hopeful.

The elf's face was grave, solemn, offering her protection, nothing more. Rega's smile waned. They continued the crossing in silence, both keeping their gaze fixed on the water. The pond, fortunately, wasn't deep, coming no higher than their knees at the middle point. Reaching the opposite bank, Roland climbed out, deposited Aleatha on the ground.

He had started to continue down the path, when he felt a timid touch on his arm.

"Thank you," said Aleatha.

The words were difficult for her to say. Not because they were in human, but because she found it hard to talk around this man, who roused such pleasing and such confusing emotions in her. Her gaze went to his sweetly curved lips, she recalled his kiss and the fire that swept through her body. She wondered if it would happen a second time. He was standing quite near her now. She had only to move closer, not even half a step. . . .

Then she remembered. He hated her, despised her. She heard his words: I hope you rot here . . . fool bitch . . . little idiot. His kiss had been an insult, mockery.

Roland looked into the pale face turned up to his, saw it freeze in disdain. His own desire changed to ice in his bowels. "Don't mention it, elf. After all, what are we humans but your slaves?"

He strode off, plunging into the jungle. Aleatha came after. Her brother and Rega walked apart, separate and alone, behind. Each one of the four was unhappy. Each was disappointed. Each had the resentful, angry idea that if only the other would say something- anything-then everything would be put right. Each had determined, however, that it was not his or her place to speak first.

The silence between them grew until it seemed to become a living entity, keeping company at their side. Its presence was so powerful that, when Paithan thought he heard a sound behind them-a sound as of heavy boots wading through water-he kept quiet, refusing to mention it to the others.

## CHAPTER 36

### SOMEWHERE, PRYAN

HAPLO AND THE DOG WALKED UP THE PATH. THE PATRYN KEPT CLOSE WATCH on the city walls, but saw no one. He listened carefully, and heard nothing except the sighing of the wind through the rocks, like a whispering breath. He was alone upon the sun-baked mountainside.

The path led him straight to a large metal door formed in the shape of a hexagon and inscribed with runes—the city's gate. Smooth white marble walls towered high above him. Ten of his people could have stood on each other's shoulders and the topmost person would not have been able to see over the wall's edge. He put his hand on it. The marble was slick, polished to a high finish. A spider would have difficulty climbing up the side. The city's gate was sealed shut. The magic guarding it and the walls made the sigla on Haplo's body crawl and itch. The Sartan were in absolute control. No one could enter their city without their permission and knowledge.

"Hail the guard!" shouted Haplo, craning his neck, peering up to the top of the walls.

His own words came back to him.

The dog, disturbed by the eerie sound of its master's echo, threw back its head and howled. The mournful wail reverberated from the walls, disconcerting even Haplo, who laid a quieting hand on the dog's head. He listened when the echoes died, but heard nothing.

He had little doubt now. The city was empty, abandoned.

Haplo thought about a world where the sun shone constantly ~ and the impact of this new world on those accustomed to regular periods of day and night. He thought about the elves and humans, perched in trees like birds, and the dwarves, burrowing into the moss, desperate for a reminder of their subterranean homes. He thought about the tytans and their horrible, pathetic search.

He looked back at the slick and gleaming walls, resting his hand against the marble wall. It was oddly cool, beneath the glaring sun. Cool and hard and impenetrable, like the past to those who had been shut out of paradise. He didn't understand completely. The light, for example. It was much like the Kicksey-Winsey on Arianus. What was its purpose? Why was it there? He had solved that mystery—or rather, it had been solved for him. He felt certain he would solve the mystery of the stars of Pryan. He was, after all, about to enter one.

Haplo glanced back at the hexagonal gate. He recognized the rune structure embossed on its shining silver frontage. One rune was missing. Supply that sigil, and the gate would swing open. It was a simple construct, elementary Sartan magic. They had not gone to a lot of trouble. Why should they? No one but the Sartan knew the rune-magic.

Well, almost no one.

Haplo ran his hand up and down the smooth-sided wall. He knew Sartan magic, he could open the gate. He preferred not to, however. Using their rune structures made him feel clumsy and inept, like a child tracing sigla in the dust. Besides, it would give him great satisfaction to break through these supposedly impenetrable walls using his own magic. Patryn magic. The magic of the Sartan's bitter enemies.

Lifting his hands, placing his fingers on the marble, Haplo began to draw the runes.

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"Hush."

"I wasn't saying anything."

"No, I mean hold still. I think I hear something."

The four ceased all movement, freezing in place, ceasing to breathe. The jungle, too, held still. No breeze stirred the leaves, no animal slithered past, no bird called. At first they heard nothing. The silence was heavy, oppressive as the heat. The shadows of the thick trees gathered around them, more than one shivered, wiped cold sweat from their foreheads.

And then they heard a voice.

"And so I said to George, 'George!' I said, 'the third movie was a bummer. Cute little furry things. Those of us with any sense had a wild desire to have them all stuffed-' "

"Wait," came another voice, rather timid and weak. "Did you hear something?" The voice grew more excited. "Yes, I think I did. I think she's coming!"

"Father!" cried Aleatha, and dashed headlong down the path.

The others followed and burst into the clearing; the elf and the two humans with weapons drawn and ready. They came to a halt, looking and feeling rather foolish at finding nothing more dangerous than the old human and the middle-aged elf.

"Father!" Aleatha made a dart toward Lenthon, only to find her way blocked by the old man.

Zifnab had risen from his seat against the tree and stood before them, his face grave and solemn. Behind him, Lenthon Quindiniar stood with arms outstretched, his face illuminated by a radiance that was not of the flesh, but of the soul.

"My dear Elithenia!" he breathed, taking a step forward. "How lovely you look. Just as I remember!"

The four followed the line of his gaze and saw nothing but dark and shifting shadows.

"Who's he talking to?" asked Roland, in an awed undertone.

Paithan's eyes filled with tears, he bowed his head. Rega, stealing near, took the elf's hand in hers and held on fast.

"Let me past!" cried Aleatha angrily. "He needs me!"

Zifnab put out his arm, grasped her in a firm grip, startling in the seemingly frail old arms.

"No, child. Not anymore."

Aleatha stared at him, wordless, then at her father. Lenthon's arms were open wide, he reached out, as if to grasp the hands of some dear one approaching him.

"It was my rockets, Elithenia," he said with shy pride. "We traveled all this way because of my rockets. I knew you would be here, you see. I could look up into the sky and see you shining above me, pure and bright and steadfast."

"Father," whispered Aleatha.

He didn't hear her, didn't notice her. His hands closed, grasping convulsively. Joy filled his face, tears of pleasure streamed down his cheeks.

Lenthán drew his empty arms to his chest, clasped the still air, and fell forward onto the moss.

Aleatha broke past Zifnab. Kneeling beside her father, she lifted him in her arms. "I'm sorry. Papa," she said, weeping over him. "I'm sorry!"

Lenthán smiled up at her. "My rockets."

His eyes closed, he sighed, relaxed in his daughter's arms. It seemed to those watching that he had just fallen into a restful sleep.

"Papa, please! I was lonely, too. I didn't know. Papa. I didn't know! But now we'll be together, we'll have each other!"

Paithán gently drew away from Rega, knelt down, lifted Lenthán's limp hand, pressed his fingers over the wrist. He let the hand drop to the ground. Putting his arm around his sister, he held her close.

"It's too late. He can't hear you, Thea." The elf eased the body of his father from his sister's grasp, rested the corpse gently upon the ground. "Poor man. Crazy to the end."

"Crazy?" Zifnab glowered at the elf. "What do you mean crazy? He found his wife among the stars, just as I promised him he would. That's why I brought him here."

"I don't know who's crazier," Paithán muttered.

Aleatha kept her gaze fixed upon her father. She had ceased crying with sudden abruptness, drawn a deep, quivering breath. Wiping her hands across her eyes and nose, she rose to her feet.

"It doesn't matter. Look at him. He's happy, now. He was never happy before, none of us were." Her voice grew bitter. "We should have stayed and died-"

"I am glad you feel that way," said a deep voice. "It will make the end easier."

Drugar stood on the path, his left hand grasping Rega tightly by the arm. The dwarf's right hand held his dagger to the woman's stomach.

"You bastard! Let her go-" Roland took a step forward.

The dwarf thrust the knife's point deeper, making a dark indentation in the woman's soft leather clothing.

"Have you ever seen anyone with a belly wound?" Drugar glowered round at them. "It's a slow, painful way to die. Especially here, in the jungle, with the insects and the animals . . ."

Rega moaned, trembling in her captor's grip.

"All right." Paithán raised his hands. "What do you want?"

"Put your weapons on the ground."

Roland and the elf did as they were told, tossing the razzar and a bladewood sword onto the path at Drugar's feet. Reaching out with a thick boot, he kicked at the weapons, knocked them back behind him.

"You, old man, no magic," growled the dwarf.

"Me? I wouldn't dream of it," said Zifnab meekly. The ground shook slightly beneath his feet, a worried expression crossed the wizard's face. "Oh, dear. I ... I don't suppose any of you . . . have seen my dragon?"

"Shut up!" Drugar snarled. Jerking Rega alongside, he entered the clearing. He kept the knife pressed against her, his eyes watching every move. "Over there." He motioned with his head to the tree. "All of you. Now!"

Roland, hands in the air, backed up until he was halted by the trunk. Aleatha found herself pressed up against the human's strong body. Roland took a step forward, moving his body between the dwarf and Aleatha. Paithan joined him, also shielding his sister.

Zifnab stared down at the ground, shaking his head, muttering, "Oh, dear. Oh, dear."

"You, too, old man!" Drugar shouted.

"What?" Zifnab raised his head and blinked. "I say, might I have a word with you?" The wizard tottered forward, head bent confidentially. "I think we're in for a bit of a problem. It's the dragon-

The knife slashed across Rega's leather pants, slitting them open, revealing her flesh beneath. She gasped and shuddered. The dwarf pressed the dagger's blade against bare skin.

"Get back, old man!" Paithan shouted, panic cracking his voice.

Zifnab regarded Drugar sadly. "Perhaps you're right. I'll just join the others, there, by the tree . . ." The old man shuffled over. Roland grabbed him, nearly hauling him off his feet.

"Now what?" Paithan asked.

"You are all going to die," said Drugar, speaking with an impassive calm that was terrible to hear.

"But why? What did we do?"

"You killed my people."

"You can't blame us!" Rega cried desperately. "It wasn't our fault!"

"With the weapons, we could have stopped them," said Drugar. Froth formed on his lips, his eyes bulged from beneath the black brows. "We could have fought! You kept them from us! You wanted us to die!"

Drugar paused, listening. Something stirred inside, whispering to him. They kept faith. They brought the weapons. They arrived late, but that wasn't their fault. They didn't know the dire need.

The dwarf swallowed the saliva that seemed to be choking him. "No!" he cried wildly. "That's wrong! It was done on purpose! They must pay!"

If wouldn't have mattered. It wouldn't have made any difference. Our people were doomed, nothing could have saved them.

"Drakar!" cried the dwarf, raising his head to heaven. The knife shook in his hand. "Don't you see? Without this, I have nothing left!"

"Now!" Roland lunged forward, Paithan moved swiftly behind. Grabbing hold of Rega, the human wrenched his sister free from the dwarfs grip and tossed her across the clearing. Aleatha held the stumbling, shaken Rega in her arms.

Paithan caught hold of Drugar's knife hand, twisted the wrist. Roland snatched the dagger from the clutching fingers, turned it point first, and held the sharp edge against the vein beneath the dwarf's ear.

"I'll see you in hell!"

The ground beneath their feet heaved and shook, tossing them about like the dolls of an irate child. A gigantic head crashed up through the moss, rending trees, ripping vines. Flaring red eyes glared down, gleaming teeth parted, black tongue flicked.

"I was afraid of this!" gasped Zifnab. "The spell's broken. Run! Run for your lives!"

"We can . . . fight!" Paithan groped for his sword, but it was all he could do to try to keep his balance on the quaking moss.

"You can't fight a dragon! Besides, I'm the one he truly wants. Isn't that right?" The old man turned slowly, faced the creature.

"Yes!" hissed the dragon, hatred dripping like venom from its fanged tongue. "Yes, you, old man! Keeping me prisoner, binding me with magic. But not now, not anymore. You're weak, old man. You should never have summoned that elf woman's spirit. And all for what? To tease a dying man."

Desperately, keeping his eyes averted from the terror of the dragon, Zifnab's voice rose in song.

In all the times I'd wander,

For rumors I grew fonder

Of the man who didn't squander

His good ale or his good cheer.

Says Earl, he is no thinker

But no wisdom there be deeper,

"There's nothing so great in this whole world

Like drinkin' addled [29] beer."

The dragon's head inched nearer. The old wizard glanced up involuntarily, saw the fiery eyes, and faltered.

I've been roamin' five and ... er ...

Let's see. I've seen war and king and ... uh ...

Da-de-dum . . . dum

who've yet to . . . er . . . do something with a girl.

I get no kick from champagne . . .

"Those aren't the words!" cried Roland. "Look at the dragon! The spell's not working! We've got to run while we've got the chance!"

"We can't leave him to fight alone," said Paithan.

He whipped around. The old man's brows bristled in anger. "I brought you people here for a reason! Don't throw your lives away, or you'll undo all that I have worked for! Find the city!" he shouted, waving his arms. "Find the city!"

He began to run. The dragon's head darted out, caught hold of the old man by the skirt of his robes, sending him crashing onto the ground. Zifnab's hands scrabbled in the dirt in a desperate effort to pull himself free.

"Fly, you fools!" he cried, and the dragon's jaws closed over him.

## CHAPTER 37

### SOMEWHERE, PRYAN

HAPLO EXPLORED THE DESERTED CITY AT HIS LEISURE, TAKING HIS TIME, studying it carefully to make a clear and accurate report back to his lord. Occasionally he wondered what was transpiring with the mensch outside the walls, but dismissed the matter from his mind for lack of interest. What he found-or failed to find- inside the city walls was of far more importance.

Within the walls, the city was different from its sibling located in the Nexus. The differences explained much, but left some questions still unanswered.

Just inside the city gate stood a wide, paved, circular plaza. Haplo traced a blue, glowing series of runes in the air with his hand and stood back to watch. Images, memories of the past held fast within the stone, came to a semblance of life, populating the area with ghosts. The plaza was suddenly crowded with faint reflections of people, shopping, bartering, exchanging the news of the day. Elves, humans, and dwarves jostled between the rows of stalls. Walking among them, Haplo could distinguish the occasional white-robed, saintly figure of a Sartan.

It was market day in the plaza-market days would be a more proper term, for Haplo witnessed the passage of time, flowing like a swift stream before his eyes. All was not peaceful and serene within the white walls. Elves and humans clashed, blood was spilled in the bazaar. Dwarves rioted, tearing down the stalls, wrecking the wares. The Sartan were too few and helpless with their magic, to find an antidote for the poison of racial hatred and prejudice.

And then there came moving among the people gigantic creatures - taller than most buildings, eyeless, wordless, strong, and powerful. They restored order, guarded the streets. The mensch lived in peace, but it was enforced peace - tenuous, unhappy.

As time passed, the images became less clear to Haplo. He strained his eyes, but couldn't see what was happening and he realized that it wasn't his magic failing him, but the magic of the Sartan that had held the city together. It dwindled - fading and turning, like colors in a rain-soaked painting. At length, Haplo could see nothing at all in the square. It was empty, the people gone.

"And so," he said to the dog, waking it; the bored animal having dozed off during the picture show, "the Sartan destroyed our world, divided it up into its four elements. They brought the mensch to this world, traveling through Death's Gate, as they brought the mensch to Arianus. But here, as in Arianus, they ran into problems. In Arianus - the Air World - the floating continents had everything needed for the mensch to survive except water. The Sartan constructed the great Kicksey-Winsey, planning to align the islands and pump water up into them from the perpetual storm that rages below.

"But something happened. The Sartan, for some mysterious reason, abandoned their project and abandoned the mensch at the same time. On this world, on Pryan, the Sartan arrived and discovered that the world was practically - from their viewpoint uninhabitable. Overgrown with jungle life, it had no stone readily available, no metal easily forged, a sun that shone constantly. They built these cities and kindly

brought the mensch to live within their protective walls, even providing them artificial, magical time cycles of day and night, to remind them of home."

The dog licked its paws, coated with the soft white dust that covered the city, letting its master ramble, sometimes cocking an ear to indicate it was paying attention.

"But the mensch didn't react with the proper gratitude." Haplo whistled to the dog. Leaving the ghostly square, he walked the city streets. "Look, signs in elven. Buildings done in elvish style - minarets, arches, delicate filigree. And here, human dwellings-solid, massive, substantial. Built to lend a false feeling of permanence to their brief lives. And somewhere, probably below us, I would guess we would find the dwelling places of the dwarves. All meant to live together in perfect harmony.

"Unfortunately, the members of the trio weren't given the same musical score. Each sang his own tune in opposition to the rest."

Haplo paused, staring around intently. "This place is different from the city in the Nexus. The city the Sartan left us-for what reason they alone know-is not divided. The signs are in the language of the Sartan. Obviously they intended to come back and occupy the city in the Nexus. But why? And why put another almost identical city on Pryan? Why did the Sartan leave? Where did they go? What caused the mensch to flee the cities? And what do the "What about the dwarf?"

Roland glanced back at Drugar. The dwarf crouched defensively in the center of the glade. His eyes, shadowed by the overhanging brows, gave no hint of what he might be feeling or thinking.

"We bring him," said Roland grimly. "I don't want him sneaking around behind us and I don't have time to kill him! Grab our weapons!"

Roland caught hold of the dwarf's thick arm, jerked him to his feet and propelled him toward the path. Rega gathered up the weapons, cast a final, fearful glance down the hole into which the dragon had disappeared, then ran after the others.

The path, though overhung with vines and plants, was wide and clear and easy to follow. They could still see, as they ran along it, the stumps of giant trees that had been leveled and gashes-now covered over by bark-where huge limbs had been hacked off to form a clear, broad trail. Each thought to himself of the immense force expended to fell such mighty trees, each thought of the powerful tytans. They didn't speak their fear out loud, but all wondered if they might be running from the jaws of one dreadful death into the arms of another.

Their fear lent them unnatural strength. Whenever they grew tired, they felt the ground rumble beneath their feet and stumbled on. But soon the heat and the heavy, stagnant air sapped even adrenaline-pumped will. Aleatha tripped over a vine, fell, and did not get back up. Paithan started to try to lift her. Shaking his head, he sank down onto the ground himself.

Roland stood above the two elves, staring down at them, unable to speak for his heavy breathing. He had dragged the dwarf the entire distance. Weighted down by his thick boots and heavy leather armor, Drugar toppled over onto the ground and lay like a dead thing. Rega tottered up behind her brother. Tossing the weapons to the trail, she slumped onto a tree stump and laid her head across her arms, almost sobbing for breath.

"We have to rest," said Paithan in response to Roland's mute, accusing glare that urged them to keep on running. "If the dragon catches us ... it catches us." He helped his sister to a sitting position. Aleatha leaned against him, eyes closed.

Roland flung himself down on the moss. "She all right?"

Paithan nodded, too weary to reply. For long moments they sat where they had fallen, sucking in air, trying to calm the pounding of their hearts. They kept glancing fearfully behind them, expecting to see the gigantic scaled head and sharp teeth diving down at them. But the dragon didn't appear and, eventually, they no longer felt the rumbling of the ground.

"I guess what it really wanted was the old man," said Rega softly, the first words any of them had spoken in a long time.

"Yeah, but when it gets hungry, it'll be looking for fresh meat," said Roland. "What did that old fool mean about a city, anyway? If there really is one, and it wasn't another of his crazy jabberings, it would mean shelter."

"This path has to lead somewhere," Paithan pointed out. He licked dry lips. "I'm thirsty! The air smells peculiar, tastes like blood." He looked back at Roland, his gaze going from the human to the dwarf who lay at his feet. "How's Blackbeard?"

Roland reached out a hand, prodded the dwarf's arm. Drugar rolled over, sat up. Hunching back against a tree, he glared at them from beneath the shaggy, shadowing brows.

"He's fine. What do we do with him?"

"Kill me now," -said Drugar gruffly. "Go on. It is your right. I would have killed you."

Paithan stared at the dwarf, but the elf wasn't seeing Drugar. He was seeing humans, trapped between the river and the tytans. Elves shooting them down with arrows. His sister, locking herself in her room. His house, burning.

"I'm sick of killing! Hasn't there been death enough without us meting it out? Besides, I know how he feels. We all do. We all saw our people butchered."

"It wasn't our fault!" Rega reached out a tentative hand, touched the dwarf on the thick arm. Drugar glowered at her suspiciously, drew away from her touch. "Can't you understand, it wasn't our fault!"

"Maybe it was," said Paithan, suddenly very, very weary. "The humans let the dwarves fight alone, then turned on each other. We elves turned our arrows on the humans. Maybe, if we had all joined together, we could have defeated the tytans. We didn't, and so we were destroyed. It was our fault. And it's starting to happen all over again."

Roland flushed guiltily, and averted his eyes.

"I used to think love would be enough," continued Paithan softly, "that it was some type of magical elixir we could sprinkle over the world and end all the hatred. I know now, it's not true. Love's water is clear and pure and sweet, but it isn't magic. It won't change anything." He rose to his feet. "We better get going."

Roland came after him. One by one, the others followed, all except Drugar. He had understood the words of the conversation, but the meaning rattled around in the empty shell that had become his soul.

"You are not going to kill me?" he demanded, standing alone in the clearing.

The others paused, glanced at each other.

"No," said Paithan, shaking his head.

Drugar was baffled. How could you talk of loving someone who was not of your race? How could a dwarf love someone who was not a dwarf? He was a dwarf, they were elves and humans. And they had risked

their lives to save his. That, first, was inexplicable. Next, they were not going to take his life after he had almost taken theirs. That was incomprehensible.

"Why not?" Drugar was angry, frustrated.

"I think," said Paithan slowly, considering, "we're just too tired."

"What am I going to do?" Drugar demanded.

Aleatha smoothed back her straggling hair, dragging it out of her eyes. "Come with us. You don't want to be ... left alone."

The dwarf hesitated. He had held onto his hate for so long, his hands would feel empty without it. Perhaps it would be better to find something other than death to fill them. Perhaps that was what Drakar was trying to prove to him.

Drugar clumped along down the path after the others.

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Silver, arched spans, graceful and strong, stood ranged round the bottom of the spire. Atop those arches were more arches, extending upward-silver layer upon silver layer-until they came together at a sparkling point. Between the arches, white marble walls and clear crystal windows were alternately placed to provide both support and interior lighting. A silver hexagonal door, marked with the same runes as the gate, allowed entrance. As before, though he knew the rune that was the key, Haplo forged his own way, moving swiftly and silently through the marble walls. The dog crept along behind.

The Patryn entered a vast circular chamber-the base of the spire. The marble floor echoed his booted footsteps, shattering the silence that had lasted for who knew how many generations. The vast room contained nothing but a round table, surrounded by chairs.

In the center of the table hung, suspended-its magic continuing to support it-a small, round, crystal globe, lit from within by four tiny balls of fire.

Haplo drew near. His hand traced a rune, disrupting the magical field. The globe crashed to the table and rolled toward the Patryn. Haplo caught it, lifted it in his hands. The globe was a three dimensional representation of the world, similar to the one he'd seen in the home of Lenthon Quindiniar, similar to the drawing in the Nexus. But now, holding it, having traveled it, Haplo understood.

His lord had been mistaken. The mensch didn't live on the outside of the planet, as they'd lived on the old world. They lived on the inside.

The globe was smooth on the outside-solid crystal, solid stone. It was hollow within. In the center, gleamed four suns. Within the center of the suns stood Death's Gate.

No other planets, no other stars could be visible because one didn't look up in the heavens at night. One looked up at the ground. Which meant that the other stars couldn't be stars but . . . cities. Cities like this one. Cities meant to house refugees from a shattered world.

Unfortunately their new world was a world that would have been frightening to the mensch. It was a world that was, perhaps, no less frightening to the Sartan. Life-giving light produced too much life. Trees grew to enormous heights, oceans of vegetation covered the surface. The Sartan had never figured on this. They were appalled at what they had created. They lied to the mensch, lied to themselves. Instead of submitting, trying to adapt to the new world they had created, they fought it, tried to force it to submit to them.

Carefully, Haplo replaced the globe, hanging it above the table's center. He removed his magical spell, allowing the globe's ancient support to catch hold of it again. Once more, Pryan hung suspended over the table of its vanished creators.

It was an entertaining spectacle. The Lord of the Nexus would appreciate the irony.

Haplo glanced around, there was nothing else in the chamber. He looked up, over the table. A curved ceiling vaulted high above him, sealing the chamber shut, blotting out any sight of the crystal spire that soared directly above it. While holding the globe, he'd become aware of a strange sound. He put his hands upon the table.

He had been right. The wood thrummed and vibrated. He was reminded, oddly, of the great machine on Arianus-the Kicksey-Winsey. But he had seen no signs of such a machine anywhere outside.

"Come to think of it," he said to the dog, "I didn't hear this sound outside either. It must be coming from in here. Maybe someone will tell us where."

Haplo raised his hands over the table, began tracing runes in the air. The dog sighed, laid down. Placing its head between its paws, the animal kept a solemn and unhappy watch.

Vaguely seen images floated to life around the table, dimly heard voices spoke. Of necessity, since he was eavesdropping on not one meeting, but on many, the conversation that Haplo could distinguish was confused, fragmented.

"This constant warring among the races is too much for us to handle. It's sapping our strength, when we should be concentrating our magic on achieving our goal. . . ."

"We've degenerated into parents, forced to waste our time separating quarrelsome children. Our grand vision suffers for lack of attention. . . ."

"And we are not alone. Our brothers and sisters in the other citadels in Pryan face the same difficulties! I wonder, sometimes, if we did the right thing in bringing them here. . . ."

The sadness, the sense of helpless frustration was palpable. Haplo saw it etched in the dimly seen faces, saw it take shape in the gestures of hands seeking desperately to grab hold of events that were slipping through their fingers. The Patryn was put in mind of Alfred, the Sartan he had encountered on Arianus. He'd seen in Alfred the same sense of sadness, of regret, of helplessness. Haplo fed his hatred on the suffering he saw, and enjoyed the warming glow.

The images ebbed and flowed, time passed. The Sartan shrank, aged before his eyes. An odd phenomenon-for demigods.

"The council has devised a solution to our problems. As you said, we have become parents when we were meant to be mentors. We must turn the care of these 'children' over to others. It is essential that the citadels be put into operation! Arianus suffers from lack of water. They need our power to assist in the functioning of their machine. Abarrach exists in eternal darkness- something far worse than eternal light. The World of Stone needs our energy. The citadels must be made operational and soon, or we face tragic consequences!

"Therefore, the council has given us permission to take the tytans from the citadel core where they have been tending the starlight. The tytans will watch over the mensch and protect them from themselves. We endowed these giants with incredible strength, in order that they could assist us in our physical labors. We gave them the rune-magic for the same reason. They will be able to deal with the people."

"Is that wise? I protest! We gave them the magic on the understanding that they would never leave the citadel!"

"Brethren, please calm yourselves. The council has given considerable thought to the matter. The tytans will be under our constant control and supervision. They are blind-a necessity so that they could work in the starlight. And, after all, what could possibly happen to us? . . ."

Time drifted on. The Sartan seated around the table disappeared, replaced by others, young, strong, but fewer in number.

"The citadels are working, their lights fill the heavens-"

"Not heavens, quit lying to yourself."

"It was merely a figure of speech. Don't be so touchy."

"I hate waiting. Why don't we hear from Arianus? Or Abarrach? What do you suppose has happened?"

"Perhaps the same thing that is happening to us. So much to do, too few to do it. A tiny crack opens in the roof and the rain seeps through. We put a bucket beneath it and start to go out to mend the crack but then another opens. We put a bucket beneath that one. Now we have two cracks to mend and we are about to do so when a third opens up. We have now run out of buckets. We find another bucket, but by this time, the leaks have grown larger. The buckets will not hold the water. We run after larger buckets to give us time to contain the water so that we can go up to the roof to fix the leak.

"But by now," the speaker's voice softened, "the roof is on the verge of collapse."

Time swirled and eddied around the Sartan seated at the table, aging them rapidly, as it had aged their parents. Their numbers grew fewer still.

"The tytans! The tytans were the mistake!"

"It worked well in the beginning. How could anyone have foreseen?"

"It's the dragons. We should have done something about them from the start."

"The dragons did not bother us, until the tytans began to escape our control."

"We could use the tytans still, if we were stronger-"

"If there were more of us, you mean. Perhaps. I'm not certain."

"Of course, we could. Their magic is crude; no more than-we teach a child-"

"But we made the mistake of endowing the child with the strength of mountains."

"I say that maybe it's the work of our ancient enemies. How do any of us know that the Patryns are still imprisoned in the Labyrinth? We've lost all contact with their jailers."

"We've lost contact with everyone! The citadels work, gathering energy, storing it, ready to transmit it through the Death's Gate. But is there anyone left to receive it? Perhaps we are the last, perhaps the others dwindled as have we ..."

The flame of hatred burning in Haplo was no longer warm and comforting, but a devouring fire. The casual mention of the prison into which he'd been born, the prison that had been the death of so many of his people, sent him into a fury that dimmed his sight, his hearing, his wits. It was all he could do to keep from hurling himself at the shadowy figures and throttling them with his bare hands.

The dog sat up, worried, and licked his master's hand. Haplo grew calmer. He had missed much of the conversation, seemingly. Discipline. His lord would be angered. Haplo forced his attention back to the round table.

A single form sat there, shoulders bowed beneath an unseen burden. The Sartan was looking, astonishingly, at Haplo.

"You of our brethren who may one day come into this chamber are undoubtedly lost in amazement at what you have found-or failed to find. You see a city, but no people living within its walls. You see the light"-the figure gestured to the ceiling, to the spire above them-"but its energy is wasted. Or perhaps you will not see the light. Who knows what will happen when we are no longer here to guard the citadels? Who knows but that the light will dim and fade, even as we ourselves have done.

"You have, through your magic, viewed our history. We have recorded it in the books, as well, so that you may study it at your leisure. We have added to it the histories kept by the wise ones among the mensch, written in their own languages. Unfortunately, since the citadel will be sealed, none of them will be able to return to discover their past.

"You now know the terrible mistakes we made. I will add only what has occurred in these last days. We were forced to send the mensch from the citadel. The fighting among the races had escalated to such a point that we feared they would destroy each other. We sent them into the jungle, where they will, we hope, be forced to expend their energy on survival.

"We had planned, those of the few of us who remain, to live in the citadels in peace. We hoped to find some means to regain control over the tytans, find some way to communicate with the other worlds. But that is not to be.

"We, ourselves, are being made to leave the citadels. The force that opposes us is ancient and powerful. It cannot be fought, cannot be placated. Tears do not move it, nor do all the weapons we have at our command. Too late, we have come to admit its existence. We bow before it, and take our leave."

The image faded. Haplo tried, but the rune-magic would summon no one else. The Patryn stood for a long time in the chamber, staring in silence at the crystal globe and its feebly burning suns surrounding the Death's Gate.

Seated at his feet, the dog turned its head this way and that, searching for something it couldn't identify, not quite heard, not quite seen, not quite felt.

But there.

## CHAPTER 38

### THE CITADEL

THEY STOOD AT THE EDGE OF THE JUNGLE, ALONG THE PATH ON WHICH THE OLD man had sent them, and stared up at the shining city on the mountain. The beauty, the immensity awed them, it seemed outlandish, other worldly. They could almost have believed that they had actually traveled to a star.

A rumbling, a tremor of the moss beneath their feet recalled the dragon. Otherwise, they might never have left the jungle, never walked forward upon the mountainside, never dared approach the white-walled, crystal-spired sun.

Frightened as they were by what lurked behind them, they were almost as frightened of the unknown that stood ahead. Their thoughts ran similar to Haplo's. They imagined guards standing on the towering walls, surveying the craggy, rock-strewn paths. They wasted precious time-considering the dragon might be

surging after them-arguing about whether they should advance with weapons drawn or sheathed. Should they approach meekly, as supplicants, or with pride, as equals?

They resolved at last to keep their weapons out and clearly visible. As Rega counseled, it made sense to do so, in case the dragon came upon them from behind. Cautiously, they stepped out of the shadows of the jungle, shadows that suddenly seemed friendly and sheltering, and walked out into the open.

Heads swiveled, keeping nervous watch before and behind. The ground no longer trembled and they argued over whether this was because the dragon had ceased to pursue them or because they stood on solid rock. They continued on up the path, each tensed to hear a hail or answer a challenge or perhaps fend off an attack.

Nothing. Haplo had heard the wind. The five didn't even hear that for it had ceased to blow with the coming of the twilight. At length, they reached the top and stood before the hexagonal gate with its strange, carved inscription. They straggled to a stop. From a distance, the citadel had filled them with awe. Up close, it filled them with despair. Weapons dangled from hands gone listless.

"The gods must live here," said Rega in a hushed voice.

"No," came the dry, laconic answer. "Once, you did."

A portion of the wall began to shimmer blue. Haplo, followed by the dog, stepped out. The dog appeared glad to see them safe. It wagged its tail and it would have dashed over to greet them but for a sharp reprimand from its master.

"How did you get inside there?" Paithan demanded, his hand flexing over the handle of his blade wood sword.

Haplo did not bother to answer the question, and the elf must have realized interrogating the man with the bandaged hands was futile. Paithan did not repeat it.

Aleatha, however, approached Haplo boldly. "What do you mean, once we lived behind those walls? That's ridiculous."

"Not you. Your ancestors. All your ancestors." Haplo's gaze took in the elves and the two humans who stood before him, regarding him with dark suspicion. The Patryn's eyes shifted to the dwarf.

Drugar ignored him, ignored them all. His trembling hands touched the stone, the bones of the world, that had been little more than memory among his people.

"All your ancestors," Haplo repeated.

"Then we can go back in," said Aleatha. "We would be safe in there. Nothing could harm us!"

"Except what you take in with you," said Haplo, with his quiet smile. He glanced at the weapons each held, then at the elves standing apart from the humans, the dwarf keeping apart from the rest. Rega paled and bit her lip, Roland's face darkened in anger. Paithan said nothing. Drugar leaned his head against the stone, tears coursed down his cheeks and vanished into his beard.

Whistling to the dog, Haplo turned, and began to walk back down the mountainside toward the jungle.

"Wait! You can't leave us!" Aleatha called after him. "You could take us inside the walls! With your magic or ... or in your ship!"

"If you don't"-Roland began swinging the raztar, its lethal blades flashed in the twilight-"we'll..."

"You'll what?" Haplo turned to face them, traced a sigil before him, between himself and the threatening human.

Faster than the eye could see, the rune sizzled through the air and smote Roland on his chest, exploding, propelling him backward. He landed hard on the ground, his raztar flew from his hand. Aleatha knelt beside him, cradled the man's bruised and bleeding body in her arms.

"How typical!" Haplo spoke softly, not raising his voice. " 'Save me!' you cry. 'Save me or else!' Being a savior's a thankless job with you mensch. Not worth the pay, because you never want to do any of the work. Those fools"-he jerked his head in the direction of the crystal spire-"risked everything to save you from us, then tried to save you from yourselves-with results that are plainly obvious. But just wait, mensch. One day, one will come who will save you. You may not thank him for it, but you will achieve salvation." Haplo paused, smiled. "Or else."

The Patryn started off, turned again. "By the way, what happened to the old man?" None of them answered, all avoided his eyes.

Nodding, satisfied, Haplo continued down the mountain, the dog trotting along at his heels.

The Patryn traveled safely through the jungle. Arriving at the Dragon Star, Haplo found the elves and humans roaming the jungle, embroiled in a bitter battle. Each side called on him to come to its aid. He paid no attention to any of them and climbed aboard his empty ship. By the time the combatants realized they were being abandoned, it was too late. Haplo listened in grim amusement to the terrified, pleading wails spoken together in two different languages, reaching his ears as one voice.

The ship lifted slowly into the air. Standing at the window, he stared down at the frantic figures.

" 'He it is, who, coming after me, is preferred before me!' " Haplo tossed them the quote, watching them dwindle away to nothing as his ship carried him into the heavens. The dog crouched at his feet and howled, upset by the pitying cries.

Below, the elves and humans watched in bitter, helpless impotence. They could see the ship shining in the sky a long time after its departure; the sigla emblazoned on its hull blazing fiery red in the false darkness created by the Sartan to remind their children of home.

## CHAPTER 39

### THE CITADEL

THE DRAGON CAME UP ON THE FIVE, CATCHING THEM MASSED IN FRONT OF THE gate of the citadel, trying vainly to get inside. The marble walls were slick and smooth, without a handhold or foothold in sight. They banged upon the gate with their fists and, in desperation, hurled themselves against it. The gate didn't so much as quiver.

One of the five suggested battering rams, another magic, but the talk was half-hearted and desultory. Each knew that if elven or human magic had been effective, the citadel would have been occupied.

And then the strange and terrible darkness once again began to flow from the city walls, creeping over the mountain and the jungle like slowly rising flood waters. Yet though it was dark below, it was light above, the crystal spire casting its radiant white call out into a world that had forgotten how to answer. The bright light caused every object to be either seen or unseen-illuminated brilliantly by its glow or lost in impenetrable shadow.

The darkness was terrifying, more so because they could still see the sun shining in the sky. Because of the darkness, they heard the dragon coming before they saw it. The rock shook beneath their feet, the city walls

trembled under the dwarf's hand. They started to flee to the jungle, but the sight of the darkness submerging the trees was appalling. For all they knew, the dragon would come from that very direction. They clung to the city walls, unwilling to leave its shelter, though they knew it couldn't protect them.

The dragon appeared, out of the darkness, breath hissing. The star-like light glittered off the scaled head, reflected red in the gleaming eyes. The dragon's mouth parted, the teeth were stained with blood that was black in the white light. A bit of mouse-colored cloth fluttered horribly, impaled upon a sharp, glistening fang.

The five stood together; Roland protectively in front of Aleatha, Paithan and Rega beside each other, hand in hand. They held desperately onto their weapons, though they knew they were useless.

Drugar's back was to the danger. The dwarf paid no attention to the dragon. He was gazing, fascinated, at the hexagonal gate, its runes thrown into sharp relief by the star-like light.

"I recognize each one," he said, reaching out his hand, running the fingers lovingly over the strange substance that gleamed brightly, reflecting the light, reflecting the image of approaching death.

"I know each sigil," he repeated, and he named them, as a child who knows the alphabet but does not yet know how to read will name the individual letters it sees upon the sign hanging from the inn.

The others heard the dwarf muttering to himself in his own language.

"Drugar!" Roland called urgently, keeping his gaze fixed on the dragon, not daring to turn around and look behind him. "We need you!"

The dwarf did not answer. He stared, mesmerized, at the gate. In the very center of the hexagon, the surface was blank. Runes surrounded it in a circle on all sides, the strokes of the tops and bottoms of the sigla merging together, breaking apart, leaving broad gaps in an otherwise continuous flow. Drugar saw, in his mind, Haplo drawing the runes. The dwarf's hand slipped into the tunic of his blouse, chilled fingers wrapped around the obsidian medallion he wore on his chest. He drew it forth, held it up before the gate so that it was level with the blank spot, and slowly began to rotate it.

"Leave him alone," said Paithan, as Roland began to curse the dwarf. "What can he do anyway?"

"True enough, I guess," Roland muttered. Sweat mingled with the blood caked on his face. He felt Aleatha's cool fingers on his arm. Her body pressed closer to his, her hair brushed against his skin. His curses hadn't really been aimed at the dwarf at all, but hurled bitterly against fate. "Why doesn't the damn thing attack and get it over with!"

The dragon loomed in front of them, its wingless, footless body coiling upward, its head almost level with the top of the smooth city walls. It seemed to be enjoying the sight of their torment, savoring their fear, a sweet aroma, tempting to the palate.

"Why has it taken death to bring us together?" whispered Rega, holding fast to Paithan's hand.

"Because, like our 'savior' said, we never learn."

Rega glanced behind her, wistfully, at the gleaming white walls, the sealed gate. "I think we might have, this time. I think it might have been different."

The dragon's head lowered; the four facing it could see themselves reflected in the eyes. Its foul breath, smelling of blood, was warm against their chilling bodies. They braced for the attack. Roland felt a soft kiss on his shoulder, the wetness of a tear touch his skin. He glanced back over his shoulder at Aleatha, saw her smile. Roland closed his eyes, praying for that smile to be his last sight.

Drugar did not turn around. He held the medallion superimposed over the blank spot on the gate. Dimly, he began to understand. As had happened when he was a child, the letters C...A...T were no longer letters to be recited individually by rote but were transformed before his eyes into a small, furbearing animal.

Elated, transfixed by excitement, he broke the leather thong that held the medallion around his neck and lunged at the gate.

"I have it! Follow me!"

The others hardly dared hope, but they turned and ran after him.

Jumping as high as he could, barely able to reach the bottom of the large round blank in the center, Drugar slammed the medallion against the surface of the gate.

The single sigil, the crude and simple rune that had been hung around the dwarf child's neck, a charm to protect him from harm, came into contact with the tops of the runes carved upon the bottom of the gate. The medallion was small, barely larger than the dwarf's hand, the sigil carved upon it smaller still.

The dragon struck at last. Roaring, it dove upon its victims.

The sigil beneath the dwarfs hand began to glow blue, light welled up between stubby fingers. The light brightened, flared. The single rune increased in size, becoming as large as the dwarf, then as broad as a human, taller than the elf.

The sigil's fire spread across the gate, and wherever the light of the rune touched another rune, that rune burst into flame. The flames expanded, the gate blazed with magical fire. Drugar gave a mighty shout and ran straight at it, shoving with his hands.

The gates to the citadel shivered, and opened.

## CHAPTER 40

### SOMEWHERE PRYAN

"I THOUGHT THEY'D NEVER FIGURE IT OUT!" STATED THE DRAGON IN exasperation. "I took my time getting up there, then they made me wait and wait. There's only so much slaving and howling one can do, you know, before it loses its effectiveness."

"Complain, complain. That's all you've done," snapped Zifnab. "You haven't said a word about my performance. 'Fly, you fools!' I thought I played that rather well."

"Gandalf said it better'?"

"Gandalf!" Zifnab cried in high dudgeon. "What do you mean, he said it 'better'?"

"He gave the phrase more depth of meaning, more emotive power."

"Well, of course he had emotive power! He had a balrog hanging onto his skivvies! I'd emote, too!"

"A balrog!" The dragon flicked its huge tail. "And I suppose I'm nothing! Chopped liver!"

"Chopped lizard, if I had my way!"

"What did you say?" the dragon demanded, glowering. "Remember, wizard, that you're 'only my familiar. You can be replaced."

"Chicken gizzard! I was discussing food. I'm extremely hungry," said Zifnab hastily. "By the way, what happened to all the rest of 'em?"

"The rest of who? Chickens?"

"Humans! Elves, you ninny."

"Don't blame me. You should be more precise with your pronouns." The dragon began to carefully inspect its glittering body. "I chased the merry little band up into the citadel where they were welcomed with open arms by their fellows. It wasn't an easy task, mind you. Blundering through the jungle. Look at this, I broke a scale."

"No one ever said it would be easy," said Zifnab, with a sigh.

"You're right there," agreed the dragon. His fiery-eyed gaze lifted, went to the citadel, shining on the horizon. "It won't be for them, either."

"Do you think there's a chance?" The old man looked anxious.

"There has to be," answered the dragon.

## EPILOGUE

### MY LORD,

My ship is currently in flight above . . . below . . . through ... (I hardly know how to describe it) the world of Pryan. The flight back to the four suns is long and tedious, and I have decided to take the time to record my thoughts and impressions of the so-called stars while they are still fresh in my mind.

From my research gleaned in the Hall of the Sartan, I am able to reconstruct the history of Pryan. What the Sartan may have had in mind when they created this world (one wonders if they had anything on their minds!) is unknown. It is obvious to me that they arrived on this world expecting something other than what they found. They did their best to compensate, by building magnificent cities, shutting the mensch and themselves up inside, shutting the rest of the world out, and lying to themselves about the true nature of Pryan.

All went well for a time, apparently. I would guess that the mensch-reeling from the shock of the disintegration of their world and the move to this one-had neither the inclination nor the energy to cause trouble- This state of peace passed rapidly, however. Generations of mensch came along who knew nothing about the terrible suffering of their parents. The citadels, no matter how big, would inevitably be too small to contain their greed and ambition. They fell to squabbling and feuding among themselves.

The Sartan, during this period, were interested solely in their own wondrous projects and did their best to ignore the mensch. Intensely curious about this project, I traveled into the heart of the crystal spire from which beamed the "star" light. I found there a huge machine, somewhat similar in design to the Kicksey-Winsey that I discovered on the world of Arianus. This machine was much smaller and its function, as far as I was able to determine, is extremely different.

To describe it, I first put forth a theory. Having visited two of the four worlds built by the Sartan, I have discovered that each was imperfect. I also discovered that the Sartan were apparently trying to make up for the imperfections. Arianus's floating continents need water. Abarrach's Stone World (which I plan to visit next) needs light. The Sartan planned to supply these deficiencies by using energy drawn from Pryan-which has it in abundance.

The four suns of Pryan are surrounded by stone that completely encases their energy. This energy is beamed down constantly onto the world surrounding the suns. The plants absorb the energy and transfer it down deep into the bedrock that supports them. I would estimate that the heat built up at this lower level must be incredible.

The Sartan constructed the citadels to absorb this heat. They dug deep shafts down through the vegetation into the rock. These shafts act as vents, drawing the heat off and expelling it back into the atmosphere. The energy is collected in a place known as the sanctuary, located in the center of the complex. A machine, running off the energy, transfers the power to the central spire, which in turn beams it out to the sky. The Sartan did not do this by themselves, but used their magic to create a race of powerful giants, who could work in the citadel. They called them tytans and gave them crude rune-magic, to help them in their physical labors.

I admit that I have no proof, but I submit to you, My Lord, that the other "stars" visible on Pryan are light-and-energy-gathering machines such as this one. It was the intention of the Sartan, as clearly explained in the writings left behind in the citadel, to use these machines to transmit the abundance of light and energy to the other three worlds. I read their descriptions of precisely how this feat was to be accomplished, but must confess to you, My Lord, that I can make little sense of what they propose. I brought the plans with me and I will turn them over to you so that you may study them at your leisure.

The transference of energy was, I am certain, the primary purpose of the "stars" of Pryan. However, I believe, although I was not able to test my theory, that the "stars" could be used to communicate with each other. The Sartan mentioned being in contact with their brethren on this world and, not only that, but were apparently awaiting to hear from other Sartan located on other worlds. The ability to establish inter-world communication could be of inestimable value to us in our drive to reestablish ourselves as the rightful rulers of our universe.

One can see why the Sartan were eager to complete their work, but the growing turmoil among the mensch in the citadels made it difficult, if not impossible. The Sartan were constantly being called from their tasks to quell the battles. They were frustrated, desperate-for all they knew, their brethren in other worlds were dying for lack of the energy they alone could provide. The Sartan set the tytans to look after "the children."

As long as the Sartan were around to control the tytans, the giants were undoubtedly highly useful and beneficial. They were extremely effective at policing the mensch. They took over all the hard physical labor and the mundane, day-to-day chores of running a city. Free at last, the Sartan were able to concentrate all their efforts on building the "stars."

Up to this point, my account of the history of Pryan has been clear and concise. Now, it will of necessity become somewhat vague, in that I was completely unable to discover the answer to the mystery of Pryan, a mystery that is shared by the world of Arianus: What happened to the Sartan?

It was obvious to me, in my research, that the Sartan were becoming increasingly few in number and that those few were having an increasingly difficult time dealing with the rapidly deteriorating situation among the mensch. The Sartan came to realize their mistake in creating the tytans and in giving them rudimentary rune-magic. As Sartan control over the giants decreased, the tytans' ability to use the rune-magic increased.

Like the legendary golems of old, did the tytans turn on their creators?

Having fought their magic myself, I can report that it is crude but exceedingly powerful. I am not yet certain why, not having finished analyzing the attacks. The nearest analogy I can furnish at the moment is to say that they hit the complex, delicate structure of our runes with one single, simple, uncomplicated sigil that has the force of a mountain behind it.

Now the citadels stand empty, but their light still shines. The mensch lie hidden in the jungle and fight among themselves. The tytans wander the world in a hopeless, deadly quest.

Where do the dragons enter in, if at all? And what is the "force" the Sartan spoke of in his last statement to me? "The force that opposes us is ancient and powerful." The force that "cannot be fought, cannot be placated." And finally, what happened to the Sartan? Where did they go?

It is possible, of course, that they didn't go anywhere, that they are still living on the other "stars" of Pryan. But I don't believe that is the case, My Lord. Just as their grand project on Arianus failed, so their grand project on Pryan came to nothing. The "stars" shine for a decade or so, then their power supply becomes depleted and their light grows dimmer and dimmer and fades out altogether. Some, perhaps, never recover. Others, after a period of years, slowly gather more energy, and gradually the "star" is reborn, sparkling in a "heaven" that is in reality nothing but ground. Might this not, My Lord, be an analogy for the Sartan?

Of course, there exist two other worlds left for us to explore. And we know that one Sartan-at least-still lives. Alfred, too, seeks his people. I begin to wonder if our quest may be similar to that of the tytans. Perhaps we are searching for an answer that doesn't exist to a question that no one remembers.

I have just now reread what I have written. Forgive these ramblings, My Lord. The time hangs heavily on my hands. But, speaking of the tytans, I venture to add one important observation before I close.

If a way can be discovered to control these creatures-and I am certain. My Lord, that you with your vast power and skill could easily do just that-then you will have an army that is powerful, effective, and completely amoral. In other words, invincible. No force, not even one that is "ancient and powerful" could oppose you.

I see only one danger to our plans, My Lord. The possibility of this danger is so minuscule that I hesitate to mention it. I am mindful, however, of your desire to be completely informed on the situation in Pryan, and so I present the following for consideration: If the mensch could ever find their way back inside the citadels, they might-by working together-be able to learn to operate the "stars." If you will remember, My Lord, the Gegg on Arianus were quite adept at running the Kicksey-Winsey. The human child named Bane was intelligent enough to figure out the machine's true purpose.

The Sartan, in their infinite wisdom, have left lying about innumerable books written in human, dwarven, and elven. The books I saw dealt mainly with the history of the races, going far back to the ancient world before the Sundering. There were, however, too many to peruse closely and so it may be, among the tomes, that the Sartan left information relevant to the "stars," to their true purpose, and to the fact that other worlds besides Pryan exist. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the mensch might even find information regarding Death's Gate.

However, from what I observed, the likelihood of the mensch discovering such information and using it appears extremely remote. The gates of the citadel are closed and, unless the mensch come up with some sort of "savior" I predict that these gates will remain sealed shut to them forever.

I remain. My Lord, respectfully devoted to your service.

-HAPLO

Haplo, Pryan, World of fire, vol.2 of Death Gate journals.

## APPENDIX

### PATRYN RUNES AND THE VARIABILITY OF MAGIC

#### A Basic Overview for Patryn Aspirants

Transcription Note: The Sartan have always found the Patryn approach to rune magic far too dry and clinical for their liking. The Patryn, on the other hand, have always sniffed at the Sartan's rather mystical and

philosophical approach to what they see as a mixture of art and power. This passage on magic was certainly scribed by a Patryn. It may yet be considered abrasive to many who read it. For example, the use of the term object, or objects, in this text is not limited to inanimate things but is applied to people as easily as to a chair. The Patrins, who consider it their destiny to order all creation under their rule, make no distinction between the two.

To manipulate an object you must understand it. This basic principle is at the heart of all Patryn rune magic. It is the key to our destiny of order.

We who see and understand an object for what it truly is-in all its aspects-have control over it. That quality and power that we use as magic is actually the manipulation of the power of existence. We are but minds that observe the full truth of the world around us. Magic is the recognition of the fire burning behind us when all else see only their own shadow on the wall. Rune magic defines in symbols the true quality of all things that might exist.

## PATRYN RUNE MAGIC: THEORY AND PRACTICE

Patrins altering any part of the world about them, first attempt to "name" an object fully. An object's true name is far more than a convenient description. In Patryn magic, an object's name defines precisely the state of the object relative to the underlying Wave of Possibility. Naming an object completely is critical to the level of success that the Patryn will have in later "renaming" the object into an alternate state or form.

Runes provide a set of symbols by which we can name (understand) and rename (change) any object. The student of Patryn magic is a student of the rune, for it is only through the runes that an object can be most fully named.

### Theory and Concept

Runes give formal structure to our magic. Our runes generally form magic in the following ways:

1. Naming of the object. Any rune of power first identifies the object being changed to its true extent-in other words, names the original object fully.
2. Calling on the Sympathetic Name. In this, we build (1) the power runes required to alter the state of the present object and (2) state-of-being runes that define the position on the Wave of Probability where such a state would be expressed. These two combined-power and position-form the Sympathetic Name.
3. The object is renamed. By applying the Sympathetic Name to the object, the object's state changes and the object is renamed. This new name becomes the object's name for as long as the magic dictates. Powerful Sympathetic Names can be permanent, while those that are not so powerful may last only a moment.

### The Laws of Rethis

While the principles of rune magic had been known many epochs before the Sundering of Worlds, abnormalities and inconsistencies still existed in the shaping of magic. One of the great thrusts in magical research was the defining of these abnormalities.

However, in our Year of Exile 1391, Sage Rethis of the Vortex [30] structured several basic laws of rune magic, which endeavored to encompass the anomalies that had been experienced since time began. Although his works were initially greeted with such skepticism as to result in his eventual death at the decree of the Lords in Exile, they were later accepted by that supreme body and are now the standard foundation of our understanding of magic.

THE BALANCE IN ALL NATURE. Rethis began with the understanding that all things must have balance to exist. The full name of an object has balance for it defines the state of harmonious existence in the Wave of

Possibility. While this principle was well known among rune magicians, Rethis placed it as the foundation of his reasoning-and thus the First Law of Rethis:

#### An Object's Name Has Balance

EQUILIBRIUM FACTOR. One of the greatest puzzles in magic was its tendency to occasionally go awry. The precise intent of the wizard's rune structure would work to specifications on any number of similar objects only to suddenly, and for no obvious reason, behave differently on an object that was for all intents and purposes identical to those previously renamed.

This effect, noted Rethis, is similar to those seen constantly in apprentices who are first learning to master the runes and often structure runes that are not balanced. Such unbalanced runes still functioned but often with bizarre results.

Rethis reasoned that such poor structures still functioned because the magic itself sought its own balance when the rune did not supply it. This became the Second Law of Rethis:

#### An Unbalanced Name Will Tend to Balance Itself

RUNIC IMBALANCE. Having established his first two rules, Rethis addressed directly the problem of the master wizards who still, on rare occasion, found their spells going awry.

Since the apprentices' spells obviously had odd results due to imbalance and since the master wizards' spells showed similar failures (although far less often), Rethis reasoned that they must somehow be related. He asked himself, What could account for imbalance in a master wizard's spells?

GRAIN OF MAGIC AND VARIABILITY. As Rethis worked on these problems, he came across an obscure monograph submitted to the Lyceum where he studied. It had been written by Sendric Klausten, a Nexus runner of great reputation in the Labyrinth but little known in the Vortex itself. It had apparently been penned on a rare return through the First Gate based on the runner's experience in the Labyrinth.

Nexus runners were attempting to break through the Labyrinth to the legendary Nexus on the far side. In those early days, the effort was still in its infancy and many centuries would pass before the runners would prove successful.

There was no greater testing ground for runes than the Labyrinth because it required greater complexity and finesse than did common use in the Vortex. Klausten, in his adventures in the Labyrinth, discovered that there was an actual limit to the detail to which a rune could be constructed.

Balance in the magic and ultimate definition of the probability being woven are crucial to the user of rune magic. Unless the weave of magic is infinitely precise, the effect will be different in detail from that originally envisioned by the magician. All rune theory seeks to define the balance of the rune as a Sympathetic Name to the object that exists.

Rune structures may, as you know, contain other rune structures. This seemingly endless progression of smaller and smaller levels of detail attempts to redefine the balanced and ordered state of objects into another state. Each level of detail more intimately defines the object until-in theory-the object is fully defined and, therefore, stable.

Klausten discovered, however, that as the rune grew more and more detailed, the presence of the rune itself affected the state of the object. A rune could be crafted into such detail that its own detail in turn affected the object the magician intended to affect. Thus the object's name would be subtly changed. The rune-balanced for the object before the change-would then be unbalanced. Further balancing of the rune would then continue to change the object, again forcing the rune to be unbalanced. Thus, Klausten explained, there was a limit to how detailed a rune could be created toward its effect. Klausten called this the Barrier of Uncertainty.

The Barrier of Uncertainty is a level of definition beyond which the runes cannot penetrate. This limit to a rune's detail is apparently related to the ancient Empirical Constant ( $6.547E27$  or  $h$ )-although why this is so remains a mystery.

Beyond the Barrier of Uncertainty, rune structures fail to have their anticipated effects. No further rebalancing seems evident in magics that attempt such artful subtlety.

This bottom level of detail in rune structures (which has been proven to hold true in both Sartan and Patryn magic) is referred to as the Grain of Runes. It is the most detailed structure that can be constructed from runes without the presence of the runes themselves changing the magic being attempted.

THIRD LAW OF RETHIS. Rethis found in Klausten's writings the key to why even the most detailed magic occasionally fails. Rethis theorized that if the object being renamed was balanced beyond the Barrier of Uncertainty, then no rune could produce a Sympathetic Name with sufficient detail to rename the object with balance. His own Second Law would then take effect with occasionally random results for even the most advanced wizard.

So it was that Rethis penned this third-and most controversial- law:

No Rune Has Infinite Balance

When a rune structure approximates a new state, the Wave of Probability produces a phenomenon called Stasis Reflex. This, basically, is nature's way of correcting for the small imbalances in all magic rune structures that may evidence themselves through the Barrier of Uncertainty.

The Third Law of Rethis has also been occasionally rephrased as "no rune is perfect," The Barrier of Uncertainty seems to condemn rune structures to a most elemental imperfection when dealing with magic at its most delicate base.

While this may prove to be rather disturbing from a philosophical standpoint, in everyday use it is of little value. Because the Second Law of Rethis tells us that even an unbalanced object will tend to seek its own balance, rune magic continues to operate as the great force in our destiny.

It was, however, the philosophical ramifications that caught up with Rethis. The Lords in Exile successfully prosecuted him for anarchistic heresy and his life was forfeit. Today, songs are sung in his praise, although he never had the opportunity to hear them.

Dimensional Magic and Future Development

All our current rune structures are based around patterns in two dimensions. New research by the Master Cryptographers of the Vortex would suggest that stable rune structures might be assembled along three-dimensional lines as well. Such runes might be crudely thought of as boxes, spheres, multihedrons, and a variety of linking conduits for power transference and effect definition.

While such structures might introduce a revolution in rune structures and power, such structures have not yet been developed that retain stability as well as our traditional structures. Dimensional structures also appear to be subject to the same Barrier of Uncertainty as standard runes. Perhaps, in time, such runes will be a part of our society and our purpose.

A WORD ABOUT SARTAN RUNE MAGIC

From time to time, you may find yourself intrigued by the mystic and backward approach of the Sartan runes. These runes-after one cuts away all of the pseudo-religious and simple-minded claptrap-function in ways similar to our own runic structures.

There is, however, a most fundamental-and dangerous- difference between the Sartan approach to magic and our own: Our inductive reasoning as opposed to the deduction of the Sartan.

In Patryn rune magic we seek out the essence of the individual object and from it induce and effect the more general principles of the universe that surrounds us. Thus we alter the balance in an individual object and then allow that rebalancing to impact the general principles that originally supported the object.

The Sartan, on the other hand, attempt to alter the general principles of existence to achieve specific results. This dangerous thinking might be likened to altering the universal laws of genetics to obtain a better lunch for yourself on a particular day.

Our magic works from the specific case out toward the more general (induction) while Sartan magic works from the general principles of existence inward toward a specific solution (deduction). Both approaches are powerful. The War of Admigon-the last great war before the Captivity of Beybon and the Sundering of Time-was fought between the Sartan and ourselves with bitter results. The Labyrinth that surrounds us and imprisoned our people at the time of the Sundering is the prime example of both the power of the Sartan and their irresponsible and reckless use of it. All creation now seeks a state that will again bring balance and harmony to all.

The time for the New Balance-our order-has come.

1 Made from a compound of calcium deposits taken from the bones of dead animals and processed with other organic elements to form a pliable paste.

2 Elven society in Equilan regulates time as follows: one hundred minutes to an hour, twenty-one hours in a cycle, fifty cycles to a season, and five seasons to a year. Time measurement varies from place to place on Pryan, according to the local weather conditions. Unlike the planet Arianus, where there is day and night, the sun never sets on Pryan.

3 A winged fowl of the segrouse family used for long-distance communication. A faultless, once properly trained, will fly unerringly between two points.

4 The medium of exchange of Equilan. It is a paper equivalent of stones, which themselves are extremely rare, being found generally only at the very bottom of the world.

5 Lodestone. An ancestor of Lenthan, Quindiniar was the first to discover and recognize its properties, which-for the first time-made overland travel possible. Before the discovery of ornite, people had no way of telling direction and would become hopelessly lost in the jungle. The location of the mother lode is a closely guarded family secret.

6 The thickness of moss used to cover elven dead.

7 Darktime is not truly dark in terms of night falling. It refers to the time during the cycle when shades are drawn and proper people go to sleep. It is also the time, however, when the lower, "darker" levels of the city come to life, and so has developed a rather sinister connotation.

8 Seasons on Pryan are named according to the cycle of the crops: Rebirth, Sowing, Vounlife, Harvest, Fallow. Rotation of crops is a human concept. The humans, with their skill in elemental magic as opposed to the elven skill in mechanical magic, are much better farmers than the elves.

9 A plant whose perpetually flowering petals curl each cycle in rhythm with the weather cycle. All races use the plant to determine the hours of the day, though each race knows them by a different name. Humans use the actual plant itself, whereas elves have developed magical mechanical devices to mimic its motion.

10 'Originally a child's toy known as a bandalore, the raztar was made into a weapon by the elves. A round case that fits snugly in the palm holds seven wooden blades attached to a magical spindle. A coiled length of cutvine, wrapped around the spindle, is looped around the middle finger. A quick flick of the wrist sends the spindle lashing out, blades magically extended. Another flick pulls the weapon, blades shut, back into

the hand. Those skilled in the art can send the weapon out as far as ten feet, the flashing blades ripping through flesh before the opponent knows what's hit him.

11 Moss beds that grow in the very tops of the gigantic jungle trees.

12 The eleven army is divided into three branches, the Queen's Guard, the Shadowguard, and the City Guard. The Shadowguard keep to the lower regions of the city and are presumably adept at dealing with the various monsters that dwell beneath the moss plains.

13 Anciently, in the Labyrinth, a person's age was calculated by how many Cites he or she had passed in the attempt to escape. This system was later standardized by the Lord of the Nexus to enable him to keep accurate records regarding the Patryn's population. A person emerging from the Nexus is questioned extensively and, from what details he or she provides, an age is determined and assigned to them by their lord.

14 A gigantic spider with a shelled body, the tyro has eight legs. Six are used for tree and web climbing, the two front legs each end in a clawed "hand" that is used for lifting and manipulation. Cargo is mounted on the back of the thorax between the leg joints.

15 Ice does not occur naturally in any of the known lands of Pryan. It came into common use after its discovery through human magical experiments on weather. Ice is one of the few products made by humans that is in demand in elven lands.

16 Peytin, Matriarch of Heaven. The elves believe that Peytin created a world for her mortal children. She appointed her eldest twin sons, Om and Obi, to rule over it. Their younger brother, San, become jealous and, gathering together the greedy, warlike humans, waged war against his brothers. This war sundered the ancient world. San was banished below. The humans were cast out of the ancient world and sent to this one. Peytin created a race known as elf and sent them to restore the world's purity.

17 Elven word, meaning "boss."

18 candy, the elven expression for someone passing fiction off as the truth, is a human concoction much loved by elves, who are extremely fond of sweets. The candy tastes quite delicious but eating too much can have dire consequences on elven digestive systems.

19 Human measure of time, equal to a fortnight

20 Drugar was the product of marriage late in life. His mother, though she maintained most cordial relations with Drugar's father, kept her own house, as was the custom of dwarven women when their children had reached maturity.)

21 Firebrand-a length of wood soaked in resin that flames quickly when the proper rune is spoken.

22 A word used by both Sartan and Patryn to designate those of the "lower" races-human, elf, and dwarf. Applies to all equally.

23 A navigational device developed by the Quindiniars. A sliver of ornite is suspended in a tiny globe of magically enhanced glass. Because ornite always points a certain direction (believed by elven astrologers to be a magnetic pole), this direction is labeled norinth. The other directions are determined from that point.

24 An extremely large, squirrellike animal that can bound swiftly over flat plains on all fours or can glide from treetop to treetop, utilizing a winglike flap of skin, connecting its front and hind legs.

25 Without any means to navigate, exploration was extremely hazardous because the odds were slim that a person leaving one place would ever find his way back to it.

26 The Labyrinth takes its toll on those imprisoned there. Those Patryns who are driven insane by the hardships are known as "gatecrashers" due to the peculiar form the madness took, leading all its victims to run blindly into the wilderness, imagining that they have reached the Last Gate.

27 The elves are a matriarchal society; by elven law, land holdings, residence, and household goods pass from mother to eldest daughter. Businesses remain in the hands of the elven males. The house, therefore, belongs to Calandra. All the Quindiniars-including Lenthon, her father-live there by her sufferance. Elves have great respect for their elders, however, and therefore Calandra would politely term the house "her father's."

28 Elven for "I don't understand."

29 Stout beer

30 The Fifth Realm-often called Limbo or simply the Nexus by those who are unfamiliar with its structure-is divided into three concentric regions. The outermost region is called the Nexus and is the place where the Deathgates of all realms converge. Four of the Deathgates lead to the Elemental Realms while the fifth gate leads into the Labyrinth. Beyond the Labyrinth lies the Vortex. It was in this place that the Sartan originally imprisoned the Patryns. After three millennia, the Patryns managed to escape the Vortex through the Labyrinth and gain control over the Nexus and all of its Deathgates.

# Deathgate Cycle

## Volume 3

### FIRE SEA

MARGARET WEIS AND TRACY  
HICKMAN

#### PROLOGUE

I'VE TRAVELED THROUGH DEATH'S GATE FOUR TIMES, YET I DON'T remember anything about the journey. Each time I've entered the Gate/ I've been unconscious. The first trip I made was to the world of Arianus, there and back—a trip that was nearly my last. [1]

On my return trip, I acquired a dragonship, built by the elves of Arianus. It's far stronger and much more suitable than my first ship. I enhanced its magic and brought this ship back with me to the Nexus, where My Lord and I worked diligently to further increase the magic protecting the ship. Runes of power cover almost every inch of its surface.

I flew this ship to my next assignment, the world of Pryan. Once again/I sailed through Death's Gate. Once again, I lost consciousness. I awakened to find myself in a realm where there is no darkness, only endless light.

I performed my task satisfactorily on Pryan, at least as far as My lord was concerned. He was pleased with my work.

I was not. [2]

On leaving Pryan, I endeavored to remain conscious, to see the Gate and experience it. The magic of my ship protects it and me to the extent that we both arrive at our destination completely safe and undamaged. Why, then, was I blacking out? My Lord hinted that it must be a weakness in me, a lack of mental discipline. I resolved not to give way. To my chagrin, I remembered nothing.

One moment I was awake, looking forward to entering the small dark hole that seemed far too tiny to contain my ship. The next moment I was safely in the Nexus.

It is important that we learn as much as possible about the journey through Death's Gate. We will be transporting armies of Patryns, who must arrive on these worlds prepared to fight and conquer. My Lord has given the matter considerable study, poring over the texts of the Sartan, our ancient

enemy, who built Death's Gate and the worlds to which it leads. He has just now informed me, on the eve of my journey to the world of Abarrach, that he has made a discovery.

\*

I have this moment returned from meeting with My Lord. I confess that I am disappointed. I mean this as no detriment to My Lord—a man I revere above all others in this universe—but his explanation of Death's Gate makes little sense. How can a place exist and yet not exist? How can it have substance and be ephemeral? How does it measure time marching ahead going backward? How can its light be so bright that I am plunged into darkness?

My Lord suggests that the Death's Gate was never meant to be traversed! He can't tell what its function is—or was. Its purpose may have been nothing more than to provide an escape route from a dying universe. I disagree. I have discovered that the Sartan intended there to be some type of communication between worlds. This communication was, for some reason, not established. And the only connection I have found between worlds is Death's Gate.

All the more reason that I must remain conscious on my next journey. My Lord has suggested to me how to discipline myself to achieve my goal. He warns me, however, that the risk is extremely great.

I won't lose my life; my ship's magic protects me from harm.

But I could lose my mind. [3]

## CHAPTER

### KAIRN TELEST, ABARRACH

"FATHER, WE HAVE NO CHOICE. YESTERDAY, ANOTHER CHILD DIED. The day before, his grandmother. The cold grows more bitter, every day. Yet," his son pauses, "I'm not certain it is the cold, so much, as the darkness, Father. The cold is killing their bodies, but it is the darkness that is killing their spirit. Baltazar is right. We must leave now, while we still have strength enough to make the journey."

Standing outside in the dark hallway, I listen, observe, and wait for the king's reply.

But the old man does not immediately respond. He sits on a throne of gold, decorated with diamonds large as a man's fist, raised up on a dais overlooking a huge hall made of polished marble. He can see very little of the hall. Most of it is lost in shadow. A gas lamp, sputtering and hissing on the floor at his feet, gives off only a dim and feeble light.

Shivering, the old king hunches his shoulders deeper into the fur robes he has piled over and around him. He slides himself nearer the faint edge of the throne, nearer the gas lamp, although he knows he will extract no warmth from the flickering flame. I believe it is the Comfort of the light he seeks. His son is right. The darkness is killing us.

"Once there was a time," the old king says, "when the lights in the palace burned all night long. We danced all night long. We'd grow too hot, with the dancing, and we'd run outside the palace walls,

run out into the streets beneath the cavern ceiling where it was cool, and we'd throw ourselves into the soft grass and laugh and laugh." He paused. "Your mother loved to dance."

"Yes, Father, I remember." His son's voice is soft and patient.

Edmund knows his father is not rambling. He knows the king has made a decision, the only one he can make. He knows that his father is now saying good-bye.

"The orchestra was over there." The old king lifts a gnarled finger, points to a corner of the hall shrouded in deep darkness. "They'd play all during the sleep-half of the cycle, drinking parfruit wine to keep the fire in their blood. Of course, they all got drunk. By the end of the cycle, half of them weren't playing the same music as the other half. But that didn't matter to us. It only made us laugh more. We laughed a lot, then."

The old man hums to himself, a melody of his youth. I have been standing in the shadows of the hall, all this time, watching the scene through a crack in the nearly closed door. I decide that it is time to make my presence known, if only to Edmund. It is beneath my dignity to snoop. I summon a servant, send it to the king with an irrelevant message. The door creaks open, a draught of chill air wafts through the hall, nearly dousing the flame of the gas lamp. The servant shambles into the hall, its shuffling footfalls leaving behind whispering echoes in the all-but-empty palace.

Edmund raises a warding hand, motions the servant to withdraw. But he glances out the door, acknowledges my presence with a slight nod, and silently bids me wait for him. He does not need to speak or do more than that nod of the head. He and I know each other so well, we can communicate without words.

The servant withdraws, its ambling footsteps taking it back out. It starts to shut the door, but I quietly stop it, send it away. The old king has noticed the servant's entrance and exit, although he pretends that he doesn't. Old age has few prerogatives, few luxuries. Indulging oneself in eccentricities is one of them. Indulging oneself in memory—another.

The old man sighs, looks down at the golden throne on which he sits. His gaze shifts to a throne that stands next to his, a throne done on a smaller scale, meant for a woman's smaller frame, a throne that has long been empty. Perhaps he sees himself, his youthful body strong and tall, leaning over to whisper in her ear, their hands reaching out to each other. Their hands were clasped together always, whenever they were near.

He holds her hand sometimes now, but that hand is chill, colder than the cold pervading our world. The chill hand destroys the past for him. He doesn't go to her much, now. He prefers memory.

The gold gleamed in the light, then," he tells his son. "The diamonds sparkled sometimes until we couldn't look at them. They were so brilliant they'd make the eyes water. We were rich, rich beyond belief. We reveled in our wealth.

"All in innocence, I think," the old king adds, after some thought. "We were not greedy, not covetous. 'How they'll stare, when they come to us. How they'll stare when they first set eyes on such gold, such jewels!' we'd say to ourselves. The gold and diamonds in this throne alone would have bought a nation back in their world, according to the ancient texts. And our world is filled with such treasures, lying untouched, untapped in the stone.

"I remember the mines. Ah, that was long ago. Long before you were born, My Son. The Little People were still among us, then. They were the last, the toughest, the strongest. The last to survive. My father took me among them when I was very young. I don't remember much about them except their fierce eyes and thick beards that hid their faces and their short, quick fingers. I was frightened of them, but my father said they were really a gentle people, merely rude and impatient with outsiders."

The old king sighs heavily. His hand rubs the cold metal arm of the throne, as if he could bring the light back to it. "I understand now, I think. They were fierce and rude because they were frightened. They saw their doom. My father must have seen it, too. He fought against it, but there was nothing he could do. Our magic wasn't strong enough to save them. It hasn't even been strong enough to save ourselves.

"look, look at this!" The old king becomes querulous, beats a knotted fist on the gold. "Wealth! Wealth to buy a nation. And my people starving. Worthless, worthless."

He stares at the gold. It looks dull and sullen, almost ugly, ^fleeting back the feeble fire that burns at the old man's feet. The diamonds no longer sparkle. They, too, look cold and dead. Their

•jte^their life—is dependent on man's fire, man's life. When that

\*\*\* is gone, the diamonds will be black as the world around them.

"They're not coming, are they, Son?" the old king asks.

"No, Father," his son tells him. Edmund's hand, strong and warm, closes over the old man's gnarled, shivering fingers. "I think, if they were going to come, they would have come by now."

"I want to go outside," the old king says suddenly.

'Are you sure, Father?" Edmund looks at him, concerned.

"Yes, I'm sure!" The old king returns testily. Another luxury of old age—indulging in whims.

Wrapping himself tighter in the fur robes, he rises from the throne, descends the dais. His son stands by to aid his steps, if necessary, but it isn't. The king is old, even by the standards of our race, who are long-lived. But he is in good physical condition, his magic is strong and supports him better than most. He has grown stoop-shouldered, but that is from the weight of the many burdens he's been forced to bear during his long life. His hair is pure white, it whitened when he was in his middle years, whitened during the time of his wife's brief illness that took her from him.

Edmund lifts the gas lamp, carries it with them to light the way. The gas is precious, now; more precious than gold. The king looks at the gas lamps hanging from the ceiling, lamps that are dark and cold. Watching him, I can guess his thoughts. He knows he shouldn't be wasting the gas like this. But it isn't wasting, not really. He is king and someday, someday soon perhaps, his son will be king. He must show him, must tell him, must make him see what it was like before. Because, who knows? The chance might come when his son will return and make it what it once had been.

They leave the throne room, walk out into the dark and drafty corridor. I stand where they may be certain to see me. The light of the gas lamp illuminates me. I see myself reflected in a mirror

hanging on a wall across from them. A pale and eager face, emerging from the darkness, its white skin and glittering eyes catching the light, looming suddenly out of the shadows. My body, dad in black robes, is one with the eternal sleep that has settled on this realm. My head appears to be disembodied, hanging suspended in the darkness. The sight is frightening. I startle myself.

The old king sees me, pretends not to. Edmund makes a swift, negating gesture, shakes his own head ever so slightly. I bow and withdraw, returning to the shadows.

"Let Baltazar wait," I hear the old king mutter to himself. "He'll get what he wants eventually. Let him wait now. The necromancer has time. I do not."

They walk the halls of the palace, two sets of footfalls echoing loudly through the empty corridors. But the old man is lost in the past, listening to the sounds of gaiety and music, recalling the shrill giggle of a child playing tag with his father and mother through the halls of the palace.

I, too, remember that time. I was twenty when Prince Edmund was born. The palace teemed with life: aunts and uncles, cousins by birth and by marriage, courtiers — always agreeable and smiling and ready to laugh — council members bustling in and out with business, citizens presenting petitions or requesting judgments. I lived in the palace, serving my apprenticeship to the king's necromancer. A studious youth, I spent far more time in the library than I did on the dance floor. But I must have absorbed more than I thought. Sometimes, in the sleep-half, I imagine I can still hear the music.

"Order," the old king was saying. "It was all orderly, back then. Order was our heritage, order and peace. I don't understand what happened. Why did it change? What brought the chaos, what brought the darkness?"

"We did, Father," replies Edmund steadily. "We must have."

He knows differently, of course. I've taught him better than that. But he will always go out of his way to avoid an argument with his father. Still, after all these years, striving desperately for love.

I follow them, my black slippers make no noise on the cold stone floors. Edmund knows I am with them. He glances back occasionally, as if relying on my strength. I gaze at him with fond pride, the pride I might have felt for my own son. Edmund and I are close, closer than many fathers and sons, closer than he is to his own father, although he won't admit it. His parents were so deeply involved with each other, they had little time for the child their love created. I was the boy's tutor and, over time, became the lonely youth's friend, companion, adviser.

Now he is in his twenties, strong and handsome and virile. He will make a good king, I tell myself, and I repeat the words several times over, as if they were a talisman and would banish the shadow that lies over my heart.

At the end of the hallway stand giant, double doors, marked with symbols whose meanings have been forgotten, symbols that have, with time and progress, been partially obliterated. The old man waits, holding the lamp while his son, muscular shoulders straining, shoves aside the heavy metal bar that keeps the palace doors shut and locked.

The bar is a new addition. The old king frowns at it. Perhaps he is remembering a time, before Edmund was born, when there was no need for a physical barrier. Magic kept the doors shut then. Over the years, however, the magic was needed for other, more important tasks—such as survival.

His son pushes on the doors and they swing open. A blast of cold air blows out the gas lamp. The cold is bitter, fierce, penetrates the fur robes. It reminds the old king that, chill as is the palace, its walls and their magic offer some protection from the blood-freezing, bone-numbing darkness outside.

"Father, are you certain you're up to this?" Edmund asks worriedly.

"Yes," the old man snaps, although my guess is that he wouldn't have gone if he'd been alone. "Don't worry about me. If Baltazar has his way, we'll all be out in this before long."

Yes, he knows I'm near, knows I'm listening. He's jealous of my influence over Edmund. All I can say is, Old man, you had your chance.

"Baltazar has found a route that takes us down through the tunnels, Father. I explained that to you before. The air will grow wanner, the deeper into the world we penetrate."

"Found such a fool notion in a book, I suppose. No use lighting the damn thing," the old king remarks, referring to the lamp. "Don't waste your magic. I don't need a light. Many and many are the times I've stood on this colonnade. I could walk it blindfolded."

I can hear them moving through the darkness. I can almost see the king thrust aside Edmund's proffered arm—the prince is dutiful and loving to a father who little deserves it—and stalk unhesitatingly through the doors. I stand in the hallway and try to ignore the cold biting at my face and hands, numbing my feet.

"I don't hold with books," the king remarks bitterly to his son, whose footfalls I can hear, walking at his side. "Baltazar spends far too much time among the books."

Perhaps anger feels good inside the old man, warm and bright, like the fire of the lamp.

"It was the books told us that they were going to return to us and look what came of that! Books." The old king snorts. "I don't trust them—I don't think we should trust them! Maybe they were accurate centuries ago, but the world's changed since then. The routes that brought our ancestors to this realm are probably gone, destroyed."

"Baltazar has explored the tunnels, as far as he dared go, and he found them safe, the maps accurate. Remember, Father, that the tunnels are protected by magic, by the powerful, ancient magic that built them, that built this world."

'Ancient magic!' The old king's anger comes fully to the surface, burns in his voice. "The ancient magic has failed. It was the failure of the ancient magic that brought us to this! Ruin where there was once prosperity. Desolation where there was once plenty. Ice where there was once water. Death where there was once life!"

He stands on the portico of the palace and looks before him. His physical eyes see the darkness that has closed over them, sees it broken only by tiny dots of light burning sporadically here and there

about the city. Those dots of light represent his people and there are too few of them, far too few. The vast majority of the houses in the realm of Kairn Telest are dark and cold. Like the queen, those who now remain in the houses can do very well without light and warmth; it isn't wasted on them.

His physical eyes see the darkness, just as his physical body feels the pain of the cold, and he rejects it. He looks at his city through the eyes of memory, a gift he tries to share with his son. Now that it is too late.

"In the ancient world, during the time before the Sundering, they say there was an orb of blazing fire they called a sun. I read this in a book," the old king adds drily. "Baltazar isn't the only one who can read. When the world was sundered into four parts, the sun's fire was divided among the four new worlds. The fire was placed in the center of our world. That fire is Abarach's heart, and like the heart, it has tributaries that carry the life's blood of warmth and energy to the body's limbs."

I hear a rustling sound, a head moving among many layers of clothing. I can imagine the king shifting his gaze from the dying city, huddled in darkness, to stare far beyond the city's walls. He can see nothing, the darkness is complete. But, perhaps, in his mind's eye, he sees a land of light and warmth, a land of green and growing things beneath a high cavern ceiling frescoed with glittering stalactites, a land where children played and laughed.

"Our sun was out there." Another rustling. The old king lifts his hand, points into the eternal darkness.

"The colossus," Edmund says softly.

He is patient with his father. There is much, so much to be done, and he stands with the old man and listens to his memories.

"Someday his son will do the same for him," I whisper hopefully, but the shadow that lies over our future will not lift from my heart.

Foreboding? Premonition? I do not believe in such things, for they imply a higher power, an immortal hand and mind meddling in the affairs of men. But I know, as surely as I know that he will have to leave this land of his birth and his father's birth and of the many fathers before him, that Edmund will be the last king of the Kairn Telest.

I am thankful, then, for the darkness. It hides my tears.

The king is silent, as well; our thoughts running along the same dark course. He knows. Perhaps he loves him now. Now that it is too late.

"I remember the colossus, Father," says his son hastily, mistaking the old man's silence for irritation. "I remember the day you and Baltazar first realized it was failing," he adds, more somberly.

My tears have frozen on my cheeks, saving me the need to wipe them away. And now I, too, walk the paths of memory. I walk them in the light... the failing light... .

## KAIRN TELEST, ABARRACH

... THE COUNCIL CHAMBER OF THE KING OF THE REALM OF KAIRN Telest is thronged with people. The king is meeting with the council, made up of prominent citizens whose heads of household served in this capacity when the people first came to Kairn Telest, centuries before. Although matters of an extremely serious nature are under discussion, the meeting is orderly and formal. Each member of the council listens to his fellow members with attention and respect. This includes His Majesty.

The king will issue no royal edicts, set forth no royal commands, make no royal proclamations. All matters are voted on by the council. The king acts as guide and counselor, gives his advice, casts the deciding vote only when the issue is equally divided.

Why have a ruler at all? The people of Kairn Telest have a distinct need for propriety and order. We determined, centuries before, that we needed some type of governmental structure. We considered Ourselves, our situation. We knew ourselves to be more a family than a community, and we decided that a monarchy, which provides a parent-figure, combined with a voting council would be the wisest, most appropriate form of government.

We have never had reason to regret the decision of our ancestors. The first queen chosen to rule produced a daughter capable of carrying on her mother's work. That daughter produced a son, and thus has the reign of Kairn Telest been handed down through generation after generation. The people of Kairn Telest are well satisfied and content. In a world that seems to be constantly changing around us—change over which we apparently have no control—our monarchy is a strong and stable influence.

'And so the level of the river is no higher?' the king asks, his gaze going from one concerned face to another.

The council members sit around a central meeting table. The king's chair stands at the head. His chair is more elaborate than the other chairs, but remains on a level equal with theirs.

"If anything, Your Majesty, the river has dropped farther. Or so it was yesterday, when I checked." The head of the Fanner's Guild speaks in frightened, gloom-laden tones. "I didn't go by to see today, because I had to leave early to arrive at the palace on time. But I've little hope that it would have risen in the night."

'And the crops?'

"Unless we get water to the fields in the next five cycles' time, we've lost the bread-grain, for certain. Fortunately, the kairn grass is doing well—it seems to be able to thrive under almost impossible conditions. As for the vegetables, we've set the field hands to hauling water to the gardens, but that's not working. Hauling water is a new task for them. They don't understand it, and you know how difficult they can be when they're given something new."

Heads nod around the table. The king frowns, scratches his bearded chin. The farmer continues, seeming to feel the need to explain, perhaps to offer a defense.

"The hands keep forgetting what they're supposed to be doing and wander off. We find them, back at work on their old jobs, water buckets left to lie on the ground. By my calculations, we've wasted more water this way than we've used on the vegetables."

'And your recommendation?'

"My recommendation." The farmer glances around the table, seeking support. He sighs. "I recommend that we harvest what we can, while we can. It will be better to save the little we have than to let it all shrivel up and die in the fields. I brought this parfruit to show you. As you see, it's undersize, not yet ripe. It shouldn't be picked for another sixteen cycles, at least. But if we don't gather it now, it'll wither and die on the vine. After the harvest, we can do another planting and perhaps, by that time, the river will have returned to its normal—"

"No," calls a voice, a voice new to the room and to the meeting. I have been kept waiting in the antechamber long enough. It is obvious that the king isn't going to send for me. I must take matters into my own hands. "The river will not return, at least not anytime soon, and then only if some drastic change occurs that I do not foresee. The Hemo is reduced to a muddy trickle and, unless we are indeed fortunate, Your Majesty, I believe it may dry up altogether." The king turns, scowls in irritation as I enter. He knows that I am far more intelligent than he is and, therefore, he doesn't trust me. But he has come to rely on me. He's been forced to. Those few times he did not, when he went his own way, he came to regret it. That is why I am now necromancer to the king.

"I was planning to send for you when the time was right, Bal-tazar. But," the king adds, his frown growing deeper, "it seems you can't wait to impart bad news. Please be seated and give the council your report." From the tone of his voice, he would like to blame the bad news on me personally.

I sit down at a chair at the far end of the rectangular meeting table, a table carved of stone. The eyes of those gathered around the table turn slowly, reluctant to look directly at me. I am, I must admit, an unusual sight.

Those who live inside the gigantic caverns of the stone world of Abarrach are naturally pale complected. But my skin is a dead white, a white so pallid it appears to be almost translucent and has a faint bluish cast given by the blood veins that lay close beneath the skin's thin surface.

The unnatural pallor comes from the fact that I spend long hours shut up in the library, reading ancient texts. My jet black hair—extremely rare among my people, whose hair is almost always white, dark brown at the tips—and the black robes of my calling make my complexion appear to be even whiter by contrast.

Few see me on a daily basis, for I keep to the palace, near my beloved library, rarely venturing into town or into the royal court. My appearance at a council meeting is an alarming event. I am a presence to be feared. My coming casts a pall over the hearts of those in attendance, much as if I'd spread my black robes over them.

I begin by standing up. Extending my hands flat on the table, I lean on them slightly so that I seem to loom over those staring back at me in rapt fascination.

"I suggested to His Majesty that I undertake to explore the Hemo, track it back to its source, and see if I could discover what was causing the water to drop so severely. His Majesty agreed that this suggestion was a good one, and I set out."

I notice several council members exchange glances with each other, their brows darkening. This exploration had not been discussed or sanctioned by the council, which means that they are, of course, immediately against it.

The king sees their concern, stirs in his chair, seems about to come to his own defense. I slide into the breach before he can say a word.

"His Majesty proposed that we inform the council and receive their approbation, but I opposed such a move. Not out of any lack of respect for the members of the council," I hasten to assure them, "but out of the need to maintain calm among the populace. His Majesty and I were then of the opinion that the drop in the river level was a freak of nature. Perhaps a seismic disturbance had caused a section of the cavern to collapse and block the river's flow. Perhaps a colony of animals had dammed it up. Why needlessly upset people? Alas"—I am unable to prevent a sigh—"such is not the case."

The council members regard me with growing concern. They have become accustomed to the strangeness of my appearance, and now they begin to discern changes in me. I am aware that I do not look good, even worse than usual. My black eyes are sunken, ringed by purple shadows. The eyelids are heavy and red rimmed. The journey was long and fatiguing. I have not slept in many cycles. My shoulders slump with exhaustion.

The council members forget their irritation at the king acting on his own, without consulting them. They wait, grim faced and unhappy, to hear my report.

"I traveled up the Hemo, following the river's banks. I journeyed beyond civilized lands, through the forests of laze trees that stand on our borders, and came to the end of the wall that forms our kairn. But I did not find the river's source there. A tunnel cuts through the cavern wall and, according to the ancient maps, the Hemo flows into this tunnel. The maps, I discovered, proved accurate. The Hemo has either cut its own path through the cavern wall or the river runs along a path formed for it by those who made our world in the beginning. Or perhaps a combination of both."

The king shakes his head at me, disliking my learned digressions. I see his expression of annoyance and, slightly inclining my head to acknowledge it, return to the subject at hand.

"I followed the tunnel a great distance and discovered a small lake set in a box canyon, at the bottom of what once must have been a magnificent waterfall. There, the Hemo plunges over a sheer rock cliff, falling hundreds of footspans, from a height equal to the height of cavern ceiling above our heads."

The citizens of Kairn Telest appear impressed. I shake my head, warning them not to get their hopes up.

"I could tell, from the vast dimensions of the smooth plane of the wall's rock surface and from the depth of the lake bed below, that the river's flow had once been strong and powerful. Once, I judge, a man standing beneath it might have been crushed by the sheer force of the water falling on him. Now, a child could bathe safely in the trickle that flows down the cliff's side."

My tone is bitter. The king and council members watch me warily, uneasily.

"I traveled on, still seeking the river's source. I climbed up the sides of the canyon wall. And I noticed a strange phenomenon: the higher I climbed, the cooler grew the temperature of the air around me. When I arrived at the top of the falls, near the ceiling of the cavern, I discovered the reason why. I was no longer surrounded by the rock walls of the cavern." My voice grows tense, dark, ominous.

"I found myself surrounded by walls of solid ice."

The council members appear startled, they feel the awe and fear I mean to convey. But I can tell from their confused expressions that they do not yet comprehend the danger.

"My friends," I tell them, speaking softly, my eyes moving around the table, gathering them up, and holding them fast, "the ceiling of the cavern, through which the Hemo flows, is rimed with ice. It didn't used to be that way," I add, noting that they still do not understand. My fingers curl slightly. "This is a change, a dire change. But, listen, I will explain further.

"Appalled by my discovery, I continued traveling along the banks of the Hemo. The way was dark and treacherous, the cold was bitter. I marveled at this, for I had not yet passed beyond the range of light and warmth shed by the colossus. Why weren't the colossus working, I wondered?"

"If it was as cold as you claim, how could you go on?" the king demands.

"Fortunately, Your Majesty, my magic is strong and it sustained me," I reply.

He doesn't like to hear that, but he was the one who challenged

\*\*>£. I am reputed to be extremely powerful in magic, more powerful than most in the realm of Kairn Telest. He thinks that I am showing off.

"I arrived eventually, after much difficulty, at the opening in the cavern wall through which the Hemo flows," I continue. 'According to the ancient maps, when I looked out of this opening, I should have seen the Celestial Sea, the freshwater ocean created by the ancients for our use. What I looked out on, my friends"—I pause, making certain I have their undivided attention—"was a vast sea of ice!"

I hiss the final word. The council members shiver, as if I'd brought the cold back in a cage and set it loose in the Council Chamber. They stare at me in silence, astounded, appalled, the full understanding of what I am telling them slowly working its way, like an arrow tip lodged in an old wound, into their minds.

"How is such a thing possible?" The king is the first to break the silence. "How can it happen?"

I pass a hand over my brow. I am weary, drained. My magic may have been strong enough to sustain me, but its use has taken its toll. "I have spent long hours studying the matter, Your Majesty. I plan to continue my research to confirm my theory, but I believe I have determined the answer. If I may make use of this parfruit?"

I lean further over the table, grab a piece of parfruit from the bowl. I hold up the round, hard-shelled fruit, whose meat is much prized for the making of parfruit wine, and—with a twist of my hands—break the fruit in half.

"This," I tell them, pointing to the fruit's large red seed, "represents the center of our world, the magma core. These"—I trace red veins that extend outward from the seed through the yellowish meat to the shell—"are the colossus that, by the wisdom and skill and magic of the ancients, carry the energy obtained from the magma core throughout the world, bringing warmth and life to what would otherwise be cold and barren stone. The surface of Abarach is solid rock, similar to this hard shell."

I take a bite of the fruit, tearing through the shell with my teeth, leaving a hollowed out portion that I exhibit.

"This, we will say, represents the Celestial Sea, the ocean of fresh water above us. The space around here"—I wave my hand around the parfruit—"is the Void, dark and cold.

"Now, if the colossus do their duty, the cold of the Void is driven back, the ocean is kept well heated, the water flows freely down through the tunnel and brings life to our land. But if the colossus fail..."

My voice trails off ominously. I shrug and toss the parfruit back onto the table. It rolls and wobbles along, eventually falls over the edge. The council members watch it in a horrible kind of fascination, making no move to touch it. One woman jumps when the fruit hits the floor.

"You're saying that is what's happening? The colossus are failing?"

"I believe so, Your Majesty."

"But, then, shouldn't we see some sign of it? Our colossus still radiate light, heat—"

"May I remind king and council that I commented on the fact that it was the top of the cavern only that is rimed in ice. Not the cavern wall. I believe our colossus are, if not failing utterly, at least growing weaker. We do not yet notice the change, although I have begun to register a consistent and previously inexplicable drop in the average daily temperature. We may not notice the change for some time. But, if my theory holds true ..." I hesitate, reluctant to speak.

"Well, go ahead," the king orders me. "Better to see the hole that lies in the path and walk around it than fall into it blindly, as the saying goes."

"I do not think we will be able to avoid this hole," I say quietly. "First, as the ice grows thicker on the Celestial Sea, the Hemo will continue to dwindle and eventually dry up completely."

Exclamations of horrified shock interrupt me. I wait until these die down.

"The temperature in the cavern will drop steadily. The light radiated by the colossus will grow dimmer and soon cease altogether. We will find ourselves in a land of darkness, a land of bitter cold, a land with no water, a land where no food will grow—not even by means of magic. We will find ourselves in the land that is dead, Your Majesty. And if we stay here, we, too, will perish."

I hear a gasp, catch a glimpse of movement near the door. Edmund—he is only fourteen—stands listening. No one else breathes a word. Several of the council members look stricken. Then someone mutters that none of this is proved, it is merely the gloom-and-doom theory of a necromancer who has spent too much time among his books.

"How long?" the king asks harshly.

"Oh, it will not happen tomorrow, Your Majesty. Nor yet many tomorrows from now. But," I continue, my fond gaze going sadly to the door, "the prince, your son, will never rule over the land of Kairn Telest."

The king follows my glance, sees the young man, and frowns. "Edmund, you know better than this! What are you doing here?"

The prince flushes. "Forgive me, Father. I didn't mean to—to interrupt. I came looking for you. Mother is ill. The physician thinks you should come. But when I arrived, I didn't want to disturb the council and so I waited, and then I heard ... I heard what Baltazar said! Is it true, Father? Will we have to leave—"

"That will do, Edmund. Wait for me. I will be with you presently."

The boy gulps, bows, and fades back, silent and unobtrusive, to stand in the shadows near the doorway. My heart aches for him. I long to comfort him, to explain. I meant to frighten them, not him.

"Forgive me, I must go to my wife."

The king rises to his feet. The council members do likewise; the meeting is obviously at an end.

"I need not tell you to keep this quiet until we have more information," the king continues. "Your own common sense will point out to you the wisdom of such an action. We will meet together again in five cycles' time. However," he adds, his brows knotting together, "I advise that we take the recommendation of the Farmer's Guild and make an early harvest."

The members vote. The recommendation passes. They file out, many casting dark and unhappy glances back at me. They would dearly love to blame this on someone. I meet each gaze with unruffled aplomb, secure in my position. When the last one has left, I glide forward and lay a hand on the arm of the king, who is eager to be gone.

"What is it?" the king demands, obviously irritated at my interruption. He is much concerned about his wife.

"Your Majesty, forgive me for delaying you, but I wanted to mention something to you in private."

The king draws back, away from my touch. "We do nothing in secret on Kairn Telest. Whatever you want to say to me should have been said in the council."

"I would have said it in the council, if I were certain of my facts. I prefer to leave it to the wisdom and discretion of His Majesty to bring up the matter if he thinks it proper that the people should know."

He glares at me. "What is it, Baltazar? Another theory?"

"Yes, Sire. Another theory ... about the colossus. According to my studies, the magic in the colossus was intended by the ancients to be eternal. The magic in the colossus, Your Majesty, could not possibly fail."

The king regards me in exasperation. "I don't have time for games, Necromancer. You were the one who said the colossus were failing—"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I did. And I believe that they are. But perhaps I chose the wrong word to describe what is happening to our colossus. The word may not be failure, Sire, but destruction. Deliberate destruction."

The king stares at me, then shakes his head. "Come, Edmund," he says, motioning peremptorily to his son. "We will go see your mother."

The young man runs to join his father. The two start to walk away.

"Sire," I call out, the urgency in my voice bringing the king again to a halt. "I believe that somewhere, in realms that exist below Kairn Telest, someone wages a most insidious war on us. And they will defeat us utterly, unless we do something to stop them. Defeat us without so much as letting fly an arrow or tossing a spear. Someone, Sire, is stealing away the warmth and light that give us life!"

"For what purpose, Baltazar? What is the motive for this nefarious scheme?"

I ignore the king's sarcasm. "To use it for themselves, Sire. I thought long and hard on this problem during my journey home to Kairn Telest. What if Abarrach itself is dying? What if the magma heart is shrinking? A kingdom might consider it necessary to steal from its neighbors to protect its own."

"You're mad, Baltazar," says the king. He has his hand on his son's thin shoulder, steering him away from me. But Edmund looks over his shoulder, his eyes large and frightened. I smile at him, reassuringly, and he seems relieved. My smile vanishes, the moment he can no longer see me.

"No, Sire, I am not mad," I say to the shadows. "I wish I were. It would be easier." I rub my eyes, which burn from lack of sleep. "It would be far easier. . . ."

CHAPTER \* 3

KAIRN TELEST, ABARRACH

EDMUND APPEARS ALONE, AT THE DOOR TO THE LIBRARY, WHERE I SIT recording in my journal the conversation that recently took place between father and son, as well as my memories of a time now long past. I lay down the pen and rise respectfully from my desk.

"Your Highness. Please, enter and welcome."

"I'm not interrupting your work?" He stands fidgeting nervously in the doorway. He is unhappy and wants to talk, yet the basis for his unhappiness is his refusal to listen to what he knows I am going to say.

"I have just this moment concluded."

"My father's lying down," Edmund says abruptly "I am afraid he'll catch a chill, standing outdoors like that. I ordered his servant to prepare a hot posset."

"And what has your father decided?" I ask.

Edmund's troubled face glimmers ghostly in the light of a gas lamp that, for the moment, drives away the darkness of Kairn Telest.

"What can he decide?" he returns in bitter resignation. "There is no decision to be made. We will leave."

We are in my world, in my library. The prince glances around, notes that the books have been given a loving good-bye. The older and more fragile volumes have been packed away in sturdy boxes of woven kairn grass. Other, newer texts, many penned by myself and my apprentices, are neatly labeled, stored away in the deep recesses of dry rock shelves.

Seeing Edmund's glance and reading his thoughts, I smile shamefacedly "Foolish of me, isn't it?" My hand caresses the leather-bound cover of the volume that rests before me. It is one of the few that I will take with me: my description of the last days of Kairn Telest. "But I could not bear to leave them in disorder."

"It isn't foolish. Who knows but that someday you will return?" Edmund tries to speak cheerfully. He has become accustomed to speaking cheerfully accustomed to doing what he can to lift the spirits of his people.

"Who knows? I know, My Prince." I shake my head ruefully. "You forget to whom you talk. I am not one of the council members."

"But there is a chance," he persists.

It hurts me to shatter his dream. Yet—for the good of all of us— he must be made to face the truth.

"No, Your Highness, there is not a chance. The fate that I described to your father ten years earlier is upon us. All my calculations point to one conclusion: our world, Abarrach, is dying."

"Then what is the use of going on?" Edmund demands impatiently. "Why not just stay here? Why endure the hardship and suffering of this trek into unknown regions if we go only to meet death at the end?"

"I do not counsel that you abandon hope and plunge into despair, Edmund. I suggest now, as I have done before, that you turn your hope in another direction."

The prince's face darkens, he is upset and moves slightly away from me. "My father has forbidden you to discuss that subject."

"Your father is a man who lives in the past, not the present," I say bluntly. "Forgive me, Your Highness, but it has always been my practice to speak the truth, no matter how unpleasant. When your mother died, something in your father died, too. He looks backward. It is up to you to look forward!"

"My father is still king," Edmund says sternly.

"Yes," I reply. And I cannot help feeling that this is a fact to be deeply regretted.

Edmund faces me, chin high. 'And while he is king we will do as he and the council command. We will travel to the old realm of Kairn Necros, seek out our brethren there, and ask them for help. You were the one who proposed this undertaking, after all."

"I proposed that we travel to Kairn Necros," I correct him. "According to my studies, Kairn Necros is the one place left on this world where we might reasonably expect to find life. It is located on the Fire Sea, and, although the great magma ocean has undoubtedly shrunk, it must still be large enough to provide warmth and energy for the people of its realm. I did not counsel that we go to them as beggars!"

Edmund's handsome face flushes, his eyes flash. He is young and proud.

I see the fire in him and do what I can to stoke it.

"Beggars to those who brought about our ruin!" I remind him.

"You don't know that for certain—"

"Bah! All the evidence points one way—to Kairn Necros. Yes, I think we will find the people of that realm alive and well. Why? Because they have stolen our lives from us!"

"Then why did you suggest that we go to them?" Edmund is losing patience. "Do you want war? Is that it?"

"You know what I want, Edmund," I say softly.

The prince sees, too late, that he's been led down the forbidden path. "We leave after we have broken our sleep's fasting," he tells me coldly. "I have certain matters to which I must attend, as do you, Necromancer. Our dead must be prepared for the journey."

He turns to leave. I reach out, catch hold of his fur-cloaked arm.

"Death's Gate!" I tell him. "Think about it, My Prince. That is all I ask. Think about it!"

Disquieted, he pauses, although he does not turn around. I increase the pressure of my hand on the young man's arm, squeezing through the layers of fur and cloth to feel the flesh and bone and muscle, hard and strong beneath. I feel him tremble.

"Remember the words of the prophecy. Death's Gate is our hope, Edmund," I say quietly. "Our only hope."

The prince shakes his head, shakes off my hand, and leaves the library to its flickering flame, its entombed books.

I return to my writing.

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The people of Kairn Telest gather in the darkness near the gate of their city wall. The gate has stood open for as long as anyone can remember, for as long as records have been kept, which is from the time of the city's founding. The walls were erected to protect the people from rampaging, predatory animals. These walls were never intended to protect people from one another. Such a concept is unthinkable to us. Travelers, strangers, are always welcome, and so the gates stand open.

But then came the day when it occurred to the people of Kairn Telest that there had been no travelers for a long, long while. It occurred to us that there would be no travelers. There hadn't even been any animals. And so the gates remain open, because to shut them would be a waste of time and a bother. And now the people stand before the open gates, themselves travelers, and wait in silence for their journey to commence.

Their king and prince arrive, accompanied by the army, the soldiers bearing kairn grass torches. Myself—necromancer to the long—and my fellow necromancers and apprentices walk behind. After us trail the palace servants bearing heavy bundles containing clothes and food. One, shambling close behind me, carries a box filled with books.

The king comes to a halt near the open gates. Taking one of the torches from a soldier, His Majesty holds it high. Its light illuminates a small portion of the dark city. He looks out across it. The people turn and look out across it. I turn.

We see wide streets winding among buildings created out of the stone of Abarrach. The gleaming white marble exteriors, decorated with runes whose meanings no one now remembers, reflect back to us the light of our torches. We look upward, to a rise in the cavern floor, to the palace. We can't see it now. It is shrouded in darkness. But we can see a light, a tiny light, burning in one of the windows.

"I left the lamp," the king announces, his voice loud and unusually strong, "to light the way for our return."

The people cheer, because they know he wants them to cheer. But the cheers die away soon, too soon; more than a few cut off by tears.

The gas fueling that lamp will last about thirty cycles," I remark in a low voice, coming to take my place at the prince's side.

"Be silent!" Edmund rebukes me. "It made my father happy."

"You cannot silence the truth, Your Highness. You can't silence reality," I remind him. He does not reply.

"We leave Kairn Telest now," the king was continuing, holding the torch high above his head, "but we will be back with newfound wealth. And we will make our realm more glorious and more beautiful than ever."

No one cheers. No one has the heart.

The people of Kairn Telest begin to file out of their city. They travel mostly on foot, carrying their clothes and food wrapped in bundles, though some pull crude carts bearing possessions and those who cannot walk: the infirm, the elderly, small children. Beasts of burden, once used to draw the carts, have long since died off; their flesh consumed for food, their fur used to protect the people from the bitter cold.

Our king is the last to leave. He walks out of the gates without a backward glance, his eyes facing forward confidently to the future, to a new life. His stride is firm, his stance upright. The people, looking at him, grow hopeful. They form an aisle along the road and now there are cheers and now the cheers are heartfelt. The king walks among them, his face alight with dignity.

"Come, Edmund," he commands. The prince leaves me, takes his place at his father's side.

He and his father walk among the people to the head of the line. Holding his torch aloft, the king of Kairn Telest leads his people forth.

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A detail of soldiers remains after the others have gone. I wait with them, curious to know their final orders.

It takes them some time and a considerable amount of effort, but at last they succeed in pulling shut the gates, gates marked with runes that no one remembers and that, now, as they march off with the torches, no one can see in the darkness.

CHAPTER \* 4

KAIRN TELEST, ABARRACH

I AM WRITING NOW, UNDER ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE CONDITIONS. I EXPLAIN this to anyone who may perhaps read this volume at a later date and wonder both at the change in style and the change in the handwriting. No, I have not suddenly grown old and feeble, nor am I plagued by illness. The letters straggle across the page because I am forced to write by the dim light of a flickering torch. The only surface I have for a tablet is a slab of flint, foraged for me by one of the soldiers. My magic alone keeps the bloodberry ink from freezing long enough for me to put words to paper.

Plus, I am bone weary. Every muscle in my body aches, my feet are bruised and blistered. But I made a pact with myself and with Edmund to keep this account and I will now record the cycle's events before—

I started to say before I forget them.

Alas, I do not think that I will ever forget.

The first cycle's journeying was not physically difficult for us. The route lies overland, through what were once fields of grain and vegetables, orchards, plains where the herd animals were fed. The paths were easily traversed—physically. Emotionally, the first cycle's journey was devastating.

Once, not so many years ago, the warm, soft light of the colossus beamed upon this land. Now, in the darkness, by the light of torches carried by the soldiers, we saw the fields lying empty, barren, desolate. The brown stubble of the last crop of kairn grass stood in clumps, rattling like bones in the blasts of chill wind that whistled mournfully through cracks in the cavern walls.

The almost joyful, adventurous mood that sent our people marching in hope drained from them and was left behind in the desolate landscape. We trudged in silence over the frozen ground, cold-numbed feet slipping and stumbling on patches of ice and frost. We halted once, for a midday meal, and then pushed on. Children, missing their naps, whimpered fretfully, often falling asleep in their father's arms as they walked.

No one spoke a single word of complaint, but Edmund heard the children's cries. He saw the people's weariness, and knew it was not caused by fatigue but by bitter sorrow. I could see that his heart ached for them, yet we had to keep going. Our food supplies are meager and, with rationing, will last barely the length of time I have estimated will be needed to reach the realm of Kairn Necros.

I considered suggesting to Edmund that he break the unhappy silence. He could talk cheerfully to the people of their future in a new land. But I decided it was best to keep quiet. The silence was almost sacred. Our people were saying good-bye.

Near cycle's end, we came to a colossus. No one said a word but, one by one, the people of Kairn Telest left the path, came to stand beneath the gigantic column of stone. Once, it would have been impossible to have approached the bright and shining source of our life. Now, it stood dead and cold as the land it had forsaken.

The king, accompanied by myself and Edmund and torch-bearing soldiers, moved forward out of the crowd and walked up to the colossus's base. Edmund stared at the huge stone pillar curiously. He had never been close to one before. His expression was awed. He marveled at the girth and mass of the pillar of rock.

I looked at the king. He appeared pained and bewildered and angry, as if the colossus had betrayed him personally.

I, myself, was familiar with the colossus and what it looked like. I had investigated it long ago, seeking to unravel its secrets to save my people. But the mystery of the colossus is forever locked in the past.

Impulsively, Edmund pulled off his fur gloves, reached out his hand to touch the rock, to run his fingers along the sigla-inscribed stone. He paused, however, suddenly fearful of the magic, afraid of being burned or shocked. He looked questioningly at me.

"It won't hurt you," I said, with a shrug. "It lost, long ago, the power to hurt."

"Just as it lost the power to help," Edmund added, but he said the words to himself.

Gingerly, he ran his fingertips over the chill stone. Hesitantly, almost reverently, he traced the pattern of the runes whose meaning and magic are now long forgotten. He lifted his head, looked up and up as far as the torchlight shone on the glistening rock. The sigla extend upward into the darkness and beyond.

The column rises to the ceiling of the cavern," I commented, thinking it best to speak in the crisp, concise voice of the teacher, as I used to speak to him in the happy days when we were together in the classroom. "Presumably, it extends up through the ceiling to the region of the Celestial Sea. And every bit of it is covered in these runes, that you see here.

"It is frustrating"—I could not help frowning—"but most of these sigla, individually, I know, I understand. The rune's power lies not in the individual sigil, however, but in the combination of sigla. It is that combination that is beyond my ability to comprehend. I copied down the patterns, took them back with me to the library, and spent many hours studying them with the help of the ancient texts.

"But," I continued, speaking so softly that only Edmund could hear my words, "it was like trying to unravel a huge ball made up of myriad tiny threads. A single thread ran smoothly through my fingers. I followed it and it led me to a knot. Patiently I worked, separating one thread from another and then another and then another until my mind ached from the strain. I untangled one knot, only to find, beneath it, another. And by the time I unraveled that one, I had lost hold of the first single thread. And there are millions of knots," I said, looking upward, sighing, "Millions." The king turned away from the pillar abruptly, his face drawn arid darkly lined in the torchlight. He had not spoken a word during the time we'd stood beneath the colossus. It occurred to me, then, that he had not spoken since we left the city gates. He walked off, back to the path. The people lifted their children to their shoulders and started on their way. Most of the soldiers followed after the people, taking the light with them. One only remained near myself the prince.

Edmund stood before the pillar, pulling on his gloves. I waited for him, sensing that he wanted to talk to me in private.

"These same runes, or others like them, must guard Death's Gate," he said in a low voice, when he was certain no one could overhear. The soldier had backed off, out of courtesy. "Even if we did find it, we could not hope to enter."

My heart beat faster. At last, he was beginning to accept the idea!

"Recall the prophecy, Edmund," was all I said.

I didn't want to appear too eager or press the issue too closely. It is best, with Edmund, to let him turn matters over in his mind, make his own decisions. I learned that when he was a boy in school. Suggest, introduce, recommend. Never insist, never force him. Try to do so, and he becomes hard and cold as this cavern wall that is now, as I write, poking me painfully in the back.

"Prophecy!" he repeated irritably. "Words spoken centuries ago! If they ever do come true, which I must admit I doubt, why should they come to fulfillment in our lifetime?"

"Because, My Prince," I told him, "I do not think that, after our lifetime, there will be any others."

The answer shocked him, as I intended. He stared at me, appalled, said nothing more. Glancing a last time at the colossus, he turned away and hastened to catch up with his father. I knew my words troubled him. I saw his expression, brooding and thoughtful, his shoulders bent.

Edmund, Edmund! How I love you and how it breaks my heart to thrust this terrible burden on you. I look up from my work and watch you walking among the people, making certain they are as comfortable as they can possibly be. I know that you are exhausted, but you will not lie down to sleep until every one of your people is sleeping.

You have not eaten all cycle. I saw you give your ration of food to the old woman who nursed you when you were a babe. You tried to keep the deed hidden, secret. But I saw. I know. And your people are beginning to know, as well, Edmund. By the end of this journey, they will come to understand and appreciate a true king.

But, I digress. I must conclude this quickly. My fingers are cramped with the cold and, despite my best efforts, a thin layer of ice is starting to form across the top of the ink jar.

That colossus of which I wrote marks the border of Kairn Telest. We continued traveling until cycle's end, when we finally arrived at our destination. I searched for and found the entrance to the tunnel that was marked on one of the ancient maps, a tunnel that bores through the kairn wall. I knew it was the right tunnel, because, on entering it, I discovered that its floor sloped gently downward.

"This tunnel," I announced, pointing to the deep darkness inside, "will lead us to regions far below our own kairn. It will lead us deeper into the heart of Abarrach, lead us down to the lands below, to the realm that is lettered on the map as Kairn Necros, to the city of Necropolis."

The people stood in silence, not even the babies cried. We all knew, when we entered that tunnel, that we would leave our homeland behind us.

The king, saying nothing, walked forward and into the tunnel—the first. Edmund and I came behind him; the prince was forced to stoop to avoid hitting his head on the low ceiling. Once the king had made his symbolic gesture, I took the lead, for I am now the guide.

The people began to follow after us. I saw many pause at the entrance to look back, to say farewell, to catch a final glimpse of their homeland. I must admit that I, too, could not refrain from taking a last look. But all we could see was darkness. What light remains, we are taking with us.

We entered the tunnel. The flickering light of the torches reflected off the shining obsidian walls, the shadows of the people slid along the floors. We moved on, delving deeper, spiraling downward.

Behind us, darkness dosed over Kairn Telest forever.

CHAPTER \* 5

THE TUNNELS OF HOPE, ABARRACH

WHOEVER READS THIS ACCOUNT (IF ANY ONE OF us is LEFT ALIVE TO read it, which I am greatly beginning to doubt), he will note a gap in the time period. When I last put down my pen,

we had just entered the first of what the map calls the Tunnels of Hope. You will see that I have scratched out that name and written in another.

The Tunnels of Death.

We have spent twenty cycles in these tunnels, far longer than I had anticipated. The map has proved inaccurate, not so far, I must admit, as to the route, which is essentially the same one that our ancestors traveled to reach Kairn Telest.

Then the tunnels were newly formed, with smooth walls, strong ceilings, level floors. I knew that much would have changed during the past centuries; Abarrach is subject to seismic disturbances that send tremors through the ground, but they do little more than rattle the dishes in the cupboards and set the chandeliers in the palace swaying.

I had assumed that our ancestors would have fortified these tunnels with their magic, as they did our palaces, our city walls, our shops, and our houses. If they did so, the runes have either failed or they need to be reforged, reinstated... re-runed, for lack of a better term. Or perhaps the ancients did not bother to protect the tunnels, assuming that what destruction took place could be easily cleared by those possessing the knowledge of the sigla.

Of all the possible disasters those early ancestors of ours feared for us, they obviously didn't foresee the worst of all. They never imagined that we would lose the magic.

Time and again we have been forced to make costly delays. We found the tunnel ceiling collapsed in many places, our way blocked by immense boulders that took us several cycles to move. Huge cracks gape in the floor, cracks that only the bravest dared jump, sacks that had to be bridged before the people could cross. And we are not out of the tunnels yet. Nor, does it seem, that we are near the end. I cannot judge our location precisely. Several major landmarks are gone, carried away by rock slides, or else have altered so over the years that it is impossible to recognize them. I am not even certain, anymore, that we are following the correct route. I have no way of knowing. According to the map, the ancients inscribed runes on the walls that could guide travelers, but—if so—their magic is now beyond our comprehension and use.

We are in desperate straits. Food rations have been cut in half. The flesh has melted from our bones. Children no longer cry from weariness; they cry from hunger. The carts have fallen by the wayside. Beloved possessions became burdens to arms grown weak from starvation and exhaustion. Only the carts needed to bear the elderly and the infirm remain in use and these carts, too, tragically, are beginning to litter the tunnels. The weak among us are starting to die now. My fellow necromancers have taken up their grim tasks.

The burden of the people's suffering has fallen, as I knew it would, on the shoulders of their prince. Edmund watches his father fail before his eyes.

The king was, admittedly, an old man, by the standards of our people. His son was born to him late in life. But, when we left the palace, he was hale, hearty, strong as men half his age. I had a dream in which I saw the king's life as a thread tied back to the golden throne that now stands in the cold darkness of Kairn Telest. As he walked away from the throne, the thread remained tied to it. Slowly, cycle by cycle, the thread is coming unraveled, stretching thinner and thinner the farther he moves from his homeland, until now I fear a harsh or clumsy touch will cause it to snap.

The king takes no interest in anything anymore: what we do, we say, where we are going. Most of the time, I wonder if he even notices the ground beneath his feet. Edmund walks constantly by his father's side, guiding him like one who has lost the power of sight. No, that is not quite a correct description. The king acts more like a man walking backward, who does not see what lies ahead, only what he is leaving behind.

On the occasions when the prince is called away by his numberless responsibilities, and he must leave his father, Edmund makes certain that two soldiers are on hand to take over his task. The king is tractable, he goes where he is led without question. He moves when he is told to move, he stops when he is told to stop. He eats whatever is put into his hand, never seeming to taste it. I think he would eat a rock, if it were given to him. I also think he would stop eating altogether, if no one brought him food.

For long cycles, at the journey's start, the king said nothing to anyone, not even to his son. Now, he talks almost constantly, but only to himself, never to anyone around him. Anyone that can be counted, that is. He spends a great deal of time talking to his wife— not as she is, among the dead, but as she was, when she was among the living. Our king has forsaken the present, returned to the past.

Matters grew so bad that the council begged the prince to declare himself king. Edmund rebuffed them, in one of the few times I have ever seen him lose his temper. The council members slunk away before his wrath like whipped children. Edmund is right. According to our law, the king is king until his death. But, then, the law never considered the possibility that a king might go insane. Such a thing doesn't happen among our people.

The council members were actually reduced to coming to me (I must say that I relished the moment) and begging me to intervene with Edmund on behalf of the people. I promised to do what I could.

"Edmund, we must talk," I said to him during one of our enforced stops, waiting while the soldiers cleared away a huge mound of rubble that blocked the path.

His face darkened, turned rebellious. I had often seen such a look when he was a youth and I had forced upon him the study of mathematics, a subject to which he never took. The look he cast me brought back such fond memories that I had to pause and recover myself before I could continue.

"Edmund," I said, deliberately keeping my tone practical, brisk, making this a matter of common sense, "your father is ill. You must take over the leadership of the people—if only for the time being," I said, raising my hand, forestalling his angry refusal, "until His Majesty is once more able to resume his duties."

"You have a responsibility to the people, My Prince," I added. "Never in the history of Kairn Telest have we been in greater danger than we are now. Will you abandon them, out of a false sense of duty and filiality? Would your father want you to abandon them?"

I did not mention, of course, that it was his father who had, himself, abandoned the people. Edmund understood my implication, however. If I had spoken such words aloud, he would angrily deny them. But when they were spoken to him by his own conscience ...

I saw him glance at his father, who was sitting on a rock, chatting with his past. I saw the trouble and distress on Edmund's face, saw the guilt I knew then, that my weapon had struck home. Reluctantly, I left him alone, to let the wound rankle.

Why is it always I, who love him, who must repeatedly cause him pain? I wondered sadly, as I walked away.

At the end of that cycle, Edmund called a meeting of the people and informed them that he would be their leader, if they wanted him, but only for the time being. He would retain the title of prince. His father was still king and Edmund confidently expected his father to resume his duties as king when he was well.

The people responded to their prince with enthusiasm, their obvious love and loyalty touched him deeply. Edmund's speech did not ease the people's hunger, but it lifted their hearts and made the hunger easier to bear. I watched him with pride and a newfound hope in my own heart.

They will follow him anywhere, I thought, even through Death's Gate.

But it seems likely that we will find death before we will find Death's Gate. The only positive factor we have encountered on our Journey thus far is that the temperature has, at least, moderated; growing somewhat warmer. I begin to think that we have been following the correct route, that we are drawing nearer to our destination—Abarach's fiery heart.

"It is a hopeful sign," I said to Edmund, at the end of another bleak and cheerless cycle, traversing the tunnels. 'A hopeful sign,' I repeated confidently.

What fears and misgivings I have, I am keeping to myself. It is needless to pile more burdens on those young shoulders, strong though they may be.

"Look," I continued, pointing at the map, "you will note that when we come to the end of the tunnels, they open up on a great pool of magma, that lies outside. The Lake of Burning Rock, it is named—the first major landmark we would see on entering the Kairn Necros. I cannot be certain, but I believe it is the heat from this lake, seeping up through the tunnel, that we are feeling."

"Which means that we are near the end of our journey," Edmund said, his face—that has grown much too thin—lighting with hope.

"You must eat more, My Prince," I said to him gently. "Eat at least your share. You will not help the people if you fall sick or grow too weak to go on."

He shook his head; I knew he would. But I knew, as well, that he would consider my advice seriously. That sleep-half, I saw him consume what small amount of food was handed to him.

"Yes," I continued, returning to the map, "I believe that we are near the end. I think, in fact, we must be about here," I placed a finger on the parchment. "Two cycles more and we reach the lake, provided that we don't run into any further obstacles."

"And then we are in Kairn Necros. And surely there we will find a realm of plenty. Surely we will find food and water. Look at this huge ocean that they call the Fire Sea." He indicated a large body of magma. "It must bring light and warmth to all this vast region of land. And these cities and

towns. Look at this one, Baltazar. Safe Harbor. What a wonderful name. I take that as a hopeful sign. Safe Harbor, where at last our people can find peace and happiness."

He spent a long time, studying the map, imagining aloud what this place or that must look like, how the people would talk, how surprised they will be to see us.

I sat back against the cavern wall and let him talk. It gave me pleasure, to see him hopeful and happy once more. Almost, it made me forget the terrible pangs of hunger gnawing at my vitals, the more terrible fears that gnaw at my waking hours.

Why should I burst his pretty bubble? Why prick it with reality's sharp-edged sword? After all, I know nothing for certain. "Theories," his father, the king, would have termed them in scorn. All I have are theories.

Supposition: The Fire Sea is shrinking. It can no longer provide the vast regions of land around it with warmth and light.

Theory: We will not find realms of plenty. We will find realms as barren, desolate, and deserted as that which we left behind. That is why the people of Kairn Necros stole light and warmth from us.

"They'll be surprised to see us," Edmund says, smiling to himself at the thought.

"Yes," I say to myself. Very surprised. Very surprised indeed.

Kairn Necros. Named thus by the ancients who first came to this world, named to honor those who had lost their lives in the Sundering of the old world, named to indicate the end of one life and the beginning—the bright beginning, it was then—of another.

Oh, Edmund, My Prince, My Son. Take that name for your sign. Not Safe Harbor. Safe Harbor is a lie.

Kairn Necros. The Cavern of Death.

## CHAPTER \* 6

### THE LAKE OF

### BURNING ROCK, ABARRACH

HOW CAN I WRITE AN ACCOUNT OF THIS TERRIBLE TRAGEDY? HOW CAN I make sense of it, record it in some coherent manner? And yet I must. I promised Edmund his father's heroism would be set down for all to remember. Yet my hand shakes so that I can barely hold the pen. Not with cold. The tunnel is warm, now. And to think we welcomed the warmth! My trembling is a reaction to my recent experiences. I must concentrate.

Edmund. I will do this for Edmund.

I lift my eyes from my work and see him sitting across from me, sitting alone, as befits one in mourning. The people have made the ritual gestures of sympathy. They would have given him the customary mourning gift—food, all they have left of value—but their prince (now their king,

although he refuses to accept the crown until after the resurrection) forbade it. I composed the body's stiffening limbs and performed the preserving rites. We will carry it with us, of course.

Edmund, in his grief, begged me to give the king the final rites at this time, but I reminded the prince sternly that these rites can be done only after three complete cycles have elapsed. To do so any earlier would be far too dangerous. Our code forbids it for that very reason.

Edmund did not pursue the subject. The fact that he even could consider such an aberration was undoubtedly a result of his dazed confusion and pain. I wish he would sleep. Perhaps he will, now that everyone has left him alone. Although, if he is like me, every time he doses his eyes he will see that awful head rearing up out of the ...

I look back over what I have written and it occurs to me that I have begun at the end, instead of the beginning. I consider destroying this page and starting again, but my parchment pages are few, too precious to waste. Besides, this is not a tale I am recounting pleurably over glasses of chilled parfruit wine. And yet, now that I think of it, this might well be an after-dinner type of tale, for tragedy struck us—as so often happens to those in the stories—just when hope shone brightest.

The last two cycles' journeying had been easy, one might almost call them blissful. We came across a stream of fresh water, the first we'd found in the tunnels. Not only were we able to drink our fill and replenish our dwindling water supply, but we discovered fish swimming in the swift current.

Hastily we rigged nets, making them out of anything that came to hand—a woman's shawl, a baby's tattered blanket, a man's worn shirt. Adults stood along the banks, holding the nets that were stretched out from one side to the other. The people were going about their task with a grim earnestness until Edmund, who was leading the fishing party, slipped on a rock and, arms waving wildly, tumbled into the water with a tremendous splash.

We could not tell how deep the stream was, our only source of light being the kairn-grass torches. The people cried out in alarm, several soldiers started to jump to his rescue. Edmund clambered to his feet. The water came only to his shins. Looking foolish, he began to laugh heartily at himself.

Then I heard our people laugh for the first time in many cycles.

Edmund heard them, too. He was dripping wet, yet I am convinced that the drops falling down his cheeks did not come from the stream, but bore the salty flavor of tears. Nor will I ever believe that Edmund, a sure-footed hunter, could have fallen from that bank by accident.

The prince reached out his hand to a friend, a son of one of the council members. The friend, trying to pull Edmund out, slipped on the wet shoreline. Both of them went over backward. The laughter increased, and then everyone was jumping or pretending to fall into the water. What had been a grim task turned into joyous play.

We did manage to catch some fish, eventually. We had a grand feast, that cycle's end, and everyone slept soundly, hunger assuaged and hearts gladdened. We spent an extra cycle's time near the stream; no one wanted to leave a place so blessed by laughter and good feelings. We caught more fish, salted them down, and took them with us to supplement our supplies.

Revived by the food, the water, and the blessed warmth of the runnel, the people's despair lifted. Their joy was increased when the king himself seemed suddenly to shake off the dark clouds of

madness. He looked around, recognized Edmund, spoke to him coherently, and asked to know where we were. The king obviously remembered nothing of our journey.

The prince, blinking back his tears, showed his father the map and pointed out how close we were to the Lake of Burning Rock and, from there, Kairn Necros.

The king ate well, slept soundly, and spoke no more to his dead wife.

The following cycle, everyone was awake early, packed and eager to go on. For the first time, the people began to believe that there might be a better life awaiting them than the life they had come to know in our homeland.

I kept my fears and my doubts to myself. Perhaps it was a mistake, but how could I take away their newfound hope?

A half of a cycle's travel brought us near the end of the tunnel. The floor ceased to slope downward and leveled off. The comfortable warmth had intensified to an uncomfortable heat. A red glow, emanating from the Lake of Burning Rock, lit the cavern with a light so bright we doused the torches. We could hear, echoing through the tunnel, a strange sound.

"What is that noise?" Edmund asked, bringing the people to a halt.

"I believe, Your Highness," I said hesitantly, "that what you are hearing is the sound of gases bubbling up from the depths of the magma."

He looked eager, excited. I'd seen the same expression on his face when he was small and I had offered to take him on an excursion.

"How far are we from the lake?"

"Not far, I should judge, Your Highness."

He started off. I laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Edmund, take care. Our bodies' magic has activated to protect us from the heat and the poisonous fumes, but our strength is not. We should proceed forward with caution, take our time.

He stopped immediately, looked intently at me. "Why? What is to fear? Tell me, Baltazar."

He knows me too well. I cannot conceal anything from him.

"My Prince," I said, drawing him to one side, out of earshot of the people and the king. "I cannot put a name to my fear and, therefore, I am loathe to mention it."

I spread the map out on a rock. We bent over it together. The people paid little attention to us. I could see the king watching us with suspicion, however, his brow dark and furrowed. "Pretend that we are discussing the route, Your Highness. I don't want to unduly worry your father."

Edmund, casting the king a worried glance, did as I requested, wondering in loud tones where we were.

"You see these runes, drawn over this lake on the map?" I said to him in a low voice. "I cannot tell you what they mean, but when I look at them I am filled with dread."

Edmund stared at the sigla. "You have no idea what they say?" "Their message has been lost in time, My Prince. I cannot decipher it." "Perhaps they warn only that the way is treacherous."

"That could be it ..."

"But you don't think so."

"Edmund," I said, feeling my face burn with embarrassment,

"I'm not sure what I think. The map itself doesn't indicate a dangerous route. As you can see, a wide path runs around the shores of the lake. A child could travel it with ease."

"The path might be cut or blocked by rock falls. We've certainly enough of that during our trip," Edmund stated grimly. "Yes, but the original mapmaker would have indicated such an occurrence if it had happened during the time he was making the . If not, he wouldn't have known about it. No, if these runes are to warn us of danger, that danger existed when this map was made."

"But that was so long ago! Surely the danger's gone by now. You're like a rune-bone player beset by bad fortune. According to the 3, our luck is bound to change. You worry too much, Baltazar," ttind added, laughing and clapping me on the shoulder. "I hope so, My Prince," I replied gravely. "Humor me. Indulge a necromancer's foolish fears. Proceed with caution. Send the soldiers ahead to scout the area—"

I could see the king, glowering at us.

"Well, of course," snapped Edmund, irritated that I should venture to tell him his duty. "I would have done so in any case. I will mention the matter to my father."

Oh, Edmund, if only I had said more. If only you had said less. If only. Our lives are made up of "if onlys."

"Father, Baltazar thinks the path around the lake may be dangerous. You stay behind with the people and let me take the soldiers—"

"Danger!" the old king flared, with a fire that had not burned in either body or mind for a long, long rime. Alas, that it should have blazed forth now! "Danger, and you tell me to stay behind! I am king. Or, at least, I was."

The old man's eyes narrowed. "I have noticed that you—with Baltazar's help, no doubt—are attempting to subvert the people's loyalty. I've seen you and the necromancer off in your dark corners, plotting and scheming. It won't work. The people will follow me, as they have always followed me!"

I heard. Everyone heard. The king's accusation echoed through the cavern. It was all I could do to keep from rushing forward and throttling the old man with my bare hands. I cared nothing for what he thought of me. My heart burned from the pain of the wound I saw inflicted on his son.

If only that fool king had known what a loyal and devoted son he had! If only he could have seen Edmund during those long, dreary cycles, walking by his father's side, listening patiently to the old man's mad ramblings. If only he could have seen Edmund, time and again, refuse to accept the crown, although the council knelt at his feet and begged him! If only . . .

But, no more. One must not speak ill of the dead. I can only assume some lingering madness put such ideas in the king's mind.

Edmund had gone deathly white, but he spoke with a quiet dignity that became him well. "You have misunderstood me, Father. It was necessary for me to take on myself certain responsibilities, to make certain decisions during the time of your recent illness. Reluctantly, I did so, as any here"—he gestured to the people, who were staring at their king in shock—"will tell you. No one is more pleased than I am to see you take, once more, your rightful place as ruler of the people of Kairn Telest."

Edmund glanced at me, asking me silently if I wanted to reply to the accusation. I shook my head, kept my mouth closed. How could I, in honesty, deny the wish that had been in my heart, if not on my lips?

His son's words had an effect on the old king. He looked ashamed, as well he might! He started to reach out his hand, started to say something, perhaps apologize, take his son in his arms, beg his forgiveness. But pride — or madness — got the better of him. The king looked over at me, his face hardened. He turned and stalked off calling loudly for the soldiers.

"Some of you come with me," the king commanded. "The rest of you stay here and guard the people from whatever danger the necromancer theorizes is about to befall us. He is full of theories, our necromancer. His latest is that he fancies himself the father of my son!"

Edmund started forward, burning words on his lips. I caught hold of his arm, held him back, shaking my head.

The king set off for the tunnel exit, followed by a small troop of about twenty. The exit was a narrow opening in the rock. The file of Soldiers, walking shoulder to shoulder, would have a difficult time squeezing their way through. In the distance, through the opening, the fiery light of the Lake of Burning Rock gleamed a fierce, bright red.

The people looked at each other, looked at Edmund. They seemed uncertain what to do or say. A few of the council members, however, shook their heads and made clucking sounds with their tongues. Edmund cast them a furious glance, and they immediately fell silent. When the king reached the end of the tunnel, he turned to face us.

"You and your necromancer stay with the people, Son," he shouted, and the sneer that curled his lip was audible in his voice.

"Your king will return and tell you when it is safe to proceed." Accompanied by his soldiers, he walked out of the tunnel. If only . . .

Dragons possess remarkable intelligence. One is tempted to say Malevolent intelligence, but, in fairness, who are we to judge a creature our ancestors hunted almost to extinction? I have no doubt

that, if the dragons could or would speak to us, they would remind us that they have good cause to hate us.

Not that this makes it any easier.

"I should have gone with him!" were the first words Edmund spoke to me, when I gently tried to remove his arms from around his father's broken, bleeding body. "I should have been at his side!"

If, at any moment in my life, I was ever tempted to believe that there might be an immortal plan, a higher power.... But no. To all my other faults, I will not add blasphemy!

As his father had commanded him, Edmund stayed behind. He stood tall, dignified, his face impassive. But I, who know him so well, understood that what he longed to do was run after his father. He wanted to explain, to try to make his father understand. If only Edmund had done so, perhaps the old king might have relented and apologized. Perhaps the tragedy would never have occurred.

Edmund is, as I have said, young and proud. He was angry— justifiably so. He had been insulted in front of all the people. He had not been in the wrong. He would not make the first move toward reconciliation. His body trembled with the force of his inheld rage. He stared out the tunnel, said no word. No one said anything. We waited in silence for what seemed to me to be an interminable length of time.

What was wrong? They could have circumnavigated the lake by now, I was thinking to myself, when the scream resounded down the tunnel, echoed horribly off the cavern walls.

All of us recognized the voice of the king. I... and his son .. -recognized it as a warning, recognized it as his death cry.

The scream was awful, first choked with terror, then agonized, bubbling with pain. It went on and on, and its dreadful echo reverberated from the rock walls, screamed death to us over and over.

I have never in my life heard anything to equal it. I hope I never hear anything like it again. The scream might have turned the people to stone, as does, purportedly, the look of the legendary basilisk. I know that I stood frozen to the spot, my limbs paralyzed, my mind in little better condition.

The scream jolted Edmund to action.

"Father!" he shouted, and all the love that he had longed for during all the years of his life was in that cry. And, just as in his life, his cry went unanswered.

The prince ran forward, alone.

I heard the clattering of weapons and the confused sounds of battle and, above that, a dreadful roaring. I could now give a name to my fear. I knew now what the runes on the map meant.

The sight of Edmund rushing to meet the same fate as his father impelled me, at last, to act. Swiftly, with what remaining strength I had left, I wove a magical spell, like the nets in which we'd

caught the fish across the tunnel exit. Edmund saw it, tried to ignore it. He crashed full-force into it, fought and struggled against it. Drawing his sword, he attempted to cut his way through.

My magic, its power heightened by my fear for him, was strong. He couldn't get out, nor could the fire dragon — on the other side — break through the net.

At least, I hoped it couldn't. I have studied what the ancients wrote about such creatures, and it is my belief that they underestimated the dragon's intelligence. To be safe, I ordered the people to retreat farther back down the tunnel, telling them to hide in whatever passages they could find. They fled like scared mice, council members and all, and soon no one was left in the front part of the cavern but myself and Edmund.

He struck at me, in his frustration. He pleaded with me, he begged me, he threatened to kill me if I did not remove the magical net I remained adamant. I could see, now, around the shores of the lake, the terrible carnage taking place.

The dragon's head and neck, part of its upper body, and its dagger-sharp spiked tail reared up out of the molten lava. The head and neck were black, black as the darkness left behind in Kairn Telest. Its eyes glowed a ghastly, blazing red. In its great jaws it held the body of a struggling soldier and, as Edmund and I Watched in horror, it loosed its jaws and dropped the man into the magma.

One by one, the fire dragon took up each of the soldiers, who were attempting, with their pitiful weapons, to battle the creature. One by one, the dragon sent them plunging into the burning lake. It left a single body on the shoreline — the body of the king. When the last soldier was gone, the dragon turned its blazing eyes on Edmund and me and stared at us for long, long moments.

I swear that I heard words, and Edmund told me later that he thought he did, too. You have paid the price of your passage. You may now cross.

The eyes closed, the black head slithered down beneath the magma and was gone.

Whether I actually heard the fire dragon's voice or not, something inside me told me that all was safe, the dragon would not return. I removed the magical net. Edmund dashed out of the tunnel before I could stop him. I hurried after, keeping my eyes on the boiling, churning lake.

No sign of the dragon. The prince reached his father, gathered the old man's body into his arms.

The king was dead, he had died horribly. A giant hole—inflicted, perhaps, by the sharp spike on a lashing tail—had penetrated his stomach, torn through his bowels. I helped Edmund carry his father's corpse back to the tunnel. The people remained at the far end, refusing to venture anywhere near the lake.

I could not blame them. I wouldn't have gone near it either, if I hadn't heard that voice and known that it could be trusted. The dragon had taken its revenge, if that's what it was, and now was at peace.

I foresee that Edmund will have a difficult time convincing the people that it is safe to walk the path on the shore of the Lake of Burning Rock. But I know in the end that he will succeed, for the people love him and trust him and now, whether he likes it or not, they will name him their king.

We need a king. Once we leave the shores of the lake behind, we will be in Kairn Necros. Edmund maintains we will find there a land of friends. I believe, to my sorrow, we will find there the land of our enemies.

And here is where I have decided to end my account. I have only a few pages of the precious parchment left, and it seems fitting to me to close the journal here, with the death of one king of Kairn Telest and the crowning of a new one. I wish I could see ahead in time, see what the future holds for us, but not all the magical power of the ancients allowed them to look beyond the present moment.

Perhaps that is just as well. To know the future is to be forced to abandon hope. And hope is all that we have left.

Edmund will lead his people forth, but not, if I can persuade him, to Kairn Necros. Who knows? The next journal I keep may be called *The Journey Through Death's Gate*.

—Baltazar, necromancer to the king

## CHAPTER \* 7

THE NEXUS INSPECTED HIS SHIP, WALKED THE LENGTH AND BREADTH OF the sleek, dragon-prowed vessel, studied masts and hull, wings and sails with a critical eye. The ship had survived three passages through Death's Gate, sustaining only minor damage, mostly inflicted by the tytans, the terrifying giants of Pryan.

"What do you think, boy?" Haplo said, reaching down and fondling the ears of a black, nondescript dog, who padded silently along beside him. "Think it's ready to go? Think we're ready to go?" He tugged playfully at one of the silky ears. The dog's plummy tail brushed from side to side, the intelligent eyes, that rarely left its master's face, brightened.

"These runes"—Haplo strode forward, laid his hand on a series of burns and carvings inscribed on the ship's hull—"will act to block out all energies, according to My Lord. Nothing, absolutely nothing should be able to penetrate. We'll be shielded and protected as a babe in its mother's womb. Safer," Haplo added, his face darkening, "than any baby born in the Labyrinth."

He ran his fingers over the spidery lines of the runes, reading in his mind their intricate language, searching for any flaw, any defect. His gaze shifted upward to the carved dragon's head. The fierce eyes Wared eagerly forward, as if they could already see the end of then-goal in sight.

"The magic protects us," Haplo continued his one-sided conversation, the dog not being disposed to talk. "The magic surrounds us. This time I will not succumb. This time I will witness the journey through Death's Gate!"

The dog yawned, sat down, and scratched at an itch with such violence that he nearly tipped himself over. The Patryn glanced at the animal with some irritation. "A lot you care," he muttered accusingly.

Hearing the note of rebuke in the loved voice, the dog cocked its head and appeared to try to enter into the spirit of the conversation. Unfortunately, the itch proved too great a distraction.

Snorting, Haplo clambered up the ship's side, walked over the top deck, giving it one final inspection.

The ship had been built by the elves of the air world of Arianus. Made to resemble the dragons that the elves could admire but never tame, the ship's prow was the dragon's head, its breast the bridge, its body the hull, its tail the rudder. Wings fashioned of the skin and scales of real dragons guided the vessel through the air currents of that wondrous realm. Slaves (generally human) and elven wizardry combined to keep the great ships afloat.

The ship had been a gift from a grateful elven captain to Haplo. The Patryn modified it to suit his needs, his own ship having been destroyed during his first journey through Death's Gate. The great dragonship no longer required a full crew to man it, or wizards to guide it, or slaves to operate it. Haplo was now captain and crew member. The dog was the ship's only passenger.

The dog, conquering the elusive itch, trotted behind, hoping that the long and boring inspection was nearly at end. The animal adored flying. It spent most of the journey with its face pressed against the porthole, tongue lolling, tail wagging, leaving nose-prints on the glass. The dog was eager to be gone. So was its master. Haplo had discovered two fascinating realms in his journeys through Death's Gate. He had no doubt he would be equally rewarded on this trip.

"Calm down, boy," he said softly, patting the dog's head. "We'll leave in a moment."

The Patryn stood on the top deck, beneath the folds of the dragon's central sail, and looked out on the Nexus, his homeland.

He never left this city without a pang. Disciplined, hard, and unemotional as he considered himself to be, he was forced to blink back the tears whenever he left. The Nexus was beautiful, but he'd seen many lands just as beautiful and never unmanned himself by weeping over them. Perhaps it was the nature of the beauty of the twilight world whose days were ever either dawn or dusk, nights were never dark but always softly brightened by . Nothing in the Nexus was harsh, nothing in the Nexus existed in extremes except for the people who lived there, people who had emerged from the Labyrinth — a prison world of unspeakable horror. Those who survived the Labyrinth and managed to escape came into the Nexus. Its beauty and peace enfolded them like the embracing arms of a parent comforting a child having a night-

Haplo stood on the deck of his flying ship and gazed out on the green, grassy lawn of his lord's mansion. He remembered the first time he'd risen from the bed where they'd carried him—more dead than alive after his trials in the Labyrinth. He had gone to a window and looked out on this land. He had known, for the first time in his scarred life, peace, tranquility, rest.

Every time he looked out a window onto his homeland, he recalled that moment. Every time he recalled that moment, he blessed and honored his master, the Lord of the Nexus, who had saved him. Every time he blessed his lord, Haplo cursed the Sartan, the demigods who had locked his people into that cruel world. Every time he cursed them, he vowed revenge.

The dog, seeing that they weren't going to leave instantly, Spped down on the deck and lay—nose on paws—patiently waiting. Haplo shook himself out of his reverie, stirred briskly to action, and nearly stepped on the animal. The dog jumped up with a startled yelp.

"There, old boy. Sorry. Keep out from under my feet next time." Haplo turned to descend into the hold, stopped in midstride as he felt the world around him rippled.

Ripple. That was the only way to describe it. He had never experienced anything like the strange sensation. The movement far beneath him, perhaps at the very core of the world, and upward in sinuous waves that did not travel horizontally, in a tremor, but vertically, rippling up from the ground through his feet, his knees, body, head.

Everything around him was distorted by the same effect. For a instant, Haplo lost all shape, form, dimension. He was flat, against a flat sky, a flat ground. The ripple passed through and >k them all simultaneously. All except the dog. The dog vanished. The effect ended as swiftly as it had begun. Haplo fell to his hands and knees. Dizzy, disoriented, he fought off a sickening of nausea. He gasped for breath, the ripple effect had compressed the air from his body. When he could breathe, he searched to see if he could discover what had caused the terrifying phenomenon.

The dog returned, standing in front of him, gazing at him reproachfully

"It wasn't my fault, fellow," Haplo said, darting wary, suspicious glances in all directions.

The Nexus glimmered in its peaceful twilight, leaves on the trees whispered softly. Haplo examined them closely. The stalwart trunks had stood straight and tall and unbent for a hundred generations. But just moments before, he'd seen them ripple like wheat in a windstorm. Nothing moved, he heard no sound — and that in itself was odd. Previous to the ripple, he'd been obliquely aware of animal noises that were now hushed in ... what? Fear? Awe?

Haplo felt a strange reluctance to move, as if the very act of taking a step would cause the frightening sensation to reoccur. He had to force himself to walk back along the deck, expected every moment to find himself pasted on the landscape once again. He peered over the side of the ship's hull, down onto the lawn.

Nothing.

His gaze scanned the mansion, the windows of his lord's magnificent dwelling. His lord lived alone in the mansion, except for Haplo, and he was only there on occasion. This day, the mansion was empty. The lord was away, fighting his endless battle against the Labyrinth.

Nothing. No one.

"Maybe I imagined it," Haplo muttered.

He wiped sweat from his upper lip, noted his hand was trembling. He stared at the runes tattooed on his skin, saw, for the first time, that they were glowing a very faint blue. Hastily, he shoved up his sleeve, saw the blue glow fading from his arms. A glance at his chest, beneath the V-slit collar of his tunic, revealed the same.

"So, I didn't imagine it," he said, comforted. His body had reacted to the phenomenon, reacted instinctively to protect him— protect him from what? A bitter iron taste, as of blood, coated his mouth. He coughed, spit. Turning, he stomped back across the deck. His fear faded with the blue glow, leaving him angry, frustrated.

The ripple had not come from inside the ship. Haplo had watched it pass through the ship, watched it pass through his body, the trunks of the trees, the ground, the mansion, the sky. He hastened below to the bridge. The steering stone, the rune-covered orb he used to guide his vessel, stood on its pedestal. The stone was dark and cold, no light emanating from it.

Haplo glared at the stone in irrational ire, having half-hoped that it might have been responsible. He was irritated to discover it wasn't. His mind cataloged everything else on board: neat coils of rope in the hold; barrels of wine, water, and food; a change of clothes; his journal. The stone was the only magical object.

He'd cleaned away all remnants of the mensch [1]—the elves, humans, dwarf, and insane old wizard who had lately been his passengers on that ill-fated journey to the Elven Star. The tytans had undoubtedly slaughtered them all by now. They couldn't be the cause.

The Patryn stood on the bridge, staring unseeing at the stone, his brain running around like a mouse caught in a maze, darting down this passage and that, sniffing and scrabbling and hoping to find a way out. Memories of the mensch on Pryan wandered to memories of mensch on Arianus and that made him think of the Sartan Haplo'd encountered on Arianus, a Sartan whose mind moved as clumsily as his oversize feet.

None of these memories led him anywhere useful. Nothing like this had happened to him before. He brought to mind all he knew of magic, the sigla that ruled the probabilities, made all things possible. But by all laws of magic known to him, that ripple could not have been. Haplo found himself back where he started.

"I should consult with My Lord," he said to the dog, who was regarding its master with concern. "Ask his advice."

But that would mean postponing his journey through Death's Gate for an indefinite period of time. When the Lord of the Nexus reentered the deadly confines of the Labyrinth, no one could say when—or if—he would return. Upon that return, he would not be pleased to discover that Haplo had been wasting precious time in his absence.

Haplo pictured the interview with the formidable old man—the only living being the Patryn respected, admired, and feared. He imagined himself attempting to put the strange sensation into words. He imagined his lord's answer.

'A fainting spell. I didn't know you were subject to those, Haplo, My Son. Perhaps you shouldn't go on a journey of such importance.'

No, better solve this on his own. He considered searching the rest of his ship, but—again—that would waste time. 'And how can I search it when I don't know what I'm looking for?' he demanded, exasperated. 'I'm like a kid who sees ghosts in the night, making my mother come in with the candle to prove to me that there's nothing there. Bah! Let's get out of here!'

He strode resolutely over to the steering stone, placed his hands on it. The dog took its accustomed position next to the glass portholes located in the dragon's breast. Apparently its master had come to the end of whatever strange game he'd been playing. Tail wagging, the dog barked excitedly. The ship rose up on the currents of wind and magic and sailed into the purple-streaked sky.

\*

The entry into Death's Gate was an awesome, terrifying experience. A tiny black dot in the twilight sky, the Gate was like a perverse star that shone dark instead of light. The dot did not grow in size, the nearer the ship sailed. Rather, it seemed that the ship itself shrank down to fit inside. Dwindling, diminishing—a frightening sensation and one that Haplo knew was all in his mind, an optical illusion, like seeing pools of water in a burning desert.

This was his third time entering Death's Gate from the Nexus side, and he knew he should be accustomed to the effect. He shouldn't let it frighten him. But now, just as every time before, he stared at that small hole and felt his stomach clench, his breath come short. The closer he flew, the faster the ship sailed. He couldn't stop his forward motion, even if he'd wanted to. Death's Gate was sucking him inside.

The hole began to distort the sky. Streaks of purple and pink, flares of soft red began twisting around it. Either the sky was spinning and he was stationary, or he was spinning and the sky was stationary, he could never tell which. And all the while he was being drawn inside at an ever-increasing rate of speed.

This time, he'd fight the fear. This time—A shattering crash and an inhuman wail brought Haplo's heart to his mouth. The dog jumped to its feet and was off like an arrow, lacing into the ship's interior.

- Haplo wrenched his gaze away from the mesmerizing swirl of colors enticing him into the blackness beyond. In the distance, he could hear the dog's bark echoing through the corridors. To judge by the dog's reaction, someone or something was aboard his ship.

Haplo lurched forward. The ship rocked and heaved and bucked. He had difficulty keeping his feet, tottered and staggered into the bulkheads like some old drunk.

The dog's barking grew in loudness and intensity but Haplo noted, oddly, a change in the note. The bark was no longer threatening, it was joyful—the animal greeting someone it knew and recognized.

Perhaps some kid had hidden himself aboard for a prank or a chance for adventure. Haplo couldn't conceive of any Patryn child who would indulge in such mischief. Patryn children, growing up (if they managed to live that long) in the Labyrinth, had very little time for childhood.

After some difficulty, he made his way to the hold, heard a voice, faint and pathetic.

"Nice doggie. Hush, now, nice dog, and go away, and I'll give you this bit of sausage ... ."

Haplo paused in the shadows. The voice sounded familiar. It wasn't a child's, it was a man's and he knew it, although he couldn't quite place it. The Patryn activated the runes on his hands. Bright blue light welled from the sigla, illuminating the darkness of the hold. He stepped inside.

The dog stood spraddle-legged on the deck, barking with all its might at a man cowering in a corner. The man, too, was familiar, a balding head topped by a fringe of hair around the ears, a weary middle-aged face, mild eyes now wide with fear. His body was long and gangly and appeared to have been put together from leftover parts of other bodies. Hands that were too large,

feet that were too large, neck too long, head too small. It was his feet that had betrayed the man, entangling him in a coil of rope, undoubtedly the cause of the crash.

"You," Haplo said in disgust. "Sartan."

The man looked up from the barking dog, which he had been attempting unsuccessfully to bribe with a sausage—part of Haplo's food supply. Seeing the Patryn standing before him, the man gave a faint, self-deprecating smile, and fainted.

'Alfred!' Haplo drew in a seething breath and took a step forward. "How the hell did you—"

The ship slammed headlong into Death's Gate.

## CHAPTER \* 8

### DEATH'S GATE

THE VIOLENCE OF THE IMPACT KNOCKED HAPLO OVER BACKWARD AND sent the dog scabbling to maintain its balance. The comatose body of Alfred slid gently across the canting deck. Haplo crashed up against the side of the hold, fighting desperately against tremendous unseen forces pressing on him, holding him plastered to the wood. At last the ship righted itself somewhat and he was able to lurch forward. Grabbing hold of the limp shoulder of the man lying at his feet, Haplo shook him viciously.

'Alfred! Damn it, Sartan! Wake up!'

Alfred's eyelids fluttered, the eyes beneath them rolled. He groaned mildly, blinked, and—seeing Haplo's dark and scowling face above him—appeared somewhat alarmed. The Sartan attempted to sit up, the ship listed, and he instinctively grabbed at Haplo's arm to support himself. The Patryn shoved the hand aside roughly.

"What are you doing here? On my ship? Answer me, or by the Labyrinth, I'll—"

Haplo stopped, staring. The ship's bulkheads were closing in around him, the wooden sides drawing nearer and nearer, the deck rushing up to meet the overhead. They were going to be crushed, squeezed flat except, at the same instant, the ship's bulkheads were flying apart, expanding into empty space, the deck was falling out from beneath him, the entire universe was rushing away from him, leaving him alone and small and helpless.

The dog whimpered and crawled toward Haplo, buried its cold nose in his hand. He clasped the animal thankfully. It was warm and solid and real. The ship was his and stable once more.

"Where are we?" Alfred asked in awe. Apparently, from the terror-stricken expression in the wide, watery eyes, he had just undergone a similar experience.

"Entering Death's Gate," Haplo answered grimly.

Neither spoke for a moment, but looked around, watching, listening with inheld breath.

'Ah.' Alfred sighed, nodded. "That would explain it."

"Explain what, Sartan?"

"How I arrived ... er ... here," Alfred said, lifting his eyes for an instant to meet Haplo's, immediately lowering them again. "I didn't mean to. You must understand that. I—I was looking for Bane, you see. The little boy you took from Arianus. The child's mother is frantic with worry—"

"Over a kid she gave away eleven years ago. Yeah, I'm in tears. Go on."

Alfred's wan cheeks flushed slightly. "Her circumstances at the time— She had no choice— It was her husband—"

"How did you get on my ship?" Haplo repeated.

"I... I managed to locate Death's Gate in Arianus. The Glegs put me in one of the dig-claws—You remember those contraptions?— and lowered me down into the storm, right into Death's Gate itself. I had just entered it when I experienced a sensation as... as if I were being pulled apart and then I was jerked violently backward ... forward ... I don't know I blacked out. When I came to myself, I was lying here." Alfred spread his hands helplessly to indicate the hold.

"That must have been the crash I heard." Haplo gazed at Alfred speculatively "You're not lying. From what I've heard, you miserable Sartan can't lie. But you're not telling me all the truth either."

Alfred's flush deepened, he lowered his eyelids. "Prior to when you left the Nexus," he said in a small voice, "did you experience an odd . . . sensation?"

Haplo refused to commit himself, but Alfred took his silence for acquiescence. 'A sort of ripplelike effect? Made you sick? That was me, I'm afraid," he said faintly.

"It figures." The Patryn sat back on his heels, glaring at Alfred. "Now what in the name of the Sundering do I do with you? I—"

Time slowed. The last word Haplo spoke seemed to take a year to emerge from his mouth and another year for his ears to hear it. He reached out a hand to grasp Alfred by the frilly neckerchief around the man's scrawny neck. His hand crept forward a fraction of an inch at a time. Haplo attempted to hasten his motion. He moved slower. Air wasn't coming in fast enough to supply his lungs. He would die of suffocation before he could draw a breath.

But impossibly he was moving fast, far too fast. His hand had grasped Alfred and was worrying the man like the dog worried a rat. He was shouting words that came out gibberish and Alfred was trying desperately to break his grasp and say something back, but the words flew by so swiftly that Haplo couldn't understand them. The dog was lolling on its side, moving in slow motion, and it was up and leaping around the deck like a thing possessed.

Haplo's mind attempted frantically to deal with these dichotomies. Its answer was to give up and shut down. He fought against the darkening mists, focusing his attention on the dog, refusing to see or think about anything else. Eventually, everything either slowed down or speeded up. Normality returned.

It occurred to him that this was the farthest he'd made it into Death's Gate without losing consciousness. He supposed, he thought bitterly, he had Alfred to thank.

"It will keep growing worse," said the Sartan. His face was white, he shook all over.

"How do you know?" Haplo wiped sweat from his forehead, tried to relax, his muscles were bunched and aching from the strain.

"I... studied Death's Gate before I entered it. The other times you passed through, you always blacked out, didn't you?"

Haplo didn't answer. He decided to try to make his way to the bridge. Alfred would be safe enough in the hold, for the time being. It was damn certain the Sartan wasn't going anywhere!

Haplo rose to his feet. ... and kept rising. He stood up and up and up until he must crash through the wooden overhead, and he was shrinking, becoming smaller and smaller and smaller until an ant might step on him and never notice.

"Deaths Gate. A place that exists and yet does not exist. It has substance and is ephemeral. Time is measured marching ahead going backward. Its light is so bright that I am plunged into darkness."

Haplo wondered how he could talk when he had no voice. He shut his eyes and seemed to be opening them wider. His head, his body were splitting apart, tearing off into two separate and completely opposite directions. His body was rushing together, imploding in on itself. He clasped his hands over his rending skull, reeling, spiraling downward until he lost his balance and tumbled to the deck. He heard, in the distance, someone screaming, but he couldn't hear the scream, because he was deaf. He could see everything clearly because he was completely and totally blind.

Haplo's mind wrestled with itself, attempting to reconcile the unreconcilable. His consciousness dove down further and further inside him, seeking to regain reality, seeking to find some stable point in the universe to which it could cling.

It found ... Alfred.

Just as Alfred's failing consciousness found Haplo.

\*

Alfred was skidding through a void, plummeting downward, when he came to a sudden halt. The terrible sensations he'd experienced in the Death's Gate ceased. He stood on firm ground and the sky was up above him. Nothing was spinning around him and he wanted to cry from relief when he realized that the body in which he was standing was not his own. It belonged to a child, a boy of about eight or nine. The body was naked, except for a loincloth twisted around the boy's thin limbs. The body was covered with the swirls and whorls of blue and red runes.

Two adults, standing near him, were talking. Alfred knew them, knew them to be his parents, although he'd never seen them before now. He knew, too, that he'd been running, running desperately, running for his life and that he was tired, his body ached and burned, and that he couldn't take another step. He was frightened, horribly frightened, and it seemed to him that he'd been frightened most of his short life; that fear had been his first recognizable emotion.

"It's no use," said the man, his father, gasping for breath. "They're gaining on us."

"We should stop now and fight them," insisted the woman, his mother, "while we have strength left."

Alfred, young as he was, knew that the fight was hopeless. Whatever was chasing them was stronger and faster. He heard terrifying sounds behind him—large bodies crashing through the undergrowth. A wail swelled in his throat, but he fought it back, knowing that to give way to his fear would only make matters worse.

He fumbled at his loincloth, drew out a sharp-pointed dagger, encrusted with dried blood. Obviously, Alfred thought, staring at it, I've killed before.

"The boy?" asked his mother, a question to the man. Whatever was coming was gaining on them rapidly.

The man tensed, fingers closing around a spear in his hand. He seemed to consider. A look passed between the two, a look that Alfred understood and he leapt forward, the word 'No.' bubbling frantically to his lips. It was met by a clout on the side of his head that knocked him senseless.

Alfred stepped out of his body and watched his parents drag his limp and unresisting form into a growth of thick bushes, hiding him with brush. Then they ran, luring their enemy as far from their child as they could before they were forced to turn and fight. They weren't acting out of love to save him, but out of instinct, just as a mother bird, pretending to have a broken wing, will lead the fox away from her nest.

When Alfred regained consciousness, he was back in the child's body. Crouching, panic-stricken, in the brush, he watched, in a dazed and dreamlike fashion, the snogs murder his parents.

He wanted to scream, to cry out, but something—instinct again or perhaps only fear freezing his tongue—kept him silent. His parents fought bravely and well, but they were no match for the hulking bodies and sharp fangs and long, razorlike claws of the intelligent snogs. The killing took a long, long time.

And then, mercifully, it was over. His parents' bodies—what was left of them when the snogs had finished their gorging—lay unmoving. His mother's screams had ceased. Then came the frightening moment when Alfred knew that he was next, when he feared that they must see him, that he must be as highly visible as the bright red blood clotting the matted leaves on the ground. But the snogs were weary of their sport. Hunger and lust to kill both satisfied, they moved off, leaving Alfred alone in the brush.

He lay hidden a long time, near the bodies of his parents. The carrion beasts arrived to take their share of the spoils. He was afraid to stay, afraid to leave, and he couldn't help whimpering, if only to hear the sound of his own voice and know that he was alive. And then two men were there, beside him, peering down at him, and he was startled for he hadn't heard them gliding through the brush, moving more silently than the wind.

The men discussed him, as if he weren't there. They eyed the bodies of his parents coldly, spoke of them without sympathy. The men were not cruel, only callous, as if they'd seen murder done all too

many times before and the sight could no longer shock them. One of them reached down into the brush, dragged Alfred to his feet. They marched him over to stand beside the bodies of his butchered parents.

"Look at that," the man told Alfred, holding the boy by the scruff of his neck and forcing him to stare at the gruesome sight. "Remember it. And remember this. It wasn't snogs that killed your father and mother. It was those who put us in this prison and left us to die. Who are they, boy? Do you know?" The man's fingers dug painfully into Alfred's flesh.

"The Sartan," Alfred heard himself answer and he knew then that he was Sartan and that he'd just killed those who had given him birth.

"Repeat it!" the man ordered him.

"The Sartan!" Alfred cried, and he wept.

"Right. Never forget that, boy. Never forget."

\*

Haplo fell into darkness, cursing, fighting, struggling to retain consciousness. His mind rebelled against him, dragged him under for his own good. He caught a glimpse of a light, as he seemed to be receding farther and farther away, and he exerted every ounce of his being to reach that light. He made it.

The falling sensation ended, all the strange sensations ended and he was filled with a vast sense of peace. He was lying on his back and it seemed to him that he had just awakened from a deep and restful slumber lit by beautiful dreams. He was in no hurry to rouse himself, but lay still, enjoying slipping into and out of sleep, listening to a sweet music in his mind. At length, he knew himself to be fully awake and he opened his eyes.

He lay in a crypt. He was startled, at first, but not frightened, as if he knew where he was but had forgotten and now that he remembered, everything was all right. He felt a sense of excitement and breathless anticipation. Something that he'd been waiting for a long time was about to happen. He wondered how to get out of the crypt, but knew the answer immediately when he asked himself the question. The crypt would open at his command.

Lying back restfully, Haplo glanced down at his body and was to see himself in strange clothes—long white robes. And he with a pang of terror, that the runes tattooed on his hands and were gone! And with the runes, his magic. He was helpless, helpless as a mensch!

But the knowledge came to him instantly, almost making him laugh at his own simplicity, that he wasn't powerless. He possessed the magic - but it was inside him, not outside. Experimentally, he lifted his hand and examined it. The hand was slender and delicate. It traced a rune in the air and, at the same time, sang the rune to the a&pie door of his crystal crypt opened.

Haplo sat up and swung his legs over the side. He jumped Hghny down to the floor; his body tingled all over with the unaccustomed exertion. Turning, he looked back into the crystalline surface of the empty crypt and experienced a profound shock. He was looking at his own reflection, but his face didn't look back. Alfred's did. He was Alfred!

Haplo staggered, physically jolted by the knowledge. Of course, that explained the absence of runes on his skin. The Sartan magic worked from within to without, whereas Patryn magic worked from without to within.

Confused, Haplo looked from his own empty crypt to one located next to his. He saw in it a woman, young, lovely, her face calm and tranquil in repose. Looking at the woman, Haplo felt a warmth Wdl up inside him and he knew he loved her, knew he had loved her a long, long time. He moved over to her crypt and rested his hands upon the chill crystal. He gazed at her fondly, tracing every line of that (flowed face.

"I'll wait," he whispered, and caressed the crystal with his hands. A chill stole through Haplo, freezing his heart. The woman isn't breathing. He could see clearly through the glass tomb that it supposed to have been a tomb but only a cocoon, a resting until it was time for them to emerge and take over their duties.

She wasn't breathing!

Admittedly, the magical stasis slowed the body's functions, watched the woman anxiously, willing the fabric across her to move, willing the eyelids to flicker. He waited and watched, pressed against the glass for hours, waited until his strength out, and he crumbled to the floor. And then, lying on the floor, he lifted his hand and stared at it again. He noticed now what he had not before. The hand was slender and delicate, but it was aged, wrinkled. Blue veins stood out clearly. Dragging himself to his feet, he stared into the crystal of the crypt and he saw his face.

"I am old," he whispered, reaching out to touch the reflection that, when he had gone to sleep, had been bright with youth and alive with eager promise. Now it was aged, skin flabby and sagging, his head bare, the fringe of hair around the ears whitish gray.

"I am old," he repeated, feeling panic surge through him. "I am old! I have aged! And it takes a long, long time for a Sartan to age! But not her! She is not old." He stared back into her crypt. No, she was no older than he remembered her. Which meant she had not aged. Which meant she was . . .

"No!" Haplo cried, clutching at the crystal sides as if he would tear them apart, his fingers sliding down ineffectually. "No! Not dead! Not her dead and me alive! Not me alive and . . . and . . ."

He stepped back, looking around him, looking into the other crypts. Each one of them, except his, held a body. Inside each was a friend, a comrade, a brother, a sister. Those who were to come back to this world with him when it was time, come back to continue the work. There was so much to do! He ran to another crypt.

"Ivor!" he called, pounding on the crystal sides with his fingers. But the man lay unmoving, unresponsive. Frantic, Haplo ran to another and another, calling out each dear name, pleading incoherently with each one to wake, to be!

"Not me! Not me ... alone!"

"Or maybe not," he said, stopping in his mad panic, hope cool and soothing inside him. "Maybe I'm not alone. I haven't been out of the mausoleum yet." He looked toward the archway that stood at the far end of the round chamber. "Yes, there are probably others out there."

But he made no motion toward the door. Hope died, destroyed by logic. There were no others. If there had been, they would have ended the enchantment. He was the only survivor. He was alone. Which meant that somewhere, somehow, something had gone horribly wrong.

"And will I be expected, all by myself, to set it right?"

## CHAPTER \* 9

### FIRE SEA, ABARRACH

DID NOT REGAIN CONSCIOUSNESS, HE REGAINED A SENSE OF himself. He had succeeded in his objective, he had remained awake during the journey through Death's Gate. But now he knew why the mind far preferred to make the trip in unknowing darkness. He understood, with a real sense of shaken terror, how near he'd come to slipping into madness. Alfred's reality had been the rope to which he'd clung to save himself. And he wondered, bitterly, if it might not have been better to have let loose his hold.

He lay for a moment on the deck, trying to draw his shattered self back together, attempted to shake off the feelings of grief and dreadful loss and fear that assailed him—all in the name of Alfred. A furry head rested on the Patryn's chest, liquid eyes looked anxiously into his. Haplo stroked the dog's silky ears, scratched its muzzle.

"It's all right, boy. I'm all right," he said, then knew that he would never truly be all right again. He glanced across at the comatose body sprawled on the deck near him.

"Damn you!" he muttered and, sitting up, started to give the body a wakening kick with his foot. He was reminded, forcibly, of the young and beautiful corpse in the crystal tomb. Reaching out a hand, he shook Alfred's shoulder.

"Hey," he said gruffly. "C'mon. C'mon and wake up. I can't leave you down here, Sartan. I want you up on the bridge where I can keep on you. Get moving!"

Alfred sat up instantly, gasping and crying out in horror. He ^mtched at Haplo's shirt, nearly dragging the Patryn down on top of him. "Help me! Save me! Running! I've been running... and they're so close! Please! Please, help me!"

Whatever was going on here, Haplo didn't have time for it. "Hey!" he shouted loudly, straight into the man's face, and slapped him.

Alfred's balding head snapped back, his teeth clicked together. Sucking in a breath, he stared at Haplo and the Patryn saw recognition. He saw something else, completely unexpected: understanding, compassion, sorrow.

Haplo wondered uneasily where Alfred had spent his journey through Death's Gate. He had the answer, deep inside, but he wasn't certain he liked it or what it all might mean. He chose to ignore it, at least for the time being.

"Was that? ... I saw ..." Alfred began.

"On your feet," Haplo said. Standing up himself, he pulled the clumsy Sartan up with him. "We're not out of danger. If anything, we've just flown into it. I—"

A shattering crash amidships emphasized his words. Haplo staggered, caught himself on an overhead beam. Alfred fell backward, arms flailing wildly, and sat down heavily on the deck.

"Dog, bring him!" Haplo ordered, and hurried forward.

During the Sundering, the Sartan had split the universe, divided it into worlds representative of its four basic elements: air, fire, stone, and water. Haplo had first visited the realm of air, Arianus. He had just returned from the realm of fire, Pryan. His glimpses into each had prepared him, so he had supposed, for what he might find in Abarrach, the world of stone. A subterranean world, he imagined, a world of tunnels and caves, a world of cool and earthy-smelling darkness.

His ship struck something again, listed sideways. Haplo could hear, behind him, a wail and a clattering crash. Alfred, down again. The ship could take such punishment, guarded as it was by its runes, but not indefinitely. Each blow sent tiny tremors through the sigla traced on the hull, forcing them a little farther apart, disrupting their magic ever so slightly. Two had only to completely separate, one from the other, open a crack that would grow wider and wider. That was how Haplo's first trip through Death's Gate had ended.

Making his way forward as rapidly as possible, tossed from side to side by the erratic motion of the heaving ship, Haplo became aware lurid glow lighting the darkness around him. The temperature increasing, growing hotter, much hotter. The runes on his skin began to glow a faint blue, his body's magic reacting instinctively to reduce his temperature to a safe level.

Could his ship be on fire?

Haplo scoffed at the notion. He had passed safely through the guns of Pryan; the runes would most assuredly protect against flame! But there was no denying the fact that the red glow was burning brighter, the temperature growing warmer. Haplo quickened his pace. Emerging onto the bridge with some difficulty, due to the lurching of the vessel, the Patryn stopped and stared, amazement and shock paralyzing him.

His ship was sailing, with incredible speed, down a river of molten lava.

A vast stream of glowing red tinged with flame yellow surged and swirled around the vessel. Darkness arched above him, made darker by contrast to the lurid light of the magma flow below. He was in a gigantic cavern. Vast columns of black rock, around which the lava curled and eddied, soared upward, supporting a ceiling of stone. Numberless stalactites hung down, reaching for him like bony, grasping fingers, their polished surface reflecting the hellish red of the river of fire beneath them.

The ship veered this way and that. Huge stalagmites, with wicked, sword-sharp edges, thrust up from the molten sea like black teeth from a red maw. Haplo understood what had caused the trashes they'd previously experienced. Jolted to action, he moved forward and placed his hands on the

steering stone, reacting by, instinct more than by conscious thought, his gaze riveted with horrid fascination on the dreadful landscape into which he sailed.

"Blessed Sartan!" murmured a voice behind him. "What frightful place is this?"

Haplo spared Alfred a brief glance.

"Your people made it," he told him. "Dog, watch him."

The dog had obediently herded and harried Alfred to this point by nipping at the man's heels. It plopped itself down on the deck, panting in the heat, fixing its intelligent eyes on the Sartan. Alfred took a step forward. The animal growled, its tail thumped warningly against the deck.

I've nothing against you personally, the dog might have been saying from its expression, but orders are orders.

Alfred gulped and froze, leaned weakly against the bulkhead. "Where . . . where are we?" he repeated in a faint voice.

"Abarrach."

"The world of stone. Was this your destination?"

"Of course! What did you expect? That I'm as clumsy as you?"

Alfred was silent, eyes staring out on the awful panorama. "So you are visiting each of the worlds?" he said at length.

Haplo didn't see any reason why he should answer and so he kept quiet and concentrated on his steering. It deserved concentration. The huge boulders sprang up suddenly, without warning. He considered taking to the air, but decided against it. He couldn't determine the height of the cavern's ceiling. The hull could withstand punishment far better than the fragile mast and dragon's head prow.

The heat was intense, even inside the ship, which had the advantage of being protected by runes on the outside. Haplo's skin gleamed a bright blue as the runes cooled him. Alfred, he noticed, was humming beneath his breath, tracing runes in the air with his long-fingered hands and shuffling his feet slightly, his body swaying to the rhythm of the Sartan magic. Flanks heaving, the dog panted loudly, but never took its eyes from Alfred.

"You've been to the second world, I presume," the Sartan continued in a low voice, almost as if he were speaking to himself. "It would be natural for you to travel to them in the order in which they were created, the order they appear on the old charts. Did you. . . did you find any trace of"—Alfred paused, seeming to have trouble speaking—"my people?" he asked finally in a voice so soft that Haplo heard him only because he knew what the question was going to be.

The Patryn didn't immediately answer. What was he going to do with Alfred? This Sartan? This mortal enemy?

Haplo's inclination, and he was astounded by how his hands and fingers itched to perform the action his mind presented to him, was to toss the man into the magma river. But to murder Alfred would be to indulge in his own hatred, a lapse of discipline the Lord of the Nexus would not tolerate. Alfred, a living Sartan—as far as Haplo had discovered, the only living Sartan—was an extremely valuable prize.

My Lord will be pleased with this gift, Haplo thought, considering. Far more pleased with this than anything else I could bring him, including my report on this hellish world. I should probably turn around, deliver the Sartan immediately. But. . . but. . .

But that would mean reentering Death's Gate and Haplo, although he hated admitting his weakness to himself, couldn't view that prospect without true alarm. He saw again the rows and rows of tombs, knew again the death of hope and promise, experienced the knowledge of being terribly, horribly, pitifully alone. . . .

He wrenched his mind from the dream or whatever it had been, cursed the eyes that had made him see it. I won't make that journey again, not now, not so soon. Let time blunt it, blur the images. He rationalized: it would be extremely difficult and dangerous to turn the ship around. Better to keep going, complete my mission, explore this world, and then return to the Nexus. Alfred isn't going anywhere without me, that's for damn sure.

One glance at the Sartan's sweat-dewed face, the shivering limbs, and Haplo was reassured. Alfred appeared incapable of making his way to the head without assistance. The Patryn didn't think it likely that his enemy would have either the strength or the ability to wrest the ship away from him and make good an escape.

Haplo met Alfred's eyes, saw — once again — not hatred or fear but understanding, sorrow. It occurred to the Patryn, suddenly, that the Sartan might not want to escape. Haplo considered, discarded the notion. Alfred must know what terrible fate awaited him at the hands of the Lord of the Nexus. And if he didn't, Haplo would obligingly tell him.

"Did you say something, Sartan?" he tossed over his shoulder.

"I asked if you found anything of my people on Pryan," Alfred repeated humbly.

"What I found or didn't find is no concern of yours. It will be up to My Lord to tell you what he thinks you ought to know."

"Are we going back there? To your lord?"

Haplo heard, with a bitter satisfaction, the nervous quaver in the man's voice. So Alfred did know, or at least had a general idea, of the reception he would receive,

"No." Haplo ground the word. "Not yet. I have a job to do and I'm going to do it. I don't think it likely you'll want to wander about this place on your own, but, just in case you're thinking you might give me the slip, the dog will have its eyes on you day and night."

The animal, hearing the reference, brushed the plummy tail on the deck, the mouth widened in a grin, exhibiting razor-sharp teeth.

"Yes," Alfred said in a low voice, "I know about the dog."

Now whafs that supposed to mean? Haplo wondered irritably, not liking the man's tone, which seemed to border on compassionate when the Patryn would have preferred fear.

"Just a reminder, Sartan. There are things I can do to you, things I would enjoy doing to you, that are not at all pleasant and would not ruin your usefulness to My Lord. Do what I tell you and keep out of my way and you won't get hurt. Understand?"

"I am not as weak as you seem to consider me."

Alfred drew himself upright with a semblance of dignity. The dog growled and lifted its head, ears flattened, eyes narrowed. The tail thumped ominously. Alfred shrank backward, stooped shoulders rounding.

Haplo snorted in derision and concentrated on his sailing.

Up ahead, in the distance, the river of magma forked. One large stream branched off to the right, another, smaller, veered to the left. Haplo steered his ship into the right, for no other reason than that it was the larger of the two and appeared easier and safer to travel.

"How could anyone live in such a terrible environ?" Alfred, talking rhetorically to himself, seemed considerably surprised that Haplo responded.

"Mensch certainly couldn't survive, although our kind could. I don't think our trip into this world will be a long one. If there ever was life here, it must be dead by now."

"Perhaps Abarrach was never meant to be habitable. Perhaps it was meant to be only an energy source for the other—" Alfred's tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth, he fell abruptly silent.

Haplo grunted, glanced at the man. "Yeah? Go on."

"Nothing." The Sartan's eyes were on his oversize feet. "I was merely speculating."

"You'll have the opportunity to 'speculate' all you want when we return to the Nexus. You'll wish you knew the secrets of the universe and could reveal them, every one, to My Lord before he's finished with you, Sartan."

Alfred kept silent, stared out the glass porthole. Haplo darted glances up and down the black and barren shoreline. Small tributaries of the magma river meandered off among the rock shoals and disappeared into fire-lighted shadow. These might lead somewhere, might lead out. There was nothing above them except rock.

"If we're in the center of the world, in the core, ifs possible that there could be life above, on the surface," Alfred remarked, echoing Haplo's thought. He found that extremely irritating.

He considered beaching his ship, proceeding forward on foot, but immediately abandoned the idea. Walking among the slick-sided, sharp, black stalagmites that gleamed with an eerie, lurid brilliance in the magma's reflected glow would be difficult, treacherous. He would stay with the river, at least for the time being. . .

A dull roaring sound came to his ears. A glance at Alfred's face told him the Sartan heard it, too.

"We're moving faster," Alfred said, licking his lips that must be rimed with salt to judge by the sweat trickling down the man's cheeks.

The ship's speed increased, the magma hurtling along as if eager to arrive at some unknown destination. The roaring sound grew louder. Haplo kept his hands on the steering stone, peered ahead anxiously. He saw nothing except vast blackness.

"Rapids! A fall!" Alfred shouted, and the ship plunged over the edge of a gigantic lava cascade.

Haplo clung to the steering stone, the ship fell downward into a vast sea of molten lava. Rocks thrust up out of the swirling fiery mass, black nails grasping for the puny ship that was hurtling down on them.

Shaking himself free of the fascinated horror that gripped him, Haplo elevated his hands on the steering stone and, as his hands lifted, the runes on the stone glowed fiercely, brightly. The ship itself lifted, the magic flowing through the wings, activating them. Dragon Wing, as he had named it, wrenched itself free of the magma's clutching grasp and soared out over the molten sea.

Haplo heard behind him a groan and a slithering sound. The dog was on its feet, barking. Alfred lay huddled on the deck, the Sartan's face white as death.

"I think I'm going to be sick," he said faintly.

"Don't do it here!" Haplo barked, noting his own hands shaking, experiencing himself a lurching in his stomach and a bitter taste of bile in his mouth. He concentrated on flying his ship.

Alfred apparently managed to control himself, for the Patryn heard nothing more from him. Haplo sailed his ship upward, hoping to discover that they had flown out of the cavern. As he flew up and up into the darkness, he was disappointed to observe stalactite formations. These were incredibly large—some as much as a mile in diameter. Far, far below gleamed the magma sea, flowing to a horizon that was red on black.

He took the ship back down, near the shoreline. He had caught a glimpse to his right of an object that appeared man-made jutting out into the water. Its lines were too straight and even to have been formed by nature's hand, no matter how magically guided. Moving closer, he saw what looked like a pier, extending from the shore out into the lava ocean.

Haplo brought the ship down. He stared at the formation intently, trying to get a clear view.

"Look!" Alfred cried, sitting up and pointing, startling the dog, who growled. "There, to your left!"

Haplo jerked his head around, thinking they must be about to crash into a stalactite. Nothing loomed ahead of them and it took some moments to determine what Alfred had sighted.

Banks of clouds, created by the extreme heat of the magma sea meeting the cool air of the cavern far above, could be seen in the distance. The clouds drifted and parted, and then myriad tiny lights were visible, blinking out from beneath the clouds like stars.

Except that there could be no stars visible in this underground world.

The mist flew apart in tattered rags, and Haplo could see clearly. Perched on terraced steppes far from the magma sea stood the buildings and towers of an enormous city.

## CHAPTER \* 10

### SAFE HARBOR, ABARRACH

"WHERE ARE YOU TAKING THE SHIP?" ALFRED ASKED.

"I'm going to dock at that pier or whatever it is over there," Haplo answered, with a glance and a nod out the window.

"But the city's located on the opposite bank!"

"Precisely."

"Then, why not—"

"It beats the hell out of me, Sartan, how you managed to survive so long. I suppose it's due to that famous fainting routine of yours. What do you plan to do? Waltz up to the walls of a strange city, not knowing who lives there, and ask them nicely to let you in? What do you say when they ask you where you're from? What you're doing here? Why you want inside their city?"

"I would say—that is, I'd tell them—I guess you have a point," Alfred conceded lamely. "But what do we gain by landing over there?" He gestured vaguely. "Whoever lives in this dreadful place"—the Sartan couldn't resist a shudder—"will ask the same questions."

"Maybe." Haplo cast a sharp, scrutinizing gaze at their landing site. "Maybe not. Take a good look at it."

Alfred started to walk to the window. The dog growled, ears pricked, teeth bared. The Sartan froze.

"It's all right. Let him go. Just watch him," Haplo told the dog, who settled back down onto the deck, keeping its intelligent eyes on the Sartan.

Alfred, with a backward glance at the animal, awkwardly crossed the deck; its slight rocking motion sent the Sartan staggering. Haplo shook his head and wondered what the devil he was going to do with Alfred while exploring. Alfred arrived at the window without major mishap and, leaning against the glass, peered through it.

The ship spiraled down out of the air, landed gently on the magma, floated on sluggish, molten waves.

A pier had been shaped out of what had once been a natural grain of obsidian, extending out into the magma sea. Several other man-made structures, built out of the same black rock, faced the pier across a crude street.

"You see any signs of life?" Haplo asked.

"I don't see anyone moving around," Alfred said, staring hard. "Either in the town or on the docks. We're the only ship in sight. The place is deserted."

"Yeah, maybe. You can never tell. This might be their version of night, and everyone's asleep. But at least it's not guarded. If I'm lucky, I can be the one asking the questions."

Haplo steered the dragonship into the harbor, his gaze scrutinizing the small town. Probably not so much a town, he decided, as a dockside loading area. The buildings looked, for the most part, like warehouses, although here and there he thought he saw what might be a shop or a tavern.

Who would sail this deadly ocean, deadly to all but those protected by powerful magic—such as Alfred and himself? Haplo was intensely curious about this strange and forbidding world, more curious than he'd been about those worlds whose composition closely resembled his own. But he still didn't know what to do about Alfred.

Apparently the Sartan was following the line of Haplo's thoughts. "What should I do?" Alfred asked meekly.

"I'm thinking about it," Haplo muttered, affecting to be absorbed in the tricky docking maneuver, although that, in reality, was being handled by the magic of the runes of the steering stone.

"I don't want to be left behind. I'm going with you."

"It's not your decision. You'll do what I say, Sartan, and like it. And if I say you'll stay here with the dog to keep an eye on you, you'll stay here. Or you won't like it."

Alfred shook his balding head slowly, with quiet dignity. "You can't threaten me, Haplo. Sartan magic is different from Patryn magic, but it has the same roots and is just as powerful. I haven't used my magic as much as you've been forced by circumstances to use yours. But I am older than you. And you must concede that magic of any type is strengthened by age and by wisdom."

"I must, must I?" Haplo sneered, although his mind went almost immediately to his lord, a man whose years were numberless, and to the vast power he had amassed.

The Patryn eyed his opposite, eyed the representative of a race who had been the only force in the universe who could have halted the Patryn's vaulting ambition, their rightful quest for complete and absolute control over the weak-minded Sartan and the squabbling, chaos-driven mensch.

Alfred didn't look very formidable. His soft face indicated to the Patryn a soft and weak nature. His stoop-shouldered stance implied a cringing, sheepish attitude. Haplo already knew the Sartan was a coward. Worse, Alfred was clad in clothes suited only to a royal drawing room—a shabby frock coat, right breeches tied at the knee with scraggly black velvet ribbons, lace-trimmed neckerchief, a coat with floppy sleeves, buckle-adorned shoes. But Haplo had seen this man, this weak specimen of a Sartan, charm a marauding dragon with nothing more than a few movements from that clumsy body.

Haplo had no doubt in his mind who would win a contest between the two of them, and he guessed that Alfred didn't either. But a contest would take time and the fighting magicks generated by these

two beings—the closest beings to gods the mensch would ever know—would proclaim their presence to everyone within eyesight and earshot.

Besides, on reflection, Haplo didn't particularly want to leave the Sartan on his ship. The dog would prevent Alfred from breathing, if Haplo ordered it. But the Patryn hadn't liked the Sartan's reference to the animal. I know about the dog, he'd said. What did he know? What was there to know? The dog was a dog. Nothing more, except that the animal had once saved Haplo's life.

The Patryn docked the ship at the silent, empty pier. He kept close watch, more than half-expecting some type of welcome—an official demanding to know their business, an idle straggler, watching their arrival out of curiosity.

No one appeared. Haplo knew little of wharves or shipyards but he took this as a bad sign. Either everyone was fast asleep and completely uninterested in what was happening at their docks or the town was, as Alfred had said, deserted. And towns that were deserted were generally deserted for a reason and that reason was generally not good.

Once the ship was moored, Haplo deactivated the steering stone, placed it once more on its pedestal, its glowing runes extinguished. He began to prepare to disembark. Rummaging in his supplies, he found a roll of plain linen cloth and wound it carefully around his hands and wrists, covering and concealing the runes tattooed on the skin.

The same runes were tattooed over most of his body. He kept himself covered with heavy clothing—a long-sleeved shirt, a leather vest, leather trousers tucked into tall leather boots, a scarf tied close around his neck. No sigla adorned the grim, square-jawed, cleanshaven face, no runes appeared on the palms of the hands or the fingers or the soles of his feet. The rune-magic might interfere with the mental processes and those of the senses: touch, sight, smell, hearing.

"I'm curious," said Alfred, watching the proceedings with interest. "Why do you bother to disguise yourself? It's been centuries since . . . since . . ." he faltered, not certain where to go from here.

"Since you threw us in that torture chamber you called a prison?" Haplo finished, glancing at Alfred coolly.

The Sartan's head bowed. "I didn't realize ... I didn't understand. Now, I do. I'm sorry."

"Understand? How could you possibly understand unless you've been there?" Haplo paused, wondering again, uncomfortably, where Alfred had spent his journey through Death's Gate. "You'll be sorry, all right, Sartan. We'll see how long you last in the Labyrinth. And to answer your question, I disguise myself because there could be people out there—like yourself, for example—who remember the Patryns. My Lord does not want anyone to remember—not yet, at least."

"There are those such as myself, who would remember and try to stop you. That's what you mean, isn't it?" Alfred sighed. "I cannot stop you. I am one. You, from what I gather, are many. You didn't find any trace of my people alive on Pryan, did you?"

Haplo looked at the man sharply, suspecting some sort of trick, though he couldn't imagine what. He had a sudden vision of those rows of tombs, of the young, dead corpses. He guessed at the desperate search that had taken Alfred to every part of Arianus— from the high realms of the self-accursed wizards to the lowly realms of the slavelike Gags. He experienced the terrible grief of

coming to realize, finally, that he alone had survived, his race and all its dreams and plans were dead.

What had gone wrong? How could godlike beings have dwindled, vanished? And if such a disaster could happen to the Sartan, could it also happen to us?

Angry, Haplo shrugged off the thought. The Patryns had survived a land determined to slaughter them—proof that they had been right all along. They were the strongest, the most intelligent, the fittest to rule.

"I found no trace of the Sartan on Pryan," Haplo said, "except a city that they'd built."

'A city?' Alfred looked hopeful.

'Abandoned. Long ago. A message they left behind said something about some type of force driving them out.'

Alfred appeared bewildered. "But that's impossible. What type of force could it have been? There is no force, except perhaps your own, that could destroy or even intimidate us."

Haplo wound the bandages around his right hand, glanced at the Sartan from beneath lowered brows. He seemed to be sincere, but Haplo had journeyed with Alfred in Arianus. The Sartan wasn't as simpleminded as he appeared. Alfred had discovered Haplo to be a Patryn long before Haplo had discovered Alfred to be a Sartan.

If he did know anything about such a force, he wasn't talking. The Lord of the Nexus would have it out of him, however.

Haplo tucked the ends of the bandages neatly beneath the shirt cuffs and whistled to the dog, who leapt eagerly to its feet.

"Are you ready, Sartan?"

Alfred blinked in surprise. "Yes, I'm ready. And, since we're speaking the human language, it might be better if you called me by my name instead of 'Sartan.' "

"Hell, I don't even call the dog by name and that animal means a lot more to me than you do."

"There might be those who remember the Sartan, as well as the Patryns."

Haplo gnawed his lower lip, conceded that the man had a point. "Very well, 'Alfred.'" He managed to make it sound insulting. 'Although that's not your real name, is it?'

"No. It's one I adopted. Unlike yours, my true name would sound very strange to the mensch."

"What is your real name? Your Sartan name? If you're wondering, I can speak your language—although I don't like to."

Alfred drew himself straighten "If you speak our language, you know then that to speak our names is to speak the runes and draw on the power of the runes. Therefore, our true names are known only to ourselves and to those who love us. A Sartan's name can be spoken only by another Sartan.

"Just as your name"—Alfred raised a delicate finger, pointed suddenly at Haplo's breast—"is marked on your skin and may be read only by those whom you love and trust. You see, I also speak your language. Although I don't like to."

"Love!" Haplo snorted. "We don't love anyone. Love is the greatest danger there is in the Labyrinth, since whatever you love is certain to die. As for trust, we had to learn it. Your prison taught us that much- We had to trust each other, because that was the only way we could survive. And speaking of survival, you might want to make certain I stay healthy, unless you think you can pilot this ship back through Death's Gate yourself."

"And what happens if my survival depends on you?"

"Oh, I'll see that you survive, all right. Not that you'll thank me for it later."

Alfred looked at the steering stone, the sigla etched on it. He would recognize each sigla, but they were arranged in far different patterns from those he knew. Elven and human languages use the same letters of the alphabet, yet the languages are vastly dissimilar. And although he might be able to speak the Patryn language, Haplo was certain the Sartan couldn't work the Patryn magic.

"No, I'm afraid I couldn't manage steering this ship," Alfred said.

Haplo laughed briefly, derisively, started for the door, then stopped. Turning, he held up a warning hand.

"Don't try that fainting trick with me. I warn you! I can't be responsible for what happens if you pass out."

Alfred shook his head. "I can't control the fainting spells, I'm afraid. Oh, in the beginning I could. I used it to disguise my magic, like those bandages you wear. What else could I do? I could no more reveal I was a demigod than you could! Everyone would have wanted to use me. Greedy men demanding I give them wealth. Elves demanding I kill the humans. Humans demanding I rid them of the elves . . ."

'And so you fainted."

"I was beset by robbers." Alfred lifted his hands, looked down at them. "I could have obliterated them with a word. I could have turned them to solid stone. I could have melted their feet to the pavement. I could have charmed them utterly . . . and left my mark indelibly on the world. I was frightened — not of them, but of what I had the power to do to them. My mental turmoil and anguish was too great for my mind to bear. When I came to myself, I knew how I had solved the dilemma. I had simply fainted dead away. They took what they wanted and left me alone. And now I can't control the spells. They simply . . . happen."

"You can control it. You just don't want to. It's become an easy way out." The Patryn pointed over the ship's hull to the blazing lava sea, burning bright around them. "But if you faint and fall into a puddle in this world, that fainting spell's liable to be your last!"

"Let's go, dog. You, too, Alfred.' "

## CHAPTER \* 11

### SAFE HARBOR, ABARRACH

LEFT THE SHIP MOORED AT THE DOCK, ITS MAGIC KEEPING IT afloat in the air above the magma flow. He was not concerned over anything happening to the vessel, runes of protection guarded it better than he could have guarded it in person, would permit no one to enter in his absence. Not that this appeared likely. No one approached the ship, no dock authority demanded to know their business, no hucksters swarmed over to push their wares, no sailors lounged about, idly eyeing the cut of their jib.

The dog leapt from the deck to the pier below. Haplo followed, landing almost as silently and lightly as the animal. Alfred remained on deck, dithering nervously, pacing back and forth.

Haplo, exasperated, was on the point of leaving the man when suddenly, with desperate courage, Alfred launched himself into the air, arms and legs flailing, and landed in a confused heap on the rock pier. It took him several moments to sort himself out, looking for all the world as if he were endeavoring to decide which limb went where and making mistakes as he went along. Haplo watched, half-amused, wholly irritated, inclined to assist the clumsy Sartan simply to expedite their progress. Alfred at last pulled himself together, discovered no bones were broken, and fell into step beside Haplo and the dog.

They wandered slowly down the pier, Haplo taking his time investigating. He stopped once to stare closely at several bales stacked on the docks. The dog sniffed around them. Alfred gazed at them curiously.

"What are they, do you think?"

"Raw material of some sort," Haplo answered, touching it gingerly. "Fibrous, soft. Might be used for making cloth. I—" He paused, leaned closer to the bale, almost as if he were sniffing it, like his dog. He straightened, pointed. "What do you make of that?"

Alfred appeared rather startled at being thus addressed, but he leaned down, squinting his mild eyes and peering distractedly. "What? I can't—"

"Look closely. Those marks on the sides of the bales."

Alfred thrust his nose nearly into the product, gave a start, paled slightly, and drew back.

"Well?" Haplo demanded.

"I... can't be sure."

"The hell you can't."

"The markings are smudged, difficult to read."

Haplo shook his head, and walked on, whistling to the dog, who thought it had found a rat and was pawing frantically at the bottom of a bale.

The town of obsidian was silent, the silence was ominous and oppressive. No heads peered out of the windows, no children ran through the streets. Yet it had obviously once been filled with life, as impossible as that might seem, so near the magma sea whose heat and fumes must kill any ordinary mortal.

Ordinary mortals. Not demigods.

Haplo continued his scrutiny of the various goods and bundles piled up on the pier. Occasionally, he paused and shot a closer glance at one and when he did this, he often pointed it out silently to Alfred, who would look at it, look at Haplo, and shrug his stooped shoulders in perplexity.

The two moved into the town proper. No one hailed them, greeted them, threatened them. Haplo was certain, now, that no one would. The pricking of certain runes on his skin would have alerted him to the presence of anything living; his magic was doing nothing more than keeping his body cool and filtering out harmful properties in the air. Alfred appeared nervous—but then Alfred would have appeared nervous walking into a children's nursery.

Two questions were on Haplo's mind: Who had been here and why weren't they here any longer?

The town itself was a collection of buildings carved of the black rock, fronting a single street. One building, standing almost directly opposite the pier, boasted thick-paned, crude glass windows. Haplo looked inside. Several globes of soft, warm light ranged around the walls, illuminating a large common room filled with tables and chairs. Perhaps an inn.

The inn's door was woven out of a heavy, coarse, grasslike substance, similar to hemp. The fiber had then been coated with a thick, glossy resin that made it smooth and impervious to weather. The door stood partially ajar, not in welcome, but as if the owner had left in such haste he'd neglected to shut it.

Haplo was about to step inside and investigate when a mark on the door caught his attention. He stared at it, the doubt in his mind hardening into finality. He said nothing, his finger jabbed at the door, at the mark on the door.

"Yes," said Alfred quietly, "a rune structure."

"A Sartan rune structure," Haplo corrected, his voice grating harshly.

"A corrupted Sartan rune, or perhaps altered would be a better choice of words. I couldn't speak it, nor use it." Head bobbing, shoulders hunched, Alfred looked singularly like a turtle, emerging from its shell. "And I can't explain it."

"It's the same as those marks we saw on the bales."

"I don't know how you can tell." Alfred wouldn't commit himself. "Those were almost worn off."

Haplo's mind went back to Pryan, to the Sartan city he'd discovered. He'd seen runes there as well, but not on the inns. The inns of Pryan hung out signs of welcome in human, elven, dwarven. He

recalled, too, that the dwarf—what had been that fellow's name?— had known something of the rune magic, but only in a crude and childlike fashion. Any three-year-old Sartan could have bettered the Pryan dwarf in a rune-scrying contest.

This rune structure may have been corrupted, but it was sophisticated, runes of protection for the inn, runes of blessing for those who entered. At last, Haplo had found what he had been seeking, what he had been dreading to find—the enemy. And, if he was to judge by appearance, he was standing in an entire civilization of them.

Great. Just great.

Haplo entered the inn, booted feet padding softly across the carpeted floor.

Alfred crept along behind, looked about in amazement. "Whoever was here certainly left in a hurry!"

Haplo was in a bad mood, not inclined for conversation. He continued his investigation in silence. He examined the lamps, was surprised to see that they had no wicks. A jet of air flowed from a small pipe in the wall. The flame burned off the air. Haplo blew out the flame, sniffed, and wrinkled his nose. Breathe that too long without benefit of magic and you'd quietly cease to breathe.

Haplo heard a noise, glanced around. Alfred had automatically and without thinking carefully righted an overturned chair. The dog sniffed a hunk of meat left lying on the floor.

And all around the Patryn, everywhere he turned his glance, were Sartan runes.

"Your people haven't been gone long," he observed, noting the bitterness in his voice, hoping it covered the crawling, twisting knot of fear, of anger, of despair.

"Don't call them that!" Alfred protested. Was he trying hard not to build his hopes too high? Or did he sound as frightened as Haplo? "There's no other evidence—"

"Like hell! Could humans, no matter how advanced in magic, live long in this poisonous atmosphere? Could elves? Dwarves? No! The only people who could survive are your people."

"Or yours!" Alfred pointed out.

"Yeah, well, we all know that's not possible!"

"We don't know anything. Mensch might live here. Over time, they might have adapted.. ."

Haplo turned away, sorry he'd brought it up. "It's no use speculating. We'll probably find out soon enough. These people, whoever they are, haven't been gone long."

"How can you tell?"

In answer, the Patryn held up a loaf of bread he'd just broken. "Stale on the outside," Haplo said, poking at it. "Soft in the center. If it'd been left out long, it would be stale all the way through. And no one bothered to put runes of preservation on it, so they expected to eat it, not store it."

"I see." Alfred was admiring. "I never would have noticed."

"You learn to notice, in the Labyrinth. Those who don't, don't survive."

The Sartan, uncomfortable, changed the subject. "Why do you think they left?"

"My guess is war," Haplo answered, lifting a filled wineglass. He sniffed at the contents. The stuff smelled awful.

"War!" Alfred's shocked tone brought the Patryn immediately to attention.

"Yes, come to think of it, that is odd, isn't it? You people pride yourselves on peaceful solutions to problems, don't you? But"—he shrugged—"it sure looks that way to me."

"I don't understand—"

Haplo waved an impatient hand. "The door standing ajar, chairs overturned, food left uneaten, not a ship in the harbor."

"I'm afraid I still don't understand."

"A person who leaves his property expecting to come back generally shuts his door and locks it, to keep that property safe until his return. A person who flees his property in fear for his life just leaves. Then, too, these people fled in the middle of a meal, leaving ordinarily portable goods behind them—plates, cutlery, pitchers, bottles—full bottles at that. I'll wager that if you went upstairs, you'd find most of their clothes still in their rooms. They were warned of danger, and they got the hell out of here."

Alfred's eyes widened in sudden horror, realization dawning on him with a sickly light. "But ... if what you say is true ... then whatever is coming down on them—"

"—is coming down on us," Haplo finished. He felt more cheerful. Alfred was right. It couldn't be Sartan.

From what he knew of their history, the Sartan had never made war on anyone, not even their most feared enemies. They had shut the Patryns into prison, into a deadly prison, but—according to the records—that prison had been originally designed to rehabilitate, not kill, the prisoner.

'And if they left in such a hurry, it must be quite close by now." Alfred peered nervously out the window. "Shouldn't we be going?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Not much more to be learned around here."

Clumsy footed as he was, the Sartan could move fast enough when he wanted to. Alfred reached the door ahead of any of them, including the dog. Bursting out into the street, he was halfway down the pier, running awkwardly for the ship, when he must have realized he was alone. Turning, he called to Haplo, who was heading in the opposite direction, toward the edge of town.

Alfred's shout echoed loudly among the silent buildings. Haplo ignored him, kept walking. The Sartan cringed, swallowed another shout. He launched into a trot, stumbled over his feet, and fell flat on his face. The dog waited for him, on orders from Haplo, and eventually Alfred caught up.

"If what you say is true," he gasped, breathing heavily from his exertion, "the enemy's bound to be out there!"

"They are," said Haplo coolly. "Look."

Alfred glanced ahead, saw a pool of fresh blood, a broken spear, a dropped shield. He ran a shaking hand nervously over his bald head. "Then . . . then where are you going?"

"To meet them."

CHAPTER \* 12

SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

THE NARROW STREET HAPLO AND HIS RELUCTANT COMPANION FOLLOWED dwindled down and eventually came to an end among gigantic stalagmites thrusting upward around the base of a slick-sided obsidian cliff. The magma sea churned sluggishly at its feet, the rock gleamed brilliantly in the lurid light. The top of the cliff reared upward until it vanished in the steamy darkness. No army was advancing on them from this direction.

Haplo turned, gazed out over a large flat plain behind the small seaside town. He could not see much, most of the land was lost in the shadows of this realm that knew no sun except that within its own heart. But occasionally a stream of lava branched off from the main flow and wandered out onto the vast rock plains. By its reflected light, he saw deserts of oozing, bubbling mud; volcanic mountains of jagged, twisted rock; and—oddly—cylindrical columns of immense girth and width vaulting upward into darkness.

"Man-made," Haplo thought and realized, too late, that he'd spoken the thought aloud.

"Yes," Alfred replied, looking upward, craning his neck until he nearly fell over backward. Recalling what Haplo'd said about tumbling into a puddle, the man looked down, regained his balance hastily. "They must reach straight up to the ceiling of this vast cavern but... for what reason? The cave obviously doesn't need the support."

Never in Haplo's wildest imaginings had he envisioned himself standing on a hell-blasted world, calmly discussing geological formations with a Sartan. He didn't like talking to Alfred, he didn't like listening to the high-pitched, querulous voice. But he hoped, through conversation, to lull Alfred into a sense of security. Lead him into discussions that might cause him to slip up, reveal whatever he was concealing about the Sartan and their plans.

"Have you seen pictures or read accounts of this world?" Haplo asked. His tone was casual, he didn't look at Alfred when he spoke, as if the Sartan's reply mattered little to him.

Alfred cast a sharp glance at him, however, and licked his lips with his tongue. He was really a terrible liar.

"No."

"Well, I have. My Lord discovered drawings of all the worlds, left behind by your people when they abandoned us to our fate in the Labyrinth."

Alfred started to say something, checked himself, and kept silent.

"This world of stone your people created looks like a cheese that has been populated by mice," Haplo continued. "It's filled with caverns like this one in which we're standing. These caverns are enormous. One single cave could easily hold the entire elven nation of Tribus. Tunnels and caves run all through the stone world, crisscrossing each other, delving down, spiraling up. Up—to what? What's on the surface?" Haplo gazed at the cylindrical towers, soaring into the shadows above. "What is on the surface, Sartan?"

"I thought you were going to call me by my name," Alfred said mildly.

"I will, when it's important," Haplo grunted. "It leaves a bad taste in my mouth."

"To answer your question, I have no idea what is on the surface. You know far more about this world than I do." Alfred's eyes glistened as he considered the possibilities. "I would speculate, however, that—"

"Hush!" Haplo held up a warning hand.

Remembering their danger, Alfred turned deathly white and froze where he stood, body trembling. Haplo clambered over the broken rocks with stealthy ease, being careful to dislodge no small chunk that could fall, rattling, and reveal their presence. The dog, padding softly as its master, went ahead, ears pricked, hackles raised.

Haplo discovered that the street didn't end, as he had thought, against the sheer rock wall. He found a path running along the stalagmites at the cliff's base. A hasty and crude attempt had been made to obliterate the path's existence, or perhaps just slow whatever was coming along it. Piles of rock had been stacked in front of it to hide it. Molten pools of lava made a slip extremely treacherous. Haplo eased himself over the rock piles, following after the dog, who seemed to have an extraordinary talent in picking out safe places for its master to cross. Alfred remained behind, quaking, shivering all over. Haplo could have sworn he heard the man's teeth chatter.

Rounding the last jumble of rock, the Patryn reached the mouth of a cave. Its high, arched entrance was invisible from land, but could be seen clearly from the seaside. A magma tributary flowed into the cave. On one side of the lava flow—Haplo's side—the path continued, leading into the cavern's lava-lighted interior.

Haplo paused near the entrance, listening. The sounds he'd first heard were clearer now—voices, echoing through the cavern. A large number of people, to judge by the sometimes clamorous noise, although occasionally everyone fell silent and one alone continued speaking. The echoes distorted the words, he couldn't understand what language was spoken, and it had a cadence that was unfamiliar to him. Certainly it was not like any of the elven, human, and dwarven dialects he'd heard on Arianus and Pryan.

The Patryn eyed the cave speculatively. The path leading inside was wide, littered with boulders and broken rock. The lava flow lighted the way, but there were pockets and pits of dark shadow along the side of the tunnel where a man—particularly a man accustomed to moving with the silence of the night—might easily hide. Haplo could probably slip up on whatever and whoever were inside that tunnel, get a close look at them, and from that observation make his plans accordingly.

"But what the devil do I do with Alfred?"

Haplo glanced back, saw the tall, gangly Sartan perched on his rock like a stork on a battlement. The Patryn thought of the clumsy feet, clattering among the stones, and he shook his head. No, taking Alfred was impossible. But leaving him? Something was bound to happen to the fool. If nothing else, he'd fall into a pit. And Haplo's lord would not be pleased at losing such a valuable prize.

Damn it all, the Sartan was skilled in magic! And he didn't need to hide it; at least, not yet.

Haplo made his way back quietly, carefully to where Alfred shivered on his perch. Cupping his hand, putting it to the Sartan's ear, the Patryn whispered, "Don't say a word. Just listen!"

Alfred nodded, to show he understood. His face could have been used as a mask in a play called Terror.

"There's a cavern beneath the cliff. Those voices we can hear are coming from inside. They're probably a lot farther off than they sound, the cave's distorting them."

Alfred appeared highly relieved and also ready to turn and head back for the boat. Haplo caught hold of the worn and shabby sleeve of the blue velvet coat. "We're going into the cave."

The Sartan's eyes opened wide, showing red rims around the pale blue iris. He gulped and would have shaken his head if his neck had not gone stiff.

"Those Sartan markings we saw. Don't you want to know the truth? If we left now, we might not ever find out."

Alfred's head drooped, his shoulders slumped. Haplo knew he had his victim netted, he had only to drag him along. At last the Patryn understood the driving force in Alfred's life. Whatever the cost, the Sartan had to know if he was truly alone in this universe or if there were others of his race left alive and, if so, what had happened to them.

Alfred closed his eyes, drew a deep, shivering breath, then nodded. "Yes," his lips mouthed, "I'll come with you."

"It's going to be dangerous. Not a sound. Not one sound or you could get us both killed. Understand?"

The Sartan appeared agonized, looked helplessly down at his own too-large feet, at the hands that dangled at the wrist as if completely beyond their owner's control.

"Use your magic!" Haplo told him irritably.

Alfred drew back, frightened. Haplo said nothing. He merely pointed in the direction of the cave, pointed to the rock-strewn and treacherous path, pointed to the glowing pools of molten rock on either side.

Alfred began to sing, his nasal voice bouncing off the roof of his mouth. He sang softly; Haplo, standing near him, could barely hear it. But the Patryn, sensitive to the slightest noise that might betray them, had to bite his tongue to keep from telling the man to shut up. Sartan rune magic involves sight and sound and movement. If Haplo wanted Alfred to use his magic, Haplo would have to put up with this teeth-jarring chant. He waited and watched. The Sartan was dancing now, hands weaving the runes his voice conjured, his ungainly feet moving in graceful patterns drawn by his voice. And then Alfred was no longer standing on the rock. He rose slowly into the air, hovered about a foot above the ground. Spreading his hands in a deprecating manner, he smiled down on Haplo.

"This is the easiest," he said.

Haplo supposed so, but he found it disconcerting, and he had to quiet the dog, who seemed to like Alfred well enough on the ground but who took offense at an Alfred floating in midair.

The Sartan had certainly done what was required of him. Alfred, drifting among the rocks, made less sound than the currents of hot wind that swirled around them. Then what's wrong? Haplo wondered irritably. Am I jealous? Because I can't do it myself. Not that I'd want to do it myself!

Patryns draw their magical energy from the possibilities of the seen, the felt, the physical; they take it from the ground, the plants and trees, the rocks, and all objects around them. To let go of reality was to fall into a void of chaos. Sartan magic was of the air, of the unseen, of the possibilities woven in faith and belief. Haplo had the strange sensation that he was being followed by a ghost.

He turned his back on the bobbing Sartan, called the dog to heel, and set his mind to what he was doing, finding the way back along the path. He hoped Alfred struck his head on a rock.

The path inside the cavern proved all that Haplo had foreseen. It was wide, far easier to travel than even he'd supposed. A large wagon could have rolled through it without much difficulty.

Haplo kept to the sides of the cavern wall, making himself one with shadows. The dog, absolutely fascinated by a flying Alfred, lagged behind, staring upward in profound disbelief at the remarkable sight. The Sartan, hands clasped nervously before him, sailed sedately along after them.

They could hear the voices inside the cavern clearly now. It seemed that rounding the next corner in the twisting cave must bring the people speaking into view. But, as Haplo had said, sound bounced among the rocks and off the cavern ceiling. The Patryn and his companion traversed a considerable distance before the clarity of the words spoken warned Haplo that he was finally drawing near.

The magma stream decreased in width, the darkness grew thicker around them. Alfred was now little more than an indistinguishable blur in the fading light. The dog, whenever it stepped into deep shadow, vanished completely. The stream had once been broad and wide; Haplo could see its bed cut cleanly into the rock. But it was drying up, cooling, and he noted the resultant drop in temperature in the darkening cave. The stream ended altogether. Light failed, leaving them in impenetrable darkness.

Haplo came to a halt and was immediately struck from behind by a heavy object. Cursing beneath his breath, he fended off the floating Alfred who, not seeing the Patryn stop, had barreled right into him. Haplo was considering conjuring light—a simple skill, learned in childhood—but the blue glow of the runes would announce his presence on this world. He might as well shout it. Alfred would be no help either, for the same reason.

"Stay here," he whispered to Alfred, who nodded, only too happy to obey. "Dog, watch him."

The dog settled down, head cocked, studying Alfred inquisitively, as if trying to figure out how the man performed such a marvelous feat.

Haplo felt his way along the rock wall. The lava flow behind provided him with ambient light enough to know he wasn't about to plunge into a chasm. He ventured around another bend in the path and saw, at the end, bright light, yellow light, fire light. Light produced by living beings, not light made by lava. And around the light, across the light, and beneath the light, moved the silhouetted shapes of hundreds of people.

The back of the cavern was vast, opening out into a large room capable of holding an army comfortably. And had he found an army? Was this the army that had sent the shore people scurrying away in panic? Haplo watched and listened. He heard them talking, understood what they said. The darkness grew deep around him, he struggled with overwhelming despair and defeat.

He had found an army—an army of Sartan!

What was to be done? Escape! Return through Death's Gate, carry word of this disaster to his lord. But his lord would ask questions, questions Haplo could not now answer.

And Alfred? It had been a mistake to bring him. Haplo cursed himself bitterly. He should have left the Sartan behind on the ship, left him in ignorance. Then he could have taken the Sartan back to the Labyrinth, keeping him in complete ignorance of the fact that his people were alive and well on Abarrach, the world of stone. Now, with just one shout, Alfred could end Haplo's mission, end his lord's hopes and dreams, end Haplo.

"Blessed Sartan," whispered a soft voice behind him, nearly causing Haplo to jump out of his rune-covered skin.

He turned swiftly, to find Alfred hovering in the air overhead, staring down at the fire-lighted bodies moving in the cavern. Haplo tensed, waiting, casting a furious glance at the dog, who had failed its trust.

At least I'll have the satisfaction of killing one Sartan before I die.

Alfred stared into the cavern, his face a pale glimmer in the reflected firelight, his eyes sad and troubled.

"Go ahead, Sartan!" Haplo demanded in a savage whisper. "Why don't you get it over with? Call to them! They're your brothers!"

"Not mine!" Alfred said in hollow tones. "Not mine!"

"What do you mean? That's Sartan they're speaking."

"No, Haplo. The Sartan language is the language of life. Theirs"—Alfred lifted a hand, ghostly in its grace, and pointed—"is the language of death."

CHAPTER \* 13

SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, LANGUAGE OF DEATH? COME DOWN HERE!" Haplo reached up, caught hold of Alfred, and pulled him nearer. "Now talk!" he ordered in a soft undertone.

"I understand it little more than you do," the Sartan said, looking helpless. "And I'm not sure what I mean. It's just that. . . well, listen for yourself. Can't you tell the difference?"

Haplo did as he was advised, pushing aside the turbulent emotions warring in him to pay close attention. Now that he concentrated, he had to admit Alfred had a point. The Sartan language sounded discordant to Patryn ears. Accustomed to hard, swift, harsh, and uncompromising words that expressed what one had to say in the quickest, simplest, shortest way possible, the Patryns considered the Sartan language elaborate, airy-fairy, cluttered with flights of fancy and unnecessary verbiage and an inexplicable need to explain that which required no explanation.

But to hear these cave-people talk was tantamount to hearing the Sartan language turned inside out. Their words did not fly, they crawled. Their language evoked no images of rainbows and sunshine in Haplo's mind. He saw a pale and sickly light, a light given off by something rotting and corrupt. He heard a sorrow deeper than the dark depths of this world. Haplo prided himself on never feeling "soft" emotion, but this sorrow touched him to the core of his being.

Slowly, he released Alfred from his rough grip. "Do you understand what's going on?"

"No, I don't. Not clearly. But I think I could become accustomed to the language in time."

"Yeah, me, too. Just like I could become accustomed to being hanged. What're you going to do?" Haplo eyed Alfred narrowly.

"Me?" Alfred was astounded. "Do? What do you mean?"

"Are you going to turn me over to them? Tell them I'm the ancient enemy? You probably won't even have to tell them. They'll remember."

Alfred did not answer immediately. His lips parted several times as if he intended to speak, but shut when he changed his mind. Haplo had the impression that the man was not trying to decide what to do, but how to explain his decision.

"This may sound strange to you, Haplo. I have no desire to betray you. Oh, I've heard your threats against me and, believe me, I don't take them lightly. I know what will happen to me in the Nexus. But now we are strangers in a strange world—a world that appears to grow exceedingly more strange the deeper we probe it."

Alfred appeared confused, almost shy. "I can't explain myself, but I feel a ... a kinship to you, Haplo. Perhaps because of what happened to us going through Death's Gate. I've been where you were. And I think, if I'm right, that you've been where I was. I'm not explaining this very well, am I?"

"Kinship! The hell with all that. Keep in mind one thing—I'm your way out of here. Your only way out of here."

"True," said Alfred gravely. "You are right. It appears, then, that while we are on this world we must depend on each other for survival. Would you like me to pledge it?"

Haplo shook his head, fearing he might be called on to pledge something in return. "I'll trust you to save your own skin and because that includes saving mine, I guess that'll be good enough."

Alfred glanced about nervously. "Now that that's settled, shouldn't we be going back to the ship?"

'Are these people Sartan?"

"Ye—es . . ."

"Don't you want to find out more about them? What they're doing on this world?"

"I suppose so . . ." Alfred hesitated.

Haplo ignored his reluctance. "We'll move closer, see if we can figure out what's going on."

The two men and the dog crept ahead, keeping to the shadows of the tunnel wall, edging their way toward the light until Haplo deemed they were close enough to see without being seen, hear without being heard. He raised a warding hand and Alfred bobbed up close beside him, hovering silently in the air. The dog flopped down on the rock floor, keeping one eye on its master and the other on Alfred.

The cavern was filled with people, all of them Sartan. Sartan appear to be human at first glance, with the exception that their hair rarely varies in color. Even among children, the hair is almost always white, shading toward brown at the bottom. Patryn hair coloration is exactly the opposite. Haplo's hair was brown on top, shading to white at the bottom. Alfred had almost no hair (perhaps the balding was another unconscious attempt at disguise) and was thus not easily recognizable.

Sartan also tended to be taller in height than those of the lesser races. Their magical power and the knowledge of that power gave them extraordinarily beautiful and radiant countenances (Alfred being the exception).

These people were Sartan, beyond doubt. Haplo's eyes darted swiftly over the crowd. He saw only Sartan, none of the lesser races, no elves, no humans, no dwarves.

But there was something odd about these Sartan, something wrong. The Patryn had met one living Sartan—Alfred. Haplo had seen visions of the Sartan on Pryan. He'd looked on them with scorn, but he was forced to admit that they were a beautiful, radiant people. These Sartan seemed aged, faded; their radiance dimmed. Some of them were, in fact, hideous to look on. Haplo was repelled by the sight of them and saw his own revulsion reflected strongly in Alfred's eyes.

"They're holding a ceremony of some sort," Alfred whispered.

Haplo was about to tell him to shut up when it occurred to the Patryn that he might learn something to his advantage. He swallowed his words and counseled patience, a hard lesson he'd learned in the Labyrinth.

"A funeral," said Alfred in a pitying tone. "They're holding a funeral for the dead."

"If so, they've waited long enough to entomb them," Haplo muttered.

Twenty corpses of varying ages, from that of a small child to the body of a very old man, lay on the rock floor of the cavern. The crowd stood at a respectful distance, giving Haplo and Alfred—unobserved watchers—an excellent view. The corpses were composed, hands folded across the chest, eyes closed in eternal sleep. But some had obviously been dead a long time. The air was foul with the odor of decay, although—probably by their magic—the Sartan had succeeded in keeping the flesh from rotting away.

The skin of the dead was white and waxy, the cheeks and eyes sunken, the lips blue. On some, the nails had grown abnormally long, the hair was wild and uncombed. Haplo thought there was something familiar about the sight of the dead, but he didn't know what. He was about to mention his notion to Alfred, when the Sartan signaled him to be quiet and watch.

A man stepped forward, stood before the dead. Prior to the man's appearance, the crowd had been whispering and murmuring among themselves. Now, they all fell silent, all eyes turned to him, Haplo could almost feel their love and respect reach out to the unknown man.

Haplo was not surprised to hear Alfred whisper, 'A Sartan prince.' The Patryn knew a leader when he saw one.

The prince raised his hands to draw their attention, an unnecessary gesture, because it seemed everyone in the cave had their eyes fixed on him.

"My people"—and it seemed that the man was speaking as much to the dead as to the living—"we have traveled far from our homeland, our beloved homeland. . . ."

His voice choked, and he had to pause a moment to regain his composure. It seemed his people loved him the more for his weakness. Several put hands to their eyes, wiped away tears.

He drew a deep breath, continued. "But that is behind us now. What is done is done. It is up to us to continue on, to build new lives on the wreckage of the old.

'Ahead of us"—the prince flung out an arm, pointed, if he had known it, directly at Haplo and a startled Alfred—"lies the city of our brethren . . ."

The silence broke, angry mutterings interrupted. The prince raised his hand in a gentle but peremptory and commanding gesture and the voices ceased, although they left behind the heat of their emotions, like the heat welling up from the magma sea.

"I say 'our brethren' and I mean 'our brethren'. They are of our race, perhaps the only ones of our race left on this world or anywhere for that matter. What they did to us—if they did anything to us—they did unknowing. I swear it!"

"Robbed us of all we possessed!" cried one elderly woman, shaking a gnarled fist. The weight of years gave her the right to speak. "We've all heard the rumors you've tried to keep silent. They robbed us of our water, of our heat. Doomed us to die up there of thirst, if the cold didn't kill us first and starvation second. And you say they didn't know! I say they knew and they didn't care!" Snapping her mouth shut, the old woman wagged her head wisely.

The prince smiled at the old woman, a smile that was patient and fond. She obviously recalled pleasant memories. "Nevertheless I say they didn't know, Marta, and I am confident that I speak truly. How could they?" The prince raised his gaze directly to the rock ceiling above his head, but his look seemed to penetrate the stalactites and carry him far above the shadows of the cavern. "We who lived up there have long been parted from our brethren who live here beneath. If their lives have been as difficult as ours, it is no wonder that they have forgotten our very existence. We were fortunate to have wise ones among us, who remembered our past and from whence we came."

Reaching out, the prince laid a hand on the arm of a man who had come to stand beside him. At the sight of this man, Alfred sucked in a deep and horrified breath that echoed among the rocks.

The prince and most of the people standing around him were wrapped in all types and manner of clothing, primarily animal furs, as though the region they'd left had been an exceedingly cold one. The man to whom the prince referred was clad differently. He wore a black skullcap and long black robes that, although the worse for wear, were clean and well kept. The robes were trimmed in silver runes. Haplo recognized these sigla as Sartan, but could make nothing else of them. Obviously, Alfred could but when Haplo cast him an interrogatory glance, the Sartan shook his head and bit his lip.

Haplo returned his attention to the prince,

"We have brought our dead with us these long and hard miles. Many have died along the way." The prince walked over, knelt beside one corpse, who lay in the front of the rest and wore, on its wispy-haired head, a golden crown. "My own father lies among them. And I swear to you"—the prince raised his hand in solemn vow—"I swear to you before our dead that I believe the people in Kairn Necros to be innocent of the harm they did us. I believe that when they hear of it they will weep for us and will take us in and shelter us, as we would do the same for them! I believe this so strongly that I, myself, will go to them alone, unarmed, and throw myself on their mercy!"

The men raised spears, clashing them against shields. The people cried out in shock. Haplo was in shock himself—the peace-loving Sartan were actually wielding weapons. Several pointed at the dead, and Haplo saw that four corpses were those of young men, whose bodies lay on their shields.

The prince was forced to shout to be heard over the clamor. His handsome face grew stern, he sent a flashing-eyed glance around them, and his people hushed, chagrined, at the sight of his anger. "Yes, they attacked us. What did you expect? You came on them too suddenly, armed to the teeth, making demands! If you had remained patient—"

"It isn't easy, remaining patient, seeing your children starving!" mumbled one man, his eyes on a thin little boy, clinging to his father's leg. He reached out a hand, fondled the small head. "We asked them only for food and water."

'Asked them at spear point," the prince said, but his face softened in compassion, took the sting from his words. "Raef, don't you think I understand? I held the body of my father in my arms. I—" He lowered his head, put his hands to his eyes.

The man in the black robes said something to him and the prince, nodding, looked up again. "The battle, too, is past and done. We cannot undo it. I take the blame. I should have kept the people together, but I thought it best to send you on while I stayed behind to prepare my father's corpse. I will carry our apologies to our brethren. I am certain they will be understanding."

To judge by the low growl among the crowd, the prince's certainty was not shared by his people. The old woman burst into tears. Hastening forward, she clasped her feeble hands on the prince's arm, begged him, as he loved them, not to go.

"What would you have me do, Marta?" the prince asked, gently patting the gnarled hand.

She looked up at him, suddenly fierce. "I would have you fight, like a man! Take back from them what they stole from us!"

The low growl increased in volume, spear clashed against shield. The prince climbed on a boulder, so that he could see and be seen by all the crowd gathered in the cave. His back was to Haplo and Alfred, but Haplo could tell by the rigid stance and the squared shoulders that the man had been pushed almost past endurance.

"My father, your king, is dead. Do you accept me for your ruler?" The edge in his voice sliced through the noise like the whistle of a sword's sharp blade. "Or is there one of you that means to challenge me? If so, step forward! We will have the contest here and now!"

The prince tossed aside his fur cloak, revealing a body young and strong and well muscled. By his movements, he was lithe and obviously skilled in the use of the sword he wore on his hip. For all his anger, he was cool and kept his wits about him. Haplo would have thought twice about confronting this man. No one among the crowd took the prince up on his offer. They appeared ashamed, and all of them lifted their voices in a shout of support that might have been heard in the far-distant city. Again, spear clashed against shield, but it was in homage, not in defiance.

The man in black robes came forward, speaking aloud for the first time. "No one challenges you, Edmund. You are our prince"—another shout—"and we will follow you as we followed your father. It is natural, however, that we fear for your safety. If we lose you, who will we turn to?"

The prince clasped the man's hand, looked around at his people and, when he spoke, his emotion could be heard plainly in his voice. "Now it is I who am ashamed. I lost my temper. I am nothing special, except that I have the honor to be my father's son. Any one of you could lead our people. All of you are worthy."

Many of his people wept. Tears flowed freely down Alfred's face. Haplo, who had never supposed he could feel pity or compassion for anyone outside his own people, looked at these people, noted

their shabby clothing, their wan faces, their pitiful children, and he was forced to remind himself sternly that these were Sartan, these were the enemy.

"We should proceed with the ceremony," said the man in black robes, and the prince agreed. He stepped down from his boulder and took his own place among his people.

The man in black robes walked among the corpses. Lifting both hands, he began to make strange designs in the air and, at the same time, he started to chant words in a loud, singsong voice. Moving among the dead, passing up and down the silent rows, he drew a sigil above each one. The eerie singing grew louder, more insistent.

Haplo felt the hair rise on his head, his nerves tingled unpleasantly, his skin crawled, though he had no idea what was being said. This was no ordinary funeral.

"What's he doing? What's going on?"

Alfred's face had gone livid, eyes wide and staring in horror. "He's not entombing the dead! He's raising them!"

CHAPTER \* 14

K.

SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

"NECROMANCY!" HAPLO WHISPERED IN DISBELIEF, CONFLICTING EMOTIONS, wild thoughts overwhelming him with confusion, "My Lord was right! The Sartan do possess the secret of bringing back the dead!"

"Yes!" Alfred gasped, wringing his hands. "We did, we do! But it should not be used! Never be used!"

The man in black had begun to dance, weaving gracefully among the corpses, twining in and out between them, hands floating above them, continuing to make the same, singular signs that Haplo recognized now were powerful runes. And then Haplo knew suddenly what had struck him as familiar about the corpses. Looking into the crowd, he noted that many among the living, particularly those huddled near the back of the cavern, were not living at all. They had the same look as the cadavers, the same white flesh, same sunken cheeks and shadowed eyes. Far more of these people were dead than alive!

The necromancer was nearing the end of the ceremony, seemingly. White insubstantial forms rose from the corpses. Possessed of shape and substance, the forms lingered near the bodies from which they sprang. At a commanding gesture from the necromancer, the misty forms drew back, yet each kept near its corpse, like shadows in a sunless world.

These shadows retained the form of the being each had left. Some stood straight and tall over the bodies of straight, tall men. Others stooped over the bodies of the aged. One little one stood near the corpse of the child. Each appeared reluctant to be separated from the bodies, some made a feeble attempt to return, but the necromancer, with a stern and shouted command, drove them away.

"You phantasms have nothing to do with these bodies now. Abandon them! They are no longer dead! Life returns! Get away from them or I will cast you and the body into oblivion!"

From his tone, the wizard would have liked to banish these ethereal shapes altogether, but perhaps that was impossible. Meekly, sorrowfully, the phantasms did as they were commanded, each moving away from its corpse, each standing as near as it dared without risking the ire of the necromancer.

"What have my people done? What have they done?" Alfred moaned.

The dog, leaping up suddenly, gave a sharp, warning bark. Alfred lost his magic, tumbled to the ground. Haplo ripped the bandages from his hands, turned to face the threat. His only hope was to fight and try to escape. The sigla on his skin glowed blue and red, the magic throbbed in his body, but, at the sight of what he faced, he was helpless.

How did one fight something already dead?

Haplo stared, confounded, unable to think through the magic, unable to sort out the possibilities that governed it to find any that might help him. His split-second delay proved costly. A hand reached out, closed over his arm, grasping him with a chill grip that came near freezing his heart. It seemed to him that the runes on his skin actually shriveled up beneath that deadly touch. He cried out in bitter pain, slumped to his knees. The dog, cringing, fell on its belly and howled.

'Alfred!' Haplo cried, through teeth clenched against the agony. "Do something!"

But Alfred took one look at their captors and fainted.

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Dead warriors led Haplo and carried the comatose Alfred into the cavern. The dog trotted quietly behind, although it took great care to avoid the touch of the dead, who seemed not to know what to do with the animal. The cadavers laid Alfred down on the floor in front of the necromancer. They brought Haplo, sullen and defiant, to stand before the prince.

Had Edmund's life been measured in gates, as was Haplo's, the prince must have been near the Patryn's age, around twenty-eight.

And it seemed to Haplo, as he looked into the serious, intelligent, shadowed eyes of the prince, that here was a man who had suffered much in those twenty-eight years, perhaps as much as Haplo himself.

"We caught them spying," one of the dead warriors said. The cadaver's voice was almost as chilling as the lifeless touch. Haplo strove to remain motionless, although the pain of the dead fingers biting into his flesh was excruciating.

"Is this one armed?" Edmund asked.

The cadavers — three of them — shook their grisly heads.

'And that one?' The prince glanced at Alfred with a half-smile. "Not that it would matter if he were."

The dead indicated he wasn't. The cadavers had eyes, but the eyes never looked at anything, never shifted or moved, never brightened or dimmed, never closed. Their phantasms, drifting restlessly behind the cadavers, had eyes that retained the wisdom and knowledge of the living. But the phantasms, it seemed, had no voice. They could not speak.

"Restore him to consciousness and treat him gently. Release the other one," the prince ordered the cadavers, who removed their fingers from Haplo's arm. "Return to your watch."

The dead shambled off, the tattered remnants of their clothing fluttering behind them.

The prince gazed curiously at Haplo, particularly Haplo's rune-covered hands. The Patryn waited stolidly to be denounced, to be judged the ancient enemy and turned into a cadaver himself. Edmund reached out to touch.

"Don't worry," the prince said, speaking slowly and loudly as one does to a person who doesn't speak the language. "I won't hurt you."

A flash of searing blue light streaked from the runes, crackled around the prince's fingers. He cried out in shock, more than pain. The jolt was a mild one.

"Damn right," Haplo said, in his own language, testing. "Try that again, and you'll be dead."

The prince drew back, staring. The necromancer, who had been chafing Alfred's temples in a vain attempt to rouse the man, ceased his work and looked up in astonishment.

"What language is that?" The prince spoke in his own, in the corrupt Sartan that Haplo understood, was beginning to understand more clearly all the time, but could not speak. "It's strange. I know what you said, although I swear I've never heard such speech before. And you understand me, although you do not speak my words. And that was rune-magic you used. I recognize the construct. Where do you come from? Necropolis? Did they send you? Were you spying on us?"

Haplo cast a mistrustful glance at the necromancer. The wizard appeared powerful and shrewd and might prove his greatest danger. But there was no recognition in the necromancer's piercing, black eyes, and Haplo began to relax. These people had been through so much in the present, perhaps they had lost all knowledge of their past.

The Patryn considered his answer. He had learned enough, from overhearing the conversation earlier, to know that it wouldn't help his cause if he told them he was from what he guessed must be the city they'd seen. This time, the truth seemed far safer than a lie. Besides, he knew that Alfred, once called on to explain himself, would never manage otherwise.

"No, I'm not from the city. I'm a stranger to this part of the world. I sailed here in a ship down the magma sea. You can see my ship." Haplo nodded toward the shoreside town. "I'm—we're"—he : included Alfred grudgingly—"not spies."

"Then what were you doing when the dead caught you? They said you had been watching us for a long time. They had been watching you for a long time."

Haplo lifted his chin, gazed steadily at the prince. "We've traveled a vast distance. We entered the town, discovered signs that there'd been a battle, the people all fled. We heard your voices, echoing down the tunnel. In my place, would you have rushed in and proclaimed yourself to me? Or would you have waited, watched, listened, learned what you could?"

The prince smiled slightly, but the eyes remained serious. "In your place, I might have returned to my ship and sailed away from something that did not appear to be any of my concern. And how is that you came by such a companion? One so different from yourself."

Alfred was slowly coming around. The dog stood over him, licking his cheeks. Haplo raised his voice, hoping to jolt Alfred to attention, knowing he would be called to corroborate the Patryn's story.

"My companion's name is Alfred. And you're right. He is different. We come from different worl—er . . . cities. He joined up with me because he had no one else. He is the last survivor of his race."

A sympathetic murmur arose from the crowd. Alfred sat up weakly, cast a swift, frightened glance around him. The dead guards were out of sight. He breathed somewhat easier and, with the help of the necromancer, struggled awkwardly to stand up. Brushing off his clothes, he made a bobbing bow to the prince.

"Is this true?" Edmund said, pity and compassion softening his tone. "Are you the last of your people?"

"I thought I was," said Alfred, speaking Sartan, "until I found you."

"But you are not one of us," Edmund said, growing more and more perplexed. "I understand your speech, as I understand his"—he waved a hand at Haplo—"but it, too, is different. Tell me more."

Alfred appeared highly confused. "I—I don't know what to say."

"Tell us how you came to be here in this cave," suggested the necromancer.

Alfred cast the Patryn a wild look. His hands fluttered vaguely. "I—we sailed ... in a ship. It's docked over there. Somewhere." He gestured vaguely, having lost all sense of direction. "We heard voices and came looking to see who was down here."

"Yet you thought we might be a hostile army," the prince said. "Why didn't you run away?"

Alfred smiled wanly, gently. "Because we didn't find a hostile army. We found you and your people, honoring your dead."

A nice way to put it, Haplo thought. The prince was impressed with the answer.

"You are one of us. Your words are my words, even though they are different. Far different. In your words"—the prince hesitated, trying to articulate his thoughts—"I see radiant light and a vast expanse of endless blue. I hear rushing wind and I breathe fresh, pure air that needs no magic to filter out its poison. In your words I hear . . . life. And that makes my words sound dark and cold, like this rock on which we stand."

Edmund turned to Haplo. "And you, too, are one of us, but you're not. In your words I hear anger, hatred. I see a darkness that is not cold and lifeless but is alive and moving, like a living entity. I feel trapped, caged, a yearning for escape."

Haplo was impressed, although he endeavored not to show it.

He would have to be careful around this perceptive young man. "I am not like Alfred," the Patryn said, choosing his words carefully, "in that my people still survive. But they are being held prisoner in a place far more terrible than you can ever imagine. The hatred and anger are for those who imprisoned us. I am one of the fortunate who managed to survive and escape. I am looking now for new lands where my people can find homes—"

"You won't find them here," said the necromancer coldly, abruptly.

"No," Edmund agreed. "No, you won't find homes here. This world is dying. Already our dead outnumber the living. If nothing changes, I foresee a time, and it is coming on us very soon, when the dead alone will rule Abarrach."

CHAPTER \* 15

#### SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

"NOW WE MUST PROCEED WITH THE RESURRECTION. AFTER THAT, WE would be honored if you would be our guests and join our repast. It is meager," Edmund added with a rueful smile, "but we are happy to share what we have."

"Only if you will allow us to add our food to yours," Alfred said, bobbing another awkward bow.

The prince looked at Alfred, at his empty hands. He looked at Haplo and his empty, rune-covered hands. Edmund appeared somewhat puzzled, but was too polite to question. Haplo glanced at Alfred to see if he was astonished over this peculiar statement of the prince's. How could a Sartan food supply be limited when they, like the Patryns, had almost limitless powers of magic to increase it? Haplo caught Alfred glancing with raised eyebrows at him. The Patryn quickly averted his gaze, refusing to give the Sartan the satisfaction of knowing that they were sharing similar thoughts.

At a sign from Edmund, dead warriors escorted the two strangers off to a corner of the cavern by themselves, away from the people, who continued to stare at them curiously, and away from the corpses, still lying on the rock floor.

The necromancer took his place among the dead, whose phantasms began to writhe and stir, as if touched by a hot wind. The corpses continued to lie still and unmoving. The necromancer began his chanting once more, raised his hands and brought them together with a sharp clap. The bodies twitched and jerked, a jolt of magical energy striking each one of them. The small corpse of the child sat up almost immediately and rose to its feet. The eyes of the small phantasm behind it appeared to search for someone in the crowd. A woman, weeping, came forward. The child's cadaver ran to her, white, cold hands outstretched in love and longing. The woman reached out to her child. A man, face drawn in grief, halted her, took the sobbing woman in his arms and drew her

away. The little girl's corpse stood in front of them, staring at them. Slowly, the arms of the cadaver dropped to its sides; the wispy, ethereal arms of the phantasm remained outstretched.

"My people . . . what have they done?" Alfred repeated in a tear-choked voice. "What have they done?"

One by one, the cadavers regained the semblance of life. Each time, the eyes of the phantasm sought out loved ones among the living, but the living turned away. One by one, each of the dead took its place in the back of the cavern, joining the crowd of other dead, who stood behind the living. The young warriors joined ranks with their dead fellows. The aged, among the last to be persuaded to return, rose up like weary sleepers who have at last lain down to rest and are loath to awaken. The child lingered near her parents for some time, then finally, withdrew to mingle with other small cadavers. Haplo saw that there were many children among the dead, few among the living. He recalled Edmund's words, This world is dying, and he understood.

But Haplo understood something else. These people possessed the key to eternal life! What greater gift could Haplo bring to his lord, to his people? No longer would the Patrins be at the mercy of the Labyrinth. If the Labyrinth killed them, they would simply rise up and fight on, their numbers growing, until finally it was conquered. And then, no army in the universe could stop them, no living army could hope to defeat an army of the dead!

I have only to learn the secret of the rune-magic. And here, Haplo thought, his gaze going to Alfred, is one who can teach me. But I must be patient, bide my time. The Sartan doesn't know yet much more than I do. But he will learn. He can't help himself. And when he does, I'll have him!

The last cadaver to rise to its feet was the elderly man wearing the golden crown. And it seemed likely, at first, that the old man was going to defy them all. Its phantasm was stronger than the others, and it stood over the body defiantly, braving the necromancer's pleas and even—after an apologetic look at the grief-stricken prince—threats. At last, the necromancer, scowling, shook his head and threw up his hands in a gesture of defeat. Edmund himself stepped forward, spoke to the body lying on the ground at his feet.

"I know how weary you are of life, Father, and how you long for and have earned rest. But think of the alternative. You will sink into dust. Your mind will continue working, yet you will know the hopeless, bitter frustration of being powerless to affect the world around you. You will live like this through the centuries, trapped in nothingness! Resurrection is far better, Father! You will be with us, the people who need you. You can advise us . . ."

The old man's phantasm writhed, rippled in a wind that only it could feel. It appeared frustrated with the fact that it couldn't communicate what it obviously, desperately desired to reveal.

"Father, please!" Edmund pleaded. "Return to us! We need you!"

The phantasm wavered, then dwindled, nearly disappearing. The cadaver stirred. The same magical jolt passed through it that had passed through the others, and it rose, feebly, to its feet.

"Father, my king," said the prince, bowing low.

The phantasm, barely a shadow, twisted in the air like mist rising from a pond. The cadaver lifted its wasted, waxen hand in acceptance of the homage, but then the head with the golden crown and

its fixed, expressionless eyes, swiveled this way and that, as if wondering what to do next. The prince's own head bowed, his shoulders slumped. The necromancer drew near.

"I am sorry, Your Highness."

"It isn't your fault, Baltazar. You told me what to expect."

The corpse of the king remained standing before its people, its regal pose a terrible mockery of what the man had once been.

"I had hoped he might be different," said Edmund, speaking in a low voice, as if the dead man might overhear him. "In life, he was so strong, so resolute—"

"The dead can be nothing more than they are, My Lord. For them, their life ends when the mind ceases to function. We can return life to the body, but there our power stops. We cannot give them the ability to learn, to react to the living world around them. Your father will continue to be king, but only to those to whom he was king before their deaths."

The necromancer gestured. The dead king had turned the sightless eyes to the back of the cavern, to the dead who stood there. The corpses bowed in homage and the dead king, its phantasm whispering in grief, abandoned the living who did not know him anymore, and went to join the dead.

Edmund started to go after him. Baltazar plucked him by the sleeve.

"Your Majesty. . ." The necromancer indicated with a glance that they needed to talk in private. The two drew apart from the rest of the people, who made way for them in respect.

Haplo, with a casual gesture, sent the dog after them. The dog pushed near Edmund's leg. Unconsciously, the man's hand reached down to pet the soft fur. Haplo heard, through the animal's ears, every word that was said.

". . . you should take the crown!" the necromancer was urging in low tones.

"No!" The prince's response was sharp. His eyes were on the cadaver of his father, walking with proud and ghastly mien among the legions of the dead. "He wouldn't understand. He is king."

"But, My Liege, we need a living king—"

"Do we?" Edmund's smile was bitter. "Why? The dead outnumber us. If the living are content to follow me as their prince, then I am content to remain their prince. Enough, Baltazar. Don't push me."

The youthful voice hardened, the eyes flashed. The necromancer bowed silently, glided off to other duties involving the cadavers. Edmund stood by himself a long while, his thoughts turned inward. The dog whined, nuzzled the hand absently petting him. The prince glanced down, smiled wanly.

"Thank you for your comfort, Friend," he said to the dog. "And you are right, I am being a neglectful host."

Recalled to his guests, Edmund came over to seat himself down on the rock floor beside Haplo and Alfred.

"We had animals like this among us once." Edmund fondled the dog, who wagged its tail and licked his hand. "I remember, as a boy—" He paused, sighed, then shook his head. "But you're not interested in that. Please, be seated. Forgive the informality," he added. "If we were in my palace in my land, I would entertain you with royal ceremony. But, then, if we were in my palace, we'd be freezing to death, so I suppose you prefer it where you are. I know I do. At least, I think I do."

"What terrible occurrence destroyed your kingdom?" Alfred asked.

The prince looked at him with narrowed eyes. "The same occurrence that destroyed yours, undoubtedly. At least, so I must guess, to judge by what I've seen on my travels."

Edmund was regarding them with renewed suspicion. Alfred stammered, appeared highly confused. Haplo sat forward, attempted to salvage the situation by changing the subject. "Did I hear something about food?"

Edmund gestured. "Marta, bring our guests supper!"

The old woman approached respectfully, carrying in her hands several dried fish. She set the fish down before them and, bowing, rose to leave.

But Haplo, watching her, saw her eyes dart jealously to the fish, then to himself and to Alfred.

"Go, old woman," the prince said sharply. His cheeks were flushed. It seemed he had noted the look, as well.

"Wait," Haplo called. Reaching out, he handed some of the fish back. "Take this for yourself. As we said, Your Highness," he added, when he saw Edmund start to protest, "we can provide our own."

"Yes." Alfred joined in eagerly, glad to have something to do. He lifted the fish in his hands. The old woman, clasping the food close to her bosom, hastened away.

"I am deeply shamed," Edmund began, but his words died on his lips.

Alfred was singing the runes to himself, his voice raised in the high-pitched nasal whine that seemed to pierce right through Haplo's head. The Sartan held one fish in his hand, then he held two, then three appeared. Ceasing the chant, Alfred handed the food to the prince, who stared at it, wide-eyed. The Sartan offered another fish, deferentially, to Haplo.

His runes glowed blue and red and where there had been one fish there were now twelve, then twenty-four. Haplo arranged the fish on the flat rock, remembered to give one to the dog, who—with an uneasy glance at the dead—dragged its dinner off to a dark recess to enjoy it in private.

"Such magic is wonderful, truly wonderful," the prince said in awed tones.

"But . . . you can do this," Alfred said, nibbling at the salty-tasting flesh. Hearing a sound, he looked up.

A child, a living child, was staring enviously at the dog. Alfred motioned the boy near and handed the fish to him. The boy caught hold of it, and hurried off. He presented the dried fish to an adult male, who stared at it in astonishment. The child pointed back at them. Haplo had the distinct feeling he was about to go into the seafood trade.

"It is said that in the old days we could perform such feats," Edmund remarked, his awed gaze fixed on the meat. "But now our magic is concentrated on our survival in this world. . . ." He glanced back at the cadavers, standing patiently in the shadows. "And on theirs."

Alfred shuddered, seemed about to say something.

Haplo gave him a swift poke in the ribs, and the Sartan fell meekly silent and began to conjure up more fish.

"You'll find food and supplies in that town," Haplo said, nodding back toward it. "Surely you saw that much while you were there."

"We are not thieves!" Edmund raised his chin proudly. "We will not take what is not ours. If our brethren in the city offer it freely, that will be different. We will work, we will pay them back."

"Some of our people think it is our 'brethren' who should be paying us back, My Liege." The new voice came from Baltazar. He stared with stern eyes at the magic being performed.

Quietly and without fuss, Haplo was replicating fish with his magic and handing it to those who crept near. Alfred was doing the same. A large crowd surrounded them. The necromancer said nothing until everyone had been fed and departed. Crossing his legs beneath the black robes, he seated himself and picked up a bit of the food.

He studied it carefully, as if he expected it to disappear in his hands the moment he touched it. "So you have not yet lost the art,"

"Perhaps," said the prince, eyeing Alfred, "your land is different from ours. Perhaps there is hope for the world, after all. I tend to judge everything by what I see. Tell me that I have judged wrongly!"

Alfred couldn't lie, he couldn't tell the truth. He stared at them, opening and closing his mouth.

"It's a big universe," Haplo said easily. "Tell us about your part of it. What he said—your necromancer—about your brethren paying you back. What does that mean?"

"Be wary, Your Majesty," warned Baltazar. "Would you confide in strangers? We have only their own words to trust that they are not spies from Necropolis!"

"We have eaten their food, Baltazar." The prince smiled faintly. "The least we can do in return is answer their questions. Besides, what does it matter if they are spies? Let them take our story back to Necropolis. We have nothing to hide.

"The realm of my people is ... or was ... up there." Edmund glanced upward beyond the shadows of the cavern ceiling. "Far, far up there. . . ."

"On the surface of this world?" Haplo asked.

"No, no. That would be impossible. The surface of Abarrach is either cold and barren rock or vast plains of ice shrouded by darkness. Baltazar has traveled to that realm. He can describe it better than I."

'Abarrach means world of stone in our language as well as in yours.'" Baltazar nodded at Haplo and Alfred. 'And it is just that, at least as far as the ancients—who had the time and talent to devote themselves to study—were able to determine. Our world consists of rock through which penetrate countless caverns and tunnels. Our 'sun' is the molten heart burning in Abarrach's core.

"The surface is as His Highness described it. It supports no life nor any possibility of life. But, beneath the surface, where we had our homes. . . ah, there the living was very pleasant. Very pleasant." Baltazar sighed over his memories.

"The colossus—" he began.

"The what?" Alfred interrupted.

"Colossus. Don't you have them in your world?"

"He's not certain," said Haplo. "Tell us what you mean."

"Gigantic round columns of stone—"

"That support the cavern? We saw those outside."

"The Colossus do not support the cavern. Such support isn't necessary. They were created by magical means by the ancients. Their purpose was to transfer the heat energy from this part of the world up to us. It worked. We had bountiful supplies of food, water. Which makes what happened all the more inexplicable."

'And that was—'

'A drop in our birthrate. Every year the number of children being born to us decreased. In some ways, however, the phenomenon proved fortunate. Our most powerful wizards turned their attention to the secrets of creating life. Instead, we discovered—'

"—the means of extending life past death!" Alfred exclaimed, voice quivering in shock and disapproval.

Fortunately, perhaps because of the language differences, Baltazar mistook shock for awe. He smiled, nodded complacently. "The addition of the dead to the population proved most beneficial. Keeping them alive does leech much of our magical power, but—in past days—we had little need for magic. The dead provided all physical labor. When we noticed that the magma river near our city was beginning to cool, we thought little of it. We continued to receive energy from below, heat traveled up through the colossus. The Little People mined the rock. They built our dwellings for us, and maintained the colossus—"

"Wait!" Haplo stopped Baltazar. "Little People? What Little People?"

The necromancer frowned, thinking back, "I don't know much about them. They are gone now."

"I recall hearing stories about the Little People from my father/ Edmund said. 'And I met them once. They loved more than anything to dig and delve in the rock. They coveted the minerals they found there, calling them such names as 'gold' and 'silver/ and brought forth jewels of rare and wondrous beauty—"

"Dwarves?" Alfred ventured at a guess.

"That word sounds strangely in my ears. Dwarves." Baltazar looked to the prince, who nodded thoughtfully in agreement. "We had another name for them, but that is near the mark. Dwarves."

"Two other races are believed to populate this world," Alfred continued, either ignoring or simply not seeing Haplo's attempts to stop the Sartan from saying too much. "Elves were one, humans another."

Neither Baltazar nor Edmund appeared to recognize the names.

"Mensch," suggested Haplo, using the term by which both Sartan and Patryns referred to the lesser races.

"Ah, mensch!" Baltazar brightened in recognition. He shrugged. "Reports exist in the writings of our grandfathers. Not that they ever saw any, but they heard of them from their fathers and their fathers before them. These mensch must have been extremely weak. Their races died out almost immediately after they came to Abarrach."

"You mean... no more remain on this world! But, they were left in your care." Alfred began in severe tones. "Surely you—"

This had gone far enough. Haplo whistled. The dog left off eating. Following its master's gesture, it trotted over and, plopping itself down beside Alfred, gleefully began to lick the man's face.

"Surely you—stop that! Nice doggie. Go ... go away, nice doggie." Alfred attempted to shove the dog aside. The dog, thinking this was now a game, entered into the spirit of the contest. "Down! Sit! Nice doggie. No, please. Do go away! I—"

"You're right, necromancer," Haplo struck in coolly. "These mensch are weak. I know something of them and they couldn't have survived in a world such as this, a fact that some should have recognized before they brought them here. It sounds like you'd found the good life. What happened?"

Baltazar frowned, his tone dark. "Disaster. The blow didn't fall at once. It came on us gradually, and that made it worse, I think. Little things began to go wrong. Our water supply mysteriously began to dwindle away. The air grew colder, fouler; poisonous gases were seeping into our atmosphere. We used up more and more of our magic in efforts to protect ourselves from the poison, to reproduce water, to grow food. The Little People—those dwarves as you called them—succumbed. We could do nothing to help them, without endangering ourselves."

"But, your magic—" Alfred protested, having finally persuaded the dog to sit quietly at his side.

"Aren't you listening? Our magic was needed for ourselves! We were the strongest, the fittest, the best suited to survive. We did what we could for the... these dwarves, but in the end they died as the other mensch died before them. And then it became more important than ever for us to resurrect and maintain our dead."

Haplo shook his head in profound admiration. "A labor force that never needs rest, never eats the food or drinks the water, doesn't mind the cold, hardship. The perfect slave, the perfect soldier."

"Yes," agreed Baltazar, "without our dead, we living could not have managed."

"But don't you understand what you've done?" Alfred cried in earnest, agonized tones. "Don't you realize—"

"Dog!" Haplo ordered.

The animal jumped back to its feet, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

Alfred raised his hands in front of his face and, with a fearful glance at Haplo, fell silent.

"Certainly we realize," said the necromancer crisply. "We regained an art that was, according to the old records, lost to our people."

"Not lost. Not lost," Alfred said sorrowfully, but he said it beneath his breath. Haplo heard it through the ears of the dog.

"Of course, you must not think us idle in attempting to discover what was going wrong," Edmund added. "We investigated and came at last, and most reluctantly, to the conclusion that the colossus, which had once provided us life, were now responsible for depriving us of it. Warmth and fresh air had once flowed through the columns. Now our heat was being tapped and drawn off—"

"By the people in that city?" Haplo waved his hand in the direction of the buildings over which he'd flown. "That's what you suspect, isn't it?"

He barely listened to the answer. The subject didn't much interest him. He would have preferred to pursue the subject of necromancy, but didn't dare make his intense interest known, either to these men or to Alfred. Patience, he counseled.

"It was an accident. The people of Necropolis could have no way of knowing that they were harming us," Edmund was arguing warmly, his gaze going to the necromancer Baltazar scowled, and Haplo recognized this as an old disagreement between them.

The necromancer—perhaps because there were strangers present—forebore offering an opinion contrary to that of his ruler. Haplo was about to attempt to turn the conversation back to the dead when a clatter and commotion in the cavern drew everyone's attention. Several cadavers—soldiers by the remnants and fragments of their uniforms—came running from the direction of the cavern's entrance.

The prince rose immediately to his feet, followed by the necromancer. Baltazar caught hold of the prince's arm, pointed. The corpse of the dead king came shuffling forward, also intent on interviewing the guards.

"I told Your Highness this would be a problem," Baltazar said in low tones.

Anger flushed the prince's pale skin. Edmund started to say something, bit off whatever hasty words he might have spoken.

"You were right and I was wrong," he said instead, after a frowning pause. "Are you pleased to hear me confess as much?"

"Your Highness misunderstands me," the necromancer said gently. "I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't, My Friend." Edmund sighed wearily. Exhaustion drained the color from his thin cheeks. "Forgive me. Please excuse us," he had just the presence of mind to say to his guests, and walked hurriedly over to where the corpse of the king was conferring with the corpses of his subjects.

Haplo made a motion with his hand and the dog, unnoticed, trotted along behind the prince. The living in the cavern had fallen silent. Exchanging grim glances, they began hastily packing away what items they had brought out to aid them in their meager meal. But, when they could turn their attention from their work, their eyes fixed on their prince.

"It isn't honorable for you to spy on them like that, Haplo," Alfred said in a low voice. He glanced unhappily at the dog, standing at the prince's side.

Haplo didn't consider the comment worthy of response.

Alfred fidgeted nervously, toying with his bit of uneaten fish. "What are they saying?" he asked at last.

"Why should you care? It isn't honorable to spy on them," Haplo retorted. "Still, you might be interested to know that these dead, who are apparently scouts, report that an army has landed in the town."

'An army! What about the ship?'

"The runes will keep anyone from coming near it, let alone harming it. What should concern you more is that the army is marching this way"

"An army of the living?" Alfred asked in a low voice, seeming to dread the answer.

"No," Haplo said, watching Alfred closely. 'An army of the dead.'

Alfred groaned, covered his face with his hand.

Haplo leaned forward. "Listen, Sartan," he said urgently, softly. "I need some answers about this necromancy and I need them quick."

"What makes you think I know anything about it?" Alfred asked uneasily, keeping his eyes averted.

"Because of that handwringing and moaning and whining you've been doing ever since you saw what was going on. What do you know about the dead?"

"I'm not certain I should tell you," Alfred said, lowering his bald head between hunched shoulders, the turtle ducking into its shell.

Haplo reached out, caught hold of the Sartan's wrist, and gave it a painful twist. "Because we're about to be caught in the middle of a war, Sartan! You're obviously incapable of defending yourself, which leaves your safety and mine up to me. Are you going to talk?"

Alfred grimaced in pain. "I'll... tell you what I know."

Haplo grunted in satisfaction, let loose of the man.

Alfred rubbed his bruised flesh. "The cadavers are alive, but only in the sense that they can move around and obey orders. They remember what they did in life, know nothing beyond."

"The king then..." Haplo paused, not quite understanding.

"Still thinks of himself as king," Alfred said, his gaze going to the cadaver, to the white head and hoary locks crowned with gold. "He's still trying to rule, because he thinks he is still the ruler. But, of course, he doesn't have any conception of the current situation. He doesn't know where he is, probably thinks he's back in his own homeland."

"But the dead soldiers know—"

"They know how to fight, because they remember what they were trained to do in life. And all a living commander has to do is point out an enemy."

"What are those spirit things that follow the cadavers around like their shadows? What do they have to do with the dead?"

"In a way, they are their shadows, the essence of what they were when they were alive. No one knows much about the phantasms, as they are called. Unlike the corpse, the phantasm seems to be aware of what is happening in the world, but it is powerless to act,"

Alfred sighed, his gaze going from the dead king to Edmund. "Poor young man. Apparently he believed his father would somehow be different. Did you see the way the old man's phantasm fought against returning to this corrupt form of life? It was as if it knew—Oh, what have they done? What have they done?"

"Well, what have they done, Sartan?" Haplo demanded impatiently. "It seems to me that necromancy could have its advantages."

Alfred turned, regarded the Patryn with serious, grave intensity. "Yes, so we thought once, long ago. But we made a terrible discovery. The balance must be maintained. For every person brought back untimely to this life, another person—somewhere—untimely dies." He cast a despairing

glance around the people huddled in the cavern. "It is possible, extremely possible, that these people have unwittingly been the doom of our entire race."

## CHAPTER

16

### SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

"THEORETICAL NONSENSE!" HAPLO SNORTED IN DISGUST. "YOU CAN'T prove such a thing."

"Perhaps it already has been proven," Alfred replied.

Haplo rose to his feet, not intending to stay around and listen to any more of the Sartan's whimperings. So the dead had a few memory problems, a short attention span. Haplo considered that if he were in their position, he might not want to dwell on the present either. If he were in their position . . . would he want to be resurrected?

The thought brought him to a standstill. He pictured himself lying on the rock floor, the necromancer standing over him, his body rising. . .

Haplo shoved the question out of his mind, continued walking. He had more important matters to consider.

Maybe not, whispered a voice inside him. If you die on this world—and you very nearly died on two other worlds—then they'll do this to you!

The staring eyes that looked straight ahead into their past. The waxy, white flesh, the blue nails and lips, the lank, uncombed hair. Revulsion twisted his stomach. For an instant, he considered fleeing, running away.

Appalled, he got a grip on himself. What the hell's the matter with me? Running out! Running away! From what? A bunch of corpses!

"The Sartan's doings," he muttered angrily. "That sniveling coward's working on my imagination. If I were dead, I don't suppose it'd matter to me one way or the other." But his gaze shifted from the cadaver to the phantasms, those pathetic, shadowy forms always hovering near their bodies, within reach, yet unable to touch.

"Father, leave this to me," Edmund was talking to the cadaver with praiseworthy patience. "Stay with the people. I will go with the soldiers and see what this is all about."

"We're under attack from the people in the city? What city? I don't remember any city." The dead king sounded querulous, the hollow voice frustrated, confused.

"There isn't time to explain, Father!" The prince's patience was slipping. "Please, don't concern yourself. I will deal with it. The people. You stay with the people."

"Yes, the people." The cadaver caught hold of that, seemed to hang on tightly. "My people. They look to me for leadership. Yet what can I do? Our land is dying! We must leave it, search for somewhere new. My Son, do you hear me? We must leave our land!"

But Edmund was no longer paying attention. He left with the dead soldiers, hastening back through the cavern toward the entrance. The necromancer stayed behind to listen to the cadaver's rambling. The dog, having no instructions to the contrary, trotted along at the prince's heels.

Haplo hurried after the prince but, when he caught up with him, he saw tears glisten on Edmund's cheeks, saw the raw grief in the man's face. The Patryn fell back a pace, stopped to play with the dog, give the prince time to compose himself. Edmund halted, brushed the back of his hand hastily over his eyes, glanced around.

"What do you want?" he demanded, voice harsh.

"Came to get my dog," Haplo said. "He ran off after you before I could catch him. What's the problem?"

"There isn't time . . ." Edmund hurried on ahead again.

The dead soldiers moved swiftly, if clumsily. Walking was difficult for them. They had trouble guiding their steps or making changes in direction if they encountered an obstacle. Consequently, they blundered headlong into the cavern walls, careened off boulders, stumbled over rocks. But although they couldn't seem to comprehend obstacles, no obstacle stopped them. They trundled through red-hot magma pools without hesitation. The glowing lava burned off whatever clothes or armor they might have had left, turned the dead flesh into charred lumps. Nevertheless, the lumps kept on moving.

Haplo felt the revulsion rise in him again. He'd seen sights in the Labyrinth that would have driven most men insane, yet he was forced to harden what he had considered a will of iron in order to keep following along behind the gruesome army.

Edmund shot him a glance, as if the prince would like very much to tell this interloper to go away. Haplo kept his expression purposefully friendly, concerned.

"What did you say was going on?"

"An army from Necropolis has landed on the shores of the town," Edmund answered shortly. Something seemed to occur to him, for he continued, in a more conciliatory tone. "I'm sorry. You have a ship docked there, I believe you said."

Haplo started to reply that the runes on his ship would protect it, thought better of it. "Yeah, I'm worried about it. I'd like to see for myself."

"I'd ask the dead to check it for you, but they're unreliable in their reports. For all I know, they could be describing an enemy they fought ten years ago."

"Why do you use them as scouts, then?"

"Because we cannot spare the living."

So, what Alfred told me was true, Haplo thought. At least that much. And that brought another problem to mind. The Sartan ... by himself.. ..

"Go back," Haplo ordered the dog. "Stay with Alfred."

The animal obediently did as it was told.

\*

Alfred was exceedingly miserable and almost welcomed the animal's return, although he knew very well it had been sent back by Haplo to spy on him. The dog flopped down beside him, gave the man's hand a swift lick with its tongue and nudged its head beneath his palm to encourage Alfred to scratch behind its ears.

The return of the necromancer was far less welcome. Baltazar was a hale and hearty man. His straight stance, commanding air, long black flowing robes emphasized his height, making him appear taller than he was. He had the ivory-hued skin of these people who had never known sunshine. His hair, unlike that of most Sartan, was so black as to be almost blue. His beard, squared-off about three inches beneath his jaw, glistened like the obsidian rock of his homeland. The black eyes were exceedingly intelligent, shrewd, and intent, stabbing whatever it was they looked at and holding it up to the light for further examination.

Baltazar turned those relentless eyes on Alfred, who felt their sharp blade enter and drain him dry.

"I am glad for this opportunity to talk with you alone," said Baltazar.

Alfred wasn't, not in the least, but he had lived much of his life in court and a polite rejoinder came automatically to his lips. "Is ... is there going to be trouble?" he added, squirming beneath the gaze of the black eyes.

The necromancer smiled and informed Alfred—politely—that, if there was trouble, it was no concern of his.

This was a point Alfred might have argued, because he was among these people, but the Sartan wasn't very good at arguing and so he meekly kept quiet. The dog yawned and lay blinking at them sleepily.

Baltazar was silent. The living in the cave were silent, watching and waiting. The dead were silent, standing around at the back of the cavern, not waiting, because they had nothing for which to wait. They simply stood and would apparently keep standing until one of the living told them otherwise. The king's cadaver didn't seem to know what to do with itself. None of the living spoke to it, and it eventually drifted forlornly to the back of the cave to join its dead subjects in doing nothing.

"You don't approve of necromancy, do you?" Baltazar asked suddenly.

Alfred felt as if the magma flow had diverted course and gone up his legs and body directly to his face. "N—no, I don't."

"Then why didn't you come back for us? Why did you leave us stranded?"

"I—I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." The fury in the necromancer's voice was all the more appalling because the anger was contained, the words spoken softly, for Alfred's ears alone.

Not quite alone. The dog was listening, too.

"Yes, you do. You are Sartan. You are one of us. And you did not come from this world."

Alfred was completely nonplussed, he had no idea what to say. He couldn't lie. Yet how he could tell the truth when, as far as he knew, he didn't know it?

Baltazar smiled, but it was a frightening smile, tight-lipped, and filled with a strange and sudden exultation. "I see the world from which you come, I see it in your words. A fat world, a world of light and pure air. And so the ancient legends are true! Our long search must be nearing an end!"

"Search for what?" Alfred asked desperately, hoping to change the subject. He did.

"The way back to those other worlds! The way out of this one!" Baltazar leaned near, his voice pitched low, tense and eager, "Death's Gate!"

Alfred couldn't breathe, he felt as if he were strangling.

"If—if you will excuse me," he stammered, trying to stand, trying to escape. "I... I'm not feeling well—"

Baltazar laid a restraining hand on Alfred's arm. "I can arrange for you to feel worse," He cast a glance at one of the cadavers.

Alfred gulped, gasped, and seemed to shrivel. The dog raised its head, growled, asking if the Sartan needed help.

Baltazar appeared startled at Alfred's reaction, the necromancer looked somewhat ashamed.

"I apologize. I shouldn't have threatened you. I am not an evil man. But," he added in a low, passionate voice, "I am a desperate one."

Alfred, trembling, sank back down onto the cavern floor. Reaching out an unsteady hand, he gave the dog a hesitant, reassuring pat. The animal lowered its head, resumed its quiet watch.

"That other man, the one with you, the one with the runes tattooed on his skin. What is he? He is not Sartan, not like you, not like me. But he is more like us than the others—the Little People." Baltazar picked up a small, sharp-edged stone, held it to the softly glowing light that filled the cavern. "This stone has two faces, each different, but both part of the same rock. You and I are one side, it seems. He is another. Yet all the same."

Baltazar's black eyes pinned the struggling Alfred to the wall. "Tell me! Tell me about him! Tell me the truth about yourself! Did you come through Death's Gate? Where is it?"

"I can't tell you about Haplo," Alfred answered faintly. "Another man's story is his to tell or to keep hidden, as he chooses." The Sartan was beginning to panic, decided that he could find refuge in the truth, even if it was only partial truth. "As to how I came here, it... was an accident! I didn't mean to."

The necromancer's black eyes bored into him, turned their sharp blade this way and that, probing and piercing. Finally, grunting, he withdrew his gaze. Brooding, Baltazar sat staring at the location on the rock floor where the dead had lately rested.

"You are not lying," he said finally. "You cannot lie, you are not capable of deceit. But you're not telling the truth, either. How can such a dichotomy exist within you?"

"Because I don't know the truth. I don't fully understand it and, therefore, in speaking of the small portion I see only very imperfectly, I might do irreparable harm. It is better if I keep what I know to myself."

Baltazar's black eyes blazed with anger, reflected the yellow firelight. Alfred faced him, steadfast and calm, blanching only slightly. It was the necromancer who broke off the attack, his frustrated rage dwindling to a heavy sorrow.

"It is said that such virtue was once ours. It is said that the very notion of one of our own kind shedding the blood of another was so impossible to conceive that no words existed in our language to speak of it. Well, we have those words now: murder, war, deceit, treachery, trickery, death. Yes, death."

Baltazar rose to his feet. His voice cracked, its hot rage cooled and hardened, like molten rock that has flowed into a pool of chill water. "You will tell me what you know about Death's Gate. And if you won't tell me with your living voice, then you'll tell me with the voice of the dead!" Half-turning, he pointed at the cadavers. "They never forget where they have been, what they have done. They forget only the reasons why they did them! And thus they are quite willing to do them again . . . and again . . . and again."

The necromancer glided away, striding down the tunnel after his prince. Alfred, stricken dumb, gazed after him, too horrified to be able to say a word.

CHAPTER \* 17

SALFAG CAVERNS, ABARRACH

"I KNEW I SHOULD NEVER HAVE LEFT THAT WEAKLING ON HIS OWN!"

Haplo fumed to himself when Alfred's stammering and confused denials came to his ears through those of the dog. The Patryn almost turned around, returned to try to salvage the situation. He realized, however, that by the time he made his way back through the cavern, the worst of the damage would already be done and so he kept going, following the prince and his army of cadavers to the cavern's end.

By the conclusion of the conversation between Baltazar and Alfred, Haplo'd been glad he'd kept out of it. Now he knew exactly what the necromancer planned. And if Baltazar wanted to take a little trip back through Death's Gate, Haplo would be more than pleased to arrange it. Of course, Alfred

would never permit it, but— at this point—Alfred had become expendable. A Sartan necromancer was worth far more than a sniveling Sartan moralist.

There were problems. Baltazar was a Sartan and, as such, inherently good. He could threaten murder, but that was because he was desperate, intensely loyal to his people, to his prince. It was unlikely that he would leave his people, abandon his prince, go off on his own. Haplo's lord would most certainly take a dim view of an army of Sartan marching through Death's Gate and into the Nexus! Still, the Patryn reflected, these snarls in the skein could be worked out.

"The enemy." The prince, slightly ahead of Haplo, came to a halt.

They had reached the end of the cavern. Standing concealed in the shadows, they could see the approaching force—a ragged, tattered army of corpses, shuffling and shambling in what they remembered as military formation. Several of the enemy in the forward ranks had already encountered the prince's troops and skirmishes were occurring on the field.

It was the strangest battle Haplo had ever seen. The dead fought using skills they remembered having used in life, giving and taking sword blows, parrying and thrusting, each obviously intent on killing their opponent. But whether they were fighting this particular enemy or one they had fought years past was open to debate.

One dead soldier parried a thrust his opponent never delivered. Another took a sword through the chest without bothering to defend itself. Blows were dealt in a deliberate, if aimless manner, and were sometimes blocked, and sometimes not. Sword blades wielded by dead hands sank deep into dead flesh that never felt it. The cadavers wrenched the blade free and kept at it, striking each other again and again, doing significant damage but never making much headway.

The battle between the dead might have gone on indefinitely had the strength of both sides been equal. The army from Necropolis was, however, in a far more advanced state of corruption and decay than the prince's army. These dead appeared less well cared for than the prince's dead, if such a thing could be said.

The flesh of the cadavers had, in many instances, fallen from the bones. Each had suffered numerous injuries, most — it appeared — after their deaths. Many of the dead soldiers were missing various parts of their bodies — a bone gone here and there, perhaps a part of an arm or a piece of a leg. Their armor was badly rusted, the leather straps that held it together had almost all rotted away, leaving breastplates dangling by a thread, leg protectors falling down around the cadaver's ankles, often tripping them up.

The corpses made mindless attempts to march over or through obstacles and were constantly impeded by their own falling accoutrements. Thus the army of dead appeared to spend more time tumbling over itself than it did advancing. Those that were fighting were being battered into shapeless heaps of bones and armor over which their phantasms wavered and twisted with pleading, outstretched wisps of arms. It might have been a comic sight, if it hadn't been horrific.

Haplo started to laugh, felt — by the clenching of his stomach — that, if he did so, he might retch.

"Old dead," said the prince, watching them.

"What?" Haplo asked. "What do you mean?"

"Necropolis is using their old dead, the dead of generations past." Edmund motioned to the dead captain of his army. "Send one of your men to fetch Baltazar. You can always tell the old dead." The prince, speaking offhandedly, turned back to Haplo. "The necromancers weren't so skilled in their art. They lacked the knowledge of how to keep the flesh from decaying, of how to maintain the cadavers."

"Do your dead always fight your wars?"

"For the most part they do, now that we have built up substantial armies. Once, the living fought wars." Edmund shook his head. "A tragic waste. But that was many years ago, long before I was born. Necropolis sent the old dead. I wonder," he continued, frowning, "what this means."

"What could it mean?"

"It could be a feint, an attempt to draw us out, force us to reveal our true strength. That's what Baltazar would say," the prince added, smiling. "But it could also be a sign from the people of Necropolis . that they don't mean us serious harm. As you can see, our new dead could defeat this lot with ease. I believe Necropolis wants to negotiate."

Edmund gazed ahead, eyes squinting against the bright red glow of the magma sea. "There must be living among them. Yes, I see them. Marching at the rear."

Two black-robed and cowled necromancers walked some distance behind their shabby army, well out of range of spear throw. Haplo was startled to note the presence of living wizards, but realized, on observation, that the necromancers were required not only to lead the army and maintain the magic that held the crumbling bodies together, but also to act as macabre shepherds.

More than once, a corpse came to a standstill, ceased to fight, or sometimes one would fall down and not get back up. The necromancers hastened into their flock, prodding and commanding, urging them forward. When a cadaver fell down, it might, on standing, face the wrong direction and head off on some erratic course directed by its faulty memory. The necromancer, like a conscientious sheepdog, raced after it, turned the dead soldier around, forced it to once more join the fray.

Edmund's dead, which Haplo supposed could be called the "new dead," did not appear subject to these failings. The small

skirmishing force fought well, reducing enemy numbers by literally battering the old dead into the ground. The larger portion of the army remained grouped behind their prince in the cavern opening, a skilled army awaiting command. Edmund's only precaution was to continually remind the dead captain of its orders. At each reminder, the captain would nod its head alertly, as if receiving such instructions for the first time. Haplo wondered if the prince's messenger would remember the message by the time it reached Baltazar.

Edmund stirred restlessly. Suddenly, giving way to impulse, he leapt up on a boulder, showing himself to the advancing army. "Hold!" he cried, raising his hand up, palm outward, in a gesture of parley.

"Halt!" cried the enemy necromancers, and both armies, after a moment of confusion, lurched to a stumbling standstill. The necromancers remained stationed behind their troops, able to see and hear, but still protected by their dead.

"Why do you march on my people?" Edmund demanded.

"Why did your people attack the citizens of Safe Harbor?" It was a female who spoke, her voice ringing clear and strong through the sulfurous air.

"Our people did not attack," the prince countered. "We came to the town seeking to buy supplies and were set on—"

"You came armed!" the woman interrupted coldly.

"Of course, we came armed! We have passed through perilous lands. We have been attacked by a fire dragon since we left our homeland. Your people attacked us without provocation! Naturally, we defended ourselves, but we meant them no harm and, as proof, you can see that we left the town with all its wealth safe and untouched, although my people are starving."

The two necromancers conferred together in low voices. The prince remained standing—a proud and lordly figure—on the black rock.

"What you say is true. We saw that much for ourselves," said the other necromancer, a male. He walked forward, moving around the army's right flank, leaving the female at the rear. The wizard lowered his cowl, showing his face. He was young, younger than the prince, with a smooth-shaven jaw, large green eyes, and the long chestnut-colored hair of the Sartan, the white tips curling on his shoulders. His mien was serious and grave and fearless as he advanced on his enemy. "Will you talk with us more?"

"I will, and welcome," said Edmund, starting to jump down from his rock.

The young necromancer held up a warding hand. "No, please, We would not take unfair advantage of you. Have you a minister of the dead who can accompany you?"

"My necromancer is coming now, as we speak," said Edmund, bowing at this show of courtesy. Haplo, glancing back into the cavern, saw the black-robed figure of Baltazar hastening in their direction. Either the cadaver had remembered its message or the necromancer had decided he should be on hand and had already started this way. And there, stumbling along behind him, as clumsy as a cadaver himself, was Alfred, accompanied by the faithful dog.

While waiting for Baltazar to catch up with them, Edmund marshaled his army, permitting enough of his troop strength to be seen to make an impression on the enemy, yet not enough to give away their true numbers. The enemy necromancer waited patiently at the head of his own army. If he was at all impressed with Edmund's show of force, the youthful face didn't reveal it.

The female necromancer kept her face covered, her cowl pulled low over her head. Attracted by the sound of the rich, smooth voice, Haplo was extremely curious to see her features. But she stood unmoving as the rocks around her. Occasionally, he heard her voice, chanting the runes that kept the dead functional.

Baltazar, breathing heavily from the exertion, joined the prince and the two moved out of the tunnel to the neutral territory in front of each army. The young necromancer advanced in his turn, meeting them halfway. Haplo sent the dog trotting after the prince. The Patryn leaned back against a wall, settled himself comfortably.

Alfred, huffing and puffing, tumbled into him. "Did you hear what Baltazar said to me? He knows about Death's Gate!"

"Shhh!" ordered Haplo irritably. "Keep your voice down or everyone in this blasted place will know about Death's Gate! Yes, I heard him. And, if he wants to go, I'll take him."

Alfred stared, aghast. "You can't mean that!"

Haplo kept his eyes fixed on the negotiators, disdained to answer.

"I understand!" Alfred said, voice trembling. "You want... this knowledge!" The Sartan pointed a finger at the rows of cadavers lined up in front of them.

"Damn right."

"You will bring doom on us all! You will destroy everything we created!"

"No!" Haplo said, shifting suddenly, jabbing his words into Alfred's breast with his finger. "You Sartan destroyed everything! We Patryns will return it to what it was! Now shut up, and let me listen."

"I'll stop you!" Alfred stated, bravely defiant. "I won't let you do this. I—" Loose gravel gave way beneath his foot. He slid, slipped. His hands scrabbled frantically in the air, but there was nothing to hold onto and he landed on the hard rock floor with a thud.

Haplo glanced down at the balding middle-aged man who lay in a pathetic heap at his feet. "Yeah, you do that," the Patryn said, grinning. "You stop me." Lounging against the wall, he turned his attention to the parley.

"What is it you want of us?" the young necromancer was asking, once the formalities of introduction had been effected.

The prince recited his story, telling it well, with dignity and pride. He made no accusations against the people of Kairn Necros but took care to attribute the wrongs his own people had suffered to mischance or ignorance of the true situation.

The Sartan language, even in its corrupt form, is adept at conjuring up images in the mind. By his expression, it was obvious that the young necromancer saw far beneath the surface of Edmund's words. The young man attempted to keep his face impassive, but a flutter of doubt and self-conscious guilt brought a crease to the smooth forehead and a slight tremor to the lips. He glanced swiftly at the female standing motionless at the rear of the army, inviting her help.

The woman, understanding, glided forward and arrived in time to hear the end of the prince's tale.

Removing the cowl from her head with a graceful motion of two fair hands, the woman turned a soft-eyed gaze on Edmund. "Truly, you have suffered much. I am sorry for you and for your people."

The prince bowed. "Your compassion does you honor, mistress—"

"Madam," she corrected him, glancing, with a smile, at the necromancer standing beside her. "My public name [1] is Jera. This man is my husband, Jonathan of the ducal House of Rift Ridge."

"My Lord Jonathan, you are blessed in your wife," said Edmund with courtesy. "And you, Your Grace, in your husband."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Your story is indeed a sorrowful one," Jera continued. "And I fear that my people are, in many ways, responsible for your misfortune—"

"I spoke no word of blame," said Edmund.

"No, Your Highness." The woman smiled. "But it is all too easy to see accusation in the images your words conjure. I do not believe, however"—a frown creased the marble-smooth forehead—"that the dynast will take kindly to his subjects coming to him as beggars—"

Edmund drew himself up tall and straight. Baltazar, who had previously said no word, glowered dourly, black brows drawn tight, black eyes reflecting the lurid red of the magma sea.

"Dynast!" Baltazar repeated incredulously. "What dynast? And to whom do you refer as subjects? We are an independent monarchy—"

"Peace, Baltazar." Edmund laid his hand on the wizard's arm. "Your Grace, we do not come to beg of our brethren." He emphasized the word. "Among our dead we number fanners, skilled artisans, warriors. We ask only to be given the chance to work, to earn our bread and shelter in your city."

The woman stared at him. "Truly, you didn't know you were under the jurisdiction of Our Most Holy Dynastic Majesty?"

"Your Grace"—Edmund appeared embarrassed at being forced to contradict—"I am the ruler of my people, their only ruler—"

"But, then, of course!" Jera clasped her hands together, her expression bright and eager. "That explains everything. It's all a dreadful misunderstanding! You must come immediately to the capital, Your Highness, and make your obeisance to His Majesty. My husband and I will be honored to escort you and give you introduction."

"Obeisance!" Baltazar's black beard stood out against his livid complexion. "It is rather for this self-proclaimed dynast—"

"I thank you for your gracious invitation, Duchess Jera." Edmund's hand clasped his minister's arm with slightly more pressure than must have been exactly comfortable. "The honor in accompanying you is mine. I cannot leave my people, however, with a hostile army camped before them."

"We will withdraw our army," offered the duke, "if you pledge your word that your army will not sail across the sea."

"Since my army has no ships, such a feat is impossible, Your Grace."

"Begging Your Highness's pardon, a ship is docked at Safe Harbor. We have never seen its like before and we assumed that it—"

'Ah, now I understand!" Edmund nodded, glanced back at Haplo and Alfred. "You saw the ship and thought we intended to sail our army across the sea. As you mentioned, Your Grace, there is, much misunderstanding among us. The ship belongs to two strangers, who landed at Safe Harbor just this cycle. We were pleased to entertain them with what hospitality we could, although," the prince added, flushing, pride vying with shame, "they gave us more than we could offer them."

Alfred clambered to his feet. Haplo stood straight. The duchess turned to them. Her face, although not beautiful by any purity or regularity of feature, was made attractive by an expression of singular intelligence and an obviously strong and resolute will. The eyes, a green-flecked brown, were exceedingly fine, reflecting the quickness of the mind that moved behind them. Her gaze flicked over the two strangers and Jera immediately picked out Haplo as the ship's owner.

"We passed your vessel, sir, and found it extremely interesting—"

"What type of runes are those?" her husband interjected with boyish eagerness. "I've never seen—"

"My dear," his wife interposed gently, "this is hardly the time or place for discussions of rune-lore. Prince Edmund will want to inform his people of the honor that awaits him in being presented to His Dynastic Majesty. We will meet you in Safe Harbor, Your Highness, at your convenience." Jera's green eyes focused on Haplo and, behind him, Alfred. "It would be our honor, as well, to introduce these strangers to our fair city."

Haplo regarded the woman thoughtfully. This prince hadn't known him for the ancient enemy, but the Patryn had come to realize, by this conversation, that Edmund's people were nothing more than a small satellite circling a larger and brighter sun. A sun that might be much better informed.

I could leave now and no one would ever blame me, not even My Lord. But he and I both would always know that I turned tail and ran.

The Patryn bowed. "It is we who would be honored, Your Grace."

Smiling at him, Jera glanced back at the prince. "We will send word ahead of your coming, Your Highness, in order that all may be in readiness to receive you."

"You are most kind, Your Grace," Edmund replied.

Everyone made final polite bows, then the group separated. The duke and duchess returned to their dead army, herded them together (several had wandered away during the talks), prodded them into formation, and headed them back toward Safe Harbor.

Baltazar and the prince reentered the cavern. "A dynast," the necromancer was saying in grim tones. "The people of the sovereign nation of Kairn Telest are nothing but his subjects! Tell me now, Edmund, that the inhabitants of Necropolis brought disaster to us in ignorance!"

The prince was obviously troubled. His eyes went to the far distant city, barely visible beneath the mass of clouds hanging low over it. "What can I do, Baltazar? What can I do for our people if I don't go?"

"I'll tell you. Your Highness! These two"—the necromancer gestured at Haplo and Alfred—"know the location of Death's Gate. These two came through it!"

The prince gazed at them with wondering, astonished eyes. "Death's Gate? Did you? Is it possible that—"

Haplo shook his head. "It wouldn't work, Your Highness. It's a long, long way from here. You'd need ships, a lot of ships, to transport your people."

"Ships!" Edmund smiled sadly. "We have no food, and you talk of ships. Tell me," he added, after a pause. "Do the city people know about. .. Death's Gate?"

"How should I know, Your Highness?" Haplo answered, shrugging-

"If he's telling the truth," hissed Baltazar. "And we can get ships! They have ships!" He nodded his head toward Necropolis.

"And how will we pay for them, Baltazar?"

"Pay, Your Highness! Haven't we paid already? Haven't we paid with our lives?" the necromancer demanded, fist clenched. "I say it's time we take what we want! Don't go crawling to them, Edmund! Lead us to them! Lead us to war!"

"No! They"—the prince gestured to the departing duke and duchess—"were sympathetic to us. We have no reason to believe the dynast will be less eager to listen and to understand. I will try peaceful means first."

" 'We,' Your Highness. I'm going with you, of course—"

"No." Edmund took the necromancer by the hand. "You stay with the people. If anything happens to me, you will be their leader."

'At last your heart speaks, Your Highness." Baltazar was bitter, sorrowful.

"I truly believe all will be well. But I would be a poor ruler if I did not provide for contingencies." Edmund continued to press the man's hand. "I may rely on you, My Friend? More than friend, mentor. .. my other father?"

"You may rely on me, Your Highness." The last part of the necromancer's sentence was little more than a choked whisper.

Edmund walked back to confer with his people. Baltazar remained behind a moment in the shadows to compose himself.

When the prince was gone, the necromancer raised his head. Ravages of a terrible, heart-wrenching grief had aged the pallid face. The stabbing black-eyed gaze struck Alfred, passed through the trembling body of the Sartan, and bored into Haplo.

I am not an evil man. But I am a desperate one. Haplo heard the necromancer's words echo in the fire-lighted darkness.

"Yes, My Prince," Baltazar promised fervently, softly. "You may rely fully on me. Our people will be safe!"

CHAPTER \* 18

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

'A MESSAGE, YOUR MAJESTY, FROM JONATHAN, THE DUKE OF RIFT Ridge.'

"Duke of Rift Ridge? Isn't he dead?"

"The younger, Your Majesty. You recall, Sire, that you sent him and his wife to deal with those invaders on the far shore—"

'Ah, yes. Quite.' The dynast frowned. "This is in regard to the invaders?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Clear the court," the dynast commanded.

The Lord High Chancellor, knowing that this matter would be dealt with circumspectly, had deliberately spoken in low tones, intended for His Majesty's ears alone. The order to clear the court came as no surprise, nor did it present difficulty. The Lord High Chancellor had only to meet the eyes of the ever-watchful chamberlain to have the matter accomplished.

A staff banged on the floor. "His Majesty's audience is ended," announced the chamberlain.

Those with petitions to present rolled their scrolls up with a snap, tucked them back into scroll cases, made their bows, and backed out of the throne room. Those who were merely court hangers-on, who spent as much time near His Dynastic Majesty as possible, hoping for notice from the royal eye, yawned, stretched, and proposed to each other games of rune-bone to ease them through another boring day. The royal cadavers, extremely well preserved and well maintained, escorted the assembly out of the throne room into the vast corridors of the royal palace, shut the doors, and took up positions before them, indicating that His Majesty was in private conference.

When the throne room no longer buzzed with conversation and affected laughter, the dynast commanded, with a wave of his hand, that the Lord High Chancellor was to commence. The Lord High Chancellor did so. Opening a scroll, he began to read.

"His Grace's most reverent respect—"

"Skip all that."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

It took some moments for the Lord High Chancellor to make his way through compliments showered on the dynast's person, compliments showered on his illustrious ancestors, compliments showered on the dynast's just rule, and so forth and so on. The chancellor finally found the heart of the message and delivered it.

"The invaders come from the outer circle, Your Majesty, a land known as Kairn Telest, the Green Caverns, due to the ... er ... former amount of vegetation grown in that region. Of late, it seems, this region has experienced bad fortune. The magma river has cooled, the people's water source has dried up.' The Green Caverns, it seems, Your Majesty," the Lord High Chancellor added, looking up from his perusal of the message, "could now be called the Bone-Bare [1] Caverns."

His Majesty said nothing, merely grunted in acknowledgment of the Lord High Chancellor's wit. The Lord High Chancellor resumed his reading. "Due to this disaster, the people of Kairn Telest have been forced to flee their land. They have encountered innumerable perils on the journey, including—' "

"Yes, yes," said the dynast impatiently. He fixed his Lord High Chancellor with a shrewd look. "Does the duke mention why these people of the Green Caverns felt it necessary to come here?"

The Lord High Chancellor hastily scanned the message to the end, read it over again to make certain he'd made no mistake—the dynast had a low tolerance for mistakes—then shook his head. "No, Your Majesty. It might almost seem, from the tone, that these people stumbled on Necropolis by accident."

"Hah!" The dynast's lips parted in a thin, cunning smile. He shook his head. "They know, Pons. They know! Well, go on. Give us the gist of it. What are their demands?"

"They make no demands, Your Majesty. Their leader, a Prince"— the Lord High Chancellor referred again to the paper to refresh his memory—"Edmund of some unknown house requests the opportunity to pay his respects to Your Dynastic Majesty. The duke adds in a concluding note that the people of Kairn Telest appear to be in a most wretched state. It has occurred to the duke that it is probable we are in some way responsible for the aforesaid disasters and he hopes Your Majesty will meet with the prince at your earliest opportunity"

"Is this young duke of Rift Ridge dangerous, Pons? Or is the man merely stupid?"

The Lord High Chancellor paused to consider the question. "I don't consider him dangerous, Your Majesty. Nor is he stupid. He is young, idealistic, ingenuous. A touch naive as concerns politics. He is, after all, the younger son and was not raised to have the responsibilities of the dukedom thrust on him so suddenly. Words come from the heart, not his head. I am certain he has no idea what he is saying."

"His wife, though, is another matter."

The Lord High Chancellor appeared grave. "I am afraid so, Your Majesty. Duchess Jera is extremely intelligent."

"And her father, deuce take him, continues to be a confounded nuisance."

"But that is all he is these cycles, Sire. Banishing him to the Old Provinces was a stroke of genius. The earl must do everything in his power merely to survive. He is too weak to cause trouble."

'A stroke of genius for which we have you to thank, Pons. Oh, yes, we remember. You needn't keep reminding us of it. And that old man may be struggling to survive but he has enough breath left in him to continue to speak out against us."

"But who is listening? Your subjects are loyal. They love Your Majesty.. "

"Stop it, Pons. We get enough of that muck shoveled over our feet from everyone else around here. We expect some sense from you."

The Lord High Chancellor bowed, grateful for the dynast's good opinion; knowing, however, that the flower of royalty would cease to grow unless it was nurtured by the aforementioned muck.

The dynast had withdrawn his attention from his minister. Rising from the throne made of gold and diamonds and the other precious minerals that were so abundant in this world, His Majesty took a turn or two around the large gold-and-silver-inlaid dais. Pacing was a habit of the dynast's; he claimed that movement aided his thought processes. Often the dynast completely discomfited those presenting suits to him by leaping up from the throne and circling it several times before returning to it to pronounce judgment.

At least it kept the courtiers on their toes, Pons reflected with some amusement. Whenever His Majesty rose to his feet, everyone in the court was expected to cease conversation and perform the ritual, reverent obeisance. Courtiers were forever called on to cease their conversation, fold their hands in their sleeves, and bow with heads practically to the floor whenever His Majesty took it into his head to walk out a problem.

Pacing was just one of the dynast's many little eccentricities, the most notable of these being a love of tournament combat and an addiction to the game of rune-bone. Any of the new dead who had been at all proficient in either game during their lives were brought to the palace, where they performed no other service except to offer His Majesty sparring partners during the waking half of the cycle or play at rune-bone with His Majesty far into the sleeping half. Such peculiarities led many to misjudge the dynast, considering him nothing but a shallow-minded gamester. Pons, having seen those many fall, was not among them. His respect for and his fear of His Dynastic Majesty were both deep and well founded.

Pons waited, therefore, in respectful silence for His Majesty to deign to notice him. The matter was obviously serious. The dynast devoted five complete revolutions around the dais to it, his head bowed, hands clasped behind his back.

In his mid-fifties, Kleitus XIV was a well-formed, muscular man of striking appearance whose beauty, when young, had been highly praised in poetry and song. He had aged well and would, as the saying went, make a handsome corpse. A powerful necromancer himself, he had many long years left to stave off that fate.

At last His Majesty ceased his heavy tread. His black fur robes, treated with purple dye to imbue them with the royal hue, rustled softly as he once again settled himself into his throne.

"Death's Gate," he muttered, tapping a ring on the arm of the throne. Gold against gold, it gave out a musical, metallic note.

"That's the reason."

"Perhaps Your Majesty worries needlessly. As the duke writes, they could have come here by chance—"

"Chance! Next you will be talking of 'luck' Pons. You sound like an inept rune-bone player. Strategy, tactics—that's what wins the game. No, you mark our words. They have come here in search of Death's Gate, like so many others before them."

"Let them go, then, Majesty. We have dealt with such madmen before. Good riddance to bad rubbish—"

Kleitus frowned, shook his head. "Not this time. Not these people. We dare not."

The Lord High Chancellor hesitated to ask the next question, not truly certain he wanted to know the answer. But he knew what was expected of him, the echo chamber for his ruler's thoughts.

"Why not, Sire?"

"Because these people are not insane. Because . . . Death's Gate has opened, Pons. It has opened and we have seen beyond!"

The Lord High Chancellor had never heard his dynast speak like this, had never heard that crisp and confident voice lowered, awed, even . . . fearful. Pons shivered, as if he felt the first flush of a virulent fever.

Kleitus was staring far off, staring through the thick granite walls of the palace, gazing at a place the Lord High Chancellor could neither see nor even imagine.

"It happened early in the waking hour, Pons. You know that we are a light sleeper. We woke suddenly, startled by a sound that, when we were truly awake, we couldn't place. It was like a door opening... or shutting. We sat up and drew aside the bed curtains, thinking there might be some emergency. But we were alone. No one had entered the room.

"The impression that we had heard a door was so powerful, that we lighted the lamp beside the bed and started to call for the guard. We remember. We had one hand on the bed curtain and we were just drawing the other back from lighting the lamp when everything around us ... rippled."

"Rippled, Your Majesty?" Pons frowned.

"We know, we know. It sounds incredible." Kleitus glanced at his chancellor, smiled ruefully. "We know of no other way to describe it. Everything around us lost shape and substance, dimension. It was as if ourselves and the bed and the curtains and the lamp and the table were suddenly nothing

but oil spread over still water. The ripple bent us, bent the floor, the bed, the table. And in an instant, it was gone."

'A dream, Your Majesty. You were not yet awake . . ."

"So we might have supposed. But in that instant, Pons, this is what we saw."

The dynast was a powerful wizard among the Sartan. When he spoke, his words brought sudden images to the mind of his minister. The images flashed past so swiftly that Pons was confused, dazzled. He saw none clearly, but had a dizzying impression of objects whirling about him, similar to an experience in childhood when his mother had been wont to take him by the hands and twirl him around and around in a playful dance.

Pons saw a gigantic machine, whose metal parts were fashioned after the parts of a human body and which was working with frantic intensity at nothing. He saw a human woman with black skin and an elven prince waging war against the prince's own kind. He saw a race of dwarves, led by one in spectacles, rising up against tyranny. He saw a sun-drenched green world and a beautiful shining city, empty, devoid of life. He saw huge creatures, horrible, eyeless, rampaging through a countryside, murdering all who came in their path and he heard them cry, "Where are the citadels?" He saw a race of people, grim, frightening in their hatred and anger, a race with runes traced on their skin. He saw dragons . . .

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"There, Pons. You understand?" Kleitus sighed again, half in awe, half in frustration.

"No, Your Majesty!" the chancellor gasped, stammered. "I do not understand! What—where—how long—"

"We know nothing more about these visions than you do. They came to us too fast and when we tried to lay hold of one, it slipped away, like the laze through our fingers. But what we are seeing, Pons, are other worlds! Worlds beyond Death's Gate, as the ancient texts write. We are certain of it! The people must not come to know this, Pons. Not until we are ready."

"No, of course not, Sire."

The dynast's face was grave, his expression hard, resolute. This realm is dying. We have leeches off other realms to maintain it—"

We have decimated other realms to maintain it, Pons corrected, but only in his own thoughts.

"We've kept the truth from the people for their own good, of course. Otherwise there would be panic, chaos, anarchy. And now comes this prince and his people—"

"—and the truth," said Pons.

"Yes," agreed the dynast. 'And the truth."

"Your Majesty, if I may speak freely—"

"Since when, Pons, do you do anything else?"

"Yes, Sire," The Lord High Chancellor smiled faintly. "What if we were to allow these wretched people admittance, establish them— say—in the Old Provinces. The land is almost completely worthless to us now that the Fire Sea has retreated."

"And have these people spread their tales of a dying world? Those who think the earl a doddering old fool would suddenly begin to take him seriously."

"The earl could be handled—" The Lord High Chancellor emitted a delicate cough.

"Yes, but there are more like him. Add to their numbers a prince of Kairn Telest, talking of his cold and barren realm, and his search for a way out, and you will destroy us all. Anarchy, riots! Is that what you want, Pons?"

"By the ash, no!" The Lord High Chancellor shuddered.

"Then quit prattling nonsense. We will portray these invaders as a threat and declare war against them. Wars always unite the people. We need time, Pons! Time! Time to find Death's Gate ourselves, as the prophecy foretold."

"Majesty!" Pons gasped. "You! The prophecy. You?—"

"Of course, Chancellor," Kleitus snapped, appearing slightly put out. "Was there ever any doubt in your mind?"

"No, certainly not, Your Majesty." Pons bowed, thankful for the chance to conceal his face until he could rearrange his features, banish astonishment and replace it with abiding faith. "I am overwhelmed by the suddenness of ... of everything, too much happening at once." This, at least, was true enough.

"When the time is right, we will lead the people forth from this world of darkness to one of light. We have fulfilled the first part of the prophecy—"

Yes, and so has every necromancer in Abarrach, thought Pons.

"It remains now for us to fulfill the rest," Kleitus continued.

'And can you, Your Majesty?' asked his chancellor, obediently taking his cue from the dynast's slightly raised eyebrow.

"Yes," answered Kleitus.

This astonished even Pons. "Sire! You know the location of Death's Gate?"

"Yes, Pons. At long last, my studies have provided me with the answer. Now you understand why this prince and his ragtag followers, arriving at precisely this moment, are such a nuisance."

A threat, Pons translated. For if you could discover the secret of Death's Gate from the ancient writings, then so could others. The "ripple" you experienced did not enlighten you so much as

terrify you. Someone may have beat you to it. That is the real reason this prince and his people must be destroyed.

"I stand humbled before your genius, Majesty." The chancellor bowed low.

Pons was, for the most part, sincere. If he had doubts, it was only because he had never quite taken the prophecy seriously. He hadn't even truly believed in it. Obviously, Kleitus did. Not only believed in it, but had gone about fulfilling it! Had he actually discovered Death's Gate? Pons might have been dubious, except for the sight of those fantastic images. The visions had sent a thrill through the chancellor's mind and body as nothing else had done these past forty years. Recalling what he'd seen, he felt, for a moment, quite wild with excitement and was forced to discipline himself severely, wrench himself back from bright and hopeful worlds to the dark and dreary business at hand.

"Your Majesty, how are we to start this war? It is obvious the Kairn Telest do not want to fight—"

"They will fight, Pons," said the dynast, "when they find out that we have executed their prince."

## CHAPTER \* 19

### FIRE SEA, ABARRACH

PRINCE EDMUND TOLD HIS PEOPLE WHERE HE WAS GOING AND WHY. They listened in unhappy silence, afraid of losing their prince, yet knowing that there was no other way.

"Baltazar will be your leader in my absence," Edmund announced simply, at the end. "Follow him, obey him as you would me."

He left amid silence. Not one found words to call out a blessing to him. Although in their hearts they feared for him, they feared a terrible, bitter death even more and so they let him go in silence, choked by their own guilt.

Baltazar accompanied the prince back to the end of the cavern, arguing all the way that Edmund should at least take bodyguards—the most stalwart of the new dead—into Necropolis. The prince refused.

"We come to our brethren in peace. Bodyguards imply mistrust."

"Call it a guard of honor then," Baltazar urged. "It is not right that Your Highness goes unattended. You will look like . . . like . . ."

"Like what I am," Edmund said in grim tones. "A pauper. A prince of the starving, the destitute. If the price we must pay to find help for our people is bending our pride to this dynast then I will kneel gladly at his feet."

"A prince of Kairn Telest, kneeling!" The necromancer's black brows formed a tight-knit knot above shadowed eyes.

Edmund halted, rounded on the man. "We could have remained standing upright in Kairn Telest, Baltazar. We'd be frozen stiff in that posture, of course—"

"Your Highness is correct. I beg your pardon." Baltazar sighed heavily. "Still, I don't trust them. Admit it to yourself, Edmund, if you refuse to admit it to me or anyone else. These people destroyed our world deliberately. We come on them as a reproach." "So much the better, Baltazar. Guilt softens the heart—" "Or hardens it. Be wary, Edmund. Be cautious." "I will, my dear friend. I will. And, at least, I don't travel quite alone." The prince's gaze glanced off Haplo, lounging idly against the cave wall, and Alfred, endeavoring to pull his foot out of a crack in the floor. The dog sat at the prince's feet and wagged its tail.

"No." Baltazar agreed dryly. "And I like that least of all, somehow. I don't trust these two any more than I trust this so-called dynast. There, there. I'll say nothing more except farewell, Your Highness! Farewell!"

The necromancer clasped the prince close. Edmund returned the embrace fondly and both men separated, the one heading out the cavern, the other remaining behind, watching the red of the Fire Sea bathe the prince in its lurid light. Haplo whistled, and the dog dashed up to trot along at its master's side.

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They reached Safe Harbor without incident, if one didn't count stopping to haul the nervous Alfred out of whatever predicament he managed to blunder into along the way. Haplo came close to impatiently ordering the Sartan to utilize his magic, float as he had done when they entered the cavern, let magic lift those clumsy feet up over rocks and crevices.

But Haplo kept quiet. He guessed that both he and Alfred were far stronger in magic than any of these people. He didn't want them to know how strong. Conjuring up fish had them awestruck, and that was a spell a child could perform. Never reveal a weakness to an enemy, never reveal a strength. Now all he had to worry about was Alfred. Haplo decided, after reflection, that Alfred wouldn't be tempted to give away his true powers. The man had spent years trying to conceal his magic. He wasn't about to use it now.

Arriving in Safe Harbor, they met the young duke and duchess standing on the obsidian pier. Both necromancers were admiring— or perhaps inspecting—Haplo's ship.

"Do you know, sir?" The young lord, catching sight of them, turned from his examination of the ship and hastened toward Haplo. "I've thought of where I've seen runes like this before! The game— rune-bone!" He waited for Haplo's response, obviously expecting Haplo to know what he was talking about.

Haplo didn't.

"My dear," said the observant Jera, "the man has no idea what you mean. Why don't we—"

"Oh, really?" Jonathan appeared quite astonished. "I thought everyone—It's played with bones, you know. Runes like those on your ship are inscribed on the bones. Why, say, come to think of it, the same runes are on your hands and arms, too! Why, you might be a walking game wall!" The duke laughed.

"What a dreadful thing to say, Jonathan! You're embarrassing the poor man," remonstrated his wife, although she gazed at Haplo with an intensity the Patryn found disconcerting.

Haplo scratched at the backs of his hands, saw the woman's green eyes focus on the runes tattooed on the skin. He coolly thrust his hands into the pockets of his leather trousers, forced himself to smile pleasantly.

"I'm not embarrassed. I'm interested. I never, heard of a game such as you describe. I'd like to see it, learn how it's played."

"Nothing easier! I've a set of rune-bones at home. Perhaps, when we land, we could go back to our house—"

"My dearest," said Jera, amused, "when we land we are going to the palace! With His Highness." She gave her husband a nudge, recalling him to the fact that he had, in his enthusiasm, impolitely ignored the prince.

"I beg Your Highness's pardon." Jonathan flushed red. "It's just that I really never saw anything quite like this ship. ..."

"No, please don't apologize." Edmund, too, was staring at the ship and at Haplo with new-kindled interest. "It is remarkable. Quite remarkable."

"The dynast will be fascinated!" Jonathan stated. "He adores the game, never misses an evening's play. Wait until he sees you and hears about your ship. He won't let you go," he assured Haplo earnestly.

Haplo didn't find that idea at all encouraging. Alfred cast him an alarmed glance. But the Patryn had an unexpected ally in the duchess.

"Jonathan, I don't believe we should mention the ship to the dynast. After all, Prince Edmund's business is far more serious. And I"—the green eyes turned on Haplo—"would like to have my father's counsel on this matter before we discuss it with anyone else."

The young duke and duchess exchanged glances. Jonathan's face sobered immediately. "A wise suggestion, my dear. My wife has the brains in the family."

"No, no, Jonathan," Jera protested, faintly blushing. "After all, you were the one who noticed the connection between the runes on the ship and the game."

"Common sense, then," Jonathan suggested, smiling at her and patting her hand. "We make a good team. I'm subject to whim, to impulse. I tend to act before I think. Jera keeps me in line. But she, on the other hand, would never do anything exciting or out of the ordinary if I wasn't around to make her life interesting." Leaning down, he kissed her soundly on her cheek.

"Jonathan! Please!" Her face was mantled with blushes. "What will His Highness think of us!"

"His Highness thinks he has rarely seen two people more deeply in love," said Edmund, smiling.

"We have not been married very long, Your Highness," Jera added, still blushing, but with a fond glance at her husband. Her hand twined around his.

Haplo was thankful that the conversation had turned from him. He knelt down beside the dog, made a show of examining the animal.

"Sar—Alfred," he called. "Come here, will you? I think the dog's picked up a rock in his paw. You hold him, will you, while I take a look?"

Alfred looked panicked. "Me, hold ... hold the—"

"Shut up and do as I say!" Haplo shot him a vicious glance. "He won't hurt you. Not unless I tell him to."

Bending down, the Patryn lifted the animal's left front paw and pretended to examine it. Alfred did as he was told, his hands gingerly and ineffectively grasping the dog's middle.

"What do you make of all this?" Haplo demanded in a low voice.

"I'm not certain. I can't see well," Alfred answered, peering at the paw. "If you could turn it to the light—"

"I don't mean the dog!" Haplo almost shouted in exasperation, fought down his frustration, lowered his voice. "I mean the runes. you ever hear anything of this game they're talking about?"

"No, never." Alfred shook his head. "Your people were not a subject to be treated lightly among us. To think of making a game—" He looked at the runes on Haplo's hand, shining blue and red as they worked their magic against the heat of the magma sea. Alfred shivered. "No, it would be impossible!"

"Like me trying to use your runes?" Haplo asked. The dog, pleased with the attention, sat patiently, submitting its paw to being poked and prodded.

"Yes, much the same. It would be difficult for you to touch them, just as you can't easily speak them. Maybe it's coincidence," Alfred offered hopefully. "Meaningless scrawls that have the appearance of runes."

Haplo grunted. "I don't believe in coincidence, Sartan. There, you're all right, boy! What did you mean, whining like that over nothing?"

Playfully, he rolled the dog over, scratched it on the belly. The dog wriggled on its back, indulging in a long luxurious scratch along its spine. Flipping over, it jumped up, shook itself, refreshed. Haplo rose to his feet, ignoring Alfred, who, in attempting to stand, lost his balance and sat down heavily. The duke hastened to assist him.

"Will you sail your ship across the Fire Sea or travel with us?" the duchess asked Haplo.

The Patryn had been pondering this question himself. If they were truly using Patryn runes in that city, there was the possibility, however remote, that someone might be able to break through his carefully planned defenses. The ship would be more difficult for him to reach, docked in this harbor

on the opposite shore, but there would be fewer to see it and gape at it and perhaps attempt to meddle with it.

"I'll sail with you, Your Grace," Haplo replied. "And leave my ship here."

"That is wise," the lady said, nodding her head, and it seemed her thoughts had run the same course as the Patryn's. He saw her glance stray to the cloud-covered city, perched on a cliff at the rear of the enormous cavern, and he saw her frown. All was not well there, apparently, but then Haplo had seen few places where living beings existed that were not subject to strife and turmoil. Those had, however, been run by humans, elves, dwarves. This city was run by Sartan, noted for their ability to dwell together in peace and in harmony. Interesting. Very interesting.

The small group walked down the length of the empty, deserted dock toward the duke's ship. It was an iron monster designed—as were most ships in the realms Haplo had traveled—in the shape of a dragon. Far larger than Haplo's elven ship, the black iron dragonship was fearsome in appearance, its huge, ugly, black head rearing up out of the magma sea. Red lights gleamed from its eyes, red fire burned in its gaping mouth, smoke issued in puffs from the iron nostrils.

The army of the dead straggled ahead of them, dropping bits of bone, armor, a hank of hair as they marched. One cadaver, almost completely reduced to a skeleton, suddenly keeled over, its legs crumbling beneath it. The dead soldier lay on the dock in a confused heap of bones and armor, its helm perched at an insane angle on its skull.

The duke and duchess paused, whispering together in hasty conference, considering the feasibility of attempting to raise the thing again. They decided to leave it. Time was pressing. The army continued on, clanking and rattling down the obsidian pier toward the ship. Haplo, glancing back at the skeleton, thought he could see its phantasm hovering over it, wailing like a mother over a dead child.

What was the unheard voice crying? To be brought back to this mockery of life again? Haplo again felt revulsion twist inside him. He turned away, shoving the thought from his mind. Hearing a snuffling sound, he glanced contemptuously at Alfred, saw tears sliding down the man's cheeks.

Haplo sneered, but his own gaze lingered on the wretched army. A Sartan army. He felt unaccountably, uncomfortably disturbed, as if the neatly arranged world he had long envisioned had suddenly turned upside down and inside out.

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"What type of magic powers has this ship?" Haplo asked, having walked the length and breadth of the top deck and seen no sign of magic emanations, no Sartan wizards chanting runes, no Sartan runes traced on hull or rudder. Yet the iron dragon sped swiftly across the magma sea, belching clouds of billowing smoke from its nostrils.

"Not magic. Water," answered Jonathan. "Steam, actually." He seemed slightly embarrassed by the fact, defensive at Haplo's look of surprise. "The ships used to be powered by magic, back in the early days."

"Before the magic was needed to raise and maintain the dead," Alfred said, casting a look of pitying horror at the cadavers ranged in ragged lines on the deck.

"Yes, quite true," Jonathan answered, more subdued than Haplo recalled having seen him since their first meeting. "And, to be perfectly honest, to maintain ourselves. You both are learning what magical strength it takes merely to survive down here. The tremendous heat, the noxious fumes take their toll. When we arrive at the city itself, you will be subjected, constantly, to a terrible type of rain that nourishes nothing but eats away at everything—stone, flesh—"

"And yet this land is habitable, compared to the rest of the world, Your Grace," said Edmund, his gaze on the storm-ridden clouds shrouding the city. "Do you think we fled the moment life grew difficult for us? We fled only when it grew impossible! There comes a point when not even the most powerful rune-magic will sustain life in a realm where there is no warmth, where the water itself turns hard as rock, and perpetual darkness falls over the land."

'And every cycle that passes," Jera said softly, "the magma sea on which we sail shrinks a little more, the temperature in the city drops a fraction of a degree. And we are near its core! So my father has determined."

"Is that true?" the prince asked, troubled.

"My dear, you shouldn't be saying such things," Jonathan whispered nervously.

"My husband's right. According to the edicts, it's treason to even think such thoughts. But, yes, Your Highness, I do speak the truth! Myself and others like me and my father will continue to speak the truth, although some don't want to hear it!" Jera lifted her chin proudly. "My father studies scientific subjects, physical laws and properties, matters that are looked down on as being beneath our people's notice. He could have become a necromancer, but he refused, saying that it was time the people of this world focused their attention on the living, not the dead."

Edmund appeared to find this statement somewhat radical. "I agree with that view to a certain extent, but without our dead, how could we living survive? We would be forced to use our magic to perform menial tasks, instead of conserving it for our maintenance."

"If we allowed the dead to die and if we built and used machines, such as the ones powering this ship, and if we worked and studied and learned more about the resources of our world, it is my father's belief that we would not only survive but prosper. Perhaps we might even learn ways to bring life back to regions such as your own, Your Highness."

"My dear, is this wise, talking like this in front of strangers?" Jonathan murmured, his cheeks pale.

"Far better to talk like this in front of strangers than those who call themselves our friends!" Jera answered bitterly. "The time is long past, says my father, when we should cease to wait for those from other worlds to come and 'rescue' us. It is time we rescued ourselves."

Her gaze flicked, as if by accident, to the two strangers. Haplo kept his eyes firmly fixed on the woman, his expression impassive. He dared not risk a glance at the Sartan, but he knew without looking that Alfred would look as guilty as if the words Yes, I Come from Another World were written across his forehead.

"And, yet, you, Your Grace, became a necromancer," Edmund observed, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

"Yes, I did," Jera said, sadly. "It was necessary. We are caught in a circle that is like a snake, who can maintain its life only by feeding off its own tail. A necromancer is essential to the running of any household. Most especially to ours, since we have been banished to the Old Provinces,"

"What are those?" Edmund asked, glad to change the subject, steer it away from talk he obviously considered dangerous, perhaps blasphemous.

"You will see. We must pass through them on our way to the city."

"Perhaps you, Your Highness, and you, gentlemen, would be interested in observing how the ship operates?" Jonathan offered, anxious to end this conversation. "You'll find it really quite amusing and entertaining."

Haplo agreed readily, any type of knowledge about this world was essential to him. Edmund agreed, perhaps secretly thinking that ships like these would carry his people to Death's Gate. Alfred went along simply, Haplo thought uncharitably, so that the inept Sartan might have the opportunity of falling headfirst down a flight of iron steps into the ship's hot, dark belly.

The ship was operated by a crew of cadavers, better kept than the army, who had performed their tasks in life and so continued to perform them in death. Haplo explored the mysteries of something called a "boiler" and marveled politely at another essential piece of equipment known as a "paddle wheel," its iron heated red-hot, that churned through the magma, pushing the dragonship along from behind.

The mechanics reminded the Patryn forcibly of the great Kicksey-winsey, the wondrous machine built by the Sartan and now run by the Glegs of Arianus; the wondrous machine whose purpose no one had understood until the child, Bane, figured it out.

The time is long past when we should cease to wait for those from other worlds to come and "rescue" us.

Haplo, ascending back on deck, thankful to leave the terrible heat and oppressive darkness below, recalled Jera's words. The Patryn couldn't help grinning. What sweet irony. The one who had come to "rescue" these Sartan was their ancient enemy. How his lord would laugh!

The iron ship sailed into a harbor, far larger and much busier than the one they had just left. Ships plied the magma sea both above and below where they docked. The thriving New Provinces, Jonathan pointed out, were located near the shores of the Fire Sea, close enough to benefit from the heat, yet far enough not to suffer from it.

Once off the ship, the duke and duchess turned the captaincy of their army over to another necromancer, who shook his head at the sight of the cadavers and marched them off to effect what repairs he could.

Thankful to be rid of their charges, Jera and her husband gave their guests a brief tour of the dockyard. Haplo had the impression that, for all Jera's gloomy talk, Necropolis—to judge by the goods piled up on the docks or being loaded onto ships by teams of cadavers—was a thriving and wealthy community.

They left the pier, heading for the main highway into the city. But, before they reached it, Jera brought the party to a halt, pointed back at the shoreline of the fiery ocean.

"Look, there," she said, her hand extended. "See those three rocks, standing one on top of the other. I placed them in that position before we left. And when I placed them there, the magma sea reached to their base."

The ocedri Was not at the base any longer. Haplo could have set his hand down in the breadth of empty shoreline left between rock and sea.

"Already, in this short span of time," said Jera, "the magma has receded that far. What will happen to this world, to us, when it has cooled completely?"

## CHAPTER 20

### NEW PROVINCE HIGHWAY, ABARRACH

AN OPEN-AIR CARRIAGE AWAITED THE DUKE, DUCHESS, AND THEIR guests. The vehicle was constructed of the same grasslike substance, woven together and covered with a high-gloss finish painted in glowing colors, Haplo had noted in the village.

"A much different material from that used to build your ship," said Jera, climbing into the carriage and seating herself beside Haplo.

The Patryn kept silent, but Alfred tumbled into the trap with his usual grace. "Wood, you mean? Yes, wood is quite common in ... er. .. well. . ." He realized his error, stammered, but it was too late.

Haplo saw, in the Sartan's enthusiastic words, visions of the trees of Arianus, lifting their green and leafy bows to the sun-drenched blue skies of that distant world.

The Patryn's first impulse was to grab Alfred by his frayed coat collar and shake him. By their expressions, Jera and Jonathan had seen the same visions and were staring at Alfred in undisguised wonder. Bad enough these Sartan knew or guessed they came from a world different from their own. Did Alfred have to show them how much different?

Alfred was climbing into the carriage, still talking, trying to cover his mistake by babbling, and succeeding in doing further damage. Haplo insinuated his booted foot between Alfred's ankles, sent him sprawling headlong across Jera's lap.

The dog, excited by the confusion, decided to add its own and began barking frantically at the beast drawing the carriage—a large fur-bearing creature as long as it was wide with two small beady black eyes and three horns on its massive head. For all its girth, the beast could move swiftly, it whipped out a clawed paw at the pesky dog. The dog leapt nimbly to one side, danced a few paces out of reach, darted forward to nip at the back legs.

"Whoa, pauka! Stop! Get back there!"

The carriage driver—a well-kept cadaver—slashed at the dog with a whip, at the same time struggling to maintain a grip on the reins. The pauka attempted to swing round its head to get a

good view (and mouthful) of its antagonist. Those in the carriage were jounced and jostled, the carriage itself seemed likely to tip over, and all thoughts of another world fled in their concern over remaining in this one.

Haplo jumped out. Collaring the dog, he dragged the animal away from the fray. Jonathan and Edmund ran to the head of the pauka, as Haplo learned it was called from certain maledictory phrases being hurled at it by the dead coachman.

"Mind the snout horn!" Jonathan called anxiously to the prince.

"I've dealt with these before," Edmund said coolly, and grabbing a handful of fur, he pulled himself up deftly onto the pauka's broad back. Sitting astride the plunging, frantic beast, the prince caught hold of the curved part of the sharp horn located just behind the snout. Giving it a swift, strong tug, he jerked the pauka's head back.

The pauka's beady eyes opened wide. It gave its head a shake that nearly threw the prince. Edmund clung firmly to the horn, jerked it back a second time. Leaning down, he said a few soothing words and patted the beast on the neck. The pauka paused to consider the matter, cast a baleful glance back at the grinning dog. The prince said something else. The pauka appeared to agree and, with an air of offended dignity, settled stolidly back into the harness.

Jonathan sighed in relief and hastened to the carriage to see if any of the passengers had come to harm. The prince slid off the pauka's back, patted it on the neck. The cadaver retrieved its dropped reins. Alfred was extracted from Jera's lap, from which he emerged extremely red in the face and profuse in his apologies. A small crowd of dockside necromancers, who had gathered around to watch, drifted back to their work, which involved keeping the laboring cadavers at theirs. Everyone climbed aboard the carriage. It rolled off, on iron wheels, the dog trotting along behind, tongue lolling and eyes bright over the remembrance of the fun.

Not a word more was said about wood, but Haplo noted that, during the ride, Jera would glance at him, her lips curving in a smile.

"What lush and fertile land you have!" said Edmund, gazing about him with undisguised envy.

"These are the New Provinces, Your Highness," said Jonathan.

"Land left behind with the falling of the Fire Sea," added the duchess. "Oh, it is prosperous now. But its very prosperity spells our doom."

"We grow mostly kairn grass here," the duke continued with almost desperate cheerfulness. He was aware of the prince's discomfort and cast a pleading glance at his wife, begging her to refrain from bringing up unpleasant subjects.

Jera, with another glance through lowered lids at Haplo, clasped her husband's hand in her own in silent apology. From then on she went out of her way to be charming. Haplo, leaning back in the carriage, watched the change of expression on the mobile face, the flash of wit in the eyes, and thought that only once before in his life had he ever met a woman to equal this one. Intelligent, subtle, quick to think and to act, yet not one to act or speak rashly, she would have made a man a good partner in the Labyrinth. It was extremely unfortunate that she was bonded to another.

What was he thinking? A Sartan woman! Once again, in his mind, he saw the motionless figures resting peacefully in the crystal tombs of the mausoleum. Alfred did this to me. It's all the Sartan's fault. Somehow, he's playing tricks on my mind. The Patryn cast the Sartan a sharp glance. If I catch him at it, he'll die. I don't need him anymore.

But Alfred was hunched miserably in the corner of the carriage, unable to so much as look at the duchess without a wave of blushes sweeping over his bald head. The man appeared incapable of dressing himself without help, yet Haplo didn't trust him. Looking up, feeling eyes on him, he caught Jera, looking back as if she were reading every thought in his mind. Haplo affected to be intensely interested in the conversation going on around him.

"You grow primarily kairn grass here?" Edmund was asking.

Haplo stared at the tall, golden stands of grass undulating in the hot vectors blowing from the magma sea. Cadavers, new dead by the looks of them, worked in the fields, busily cutting the grass with curved sickles, stacking it in bundles that other cadavers pitched onto trundling carts.

"The plant is extremely versatile," Jera said. "It's flame resistant, thrives on heat, drawing its nutrients from the soil. We use its fibers in almost everything, from this carriage to the clothes we wear to a kind of tea we brew."

She was, Haplo realized, speaking to people from another world, a people who wouldn't know kairn grass from paukas. Yet all the while she was talking directly to the prince, who—probably having grown up eating, sleeping, and breathing kairn grass— appeared slightly amazed at being thus edified, but was too polite to say anything.

"Those trees you see growing over there are lanti. They can be found in the wild. We cultivate them. Their blue flowers are known as lanti lace and are highly prized for decoration. Beautiful, aren't they, Your Highness?"

"It has been some time since I have seen the lanti," Edmund said, his expression grim. "If any do still grow in the wild, we did not run across them."

Three thick, stalwart trunks thrust up through the surrounding stands of golden kairn grass. The trunks twined together to form one gigantic braided trunk that soared high up into the air, the tops lost in the mists. The tree's limbs, thin and fragile, gleaming silver-white, were so intertwined that it appeared impossible to separate one from another. Some of these bore flowers of a soft pale blue color.

As the carriage neared the grove of these trees, Haplo noted that the air smelled sweeter, seemed easier to breathe. He saw, by the dimming of the runes on his skin, that his body was using less magic to maintain itself.

"Yes," answered Jera, seeming again to understand his unspoken thoughts. "The flowers of the lanti have the unique ability to draw the poisons from the atmosphere and give back pure air in return. That is why the trees are never cut. To kill a lanti is an offense punishable by oblivion. One may pick the blue flowers, however. They are highly valued, particularly by lovers." She turned a sweet smile on her husband, who squeezed her hand.

"If you took this road," said Jonathan, pointing to a smaller highway that branched off from the major one on which they traveled, "and you continued on it almost to Rift Ridge, you would reach my family's estate. I really should be getting back," he added, looking at the road they were leaving behind with a longing gaze. "The kairn grass is ready to harvest and, although I left Father's cadaver in charge, sometimes it forgets and then nothing is done."

"Your father, too, is dead?" Edmund asked.

"And my elder brother, as well. That is why I'm lord of the manor, although oblivion take me if I ever wanted it or thought I'd come to it. I'm not very responsible, I'm afraid," Jonathan admitted, referring to his own shortcomings with a cheerful candor that was quite engaging. "Fortunately, I have someone at my side who is."

"You underestimate yourself," Jera said crisply. "It comes of being the youngest. He was spoiled as a child, Your Highness. Never made to do anything. Now all that's changed."

"No, you don't spoil me at all," the duke teased.

"What happened to your father and brother? How did they die?" Edmund asked, thinking undoubtedly of his own recent sorrow.

"Of the same mysterious malady that strikes so many of our people," Jonathan answered, almost helplessly. "One moment both were hale and filled with life. The next—" He shrugged.

Haplo looked sharply at Alfred. Because for every person brought back untimely to life, another—somewhere—untimely dies.

"What have they done? What have they done?" Alfred's lips moved in a silent litany.

Haplo, thinking about all he'd seen and heard, was beginning to wonder the same.

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The carriage left the New Provinces, left behind the tall stands of kairn grass and the lovely, lacy lanti trees. Little by little, the landscape changed.

The air grew cooler, the first drops of rain began to fall, a rain that, when it struck Haplo's skin, caused the protective runes to glow. A shrouding mist closed in. By Jonathan's order, the carriage rolled to a stop, the cadaver driver jumped from his post and hastened around to unfurl a screen of protective fabric over their heads that offered some protection from the rain. Lightning flickered among the trailing clouds, thunder rumbled.

"This area," said Jera, "is known as the Old Provinces. This is where my family lives."

The land was blasted, devoid of life except for a few scraggly rows of sickly looking kairn grass, struggling up through piles of volcanic ash, and some flowerlike plants that gave off a pale and ghostly light. But although the land appeared barren, harvesters moved among the mud pits and slag heaps.

"Why? What are they doing?" Alfred leaned out of the carriage. "The old dead," answered Jera. "They are working the fields."

"But . . ." whispered Alfred in a horror too profound to be spoken aloud, "there are no fields!"

Cadavers in the most deplorable condition, far worse than the army of the old dead, toiled in the drizzling haze. Skeletal arms lifted rusted sickles or, in some cases, no sickles at all but merely went through the motions. Other cadavers, flesh rotting from their bodies, trailed after the harvesters, gathered up nothing, put it carefully nowhere. Barely distinguishable from the mist around them, the phantasms trailed disconsolately after the cadavers. Or perhaps the mist around them was made up of nothing but phantasms belonging to those whose bones had sunk into the ground and would never rise again.

Haplo looked at the mist and saw hands in it and arms and eyes. It clutched at him, it wanted something from him and seemed to be trying to speak to him. Its chill pervaded body and mind.

"Nothing grows here now, although once the land was as lush as the New Provinces. The few stands of kairn grass you see grow along the underground colossus that carry the magma into the city to provide heat. The old dead, who worked this land once themselves when they were alive, are all that remain. We tried moving them to new lands, but they kept drifting back to places they had known, and finally we left them in peace."

"In peace!" Alfred echoed bitterly.

Jera appeared slightly surprised at his attitude. "Why, yes. Don't you do this with your own dead when they grow too old to be of use?"

Here it comes, thought Haplo, who knew he should stop what Alfred was going to say. But he didn't. He kept still, kept quiet.

"We have no necromancers among us," Alfred said, his voice soft and fervent with conviction. "Our dead when they die are allowed to rest after their labors in life."

The three in the carriage said nothing, were stunned into silence. They regarded Alfred with much the same expression of horror as he regarded them.

"You mean," said Jera, recovering from her shock, "you consign your dead, all your dead, to oblivion?"

"To oblivion! I don't understand. What does that mean?" Alfred glanced from one to the other helplessly.

"The body rots, falls to dust. The mind is trapped within, powerless to free itself."

"Mind! What mind? These have no minds!" Alfred waved a hand at the old dead, toiling among the ash and mud.

"Of course, they have minds! They work, they perform useful functions."

"So does that dragonship on which we sailed, but it has no mind. And you're using your dead the same way. But you have done worse than that! Much worse!" cried Alfred.

The prince's expression darkened from one of tolerant curiosity to one of anger. Only his innate courtesy kept him quiet, because what he would say would obviously cause unpleasantness. Jera's brows came together sharply, her chin jutted forward, her back straightened. She would have spoken but her husband held her hand fast, squeezed it tightly. Alfred didn't notice, rushed headlong into an icy, disapproving silence.

"The use of such black arts has been known to our people but expressly forbidden. Surely the ancient texts spoke of such matters. Have those been lost?"

"Perhaps destroyed," suggested Haplo coolly, speaking for the first time.

"And what do you think, sir?" Jera demanded of the Patryn, ignoring the pressure of her husband's hand. "How do your people treat their dead?"

"My people, Your Grace, have all they can do to keep the living alive, without worrying about the dead. And it seems to me that this, for the moment, should be our primary concern. Were you aware that there is a troop of soldiers headed this way?"

The prince sat bolt upright, tried to see out the screened carriage. He stared into nothing but mist and rain and hurriedly ducked his head back inside.

"How can you tell?" he demanded, more suspicious of them now than he had been when he first encountered them in the cavern.

"I have extraordinary hearing," Haplo replied dryly. "Listen, you can hear the jingle of their harness."

The jingle of harness, the stamping of what sounded like hooves on rock came to them faintly above the noise of their own carriage.

Jonathan and his wife exchanged startled glances, Jera appeared troubled.

"I take it, then, that troop movement along this highway isn't exactly normal?" Haplo asked, leaning back in the carriage and folding his arms across his chest.

"Probably a royal escort for His Highness," Jonathan said, brightening.

"Yes, that's it. Surely," Jera agreed, with rather too much relief in her voice to be entirely convincing.

Edmund smiled, ever courteous, despite whatever private misgivings he might have had.

The wind rose, the mists thinned. The troops were close and clearly visible. The soldiers were dead, new dead, in superb condition. At sight of the carriage, they came to a halt, formed a line across the highway, blocking the way. The carriage stopped on a hastily given command by Jonathan to his dead driver. The pauka snorted and shook its head restlessly, not liking the beasts the soldiers rode.

Lizardlike creatures, the soldiers' mounts were ugly and misshapen. Two eyes on either side of the head revolved, each independent of the other, giving the impression that they could see in all directions at once. Short and squat, built close to the ground, they had powerful hind legs and a thick, barbed tail. The dead rode on their backs.

"The troops of the dynast," Jera said, speaking in an undertone. "His soldiers alone are permitted to ride mud dragons. And the man in the gray robes leading them is the Lord High Chancellor, the dynast's right hand."

'And the black-robed person riding beside him?'

"The army's necromancer."

The chancellor, mounted astride a mud dragon and looking extremely uncomfortable, said a few words to the captain, who guided its beast forward.

The pauka sniffed and snorted, shook its head at the mud dragon smell, which was foul and rank as if it had climbed out of a pit of poisonous ooze.

'All of you, please step out of the carriage,' requested the captain.

Jera glanced at her guests. "I think, perhaps, we better," she said apologetically.

They trooped out of the carriage, the prince graciously assisting the duchess. Alfred stumbled down the two stairs, nearly pitched headfirst into a pit. Haplo stood quietly toward the back of the group. An oblique gesture of his hand brought the dog padding to his side.

The cadaver's expressionless eyes peered at the group, its mouth forming the words the Lord High Chancellor had bidden it say.

"I ride in the name of the Dynast of Abarrach, ruler of Kairn Necros, regent of Old and New Provinces, king of Rift Ridge, king of Salfag, king of Thebis, and liege lord of Kairn Telest."

Edmund flushed darkly at hearing his own kingdom thus claimed, but he held his tongue. The cadaver continued.

"I am looking for one who calls himself king of Kairn Telest."

"I am prince of that land," Edmund said, speaking up proudly. "The king, my father, is dead and but newly raised. That is why I am here and he is not," he added for the benefit of the waiting necromancer, who nodded the black hood in understanding.

The cadaver captain, however, was somewhat at a loss. This new information came outside the scope of its orders. The chancellor indicated in a few words that the prince would serve in place of the king, and the captain, reassured, carried on.

"I am bidden by His Majesty to place the king—"

"Prince," inserted the chancellor patiently.

"—of Kairn Telest under arrest."

"On what charge?" Edmund demanded. Striding forward, he ignored the cadaver, glared at the chancellor.

"Of entering the realms of Thebis and Salfag, realms foreign to him, without first seeking the permission of the dynast to cross their borders—"

"Those so-called realms are uninhabited! And neither myself nor my father ever knew that this 'dynast' even existed!"

The cadaver was continuing its speech, perhaps it hadn't heard the interruption. "And of attacking without provocation the town of Safe Harbor, driving off the peaceful inhabitants, and looting—"

"That is a lie!" Edmund shouted, his fury overtaking his reason.

"Indeed it is!" Jonathan cried impetuously. "My wife and I have just returned from the town. We can testify to the truth of the matter."

"His Most Just Majesty will be only too pleased to hear your side of this dispute. He will let you both know when to come to the palace." It was the chancellor who spoke.

"We're coming to the palace with His Highness," Jonathan stated.

"Quite unnecessary. His Majesty received your report, Your Grace. We require the use of your carriage to the city walls, but, when we arrive in Necropolis, you and the duchess have His Majesty's leave to return to your home."

"But—" Jonathan sputtered. It was his wife's turn to restrain him from speaking his mind.

"My dear, the harvest," she reminded him.

He said nothing, subsided into an unhappy silence.

'And now, before we proceed," continued the chancellor, "His Highness the Prince will understand and forgive me if I ask that he surrender his weapon. And those of his companion, too, I—"

The chancellor's gray hood, hiding his face, turned for the first time toward Haplo. The voice ceased speaking, the hood paused in its rotation, the fabric quivered as if the head it covered were subject to some strong emotion.

The runes on Haplo's skin itched and prickled. What now? he wondered, tensing, sensing danger. The dog, who had been content to flop down in the road during the lull in the proceedings, jumped to its feet, a low growl rumbling in its chest. One of the eyes of the mud dragon swiveled in the direction of the small animal. A red tongue flicked out of the lizard's mouth.

"I have no weapons," said Haplo, raising his hands.

"Nor I," added Alfred in a small and miserable voice, although no one had asked him.

The chancellor shook himself, like a man waking from a doze he never meant to take. With an effort, the gray hood wrenched itself from staring at Haplo back to the prince, who had remained motionless.

"Your sword, Your Highness. No one comes armed into the presence of the dynast."

Edmund stood defiant, irresolute. Duke and duchess kept their gazes lowered, unwilling to influence him in any way, yet obviously hoping he would not cause trouble. Haplo wasn't certain what he hoped the prince would do. The Patryn had been warned by his lord not to become involved in any local dispute, but his lord had certainly not counted on his minion falling into the hands of a Sartan dynast!

Edmund suddenly and swiftly reached down, unbuckled his sword belt, and held it out to the cadaver. The captain accepted it gravely, with a salute of a white and wasted hand. Cold with outraged pride and righteous anger, the prince climbed back into the carriage and seated himself stiffly, staring out over the blasted landscape with studied calm.

Jera and her husband, prey to shame, could not look at Edmund, who must think now that they had lured him into a trap. Faces averted, they silently entered the carriage and silently took their seats. Alfred glanced uncertainly at Haplo, for all the world as if he were asking for orders! How that man had survived on his own this long was beyond the Patryn's comprehension. Haplo jerked his head toward the carriage, and Alfred tumbled in, stumbling over everyone's feet, falling rather than sitting in his seat.

They were all waiting for Haplo. Reaching down, patting the dog, he turned the animal's head toward Alfred.

"Watch him," he instructed in a soft undertone that no one heard except the animal. "Whatever happens to me, watch him."

Haplo climbed into the carriage. The cadaver captain rode forward, caught hold of the pauka's reins, and started the grumbling animal moving, driving the carriage forward toward the city of Necropolis, the City of the Dead.

CHAPTER \* 21

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

THE CITY OF NECROPOLIS WAS BUILT AGAINST THE HIGH WALLS OF THE kairn [1] that gave the empire its name. The kairn, one of the largest and oldest on Abarrach, had always been inhabited, but had not, until now, been a great population center. Those who traveled to this world in the early years of its history had moved to the more temperate regions nearer the planet's surface, those cities that were located, as was popularly quoted, "between fire and ice."

Abarrach's world had been most carefully designed by the Sartan when their magic first attempted to save their world by sundering it. 'All the more astonishing that what had seemed so right had gone so tragically wrong,' said Alfred to himself during the dismal, gloom-ridden journey to the city.

Of course, thought Alfred, this world, like the other three worlds, was never meant to remain self-sufficient. They were to have communicated, cooperated. For some reason, unknown, the cooperation failed, left each world cut off, isolated.

But the populations of mensch on Arianus had managed to adapt to their harsh surroundings and survive, even flourish—or they would if their own squabbles and bickering did not kill them off. It was the Sartan, Alfred's race, who had disappeared on Arianus. It would have been better—far, far better, he reflected sadly—if his race had disappeared off this one, as well.

"The city of Necropolis," announced the Lord High Chancellor, dismounting awkwardly from his mud dragon. "I am afraid that from here on we must walk. No beasts are allowed inside the city walls. That includes dogs." He stared hard at Haplo's pet. "I'm not leaving the dog," Haplo said shortly. "The animal could stay with the carriage," Jera offered, her manner timid. "Would he remain here by himself, if you told him to? We could take him back to our dwelling."

"The dog would, but it won't." Haplo climbed out of the carriage, whistled the dog to him. "Where I go, the dog goes. Or neither of us goes."

"The creature is extremely well trained." Jera, dismounting from the carriage with her husband, turned to the chancellor. "I will vouch for its good behavior while inside the city."

"The law is dear: No beasts inside the city walls," the Lord High Chancellor stated, his face flint-hard and sharp, "except those destined for the marketplace and they must be butchered within the specified time after entering. And if you will not submit to our laws peaceably, sir, then you will submit by force."

"Ah, now," said Haplo, smoothing the rune-covered skin on the back of his hands, "that should be very interesting."

More trouble, Alfred foresaw unhappily. Having his suspicions concerning the dog and its relationship to Haplo, the Sartan had no idea how this would be resolved. Haplo would sooner part with his life than the animal and it seemed, from the look on his face, that he would enjoy the opportunity to fight.

No wonder. Face-to-face, at last, with an enemy who had locked his people into a hellish world for a thousand years. An enemy who had deteriorated in magical skills ... and in so much else! But could the Patryn deal with the dead? He had been captured easily enough back in the cavern. Alfred had seen pain twist the man's face, and the Sartan knew Haplo well enough to guess that there were few who had ever seen him so incapacitated. But perhaps now he was prepared, perhaps the magic in his body was acclimated.

"I don't have time for such nonsense," said the Lord High Chancellor coldly. "We are late for our audience with His Majesty as it is. Captain, deal with it."

The dog, having grown bored during the conversation, had been unable to resist taking another sniff and mischievous nip at the pauka. Haplo's gaze was fixed on the chancellor. The captain of the guard leaned down, grabbed the dog up in strong arms and, before Haplo could prevent it, the cadaver hurled the animal into a pit of bubbling hot mud.

The dog gave a wild, pain-filled scream. Its front paws scrabbled frantically, liquid eyes fixed in desperate pleading on its master.

Haplo leapt toward it, but the mud was thick and viscous and scalding hot. Before the Patryn could save it, the animal was sucked down beneath the surface and vanished without a trace.

Jera gasped and hid her face in her husband's breast. Jonathan, shocked and appalled, glowered at the chancellor. The prince cried out in bitter, angry protest.

Haplo went berserk.

Runes on his body flared into brilliant life, glowing bright blue and crimson red. The vivid light could be seen through his clothing, welling out beneath the fabric of his shirt, showing clearly the runes drawn on his arms. The leather vest he wore hid those on his back and chest, the leather trousers concealed those on his legs, but so powerful were the runes that a glowing halo was beginning to form around him. Silent, grim, Haplo launched himself directly at the cadaver, who—seeing the threat—went for its sword.

Haplo's lunge carried him to his prey before the captain had its sword halfway clear of the scabbard. But the moment the Patryn's choking hands touched the cadaver's chill flesh, white lightning flared and danced crazily around the two of them. Haplo cried out in agony, staggered backward, limbs twitching and writhing convulsively as the charge passed through his body. He slammed up against the side of the carriage. Groaning, he slid down to lie, seemingly unconscious, in the soft ash that covered the road.

An acrid odor of sulfur filled the air. The cadaver continued, unperturbed, the motion of drawing its sword, then looked to the chancellor for orders.

The Lord High Chancellor was staring, wide-eyed, at Haplo, at the glow of the runes that was just beginning to fade from the skin. The minister licked his dry lips.

"Kill him," was the command.

"What?" Alfred quavered, staring in disbelief. "Kill him? Why?"

"Because," Jera said softly, laying a restraining hand on Alfred's arm, "it is far easier to obtain information from a cadaver than a stubborn, living man. Hush, there is nothing you can do!"

"There is something I can do," Edmund said coldly. "You cannot kill a helpless man! I won't allow it!" He took a step forward, obviously intent on impeding the cadaver in its grisly task.

The captain never paused, but raised its hand in a commanding gesture. Two of its troops ran to obey. Dead soldiers grasped the prince from behind, pinioning his arms skilfully to his sides. Edmund, outraged, struggled to free himself.

"Just a moment, Captain," said the chancellor. "Your Highness, is this man with the strange markings on his skin a citizen of Kairn Telest?"

"You know very well he isn't," answered Edmund. "He is a stranger. I met him just today, over on the opposite shore. But he has done no harm and has seen a faithful companion meet a barbarous death. You have punished him for his effrontery. Let it go at that!"

"Your Highness," said the Lord High Chancellor, "you are a fool. Captain, carry out your orders."

"How can my people ... my people commit these terrible crimes?" Alfred babbled wildly, talking to himself, wringing his hands as if he would wring the answers from his own flesh. "If I stood in the midst of the Patryns, then, yes, I could understand. They were the race that was heartless, ambitious, cruel... We ... we were the balance. The wave correcting itself. White magic to their black. Good for evil. But I see in Haplo ... I have seen good in Haplo. . . . And now I see evil in my fellow Sartan. . . . What shall I do? What shall I do?"

His immediate answer was: faint.

"No!" Alfred gasped, fighting against his inherent weakness. Blackness crept over him. 'Action! Must . . . act. Grab the sword. That's it. Grab the sword.'

The Sartan flung himself at the captain of the guard.

That was the plan. Unfortunately, the Sartan ended up flinging only part of himself at the captain of the guard. Alfred's upper half went for the sword. His lower half refused to move. He fell flat, landed in a headlong sprawl on top of Haplo.

Alfred, looking at him, saw the Patryn's eyelids flicker.

"Now you've done it!" Haplo shot irritably out of the corner of his mouth. "I had everything under control! Get off me!"

Either the cadaver didn't notice that now it had two victims instead of one, or perhaps it assumed that it was to save time by dispatching both at once.

"I—I can't!" Alfred was paralyzed with fear, unable to move. Looking up in frantic terror, he saw the razor-sharp, if slightly rusted blade, descending.

The Sartan gasped the first runes that came to his lips.

The captain of the dead had been a brave and honorable soldier, well respected and loved by his men. He had died in the Battle of the Pillar of Zembar, [2] of a sword thrust in the gut. The horrible wound could still be seen, a gaping, although now bloodless, hole in the cadaver's stomach.

Alfred's rune-chant appeared to inflict the same killing blow over again.

For a brief instant, a semblance of life flickered in the dead eyes. The cadaver's well-preserved face wrenched with pain, the sword fell from a hand that reached instinctively at its torn vitals. A silent scream came from blue lips.

The cadaver doubled over, clutching its gut. Those watching in stunned shock saw its hands curl around the invisible blade of some unseen attacker. Then, seemingly, the sword was wrenched free.

The cadaver gave a last, silent groan and slid to the ground. It did not get back to its feet, it did not continue the attack. The captain lay on the ash-covered ground, dead.

No one moved or spoke; all standing near might have been struck by the same invisible sword. The Lord High Chancellor was the first impelled to action.

"Bring the captain back!" he commanded the court necromancer.

Hastening forward, her black robes fluttering around her, her cowl fallen, unheeded, from her head, the necromancer approached the captain's corpse.

She sang the runes.

Nothing happened. The captain lay motionless.

The necromancer sucked in a deep breath, eyes widened in astonishment, and then narrowed in anger. She began to chant the runes again, but the magic died on her lips.

The cadaver's phantasm rose up before the necromancer and stood between the wizardess and its corpse,

"Be gone," ordered the necromancer, attempting to brush it aside, as she might brush away smoke from a fire.

The phantasm remained where it was, began to change in appearance. No longer was it a pitiful wisp of fog, but the semblance of a man—strong and proud—who faced the wizardess with dignity. And all realized, who stood watching in amazed awe, that they were seeing the corpse as he had been in life.

The captain faced the necromancer and the watchers saw, or thought they saw, the phantasm shake its head in firm denial. It turned its back on its corpse and walked away, and it seemed a great and sorrowful wail resounded from the mist around them, a wail that was fraught with envy.

Or was it the wind, howling among the rocks?

The necromancer stood gazing at the phantasm in openmouthed stupefaction. When it disappeared, she suddenly became aware of her audience and snapped her mouth shut.

"Good riddance." Bending over the corpse, she spoke, the runes again, adding, for good measure, "Get up, damn you!"

The corpse didn't move.

The necromancer's face flushed an ugly red. She kicked at the cadaver. "Get up! Fight! Carry out your orders!"

"Stop it!" Alfred cried in anger, regaining his feet with difficulty. "Stop it! Let the man rest!"

"What have you done?" The necromancer rounded on Alfred. "What have you done to it? What have you done?"

Alfred, taken aback, stumbled over Haplo's ankles. The Patryn groaned and stirred.

"I—I don't know!" Alfred protested, bumping into the side of the carriage.

The necromancer advanced on him. "What have you done?" she demanded, her voice rising to a shrill scream.

"The prophecy!" Jera exclaimed, clutching at her husband. "The prophecy!"

The necromancer overheard, paused in her harangue. She stared at Alfred narrowly, then looked swiftly to the chancellor for orders. He appeared dazed.

"Why doesn't it get up?" he asked in a shaken voice, staring at the corpse.

The necromancer bit her lip, shook her head. She went over to discuss the matter with him in low, urgent undertones.

Jera took advantage of the chancellor's distraction to hasten to Haplo's side. She was solicitous of the Patryn, attentive to him, but the green eyes fixed in silent questioning on the stammering Alfred.

"I — I don't know!" he answered, as confused as anyone there. "Truly, I don't know. It all happened so fast. And ... I was terrified! That sword — " He shuddered, shivering from cold and reaction. "I'm not very brave, you see. Most of the time I ... I faint. Ask him." He pointed a shaking finger at Edmund. "When his men captured us, I passed out cold! I wanted to faint this time, but I wouldn't let myself. When I saw the sword ... I spoke the first words that came to me! I can't recall, for the life of me, what I said!"

"For the life of you!" The necromancer turned, glared at Alfred from the depths of her black hood. "No, but you'll recall them swiftly enough after death. The dead, you see, never lie, never keep anything concealed!"

"I'm telling you the truth," said Alfred meekly, "and I doubt if even my corpse would have very much to add."

Haplo groaned again, almost, it seemed, as if he were responding to Alfred's statement.

"How is he?" Jonathan asked his wife.

Jera's hand reached out to trace the runes on Haplo's skin. "I think he'll be all right. The sigla appear to have absorbed most of the shock. His heartbeat is strong and — "

Haplo's hand closed suddenly and firmly over hers. "Don't ever touch me again!" he whispered, voice hoarse.

Jera flushed, bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—" She flinched, tried to move her arm. "You're hurting me . . ."

Haplo flung her from him, regained his feet by his own power, though he was forced to lean for support against the carriage. Jonathan hastened to his wife's side.

"How dare you treat her like that?" the duke demanded savagely, swinging around on Haplo. "She was only trying to help — "

"Don't, my dear," Jera interrupted. "I deserve his reproach. I had no right. Forgive me, sir."

Haplo grunted, muttered something in ungracious acceptance. He was obviously still not feeling well, but he understood that danger had not lessened.

If anything, thought Alfred, it has increased.

The chancellor was giving new instructions to his troops. Soldiers massed themselves around the prince and his companions, herding them close together.

"What in the name of the Labyrinth did you do?" Haplo hissed, edging nearer the wretched Alfred.

"He fulfilled the prophecy!" said Jera in a low voice.

"Prophecy?" Haplo looked from one to the other. "What prophecy?"

But Jera only shook her head. Rubbing her bruised flesh, she turned away. Her husband put his arm around her protectively.

"What prophecy?" Haplo demanded, turning his accusing stare to Alfred. "What the hell did you do to that corpse?"

"I killed him," said Alfred, adding by way of explanation. "He was going to kill you—"

"So you saved my life by killing a dead man. That figures. Only you—" Haplo stopped talking, stared at the corpse, then looked back at the Sartan. "You say you 'killed' him."

"Yes. He's dead. Quite dead."

The Patryn's gaze switched from Alfred to the infuriated necromancer to the sharp-eyed duchess to the watchful, suspicious prince.

"I really didn't mean to," Alfred pleaded unhappily. "I... I was frightened."

"Guards! Keep them apart!" The chancellor gestured, and two cadavers hastened to separate Alfred and Haplo. "No talking among yourselves! Any of you! Your Graces." He turned to the duke and duchess. "I'm afraid that this . . . incident changes matters. His Majesty will want to interview all of you. Guards, bring them!"

The chancellor and the necromancer strode on, heading toward the gate in the city walls. The cadavers closed ranks around their captives, separated them one from the other, and ordered them forward.

Alfred saw the Patryn cast one glance at the mud hole into which his faithful dog had disappeared. Haplo's mouth tightened, stern eyes blinked rapidly. Then the guards took him away, blocking him from Alfred's sight.

A moment of confusion followed. Edmund struck aside the chill hands of the cadavers, stated that he would enter the city as a prince, not a captive. He moved forward proudly on his own, his guards trailing behind.

Jera took advantage of the situation to whisper hurried, urgent instructions to her carriage driver. The cadaver nodded and turned the pauka's head toward home, guiding the animal down a road that ran for some distance beneath the city wall. Duke and duchess exchanged glances, they were of one mind on something, but what that could be the unhappy Alfred had no idea.

Nor, at the moment, did he care. He had not been lying. He had no idea what he had done and he wished, with all his heart, he hadn't done it. Lost in dark thoughts, he didn't notice that the duke and duchess fell into step with him, one on either side, the dead guards tramping along behind.

## CHAPTER \* 22

### NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

THE INHABITANTS OF NECROPOUS HAD TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF A PECULIAR natural rock formation in building their city walls. A long row of stalagmites, poking up from the cavern floor, extended from one side of the back end of the cavern around in a half circle, closing it off at the other end. Stalactites flowed into the stalagmites, forming a wall that gave the visitor the startling impression he was entering a gigantic, bared-toothed mouth.

The stalactic form was ancient, dating back to the world's origins, and was undoubtedly one reason that this point had become one of Abarrach's earliest outposts of civilization. Old Sartan runes could occasionally be seen on the massive wall, their magic having once conveniently filled up gaps left by the natural architecture.

But Sartan magic had dwindled, the continual fall of drizzling laze had worn most of the sigla away, and no one now remembered the secret of restoring them. The dead kept the wall in repair, filling the gaps between the "teeth" with molten lava, pumping magma into the cavities. The dead also guarded the walls of Necropolis.

The city gates stood open during the dynast's waking time. Gigantic doors woven of strong kairn grass reinforced by the few crude runes these Sartan remembered were shut only when the royal eyes closed in sleep. Time in this sunless world was regulated by the ruler of Necropolis, which meant that it tended to change depending on the whim of His or Her Majesty.

Time was, therefore, denoted by such appellations as "the dynast's breakfast hour" or "the dynast's audience hour" or "the dynast's napping hour." An early-rising ruler forced his subjects to rise early to conduct their business under his watchful eye. A late-rising ruler, as was their current dynast, altered the routine of the entire city. Such changes were no great hardship on the living inhabitants, who were generally at leisure to alter their lives to suit their ruler. The dead, who did all the work, never slept.

The Lord High Chancellor and his prisoners entered the city gates during the close of the dynast's audience hour, one of the busiest times of day for the city's inhabitants. Audience hour marked a last moment's flurry of activity before the city shut down for the dynast's luncheon hour and the dynast's napping hour.

Consequently, the narrow streets of Necropolis were crowded with people, both living and dead. The streets were, in reality, tunnels, created either naturally or artificially, designed to give the inhabitants some protection from the constantly falling rain. These tunnels were narrow and twisting and tended to be dark, shadowy places, imperfectly lighted by hissing gas lamps.

Masses of people—both living and dead—crowded into the tunnels. It seemed barely possible for Alfred, the duke and duchess and the guards to add their bodies to the throng. Alfred understood that the law prohibiting beasts in the city streets had not been passed arbitrarily but out of necessity. A mud dragon would have seriously impeded traffic, the huge furry form of pauka would have brought movement in the streets to a complete standstill. Studying the crowds heaving and shoving and pushing around him, Alfred saw that the dead vastly outnumbered the living. His heart seemed to shrivel inside him.

The guards closed ranks around their prisoners, the several groups were almost instantly separated by the crowd. Haplo and the prince vanished from sight. The duke and duchess pressed close to Alfred, one on either side, their hands closing over his arms.

He felt an unusual tenseness, a rigidity in their bodies, and looked at each in doubt and sudden, sickening apprehension.

"Yes," said Jera, her voice pitched low, barely audible above the noise level created by the multitudes jamming the streets, "we're going to try to help you escape. Just do what we tell you, when we tell you."

"But... the prince ... my fri—" Alfred paused. He had been about to term Haplo his "friend" and wondered uneasily if the word quite proper or even accurate.

Jonathan appeared troubled, glanced at his wife, who shook her head firmly.

The duke sighed. "I'm sorry. But you see that helping them is impossible. We will make certain you get away safely, then perhaps together we can do something to assist your friends."

What he said made sense. How could the duke know that, without Haplo, Alfred was a prisoner no matter where he went on this world? He emitted a small sigh, that no one could possibly have heard. "I suppose it wouldn't matter if I told you that I didn't want to escape?"

"You're frightened," said Jera, patting his arm. "Thafs understandable. But trust us. We'll take care of you. It won't be that difficult," she added, casting a scornful glance at their dead guards, shouldering their way through the crowd.

"No, I didn't think it would," Alfred said, but he said it to himself.

"Our concern is for your safety," added Jonathan.

"Is it?" Alfred asked wistfully.

"Why, of course!" the duke exclaimed, and Alfred had the feeling that the young man actually believed what he said.

The Sartan couldn't help but wonder, with a gentle melancholy, how ready these two would be to risk their lives to save a clumsy-footed bumbling fool instead of a man who'd fulfilled "the prophecy," whatever that might be. He considered asking, decided he really didn't want to know.

"What will happen to the prince, to ... to Haplo?"

"You heard Pons," said the duchess shortly.

"Who?"

"The chancellor."

"But he's talking about murder!" Alfred was aghast. He could believe it of mensch, believe it of the Patryns ... but his people!

"It's been done before this," said the duke grimly. 'And will be done again after."

"You must think of yourself," Jera added softly. "There'll be time to think of helping your friends escape when you're safe."

"Or at least we might be able to rescue their cadavers," offered Jonathan, and Alfred, looking into the young man's eyes, saw that the duke was completely in earnest.

Everything within Alfred went numb. He was walking in a dream, but if it was a dream, it must be someone else's, because he couldn't wake up. The warm hands of the duke and duchess steered him among the sea of dead, combating the chill flow from the blue-white flesh of the cadavers pressing around them. The odor of decay was strong in his nostrils and emanated not only from the dead but from everything in this world.

The buildings themselves, made of obsidian and granite and cooied lava, were subject to the constant, drizzling, acid-filled laze. Dwellings and shops, like the cadavers, were crumbling, falling apart. Alfred saw, here and there, old runes or what was left of them; sigla whose magic would have brought heat and light to this gloomy, forbidding city. But most were obliterated, either washed away or covered over by makeshift repair work.

Duke and duchess slowed their pace. Alfred glanced at them nervously.

"Up ahead is a cross-tunnel," Jera said, drawing near him. Her face was firm, resolute, her tone urgent, impelling. "We'll encounter the normal traffic tie-ups, confusion. Once we reach that point, be ready to do what we say."

"I think I should warn you—I'm not very good at running, fleeing pursuit, that sort of thing," said Alfred.

Jera smiled, a rather right smile and lopsided, but her green eyes were warm. "We know," she said, patting his arm again. "Don't worry. It should all be much easier than that."

"Should be," breathed her husband, gulping with excitement.

"Calmly, Jonathan," ordered his wife. "Ready?"

"Ready, my dear," said the young man.

They arrived at a junction, where four tunnels converged. People flowed in from four different directions. Alfred caught a quick glimpse of four necromancers, clad in plain black robes, standing in the center of the intersection, directing the streams of traffic.

Jera turned suddenly and began to push and shove irritably at the cadaver guard, who marched directly behind her.

"I tell you," she shouted loudly, "you've made a mistake!"

"Yes, be off with you!" Jonathan raised his voice, stopping to remonstrate with his guard. "You've got the wrong people! Can you understand that? The wrong people! Your prisoners"—he raised his hand and pointed—"went off in that direction!"

The cadaver guards came to a standstill, remaining tightly bunched around Alfred and the duke and duchess as they'd been ordered. People stumbled to a halt around them, the living pausing to see what was going on, the dead attempting single-mindedly to continue on whatever errands they'd been assigned.

A bottleneck occurred. Those in the back of the crowd, who couldn't see, began to push and shove those ahead of them, demanding in strident tones to know what was holding up traffic. The situation was deteriorating, and the necromancers moved with alacrity to find out what was wrong and attempt to clear up the snarl.

A cross-tunnel monitor clad in plain black robes made his way through the mass. Noting the red trim on the black robes of the duke and duchess, the necromancer recognized minor royalty and bowed low. He did, however, glance slightly askance at the cadavers, who wore the royal insignia.

"How can I assist Your Graces?" asked the monitor. "What is the problem?"

"I'm really not sure," said Jonathan, the picture of innocent confusion. "You see, my wife and our friend and I were walking along minding our own business when these . . . these"—he waved a hand at the guards as if there existed no words to describe them—"suddenly surrounded us and began to march us off toward the palace!"

"They've been ordered to guard a prisoner, but they've apparently mislaid him and latched on to us," said Jera, glancing about helplessly.

Traffic was growing more and more snarled. Two of the monitors attempted to direct the flow around the group. A fourth, appearing harassed, tried to herd them over to the side of the road but the walls of the tunnels prevented them from moving very far. Alfred, standing head and shoulders above most of the rest of the crowd, could see that the backup was spreading through all four streets. At this rate, the entire city might be brought to a halt.

Someone was treading heavily on his foot, someone else had his elbow in his ribs. Jera was plastered up against him, her hair tickled his chin. The monitor himself was caught in the tide and had to battle his way out or he would have been carried along in the surging mob.

"We came in the front gate at the same time as the Lord High Chancellor and three political prisoners!" Jonathan shouted to be heard in the echoing tunnels. "Did you see them? A prince of some barbarian tribe and a man who looked like a walking rune-bone game?"

"Yes, we saw them. And the Lord High Chancellor."

"Well, there was a third man, and this lot was guarding him and then suddenly they were guarding us and he's escaped somewhere."

"Perhaps," said the increasingly flustered monitor, "Your Graces could simply go along with these guards to the palace—"

"I, the Duchess of Rift Ridge, marched before the dynast like a common criminal! I could never show my face in court again!" Jera's pale skin flushed, her eyes blazed. "How can you even suggest such a thing!"

"I—I'm sorry. Your Grace," the monitor stammered. "I wasn't thinking. It's this crowd, you see, and the heat—"

"Then I suggest you do something about it," Jonathan stated loftily.

Alfred glanced at the cadavers, who stood stolidly in the center of the confusion swirling about them, faces set in expressions of fixed, albeit mindless, purpose.

"Sergeant," said the necromancer, turning to the cadaver in the lead of the small troop, "what is your assigned duty?"

"Guard prisoners. Take them to the palace," answered the cadaver, its hollow voice mingling with the other hollow voices of the dead milling about in the tunnel.

"What prisoners?" the monitor asked.

The cadaver paused, searching its past, latched on to a memory. "Prisoners of war, sir."

"What battle?" asked the monitor, a hint of exasperation in his voice.

"Battle." A trace of a smile seemed to touch the cadaver's blue lips. "Battle of the Fallen Colossus, sir."

"Ah," said Jera, bitingly.

The necromancer heaved a sigh. "I am extremely sorry, Your Graces. Would you like me to deal with this?"

"If you please. I could have done it myself, but there's so much less bother involved if you take care of the matter, you being a government official. You'll know how to submit the proper reports."

'And we didn't want to cause a scene," added Jonathan. "The dead can be so stubborn sometimes. Once they got it into their heads that we were their prisoners . . ." He shrugged. "Well, they might have proved difficult. Think of the scandal if Her Grace and I were seen arguing with cadavers!"

The monitor evidently thought of it, for he bowed, then began to wave his hands in the air, tracing the runes, and chanting. The cadavers' expressions wavered, became slightly confused, lost, helpless.

"Return to the palace," stated the monitor crisply. "Report to your superior that you lost your prisoner. I'll send someone with them, make certain that they don't annoy anyone else along the way. And now, Your Graces," said the monitor, touching his hand to the cowl of his robe, "if you will excuse me—"

"Certainly. Thank you. You've been most helpful." Jera raised her hand, traced a sigil of polite blessing.

The monitor returned it, hurriedly, then hastened off to deal with the traffic tie-up clogging the tunnel. Jera linked her arm into her husband's, who took hold of Alfred's elbow. They steered the Sartan down a tunnel heading in a direction at right angles to the one they'd been traveling.

Dazed by the noise, the crowd, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the tunnels, it took Alfred a moment to realize that he and his companions were free.

"What happened?" he asked, glancing behind, missing his footing, and stumbling over himself.

Jonathan balanced him. "A matter of timing, actually. Do you think you might speed up your pace a bit and keep an eye on where you're walking? We're not out of this yet and the sooner we reach the Rift Gate, the better."

"I'm sorry." Alfred felt his face burn. He paid close attention to where he was putting his feet and watched them travel in the most extraordinary places—down holes, onto other people's feet, turning corners never intended to be turned.

"Pons was in such haste to get you back to the dynast—here, allow me to help you up—he neglected to renew the dead's instructions. You have to do that periodically or they do what this lot did. They revert back to acting from memory, their own memories."

"But they were taking us to the palace—"

"Yes. They would have managed that task quite adequately. Clung to it tenaciously, in fact. One reason we didn't dare try to get rid of them ourselves. As it was, that other necromancer confused them enough to break the thin thread still attaching them to their orders. The smallest distraction can send them back to bygone days. That's one reason the monitors are posted around town. They take charge of any dead who're wandering about aimlessly. Look out for that cart! Are you all right? Just a bit farther, then we should be through the worst of the traffic."

Jera and Jonathan hustled Alfred along at a rapid rate, each glancing nervously about as they did so. They kept to the shadows when possible, avoiding the pools of light cast by the gas lamps.

"Will they come after us?"

"You may be sure of that!" the duke said emphatically. "Once the guards return to the palace, Pons will have fresh guards sent out with our descriptions. We must reach the gate before they do."

Alfred said nothing more—he couldn't say anything more, he didn't have breath left to say it. The passage through Death's Gate, followed by the emotional upheaval of the cycles' shocking events and the constant drain on his magic to help him survive, rendered the Sartan weak to the point of collapse. Blindly, wearily, he stumbled along where he was led.

He had only a vague impression of arriving at another gate, of emerging thankfully from the maze of tunnels, of Jera and Jonathan answering questions put to them by a dead guard, of hearing that someone was taken ill and wondering vaguely who, of a large fur-covered body of a pauka appear out of the mist, of falling, face first, into a carriage and hearing, as in a dream, the voice of Jera saying, "... my father's house . . ." and of the eternal, horrible darkness of this dreadful world closing over him.

CHAPTER \* 23

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

'AND, so, PONS, YOU LOST HIM," SAID THE DYNAST, IDLY SIPPING AT A potent, fiery, red-hued liquor known as stalagma, the favored after-dinner drink of His Majesty.

"I am sorry. Sire, but I had no idea I would be responsible for transporting five prisoners. I thought there would be only one, the prince, and that I would take charge of him personally. I had to rely on the dead. There was no one else."

The Lord High Chancellor was not concerned. The dynast was fair-minded and would not hold his minister responsible for the inadequacies of the cadavers. The Sartan of Abarrach had learned long ago to understand the limits of the dead. The living tolerated the cadavers, responding to them with patience and fortitude, much as fond parents tolerate the inadequacies of their children.

'A glass, Pons?" asked the dynast, waving off the cadaver servant and offering to fill a small golden cup with his own hands. "Quite an excellent flavor."

'Thank you, Your Majesty," said Pons, who detested stalagma but who wouldn't have dreamed of offending the dynast by refusing to drink with him. "Will you see the prisoners now?"

"What is the hurry, Pons? It is nearly time for our rune-bone game. You know that."

The chancellor gulped down the bitter-tasting liquid as swiftly as possible, fought a moment to catch his breath, and mopped his sweating forehead with a handkerchief.

"The Lady Jera mentioned something, Sire, about the prophecy."

Kleitus paused in the act of lifting the glass to his lips. "Did she? When?"

'After the stranger had ... er ... done whatever he did to the captain of the guard."

"But you said he 'killed' it, Pons. The prophecy speaks of bringing life to the dead." The dynast drank off the liquor, tossing it to the back of his throat and swallowing it immediately, as did all experienced stalagma drinkers. "Not ending it."

"The duchess has a way of twisting words to suit her own convenience, Sire. Consider the rumors that she could spread concerning this stranger. Consider what the stranger himself might do to make the people believe in him."

"True, true." Kleitus frowned, at first worried. Then he shrugged. "We know where he is and with whom." The stalagma put him in a relaxed mood.

"We could send in troops . . ." suggested the chancellor.

"And have the earl's faction up in arms? Ifs possible they might join these rebels from Kairn Telest. No, Pons, we will continue to handle this matter subtly. It could give us the excuse we need to put that meddlesome earl and his duchess daughter out of the way for good. We trust you took the usual precautions, Pons?"

"Yes, Sire. The matter is already in hand."

"Then why worry over nothing? By the way, who takes over the ducal lands of Rift Ridge if young Jonathan should die untimely?"

"He has no children. The wife would inherit—"

The dynast made a fatigued gesture. Pons lowered his eyelids, indicative of understanding.

"In that case, his estate reverts to the crown, Your Majesty."

Kleitus nodded, motioned to a servant to pour him another glass. When the cadaver had done so and withdrawn, the dynast lifted his cup, prepared to enjoy the liquor. His gaze caught that of his chancellor and, with a sigh, he set the glass back down.

"What is it, Pons? That sour face of yours is ruining our enjoyment of this excellent vintage."

"I beg your pardon, Sire, but I wonder if you are taking this matter seriously enough." The chancellor drew nearer, speaking in an undertone, although they were quite alone, apart from the cadavers. "The other man I brought in with the prince is extraordinary in his own way! Perhaps more so than the one who escaped. I think you should see this prisoner immediately."

"You've been dropping vague hints about this man. Spit it out, Pons! What's so ... extraordinary . . . about him?"

The chancellor paused, considering how to produce the greatest impact. "Your Majesty, I've seen him before."

"I am aware of your extensive social connections, Pons." Stalagma tended to make Kleitus sarcastic.

"Not in Necropolis, Sire. Nor anywhere around here. I saw him this morning ... in the vision."

The dynast returned the glass, its contents left untasted, to the tray at his elbow.

"We will see him . . . and the prince."

Pons bowed. "Very good, Sire. Shall they be brought here or to the audience chamber?"

The dynast glanced around the room. Known as the gaming room, it was much smaller and more intimate than the grand audience hall and was well lighted by several ornate gas lamps. Numerous kairn-grass tables had been placed around the room. On top of each were four stacks of rectangular white bones adorned with red and blue runes. Tapestries lined the walls, portraying various famous battles that had been fought on Abarrach. The room was dry, cozy, and warm, heated by steam that swirled through wrought-iron, gold-trimmed pipes.

The entire palace was heated by steam, a modern addition. In ancient times, the palace—originally a fortress and one of the earliest structures built by the first-arriving Sartan—had not been dependent on mechanical means to provide comfortable living conditions. Traces of the old runes could be seen to this day in the ancient parts of the palace, sigla that had provided warmth, light, and fresh air to the people dwelling within. Most of these runes, their use forgotten through neglect, had been deliberately obliterated. The royal consort considered them an ugly eyesore.

"We will meet our guests here." Kleitus, another glass of sta-lagma in hand, took a seat at one of the gaming tables, and began idly setting up the rune-bones as if in preparation for a game.

Pons gestured to a servant, who gestured to a guard, who disappeared out a door and, after several moments, entered with a retinue of guards, marching the two prisoners into the royal presence. The prince entered with a proud, defiant air, anger smoldering like boiling lava beneath the cool surface of royal etiquette. One side of his face was bruised, he had a swollen lip, and his clothes were

torn, his hair disheveled.

'Allow me to present, Sire, Prince Edmund of Kairn Telest," introduced Pons.

The prince inclined his head slightly. He did not bow. The dynast paused in setting up his game board, stared at the young man, eyebrows raised.

"On your knees to His Most Royal Majesty!" the scandalized chancellor hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

"He is not my king," said Prince Edmund, standing tall, head back. 'As the ruler of Kairn Necros, I bid him greeting and do him honor.'" The prince inclined his head again, the gesture graceful and proud.

A smile played about the dynast's lips. He moved a bone into position.

'As I trust His Majesty does me honor," pursued Edmund, his face flushed, his brows contracting, "as prince of a land that has now admittedly fallen on evil times but was once beautiful, rich, and strong."

"Yes, yes," said the dynast, holding a rune-marked bone in his hand, rubbing it thoughtfully across his lips. 'All honor to the Prince of Kairn Telest. And now, Chancellor"—the eyes, hidden in the shadow of the black cowl trimmed in purple and in gold, turned toward Haplo—"what is the name of this stranger to our royal presence?"

The prince sucked in an angry breath, but kept his temper, perhaps mindful of his people, who were, according to reports, starving in a cave. The other man, the one with the rune-marked skin, stood quietly, unabashed, unimpressed, one might say almost uninterested in what was going on around him except for the eyes that saw everything without betraying that they'd seen anything.

"He calls himself Haplo, Sire," said Pons, bowing low. A dangerous man, the chancellor might have added aloud. A man who lost control once, but who won't be goaded into losing it again. A man who kept to the shadows, not furtively, but instinctively, as if he'd learned long ago that to draw attention to himself was to make himself a target.

The dynast leaned back in his chair. He gazed at Haplo through eyes that were slits only. Kleitus appeared bored, lethargic. Pons shivered. His Majesty was at his most dangerous when he was in this mood.

"You do not bow before us. We suppose you're going to tell us that we're not your king either," he remarked.

Haplo shrugged, smiled. "No offense."

His Majesty covered twitching lips with a delicate hand, cleared his throat. "None taken. . . from either of you. In time, perhaps, we will come to an understanding."

He sat silent, brooding. Prince Edmund began to fidget with impatience. His Majesty glanced swiftly at him and raised his languid hand, gesturing at the table.

"Do you game, Your Highness?"

Edmund was taken aback. "Yes . . . Sire. But it has been a long time since I played. I have had little leisure for frivolous activities," he added bitterly.

The dynast waved such considerations aside. "We had thought to give up our game tonight, but we see no reason to do so now. Perhaps we can come to an understanding over the game board. Will you join us, sir? Forgive me, but are you a prince ... or ... or any sort of royalty that we should acknowledge?"

"No," said Haplo, and volunteered nothing else.

"No, you won't join us, or no, you are not a prince, or no, in general?" the dynast inquired.

"I'd say that pretty well describes the situation, Sire." Haplo's gaze was fixed on the gaming pieces, a fact that did not go unnoticed by His Majesty.

The dynast permitted himself an indulgent laugh. "Come, sit with us. The game is complex in its subtleties, but it is not difficult to learn. We will teach you. Pons, you will make up a fourth, of course."

"With pleasure, Sire," said the chancellor.

An inept rune-bone player at best, Pons was rarely called on to game with his dynast, who had little patience with the unskilled. But the true game tonight would be played on a far different level, one with which the Lord High Chancellor was vastly familiar.

Prince Edmund hesitated. Pons knew what the young man was thinking. Might such an activity reduce his dignity and dilute the seriousness of his cause? Or would it be politically expedient to give in to this royal whim? The chancellor could have assured the young man it didn't matter, his doom was sealed no matter what he chose to do.

The Lord High Chancellor felt sorry for this prince for a brief moment. Edmund was a young man with heavy burdens, who took his responsibilities seriously, who was obviously sincere in his desire to help his people. A pity that he couldn't see he was just another game piece, to be moved where it suited His Majesty, or removed ... if it suited His Majesty.

The prince's well-bred courtesy won out. He walked over to the gaming table, sat down opposite the dynast, and began arranging the bones in the starting position, which required that they be lined up to resemble the walls of a fortress.

Haplo hesitated, as well, but his reluctance to move was perhaps nothing more than a reluctance to leave the shadow and venture into the strong light. He did so, at last, walking forward slowly to take his place at the table. He kept his hands beneath the table, lounged back in his chair. Pons seated himself opposite.

"You begin, sir," said the chancellor, acting on a cue from the dynast's upraised eyebrow, "by arranging the pieces thusly. Those marked with the blue runes are the base. Those with the red are stacked on top of the blue and those with both blue and red markings form the battlements."

The dynast had completed building his wall. The prince, frustrated and angry, was halfheartedly constructing his. Pons affected to be interested in putting his together, but his gaze crept to the man opposite. Haplo moved his right hand out from beneath the table, lifted a rune-bone, and slid it into place.

"Remarkable," said the dynast.

All movement at the gaming table ceased, all eyes were fixed on Haplo's hand.

There could be no doubt. The runes on the bones were far cruder in nature than the runes tattooed on the man's skin — a child's scrawl compared to the flowing script of a grown man — but they were the same.

The prince, after a moment's involuntary fascination, wrenched his glance away and continued to work on his wall. Kleitus reached out his hand to Haplo's, intending to seize it and study it closer.

"I wouldn't do that, Sire." Haplo said quietly, not moving his hand. He wasn't making an overt threat, but a quality in the voice caused the dynast to pause. "Perhaps your man there told you." Eyes flicked to Pons. "I don't like to be touched."

"He said that when you attacked the guard the marks on your skin glowed. By the way, may we apologize for that tragic incident? It is one that we deeply regret. We had no intention of harming your pet. The dead tend to ... overreact."

Pons, watching closely, saw Haplo's jaw muscle twitch, the lips tighten. Otherwise, the face remained impassive.

His Majesty was continuing, "You attacked a soldier, he said, without a weapon in your hands, and yet you seemed confident of your ability to fight one armed with a sword. But you didn't intend battling with bare hands, did you, sir? These marks"—the dynast did not touch, but pointed—"these sigla are magic. Magic was your intended weapon. I am certain you can understand that we are fascinated. Where did you come by these runes? How do they work?"

Haplo lifted another rune-bone, placed it beside the one he moved into position. Lifting another, he set it next to the first.

"We asked you a question," said the dynast.

"We heard you," replied Haplo, lips twisting in a smile.

The dynast flushed in anger at the mockery. Pons tensed. The prince glanced up from his building.

"Insolence!" Kleitus glowered. "You refuse to answer?"

"It's not a question of refusing, Sire. I've taken a vow, an oath. I could no more tell you how my magic works than"—Haplo's eyes flicked to the dynast, returned coolly to the game—"than you could tell me how your magic raises the dead."

The dynast sat back in his chair, turning a game piece over and over in his hand. Pons relaxed, emitting a long breath, unconscious, until now, that he'd been holding it in.

"Well, well," said Kleitus at last. "Chancellor, you are delaying the game. His Highness has almost completed his wall and even the novice, here, is ahead of you."

"I beg your pardon, Sire," said Pons humbly, knowing and understanding his role in this charade.

"This palace is old, isn't it?" said Haplo, studying the room.

Pons, affecting to be absorbed in building his wall, eyed the man from beneath lowered lids. The question had an idle, making-polite-conversation sound to it, but this wasn't the type of man who engaged in mindless chatter. What was he after? The chancellor, watching carefully, saw Haplo's gaze stray to several partially obliterated rune markings on the walls.

Kleitus took it on himself to respond. "The old part of the palace was built out of a natural formation, a cavern within a cavern, one might say. It stands on one of the highest points of elevation in Kairn Necros. The rooms on the upper levels once provided a quite magnificent view of the Fire Sea, or so we're led to believe by ancient report. That was, of course, before the sea withdrew." He paused to take a drink of liquor, glanced at his chancellor.

"The palace was originally a fortress," Pons obediently picked up the thread of the story, "and there is evidence that a vast number of people passed through here at one time, undoubtedly on their way to the more habitable upper regions."

The prince frowned. His hand jerked, he knocked several pieces off his partially completed wall.

'As you may have surmised," Pons continued, "this room is in one of the older parts of the palace. Although, of course, we've made considerable modern improvements. The royal family's living quarters are located back here; the air's purer, don't you agree? Official chambers and halls and ballrooms are to the front, near where you entered."

"Seems a confusing sort of place," Haplo pursued. "More like a bee's hive than a palace."

"Bee's hive?" asked the dynast, raising an eyebrow and stifling a yawn. "I'm not familiar with that term."

Haplo shrugged. "What I mean is, a fellow could get himself lost in here without too much trouble."

"One learns one's way around," said the dynast, amused. "However, if you would truly be interested in seeing a place in which it is easy to lose oneself, we could show you the catacombs."

"Or, as we know them, the dungeons," the chancellor inserted, with a snigger.

"Pay attention to your wall, Pons, or we shall be here all night."

"Yes, Sire."

Nothing more was said. The walls were completed. Pons noted that Haplo, who maintained that he had never played, constructed his wall with perfect accuracy, although many beginning players found the markings on the bones confusing. It was almost, the chancellor thought, as if the runes said something to him they said to no one else.

"Excuse me, my dear sir," said Pons fussily, leaning over to whisper to Haplo. "I believe you've made a mistake. That particular rune doesn't belong up on the battlements, where you've put it, but down below."

"Properly placed, it goes there," said Haplo in his quiet voice.

"He's right, Pons," said Kleitus.

"Is he really, Sire?" The chancellor was flustered, laughed at himself. "I—I must have it wrong, then. I've never been very good at this game. I confess that all the bones look alike. These markings mean nothing to me,"

"They mean nothing to any of us, Chancellor," said the dynast severely. 'At least they didn't, up until now." A glance at Haplo. "You have to memorize them, Pons. I've told you that before."

"Yes, Your Majesty. It's good of Your Majesty to have such patience with me."

"Your bid, Your Highness," said Kleitus to the prince.

Edmund stirred restlessly in his chair. "One red hexagon."

The dynast shook his head. "I'm afraid, Your Highness, that a red hexagon is an improper opening bid."

The prince sprang to his feet. "Your Majesty, I have been arrested, beaten, insulted. If I had been alone, without a responsibility for others, I would have rebelled against such treatment that is not due from one Sartan to another, let alone from one king to another! But I am a prince. I hold the lives of others in my keeping. And I cannot concentrate on a ... a game"—he waved a hand contemptuously at the board—"when my people are suffering from cold and starvation!"

"Your people attacked an innocent village—"

"We did not attack, Sire!" Edmund was rapidly losing control.

"We wanted to buy food, wine. We intended to pay for it, but the people attacked us before we had a chance to say a word! Strange, now that I think of it. It was as if they'd been led to believe we would attack them!"

The dynast cast a look at Haplo, to see if he had anything to add.

Haplo toyed with a rune-bone, appeared bored.

"A perfectly natural precaution," said the dynast, returning his attention to the prince. "Our scouts sight a large force of armed barbarians, moving toward our city, coming from the outland. What would have been your assumption?"

"Barbarians!" Edmund went white to the lips. "Barbarians! We are no more barbarians than ... than this fop of a chancellor is a barbarian! Our civilization is older than yours, one of the first established following the Sundering! Our beautiful city, open to the air, makes this one look like the stinking rat's warren that it is!"

"And yet I believe you've come to beg to be allowed to live inside this 'stinking rat's warren,'" said Kleitus, leaning back and looking languidly at the prince through slit eyelids.

The prince's livid face suffused with a red, feverish flush. "I have not come to beg! Work! We will work to earn our keep! All we ask is shelter from the killing rain and food to feed our children. Our dead and our living, too, if you want, will work in your fields, serve in your army. We will"—Edmund swallowed, as though forcing down the bitter stalagma—"we will acknowledge you as our liege lord ..."

"How good of you," murmured the dynast.

Edmund heard the sarcasm. His hands closed over the back of the chair, the fingers punching holes through the strong kairn grass in the desperate need to control his raging anger. "I wasn't going to say this. You have driven me to it."

Haplo stirred at this juncture. It seemed he might have interrupted, but he apparently thought better of it, relapsed into his former state of impassive observer.

"You owe us this! You destroyed my people's homes! You leached our water, you stole our heat and used it for your own. You made our beautiful lush land a barren and frozen desert! You killed our children, our elderly, our sick and infirm! I have maintained to my people that you brought this disaster on us through ignorance, that you knew nothing of our existence in Kairn Telest. We didn't come in retribution. We didn't come in revenge, although we could have. We came to ask our brethren to right the wrong they inadvertently committed. I will keep on telling them this, although I know, now, that it is a lie."

Edmund left his place behind his chair. His fingers bled, the sharp prongs of the splintered kairn grass had driven through the flesh. He didn't seem to notice. Moving around the table, he bent gracefully to one knee and spread his hands.

"Take my people in. Your Majesty, and I give you my word of honor that I will keep my knowledge of the truth from them. Take my people in and I will work with them, side by side. Take my people in, Sire, and I will bend my knees to you, as you require." Although in my heart, I despise you.

The last words were not spoken aloud. There was no need. They hissed in the air like the gas that lit the lamps.

"We were right, you see. Pens," said Kleitus. "A beggar."

The chancellor could not help but sigh. The prince, in his youth and beauty, graced by compassion for his people, had a majesty about him that lifted him in stature and in rank far above most kings, let alone beggars.

The dynast leaned forward, fingertips touching. "You'll find no succor in Necropolis, Edmund, prince of beggars."

The prince rose to his feet, suppressed anger leaving patches of chill white in the feverish crimson of his skin.

"Then there is nothing more to say. I will return to my people."

Haplo stood up. "Sorry to break up the game, but I'm with him," he said, jerking his thumb in the direction of the prince.

"Yes, you are," said the dynast in a soft and menacing tone that only Pons heard. "I suppose this means war, Your Highness?"

The prince didn't stop walking. He was halfway across the room, Haplo at his side. "I told you, Sire, my people do not want to fight. We will travel on, perhaps proceed farther down the shoreline. If we had ships—"

"Ships!" Kleitus sucked in a breath. "Now we come to it! The truth. That's what you've been after all along! Ships, to find Death's Gate! Fool! You will find nothing except death!"

The dynast gestured to one of the armed guards, who nodded in response. Lifting his spear, the cadaver aimed and threw.

Edmund sensed the threat, whirled around, raised his hand in an attempt to ward off the attack. Futile. He saw his death coming. The spear struck him full in the chest with such force that the point shattered the breastbone and emerged from the man's back, pinned him to the floor. The prince died the instant the blow was struck, died without a scream. The sharp iron tore apart the heart.

By the expression of sadness on the face, his last thoughts had been, perhaps, not of regret for his own young life, cut tragically short, but of how he had failed his people.

Kleitus gestured again, motioned toward Haplo. Another cadaver raised its spear.

"Stop him," the Patryn said, in a quick, tight voice, "or you'll never learn anything about Death's Gate!"

"Death's Gate!" Kleitus repeated softly, staring at Haplo. "Halt!"

The cadaver, arrested in the act of throwing the spear, let it slip from the dead hand. It fell, clattering, to the floor, the only sound to break the tense silence.

"What," demanded the dynast at last, "do you know of Death's Gate?"

"That you'll never get through it if you kill me," returned Haplo.

## CHAPTER \* 24

### NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

IT HAD BEEN A GAMBLE, BRINGING UP THE SUBJECT OF DEATH'S GATE.

The dynast might have blinked once, shrugged his shoulders, and ordered the cadaver to pick up the dropped spear and try again.

Haplo wasn't risking his life. His magic would protect him from the spear's deadly point, unlike the poor devil of a prince, who lay sprawled dead on the floor at the Patryn's feet. It was the revelation of his potent magical power that Haplo sought to avoid, one reason he'd faked unconsciousness when that cadaver had attacked him on the road.

Unfortunately, he hadn't counted on Alfred rushing to his rescue. Damn the man! The one time fainting would have been beneficial, the blasted Sartan weaves some inexplicably complex and powerful magical spell that stands everyone's hair on end. It was always better, Haplo had learned, to encourage your enemy to underestimate you rather than overestimate. You were far more likely to catch him napping.

But at least this gamble had apparently paid off. Kleitus hadn't blinked and shrugged. He knew about Death's Gate, would almost have had to know about it. Obviously intelligent, a powerful necromancer, such a man would certainly have looked for and found any ancient records those early Sartan had left.

His "opening bid" strategy flashed through Haplo's mind while the prince's splattered blood was still warm on the Patryn's rune-covered skin.

The dynast had recovered his composure, was affecting indifference. "Your corpse will provide me with whatever information I might require, including information about this so-called Death's Gate."

"It might," Haplo countered. "Or it might not. My magic is kin to yours, that's true, but different. Far different. Necromancy has never been practiced among my people and there could be a reason for it. Once the brain that controls these sigla"—he held up his arm—"is dead, the magic dies. Unlike you, my physical being is inextricably bound with the magic. Separate one from the other and you may have a cadaver who can't even remember its name, much less anything else."

"What makes you think we care what you remember?"

"Ships, to find Death's Gate. Those were the words you used, almost the last words this poor fool heard." Haplo gestured at Edmund's torn body. "Your world's dying. But you know it isn't the end. You know about the other worlds. And you're right. They exist. I've been there. And I can take you back with me."

The cadaver had picked up the spear and was holding it ready, aimed for Haplo's heart. The dynast made an abrupt gesture, and the cadaver lowered the weapon, brought it down butt end against the cavern floor, and resumed standing at attention.

"Don't harm him. Take him to the dungeon," ordered Kleitus. "Pons, take both of them to the dungeons. We must think this matter through."

"The prince's body, Sire. Shall we send it to oblivion?"

"Where are your brains, Pons?" the dynast demanded irritably. "Of course not! His people will declare war against us. The corpse will tell us everything we need to know to plan our defense. The Kairn Telest must be destroyed utterly, of course. Then, you may send the beggar to oblivion along with the rest of his clan. Keep his death hushed up the requisite number of waiting days until we can safely reanimate him. We don't want that rabble to strike before we're ready."

'And how long would you suggest, Sire?'

Kleitus gave the body a professional evaluation. "A man of his youth and vigor with a strong hold on life, a passage of three days will be necessary to make certain the phantasm is tractable. We will be performing the raising ritual ourselves, of course. It's liable to be a bit tricky. One of the dungeon necromancers can perform the preservation rites."

The dynast left the room, walking rapidly, the skirts of his robes flapping about his ankles in his haste.

Probably, thought Haplo with an inward grin, going straight to the library or wherever it is the ancient records are kept.

Cadavers hastened over at Pons's command. Two guards removed the spear from the body of the prince, lifted it between them and bore it away. Dead servants brought water and soap to cleanse the blood from floor and walls. Haplo stood patiently off to one side, observing the proceedings. The chancellor, he noticed, kept avoiding looking at him. Pons fussed about the room, exclaimed loudly over bloodstains on one of the wall tapestries, made a major production of dispatching servants in search of powdered kairn grass to sprinkle on it.

"Well, I suppose that's all that can be done." Pons heaved a sigh. "I don't know what I'm going to say to Her Majesty when she sees this!"

"You might suggest to her husband that there are less violent ways of killing a man," suggested Haplo.

The chancellor gave an unaffected start, glanced about fearfully at the Patryn. "Oh, it's you!" He sounded almost relieved. "I didn't realize—forgive me. We have so few living prisoners. I'd quite forgotten you weren't a cadaver. Here, I'll take you down myself. Guards!"

Pons gestured. Two cadavers hurried to his side and all of them, chancellor and Haplo in front, guards behind, left the game room.

"You appear to be a man of action," said the chancellor, glancing at Haplo. "You didn't hesitate to attack that armed soldier who killed your dog. The death of the prince offended you?"

Offended? One Sartan killing another in cold blood? Amused, maybe, not offended. Haplo told himself that was how he should feel. But he looked with distaste at the blood spattered on his clothing, rubbed it off with the back of his hand.

"The prince was only doing what he thought was right. He didn't deserve to be murdered."

"It was not murder," retorted Pons crisply. "Prince Edmund's life belonged to the dynast, as do the lives of all His Majesty's subjects. The dynast decided that the young man would prove more valuable to him dead than alive."

"He might have allowed the young man to give his opinion on the subject," Haplo observed dryly.

The Patryn was attempting to pay close attention to his whereabouts, but he'd become immediately lost in the maze of identical, interconnecting tunnels. He recognized they were descending only by the slope of the smooth cavern floor. Soon, the gaslights were left behind. Crude torches burned in sconces on the damp walls. Haplo could see, by the flaring light, faint traces of runes running along the walls at floor level. Ahead of him, he heard the echoing sound of footsteps, heavy and shuffling, as if bearing a burden. The prince's body, going to its not-so-final resting place.

The chancellor was frowning. "I find it very difficult to understand you, sir. Your words come to me out of a cloud of darkness, shot with lightning. I see violence in you, violence that makes me shudder, makes my blood run cold. I see vaunting ambition, the desire for power achieved by any means. You are no stranger to death. Yet I sense that you are deeply disturbed by what was, in reality, the execution of a rebel and a traitor."

"We don't kill our own," Haplo said softly.

"I beg your pardon?" Pons leaned nearer. "What was that?"

"I said, 'We don't kill our own,' " Haplo repeated shortly, succinctly. He snapped his mouth shut, troubled, angry at being troubled. And he didn't much like the way everyone around here seemed to be able to stare into the heart and soul of everyone else.

I'm going to welcome prison, he thought. Welcome the soothing, cooling darkness, welcome the silence. He needed the darkness, needed the quiet. He needed time to reflect and think, decide on a course of action. He needed time to sort out and quash these disturbing and confusing thoughts. Which reminded him. He needed a question answered.

"What's this I heard about a prophecy?"

"Prophecy?" Pons's eyes slid sideways to Haplo, slid rapidly away again. "When did you hear about a prophecy?"

"Right after your guard tried to kill me."

"Ah, but you'd only just regained consciousness. You had suffered a severe injury."

"My hearing wasn't injured. The duchess said something about a prophecy. I wondered what she meant."

"Prophecy." The chancellor tapped a finger thoughtfully on his chin. "Let me see if I can remember. I must admit, now I come to think of it, that I was rather baffled by her mentioning the subject. I can't imagine what she was thinking! There have been so many prophecies given to our people over the past centuries, you see. We use them to amuse the children."

Haplo'd seen the look on the chancellor's face when Jera mentioned the prophecy. Pons hadn't been amused.

Before the Patryn could pursue the subject, the chancellor began discussing, with seeming innocence, the runes on the game pieces, obviously trying to wheedle information. Now it was Haplo's turn to dodge Pons's questions. Eventually the chancellor dropped the subject, the two proceeded through the narrow corridors in silence.

The atmosphere of the catacombs was dank and heavy and chill. The smell of decay hung in the air so thickly that Haplo could have sworn he tasted it, like oil on the back of the throat. The only sounds he heard were the footsteps of the dead, leading them on.

"What's this?" came a strange voice suddenly.

The chancellor gasped, involuntarily reached out and grasped hold of Haplo's arm, the living clinging to the living. Haplo himself was disconcerted to feel his heart lurch in his chest and did not rebuke Pons for touching him, although he irritably shook the grasping hand free almost immediately.

A ghostly shape emerged from the shadows into the torchlight.

"Flame and ash, you startled me, preserver!" Pons scolded, mopping his forehead with the sleeve of his black robes, trimmed in green—the mark of his ranking in court. "Don't ever do that again!"

"I beg your pardon, My Lord, but we're not accustomed to seeing the living down here."

The figure bowed. Haplo saw—to his relief, although he didn't like to admit it—that the man was alive.

"You better get used to it," Pons said in acerbic tones, obviously attempting to compensate for his former weakness. "Here's a live prisoner for you and he's to be well treated, by orders of His Majesty."

"Live prisoners," said the preserver, with a cold glance at Haplo, "are a nuisance."

"I know, I know, but it can't be helped. This one—" Pons drew the preserver to one side, whispered earnestly into the man's ear.

The gaze of both men shifted to tattooed runes on the skin of Haplo's hands and arms. Their stares made his flesh crawl, but he forced himself to stand still beneath the scrutiny. He'd be damned if he'd give them the satisfaction of seeing that they made him uncomfortable.

The preserver didn't appear particularly mollified. "Freak or not, when all's said and done, he has to be fed and watered and watched, doesn't he? And I'm only one man down here during the sleep-half shift, with no help, although I've asked for it often enough."

"His Majesty is aware. . . deeply regrets. . . can't be done at this time . . ." Pons was murmuring.

The preserver snorted, waved a hand at Haplo, gave an order to one of the dead. "Put the live one in the cell next to the dead one who came in tonight. I can work on one and keep my eye on the other."

"I'm certain His Majesty will be wanting to speak to you on the morrow," said the chancellor, by way of bidding Haplo farewell.

I'm certain he will, Haplo answered, but not aloud. He pulled back from the cadaver's touch. "Make that thing keep its hands off me!"

"What did I tell you?" the preserver demanded of Pons. "Come with me, then."

Haplo and his escort marched past cells occupied by corpses, some of them lying on cold, stone beds, others up and moving aimlessly about. In the shadows, the phantasms could be seen hovering near their corpses, the faint pale glow they gave off softly illuminating the cell's darkness. Iron bars with locked doors prevented escape from the small, cavelike cells.

"You bolt the doors against the dead?" Haplo asked, almost laughing.

The preserver came to halt, fumbled with a key in the door of an empty cell. Glancing at the cell across from him, Haplo saw the prince's corpse, a gaping hole in its chest, being laid out on a stone bier by two cadavers.

"Of course, we keep them locked up! You don't suppose I want them wandering about underfoot? I have enough to do down here as it is. Hurry up. I haven't got all night. That newest arrival isn't getting any fresher. I suppose you'll be wanting something to eat and drink?" The preserver slammed shut the door, glared through the bars at his prisoner.

"Just water." Haplo didn't have much appetite.

The preserver brought a cup, shoved it through the bars, ladled water from a bucket into it. Haplo took a drink, spit it out. The water tasted decayed, like everything smelled. Using the remainder, he washed the prince's blood from his hands and arms and legs.

The preserver glowered, as if he considered this a waste of good water, but said nothing. He was obviously in haste to begin his work on the prince. Haplo lay down on the hard stone, cushioned by a few handfuls of scattered kairn grass.

A Sartan chant rose high-pitched and grating, echoing thinly through the cells. At the sound, it seemed another chant arose, almost unheard, a ghostly wailing groan of unutterable sorrow. The phantasms, Haplo told himself. But the sounds reminded him of the dog, of that last pain-filled yelp. He saw the eyes looking at him, confident that its master would be there to help, as Haplo had always been there. Faithful, believing in him, to the end.

Haplo grit his teeth, and blotted the sight from his mind. Digging his hand into his pocket, he drew out one of the rune-bones he'd managed to palm during the game. He couldn't see it, in the darkness, but he turned it over in his hand, fingers tracing the sigla carved into the surface.

CHAPTER \* 25

OLD PROVINCES, ABARRACH

'AND THEN, FATHER," SAID JERA, "THE PHANTASM BEGAN TO TAKE shape and form—"

"Become solid, Daughter?"

"No." Jera hesitated, thoughtful, frowning, trying to put her memories into words. "It remained ethereal, translucent. If I tried to touch it, my hand would feel nothing. But yet I could see . . . features, details. The insignia he wore on his breastplate, the shape of his nose, battle scars on his arms. Father, I could see the man's eyes! Yes, his eyes! He looked at me, looked at all of us. And it was as if he'd won a great victory. Then, he ... disappeared."

Jera spread her hands. So provocative were her words and so eloquent her gesture that Alfred could almost see again the diaphanous figure dwindle and fade like morning mist beneath an ever-shining sun.

"You should have seen," added Jonathan with his warm, boyish laugh, "the expression on old Pons's face!"

"Mmmm, yes," muttered the earl.

Jera flushed delicately. "Husband dear, this matter is really quite serious."

"I know, darling, I know." Jonathan struggled to regain his self-composure. "But you have to admit, it was funny . . ."

A smile crept over Jera's lips. "More wine, Papa," she said, and hastily moved to fill her father's glass.

When she thought the earl wasn't watching, Jera shook her head in fond, mock reproof at her husband, who grinned back at her and winked.

The earl saw and wasn't amused. Alfred had the uncomfortable impression there wasn't much that went on around him that the earl didn't see. A dried-up, wizened husk of a man, the earl kept his beady black-eyed gaze constantly darting about the room, then suddenly sent the darts into Alfred.

"I'd like to see you do that spell of yours." The earl spoke as if Alfred had performed a rather ingenious card trick. The earl leaned forward in his chair, balancing himself on sharp-pointed elbows. "Do it again. I'll call one of the cadavers. Which one. Daughter, can we afford to spare—"

"I—I couldn't!" Alfred stammered, becoming more and more flustered as he sought to grope his way through the morass threatening to engulf him. "It was impulse. Act of the . . . the moment, you see. I looked up and . . . there was that sword c-coming down. The runes . . . just popped into my head . . . er... so to speak."

'And just popped back out again, eh?" The earl jabbed a sharp-boned finger into Alfred's ribs. Every part of the old man's body appeared to have been honed on a grindstone.

"So to speak," returned Alfred faintly.

The earl chuckled and poked him again. Alfred could almost envision truth being sucked out of him like blood whenever that knifelike finger or those knifelike eyes touched him. But what was the truth? Did he truly not know what he'd done? Or was one part of him hiding it from the other, as he'd grown so adept at doing over these many years of being forced to conceal his true identity?

Alfred passed a shaking hand through his thinning hair.

"Father, leave him be." Jera came to stand at Alfred's side, placed her hands on his shoulders.

"More wine, Sir?"

"No, thank you, Your Grace." Alfred's glass stood untouched, untasted. "If you would excuse me, I'm very tired. I'd like to lay down . . ."

"Of course, Sir," said Jonathan. "We've been thoughtless, keeping you up well into the dynast's sleep time after what must have been a terrible cycle for you—"

More than you know, Alfred said to himself sadly, with a shudder. Far more than you know! He rose unsteadily to his feet.

"I'll show you to your room," Jera offered.

The faint sound of a bell chimed softly through the gas-lighted darkness. All four in the room hushed, three of them exchanged conscious glances.

"That will be news from the palace," said the earl, starting to rise on creaking limbs.

"I'll go," Jera said. "We daren't trust the dead." She left them, disappearing into the shadows.

"You'll want to hear this, I'm sure, Sir," said the earl, black eyes glittering. He waved a hand, inviting—or ordering—Alfred to be seated.

Alfred had no choice but to sink back down into the chair, although he was miserably conscious of the fact that he didn't want to hear whatever news came swiftly and secretly in what, for this world, were the waning hours of the cycle.

The men waited in silence, Jonathan's face was pale and troubled, the old earl looked crafty and enthused. Alfred stared bleakly, hopelessly at a blank wall.

The earl lived in Old Province, on what had once been a large and affluent estate. Ages ago, the land had been alive, worked by immense numbers of cadavers. The house had overlooked waving stands of kairn grass and tall, blue-flowered lanti trees. Now the house itself had become a cadaver. The lands round it were barren, lifeless seas of ash-mud created by the endless rain.

The earl's dwelling was not a cavern-formed structure, as were many in Necropolis, but had been built of blocks of stone, reminding Alfred strongly of the castles the Sartan had created during the height of their power in the High Realms of Arianus.

The castle was large, but most of the back rooms had been shut off and abandoned, their upkeep difficult to maintain because the only person who dwelt here was the earl and the cadavers of old servants. But the front part of the house was exceptionally well preserved, compared to other mournful and dilapidated dwellings they had passed during the carriage ride through the Old Provinces.

"Its the ancient runes, you see," the earl told Alfred, with a sharp glance. "Most people took them off. Couldn't read them and thought they made the place look old-fashioned. But I left them on, took care of them. And they've taken care of me. Kept my house standing when many another's sunk into dust."

Alfred could read the runes, could almost feel the strength of the magic upholding the walls over the centuries. But he said nothing, fearful of saying too much.

The lived-in portion of the castle consisted of downstairs utility rooms: a kitchen, servants' quarters, pantry, front and back entry-ways, and a laboratory where the earl conducted his experiments in attempting to bring life back to the soil of the Old Provinces. The two levels above were divided into comfortable family living quarters: bedchambers, guest rooms, drawing room, dining area.

A dynast clock [1] headed for its bedchamber, indicating the current time. Alfred thought longingly of bed, sleep, blessed oblivion, if only for a few hours before returning to this waking nightmare.

He must have actually dozed off, because when a door opened, he experienced the unpleasant tingling sensation of being awakened from a nap he had never meant to take. Blinking, he focused

bleary eyes on Jera and a man wrapped in a black cloak, emerging from a doorway at the far end of the room.

"I thought you should hear this news from Tomas himself, in case you had any questions," said Jera.

Alfred knew, then, that the news was bad and he let his head sink into his hand. How much more could he take?

"The prince and the stranger with the rune-covered skin are both dead," said Tomas in a low voice. He stepped into the light, pulled the cowl from off his head. He was a young man, near Jonathan's age. His robes were dirty, fouled with mud as if he had ridden hard and fast. "The dynast executed both of them this very night in the palace gaming room."

"Were you present? Did you see it happen?" the earl demanded, sharp-hewn face jutting forward, seeming to slice the air in its eagerness.

"No, but I talked to a dead guard whose duty it was to take the bodies to the catacombs. It told me that the preserver was being set to work to maintain both men."

"The dead told you!" The old man sneered. "You can't trust the dead."

"I am well aware of that, Milord. I pretended that I didn't know the dynast had canceled his rune-bone game and blundered into the gaming room. The cadavers were cleaning up a great pool of blood— fresh blood. A blood-covered spear, its tip notched, lay nearby. There can be little doubt. The men are dead."

Jera shook her head, sighed. "Poor prince. Poor young man, so handsome, honorable. But one's ill fortune can be another's good luck, as they say."

"Yes," said the old man fiercely, eagerly. "Our luck!"

"All we need do is rescue the cadavers. The prince and your friend's." Jera turned briskly to Alfred. "It will be dangerous, of course, but—my dear sir," she said in sudden consternation, "are you all right? Jonathan, bring him a glass of stalagma."

Alfred sat staring at her, unable to move, unable to think in any rational manner. Words burst forth from him. He rose, clumsy and stumbling, to his feet. "Haplo, the prince—dead. Murdered. My own people. Killing wantonly. And you—you callous . . . Treating death as if it were nothing more than a mild inconvenience, a nuisance, like a cold in the head!"

"Here, drink this." Jonathan held out a glass of a foul-smelling liquor. "You should have eaten more at dinner—"

"Dinner!" Alfred cried hoarsely. He knocked the glass away, backed up until he bumped into a wall and could go no farther. "The lives of two people have been torn from them and you can talk only of eating more dinner! Of... of recovering their . . . their bodies!"

"Sir, I assure you. The corpses will be well treated." This from Tomas, the stranger. "I know the late-cycle preserver, personally. He is highly skilled in this art. You will note little change in your friend—"

"Little change!" Alfred ran his trembling hand over his bald head. "It is death that gives life its meaning. Death, the great equalizer. Man, woman, peasant, king, rich, poor: all of us fellow travelers to our journey's end. Life is sacred, precious, a thing to value, to cherish, not to be taken lightly or wantonly. You have lost all respect for death and thereby all respect for life. Stealing a man's life is no more a crime to you than . . . than stealing his money!"

"Crime!" countered Jera. "You talk of crime? You were the one who committed the crime! You destroyed the body, sent the phantasm into oblivion where it will chafe forever, bereft of any form or shape."

"It had form, it had shape!" Alfred cried. "You saw it! The man was finally free!" He paused, confounded by what he'd said.

"Free?" Jera stared at him in bewilderment. "Free to do what? Free to go where?"

Alfred flushed hotly, shivered with chills. The Sartan, demigods. Capable of forging worlds from one that was doomed. Capable of creation. But creation had been brought about by destruction. Our magic led the way to necromancy. This next step was inevitable. From controlling life, to controlling death.

Yet why is that so terrible? Why does every fiber of my being revolt against this practice?

He saw, once again, the mausoleum back on Arianus, the bodies of his friends lying in their tombs. He'd felt a sadness when he had visited them the last time before he'd left Arianus. His sorrow was not so much for them, he realized, as for himself. Left alone.

He recalled, as well, the deaths of his parents in the Labyrinth. . . .

No, Alfred remembered confusedly. That had been Haplo's parents. But he'd felt the tearing grief, the raging anger, the terrible fear. . . . Again, for himself. For Haplo, that is. Left alone. The mangled bodies who had fought and struggled had found peace at last. Death had taught Haplo to hate, hate the enemy who had locked his parents inside the prison that had killed them. But, although Haplo might not know it himself, death had taught him other lessons, as well.

And now Haplo was dead. And I'd almost begun to think there was a chance that he ...

A whine broke in on Alfred's thoughts. The swipe of a tongue, cold and wet on his skin, made him jump.

A black, nondescript dog gazed up at him worriedly, cocked its head to one side. It raised a paw, placed it on Alfred's knee. Liquid brown eyes offered consolation for trouble felt, if not understood.

Alfred stared at the dog, then, recovering from his initial shock, he threw his arms around the animal's neck. He could almost have wept.

The dog had been prepared to offer sympathy, but such rough familiarity was apparently not to be tolerated. It wriggled out of Alfred's grasp, regarded the man in puzzlement.

Why all the fuss? it seemed to say. I'm only obeying orders.

Watch him. Haplo's final command.

"G-good boy," Alfred said, reaching out gingerly to pat the furry black head.

The dog submitted to the caress, indicating, with a dignified air, that head patting was acceptable and the relationship might advance to ear scratching, but a line had to be drawn somewhere and it hoped that Alfred understood.

Alfred did understand.

"Haplo's not dead! He's alive!" he cried.

Looking around, he saw everyone in the room staring at him.

"How did you do that?" Jera's face was livid, her lips white. "The beast's corpse was destroyed! We saw it!"

"Tell me, Daughter! What are you talking about?" her father demanded irascibly.

"That... that dog, Father! It was the one the guard threw into the mud pit!"

'Are you sure? Maybe it resembles—"

"Of course I'm sure, Father! Look at Alfred. He knows the dog! And the dog knows him!"

"Another trick. How did you manage this one?" the earl asked. "What marvelous magic is this? If you can restore cadavers that have been destroyed—"

"I told you, Father!" Jera gasped, hardly able to speak for awe. "The prophecy!"

Silence. Jonathan gazed at Alfred with the undisguised and fascinated wonder of a child. The earl, his daughter, and the stranger regarded the Sartan with shrewd, thoughtful eyes, perhaps plotting how best they could make use of him.

"No trick! Not me! I didn't do anything," Alfred protested. "It wasn't my magic that brought the dog back. It's Haplo's—"

"Your friend? But, I assure you, sir, he's dead," said Jonathan, with a glance at his wife that said plainly, Poor man's gone mad."

"No, no, he's not dead. Your friend, here, must be mistaken. You didn't actually see the body, did you?" Alfred asked.

"I didn't. But the blood, the spear—"

"I tell you," Alfred insisted, "that the dog would not be here if Haplo were dead. I can't explain how I know, because I am not even certain my theory about the animal is the correct one. But I do know this. It would take more than a spear to kill my... er... friend. His magic is powerful, very powerful."

"Well, well. There's no use arguing over it. Either he's alive or he isn't. All the more reason for us to get him, or what's left of him, out of the dynast's clutches," said the earl. He turned to Tomas. "And, now, sir, when will the resurrection on the prince be performed?"

"Three cycles hence, according to my source, Milord."

"That gives us time," Jera said, twining her fingers together, her expression thoughtful. "Time to plan. And time to get a message to his people. When Prince Edmund doesn't return, they will guess what has happened. They must be warned not to do anything until we're ready."

"Ready? Ready for what?" asked Alfred, perplexed.

"War," said Jera.

War. Sartan fighting Sartan. In all the centuries of Sartan history, there had never been such a tragedy. We sundered a world to save it from conquest by our enemy and we succeeded. We won a great victory.

And lost.

CHAPTER \* 26

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

ONE CYCLE FOLLOWING THE PRINCE'S DEATH, THE DYNAST CANCELED his audience hour, a thing he had never before been known to do. The Lord High Chancellor gave it out publicly that His Majesty was fatigued with pressures of state. Privately, Pons allowed it to be known to a privileged few, "in strictest confidence," that His Majesty had received disturbing reports concerning an enemy army camped across the Fire Sea,

As Kleitus had foreseen, the alarming news drizzled down among Necropolis's inhabitants like the incessant laze, creating an atmosphere of tension and panic quite conducive to his plans. He spent the cycle secreted in the palace library, quite alone, except for the dead who guarded him and they didn't matter anyway.

Elihn, God in One, looked on Chaos with displeasure. He stretched forth his hand and this motion created the Wave Prime. [1] Order was established, taking the form of a world blessed with intelligent life. Elihn was pleased with his creation and granted all good things needed to sustain life thereon. Once he set the Wave in motion, Elihn left the world, knowing that the Wave would maintain the world and a Caretaker was no longer necessary. The three races created by the Wave, elves, humans, and dwarves, lived in harmony.

"Mensch," Kleitus declared in disdain and scanned rapidly over the next few paragraphs of text, which dealt with the creation of the first races, now known as the lesser races. The particular item of information he sought wouldn't be found in this section, although he remembered it as being near

the beginning of the dissertation. It had been a long time since he'd read this particular manuscript, and at that time he'd paid scant attention to it. He'd been searching for a way out of this world, not a history of another world long dead and gone.

But, during the small hours of a sleepless sleep-half, a phrase had come to His Majesty's mind, a phrase he recalled reading from the pages of a text. The phrase brought him bolt upright in his bed. Its discovery was of such importance that it had prompted him to cancel the cyclical audience. A rummage through his memory brought the book to recollection. He had only to track it down and corner the words.

In its effort to maintain balance and prevent degeneration back into Chaos, the Wave Prime constantly corrects itself. Thus the Wave rises and thus it dips. Thus there is light and thus darkness. Thus good and thus evil. Thus peace, thus war.

At the world's beginning, during what were known falsely as the Dark Ages, people believed in magical laws and in spiritual laws, balanced by physical laws. But as time passed, a new religion swept the land. It was known as "science." Propagating physical laws, science ridiculed the spiritual and the magical laws, claiming that they were "illusions."

The human race, because of their short-lived span of time, became particularly enamored of this new religion, which held out the false promise of immortality. They referred to this period of time as the Renaissance. The elven race maintained their belief in magic and were now consequently persecuted and driven from the world. The dwarven race, quite skilled with things mechanical, offered to work with the humans. But the humans wanted slaves, not partners, and so the dwarves left the world on their own, taking refuge beneath the ground. Eventually, humans forgot these other races, ceased to believe in magic. The Wave lost its shape, became erratic, one end bulged with strength and power, the other end was flat and weak.

But the Wave would ever correct itself and it did, at horrific cost. At the end of the twentieth century, the humans unleashed a terrible war upon themselves. Their weapons were marvels of scientific design and technology and brought death and destruction to untold millions. In that day, science destroyed itself.

The dynast frowned in displeasure. Certain parts of this work appeared to him to be wild surmise and speculation. He had never known any mensch—all those in Kairn Necros had died before he'd been born—but he found it extremely difficult to believe that any 'J' race would bring deliberate destruction on itself.

"I did find corroborating texts to back this up." He often spoke aloud to himself when in the library, to relieve the incessant, nerve-racking silence. "But the writers came out of the same early period of our history and probably shared the same faulty information. Thus they all might be considered suspect. I shall keep that in mind."

The survivors were plunged into what was known as the Age of Dust, during which they were forced to struggle to simply remain alive. It was during this struggle that there arose a mutant strain of humans who could, now that the incessant din of science was shattered, hear the flow of the Wave around them and feel it within them. They recognized and utilized the Wave's potential for magical power. They developed the runes, to direct and channel the magic. Wizards, male and female, banded together in order to bring hope to lives lost in darkness. They called themselves Sartan, meaning, in the rune language, "Those Who Bring Back Light."

"Yes, yes." The dynast sighed. He'd formerly had little use for history, for a past dead and gone, a corpse decayed beyond the point of resurrection.

Or, perhaps not.

The task proved enormous. We Sartan were few in number. In order to facilitate the rebirth of the world, we went forth and taught the most rudimentary use of magic to the lesser peoples, reserving the true nature and power of the Wave for ourselves, that we might maintain control and prevent the catastrophe that had occurred from reoccurring.

Fondly, we believed that we were the Wave. Too late, we realized that we ourselves were only a part of the Wave, that we had become a bulge in the Wave and that the Wave would take corrective action. Too late, we discovered that some of us had forsaken the altruistic goals of our work. These wizards sought power through the magic, they sought rulership of the world. Patryns, they called themselves, "Those Who Return to Darkness."

"Ah!" Kleirus took a breath and settled himself to read more carefully and concisely.

The Patryns named themselves thus in mockery of us, their brethren, and because, in the beginning, they were forced to work in dark and secret places in order to remain hidden from us. They are a close-knit people, fiercely loyal to each other and to their one abiding goal, which is the absolute and complete domination of the world.

"Absolute and complete domination," the dynast repeated, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

It proved impossible to penetrate such a closed society and learn their secrets. We Sartan tried, but those we sent among the Patryns disappeared; it can only be assumed that they were discovered and destroyed. Thus we know little about the Patryns or their magic.

Kleirus scowled in disappointment, but continued reading.

It is theorized that the Patryns' use of rune-magic is grounded in the physical portion of the Wave, whereas our magic tends to be based in the spiritual. We sing the runes and dance them and draw them in the air, resorting to physically transcribing them when necessity dictates.

The Patryns, on the other hand, rely heavily on the physical representation of the runes themselves, even going so far as to paint them on their own bodies in order to enhance their magic. I trace—

The dynast stopped, returned, and read the words over again. 'Paint them on their own bodies in order to enhance their magic.' He continued on, reading aloud. 'I trace, as a curiosity, some of the rune structures that they have been known to use. Note the similarity to our runes, but note also that it is the barbaric manner in which the sigla are constructed that radically alters the magic, creating—as it were—an entirely new language of crude but forceful magical power.'

Kleirus lifted several of the rune-bones from his game and placed them on the page, next to the drawings of that ancient Sartan author. The matches were almost perfect. "It's so blasted obvious. Why didn't I ever notice before?"

Shaking his head, vexed at himself, he resumed reading.

The Wave, for the moment, appears stable. But there are those among us who fear that the Patryns are growing stronger and that the Wave is beginning to bulge again. There are some who argue that we must go to war, stop the Patryns now. There are some, myself included, who caution that we must do nothing to upset the balance or the Wave will bulge in the other direction.

The treatise continued on, but the dynast dosed the text. It contained nothing more about the Patryns, wandered into speculation about what might happen if the Wave bulged. The dynast already knew the answer. It had, and then had come the Sundering, and then life in this tomb of a world. So much he knew of the history of the Sartan.

But he had forgotten the Patryns, the ancient enemy, bringers of darkness, possessors of a "crude but forceful" magical power.

'Absolute and complete domination . . . ' he repeated softly to himself. "What fools we've been. What complete and utter fools. But it isn't too late. They think they're clever. They think they can catch us unawares. But it won't work."

After several more moments' reflection, he beckoned to one of the cadavers. "Send for the Lord High Chancellor."

The dead servant left, returning almost instantaneously with Pons, whose value lay in the fact that he was always where he could be easily found when he was wanted and was conveniently absent when he wasn't.

"Your Majesty," said Pons, bowing low.

"Has Tomas returned?"

"Just this moment, I believe."

"Bring him to us."

"Here, Your Majesty?"

Kleitus paused, glanced around, nodded. "Yes, here."

The matter being an important one, Pons went on the errand himself. One of the cadavers might have been dispatched to fetch the young man, but there was always the possibility, with the dead servants, that the cadaver might bring back a basket of rez flowers, having completely forgotten its original instructions.

Pons returned to one of the public rooms, where large numbers of couriers and suitors were wont to be found. The dynast's appearance in the room would have struck them like a bolt of lightning from the colossus, shocking them into a frenzy of fawning and bowing and scraping. As it was, the appearance of the Lord High Chancellor sent a mild jolt through the throng. A few of the lower-ranking members of the nobility bowed humbly, the upper echelon ceased their rune-bone playing and conversations and turned their heads. Those who knew Pons well gave him greeting, much to the jealous envy of those who did not.

"What's up, Pons?" asked one languidly.

The Lord High Chancellor smiled. "His Majesty is in need—"

Numerous couriers rose instantly to their feet.

"—of a living messenger," Pons finished. He gazed about the room with apparent bored indifference.

"Errand boy, huh?" A baron yawned.

The upper echelon, knowing that this was a menial task, one that probably wouldn't even involve actually seeing the dynast, returned to their games and gossip.

"You, there." Pons gestured to a young man standing near the back of the room. "What is your name?"

"Tomas, My Lord."

"Tomas. You'll do. Come this way."

Tomas bowed in silent acquiescence and followed the Lord High Chancellor out of the antechamber into the private and guarded section of the palace. Neither spoke, beyond one brief exchange of significant glances on leaving the antechamber. The Lord High Chancellor preceded the young man, who walked several paces behind Pons as was proper, his hands folded in his sleeves, his black and untrimmed cowl drawn low over his head.

The Lord High Chancellor paused outside the library, made a sign to the young man to wait. Tomas did as he was bid, standing silently in the shadows. One of the dead guards thrust open the stone door. Pons looked inside, Kleitus had returned to his reading. On hearing the door open, he glanced up and—seeing his minister—nodded.

Pons beckoned to the young man, who slid out of the shadows and in through the door. The Lord High Chancellor entered with him, shut the door softly behind him. The cadavers guarding His Majesty took up their positions.

The dynast returned to perusing the text spread out on the table before him.

The young man and Pons stood quietly, waiting.

"You have been to the earl's dwelling, Tomas?" Kleitus asked, without looking up.

"I have just now returned, Sire," said the young man, bowing.

'And you found them there—the duke and duchess and the stranger?'

"Yes, Your Majesty."

'And you did as you were told?'

"Yes, of course, Sire."

"With what result?"

'A—a rather peculiar result, Sire. If I may explain—" Tomas took a step forward.

Kleitus, eyes on his text, waved a negligent hand.

Tomas frowned, glanced at Pons, the young man asking if the dynast was paying attention.

The Lord High Chancellor answered with a peremptory raise of his eyebrows, meaning, "His Majesty is paying far more attention to you than you might wish."

Tomas, now appearing somewhat uncomfortable, launched into his report. "As Your Majesty is aware, the duke and duchess believe that I am one of their party, involved in this misguided rebellion." The young man paused to bow, to demonstrate his true feelings.

The dynast turned a page.

Tomas, receiving no acknowledgment, continued, discomfiture growing. "I told them of the prince's murder—"

"Murder?" Kleitus stirred, the hand turning the page paused.

Tomas cast Pons a pleading glance.

"Forgive him, Majesty," the Lord High Chancellor said softly, "but that is how the rebels would view the prince's lawful execution. Tomas must appear to join in their views, in order to convince them that he is one of them, and thus remain useful to Your Majesty."

The dynast resumed the turning of his page, smoothed it with his hand.

Tomas, with a small sigh of relief, continued, "I told them that the man with the rune-painted skin was dead, as well." The young man hesitated, uncertain how to continue.

"With what result?" Kleitus prompted, running a finger down the page.

"The man's friend, the one who killed the dead, denied the report."

The dynast looked up from his reading. "Denied it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. He said he knew that his friend, whom they called 'Haplo,' was alive."

"He knew it, you say?" The dynast exchanged glances with the Lord High Chancellor.

"Yes, Sire. He seemed quite firmly convinced of the fact. It had something to do with a dog—"

His Majesty was about to say something, but the Lord High Chancellor raised a finger in a warding, albeit highly respectful, manner.

"Dog?" Pons asked. "What about a dog?"

"A dog entered the room while I was there. It went up to the stranger, whose name is Alfred. This Alfred appeared quite pleased to see the dog and he said that now he knew Haplo wasn't dead."

"What did this dog look like?"

Tomas thought back. 'A largish animal. Black fur, with white eyebrows. It's very intelligent. Or seems so. It... listens. To conversations. Almost as if it understood—'

"The very animal, Sire." Pons turned to Kleitus. "The one that was thrown into the boiling mud pit. I saw it die! Its body sucked down beneath the ooze."

"Yes, that's exactly right!" Tomas appeared amazed. "That's what the duchess said, Your Majesty! She and the duke couldn't believe their eyes. The duchess Jera said something about the prophecy. But the stranger, Alfred, denied most vehemently that he'd had anything to do with it."

"What did he say about the dog, how it came to be alive?"

"He said he couldn't explain, but if the dog is alive, then Haplo must be alive."

"Exceedingly strange!" murmured Kleitus. 'And did you find out, Tomas, how these two strangers managed to make their way to Kairn Necros?'

'A ship, Sire. According to the duke, who told me as I was leaving, they arrived in a ship which they left docked at Safe Harbor.'

The ship is made of a strange substance and is, by the duke's account, covered with runes, much like the stranger Haplo's body."

"And what do the duke and duchess and the old earl plan to do now?"

"They are sending, this cycle, a message to the prince's people, telling them of their ruler's untimely death. In three cycles' time, when the resurrection is complete, the duke and duchess plan to rescue the prince's cadaver and return him to his people and urge them to declare war on Your Majesty. The earl's faction will join with the people of Kairn Telest."

"So, in three cycles, they plot to break into the palace dungeons and rescue the prince."

"That is true, Sire."

"And you offered them your willing assistance, Tomas?"

"As you commanded me, Sire. I am to meet with them this night, to go over the final details."

"Keep us apprised. You run a risk, you know that? If they discover you are a spy, they will kill you and send you into oblivion."

"I welcome the risk, Sire." Tomas placed his hand over his heart, bowed low. "I am completely devoted to Your Majesty."

"Continue your good work and your devotion will be rewarded." Kleitus lowered his eyelids, resumed his reading.

Tomas looked at Pons, who indicated that the interview was at an end. Bowing again, the young man left the library alone, escorted through the dynast's private chambers by one of the servant cadavers.

When Tomas was gone and the door shut behind him, Kleitus looked up from his book. It was obvious, from the staring, searching expression, that he hadn't seen the page lying open before him. He was looking far away, far beyond the cavern walls surrounding him.

The Lord High Chancellor watched the eyes grow dark and shadowed, saw lines deepen in the forehead. A tingle of apprehension knotted Pons's stomach. He glided nearer, treading softly, not daring to disturb. He knew he was wanted, because he had not been dismissed. Approaching the table, he sat down in a chair and waited in silence.

A long time passed. Kleitus stirred, sighed.

Pons, knowing his cue, asked softly, "Your Majesty understands all this: the arrival of the two strangers, the man with the runes on his skin, the dog that was dead and is now alive?"

"Yes, Pons, we believe we do."

The Lord High Chancellor waited, again, in silence.

"The Sundering," said the dynast. "The cataclysmic war that would once and for all bring peace to our universe. What if we told you that we didn't win that war as we have so fondly assumed all these centuries? What if we told you, Pons, that we lost?"

"Sire!"

"Defeat. That is why the help that was promised us never came. The Patryns have conquered the other worlds. Now they wait, poised, to take over this one. We are all that remains. The hope of the universe."

"The prophecy!" Pons whispered, and there was true awe in his tone. At last, he was beginning to believe.

Kleitus noticed his minister's conversion, noticed that faith came rather late, but smiled grimly and said nothing. It wasn't important.

"And now, chancellor, leave us," he added, coming out of his momentary reverie. "Cancel all our engagements for the next two cycles. Say that we have received disturbing news concerning the hostile enemy force across the Fire Sea and that we are making preparations to protect our city. We will see no one."

"Does that include Her Majesty, Sire?"

The marriage had been one of convenience, meant to do nothing more than maintain the dynastic rule. Kleitus XIV had produced Kleitus XV, along with several other sons and daughters. The dynasty was assured.

"You, alone, are excepted, Pons. But only in an emergency."

"Very good, Sire. And where will I find Your Majesty if I am in need of counsel?"

"Here, Pons," said Kleitus, glancing around the library. "Studying. There is much to be done, and only two cycles in which to do it."

## CHAPTER \* 27

### OLD PROVINCES, ABARRACH

THE TIME PERIOD WAS KNOWN AS THE DYNAST'S WAKING HOUR AND, although the dynast himself was far away in the city of Necropolis, the household in Old Province was up and stirring. The dead had to be roused from their slumber time state of lethargy, the magic that kept them functional renewed, and their daily tasks urged on them. Jera, as necromancer in her father's house, moved among the cadavers, chanting the runes that brought the mockery of life to the servants and workers.

The dead do not sleep, as do the living. They are told at slumber time to sit down and not move about, for fear of disturbing the living members of the household. The cadavers obediently take themselves to whatever out-of-the-way spot can be found for them and wait, motionless and silent, through the sleeping hours.

"They do not sleep, but are they dreaming?" Alfred wondered, regarding them with wrenching pity.

It may have been his imagination, but he fancied that during this time when contact with the living was forgone, set aside until the morrow, the faces of the dead grew sad. The phantasm shapes hovering over their physical husks cried out in despair. Lying on his bed, Alfred tossed and turned, his rest broken by the restless sighs of whispered keening.

"What a quaint fancy," said Jera, over breakfast.

The duke and duchess and Alfred dined together. The earl had already broken his fast, she explained apologetically, and had gone downstairs to work in his laboratory. Alfred was able to obtain only a vague idea of what the old man was doing, something about experimenting with varieties of kairn grass to see if he could develop a hardy strain that could be grown in the cold and barren soil of the Old Provinces.

"The moaning sound must have been the wind you heard," Jera continued, pouring kairn-grass tea and dishing up rashers of torb. [1] (Alfred, who had been afraid to ask, was vastly relieved to note that a living female servant did the cooking.)

"Not unless the wind has a voice and words to speak," Alfred said, but he said it to his plate and no one else heard him.

"You know, I used to think the same thing when I was a child," said Jonathan. "Funny, I'd forgotten all about it until you brought it up. I had an old nanny who used to sit with me during sleep-time and, after she died, her corpse was reanimated and, naturally, she came back into the nursery to do what she'd always done in life. But I couldn't sleep with her in there, after she was dead. It seemed to me she was crying. Mother tried to explain it was just my imagination. I suppose it was, but at that time it was very real to me."

"What happened to her?" Alfred asked.

Jonathan appeared slightly shamefaced. "Mother eventually had to get rid of her. You know how children get something fixed in their minds. You can't argue logically with a child. They talked and talked to me but nothing would do but that nanny had to go."

"What a spoiled brat!" said Jera, smiling at her husband over her teacup.

"Yes, I rather think I was," said Jonathan, flushing in embarrassment. "I was the youngest, you know. By the way, dear, speaking of home—"

Jera set down her teacup, shook her head. "Out of the question. I know how worried you are about the harvest, but Rift Ridge is the first place the dynast's men will come searching for us."

"But won't this place be the second?" Jonathan inquired, pausing in his eating, his fork halfway to his mouth.

Jera ate her breakfast complacently. "I received a message from Tomas this morning. The dynast's men have set out for Rift Ridge. It will take them at least a half cycle's march to reach our castle. They'll waste time searching, and then another half cycle's journey back to report. If Kleitus even cares about us anymore, now that he has this war to fight, he'll order them to come here. They can't possibly arrive in Old Provinces before tomorrow. And we're leaving this cycle, once Tomas returns."

"Isn't she wonderful, Alfred?" said Jonathan, regarding his wife admiringly. "I would have never reasoned any of that out. I'd have run off wildly, without thinking, and landed right in the arms of the dynast's men."

"Yes, wonderful," mumbled Alfred.

This talk of troops searching for them and sneaking about in the slumber-time and hiding completely unnerved him. The smell and sight of the greasy torb on his plate made him nauseous. Jera and Jonathan were gazing lovingly into each other's eyes. Albert lifted a largish piece of torb off his plate and slipped it to the dog, who was lying at his feet. The treat was graciously accepted, with a wag of the tail.

After breakfast, the duke and duchess disappeared to make arrangements for the night's decampment. The earl remained in the laboratory. Alfred was left to his own dismal company (and that of the ever-present dog). He wandered the house, and eventually found the library.

The room was small and windowless, light came from glowing gas lamps on the walls. Shelves, built into the stone walls, housed numerous volumes. A few were quite old, their leather binding cracked and worn. He approached these in some trepidation, not certain what he feared finding;

perhaps voices from the past, speaking to him of failure and defeat. He was vastly relieved to see that they were nothing more alarming than monographs written on agricultural topics: The Cultivation of Kairn Grass, Diseases Common to the Pauka.

"There's even," he said conversationally, glancing down, "a book on dogs."

The animal, hearing its name, pricked its ears and thumped its tail against the floor.

'Although I bet I wouldn't find mention of anything like you!" Alfred murmured.

The dog's mouth parted in a grin, the intelligent eyes seemed to be laughing in agreement.

Alfred continued his desultory search, hoping to come across something innocuous to occupy his mind, take it away from the turmoil and danger and horror surrounding him. A thick volume, its spine lavishly decorated in gold leaf, caught his eye. It was a handsome work, well bound and, although obviously well read, lovingly cared for. He drew it out, turned it over, to see the cover.

The Modern Art of Necromancy.

Shuddering from head to toe, Alfred attempted to place the book back on the shelf. His trembling hands, more clumsy than usual, failed. He dropped the volume and fled the room, fled even that portion of the house.

He roamed disconsolately through the earl's gloomy mansion. Unable to rest, unable to sit still, he gravitated from room to room, peering out the windows at the bleak landscape, his large feet displacing small articles of furniture or stumbling over the dog, his hands upending cups of kairn-grass tea.

What is it you fear? he asked himself, his thoughts constantly straying back to the library. Surely not that you will succumb to the temptation of practicing this black art! His gaze went to a servant cadaver, who had, in life, cleaned up spilled cups of kairn-grass tea and who was mechanically performing the same task after death.

Alfred turned to stare out a window at the black, ash-covered landscape beyond.

The dog, who had been trotting along behind him, obeying its master's last order, watched the man carefully. Deciding that, perhaps, at last, Alfred was going to stay put, the dog flopped down on the floor, curled its tail to its nose, sighed deeply, and closed its eyes.

I remember the first time I saw the dog. I remember Haplo, and the sight of his bandaged hands. I remember Hugh, the assassin, and the changeling Bane.

Bane.

Alfred's face grew haggard. He leaned his forehead against the window, as though his head were too heavy for him to support.. .

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. . . The hargast forest was on Pitrin's Exile, an island of coralite floating in the air world of Arianus. The forest was a terrifying place—to Alfred, at least. But then, most of the world outside the comforting peace of the mausoleum terrified the Sartan. The hargast tree is sometimes called the crystal tree. They are much prized in Arianus, where they are cultivated and tapped for the water they store in their brittle, crystalline trunks. But the forest wasn't a hargast farm, the trees weren't small and well tended.

In the wild, the hargast trees grow to hundreds of feet in height. The ground on which Alfred walked was littered with branches broken off in the wind currents that swept this end of the island. He stared at the branches, stared in disbelief at their razor-sharp edges. Loud cracks boomed like thunder, splintering crashes brought to mind fearful images of the giant limbs falling down on top of him. Alfred was feeling thankful he was walking on a road running along the forest's fringes when the assassin, Hugh the Hand, stopped and gestured.

"This way." He pointed into the forest.

"In there?" Alfred couldn't believe it. To walk in a hargast forest in a windstorm was madness, suicidal. But maybe that's what Hugh had in mind.

Alfred had long begun to suspect that Hugh the Hand couldn't go through with his "deal" to cold-bloodedly murder the child, Bane, who traveled with them. Alfred had been watching the assassin's inner struggle with himself. He could almost hear the curses Hugh was heaping on his own head, cursing himself for being a weak and sentimental fool. Hugh the Hand—the man who had killed many before this with never a qualm or a moment's regret.

But Bane was such a beautiful child, ingratiating, charming . . . with a soul blackened and warped by the whispered words of a wizard father the boy had never met or seen. Hugh had no way of knowing he, the spider, was being caught in a web far more devious and cunning than any he could ever hope to spin.

The three of them—Bane, Hugh, and Alfred—entered the hargast forest, forced to fight their way through a tangle of underbrush. At last they came to a cleared path. Bane was in high spirits, eager to see Hugh's famed flying ship. The boy darted ahead. The wind blew strong, the branches of the hargast trees clashed together, their crystalline tones harsh and ominous in Alfred's mind.

"Oh, sir, shouldn't we stop him?" the Sartan asked.

"He'll be all right," Hugh answered, and Alfred knew then that the assassin was sluffing off his responsibility, tossing the child's death into the lap of fate or chance or whatever deity, if any, this dark-souled man thought might bear the burden.

Whatever it was had accepted it.

Alfred heard the crack, like the booming of the perpetual storm of the Maelstrom. He saw the limb fall, saw Bane standing beneath it, staring up in rapt shock. The Sartan lunged forward, but he was too late. The limb fell on the child with a shattering crash.

He heard a scream, then, abruptly, silence.

Alfred dashed forward. The fallen branch was huge. It completely covered the path. The child's body was nowhere to be seen. He must be buried underneath the wreckage. Alfred gazed in hopeless despair at the broken branches, their edges sharp as spears.

Leave it. Don't meddle. You know what this child is! You know the evil that brought him forth. Let it die with him.

But he is a child! He's had no choice in his fate. Must he pay for the sin of the father? Shouldn't he have the chance to see for himself, to understand, to judge, to redeem himself, and perhaps redeem others?

Alfred glanced down the path. Hugh must have heard the branch fall, must have heard the scream. The assassin was taking his time, or perhaps offering up a prayer of thanksgiving. But he would be along soon.

The gigantic branch would take a team of men with cables and ropes to move—or one man with powerful magic. Standing over it, Alfred began to sing the runes. They wove and twined themselves about the tree branch, separated it into two halves, lifted each half up, deposited each half on either side of the path. Beneath the shattered limb lay Bane.

The child wasn't dead, but he was dying. He was covered with blood. Crystal shards had pierced the small body, there was no telling how many bones were crushed and broken.

Bring life to the dead. The Wave must correct itself. Bring life to one and another will die untimely.

The child was unconscious, in no pain, his life seeping away rapidly.

If I were a physician, I would try to help him live. Is what I am capable of doing wrong?

Alfred picked up a small shard of crystal. Hands, generally so clumsy, moved with delicacy and skill. The Sartan made a cut in his own flesh. Kneeling down beside the child, he traced in his own blood a sigil on the boy's mangled body. Then he sang the runes and, with his other hand, repeated them in the air.

The child's broken bones knit together. The torn flesh closed. The rapid, shallow breathing eased. The grayish skin grew pink, flushed with returning life.

Bane sat up and stared at Alfred with blue eyes sharper than the crystal branches of the hargast tree.

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... Bane lived. And Hugh died. Died untimely. Alfred pressed his hand to his aching temples. But others were saved! How can I know? How can I know if I did right? All I know is that it was in my power to save that child and I did so. I couldn't let him die.

Then Alfred understood his fear. If he opened that book on necromancy, he would see on its pages the very rune he drew on Bane's flesh.

I have taken the first step down the dark and twisting path and who knows but that I shall not take a second and a third! Am I stronger than these, my brethren?

No, Alfred said to himself, and sank down, despairing, in a chair. No, I am the same.

## CHAPTER \* 28

### NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

HAPLO PROPPED HIMSELF UP ON ONE ELBOW AND GAZED OUT THE bars of his prison cell at the body of the prince, lying in the cell across from him. The preserver had done his job well. No grotesque stiffening of the limbs, face muscles relaxed; Edmund might have been peacefully sleeping, except for the gaping, bloody hole in the chest. The preserver had been ordered to leave the wound, visible evidence of the prince's terrible manner of death and one guaranteed to inflame his people to war when the cadaver was returned.

The Patryn rolled over on his back, made himself as comfortable as he could on the hard stone bed, and wondered how long it would be before the dynast came to pay him a visit.

"You're a cool one, aren't you?" The preserver, passing by the cell, on his way home after his cycle's duty, paused to stare at Haplo. "I've seen corpses more restless. That one, for example"—the preserver motioned gloomily at the prince—"will be a handful when it comes back to life. They keep forgetting they're locked up and crash into the bars. Then, when I make them understand, they pace: back and forth and back and forth. Then they forget again and hurl themselves against the bars. While you—lying there as if you hadn't a care in the world."

Haplo shrugged. "A waste of energy. Why wear myself out?"

The preserver shook his head and left, glad to return to his home and family after a long and arduous shift. If he had the suspicion that Haplo wasn't telling all he knew, the preserver was right. A prison is a prison only to a man who can't escape. And Haplo could have walked out of his cell any time he chose.

It suited his purpose to stay.

Kleitus was not long in coming. He was accompanied by Pons. It was the chancellor's duty to make certain that prisoner and ruler were not disturbed in their conversation. Pons slid his arm through the arm of the highly astonished wake-time preserver, who was making herself dizzy by repeated bowings and scrapings, and led her away. The only ones to overhear the dynast's conversation with his prisoner were the dead.

Kleitus stood outside Haplo's cell door, intently regarding the man inside. The dynast's face was shadowed by the hood of his purplish black robes. Haplo could not see the expression. But he sat quietly, gazing calmly back at the dynast.

Kleitus opened the cell door with a gesture of his hand and a spoken rune. Everyone else used a key. Haplo wondered if this magical show was intended to impress him. The Patryn, who could have dissolved the cell doors with a gesture and a rune, grinned.

The dynast glided inside, glanced around with distaste. There was nowhere for him to sit. Haplo slid to one side of the stone bed, patted it with his hand. Kleitus stiffened, as if to ask if the Patryn were joking. Haplo shrugged.

"No one sits while we stand," said Kleitus coldly.

Several appropriate remarks came to Haplo's tongue, but he swallowed them. No use antagonizing this man. The two of them were, after all, going to be traveling companions. Haplo slowly rose to his feet.

"Why did you come here?" Kleitus asked, lifting long-fingered, delicate hands and folding back the cowl so that his face was visible.

"Your soldiers brought me," Haplo replied.

The dynast smiled faintly, clasped his hands behind his back and began to walk about the cell. He made one complete turn—which didn't take long, the cell being extremely cramped—paused, and stared at Haplo.

"We meant, why did you come through Death's Gate to this world?"

The question took Haplo by surprise. He'd expected "Where is Death's Gate?" or perhaps "How did you get through it?" but not "why." The truth, or at least part of the truth, was necessary in answering. And they'd probably find it out anyway, because every word Haplo spoke seemed to create clouds of images in the brains of these Sartan.

"My Lord sent me, Your Majesty," Haplo replied.

Kleitus's eyes widened. Perhaps he'd caught a glimpse of the Lord of the Nexus from Haplo's mind. Just as well. He'd know the lord, then, when they met.

"What for? Why did your lord send you?"

"To look around, see how things were going."

"You've been to the other worlds?"

Haplo wasn't able to keep the images of Arianus and Pryan from flitting across his memory, and from his mind they were certain to enter Kleitus's.

"Yes, Sire."

'And what is it like on these other worlds?'

"Wars. Chaos. Turmoil. About what you could expect with the mensch in control."

"The mensch in control." Kleitus smiled again, this time politely, as if Haplo had made a bad joke. "Implying, of course, that we here on Abarrach, with our wars and turmoil, are no better than mensch." He tilted his head, stared down at Haplo from between half-closed eyelids. "Pons told us

that you don't approve of the Sartan on Abarrach. What was it you said, 'We don't kill our own kind.' "

The dynast's gaze shifted, moved to the body of the prince lying on the stone in the cell opposite. He glanced back at Haplo, who didn't have time to rearrange the sardonic sneer on his lips.

Kleitus paled, frowned. "You, the ancient enemy, scion of a race of cruel and barbarous people, whose greed and ambition led to the destruction of our world, you dare pass judgment on us! Yes, you see we know about you. We've studied, found reference to you—to your people, rather—in the ancient texts."

Haplo said nothing, waited.

The dynast raised an eyebrow. "Tell us again, why have you come to our world?"

"I'll tell you again." The Patryn was growing impatient, decided to get to the point. "My Lord sent me. If you want to ask him why he sent me, you can do that yourself. I'll take you to him. I was going to propose just such a journey anyway."

"Indeed? You'd take me through Death's Gate with you?"

"Not only that, Your Majesty, I'll show you how to get through it, how to get back. I'll introduce you to My Lord, show you around my world—"

'And what do you want in return? We don't suppose, from what we've read of your people, that you will perform these services for us out of the goodness of your heart."

"In return," Haplo said quietly, "you will teach my people the art of necromancy."

"Ah." Kleitus's gaze went to the runes tattooed on the back of Haplo's hand. "The one magical skill you do not possess. Well, well. We will consider the idea. We could not, of course, leave when the peace of our city is threatened. You would have to wait until this matter between our people and those of the Kairn Telest is settled."

Haplo shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm in no hurry." Kill off more of your people, he suggested silently. The fewer of you Sartan left alive to interfere with My Lord's plans the better.

Kleitus's eyes narrowed and Haplo thought for a moment he had gone too far. He wasn't used to having his mind probed. That fool Alfred had always been far too absorbed with his own worries to try to worm into Haplo's. I'll have to watch myself, the Patryn counseled.

"In the interim," the dynast said slowly, "we hope you won't mind being our guest. We regret the accommodations aren't more comfortable. We would offer you a room in the palace, but that would occasion gossip and explanations. Far better if we keep you here, safe and quiet."

Kleitus started to leave, paused, turned back. "Oh, by the way, that friend of yours—"

"I don't have any friends," Haplo said shortly. He had started to sit down, but was now forced to remain standing.

"Indeed? I'm referring to the Sartan who saved your life. The one who destroyed the dead guard about to execute you—"

"That was self-preservation, Your Majesty. I'm the only way he gets back home."

"Then it wouldn't concern you to hear that this acquaintance of yours is in collusion with our enemies and has, therefore, placed his life in jeopardy?"

Haplo grinned, sat down on the stone seat. If you're trying to use threats against Alfred to goad me into talking, Friend, you're sadly mistaken. "It wouldn't concern me to hear that Alfred fell into the Fire Sea."

Kleitus slammed shut the cell door, using his hands this time, not the rune-magic. He began to walk away.

"Oh, by the way, Your Majesty—" Haplo called, scratching at the tattoos on his arm. Two could play at this game.

Kleitus ignored him, continued to walk away.

"I heard something mentioned about a prophecy . . ." Haplo paused, let his words hang in the chill, dank air of the catacombs.

The dynast stopped. He had drawn the cowl up over his head. The hood, turning toward Haplo, shadowed Kleitus's face. His voice, though he attempted to keep it cold and uncaring, had an edge of sharpened steel to it.

"Well, what about it?"

"Just curious to know what it was. I thought perhaps Your Majesty could tell me."

The dynast emitted a dry chuckle. "We could spend the remainder of our waking hours relating prophecies to you, Patryn, and half the slumbering hours into the bargain."

"There've been that many, have there?" Haplo marveled.

"That many. And most of them worth about what you might expect—the ravings of half-crazed old men or some dried-up old virgin in a trance. Why do you ask?" The voice probed.

So many, huh? Haplo thought. The prophecy, Jera said, and everyone knew—or seemed to know—exactly what she meant. I wonder why you don't want to tell me, you crafty dragon-spawn. Perhaps it hits a little too close to home, eh?

"I thought perhaps one of the prophecies might refer to My Lord," Haplo said, taking a risk.

He didn't know exactly what he hoped to accomplish with that shot, made completely in the dark. But if he'd intended it to draw blood, apparently he missed his mark. Kleitus didn't flinch or cringe. He made no comment, but turned as if completely bored with the conversation and walked off down the narrow hallway.

Haplo, listening closely, heard the dynast greet Pons in the same bored, casual tones. The echo of their voices gradually faded in the distance, and the Patryn was left alone with the dead for company.

At least the dead were a quiet group . . . with the exception of that incessant sighing or whining or whatever noise buzzed in his ears.

Haplo threw himself down on the stone bed to consider his conversation with the dynast, going over every word spoken and every word that hadn't been. The Patryn decided that he'd come out ahead in this first contest of wills. Kleitus wanted off this hunk of rock badly, that much was obvious. He wanted to visit other worlds, wanted to rule other worlds—that, too, was obvious.

"If there were such a thing as a soul, as the ancients believed, this man would sell his for the chance," Haplo remarked to the dead. "But, in lieu of his soul, he'll sell me the necromancy. With the dead fighting for him, My Lord will forge his own prophecy!"

He looked across at the still form lying in the cell opposite. "Don't worry, Your Highness," Haplo said quietly. "You'll have your revenge."

"He's lying, of course, the cunning devil," the dynast told Pons, when the two Sartan were again alone in the library, "Trying to make us believe the mensch are in control of the worlds beyond! As if mensch could control anything!"

"But you saw—"

"We saw what he wanted us to see! This Haplo and his partner are spies, sent to discover our weaknesses, betray our strengths. It is this lord of his who rules. We saw the man." Kleitus fell silent, remembering. Slowly, he nodded his head. "A power to be reckoned with, Pons. An elder wizard of extraordinary skill and discipline and will."

"You could tell this by viewing him in a vision, Sire?"

"Don't be an idiot, Pons! We saw him through the eyes of his minion. This Haplo is dangerous, intelligent, skilled in his magical art, barbaric though it may be. He honors and reveres this man he calls 'his lord'! A man as strong as this Haplo would not give his body and mind to an inferior or even an equal. This lord will be a worthy foe."

"But if he has worlds at his command, Sire—"

"We have the dead, chancellor. And the art of raising the dead. He doesn't. His spy admitted it to us. He is trying to induce us to make a bargain."

'A bargain, Your Majesty?"

"He would lead us to Death's Gate and we would provide him with the knowledge of necromancy." Kleitus smiled, thin-lipped, devoid of mirth. "We allowed him to think we were considering it. And he brought up the prophecy, Pons."

The chancellor gaped. "He did?"

"Oh, he pretends he knows nothing about it. He even asked us to recite it to him! I am certain he knows the truth, Pons. And do you realize what that means?"

"I'm not sure, Sire." The chancellor was moving warily, not wanting to appear slow of thought. "He was unconscious when the Duchess Jera mentioned it—"

"Unconscious!" Kleitus snorted. "He was no more unconscious than we are! He is a powerful wizard, Pons. He could stroll out of that cell at this moment, if he chose. Fortunately, he believes himself to be in control of the situation.

"No, Pons, he was shamming that entire episode. We've been studying their magic, you see." Kleitus lifted a rune-bone, held it up to the light. "And we think we're beginning to understand how it works. If those fat, complacent ancestors of ours had taken the trouble to learn more about their enemy, we might have escaped disaster. But what do they do, in their smugness? They turn their paltry knowledge into a game! Bah!" The dynast, in a rare flash of anger, swept the rune-bone pieces from the table to the floor. Rising to his feet, he began to pace.

"The prophecy, Your Majesty?"

"Thank you, Pons, You remind us of what is truly important. And the fact that this Haplo knows of the prophecy is of monumental significance."

"Forgive me, Majesty, but I fail to see—"

"Pons!" Kleitus came to stand in front of his minister. "Think! One comes through Death's Gate who knows the prophecy. This means that the prophecy is known beyond."

Light shown on the benighted chancellor. "Your Majesty!"

"This Patryn lord fears us, Pons," Kleitus said softly, eyes gazing far away, to worlds he had seen only in his mind. "With our necromancy, we have become the most powerful Sartan who have ever lived. That is why he has sent his spies to learn our secrets, to disrupt our world. I see him, waiting for his spies to return. And he will wait in vain!"

"Spies plural. I assume that Your Majesty refers to the other man, the Sartan who destroyed the dead. May I respectfully remind you, Sire, that this man is a Sartan. He is one of us."

"Is he? Destroying our dead? No, if he is a Sartan, he is one of us turned to evil. It is likely that, over the centuries, the Patrysts have corrupted our people. But not us. They will not corrupt us. We must have that Sartan. We must learn how he performed his magic."

'As I told you before, Sire, he did not use a rune structure that I recognized—"

"Your skills are limited, Pons. You are not a necromancer."

"True, Sire." The chancellor admitted this lack quite humbly. Pons knew of and was confident in his own particular area of expertise—how to make himself indispensable to his ruler.

"This Sartan's magic could prove to be a significant threat. We must know what he did to the corpse that ended its 'life.'"

"Undoubtedly, Sire, but if he is with the earl, capturing this Sartan may prove difficult—"

"Precisely why we will not attempt it. Nor will 'capture' be necessary. The duke and duchess are coming to rescue the prince, are they not?"

'According to Tomas, their plans are moving forward.'

"Then, this Sartan we want will come with them."

"To rescue the prince? Why should he?"

"No, Pons. He will come to rescue his Patryn friend—who, by that time, will be dying."

## CHAPTERS 29

### NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

THE NEXT CYCLE, THE CONSPIRATORS PLANNED THEIR MOVE TO THE CITY, to the house of Tomas. They would have no difficulty slipping into Necropolis under the cover of the slumber hours. Only one main gate led into the city and it was guarded by the dead. But, being a network of tunnels and caves, Necropolis had any number of other entrances and exits, too numerous for guards to be posted at each, particularly because there was usually no enemy to guard against.

"But now there is an enemy," said Jera. "Perhaps the dynast will order all the 'rat holes' stopped up."

But Tomas was confident that the dynast would not have issued such an order; the enemy was, after all, on the other side of the Fire Sea. Jera appeared dubious, but Jonathan reminded her that their friend Tomas stood high in the dynasts regard and was extremely knowledgeable concerning His Majesty's way of thinking. At length all agreed that they would sneak into the city through the rat holes. But what were they to do with the dog?

"We could leave him here," suggested Jera, eyeing the animal thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid the animal wouldn't stay," Alfred returned.

"He's got a point," Jonathan said in an undertone to his wife. The dog wouldn't even stay dead!"

"Well, we can't let it be seen. Few in Necropolis are likely to pay any attention to us, but some zealous citizen would report a beast inside the city walls in a moment!"

Alfred could have told them they needn't have worried. The dog could be tossed into any number of boiling hot mud pits. It could be hauled off by any number of guards, locked into any number of cages, and, as long as Haplo lived, the dog would, sooner or later, turn up again. The Sartan didn't know quite how to put this into words, however. He let the discussion continue until it became obvious that their solution was to leave both him and the dog behind.

The old earl was in favor of this plan. "I've seen corpses dead fifty years who got around with less likelihood of falling apart!" he said to his daughter testily.

Moments before, Alfred had nearly broken his neck tumbling down a staircase.

"You'd be much safer here, Alfred," added Jera. "Not that smuggling the prince out of Necropolis will be all that dangerous, but still—"

"I'm coming," Alfred insisted stubbornly. To his surprise, he had an ardent supporter in Tomas.

"I agree with you, sir," the young man said heartily. "You should definitely be one of us." He drew Jera to one side, whispered something to her. The woman's shrewd eyes gazed at Alfred intently, much to his discomfiture.

"Yes, perhaps you're right."

She had a talk with her father. Alfred listened closely, picked out a few threads of conversation.

"Shouldn't leave him here ... chance dynast's troops ... remember what I told you I saw ... the dead dying."

"Very well!" stated the old man disagreeably. "But you're not planning to take him into the palace, are you? He'd go stumbling into something and that'd be the end of us!"

"No, no," soothed Jera. "But what," she added with a sigh, "do we do about the dog?"

In the end, they decided to simply take their chances. As Tomas pointed out, they were entering the city during the slumber hours and the odds of meeting any living citizens who were likely to protest against a beast inside the city walls were slim.

They traveled the backroads of Old Provinces, and reached Necropolis during the deepest of the slumber hours. The main highway leading into the city was deserted. The city walls stood dark and silent. The gas lamps had been dimmed. The only light was a lambent glow shining redly from the distant Fire Sea. Dismounting from the carriage, they followed Tomas to what appeared to be a hole burrowing beneath the cavern wall. All the citizenry knew about the rat holes, as they were called, and used them because they were more convenient than entering by the main gate and trying to move through the congested tunnel streets.

"How does the dynast plan to defend these entrances against an invading army?" Jera whispered, ducking her head to walk beneath a glistening wet cavern ceiling.

"He must be wondering that himself," said Tomas, with a slight smile. "Perhaps that's why he's shut up in his room with his maps and military advisers."

"On the other hand, he may not be worried at all," pointed out Jonathan, assisting Alfred to his feet. "Necropolis has never fallen in battle."

"Wet pavement," murmured Alfred in apology, cringing at the earl's look of irritation. "Have there truly been that many wars fought among you?"

"Oh, yes," Jonathan answered, quite cheerfully. They might have been discussing rune-bone games. "I'll tell you about them later, if you're interested. Now, we should probably keep our voices low. Which way, Tomas? I get rather muddled down here."

Tomas indicated a direction, and the group entered a perfect maze of dark, intersecting tunnels that had Alfred completely lost and confused in a matter of moments. Glancing around, he saw the dog, trotting along behind.

The first streets, those nearest the wall, were empty. Narrow and dark, they wound among a confused jumble of shabby houses and small shops, built of blocks of black rock or carved out of lava formations.

The shops were shuttered for the sleep-half, the houses dark. Many of them appeared to be deserted, abandoned, left to fall to ruin. Doors hung crazily on hinges, rags and bits of bone littered the street. The odor of decay was unusually strong here. Curious, Alfred peeped through a broken window.

A cadaverous face loomed white in the darkness. A pair of empty, dark eye sockets stared sightlessly into the street. Alarmed, Alfred stumbled backward, nearly knocking Jonathan off his feet. "Steady, there!" the duke remonstrated, catching his balance and helping Alfred reestablish his. "I admit it's a depressing sight. This part of the city used to be quite nice, or so the old records tell us. In the ancient time, this area housed the working class of Necropolis: soldiers, builders, storekeepers, and the lower echelon necromancers and preservers.

"I suppose," he added, lowering his voice after a warning glance from his wife, "that you could say they live here still, but they're mostly all dead."

So depressing were these empty streets with their tomblike houses that Alfred breathed a sigh of relief to actually emerge into a larger tunnel and see people moving about. Then he remembered the danger of the dog being observed. Despite Jera's whispered assurance that everything would be all right, Alfred crept nervously along, keeping near the wall, avoiding the pools of dim light cast by the sputtering lamps. The dog followed almost at his heels, as if the animal itself understood and was willing to cooperate.

The people in the streets passed them without a glance, not seeming to notice or care about them at all. Alfred realized, gradually, that these people were not living. The dead walked the streets of Necropolis during the slumber hours.

Most of the cadavers moved along purposefully, obviously intent on performing some task assigned to them by the living before the living took to their beds. But, here and there, they came on a cadaver roaming about aimlessly or performing some task it should have been performing during the waking time. Necromancers patrolled the streets of Necropolis, picking up any of these dead who had become confused, forgotten their tasks, or were making nuisances of themselves. Alfred's group took care to keep out of the way of these necromancers, slipping into the shadows of doorways until the black-robed wizards had passed.

Necropolis was built in a series of half circles that radiated out from the fortress. Originally, a small population of mensch and Sartan had dwelt inside the fortress, but as more and more people began to settle in the area permanently, the population soon overflowed the fortress and began building homes in the shadow of its sheltering walls.

In the days of Necropolis's prosperity, the then-current dynast, Kleitus III, took over the fortress as his castle. The nobility dwelt in magnificent homes located near the castle and the remainder of the population spread out around them, in order of rank and wealth.

Tomas's house was located about halfway between the poor houses on the city's outer walls and homes of the wealthy, near the castle walls. Depressed and weary from his journey, Alfred was extremely glad to escape the dark and drizzling atmosphere and enter rooms that were warm and well lighted.

Tomas apologized to the duke and duchess and the earl for the modesty of the dwelling, which was—as were many of the dwellings in the cavern—built straight up to conserve space.

"My father was a minor noble. He left me the right to stand around in the court with the other courtiers, hoping for a smile from His Majesty, and not much else," Tomas said, with a tinge of bitterness. "Now he stands around with the dead. I stand around with the living. Little difference between us."

The earl rubbed his hands. "Soon all that will change. Come the rebellion."

"Come the rebellion," said the others, in a sort of reverent litany.

Alfred sighed bleakly, sank into a chair, and wondered what he was going to do. The dog curled up at his feet. He felt numb, unable to think or react of his own volition. He wasn't a man of action, not like Haplo.

Events move me, Alfred reflected sadly, I don't move events. He supposed that he should be doing something to bring about an end to the practice of the long-forbidden art of necromancy, but what? He was one man, alone. And not a very strong man or a very wise one at that.

The only thought in his mind, his only wish, his only desire, was to flee this horrible world, run away, escape, forget it, and never be reminded of it again.

"Excuse me, sir," said the duke, coming up and touching Alfred deferentially on the knee.

Alfred jumped, and lifted a frightened face.

'Are you well?' Jonathan asked in concern.

Alfred nodded, waved a vague hand, mumbled something about a tiring walk.

"You mentioned being interested in the history of our wars. My wife and the earl and Tomas are planning our strategy for sneaking away the prince. They sent me off." Jonathan smiled, shrugged. "I simply don't have the head for plots. My task is to entertain you. But if you're too tired and you'd rather retire, Tomas will show you to your room—"

"No, no!" The last thing Alfred wanted was to be left alone with his thoughts. "Please, I'd be very interested in hearing about... wars." He had to force the word out past the lump in his throat.

"I can only tell you about the ones fought around here." The duke pulled up a chair, made himself comfortable. "Tea? Biscuits? Not hungry. Where shall I start? Necropolis was originally nothing more than a small town, mostly a place where people came to wait until they could move to other parts of Abarrach. But, after a while, the Sartan and the mensch—there were mensch back then—began to look around and decide that life was good here and that they didn't need to move. The city grew rapidly. People began to farm the fertile land. Crops flourished. Unfortunately, the mensch didn't."

Jonathan spoke in a carefree, cheerful manner that Alfred found quite shocking.

"You don't seem to care much about them," he observed, gently rebuking. "You were supposed to protect those weaker than yourselves."

"Oh, I think our ancestors were extremely upset, at first," said Jonathan defensively. "Devastated, in fact. But it really wasn't our fault. The help they were promised from other worlds never came. The magic needed to keep the mensch alive in this grim world was simply too great. Our ancestors couldn't provide it. There was nothing they could do. Eventually, they quit blaming themselves. Most of them, back then, came to believe that the era of the Dying of the Mensch was something inevitable, necessary."

Alfred said nothing, shook his head sadly.

"It was during this era, possibly in reaction to it," Jonathan continued, "that the art of necromancy was first studied."

"The forbidden art," Alfred corrected, but in such soft tones that the duke didn't hear him.

"Now that they no longer had to support the mensch, they discovered they could live quite well in this world. They invented iron ships to sail the Fire Sea. Colonies of Sartan spread throughout Abarrach, trade was established. The realm of Kairn Necros came into being. And as they progressed, so did the art of necromancy. Soon the living were living off the dead."

Yes, Alfred could see it all as Jonathan talked.

Life in Abarrach was good. Death was not bad, either. But then, just when everything (not counting the mensch, who by this time had been mostly forgotten anyway) seemed to be going so well, it all began to go terribly wrong.

"The Fire Sea and all the magma lakes and rivers and oceans were cooling and receding. Realms that had previously been trading neighbors became bitter enemies, hoarding their precious supplies of food, fighting over the life-giving colossus, That's when the first wars were fought.

"I guess it would be more correct to term them brawls or skirmishes, not really wars. Those," Jonathan said more seriously and solemnly, "would come later. Our ancestors apparently didn't know much about waging war at that time,"

"Of course not!" Alfred said severely. "We abhor warfare. We are the peacemakers. We promote peace!"

"You have that luxury," said Jonathan quietly. "We did not."

Alfred was struck, startled by the young duke's words. Was peace a luxury available only to a "fat" world? He recalled Prince Edmund's people, ragged, freezing, starving; watching their children, their elderly die while inside this city was warmth, food. What would I do if I was in their position? Would I meekly die, watch my children die? Or would I fight? Alfred shifted in his chair, suddenly uncomfortable.

I know what I'd do, he thought bitterly. I'd faint!

"As time passed, our people became more adept at war." Jonathan sipped at a cup of kairn-grass tea. "The young men began to train as soldiers, armies were formed. At first, they tried to fight with magic as their weapon, but that took too much energy away from the magic needed to survive.

'And so we studied the art of ancient weaponry. Swords and spears are far cruder than magic, but they're effective. Brawls became battles and, inevitably, led to the great war of about a century ago—the War of Abandonment.

"A powerful wizardess named Bethel claimed that she had discovered the way out of this world. She announced that she was planning to leave and would take those who wanted to go with her. She drew a large following. If the people had left, it would have decimated the population that was rapidly dwindling anyway. To say nothing of the fact that everyone feared what might happen if the "Gate" as she called it was opened. Who knew what terrible force might rush in and seize control?

"The dynast of Kairn Necros, Kleitus VII, forbid Bethel and her followers to leave. She refused to obey and led her people across the Fire Sea to the Pillar of Zembar, preparatory to abandoning the world. The battles between the two factions raged off and on for years, until Bethel was betrayed and captured. She was being ferried across the Fire Sea when she escaped her captors and flung herself into the magma, to keep her corpse from being resurrected. Before she jumped, she cried out what later became known as the prophecy about the Gate."

Alfred pictured the woman standing on the bow, screaming defiance. He pictured her hurling herself into the flaming ocean. He lost the thread of Jonathan's tale, picked it up again only when the young man suddenly lowered his voice.

"It was during that war that armies of the dead were first formed and pitted against each other. In fact, it's said that some commanders actually ordered the killing of their own living soldiers, to provide themselves with troops of cadavers . . ."

Alfred's head jerked up. "What? What are you telling me? Murdered their own young men! Blessed Sartan! To what black depths have we sunk?" He was livid, shaking. "No, don't come near me!" He raised a warding hand, rose distractedly from his chair. "I must get out of here! Leave this place!" It seemed, from his fevered attitude, that he meant to run out of the house that instant.

"Husband, what have you been saying to upset him like this?" demanded Jera, coming into the room with Tomas. "My dear sir, please sit down, calm yourself."

"I was only telling him that old story about the generals killing their own men during the war—"

"Oh, Jonathan!" Jera shook her head. "Certainly, you can leave, Alfred. Any time you want. You're not a prisoner here!"

Yes, I am! Alfred groaned inwardly. I'm a prisoner, a prisoner of my own ineptness! I came through Death's Gate by sheer accident! I would never have the courage or the knowledge to get back alone!

"Think about your friend," Tomas added soothingly, pouring out a cup of kairn tea. "You don't want to leave your friend behind, do you, Sir?"

"I'm sorry." Alfred collapsed back into his chair. "Forgive me. I'm . . . tired, that's all. Very tired. I think I'll go to bed. Come on, boy."

He laid a trembling hand on the dog's head. The animal looked up at him, whimpered, slowly brushed its tail against the floor, but didn't move.

The whimper had an odd note to it, a sound that Alfred had never heard the dog make before. He took more notice, looked down at it intently. The dog tried to lift its head, let it sink back weakly on its paws. The tail wagging increased slightly, however, to indicate that it appreciated the man's concern.

"Is there something wrong?" asked Jera, staring down at the dog. "Do you think the animal's sick?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know much about dogs I'm afraid," Alfred mumbled, feeling dread shrivel him up inside.

He did know something about this dog, or at least suspected. And if what he suspected was true, then whatever was wrong with the dog was wrong with Haplo.

CHAPTER \* 30

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

THE DOG'S CONDITION GRADUALLY WORSENE. BY THE NEXT CYCLE, it couldn't move at all, but lay on its side, flanks heaving, panting for breath. The animal refused all attempts to feed it or give it water.

Although everyone in the house was sorry for the dog's suffering, no one, except Alfred, was much concerned. Their thoughts were on the raid on the castle, the rescue of the prince's cadaver. Their plans were made, discussed and viewed from every conceivable angle for flaws. None could be found.

"It's going to be almost ridiculously easy," said Jera, at breakfast.

"I do beg your pardon," said Alfred in timid tones, "but I spent some time at court on . . . er . . . well, the world from which I come, and King Stephen's . . . that is . . . the king's dungeons were quite heavily guarded. How do you plan—"

"You're not involved." The earl snorted. "So don't concern yourself."

I may yet be involved, Alfred thought. His glance strayed to the sick dog. He said nothing aloud, however, preferring to bide his time until he had more facts.

"Don't be so cantankerous, Milord," said Jonathan, laughing. "We trust Alfred, don't we?"

Silence fell over the group, a faint blush suffused Jera's cheek. She glanced involuntarily at Tomas, who met her look, shook his head slightly, and lowered his gaze to his plate. The earl snorted again. Jonathan glanced from one to the other in perplexity.

"Oh, come now—" he began.

"More tea, sir?" Jera interrupted, lifting the stoneware kettle and holding it over Alfred's teacup. "No, thank you, Your Grace."

No one else said anything. Jonathan started to speak again, but was stopped by a look from his wife. The only sounds were the labored breathing of the dog and the occasional rattle of cutlery or the clink of a pottery plate. All seemed vastly relieved when Tomas rose from the table.

"If you will excuse me, Your Grace." A bow to Jera. "It is time for my appearance at court. Although I am not of the least importance"—he added with a self-deprecating smile—"this cycle of all cycles I should do nothing to draw attention to myself. I must be seen at my regular place at my regular time."

Alfred lurked about on the fringes of the group until everyone had separated and gone about their morning tasks. Tomas was alone on the lower floor, heading out the door of his dwelling. Alfred emerged from a shadowy corner, plucked at the sleeve of the man's robe.

Tomas gave a start, stared around with livid face and wide eyes. "Excuse me," said Alfred, taken aback. "I didn't mean to startle you,"

Tomas frowned when he saw who had hold of him. "What do you want?" he demanded impatiently, shaking free of Alfred's grip.

"I'm late as it is."

"Would it be possible—could you speak to your friend in the dungeons and find out the ... the condition of my friend?"

"I told you before. He's alive, just as you said," Tomas snapped.

"That's all I know."

"But you could find out. . . today," Alfred insisted, somewhat surprised at his own temerity. "I have the feeling he has fallen ill. Gravely ill."

"Because of the dog!"

"Please . . ."

"Oh, very well. I'll do what I can. But I don't promise anything. And now I must be leaving."

"Thank you, that's all I—"

But Tomas was gone, hastening out the door and joining the throng of living and dead crowding the streets of Necropolis,

Alfred sat down beside the dog, stroked its soft fur with a soothing hand. The animal was extremely ill.

Later that day, Tomas returned. It was near the dynasty's dining hour, a time when the courtiers, those unfortunates who had not been asked to dinner, departed for their own pleasures.

"Well, what news?" Jera asked. "All is well?"

"All is well," Tomas answered gravely. "His Majesty will resurrect the prince during the lamp dimming hour." [1]

"And we have permission to visit the Queen Mother?"

"The queen was most pleased to grant permission herself."

Jera nodded at her father. "All is ready. I wonder, however, if we shouldn't—"

Tomas cast a significant glance at Alfred, and the duchess fell silent.

"Excuse me," Alfred murmured, rising stiffly to his feet. "I'll leave you alone—"

"No, wait." Tomas raised his hand, his expression grew more grave. "I have news for you, and this affects us all and affects our plans, I'm afraid. I spoke to my friend the sleep-shift preserver, before he left the castle this morning. I am sorry to relate that what you feared, Alfred, is true. Your friend is rumored to be dying."

\*

Poison.

Haplo knew it the moment the first cramps twisted his gut, knew it when the nausea swept over him. He knew it, but he wouldn't admit it to himself. It made no sense! Why?

Weak from vomiting, he lay on the stone bed, bent double by the clenching pain that stabbed at his vitals with knives of fire. He was parched, suffering from thirst. The waking-shift preserver brought him water. He had just strength enough to dash the cup from her hand. The cup smashed on the rock floor. The preserver withdrew hurriedly. The water seeped rapidly into the cracks in the floor. Haplo collapsed on the bed, watched it disappear, and wondered, Why?

He attempted to heal himself, but his efforts were feeble, halfhearted, and at length he gave up. He'd known from the outset healing wouldn't work. A cunning and subtle mind—a Sartan mind—had devised his murder. The poison was powerful, acting equally on his magic and his body. The complex, interconnecting circle of runes that was his life's essence was falling apart and he couldn't put it back together again. It was as if the edges of the runes were being burned away, they wouldn't link up. Why? "Why?"

It took Haplo a dazed moment to realize that his question had been repeated out loud. He lifted his head—every movement was fraught with pain, every movement took extraordinary will and effort. His eyes dimming with death's shadow, he could barely make out the dynast, standing outside his cell. "Why what?" Kleitus asked quietly.

"Why . . . murder me?" Haplo gasped. He gagged, wretched, doubled over, clutching his stomach. Sweat rolled down his face, he suppressed an agonized cry.

"Ah, you understand what is happening to you. Painful, is it? For that, we are sorry. But we needed a poison that was slow to do its work and we didn't have much time to devote to study. What we devised is crude, albeit efficient. Is it killing you?"

The dynast might have been a professor, inquiring of a student if his experiment in alchemy was proceeding satisfactorily.

"Yes, damn it! It's killing me!" Haplo snarled.

Anger filled him. Not anger at dying. He'd been near death before, the time the chaodyns attacked him, but then he'd been content to die. He'd fought well, defeated his enemies. He'd been victorious. Now he was dying ignominiously, dying at the hands of another, dying shamefully, without being able to defend himself.

Lunging off the stone bed, he hurled himself at the cell door, fell to the floor. He reached out a grasping hand and clutched at the hem of the dynast's robe before the startled man had time to withdraw.

"Why?" Haplo demanded, clinging to the purple-dyed black fabric. "I would have taken you . . . Death's Gate!"

"But I don't need you to take me," replied Kleitus calmly. "I know where Death's Gate is. I know how to get through it. I don't need you . . . for that." The dynast bent down, his hand moved to touch the rune-covered hand holding on to the black robes.

Haplo grit his teeth, but did not loosen his grasp. Delicate fingers traced over the runes on the Patryn's skin.

"Yes, now you begin to understand. It takes so much of our magical ability to bring life to the dead that it drains us. We hadn't realized how much until we met you. You tried to hide your power but we felt it. We could have thrown a spear at you, thrown a hundred spears at you, and none would have so much as scratched you. True? Yes, of course it's true. In fact, we could probably have dropped this castle on top of you and you would have emerged alive and well." The fingers continued to trace the tattooed runes, slowly, longingly, with desire.

Haplo stared, understanding, disbelieving.

"There is nothing more we can gain from our magic. But there is a great deal we can gain from yours! That is why," the dynast concluded briskly, rising to his feet, looking down at Haplo from what seemed to the dying man to be a tremendous height, "we couldn't afford to injure your body. The rune patterns must be left unblemished, unbroken, to be studied at our leisure. Undoubtedly your cadaver will be of assistance in explaining the meaning of the sigla to me.

"'Barbaric' our ancestors called your magic. They were dolts. Add the power of your magic to ours and we will be invincible. Even, we surmise, against this so-called Lord of the Nexus."

Haplo rolled over on his back. His hand released its grip on the dynast's robe; he no longer had the strength left in his fingers to maintain it.

'And then there is your comrade, your ally—the one who can bring death to the dead.'

"Not friend," Haplo whispered, barely aware of what he was saying or what was being said to him. "Enemy."

Kleitus smiled. "A man who risks his life to save yours? I think not. Tomas gathered, from certain things this man has said, that he abhors necromancy and that he would not come to restore your corpse, if you were dead. Most likely he would flee this world, and we would lose him. We inferred, however, that there must be some sort of empathic connection between the two of you. It turned out we were right. Tomas reports that your friend knows, somehow, that you are dying. Your friend believes that there is a chance you might be saved. There isn't, of course, but that won't matter to your friend. Or, at least it won't matter to him long."

The dynast drew aside the hem of his robe. "And now I must commence the resurrection of Prince Edmund."

Haplo heard the man's voice receding, heard the rustle of the robe's fabric along the floor and the voice became the rustle, or perhaps the rustle was the voice. "Don't worry. Your agony is almost over. We would imagine the pain eases, near the end. 'And so you see, Haplo, there is no need for you to ask why The prophecy," came the rustling voice. "It is all for the prophecy."

Haplo lay on his back, on the floor, too weak to move. That bastard's right. The pain is beginning to fade . . . because my life is fading. I'm dying. I'm dying and there's not a damn thing I can do about it. I'm dying in fulfillment of a prophecy.

"What is ... the prophecy?" Haplo cried out.

But his cry was, in reality, nothing more than a breath. No one answered. No one heard him. He couldn't even hear himself.

CHAPTER \* 31

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

THE CONSPIRATORS PLEADED, ARGUED, AND BEGGED, AND FINALLY PERSUADED the old earl to allow Alfred to accompany them on their mission to the palace. Tomas spoke eloquently on Alfred's behalf, a fact that considerably astonished the Sartan. Prior to this, Alfred had received the distinct impression that Tomas didn't trust him. Alfred wondered, rather uneasily, at the cause for this change.

But he was determined to go to the castle, determined to go to Haplo's aid, despite the nagging, inner voice that kept insisting it would be better, easier, simpler to let the Patryn die.

You know what villainy he plots, what villainy he's done. He started a world war on Arianus.

Haplo was the spark, perhaps, Alfred argued with himself, but the powder was poured and ready to ignite long before he arrived. Besides, he countered, I need Haplo in order to escape this terrible world!

You don't need Haplo! the inner voice scoffed. You could go back through Death's Gate on your own. Your magic is strong enough. It took you to the Nexus. And if he is dying, what will you do? Save his life? Save his life as you saved Bane? The boy was dying, and he was brought back by you! Necromancer!

Alfred's conscience squirmed in indecision. Again I'm confronted with that awful choice. And what if I save Haplo, only to save him for evil? The Patryn is capable of committing dreadful crimes, I know that. I've seen it in his mind. It would be easy, so very easy, to stay here, to turn my back to let the Patryn die. If the situation were reversed, Haplo would not lift one rune-covered hand to save me.

And yet. . . and yet. . . What about mercy? Compassion?

A whimpering sound drew the Sartan back from his confused musings, his attention drawn to the dog, lying at his feet. The animal could not lift its head, it could only feebly wag the tail that thumped weakly against the floor. Alfred had barely left the dog's side all cycle; the animal appeared to rest easier when he was nearby and it could see him. Several times, he'd feared the animal had died, and had been forced to put his hand on its flanks to feel for a heartbeat. But the life's pulse was present, fluttering beneath his gentle fingers.

The dog's eyes gazed at him with an expression of confidence that seemed to say, I don't know why I'm suffering like this, but I know you're going to make everything all right.

Alfred reached down, stroked the animal's head. The patient eyes closed, the dog was comforted by the touch.

Let's just say, he told that bothersome inner voice, that I'm not saving Haplo, I'm saving Haplo's dog. Or, rather, I will try to save him, he added, worried and unhappy.

"What was that?" Jera asked. "Alfred, did you say something?"

"I... I was just wondering if they knew what was wrong with my friend?"

"It is the preserver's considered opinion," answered Tomas, "that your friend's magic is incapable of sustaining him in this world. Just as the mensch's magic was incapable of sustaining them."

"I understand," Alfred murmured, but he didn't understand and, what's more, he didn't believe it. Alfred hadn't been in the Labyrinth (in Haplo's body) long, but he was positive that a person who had survived that fearsome place would not drop over dead in Abarrach. Someone was lying to Tomas ... or Tomas was lying to them. A nervous tremor convulsed one of Alfred's legs. He clasped his hand over the twitching muscle and tried to keep his voice from quavering.

"In that case, I must insist on going with you. I'm certain I can help him."

"And whether he can help his friend or he can't," Jera said to her father, who was glowering at Alfred, "we'll need his help ourselves. Jonathan and I will be guiding the prince. Tomas can't handle by himself a sick man or a—forgive me, sir, but we must be realistic about this—a dead one. We don't want to leave Haplo behind, no matter what his condition, for the dynast."

"If I were twenty years younger—"

"But you're not, Father," Jera admonished.

"I can get around better than he can!" the earl thundered, pointing a bony finger at Alfred.

"But you can't do anything to help Haplo."

"All our plans will remain the same, My Lord," added Tomas. "We just include one more in our numbers, that's all."

"Perfectly simple and safe, the way my wife and Tomas have worked it out," Jonathan stated, regarding the duchess with pride. "When we have the prince, we'll meet you at the gate, just as we've planned."

"Everything will be fine, Father." Jera leaned over, kissed the old man's wrinkled cheek. "This slumber time will mark the beginning of the end for the Kleitus dynasty!"

The beginning of the end. Her words passed through Alfred like the ripple of the Wave, tingling his nerves, leaving him feeling wrung out and flattened when the sensation had passed.

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"You can't appear at court in those clothes," Jera told Alfred, eyeing his faded velvet knee breeches and shabby velvet jacket. "You would call far too much attention to yourself. We'll have to find robes that fit you."

"Begging your pardon, my dear," said Jonathan, after Alfred's transformation had been effected, "but I don't think you've improved matters much."

Alfred's stoop-shouldered walk gave a false impression of his height, making him seem shorter than he actually was. Jera had first thought of clothing him in a gray robe of Tomas's, but the young man was short for a Sartan and the robe's hem hit Alfred about mid-calf. The effect was ludicrous. The duchess searched for the longest garment she could find and eventually outfitted the Sartan in one of Tomas's cast-off court robes.

Alfred felt extremely uncomfortable in the black robes of a necromancer and made a feeble protest but no one paid the least attention to him. The robes hit him at a point slightly above his large, raw-boned ankles. He was able to wear his own shoes, at least; no other pair could be found that came close to fitting over his feet.

"They're bound to take him for a refugee," said Jera, with a sigh. "Just keep your hood over your head," she instructed Alfred, "and don't say a word to anyone. Let us do the talking."

The robe was worn loosely belted around the waist. Tomas added an embroidered purse to be carried at the belt. Jera would have added an iron dagger—to be hidden in the purse—but Alfred adamantly refused.

"No, I won't carry a weapon," he said, recoiling from the dagger as he might have recoiled from one of the deadly jungle snakes of Arianus.

"It's only a precaution," said Jonathan. "No one trunks for a moment we'll actually have to use these weapons. See, I have mine." He displayed a dagger made of silver, inlaid with precious jewels. "It was my father's."

"I won't," Alfred said stubbornly. "I took a vow—"

"He took a vow! He took a vow!" the earl mimicked in disgust. "Don't force it on him, Jera. It's just as well. He'd probably cut off his own hand."

Alfred did not carry a weapon.

He had supposed that they would sneak into the palace in the dead of the dynast's slumber hours. He was considerably astonished when Tomas announced shortly after dinner that it was time they departed.

The farewells were brief and matter-of-fact, as between those who know they will meet again shortly. Everyone was excited, on edge, and didn't appear in the least fearful or cognizant of danger. The possible exception was Tomas.

Having caught him in what he was certain was a lie about Haplo, Alfred watched Tomas carefully and fancied that the easygoing smile was forced, the carefree laugh was just a split second too late to be natural, the eyes had a tendency to dart away whenever anyone looked at him directly. Alfred considered mentioning his suspicions to Jera, but rejected the idea.

I'm a stranger, an outsider. They've known him far longer than they've known me. She wouldn't listen to me and I might make matters worse instead of better. They don't trust me, as it is. They might decide to leave me behind!

Alfred took a last look at the dog before he left.

"The beast is dying," stated the earl bluntly

"Yes, I know." Alfred stroked the soft fur, petted the heaving flanks.

"What am I supposed to do with it, then?" the old man demanded. "I can't haul a corpse with me to the gate."

"Just leave it," said Alfred, rising to his feet with a sigh. "If all goes well, the dog will come to meet us. If not, it won't matter."

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Despite the fact that the dynast was not appearing in public, the court was thronged with people. Alfred had thought the tunnel streets crowded and claustrophobic until he entered the castle. Most of the living inhabitants of Necropolis could be found there at night, dancing, sharing the latest gossip, playing at rune-bone, eating the dynast's food.

Entering the crowded antechamber, doing his best not to trip over Jonathan's heels or tread on the hem of Jera's robe, Alfred was almost suffocated by the heat, the perfume of the rez flower, the raucous noise of laughter and music. The fragrance of the rez was delightful, sweet and spicy. But it couldn't quite mask another odor prevalent in the ballroom, an underlying odor, pervasive, cloying, sickening in the heat—the odor of death.

The living ate and drank, joked and flirted. The dead moved among the living, waiting on them, serving them. Trailing behind the cadavers, the phantasm shadows almost disappeared in the glitter of bright lights.

Everyone they met greeted the duke and duchess with enthusiasm.

"Did you hear the news, my darlings? There's to be a war! Isn't it too shocking!" cried a woman in mauve robes, rolling her eyes with intense enjoyment.

Jera, Jonathan, and Tomas laughed and danced and exchanged gossip and skilfully oiled their way through the throng in the antechamber, dragging, pushing, and prodding a stumbling and distressed Alfred along with them. From the antechamber, they passed into the ballroom, which was even more crowded, if such a thing were possible.

A surge in the throng suddenly separated Alfred from his group. He took a hesitating step toward where he'd last seen Jera's shining hair, and found himself in the midst of a crowd of young people amusing themselves by watching a corpse dance.

The cadaver was that of an older man of grave and stately mien. From the dilapidated appearance of both the cadaver and the clothing it wore, the corpse had been around a long, long time. Urged on by the giggling young people, the cadaver was performing a dance that it had probably performed in its own youth.

The young people hooted and jeered and began to dance around the corpse in mockery of the old-fashioned steps. The cadaver paid no attention to them, but continued to dance on its decaying legs, moving solemnly with a pathetic grace to the tune of music only it could hear.

"I've found him. Fire and ash! He's going to faint!" gasped Tomas, grabbing hold of Alfred and propping him up as the Sartan started to keel over.

"I've got him," said Jonathan, catching hold of Alfred's limp, dangling arm.

"Whafs the matter with him?" Jera demanded. "Alfred? Are you all right?"

"The . . . heat!" Alfred panted, hoping they would mistake the tears on his face for sweat. "The noise . . . I'm . . . most frightfully sorry..."

"We've been seen around the ballroom long enough to allay suspicion. Jonathan, go find the chamberlain and ask if the Queen Mother is receiving yet."

Jonathan wormed his way through the crowd. Tomas and Jera between them guided Alfred to a somewhat quieter corner, where they dislodged a portly and grumbling necromancer from his chair and plunked the shaken Alfred down into it. The Sartan closed his eyes and shivered and hoped he could avoid being sick.

Jonathan returned shortly with the news that the Queen Mother was receiving and that they had permission to wait on her and pay their respects.

Between the three of them, they hauled Alfred to his feet and propelled him through the throng, out of the ballroom, and into a long, empty hallway that, after the heat and noise of the ballroom, was a cool and quiet haven of rest.

"Your Graces." The chamberlain stood before them. "If you will follow me."

The chamberlain led them down the hallway, advancing several steps before them, his staff of office striking the rock floor with a ringing sound at about every five paces. Alfred followed, extraordinarily confused, wondering why they were taking time out of a desperate attempt to free an imprisoned prince's corpse to pay a royal visit. He might have asked Jonathan, who was beside him, but the slightest sound seemed to reverberate through the hallway, and he was fearful of the chamberlain overhearing.

Alfred's confusion grew. He had assumed they were going to the royal family's quarters. But they left the sumptuous, beautifully decorated halls far behind. The corridor they walked was narrow, winding, and began to dip downward. The gas lamps were infrequently spaced and soon ended altogether; the darkness was deep and heavy, tainted strongly with the smells of decay and must.

The chamberlain spoke a rune and a light gleamed on the top of his staff, but it merely guided the way. The light did little to aid their steps. Fortunately, the rock floor was smooth and unobstructed and they traversed it without undue difficulty, not counting Alfred, who fell over a minuscule crack in the floor and landed flat on his face.

"I'm quite all right. Please, don't bother," he protested. Nose pressed against the floor, he happened to get a very close look at the base of the rock walls.

Rune markings. Alfred blinked, stared, his thoughts going back to the mausoleum, to the underground tunnel built by his people far beneath the Geg's realm of Drevlin on Arianus, to the rune markings that ran along the tunnel floors and, when activated by the proper magic, became small, lighted guides through the darkness. In Arianus, the tunnels had been kept in good repair, the rune markings were easy to see for those with eyes to see them. On Abarrach, the sigla were faded, some obscured by dirt, in a few places completely obliterated. They had not been used in a long time. Perhaps their use had been completely forgotten.

"My dear sir, are you injured?" The chamberlain was coming back to check on him.

"Get up!" Tomas hissed. "What's the matter with you?"

"Uh, nothing. I'm fine." Alfred clambered to his feet. "Th-thank you."

The tunnel wound around, was met by other runnels, was intersected by other tunnels, flowed through and over and under and into other tunnels. Each tunnel looked exactly like every other tunnel. Alfred was completely confused and disoriented, and he marveled at the chamberlain, who moved through the maze without hesitation.

Finding the way would have been easy, if the chamberlain had been reading the guide-runes on the floor, but he never so much as glanced in their direction. Alfred couldn't see them in the dark and he dared not call attention to himself by activating their magic, and so he stumbled on ahead blindly, knowing only that they were moving downward, ever downward, and thinking that this was a very odd place for the Queen Mother to keep her parlor.

CHAPTER \* 32

### THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

THE SLOPING FLOOR GREW MORE LEVEL, GAS LAMPS REAPPEARED, gleaming yellow in the darkness. Alfred heard Jera's breathing quicken slightly in excitement. He felt Jonathan's body tense. Tomas, passing beneath a gas lamp, appeared almost as livid as one of the corpses. Alfred judged by these signs that they were nearing their goal. His heart fluttered, his hands shook, and he banished the comforting thought of fainting firmly from his mind.

The chamberlain brought them to a halt with an imperious gesture of his staff. "Please wait here. You will be announced." He moved off, calling, "Preserver! Visitors for the Queen Mother."

"Where are we?" Alfred took advantage of the moment to whisper to Jonathan.

"In the catacombs!" Jonathan answered, eyes glittering with fun and excitement.

"What?" Alfred was amazed. "The catacombs? Where Haplo and the prince—"

"Yes, yes!" Jera murmured.

"We told you it would be simple," Jonathan added.

Tomas, Alfred noticed, said nothing, but stood off to one side, keeping in the shadows, out of the light of the gas lamps.

"Of course, we'll have to go through with this farce of visiting the Queen Mother," Jera whispered, peering impatiently into the catacombs for some sign of the chamberlain. "I wonder where he's gone off to?"

"The Queen Mother. Down here." Alfred was completely baffled. "Did she commit some crime?"

"Oh, dear no!" Jonathan was shocked. "She was a very great lady when she was alive. It was her corpse that proved rather difficult."

"Her corpse," Alfred repeated weakly, leaning against the damp stone wall.

"Constantly interfering," said Jera in a low voice. "She simply could not understand that she was no longer wanted at royal functions. Her cadaver kept barging in at the most inopportune moments.

Finally, there was nothing the dynast could do but lock the corpse away down here, where she can't cause trouble. It's quite fashionable to visit her, however. And it does please the dynast. He was a good son, if not much else."

"Hush!" Tomas said sharply. "The chamberlain's returning."

"This way, if you will be so good," called the man in sonorous tones.

The narrow hall and dank walls echoed back the sounds of rustling robes and shuffling feet. A man clad in untrimmed black robes bowed, stood deferentially to one side. Was it Alfred's imagination or did Tomas and this black-robed apparition exchange telling glances? Alfred began to shiver with cold and apprehension.

They came to an intersection that formed the shape of a cross; narrow hallways branched off in four directions. Alfred darted a swift glance down the hall to his right. Darkly shadowed cells ranged along either side of the hall. The Sartan tried to catch a glimpse of the prince, or possibly Haplo. He saw nothing, and he didn't dare take time for a closer inspection. He had the uncanny feeling that the preserver's eyes were fixed on him.

The chamberlain turned to the left and the group trooped behind him. Rounding a corner, they stepped into a blaze of light that nearly blinded them after the dim light of the hallways. Sumptuously adorned and appointed, the cavern might have been lifted intact from the royal chambers, except for the iron cell bars, which marred the effect. Behind the bars, surrounded by every possible luxury, a well-preserved cadaver sat in a high-backed chair drinking air from an empty teacup. The corpse was clad in robes of silver thread, and gold and jewels glittered on waxen fingers. Her silver hair was beautifully coiffed and cared for.

A young woman clad in plain black robes sat in a chair near her, making desultory conversation. Alfred realized, with a shock, that the young woman was alive; the living actually serving the dead.

"The Queen Mother's private necromancer," said Jera.

The young woman brightened when she saw them, her expression grew eager. She rose quickly and respectfully from her seat. The cadaver of the Queen Mother glanced their way, made a stately invitational motion with its wrinkled hand.

"I will wait to accompany you out of the catacombs, Your Graces," said the chamberlain. "Please do not remain long. Her Most Gracious Majesty is easily tired."

"We could not think of taking you from your duties," Jera protested smoothly. "Don't let us inconvenience you. We know the way."

At first the chamberlain would not hear of such a thing but Her Grace was persuasive and His Grace was careless with a bag of golden coins that happened to fall into the chamberlain's hands by accident. The chamberlain left them, returning down the hallway, his staff thumping against the floor. Alfred watched him depart, thought he saw the chamberlain nod once at the black-robed preserver. Alfred broke out into a cold sweat. Every fiber in his body was urging him to either run or faint or perhaps do both simultaneously.

The young woman had moved to open the cell door.

"No, my dear, that won't be necessary," Jera said softly.

The conspirators stood together, listening, waiting for the sound of the chamberlain's staff to disappear in the distance. When it could no longer be heard, the preserver beckoned.

"This way!" he called, motioning them toward him.

They moved swiftly. Alfred, glancing back, saw the bitter disappointment in the young woman's face, saw her sink back down into her chair, heard her resume—in a dull, lifeless voice—her conversation with the corpse.

The preserver led them down the hall opposite to the one in which the Queen Mother was housed. It was far darker than the hall they'd just left, far darker than any hall they'd walked yet. Alfred, hurrying along next to Tomas, saw numerous gas lamps on the wall, but for some reason most of them were unlit. Either they'd blown out... or they'd been turned off.

Only one lamp in the hallway remained lighted. It beamed out from somewhere ahead, making the surrounding darkness that much darker by contrast. Drawing near, Alfred saw that the light shone on a corpse sitting on a stone slab. The eyes stared straight ahead, its arms dangled listlessly between its knees.

"That's the prince's cell!" said Tomas, his voice tight and hard. "The one with the light in it. Your friend is in the cell across from the cadaver."

Jera, in her eagerness, darted ahead. Jonathan kept dose pace behind his wife. Alfred was forced to concentrate on keeping both his feet headed in the same general direction. He found himself at the rear and he suddenly realized that the preserver, who had been in the lead, had unaccountably dropped back behind him. Tomas, too, was no longer around.

From out of the darkness came the clank and rattle of armor. Alfred saw the danger, saw it clearly in his mind, if not with his eyes. He drew a breath to shout a warning, forgot to watch where he was going. The toe of one foot caught on the heel of his other foot. He pitched forward, came down hard on the rock surface, the force of his impact slamming the breath from his body. His cry became nothing more than a whoosh of air, followed by a twanging sound behind him. An arrow flew over his head, pierced the air where he'd been standing.

Peering ahead, fighting desperately to breathe, Alfred saw Jonathan and Jera, two shapes silhouetted against the light—perfect targets.

"Jonathan!" Jera screamed. The two shapes converged con-fusingly. A flight of arrows sped at them.

Unconsciousness sought to claim Alfred, to draw him into its comfortable oblivion. He battled it back and managed to gasp out the runes, his subconscious bringing words to lips that had no idea what they were speaking.

A heavy weight crashed on top of Alfred, who wondered dazedly if he'd brought the cavern roof down on them. But he realized, from the smell and the feel of chill flesh and cold armor plate

against his skin, that he'd succeeded in performing the magic he'd performed once before. He had killed the dead.

"Jera!" Jonathan's voice, panic-stricken, disbelieving, rose to a shriek. "Jera!"

The soldier's corpse had fallen across Alfred's legs. The Sartan pulled himself out from beneath it. A phantasm floated around him, taking on the living form and shape of the body it had left, before it wafted away into the darkness. Alfred was vaguely aware of footsteps—living footsteps—running swiftly back down the hallway and of the preserver kneeling beside the soldier-corpse, speaking to it imperatively, commanding it to rise.

Alfred had no clear idea in his mind of what to do, where to go. He made it to his feet and peered around in terrified confusion. Grief-choked, ragged sobs drew him forward, into the darkness.

Jonathan knelt on the floor. He held Jera in his arms.

The two had almost reached the prince's cell. The light of the gas lamp above it streamed over them, shone off the shaft of an arrow, buried deep, lodged in Jera's right breast. Her eyes were fixed on her husband's face and, just as Alfred reached them, her lips parted in a sigh that took the last breath from her body.

"She jumped in front of me," Jonathan cried dazedly. "The arrow was meant for me and. .. she jumped in front of me. Jera!" He shook the corpse, as if he were trying to waken a deep sleeper. Her lifeless hand slid to the floor. Her head lolled to one side. The beautiful hair fell over her face, covering it like a shroud.

"Jera!" Jonathan clasped her to his breast.

Alfred could still hear the voice of the preserver, attempting to raise the dead guard.

"But he'll soon realize that's futile and summon other guards. Maybe that's where Tomas, the traitor, went." Alfred was talking to himself, knew he was talking to himself, but he couldn't seem to help it. "We have to get away, but where do we go? And where's Haplo?"

A soft groaning came to him as if in response to the sound of the name, cutting beneath Jonathan's cries and the preserver's chants. Alfred looked around hurriedly, saw Haplo lying on the floor near his cell door.

Swift-spoken runes and a graceful weaving of the hands, all done without conscious thought on Alfred's part, reduced the iron bars of the cell to small piles of rust lined up in a neat row.

Alfred touched the Haplo's neck. He could not find the heartbeat, the life's pulse had sunk low, and he feared he was too late. Reaching out a gentle, trembling hand, he turned the man's head to the light. He saw the eyelids flutter. He could feel a soft stirring of warm breath on the skin of the hand that he held near the Patryn's cracked and parched lips. He was alive, but just barely.

"Haplo!" Alfred leaned near, whispering urgently. "Haplo! Can you hear me!" Watching anxiously, he saw the man's head nod with a feeble motion. Relief flooded through him. "Haplo! Tell me what happened to you? Is it sickness? A wound? Tell me! I"—Alfred drew a deep breath, but there had really never been any doubt over his decision—"I can heal you—"

"No!" The crusted lips could barely move, but Haplo managed to form the word, managed to summon enough breath to speak it aloud. "I won't... owe my life ... Sartan." He ceased talking, shut his eyes. A spasm convulsed his body and he cried out in agony.

Alfred hadn't foreseen this, couldn't think how to handle it. "You wouldn't owe your life to me! I owe you!" He was babbling, but it was the only thing he could think to do under the circumstance. "You saved my life from the dragon. On Arian—"

Haplo sucked in a breath. He opened his eyes, reached out and gripped Alfred's robes. "Shut up and ... listen. You can do ... one thing for me ... Sartan. Promise! Swear!"

"I—I swear," Alfred said, not knowing what else to say. The Patryn was very near death.

Haplo was forced to pause, summon his waning strength. He ran his swollen tongue over lips coated with a strange, black substance. "Don't let them. . . resurrect me. Burn... my body. Destroy it. Understand." The eyes opened, gazed intently into Alfred's. "Understand?"

Slowly, Alfred shook his head. "I can't let you die."

"Damn you!" Haplo gasped, his weak hand losing its grasp.;

Alfred traced the runes in the air, began his chant. His only question now, the only dread left in his heart was: would his magic work on a Patryn?

Behind him, he heard, like an echo of his own words, the soft phrase, "I won't let you die!" And he heard the chanting of runes. Alfred, concentrating on his work, paid no attention.

"Damn you!" Haplo cursed him.

CHAPTER \* 33

## THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

FOLLOWING ALFRED'S FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH HAPLO ON ARIANUS, the Sartan took pains to study the Patryns, the ancient enemy. The early Sartan were meticulous record keepers, and Alfred delved into the mass of histories and treatises kept in the record vaults in the mausoleum beneath Drevlin. He searched particularly for information on the Patryns themselves and their concepts of magic. He found little, the Patryns having been wary of revealing their secrets to their enemies. But one text struck him particularly, and it came now to his mind.

It had been written, not by a Sartan, but by an elven wizardess, who had formed a romantic liaison (brief and volatile) with a Patryn.

The concept of the circle is the key to the understanding of Patryn magic. The circle rules not only the runes they tattoo upon their bodies and how those runes are structured, but it also extends into every facet of their lives—the relationship between the mind and body, relationships between two people, relationships with the community. The rupture of the circle, whether it be injury to the body, the destruction of a relationship, or rupture in the community, is to be avoided at all costs.

The Sartan and others who have encountered the Patryns and are familiar with their harsh, cruel, and dictatorial personalities are continually amazed at the strong loyalty these people feel for their own kind. (And only their own kind!) To those who understand the concept of the circle, however, such loyalty is not surprising. The circle preserves the strength of their community by cutting the community off from those the

Patryns consider beneath them. [There followed irrelevant material concerning the wizardess and her failed love affair.] Any illness or injury that strikes down a Patryn is seen to have broken the circle established between body and mind. In healing practices among the Patryns, the most important factor is to reestablish the circle. This may be done by the wounded or a sick person himself or it may be done by another Patryn. A

Sartan who understood the concept might possibly be able to perform the same function, but it is highly doubtful 1: if the Patryn would permit it and 2: if even a Sartan would be inclined to exhibit such mercy and compassion for an enemy who would a turn around and slaughter him without compunction.

The mensch wizardess had not had much use for either Patryns or Sartan. Alfred, on originally reading the text, was somewhat indignant at the woman's tone, feeling sure his people were being unfairly maligned. Now, he wasn't so certain.

Mercy and compassion ... to an enemy who would show you none himself. He had read the words lightly, glibly, without thinking about them. Now he didn't have time to think about the question, but it occurred to him that somewhere in that sentence was the answer.

The circle of Haplo's being was broken, shattered. Poison, Alfred guessed, noting the black substance on the lips, the swollen tongue, the evidence around him that the man had suffered terrible sickness.

"I must mend the circle, then I can mend the man."

Alfred took hold of Haplo's rune-tattooed hands—the Patryn's left hand held in the Sartan's right, the Sartan's right hand holding the Patryn's left. The circle was formed. Alfred closed his eyes, shutting out every sound around him, banishing the knowledge that more guards were coming, that they were still in deadly peril. Softly, he began to sing the runes.

Warmth surged through him, blood pulsed strongly in his body, life welled up inside him. The runes carried the life from his heart and head to his left arm and his left hand and he sensed it passing through his hand to Haplo's hand. The chill skin of the dying man grew warm to the touch. He heard, or thought he heard, the man's breathing grow stronger.

Patryns have the ability to block Sartan spells, to obviate their power. Alfred was truly afraid, at first, that Haplo might do just that.

But he was either too weak to tear apart the weaving of the runes Alfred spun around him, or the urge to survive was too strong.

Haplo was growing better, but, suddenly, Alfred himself was gripped with pain. The poison entered his system, flowing from the Patryn to the Sartan, stabbing at his insides with knives of flame. Alfred gasped and moaned and doubled over, nausea twisting bowels and stomach, seeming likely to tear him apart.

An enemy who would turn around and slaughter him without compunction,

A horrifying suspicion came over Alfred. Haplo was killing him! The Patryn cared nothing about his own life, he would die and use this opportunity to take his enemy with him.

The suspicion vanished in an instant. Haplo's hands, growing warmer and stronger, clasped the Sartan's more tightly, giving what life and strength he had to give back to Alfred. The circle between the two was truly forged, truly complete.

And Alfred knew, with a feeling of overwhelming sadness, that Haplo would never forgive him.

"Stop! No! What are you doing?" Someone was yelling in panic.

Alfred came back to his surroundings, to their peril, with a jolt. Haplo sat upright and, although he was pale and shivering, he was breathing normally, his eyes were clear, their gaze fixed on Alfred with grim enmity.

Haplo broke the circle, jerking his hands from Alfred's grip.

"Are ... are you all right?" Alfred asked, peering at Haplo anxiously.

"Leave me alone!" Haplo snarled. He attempted to stand, fell back.

Alfred stretched forth a solicitous hand, Haplo shoved him away roughly.

"I said leave me alone!"

Gritting his teeth, he leaned against the stone bed and pulled himself up off the floor. He was about to attempt to stand, when he glanced out the cell, over Alfred's shoulder. The Patryn's eyes narrowed, his body tensed.

Becoming aware of the panicked shouting behind him, Alfred swung around hastily. The preserver was yelling, but he was yelling at the duke, not at Alfred.

"You're insane! You can't do such a thing! It is against all the laws! Stop it, you fool!"

Jonathan was singing the runes working the magic on the body of his dead wife.

"You don't know what you are doing!"

The preserver lunged at Jonathan, attempted to drag him away from the corpse. Alfred heard the preserver add something about a "lazar," but the Sartan didn't understand the incoherent shout.

Jonathan flung the preserver off him with a strength born of grief, despair, and madness. The man slammed into a wall, struck his head, and crumpled to the floor. The duke paid no attention to him, paid no attention to the sounds of pounding footsteps, far away, but drawing closer. Holding the still-warm body of his wife to his breast, Jonathan continued to sing the runes, tears running down his face.

"The guards are coming," said Haplo, his voice sharp-edged, cutting. "You've probably saved my life just to get me killed again. I don't suppose you gave any thought as to how we get out of here?"

Alfred looked involuntarily back down the way they'd come, realized the sound of the pounding boots emanated from precisely the same direction. "I . . . I—" he stammered.

Haplo snorted in derision, glanced grimly at the duke. "He's too far gone to be of any help to us." The Patryn stood up, somewhat shakily, nearly falling back on the stone bed. A furious look warned Alfred to keep his distance. Haplo regained his balance, staggered out of the cell, peered down the hallway that continued on into impenetrable darkness.

"Does it lead out of here? Or does it dead-end? If it comes to a dead end, then so do we. Or we could wander around in a maze forever. Still, it's our—Well, hullo, boy! Where did you come from?"

The dog, seeming to materialize out of the darkness, leapt on its master with a joyous bark. Haplo bent down to fondle it. The dog wriggled and danced and nipped at his master's ankles in a frenzy of affection.

The footsteps were nearer, but they had slowed and now Alfred could hear voices, indistinct but audible. From the fragments of conversation, it appeared that they were wary about entering the catacombs, facing the dread magic of the mysterious stranger.

Haplo patted the dog's flanks, looked inquiringly at Alfred.

"I know what you're going to ask me!" Alfred cried distractedly. The Sartan rose hastily, avoiding the Patryn's gaze, and crossed the hall to where the preserver lay in a heap on the floor. He knelt beside the body of the comatose man. 'And, no! I can't remember the spell that I used to kill the dead. I'm trying but it's impossible. It's like my fainting. It's something I can't control!"

"Then what the hell are you doing wasting time?" Haplo demanded angrily. "We've got to get out of here! If we knew the way—"

The runes!" Alfred remembered, stared at the wall of the catacomb, shining in the light. He pointed a shaking hand. "The runes!"

"Yeah? So?"

"They'll lead us out! I—Wait!"

Alfred's fingers traced the carvings on the wall, ran over the whorls and notches and intricate designs. Touching one, he spoke the rune. The sigil beneath his fingers began to glow with a soft, radiant blue light. A rune carved beside the one he touched caught the magical fire and began to glow. Soon, one after the other, a line of runes appeared out of the darkness, running down the length of the hallway and vanishing beyond their line of vision.

"Those'll lead us out of here?"

"Yes," said Alfred confidently. "That is . . ." He hesitated, wavering, recalling what he'd seen in the halls in levels above. His shoulders sagged. "If the sigla haven't been destroyed or defaced . . ."

Haplo grunted. "Well, at least it's a start." The voices were louder. "Cmon. It sounds like they're massing the whole damn army! You go on ahead. I'll get the prince. Knowing Baltazar, I have a feeling we may run into trouble trying to reach the ship without His Highness along."

The preserver was knocked unconscious, but he was alive. Alfred could leave him with a clear conscience. The Sartan hurried over to the duke's side, bent down, not certain what he could do or say to persuade the grief-stricken man to flee for a life that he must now care little about.

Alfred started to speak, stopped, sucked in a breath.

Jonathan's magic had worked. Jera's eyes were open, staring about her. She looked up at her husband with the warm and shining eyes of the living. He reached out to her but at that moment, her visage wavered, dissolved, and she was staring at him with the cold, vacant gaze of the dead.

"Jonathan!" her living voice moaned in pain. "What have you done?"

And there came a chill echo, as if from the grave, moaning, "What have you done?"

Horror filled Alfred, numbed him. He shrank back, bumped into Haplo, and clutched at him thankfully.

"I thought I told you to go on ahead!" the Patryn snapped. He had one hand on the prince's arm, the cadaver moving along quite docilly. "Leave the duke, if he won't come. He's no use to us. What the devil's the matter with you now? I swear—"

Haplo's eyes shifted, his voice trailed off. The Patryn's jaw sagged.

Jonathan was on his feet, helping his wife to stand. The arrow was lodged in her breast, the front of her robes were stained with her life's blood. That much of her image remained fixed and solid in their minds. But her face . . .

"Once, on Drevlin, I saw a woman who had drowned," Alfred said softly, voice tinged with awe. "She was lying beneath the water and her eyes were open, the water stirred her hair. She looked alive! But I knew all the time that. . . she wasn't."

No, she wasn't. He remembered the ceremony he'd witnessed in the cave, remembered the phantasms, standing behind the corpses, separate and apart from the body, divided.

"Jonathan?" the voice cried again and again. "What have you done?"

And the dreadful echo, "What have you done?"

Jera's phantasm had not had time to free itself from the body. The woman was trapped between two worlds, the world of the dead and the world of the spirit. She had become a lazar. [1]

CHAPTER \* 34

THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

THE PRESERVER GROANED AND STIRRED, REGAINING CONSCIOUSNESS.

The footsteps were on the move again, the arguing voices silenced. Apparently they had their orders and were coming after them.

The animated corpse of Prince Edmund gazed about with the dazed air of a rudely awakened sleeper; its phantasm, hovering at the prince's shoulder, whispered incoherently, sounding like the hissing of a chill wind. The duchess's cadaver was a frightful apparition. Her image constantly shifted, dissolving one moment into that of a writhing phantasm, only to coalesce again into a pale and bloody corpse. Her husband could do nothing except stare at her; the enormity of his terrible crime had stunned him senseless. Alfred was deathly white, whiter than the corpse, and looked as if he were going to keel over any moment. The dog barked frantically.

"It would be easier," Haplo said to himself bitterly, "just to lay down and die ... except that I don't dare leave my body behind.

"Get moving!" he ordered, poking Alfred none too gently in the ribs. "I've got the prince. Go on!"

"What about—" Alfred's gaze was fixed on the duke and the terrible form that had been the duchess.

"Forget them! We've got to get out of here. The soldiers and most likely the dynast himself are coming." Haplo shoved a reluctant Alfred down the hall. "Kleitus will deal with the duke and duchess."

"They will send me to oblivion!" the lazar shrieked.

"... oblivion ... ." came the echo.

Fear jolted both the lazar's body and spirit into movement. Haplo glanced behind him in the eerie, blue, rune-lit darkness, and had the awful impression that two women were running after him.

Jera's flight impelled Jonathan to movement. The duke followed after his wife. His hands reached out to her, but he couldn't seem to bring himself to touch her. His hands dropped limp at his sides.

Alfred chanted. The runes on the walls shone brightly, lighting their way deeper into the catacombs. The light rarely failed. If one line of sigla on one side of the wall grew dim or darkened, the sigla on the other side was almost certain to be visible.

The runes led them far below the catacombs. The floor sloped downward at a steep angle that made it difficult to traverse. The cell block soon came to an end, as did the modern improvements such as gas lamps on the walls.

"This part ... is ancient!" gasped Alfred, panting from the exertion of running, staggering, and stumbling. "The runes ... are undisturbed."

"But just where the hell are they leading us?" Haplo demanded. "They're not going to drop us in a hole, are they? Or run us smack into a blank wall?"

"I—I don't think so."

"You don't think so!" Haplo sneered.

"At least, the runes aren't leading our enemy to us," Alfred ventured. He pointed back at the path they had taken. It had been swallowed up by darkness, the runes had gone out.

Haplo listened carefully. He couldn't hear the footsteps or the voices. Perhaps the fool Alfred had finally managed to do something right. Perhaps the dynast had given up the pursuit.

"Either that, or he has sense enough not to come down here," Haplo muttered. He felt sick and wobbly on his legs. It took an effort just to draw each breath. The runes swam in his blurred vision.

"If I could rest ... a moment. Have time to think—" Alfred suggested timidly.

Haplo didn't want to stop. He couldn't imagine that Kleitus would just let them slip through his fingers. But the Patryn knew, though he'd never admit it, that he couldn't walk another step.

"Go ahead." He sank down thankfully onto the floor. The dog curled up at his side, crowding close, resting its head on Haplo's leg.

"Watch them, boy," he commanded, turning the dog's head in a slow sweep to include everyone in the narrow tunnel. The prince's cadaver had come to a halt and stood staring at nothing. Jera's body and spirit flitted restlessly from one side of the hall to another. Jonathan collapsed onto the tunnel floor, buried his face in his arms. He hadn't spoken a word since they'd fled.

The Patryn closed his eyes, wondered wearily if he had strength enough to complete the healing process. Or was healing possible, considering the powerful poison that had been used on him. ...

The dog lifted its head, barked once sharply. Haplo opened his eyes.

"Don't go anywhere, Your Highness."

The prince's cadaver turned around. It had been heading down the hallway. Purpose had apparently replaced dazed confusion.

"You are not my people. I must return to my people."

"We'll get you there. But you've got to be patient."

The answer appeared to satisfy Edmund's cadaver, which again stood stock-still. His phantasm, however, wavered and whispered. The lazar stopped its restless pacing, turned its head as if a voice had spoken to it.

"Is that what you desire? The experience will not be a pleasant one! Look at me!" it cried in a ghastly voice.

"... at me ..." came the echo.

The phantasm appeared resolute.

The lazar lifted its arms, its bloody hands wove strange runes around the prince's cadaver. Edmund's face, once peaceful in death, twisted in pain. The phantasm disappeared, life gleamed in the corpse's eyes. The lips moved, mouthing words, but only one among them heard what he said,

The lazar turned to Haplo. "His Highness wonders why you are helping him."

Haplo attempted to look at the lazar, to meet the eyes, but found he couldn't. The sight of the blood, the arrow, the shifting face was too horrible for him to bear. He cursed himself for his weakness, kept his gaze on the prince.

"How can it wonder anything? Its dead."

"The body is dead," the lazar answered. "The spirit is alive. The prince's phantasm is aware of what is transpiring around it. It could not speak, could not act. That is why this living death in which we are trapped is so terrible!"

". . . terrible . . ." came the echo.

"But now," continued the lazar, the awful visage cold with pride, "I have given him, as far as I am able, the power of speech, of communicating. I have given him the ability to act, spirit and body as one."

"But... we can't hear him," Alfred said in a weak voice.

"No, his spirit and body were too long divided. They have joined together, but the joining is painful, as you can see. It will not last long. Not like mine. My torment is eternal [1]"

". . . eternal. . ."

Jonathan groaned, writhed in agony nearly as acute as his wife's. Alfred blinked, incredulous, and opened his mouth. Haplo gave him a vicious nudge, warning him to silence.

"His Grace repeats the question: Why are you helping him?"

"Your Highness," said Haplo, speaking to the prince slowly, carefully considering his words, "in helping you, I'm helping myself. My ship . . . remember my ship?"

The cadaver may have nodded.

"My ship," Haplo continued, "is on the other side of the Fire Sea, docked at Safe Harbor. Your people now control Safe Harbor. I'll get you across the Fire Sea, if you'll keep your people from attacking me and grant me passage out of the docks."

The cadaver stood without moving, only the dead eyes flickered in answer.

The lazar listened, then said, with a slight sneer, "His Highness understands and accedes to the arrangement."

So much, thought Haplo, for my plan to abandon the duchess and her traumatized husband. She—or whatever it is she's turned into—could prove extraordinarily useful. He leaned over, caught hold of Alfred's robes.

"Have you come up with something? Do you know where these runes are taking us?"

"I ... I believe so." Alfred's voice lowered, his gaze shifted to Jera. "But do you realize—she can communicate with the dead!"

"Yes, I realize it! And so will Kleitus, if he gets hold of her." Haplo rubbed his arms, his skin prickled and burned. "I don't like this. Someone's coming. Someone's following us. And whoever or whatever it is, I'm in no condition to fight. It's up to you to save us, Sartan."

"And now I understand," the lazar was saying softly, speaking either to the prince or to the other half of its tortured being. "I hear your words of bitter sorrow. I share your regret, your despair, your frustration!"

The lazar wrung its hands, its voice rising. "You want so desperately to make them listen, and they can't hear! The pain is worse than this arrow in my heart!" Grasping the arrow's shaft, the lazar jerked it free, hurled it to the floor. "That pain ended swiftly. This pain will last forever! Never ending! Oh, my husband, you should have let me die!"

". . . should have let me die . . ." came the mournful echo that faded into the silence of the tunnel.

"I know how she feels," Haplo said grimly. "Pay attention to me, Sartan! There'll be enough time later for your tears... if we're lucky. The runes, damn it!"

Alfred wrenched his gaze from Jera. "Yes, the runes." He swallowed. "The sigla are leading us in a definite direction, keeping in one path. If you've noticed, we've passed by several other tunnels, branching off from this one, and they haven't taken us down those. When I spoke the runes, it was in my mind that I wanted out and so I think that the runes are leading me where I asked to go. But—" Alfred hesitated, appeared uncomfortable.

"But?"

"But that exit might very well be the front entrance to the palace," Alfred concluded miserably.

Haplo sighed, fought back a strong desire to curl up in a ball and be sick. "We've got no choice except to keep going." The burning of the runes on his skin was strong. He rose slowly and painfully to his feet, whistled to the dog.

"Haplo." Alfred stood up, laid a tentative hand on the Patryn's arm. "What did you mean, you know how she feels? Do you mean I should have let you die?"

Haplo jerked away from the man's touch. "If it's thanks you want for saving my life, Sartan, you won't get them. By bringing me back, you may have imperiled my people, your people, and all those fool mensch out there you seem to care so much about! Yes, you should have let me die, Sartan! You should have let me die, then you should have done what I asked and destroyed my body!"

Alfred stared, confused, frightened. "Imperiled ... I don't understand."

Haplo lifted a tattooed arm, thrust it into Alfred's face, pointed at the runes on his skin. "Why do you think Kleitus used poison, instead of a spear or an arrow to murder me. Why use poison? Instead of a weapon that would damage the skin?"

Alfred went livid. "Blessed Sartan!"

Haplo laughed, briefly. "Yeah! Blessed Sartan! You're a blessed bunch, all right! Now go on. Get us out of here."

Alfred started down the hallway. The sigla on the walls flamed into soft blue light at his approach. The prince's cadaver waited for the lazar, held out its hand with regal dignity, despite the gaping hole in its chest.

The lazar looked from the dead prince to her husband.

Jonathan's head was bowed, his hands clutched at his long hair, tearing it in his bitter regret.

The lazar regarded him without pity, its face smooth, cold, frozen in its death mask. The phantasm, trapped within, gave the lazar its life, a terrible life that stared out of the dead eyes with sudden, dreadful menace.

"It is the living who have done this to us," she hissed.

". . . done this to us . . ." whispered the echo.

The duke lifted a ravaged face, his eyes widened. The lazar took a step toward him. Cringing, he shrank away from what had once been his wife.

The lazar regarded him in silence. The two halves of her being shifted, separated, the spirit attempting futilely to free itself from the body's prison. Turning, without a word, the lazar joined the dead prince, its feet trampling heedlessly over the blood stained arrow it had hurled to the floor.

Wild-eyed, Jonathan plucked an object from beneath his robes. Steel flashed in the already fading light of the runes.

"Dog!" Haplo shouted. "Stop him!"

The dog leapt, teeth slashing. Jonathan cried out in pain and astonishment. The knife he held clattered to the tunnel floor. He made a grab for it, but the dog was swifter. Standing over it, the animal bared its teeth, growling. Jonathan fell back, nursing a bleeding wrist.

Haplo put his hand on the duke's arm, steered him down the tunnel after Alfred. A whistle brought the dog trotting along behind.

"Why did you stop me!" Jonathan asked in a dull voice. His feet dragged. He walked blindly. "I want to die!"

Haplo grunted. "All I need is another corpse! Get moving!"

THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

THE CATACOMB TUNNEL CONTINUED TO DESCEND AT A MODERATE slope, the runes lighting a smooth path that appeared to be delving straight into the depths of the world. Haplo had doubts about anything that Alfred undertook, but the Patryn was forced to concede that the tunnel, although ancient, was dry, wide, and had been kept in good repair. He hoped he was right in deducing, therefore, that it had been designed to accommodate a considerable amount of traffic.

Why? he reasoned, if not to take a large number of people to a specific place. And wouldn't that place more than likely be out?

It made sense. Still, he reminded himself gloomily, there was no telling with the Sartan.

But, wherever the path was leading them, they were forced to follow. There was no turning back. Haplo paused often to listen, and now he was certain he heard footsteps, the clank of armor, the rattle of sword and spear. He glanced over at his charges. The dead were in better condition than the living. The lazar and the prince's cadaver walked down the tunnel with calm, purposeful steps. Behind them, Jonathan stumbled aimlessly, paying little attention to his surroundings, his gaze fixed with a puzzled horror on the tortured figure of his beloved wife.

Haplo wasn't moving all that well himself. The poison was still in his system. Only a healing sleep would cure him completely. The runes on his flesh glowed in a sickly manner. His magic fought to place one foot in front of the other. The runes on his skin might flicker and die out completely if the sigla had to fight anything more challenging. Silent, watchful, the dog padded along, keeping at the duke's heels.

The Patryn edged his way through the narrow tunnel, past the living and the dead, to catch up with Alfred. The Sartan sang the runes softly beneath his breath, watched the sigla flame to life and light their path.

"We're being followed," Haplo announced in a low voice.

The Sartan was concentrating on the runes, had no idea Haplo was near. Alfred jumped, tripped, and nearly fell. He saved himself by clinging to the smooth, dry wall and glanced nervously behind him.

Haplo shook his head. "I don't think they're close, although I can't be certain. These damn tunnels distort the sound. They can't be sure which way we went. My guess is that they're having to stop and investigate every intersection, send patrols down every branching path to make certain they don't lose us." He gestured at the glowing blue marks on the wall. "These sigla wouldn't be likely to light up again, show them the way, would they?"

"They might," Alfred paused, considering. He looked unhappy. "If the dynast knew the proper spells. . ."

Haplo stopped walking, began swearing fluently. "That damn arrow!"

"What arrow?" Alfred cringed back against the wall, expecting barbed shafts to come flying past him.

"The arrow Her Grace yanked out of her body!" Haplo pointed in the direction they'd just come. "Once they find that, they'll know they're on the right track!"

He took a step in that direction, hardly knowing what he was doing.

"You can't be thinking of returning!" Alfred cried, panicked. "You'd never find the way back!"

Is that what I'm thinking? Haplo wondered to himself silently, nerves tingling with the idea. I use retrieving the arrow as an excuse, double back on our own trail. The soldiers will keep going forward. All I'd have to do is hide until they're gone, then be on my merry way and leave these Sartan to their well-deserved fate.

It was tempting, very tempting. But that left the problem of returning to his ship, a ship that was now moored in hostile enemy territory.

Haplo resumed walking beside Alfred.

"I'd find a way back," he said bitterly. "What you mean is that you'd never find the way back—the way back through Death's Gate. That was the reason you saved my life, wasn't it, Sartan?"

"Of course," returned Alfred softly, sadly. "Why else?"

"Yeah. Why else?"

Alfred was apparently deeply absorbed in his chanting. Haplo couldn't hear the words, but he saw the Sartan's lips move, the runes continue to light. The slope in the floor had decreased markedly. It ran level, which might indicate they were getting somewhere. The Patryn didn't know if this was good or bad.

"It wouldn't be on account of the prophecy, would it?" he asked abruptly, keeping his gaze fixed intently on Alfred.

The Sartan's entire body jerked as if dancing on a puppeteer's string—head, hands flew up, eyes opened wide. "No!" he protested. "No, I assure you! I don't know anything about this . . . this prophecy."

Haplo studied the man. Alfred was not above lying, if driven to it, but he was a terrible liar, offering up his prevarications with a wistful, pleading expression, as if begging you to believe him. He was looking at Haplo now and his look was frightened, miserable. . . .

"I don't believe you!"

"Yes, you do," answered Alfred meekly.

Haplo fumed, angry, disappointed. "Then you're an idiot! You should have asked them. After all, the prophecy was mentioned in connection with you."

"The one reason that I never want to know of it!"

"That makes a hell of a lot of sense!"

'A prophecy implies that we are destined to do something. It dictates to us, we have no choice in the matter. It robs us of our freedom of will. Too often, prophecies end up being self-fulfilling. Once the thought is in our minds, we act, either consciously or unconsciously, to bring it to pass. That can be the only explanation . . . unless you believe in a higher power.'

"Higher power!" Haplo scoffed. "Where? The mensch? I don't plan to believe in this 'prophecy' These Sartan believe in it, and that's what interests me. As you say"—Haplo winked—"that prophecy could be self-fulfilling."

"You don't know what it is either, do you?" Alfred guessed.

"No, but I intend to find out. Don't worry, though. I don't plan to tell you. Say Your Grace—" He turned toward Jonathan.

"Haplo!" Alfred sucked in his breath, caught hold of the Patryn's arm.

"Don't try to stop me!" Haplo tore himself free. "I'm warning you—"

"The runes! Look at the runes!"

Alfred pointed a trembling finger at the wall. Haplo glared at the Sartan, thinking it was a ruse to keep him from talking to the duke. But Alfred appeared truly upset. The Patryn reluctantly and warily shifted his gaze.

The sigla, lighting one by one, had been running consistently along the base of the wall ever since they left the dungeon. At this point, however, they left the base of the wall, traveled upward to form an arch of glowing blue light. Haplo squinted his eyes against the brilliance, peered ahead. He could see nothing beyond but darkness.

"It's a door. We've come to a door," said Alfred nervously

"I can see that! Where does it lead?"

"I—I don't know. The runes don't say. But... I don't think we should go any farther."

"What do you suggest we do instead? Wait here to pay our respects to the dynast?"

Alfred licked his lips. Sweat beaded on his balding head. "N-no. It's just... I mean I wouldn't—"

Haplo walked straight for the arch. At his approach, the runes changed color, blue turned to flaring red. The sigla smoldered, burst into flame. He put his hand in front of his face, tried to advance. Fire roared and crackled, smoke blinded him. The superheated air seared his lungs. The runes on his arms glowed blue in response, but their power could not protect him from the burning flames that scorched his flesh. Haplo fell back, gasping for air. He'd be immolated if he went through that doorway.

The Patryn glared at Alfred, irrationally blaming him. At Haplo's retreat, the sigla's fire faded to a red-yellow glow.

"Those are runes of warding. You can't enter," said Alfred, wide eyes reflecting the rune light. "None of us can enter! There's another hallway over here." He indicated a tunnel running at right angles to the one in which they stood.

They left the flaring archway, whose runes dimmed to darkness behind them, and entered the hallway. Alfred began to chant, the blue runes lit up along the base of the wall, leading them onward. But after taking about forty steps, they discovered that the corridor bent around to the right, leading them back in the direction from which they'd come. Haplo wasn't surprised to see another archway light up before them.

"Oh, dear," murmured Alfred, distressed. "But this can't be the same one!"

"It isn't," said Haplo, voice grim.

"Look, the hall continues on around—"

\*—and my guess is that it will only take us to another arch. You can go look, but—"

"The dead are coming." The lazar spoke suddenly, chill lips curved in a strange and eerie smile. "I can hear them."

"... hear them ..." murmured the phantasm.

"I can hear them, too," Haplo said, "the clash of cold steel." He eyed Alfred. The Sartan shrank back against the wall. By his expression, it seemed he wished very much he could crawl into the rock. "Runes of warding, you said. That means they would 'ward' people away, not prevent them from entering."

Alfred flicked a despairing glance at the sigla. "No one who came across these runes would want to enter."

Haplo checked a bitter, frustrated comment, turned to Jonathan. "Do you have any idea what could be in there?"

The duke raised glazed eyes, glanced around without interest. He had little or no idea where he was and obviously cared less. Haplo swore softly, turned back to Alfred. "Can you break the runes?"

Sweat trickled down the Sartan's face. He gulped, swallowed. "Yes." His voice was tremulous, barely audible. "But you don't understand. These runes are the strongest that could possibly be laid down. Something terrible lies beyond that door! I will not open it!"

Haplo eyed Alfred intently, measuring what it would take to force the Sartan to act. Alfred was very pale, but resolute, stooped shoulders braced, eyes meeting Haplo's with unflinching, unexpected resolve.

"So be it," Haplo muttered and, turning, started walking toward the arch. The sigla flared red, he could feel the heat on his face and arms. Gritting his teeth, he continued to walk forward. The dog gave a frantic bark.

"Stay!" Haplo commanded, and kept on walking.

"Wait!" Alfred cried in a tone no less frantic than the dog's. "What are you doing? Your magic can't protect you!"

The heat was intense. Breathing was difficult. The doorway was ablaze, an arc of fire.

"You're right, Sartan," Haplo said, coughing, moving steadily forward. "But ... it will be over quickly. And"—he glanced backward—"my body won't be of much use to anyone afterward . . ."

"No! Don't! I'll . . . I'll open them!" Alfred cried, shuddering. "I'll. . . open them," he repeated. Pushing himself up from the wall, he shuffled forward.

Haplo came to a stop, stepped to one side, watched with a quiet, satisfied smile. "You weakling," he said in disdain as Alfred moved slowly past.

CHAPTER \* 36

THE CHAMBER OF THE DAMNED, ABARRACH

STANDING BEFORE THE ARCHWAY, A PREPOSTEROUS, UNGAINLY FIGURE in his too-short black robe, Alfred began to perform a solemn dance.

The feet that could not take ten steps without falling over themselves were suddenly executing intricate steps with extraordinary grace and delicacy. His face was grave and solemn, wholly absorbed in the music. He accompanied himself with a grave and solemn song. Hands wove the runes in the air, his feet replicated the pattern on the floor. Haplo watched until he discovered some wayward part of himself feeling touched and entranced by the beauty.

"How long is this going to take?" he demanded, his voice harsh and discordant, breaking in on the song.

Alfred paid no attention to him, but the dancing and the singing ended soon after Haplo spoke. The red light of the warding runes glimmered, faded, glimmered, and died. Alfred shook himself, drew a deep breath, as if he were emerging from deep water. He looked up at the dying light of the runes and sighed.

"We can go in now," he said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

They passed through the arch without incident, although Haplo was forced to fight down a sudden overwhelming reluctance to enter, and he experienced an unpleasant tingling sensation on his skin.

If I were in the Labyrinth, I'd heed these warnings. He was the last to walk beneath the arch, the dog trotting along at his heels. The runes lit again almost immediately, their red glow illuminating the tunnel.

"That should stop whoever's following us, or at least slow them down. Most of the Sartan may have forgotten the old magic but I wouldn't put it past Kleitus—" Haplo paused, frowning. The red-glowing sigla gleamed on both sides of the arch. "What does that mean, Sartan?"

"The runes are different," said Alfred softly, fearfully. "The sigla on the opposite side were designed to keep people out. These"— he turned, staring into the darkness—"are meant to keep something in."

Haplo leaned wearily back against the tunnel wall. Patryns are not noted for their imagination or creativity, but it took little of either for Haplo to conjure up visions of various terrible monsters that might be lurking in the depths of this world.

And I haven't got the strength left to fight an angry house cat.

He felt eyes on him and glanced up swiftly. The lazar was watching him. The eyes in the dead face were fixed and staring, without expression. But the eyes of the phantasm, that sometimes looked out of the dead eyes, like a sentient shadow, were regarding him steadfastly.

Their look was fey, dire. A slight smile touched the lazar's blue-gray lips. "Why struggle? Nothing can save you. In the end, you will come to us."

Fear twisted inside Haplo, turned his guts to water, clenched his bowels; not the adrenaline-pumped fear of battle that gave a man strength he didn't possess, stamina and endurance he didn't have. This fear was the child's fear of the darkness, the terror of the unknown, the debilitating fear of a thing he didn't understand and, therefore, couldn't control.

The dog, sensing the menace, growled, hackles raised and stepped between its master and the lazar. The corpse's malevolent eyes lowered, their dreadful spell broke. Alfred had moved on down the hallway, murmuring the runes to himself. Blue sigla on the walls were once again leading them forward. Prince Edmund's cadaver stalked after him. Its phantasm had again separated from the body, trailed along behind the cadaver like a ragged silk scarf.

Shaken and unnerved, Haplo remained leaning against the wall until the rune's light had almost faded, attempting to recover himself. A voice, speaking out of the dimness, set every nerve jumping and twitching.

"Do you suppose all the dead hate us that much?" It was Jonathan's voice, torn, anguished.

Haplo hadn't been paying attention, hadn't known the duke was near. Such a lapse would have cost the Patryn his life in the Labyrinth! Cursing himself, the tunnel, the poison, and Alfred, Haplo cursed Jonathan for good measure. Grabbing the duke by the elbow, he propelled him roughly along down the hallway.

\*

The tunnel was wide and airy, the ceiling and walls dry. A thick coating of dust lay undisturbed on the rock floor. No sign of footprints or claw marks or the sinuous trails left by serpents and dragons. No attempt had been made to obliterate the sigla, the guide-runes shone brilliantly, lighting their way to whatever lay ahead of them.

Haplo listened, smelled, felt and tasted the air. He kept close watch on the runes on his skin, was alert to every fiber of his body that might warn him of danger.

Nothing.

If it hadn't seemed too preposterous, he could have sworn he actually felt a sense of peace, of well-being that relaxed taut muscles, soothed frayed nerves. The feeling was inexplicable, made no sense, and simply increased his irritation.

No danger ahead, but he distinctly sensed pursuit behind.

The tunnel led them straight forward, no twists or turns, no other tunnels branched off this one. They passed beneath several archways, but none were marked with the warding runes as had been the first. Then, without warning, the blue guide-runes came to an abrupt halt, as if they'd run into a blank wall.

Which, Haplo discovered, catching up to Alfred, was exactly the case.

A wall of black rock, solid and unyielding, loomed before them. It bore faint markings on its smooth surface.

Runes, Sartan runes, observed Haplo, studying them closely by the reflected light of the blue sigla. But there was something wrong with them, even to his untrained eye.

"How strange!" Alfred murmured, gazing at the wall.

"What?" demanded Haplo, jumpy and on edge. "Dog, watch," he commanded. A hand motion sent the animal back to stand guard over the path down which they'd come. "What's strange? Is this a dead end?"

"Oh, no. There's a door here.. .

"Can you open it?"

"Why, yes. A child could open it, in fact."

"Then let's find a child to do it!" Haplo seethed with impatience.

Alfred gazed at the wall with academic interest. "The rune structure is not complicated, rather like locks one places on one's bedroom door in one's own home, but.. ."

"But what?" Haplo suppressed a strong desire to wring the Sartan's scrawny neck. "Quit rambling!"

"There are two sets of runes here." Alfred lifted a finger, traced it over the wall. "Surely, you can see that?"

Yes, Haplo could see it and realized that's what he'd noticed when he'd first approached.

"Two sets of runes." Alfred was talking to himself. "One set apparently added later . . . much later, I would guess . . . inscribed on top of the first." Lines wrinkled the high, domed forehead; thin, gray brows came together in thoughtful consternation.

The dog barked once, loudly, warning.

"Can you open the damn door?" Haplo repeated, teeth and hands clenched, keeping a tight grip on himself.

Alfred nodded, in an abstract manner.

"Then do it," Haplo spoke quietly to keep from shouting.

Alfred turned to face him, the Sartan's expression unhappy. "I'm not sure I should."

"You're not sure you should?" Haplo stared at him, disbelieving. "Why? Is there something so formidable written on that door? More runes of warding?"

"No," admitted Alfred, swallowing nervously. "Runes of ... sanctity. This place is sacred, holy. Can't you feel it?"

"No!" Haplo lied, fuming. "All I can feel is Kleitus, breathing down my neck! Open the damn door!"

"Holy . . . sanctified. You're right," Jonathan whispered in awe. He had regained some color in his face, looked about in reluctant astonishment. "I wonder what this place was? Why no one ever knew it was down here?"

"The sigla are ancient, dating back almost to the Sundering. The runes of warding would have kept everyone away and, over the centuries, I imagine people forgot it was here."

Those runes of warding had been put up to stop whatever was beyond that door from going farther. Haplo shoved the unwelcome thought out of his mind.

The dog barked again. Turning tail, it dashed back to its master and stood at his feet, body tense, panting.

"Kleitus is coming. Open the door," Haplo said again. "Or stand here and die."

Alfred glanced fearfully behind, looked fearfully ahead. Sighing, he ran his hands over the wall, tracing rune patterns, chanting them beneath his breath. The stone began to dissolve beneath his fingers and, faster than the eye could capture, an opening in the wall appeared, outlined by the blue guide-runes.

"Get back!" Haplo ordered. He flattened himself against the wall, peered into the darkness beyond, prepared to meet slavering jaws, slashing fangs, or worse.

Nothing, except more dust. The dog sniffed, sneezed.

Haplo straightened, lunged through the door and into the darkness. He almost hoped something would leap out at him, something solid and real that he could see and fight.

His foot encountered an obstacle on the floor. He shoved against it gently. It gave way with a clatter.

"I need light!" Haplo snapped, looking back at Alfred and Jonathan, who stood huddled in the doorway.

Alfred hastened forward, stooping his tall body to duck beneath the arch. His hands fluttered, he recited the runes in a singsong tone that set Haplo's teeth on edge. Light, soft and white, began to beam out of a sigla-etched globe that hung suspended from the center of a high, domed ceiling.

Beneath the globe stood an oblong table carved of pure, white wood—a table that had not come from this world. Seven sealed doorways in the walls undoubtedly led to seven other tunnels, similar to the one down which they'd passed, all of them leading to the same place—this room. And all of them, undoubtedly, marked with the deadly runes of warding.

Chairs that must have once stood around the table lay scattered over the floor, upended, overturned. And amid the wreckage...

"Merciful Sartan!" Alfred gasped, clasping his hands together.

Haplo looked down. The object his foot had disturbed was a skull.

## CHAPTER \* 37

### THE CHAMBER OF THE DAMNED, ABARRACH

THE SKULL LAY WHERE HE HAD NUDGED IT, SENDING IT ROLLING ONTO a pile of dry bones. More bones, and more skulls—almost too numerous to count—filled the chamber. The floor was carpeted with bones. Well preserved in the sealed atmosphere, undisturbed through the centuries, the dead lay where they had fallen, limbs twisted grotesquely.

"How did they die? What killed them?" Alfred glanced this way and that, expecting to see the killer emerge at any moment.

"You can relax," said Haplo. "Nothing killed them. They killed each other. And some of them weren't even armed. Look at these two, for example."

A bony hand held the hilt of a sword, its bright metal had not rusted in the dry, hot atmosphere. The notched blade lay beside a head that had been severed from its shoulders.

"One weapon, two bodies."

"But then, who killed the killer?" Alfred asked.

"Good question," Haplo admitted.

He knelt down to examine one of the bodies more closely. The skeletal hands were wrapped around the hilt of a dagger. The dagger's blade was lodged firmly in the skeleton's own rib cage.

"It seems the killer killed himself," said Haplo.

Alfred drew back in horror. Haplo looked quickly about, saw evidence that more than one had fallen by his or her own hand.

"Mass murder." He stood up. "Mass suicide."

Alfred stared, aghast. "That's impossible! We Sartan revere life! We would never—"

"Just as you never practiced necromancy?" Haplo interrupted curtly.

Alfred closed his eyes, his shoulders sagged, he buried his face in his hands. Jonathan stepped gingerly inside, stared dazedly around the room. Prince Edmund's cadaver stood stolidly against one wall, evincing no interest. These were not his people. The lazar glided among the skeletal remains, its dead-living eyes quick and darting.

Haplo kept one of his own eyes on Jera. He walked over to Alfred, slumped dispiritedly against the wall.

"Get a grip on yourself, Sartan. Can you shut that door?"

Alfred lifted an anguished face. "What?"

"Shut the door! Can you shut the door?"

"It won't stop Kleitus. He came through the warding runes."

"It'll slow him down. What the hell's the matter?"

"Are you sure you want me to? Do we want to be ... locked in here?"

Haplo gestured impatiently at the six other doors in the chamber.

"Oh, yes, well, I see," Alfred mumbled. "I suppose it will be all right..."

"Suppose all you want. Just shut the damn door!" Haplo turned, surveying the exits. "Now, there must be some way to figure out where these lead. They must be marked—"

A grating sound interrupted him; the door starting to slide shut.

Why, thank you, Haplo was about to comment sarcastically, when he caught a glimpse of Alfred's face.

"I didn't do it!" the Sartan protested, staring wide-eyed at the stone door that was grinding its way inexorably across the opening.

Suddenly, irrationally, Haplo didn't want to be trapped in this place. He leapt forward, interposed his body between the door and the wall.

The massive stone door bore down on him.

He pushed against it with all his might. Alfred grabbed wildly at the door with his hands, fingers scrabbling at the stone.

"Use magic!" Haplo commanded.

Desperately, Alfred shouted a rune. The door continued to shut. The dog barked at it frantically. Haplo made an attempt to stop it using his own magic, hands trying to trace runes on the door that near to squeezing the life from him.

"It won't work!" Alfred cried, ending his attempt to stop the door. "Nothing will work. The magic's too powerful!"

Haplo was forced to agree. Near being crushed between the door and the wall, he lunged sideways, pulled himself free. The door shut with a dull boom that sent dust into the air, rattled the bones of the skeletons.

So the door shut. It's what I wanted. Why did I panic like that? Haplo demanded of himself angrily. It's this place, a feeling about this place. What drove these people to kill each other? To kill themselves? And why those warding runes, preventing anyone from coming, anyone from leaving?

...

A soft blue-white light began to illuminate the chamber. Haplo looked up swiftly, saw runes appear, running in a circle around the upper portion of the chamber walls.

Alfred drew in a deep breath.

"What is it? What do they say?" Haplo braced himself.

"This place is ... sanctified!" Alfred breathed in awe, staring up at the runes whose glow grew brighter, bathing them in radiant light. "I think I'm beginning to understand. Any who bring violence in here . . . will find it visited on themselves! That's what they say."

Haplo breathed a sigh of relief. He'd begun to have visions of people trapped inside a sealed room, dying of suffocation, going mad, ending it swiftly.

"That explains it. These Sartan began fighting among themselves, the magic reacted to put a stop to it, and that was that."

He shoved Alfred toward one of the doorways. It didn't matter where it led. Haplo wanted only to get out of here. He almost flung the Sartan into the door. "Open it!"

"But why is this chamber sacred? What is it sacred to? And why, if it is sacred, should it be so strongly guarded?" Alfred, instead of studying the runes on the door, was peering vaguely about the room.

Haplo flexed his hands, clenched them tightly. "It's going to be sacred to your own corpse, Sartan, if you don't open that door!"

Alfred set to work with infuriating slowness, hands groping over the stone. He peered at it intently, murmured runes beneath his breath. Haplo stood near, to make certain the Sartan wasn't distracted.

"This is our perfect chance for escape. Even if Kleitus does manage to make it this far, he won't have any idea which way we've gone—"

"There are no phantasms here," came the lazar's voice.

". . . no phantasms here , . ." whispered its echo.

Haplo glanced around, saw the lazar flitting from one corpse to another. The prince's cadaver had left the doorway and moved over near the white wood table in the center of the chamber.

Is it my imagination, wondered Haplo, or is the prince's phantasm gaming shape and form?

The Patryn blinked, rubbed his eyes. It was this damn light! Nothing looked like it was supposed to look.

"I'm sorry," said Alfred meekly. "It won't open."

"What do you mean, it won't open?" Haplo demanded.

"It must be something to do with those runes," the Sartan said, gesturing vaguely up at the ceiling. "While their magic is activated, no other magic can work. Of course! That's the reason," he continued in a pleased tone, as if he'd just solved some complex mathematical equation. "They didn't want to be interrupted in whatever it was they were doing."

"But they were interrupted!" Haplo pointed out, kicking at one of the skulls with his foot. "Unless they went mad and turned on themselves."

Which seemed like a very real possibility. I have to get out of here! Haplo couldn't breathe. Some strange force in the room was expanding, squeezing the air out. The light was intensely bright, painful, hurt his eyes.

I have to get out of here, before I go blind, before I suffocate! Clammy sweat dampened his palms, chilled his body. I have to get out of here!

Haplo shoved Alfred aside, hurled himself at the sealed door. He began to trace runes on the rock, Patryn runes. He was frantic, his hands shaking so that he could barely form the sigla he had known how to shape since childhood. The sigla burned red, dimmed, went out. He'd made a mistake. A stupid mistake. Swearing, he grit his teeth and began again. He had a vague sense of Alfred attempting to stop him. Haplo brushed him away, as he would have brushed away a stinging fly. The white, blue light was growing stronger, more brilliant, beating down on him like the sun.

"Stop him!" The lazar's shrill voice. "He's leaving us!"

\* .. leaving us ..." came the echo.

Haplo began to laugh. He wasn't going anywhere and he knew it. His laughter had a hysterical edge. He heard it, didn't care. Die, We're all going to die...

"The prince!" Alfred's voice and the dog's warning bark came at the same time, were almost indistinguishable, as if the Sartan had given the dog words.

Body and mind numb from sickness, fatigue, and what could only be described as panic, Haplo saw that at least one member of their group had discovered a way out.

The prince's cadaver slumped over the table, the dreadful magic that had kept it alive was gone. Edmund's phantasm was walking away from the husk that had been its prison, the spirit's form tall and regal as the prince had been in life, its face transfigured by an expression of rapt wonder. The arms of the cadaver lay flaccid on the marble. The arms of the phantasm reached out. It took a step forward moving through the solid wooden table as if it were a phantasm. Another step and another. The phantasm was leaving its body behind.

"Stop him!" The lazar's shifting features, blending those of the living and the dead, faced Haplo. "Without him, you will never recover your ship! Even now, his people are attempting to break down the runes you have placed on it. Baltazar plans to sail across the Fire Sea and attack Necropolis."

"How the hell can you know that?" Haplo shouted. He heard himself shouting, but couldn't stop. He was losing control.

"The voices of the dead cry out to me!" the lazar answered. "From every part of this world, I hear them. Stop the prince or your voice will join them!"

". .. your voice will join them . . ." hissed the echo.

None of this made sense anymore. It was all an insane dream. Haplo shot Alfred an accusing glance.

"I didn't cast the spell! Not. . . not this time!" Alfred protested, wringing his hands. "But it's true. He is leaving!"

The prince's phantasm, arms outstretched, glided through the wood table, approaching the center. The spirit grew clearer in the vision of those watching, the lifeless cadaver began to slide to the floor. Where was he going? What was drawing him away?

What would bring him back?

"Your Highness " Jonathan called out/ voice cracking with frantic urgency. "Your people! You can't leave them. They need you!"

\*Your people!" The lazar added its persuasion. "Your people are in danger. Baltazar rules now, in your stead, and he is leading them to war, a war they cannot hope to win."

"Can he hear us?" Haplo demanded.

The phantasm heard. It hesitated in its movement, gazed at those standing around it, the expression of wonder blurring, marred by doubt, sorrow.

"It seems a pity to call him back," Alfred murmured.

Haplo could have made a sarcastic comment, but he lacked the energy. He was irritated with himself for having been thinking the very same thing.

"Return to your people." The lazar was luring the phantasm back to its corpse, crooning to it gently, as a mother lures a child from the perils of the cliffs edge. "It is your duty, Your Highness. You are responsible. You have always been responsible. You cannot be selfish and leave them when they need you most!"

The phantasm dwindled, faded until it was nothing more than the gibbering ghost it had been before. And then, it vanished, disappeared altogether.

Haplo shut his eyes, hard, thinking again that the eerie blue light was playing tricks on them. Blinking, he glanced around to see if anyone else had noticed.

Alfred stared vacantly at the white wooden table. Jonathan was assisting the reanimated corpse to stand.

Would anyone notice if a man, walking down a street in broad daylight, cast no shadow?

"My people," the corpse said. "I must return to my people."

The words were the same, the intonation was different. The difference was subtle, a change in the pitch, the modulation. He wasn't reciting them by rote, he was thinking about them. And Haplo realized that Edmund's corpse had become a "he," no longer an "it." The sightless eyes were sightless no longer. They were fixed on the lazar and in the eyes was the shadow of doubt. Haplo knew then where Edmund's phantasm had gone. It had, once again, joined with the corpse.

Glancing at the lazar, he saw that it had seen the same phenomenon and that it was not pleased.

Haplo didn't know why, he didn't care. Strange things had happened—were happening—in this room. The longer he stayed, the less he liked it and he hadn't liked it much from the beginning. There had to be some way to shut off those damn blue lights ...

"The table," said Alfred suddenly. "The key is the table." He approached it, stepping carefully over the bodies that littered the floor. Haplo went with him, keeping up with him, step for step. "And look at this! The bodies around the table are facing outward, as if they had fallen defending it."

"And they're the ones who weren't armed," Haplo added. "The sacred runes, a table these people died to protect. If they had been mensch, I'd say this table was an altar." His eyes met Alfred's, the same question was in both.

The Sartan considered themselves to be gods. What could they possibly have worshiped?

He and Alfred drew close to the table now. Jonathan was examining it closely, brow furrowed. He reached out a hand.

"Don't touch it!" Alfred exclaimed.

The duke snatched his hand back. "What? Why not?"

"The sigla on it. Can't you read them?"

"Not very well." Jonathan flushed. "The runes are old."

"Very old," Alfred agreed solemnly. "The magic has to do with communication."

"Communication?" Haplo was disappointed, disgusted. "Is that all?"

Alfred began slowly unraveling the tangled skein. "This table is ancient. It did not come from this world. They brought it with them from the old world, the sundered world. They brought it with them and they established it here, beneath the first structure they ever built. For what purpose? What would be one of the first things these ancient Sartan would attempt to do?"

"Communicate!" Haplo said, studying the table with more interest.

"Communicate. Not with each other on this world, they could do that by means of their magic. They would try to establish contact with the other worlds."

"Contact that failed."

"Did it?" Alfred studied the table. He held his hands above the sigil-inscribed wood, fingers spread, palms facing down. "Suppose that, in attempting to contact the other worlds, they made contact with . . . something, someone else?"

The force that opposes us is ancient and powerful. It cannot be fought, cannot be placated. Tears do not move it, nor do all the weapons we have at our command. Too late, we have come to admit its existence. We bow before it...

Haplo recalled the words, couldn't think, for the moment, where he'd heard them. On another world. Arianus? Pryan? An image of a Sartan speaking them came to mind, but Haplo had never spoken to another Sartan, except Alfred, before coming to this place. It didn't make any sense.

"Does it say how we get the hell out of here?" Haplo demanded.

Alfred, hearing the jagged edge to the Patryn's voice, looked grave. "One of us must attempt the communication himself."

"Just who are you going to communicate with?"

"I don't know."

'All right. Anything to end this. No, wait, Sartan. I'm in on this, too," Haplo said grimly. "Whatever you hear, I'm going to hear."

'And you, Jonathan?" Alfred turned to the duke. "You are the representative of this world."

"Yes. Perhaps I can learn how to help. . ." Jonathan's glance strayed to his wife, the words died on his lips. "Yes," he said again in a low voice.

"I will guard the door," offered the lazar, moving to stand beside the sealed rock.

"That's not really necessary." Alfred found it difficult to look directly at the dead woman. He tried, but his gaze kept shifting, sliding away from her. "No one can enter this hallowed chamber."

"They entered the last time," the lazar said.

".. . the last time .. ." whispered her phantasm.

"So they did!" Alfred licked dry lips, swallowed.

"We can't worry about that now," Haplo said shortly. "What do we do?"

"Put your .. . uh, put your hands on the table. You can see the indentations where the hands are to be placed. Like this, palm down, thumbs touching, fingers spread. Haplo, make certain none of the sigla on your skin come in contact with the wood. Make your mind a blank—"

"Think like a Sartan, huh? I can manage that," Haplo did as instructed. Gingerly, he placed his hands on the table. Muscles hvitched involuntarily, expecting a jolt, pain, he didn't know what. He touched wood, solid beneath his hands, cool, reassuring.

"I warn you, I don't know what's going to happen," Alfred reiterated, nervously placing his hands on the table.

Jonathan, opposite them, did the same.

Alfred began to chant the runes. The duke, after a moment's hesitation, joined in, speaking the language of the arcane clumsily and uncertainly. Haplo sat still, kept silent. The dog curled up on the floor near its master.

Soon, the three men heard nothing except Alfred's chanting. And, soon, they couldn't hear that.

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The lazar stood near the door, watching in silence, watched Alfred slump forward, watched Haplo's head rest on the table, watched Jonathan cradle his cheek on the cool, white wood. The dog's eyes blinked sleepily, closed.

The lazar raised its chill voice. "Come to me. Follow my call. Fear no runes of warding. They are for the living. They have no power over the dead. Come to me. Come to this chamber. They will open the door for you, as they opened it long ago, and invite their own doom inside. It is the living who have done this to us."

"... done this to us .. ." came the echo.

"When the living are no more," the lazar intoned, "the dead will be free."

"...free..."

CHAPTER \* 38

THE CHAMBER OF

THE DAMNED, ABARRACH

... A SENSE OF REGRET AND SADNESS FILLED ALFRED. AND ALTHOUGH painful to him, the sorrow and unhappiness were better—far better—than the lack of feeling he'd experienced prior to joining this brotherhood. Then he had been empty, a husk, a shell containing nothing. The dead—those dreadful creations of those who were beginning to dabble in necromancy—had more life than he. Alfred sighed deeply, lifted his head. A glance around the table revealed similar feelings softening the faces of the men and women gathered together in this sacred chamber.

The sadness, the regret wasn't bitter. Bitterness comes to those who have brought tragedy on themselves, through their own misdeeds, and Alfred foresaw a time for his people when bitter sorrow must encompass them all, unless the madness could be halted.

He sighed again. Just moments before, he had been radiant with joy, peace had spread like a balm over the boiling magma sea of his doubts and fears. But that heady sense of exaltation could not last in this world. He must return to face its problems and perils and thus the sadness, the regret.

A hand reached out, clasped his. The hand's grip was firm, the hand's skin smooth and unwrinkled, a contrast to Alfred's aged, parchment-paper skin, his weakened grasp.

"Hope, brother," said the young man quietly. "We must have hope."

Alfred turned to look at the man seated beside him. The young was handsome, strong, resolute—fine steel from a forging fire.

No doubts marred its shining surface, its blade was honed to a sharp, cutting edge. The young man looked familiar to Alfred. He could almost put a name to him, but not quite.

"I try," answered Alfred, blinking back the tears that suddenly misted his eyes "Perhaps it's because I've seen so much during my long life. I've known hope before, only to watch it wither and die, as did the mensch, left in our care. Our people are rushing headlong into evil—madmen rushing to the edge of the cliff, intent on hurling themselves into the abyss below. How can we stop them? Our numbers are too few—"

"We will stand before them," said the young man. "Reveal to them the truth .. ."

And be carried over the edge of the cliff with them, thought Alfred. He kept the words to himself; let the young man live while he could in the bright dream.

"How," he said instead, sadly, "do you suppose it all went wrong?"

The young man had the answer, the young always have the answers. "Throughout history, man has feared the forces in the world he could not control. He was alone in an immense universe that

appeared uncaring. Thus in the ancient days, when the lightning flashed and thundered, he cried to the gods to save him.

"In the more recent past, man began to understand the universe and its laws. Through technology and science, he developed the means to control the universe. Unfortunately, like the rabbi who created the golem, man discovered he could not control his own creation. Instead of coming to control the universe, he came near to destroying it.

"After the holocaust, man had nothing to believe in; all his gods had abandoned him. He turned to himself, to the forces within himself. And he found the magic. Over time, the magic brought us more power than we'd ever attained in our many thousand years of striving. We didn't need the gods anymore. We were the gods."

"Yes, so we believed," agreed Alfred, pondering. "And being a god was a heavy responsibility, burdensome—or so we told ourselves: ruling over and controlling the lives of those weaker than ourselves, depriving them of their freedom to determine their paths through life, forcing them to walk the one path we deemed good...."

"Yet how we enjoyed it!" said the young man.

Alfred sighed. "How we enjoyed it. How we enjoy it still and hunger after it! That's why it is going to be difficult, so very difficult—"

"Brethren." A woman, seated at the head of the table, broke in. "They are coming."

No tongue spoke a word, only the eyes communicated. Heads turned, each person looked searchingly at those beside him, receiving strength and reassurance. Alfred saw resolution and fierce joy light the eyes of the young man.

"Let them come!" he said suddenly. "We are not misers, bent on hoarding the gold we have discovered! Let them come and we will share it with them, gladly!"

The other young people who were gathered around the table caught fire from the young man's torch. Burning with inspiration, they cried out in agreement. Their elders smiled indulgently, sorrowfully. Many lowered their eyelids, not wanting their own bitter knowledge and unfortunate wisdom to snuff out the life of the bright flame.

Besides, thought Alfred, perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps the young are right. After all, why should this be revealed to us if we are not to carry it forth . . .

Sounds could be heard outside the sealed chamber, sounds indicative of many people. And it was not the sound of footsteps marching in response to order and discipline. It was the shuffling, stomping, confused sound of indiscipline, of chaos and riot, of the mob. The Sartan seated around the table again exchanged glances, doubtful, questioning.

No one can enter this chamber unless we open it. We can stay sealed up in here forever, reveling in our knowledge, keeping it only for ourselves.

"Our brother is right," said the eldest Sartan among them. A venerable woman whose body was frail and fragile as that of a bird's, her indomitable spirit and powerful magic had led them to the

marvelous discovery. "We have been the miser, hiding our wealth beneath the mattress, living in poverty by day, taking our gold out in the darkness of the night to gaze at it with covetous eyes and then returning it to its hiding place. Like the miser, who does no good with his gold, we will soon shrivel and dry up inside. It is not only our responsibility to share our wealth, it is our joy. Remove the runes of protection."

It is the right thing to do, I know, thought Alfred, lowering his head. But I am not strong. I am afraid.

A hand closed over his, a hand that was warm and strong and tried to share the confidence of the self that guided it.

"They will listen to us," said the young man softly, exultantly. "They must!"

The bright and beautiful white-blue light faded, dimmed, and died. The sounds beyond the sealed doors were suddenly louder and far more ominous, sounds of shouts and jeers, anger and hatred. Alfred's heart quailed. His hand, held fast in the young man's, trembled.

We are right. What we do is right, he kept reminding himself. But, oh, it is hard!

The stone doors ground open. The mob burst into the room, those in back shoving those in front of them to reach their goal. The people in front, however, came to a halt, nonplussed by the calm demeanor and grave, solemn countenances of those gathered around the table. A mob feeds off fear. Faced by reason and calm, the mob finds some of its energy begin to drain away.

The enraged shouts dwindled to mutterings, broken occasionally by the yell of someone in the back, demanding to know what was happening. Those who had crowded into the room, intent on violence, looked foolish and sought among themselves for a leader, someone to rekindle the comforting flame of rage.

A man stepped forward. Alfred's heart, which had been lifted by a sudden flutter of hope, sank in despair, wings broken. The man was clad in black, one of those practicing the newly discovered and previously forbidden art of necromancy. He was powerful, charismatic, and it was rumored that he was seeking to set himself up as king.

He opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the old woman, gazing on him as she might have gazed on an obstreperous child who has just interrupted its elders, asked mildly, "Why have you and your followers disturbed us in our work, Kleitus?"

"Because your work is the work of heretics and we have come to put an end to it," the necromancer answered.

"Our work here was established by the council—"

"—who deeply regret their actions!" Kleitus sneered.

Those standing behind him voiced their approbation. He knew himself to be in control, now. Or perhaps, Alfred realized with a sudden flash of terrifying insight, Kleitus had been in control all along. His was the spark that had ignited the fire. Now he had only to blow on the coals to create a raging inferno.

"The council set you the task of contacting the other worlds, to explain to them our desperate peril and beg them to send the aid promised to us before the Sundering. And what was the result? For months you did nothing. Then, suddenly, you come forward prattling nonsense that only a child would believe—"

"If it is nonsense," cut in the old woman, her voice smooth and calm, a contrast to the rising, strident tones of her accuser, "then why disturb us? Let us continue on—"

"Because it is dangerous nonsense!" Kleitus shouted. He lapsed into silence, seeking to gain control over himself. An intelligent man, he knew that wild hacking and slashing was as self-destructive in verbal parry as it was in actual swordplay. His voice, when he spoke, had regained its discipline. "Because, unfortunately, there are some of our people who have the guileless minds of children. And others, like this one." Kleitus's gaze rested on the young man. The necromancer's eyes darkened in anger. "Young people who have been lured into your trap by the bright bauble you dangled in front of them!"

The young man said nothing, the hand holding Alfred's tightened its firm grip, the handsome face became more serene. What was this young man to Kleitus? He couldn't be his son, Kleitus wasn't old enough to have fathered one this age. Younger brother, perhaps, who had looked to the older brother in worship before finding out the truth? Apprentice to a once-idolized teacher? It occurred to Alfred that he didn't know the young man's name. Names had never been important to those gathered around the table. Something told Alfred, deep inside, that he would never know it. And that, somehow, it would not matter.

Alfred felt stronger. He was able to return the pressure of the young man's grip. The young man looked at him, and smiled.

Unfortunately, this smile was oil thrown on Kleitus's smoldering blaze. "You stand accused of corrupting the minds of our youth! There"—he pointed a stabbing finger at the young man—"is our proof!"

The crowd surged forward, its anger rumbled like the belching of the Fire Sea, breaking out of the cracks in the ground.

The old woman thrust aside the hands of those of her brethren who respectfully sought to assist her and rose to her feet under her own power. "Take us before the council, then!" she returned in a voice that quelled the fiery tide. "We will answer any charges brought against us!"

"The council is a bunch of doddering fools, who, in their misguided efforts to preserve peace, have put up with your rantings far too long. The council has turned over leadership to me!"

The mob cheered. Kleitus, emboldened, moved the accusing finger from the young man to the old woman.

"Your heretical lies will do no more harm to the innocent!"

The mob's cheering grew louder, more sinister. They surged forward again. Blades flashed, blades of sword and knife.

"Those who wield steel in this sacred chamber will find the point turned to their own breasts!" the old woman warned.

It was Kleitus who raised a hand, brought the mob to a halt, brought their clamor to a grumbling quiet. He didn't act to stop the threat out of fear or mercy; he was demonstrating his control, letting it be known that he could release his wolf pack any time he chose.

"We mean you no harm," he said smoothly. 'Agree to go forth publicly and tell the people that you have been lying to them. Tell them.. .' Kleitus paused, spinning his web. "Tell them that you did, in fact, contact the other worlds. That you hoped to preserve their riches for yourselves. Actually, now that I think of it, such a scheme is probably not far from the truth."

"Liar!" cried the young man, jumping to his feet. "You know what we have done! I told you! I told you everything! I only wanted to share with you—" Hands outspread, he turned to those gathered around the table. "Forgive me. I have brought this on us."

"It would have come," said the old woman softly. "It would have come. We are too early ... or too late. Resume your place at the table."

Sorrowing, the young man slumped back into his chair. It was Alfred's turn to offer comfort, what comfort there could be. He rested his hand on the young man's arm.

Brace yourself, he told him silently. Brace yourself for what must come. Too early . . . too late. Please, not too late! Hope is all we have left.

Kleitus was saying something: ". . . appear in public, denounce yourselves as charlatans. Suitable punishment will be determined. And now stand aside from that table!" he commanded, his voice cold and grinding as the stone door. Several of his followers came forward, iron hammers and chisels in their hands.

"What do you intend to do, Kleitus?"

He shifted the pointing finger again, this time to the white wood. "It will be destroyed, lest it lead others to evil!"

"To the truth, don't you mean?" the old woman said quietly. "Isn't that what you fear?"

"Stand aside! Or you will meet the same fate!"

The young man raised his head, stared, stricken, at Kleitus. Only now, he was beginning to understand what terrible purpose the necromancer had in mind. Alfred felt profoundly sorry for the young man. The old woman remained standing. As a body, the men and women gathered around the table rose to stand with her.

"You are wasting your time and possibly your lives, Kleitus. You may silence our voices, but others will come after us. The table will not be destroyed!"

"You plan on defending it?" Again, Kleitus sneered.

"Not with our bodies. With our prayers. Brethren, do no violence. Harm no one. These are our people. Raise no magical defenses. None will be needed. I warn you again, Kleitus!" The old woman's voice rose strong and proud. "This chamber is sacred, blessed. Those who bring violence will—"

A bow snapped, an arrow sped over the table, thudded into the woman's breast.

"—be forgiven," she whispered, and slumped down, red blood staining the white wood.

A flash of movement. Alfred turned. A man raised his bow, arrow aimed straight at Alfred. The man's face was twisted with fear and the anger fear breeds, Alfred couldn't move. He couldn't have cast a magical defense if he'd wanted to. The man drew back the bowstring, prepared to let fly. Alfred stood waiting for death. Not courageously, he realized sadly, but rather foolishly.

A strong hand, coming from behind Alfred, shoved him to one side, and he was falling. . . .

CHAPTER \* 39

THE CHAMBER OF THE DAMNED, ABARRACH

"DAMN it, SAKTAN! WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?"

A hand caught hold of him, shook him roughly.

Alfred raised his head, gazed confusedly about. He was lying on the floor, and expected to see the bloodstained hems of white robes, the trampling feet of the mob. Instead, he saw a dog, standing over him, and Haplo. He could hear voices, shouts, and the tramping of feet. The mob. The mob was coming. But, no, the mob had come—

"Must. . . guard the table . . ." Alfred struggled to stand.

"There's no time for any more of your tricks!" Haplo fumed. "Do you hear that? The soldiers are coming!"

"Yes, the mob . . . attacking. . ."

Haplo grabbed him, shook him as if to shake up his scattered wits. "Give your magic up as a bad try and concentrate on how you're going to get us out of here!"

"I don't understand ... please! Tell me what's going on! I... I truly don't understand!"

The Patryn kept his watchful gaze on the door, dropped his hands from Alfred's robes in exasperation. "Why should that surprise me? All right, Sartan. Apparently during the 'performance' you put on for our benefit—"

"I didn't—"

"Shut up and listen! Our duchess managed somehow to douse the sacred lights and activate the runes that open that door. And you're going to do the same to the runes on that door"—Haplo

pointed to another door located at a forty-five-degree angle from the first—"when I give the word. Do you think you can walk now?"

"Yes," Alfred said, somewhat hesitantly. He swayed unsteadily on his feet, clung to the table for support. He was confused, felt as if he were in two different places at the same time, and he had a strong reluctance to leave the last place, despite the danger. The overwhelming sense of peace and . . . and of having found something long sought. . . now gone again . . .

"I don't know why I asked." Haplo glared at him. "You couldn't walk all that well in the first place. Keep low, damn it! You're of no use to me with an arrow stuck in your craw! And if you faint, I'll leave you here!"

"I'm not going to faint," Alfred said, with dignity. "And my own magic is now strong enough to protect me from . . . from attack," he added, faltering.

Brethren, do no violence. Harm no one. These are our people. Raise no magical defenses.

I did her bidding. I had no magical defenses. Haplo knew that. He knew it because he was there with me! He was beside me! He saw what I saw. . . . What did we see?

A deep voice could be heard outside the door. It sounded distant, but the clamoring of the dead soldiers hushed.

"Kleitus," said Haplo grimly. "We'll have to run for it!" He propelled the Sartan forward, guiding him over and around the tangle of bones on the floor, dragging him to his feet when he stumbled.

"Jonathan!" Alfred attempted to twist around to see the duke.

"I have care of him," came a voice.

Prince Edmund's cadaver was following behind them, leading a bewildered, seemingly stupefied young duke.

"Your spell worked on him." Haplo sneered. "Blasted fool has no idea where he is!"

"It wasn't my spell!" Alfred protested. "I didn't do—"

"Shut up and keep moving. Save your breath to activate the nines on the door."

"What do we do about Jera?—"

The lazar stood near the open door. The cadaver's eyes stared straight ahead, the spirit twined about the body, sometimes looking at them from its own vantage point, sometimes peering out of the dead eyes. The dead lips formed words, and Alfred could hear them, realized that he'd been hearing them ever since he'd awakened from the vision.

"The living hold us in bondage. We are slaves to the living. When the living are no more, we will be free."

"... we will be free . . ." whispered the echo.

"Blessed Sartan!" Alfred shuddered.

"Yeah," Haplo said briefly. "She's out to recruit more for her side. Maybe Kleitus cast a spell of some sort on her—"

"No," said Prince Edmund. "It is no spell. She has seen, as I have seen. But she does not understand."

You've seen it! And I've seen it, too! Only I haven't seen it! Alfred looked back longingly at the table. Outside the chamber, he could hear shouted commands, the shuffling of feet. He had only to activate the runes to open the door. The sacred light had disappeared, the door would work. But the words stuck in his throat, the magic twisted around in his head. If I stay, if I spend a little more time, I will remember. . . .

"Do it, Sartan!" Haplo hissed through clenched teeth. "If Kleitus takes me alive, we ... our people, our worlds are finished!"

Two forces, pulling him apart. The people's hope, the people's doom, both in this chamber! If I leave, I will lose one forever. If I don't leave. . .

"Look what we have found, Pons." Kleitus's black-robed bulk filled the entryway, the smaller figure of his minister scuttled in beside him. "You see before you the Chamber of the Damned. It would be interesting to know how these wretches found it and also how they managed to break the warding runes. Unfortunately, we can't allow them to live long enough to tell us."

"The Chamber of the Damned!" Pons's words were faint, he seemed barely able to speak. The minister stared around the room, stared at the corpses littering the floor, stared at the white wood table. "It is real! Not legend!"

"Of course it's real. And so is its curse. Guards." Kleitus's motion brought forward dead soldiers, as many as could crowd through the door. "Slay them."

Brethren, do no violence. Harm no one. These are our people. Raise no magical defenses.

Alfred fumbled for the runes to open the door, the old woman's voice rang in his ears, obliterating the construction. He was dimly aware of Haplo standing beside him, the exhausted Patryn braced to fight, if not for his life, then to make certain that his body proved useless.

But the soldiers weren't fighting.

"Did you hear my command?" Kleitus demanded angrily. "Kill them!"

The dead guards stood with weapons raised, arrows notched, swords drawn, but they did not attack. Their phantasms, barely visible, stirred as if shaken by a hot wind, Alfred could almost feel their agitated whisperings breathe against his cheek.

"They will not obey you," said the lazar. "This chamber is sacred. Violence will turn on the one who uses it."

"... the one who uses it. . ." spoke the echo.

Kleitus turned. His eyes narrowed, black brows came together at the sight of the woman's horrifying visage. Pons gasped, and shrank away from her, attempted to hide himself among the troops of the dead.

"How do you know what the dead think?" the dynast demanded, studying the lazar intently.

The runes! Alfred said to himself frantically, and began to trace them in his mind. Yes, yes. The sigla on the door caught fire, began to glow a soft blue.

"I can communicate with them, I understand their thoughts, their needs, their desires."

"Bah! The dead think nothing! Need nothing! Desire nothing!"

"You are wrong," the lazar said in the hollow voice that brought out a sheen of sweat on Pons's face. "The dead want one thing: their freedom. We will have our freedom when our tyrants are dead!"

" . . tyrants are dead . . ."

"You see this, Pons," said Kleitus with a ghastly smile, affecting to speak in nonchalant tones, although he was working hard to control the tremor in his voice. "She has become a lazar. This is what happens when the dead are raised too soon. Now you understand the wisdom of our ancestors, who teach that the body must be left at rest until the phantasm has completely abandoned it. We will have to experiment with her cadaver. The books suggest that, in this instance, the body should be 'killed' again. Although we're not quite certain . . ." The dynast paused, then shrugged. "But we will have time to study it further. Guards, take her."

The slight, terrible smile played on the chill blue lips. The lazar began to chant. The wispy phantasms hovering about their cadavers

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suddenly vanished. Dead eyes came to life. Dead arms reached out. Dead hands lifted weapons but not against the lazar. The dead eyes turned on Kleitus and the Lord High Chancellor, dead eyes turned on the living.

Pons clasped hold of the dynast's black robes. "Your Majesty! It is this accursed chamber! Leave it! Seal it up! Leave them all trapped inside! Please, Majesty!"

The lights of Alfred's runes flared brilliantly. The door started to grind open. At last! He'd done something right! •!/-

"Haplo—"

A flash of movement. Alfred turned.

Kleitus had grabbed a bow from a guard.

A man raised it, arrow aimed straight at Alfred. The man's face was twisted with fear and the anger fear breeds. Alfred couldn't move. He couldn't have cast a magical defense if he had wanted to. ...

"Do no violence!"

The man drew back the bowstring, prepared to let fly. Alfred stood waiting for death. Not courageously, he realized sadly, but rather foolishly.

A strong hand, coming from behind Alfred, shoved him to one side, and he was falling. . . .

Red light filled the room, blinding, stabbing the eyes, searing the brain with fire. Alfred was on the floor, groping about on his hands and knees, aware of legs stumbling into him and over him and the warm body of the dog crowding beside him. A hand grasped hold of the collar of his robes, jerked him to his feet. A harsh voice shouted in his ear, "Now, we're even, Sartan!" The same hand shoved him toward the door that, by the grinding sound, was sliding closed again.

"Run, damn you!"

Alfred staggered forward. He was running through flame, smoke. Everything around him had caught fire, was burning: Prince Edmund, Jonathan, Haplo, the dog, the rock walls, the stone floor, the door. Burning, burning. . . .

Haplo jumped through the opening, pulled Alfred after him. The Sartan could feel the heavy stone weight of the door press against him, sliding shut. But, even at this moment, his heart wrenched. He was leaving behind something wonderful, something of immense value, something . . .

". . . only when the living are dead!" cried out the lazar's voice.

Alfred peered through the fiery light. Steel flashed red in the duchess's dead hand. The knife plunged hilt-deep into Kleitus's chest.

His bellow of anger degenerated into a scream of pain.

The lazar wrenched the bloody knife free, stabbed again.

Kleitus howled in agony, clutched at her, trying to wrest the blade from her hand. She stabbed him again, and the dead guards joined her in the attack. The dynast fell, disappeared beneath flailing hands and stabbing swords and slashing spears.

Alfred's arm was nearly yanked out of the socket. He tumbled headfirst into Haplo's grasp. Alfred heard a pleading scream cut off in an agonized gurgle—the Lord High Chancellor.

The door ground shut. But everyone standing in the dark tunnel could hear the lazar, either through the walls or in their hearts.

"Now, dynast, I will show you true power. The world of Abarrach will belong to us, to the dead."

And her echo, "... to the dead . . ."

The lazar's voice raised, chanting the runes of resurrection.

.CHAPTER \* 40

## THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

ALFRED'S EYES GRADUALLY ADJUSTED TO THE DARKNESS INSIDE THE TUNNEL. The darkness wasn't absolute, as he'd first feared when he emerged from the bright light of the chamber, but was red tinged, dimly lit by reflected light shining down a slick-walled corridor. From the light and from the heat, a magma pool was not far distant. Alfred turned to ask Haplo if he should activate the guide-runes, saw the Patryn slump to the floor.

Concerned, he hastened to Haplo's side.

The dog stood over its master, teeth bared, a warning growl in its throat.

Alfred tried to reason with the animal. "I want to see if he's injured. I can help—" He took another step, his hand outstretched.

The dog's growl deepened, the eyes narrowed, ears flattened. We've shared some good times, the dog appeared to be advising Alfred. And I think you're a fine fellow and I'd be sorry to see you come to harm. But that hand comes any closer and you'll find my teeth in it.

Alfred withdrew the hand hastily, retreated a step.

The dog watched him warily.

Peering over the dog's shoulder at Haplo, Alfred studied the man and decided that, after all, he wasn't injured. He had fallen sound asleep—either the height of bravery or the height of folly, Alfred couldn't decide which.

Perhaps, however, it was really only common sense. He seemed to recall something to the effect that Patryns had the ability to heal themselves in their sleep. Now that he thought of it, Alfred himself bone weary. He could have kept moving, the sheer horror of he'd witnessed in that chamber would have propelled him on until he dropped. As it was, it was probably better that he rest, conserve his strength for whatever lay ahead. He glanced nervously and fearfully, at the sealed door.

"Do ... do you suppose we're safe here?" he asked aloud, not quite certain to whom he was addressing the question.

"Safer here than anywhere else in this doomed city," answered Prince Edmund.

The cadaver seemed more alive than the living. The phantasm had once more departed from the body, but the two appeared to act in conjunction. This time, however, it was as if the corpse were the shadow.

"What's wrong with him?" Alfred's pitying gaze encompassed Jonathan. The duke, lost in a rapt vision, had been led like a child from the chamber by the prince, the cadaver's cold hand grasping the duke's that was not much warmer. "Is he ... insane?"

"He saw what you saw. Unlike you, he continues to see."

Witness to that tragic, ancient slaughter, Jonathan was apparently oblivious to the current terror surrounding him. At the cadaver's gentle urging, he sat down on the stone floor. His eyes stared back into the past. Occasionally he cried out or made motions with his hands as though endeavoring to help someone he could not see.

Prince Edmund's phantasm was clearly visible in the darkness, a reverse shadow, a shining white-blue outline of a corpse shrouded in darkness. "We will be safe," he repeated. "The dead have more urgent business to do than chase after us."

Alfred shuddered at the grim, solemn tone. "Business? What do you mean?"

The phantasm turned glittering eyes back toward the door. "You heard her. 'We will have our freedom only when the tyrants are dead.' She means the living. All the living."

"They're going to kill—" Alfred was appalled. His mind recoiled from the supposition. He shook his head. "No, it's impossible!" But he recalled the lazar's words, recalled the expression on the face that was sometimes dead, sometimes horribly alive.

"We should warn the people," he mumbled, although the thought of forcing his weak and weary body to continue on was enough to make him weep. He hadn't realized how exhausted he was.

"Too late," said the phantasm. "The slaughter has begun and will continue, now that Kleitus has joined the ranks of the lazar. As Jera told him, he will discover true power—power that can be his eternally. The living are his only threat, and he will take care to see to it that such a threat does not long survive."

"But what can the living do against him?" Alfred demanded, shuddering at the horrible memory. "He's ... he's dead!"

"Yet you cast a spell that caused the dead to die," said Prince Edmund. "And if you could do it, then so could another. Kleitus cannot take the chance. And even if it were not so, the lazar would kill out of hatred. Kleitus and Jera both understand now what the living have done to the dead."

"But not you," said Alfred, staring at the phantasm, puzzled. "You said you understand. And yet I sense in you only deep regret, not hatred."

"You were there. You saw."

"I saw, but I don't understand! Will you explain it to me?"

The phantasm's eyes were suddenly hooded, invisible lids closing. "My words are for the dead, not the living. Only those who seek shall find."

"But I'm seeking!" Alfred protested. "I truly want to know, to understand!"

"If you did, you would," said the prince.

Jonathan gave a fearful cry, clutched his chest and pitched forward, writhing in pain. Alfred hastened to the man's side.

"What happened to him?" he gasped, looking over his shoulder. "Are we being attacked?"

"It is not a weapon of our time that has hit him," said the phantasm, "but a weapon of the past. He is still in the vision of what has been. You had better wake him, if you can."

Alfred turned Jonathan over, saw the pinched, blue lips, the bulging eyes, felt the clammy skin, the thudding heartbeat. The duke was so completely wrapped in the spell that he might very well die of shock. Yet to waken him might be worse. Alfred glanced at the slumbering Haplo, saw the wan face peaceful, lines of sickness and suffering smoothed out.

Sleep. Or, as the ancients had termed it, "little death."

Alfred held the duke in his arms, soothed the young man/ murmured comforting words and interspersed them with a singsong chant. Jonathan's stiffened limbs relaxed, the pain-twisted features eased. He drew a deep, shivering breath. His eyes closed. Alfred held Jonathan a moment longer, to make certain he was truly asleep, then eased him down onto the stone floor.

"Poor man," said Alfred softly. "He will have to live with the knowledge that he brought this terrible evil on his people."

Prince Edmund shook his head. "What he did, he did for love. Evil has come out of it, but—if he is strong—good will prevail."

Such a sentiment might read well in a child's bedtime story, but in this fire-lighted tunnel, with unspeakable horrors raging in the city above . . .

Alfred slumped back against the wall, sank down to the floor.

"What about your people?" he asked, suddenly remembering the Kairn Telest. "Aren't they in danger? Shouldn't you be doing something to warn them, help them?"

The prince's expression altered, grew sad. Or perhaps Alfred only sensed the sadness, and his mind willed the cadaver's expression to change accordingly.

"I grieve for my people and their suffering. But they are the living and no longer my responsibility. I have left them and gone beyond. My words are for the dead,"

"But what will you do?" Alfred asked helplessly. "What can you do for them?"

"I don't know yet," said the phantasm. "But I will be told. Your living body needs sleep. I will keep watch while you rest. Fear nothing. No one will find us. For the time being, you are safe."

Alfred had little choice except to trust the prince and give way to weariness. Magic, even Sartan magic, had its physical limitations, as had been proven on this terrible world. He could draw on it

only so long before his strength needed replenishing. He made himself as comfortable as possible on the hard rock floor.

The dog, who had been keeping a wary eye on Alfred, was satisfied that it, too, could relax. Curling up beside its master, the animal rested its head on Haplo's chest, but kept its eyes open.

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Haplo awoke from a long sleep that had healed his body, but had not brought peace or ease to his mind. He was unaccountably restless, vague anger gnawed at him. Lying on the floor in the darkness, he stroked the dog's head, and attempted to figure out what was the matter with him.

He had something of extreme importance to do or say or tell someone. Something urgent, something of value and. . . he couldn't remember what it was.

"Arrant nonsense," he told the dog. "Impossible. If it were that important, I'd remember it." But, try as he might, he couldn't, and the lost knowledge burned within him, another kind of poison.

Added to his disquiet were hunger and a raging thirst. He'd had nothing to eat or drink since the supper that had nearly been his last. He sat up, glanced about, searching for water—perhaps a tiny rivulet streaming through a crack in the wall, a drop falling from the ceiling. He could use a drop to create more with his rune-magic, but he couldn't conjure water out of solid rock.

No water. Nothing. Everything was going wrong, had gone wrong ever since he'd arrived on this blasted world. At least he knew where to lay the blame.

Alfred lay hunched up on his side, his mouth wide open, snoring softly.

I should have let the bastard die back there. Especially after he cast that spell on me, made me see those people around that table, made me say—Haplo shook free of the unpleasant memory. But at least now we're even. I saved his life in return for him saving mine. I don't owe him a damn thing.

Haplo stood up suddenly, startling the dog, who jumped to its feet and stared at him with an air of faint reproach.

"You are setting off on your own." Prince Edmund's cadaver stood motionless at the end of the corridor, near the sealed door, near where Jonathan lay in spellbound sleep on the floor.

"I travel faster that way." Haplo stretched his arms, rubbed a stiff neck. He didn't like looking at the phantasm. The sight made him think again of whatever it was he'd forgotten.

"You're going to leave without the guiding runes." The phantasm wasn't attempting to persuade him, apparently. It didn't seem to care, was merely pointing out the obvious. It was probably lonely, liked hearing itself talk.

"I figure we're at the bottom of the catacombs," said Haplo. "Til find a corridor that leads back up, follow it until I get to the top. I can't end up much worse than I've ended up following him!"

He gestured at Alfred, who had rolled over on his stomach, his backside hunched up in a most undignified position.

"Besides," Haplo grunted, "I've been in worse places. I was born in one. C'mon, dog."

The dog yawned and stretched, front paws extended, rocked forward, back legs extended, then shook itself all over.

"Do you know what is going on up there?" The phantasm's gleaming-eyed gaze lifted.

"I can guess," Haplo muttered, not liking to discuss it.

"You will never reach your ship alive. You will become like Kleitus and Jera—souls trapped in dead bodies, hating the mockery of life that binds them to this realm, fearing the death that would free them."

"That's my risk," retorted Haplo, but the palms of his hands grew clammy. Sweat broke out on his body, chilling him, although the air in the tunnel was warm and oppressive.

All right, I'm afraid! We respect fear, we're not ashamed of it—so the elders taught us in the Labyrinth. The rabbit feels no shame fleeing the fox, the fox feels no shame fleeing the lion. Listen to your fear, confront it, understand it, deal with it.

Haplo walked over, faced the phantasm of the prince. He could see through it, see the wall in back of it, and he knew from the cool, intent stare of the eyes that, in much the same way, it could see through him.

"Tell me the prophecy."

"My words," said the prince, "are for the dead."

Haplo turned abruptly, moving swiftly, and fell over the dog, who had been trotting along behind. He stepped on the animal's fore paw. The dog yelped in pain, sprang backward, cringing, wondering what it had done wrong.

Alfred woke with a start. "What—? Where—?" he gabbled.

Haplo cursed fluently, held out his hand to the dog. "I'm sorry, boy. Come here. I didn't mean it."

The animal accepted the apology, came forward graciously to be scratched behind the ears, indicated that there were no hard feelings.

Seeing only Haplo, Alfred gulped in relief, mopped his brow. "Are you feeling better?" he asked anxiously.

The question annoyed Haplo almost beyond endurance. A Sartan, concerned for my health! He gave a brief, bitter laugh and turned away, continued his search for water.

Alfred sighed, shook his bald head. He was obviously in misery, his stiff body twisted like an old gnarled tree. He watched Haplo a moment, guessed what he must be doing.

"Water, that's a good idea. My throat is raw. I can barely talk—"

"Then don't!" Haplo made a fourth fruitless circuit of the runnel, the dog trotting along at his heels. "Nothing here. There's bound to be water near the surface. We better get started." He walked over to the duke, nudged him with his foot. "Wake up, Your Grace."

"Oh, dear! I forgot." Alfred flushed. "He's under a spell. He was dying. Well, he wasn't, but he thought he was and the power of suggestion..."

"Yeah. I know all about the power of suggestion! You and your spells! Wake him up and let's get out of here. And no more guide-runes, either, Sartan!" Haplo held up a warning finger. "The Labyrinth only knows where they'd lead us next! This time, you follow me. And be quick about it or I'll leave without you."

But he didn't. He waited. He waited for Alfred to wake the duke, waited for the wretched Jonathan to come to his senses.

Haplo waited, fretting with impatience, tormented by his thirst, but he waited.

When he asked himself why he had changed his mind about going off alone, he answered himself that traveling in numbers made sense.

CHAPTER \* 41

THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

THE TUNNEL CLIMBED STEADILY UPWARD, LED THEM OUT AND AWAY FROM the Chamber of the Damned to the shores of a vast pool of magma. Its fire lit the cavern's eternal night with a red glow. There was no way around it, they could only go over it. A narrow rock bridge spanned the molten lava, a thin black line snaking over an inferno. They moved across it in single file.

The sigla tattooed on Haplo's skin glowed blue, their magic protected him from the heat and the fumes. Alfred chanted beneath his breath; either his magic was aiding his breathing or his walking, Haplo wasn't certain, but he guessed the walking, amazed that the clumsy-footed Sartan made it over the treacherous span.

Jonathan followed after, his head bowed, ignoring the others' talk, absorbed in his own thoughts. He had changed since yesterday, however. His step was no longer aimless and stumbling, but firm and resolute. He took an interest in their surroundings and in his own well-being, walking the span with care and caution.

"He's young, after all," said Alfred softly, watching anxiously as the duke, accompanied by the cadaver, arrived at the end of the bridge. "His instinct for self-preservation has won out over the desire to end his despair by ending his life."

"Look at his face," said Haplo, wishing for the hundredth time that Alfred would keep out of his brain and stop saying what he, Haplo, was thinking.

Jonathan had lifted his head to stare at the prince's phantasm novering near him. The young face, lit by the magma's fiery glow, was prematurely aged; grief and horror had tightened the once-smiling

mouth, shadowed the light of the eyes. But the sullen uncaring desperation and despair were gone, replaced by a thoughtful, introspective study. His gaze was fixed most often on the prince.

The tunnel continued to carry them upward, the floor slanting upward at a steep angle as if it couldn't wait to leave behind the horror of what lay below. But what horror lay ahead? Haplo didn't know and at this point didn't care.

"What did you do to him with that spell of yours?" He kept talking to distract himself, keep his mind off his thirst. A gesture sent the dog back to watch over the duke and the caddver.

"It was only a simple sleep spell—" Alfred stumbled, fell head-lone over his own feet.

Haplo walked grimly on, ignoring sounds of scrabbling and panting behind.

"It's grown rather dark," Alfred said timidly, catching up with Haplo. "We could use the guide-runes for light—"

"Forget it! I've had enough Sartan magic to last a lifetime. And I wasn't referring to your sleep spell. I meant that spell you cast over him in that chamber back there."

"You're mistaken. I didn't cast any spell. I saw what you saw and what he saw. At least, I think I did. .." Alfred glanced at Haplo sideways, an open invitation to talk about what they'd seen.

The Patryn snorted and continued on in silence.

The tunnel widened, grew lighter. Other tunnels branched off from it, heading in several different directions. The air was cooler, more moist, easier to breathe. Gas lamps hissed, formed pools of yellow light that alternated with pools of darkness. Haplo had no doubt they were nearing the city.

What would they find once they reached the top? Guards posted, waiting for them? All exits blocked?

Water. That was all Haplo cared about at this moment. At least, there would be water. He'd fight an army of the dead for one swallow.

Behind him, the prince and Jonathan spoke together in low tones. The dog trotted along at their feet, a quiet, unobtrusive spy on their conversation.

"Whatever happens, it will all be my fault," Jonathan was saying. His tone was sad, regretful. He was accepting blame, not whining in self-pity. "I've always been heedless, reckless! I forgot all I'd been taught. No, that's not quite true. I chose to forget it. I knew what I was doing was wrong when I worked the magic on Jera. ... But I couldn't bear to let her go!"

He paused a moment, added, "We Sartan became obsessed with life. We lost our respect for death. Even a semblance of life, a horrible mockery of life, was better for us than death. Such an attitude came from thinking of ourselves as gods. What is it, after all, that separates man from the gods? Ultimate rule over life and death. We were able to control life with our magic. We worked until we were able to control death—or thought we had."

He's speaking about himself and his people in the past tense, Haplo realized. He might have been eavesdropping on a conversation between two cadavers, instead of one.

"You are beginning to understand," said the prince.

"I want to understand more," Jonathan spoke humbly

"You know where to look for the answers."

Back in that damn chamber, no doubt. Or just have good, old Alfred sing his blasted runes at you again. What is it I'm supposed to remember? I saw it all so clearly... . Saw what clearly? ... I understood . . . understood what? If only I could recall. . .

The hell with it! I know everything I need to know. My lord is all-powerful, all-wise, all-knowing. My Lord will one day rule this world and all others. My duty is to My Lord and to his cause. These doubts, these confusing vagaries are a trick of the Sartan's.

"Haplo . . ." Alfred's voice.

"What now?"

Turning around, Haplo saw that the Sartan had again come to grief. Alfred lay sprawled on the stone floor, his face twisted with pain. He raised his hand, held it palm out.

"If you think I'm helping you, forget it. You can lie there and rot for all I care."

The dog hurried up to Alfred, began to lick the man's cheek. Haplo turned away in disgust.

"No, it's not that! I think—that is ... I've found water. I—I'm lying in a puddle."

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Alfred had, unfortunately, soaked up quite a bit of the water on his clothes, but once they had a small amount of the precious liquid, they could magically replicate more. Haplo searched until he discovered the source, a steady drip of water draining through a crack in the ceiling.

"We must be near the upper level. Best stay alert. Don't drink too much," he cautioned. "It'll cramp the stomach. Slowly, in small sips." He found it difficult to follow his own advice. The liquid was muddy and tasted faintly of sulfur and iron, even after magic had purified it. But it quenched thirst, kept the body going.

"Some gods we are," said Haplo to himself, sucking on a piece of cloth he'd dipped in the puddle. He caught Alfred's swift glance and scowled, turned away in irritation. Why had such a thought crossed his mind? The Sartan had put it there, no doubt. . .

The dog lifted its head, ears pricked. It growled low and softly.

"Someone's coming!" Haplo whispered, twisting, catlike, to his feet.

A figure in black robes emerged from the shadows at the end of the corridor. It moved slowly, haltingly, as if injured or greatly fatigued, and made frequent stops to look back over its shoulder.

"Tomas!" cried Jonathan suddenly, although how he could tell one black-robed necromancer from another was beyond Haplo's ability to fathom. "Traitor!" Before anyone could stop him, the young duke sprinted forward, robes flapping behind him.

Tomas whirled around to face them, his panicked shriek echoed through the corridors. He tried to run. An injured leg or ankle gave out, and he fell to the stone floor. Crawling on hands and knees, he attempted to drag himself away. Jonathan caught up with him easily, placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

Screaming fearfully, Tomas lurched over on his back, raised his hands over his face. "No, please! Don't! Please! No!" he babbled, over and over, writhing in a paroxysm of terror, his body twitching and rolling on the floor.

The duke stared at the man. "Tomas! I'm not going to hurt you! Tomas!" Jonathan attempted to catch hold of the wretched man, soothe him. But the sight of hands approaching him only increased his panic.

"Shut him up!" ordered Haplo furiously. "He'll have every guard in the palace down on us!"

"I can't!" Jonathan looked helpless. "He's ... he's gone mad!"

Alfred knelt beside Tomas, began weaving his hands over him, chanting the runes.

"Don't put him to sleep, Sartan! We need information."

Alfred shot Haplo a stern, reproachful glance.

"You want to carry him through the corridors with us?" Haplo demanded. "Or just leave him here, unconscious?"

Abashed, Alfred nodded. The motion of his hands formed an invisible blanket over the man. Tomas's cries ceased, he began to breathe easier. But he continued to stare at them with wide eyes, his limbs shivered and shook. Haplo crouched on the floor near the man. The dog, coming up alongside, sniffed and pawed at Tomas's robes with intense interest. Haplo reached out and touched the robe's fabric. It was wet and sodden. He held up his hand to the light, his fingers were stained crimson.

Alfred shoved the man's robe aside, looked at the leg beneath. It was bruised, but otherwise uninjured. The blood wasn't his own. Alfred went extremely pale.

"You know this man?" Haplo asked Jonathan.

"Yes, I know him."

"Talk to him. Find out what's going on up there."

"Tomas. It's me, Jonathan. Don't you recognize me?" The duke had forgotten his anger in pity. He reached out his hand, gingerly.

Tomas's eyes followed the hand, his gaze suddenly shifted to Jonathan's face. "You're alive!" he gasped. He grasped Jonathan's hand convulsively, held it fast. "You're alive!" he whispered over and over, and burst into dry, heaving sobs.

"Tomas, what happened to you? Are you hurt? There's blood—"

"Blood!" The man gasped, shuddered. "It's in the air. I can taste it! Breathe it! It stands in pools, burns like the magma. It drips, drips. I can hear it. All cycle. Drip, drip."

"Tomas . . ." Jonathan urged.

The man paid no attention. He clutched the duke's hands, stared out into the shadows. "She came... for her father. His blood seeped down through the floor . . . drip, drip."

Jonathan's face went livid. He let loose Tomas's grasping hands, sat back on his heels.

Haplo decided it was time to intervene. Roughly crowding the duke aside, he caught hold of Tomas and shook him. "What's going on in the city? What's going on up there?"

"Only one alive. Only one—" He began to choke, his eyes bulged from his head, his tongue protruded from his mouth.

"Sartan! Do something, damn it! He's having some sort of fit! I have to know—"

Alfred moved to minister to him. Too late. Tomas's eyes rolled back in the head, his body stiffened, then went limp.

Haplo felt for a pulse, shook his head.

"Is he—? Is he ... dead?" Jonathan's voice was barely audible. "How?"

"His own fear killed him," Alfred replied. "Whatever he saw up there."

" 'Only one alive'," Haplo repeated the words slowly.

"I hear the voices of the dead," said the phantasm. Prince Edmund's cadaver stood near Jonathan, the phantasm's gleaming eyes gazed dispassionately at the corpse. "They are many and they are filled with anger. Be at ease, poor spirit," the prince added, speaking to a thing unseen. "Your wait will not be long. Time grows short. The prophecy is about to be fulfilled."

The prophecy! Haplo'd forgotten all about it. He rose to his feet. "Tell me about this—"

The dog growled, lowered its head.

"Damn! Get out of the light!" Haplo ordered, melting back into the darkness. "Keep quiet!"

Shadowed forms appeared, hooded faces hidden.

"The man ran this way," said one. "I am positive. I can sense warmth. There is life down here!"

". . . life down here . . ." came the faint, sibilant whisper.

"Lazar . . ." Alfred said, gave a gentle sigh, and slid down the wall.

"He's fainted!" whispered Jonathan.

Just when the bastard might have proved useful! Haplo swore beneath his breath. He glanced down the hallway, back the way they'd come. We passed other corridors. Alone, I could make a run for it. I'd stand a good chance of escaping, particularly because the lazar would be otherwise occupied with the duke and Alfred. That's how you escape wolfen. Toss them a freshly killed carcass. The beasts stop to feast, you make tracks.

He looked at Alfred, lying on the floor, looked at Jonathan, bending over him. The strong survived. The weak did not,

"Dog! Here, boy!" Haplo called softly. "Cmon!"

The dog stood over Alfred.

The lazar had stopped to stare searchingly down another corridor. Now was the time.

"Dog!" Haplo ordered.

The animal wagged its tail, began to whimper.

"Dog! Now!" Haplo insisted, snapping his fingers.

The dog took a few steps toward Haplo, then circled back to Alfred. The lazar were on the move again. Jonathan glanced up at Haplo.

"Go on. You've done enough. I can't ask you give up your life for us. I'm sure your friend would want it this way."

He's not my friend! Haplo started to shout. He's my enemy! You're my enemy! You Sartan murdered my parents, you imprisoned my people. Countless thousands have suffered and died because of you. Damn right I won't give up my life for you! You're getting no more than you deserve.

"Dog!" Haplo yelled furiously, grabbing for the animal.

The dog glided out of his reach, turned, and dashed straight at the lazar.

CHAPTER \* 42

THE CATACOMBS, ABARRACH

IT WAS DIFFICULT TO COUNT THE NUMBER OF LAZAR. SEEN IN SHADOW, their bodies and spirits merged and separated constantly, confusing to the eye, appalling to the brain. They were clad in black robes, necromancers—those who had the power to turn other newly dead into those who were neither dead nor alive.

Haplo had one consolation. They wouldn't be interested in his skin. They'd just butcher him outright. He supposed he should be grateful.

The lazar came to a halt. Strong hands reached out to capture the pesky dog, throttle it, twist its neck.

Haplo traced a sigil in the air. It caught fire, streaked from his hands, flashing like lightning, and struck the dog. Blue and red flame engulfed the animal. It grew in size and continued to grow with each bounding leap. Its massive head brushed against the ceiling, huge paws shook the ground. Its eyes were fire, its breath hot smoke.

The dog leapt on the lazar, crushed their bodies beneath its gigantic paws. The animal's teeth sank into dead flesh. It didn't rip out the throat, it tore off the head.

"This will stop them, but not for long," Haplo shouted above the dog's hoarse growling. "Get Alfred on his feet and start moving!"

Jonathan tore his horrified gaze from the carnage at the end of the hallway. Grabbing hold of a groggy Alfred, who was just starting to come to his senses, the duke and the prince's cadaver managed to lift the Sartan to his feet.

Haplo took a moment to consider his strategy. Going back was out. Their hope lay in reaching the city, in joining forces with the rest of the living. And to reach the city, they had to get past the lazar.

He started down the corridor at a run, not looking behind him. If the others followed, fine. If they didn't, it was all the same to him.

The dog stood in the center of a grisly battlefield of dismembered corpses and torn, black robes. The stone floor was slippery with blood and gore.

Haplo kept close to the wall, watching his footing. Behind him, he heard the young duke's breath rattle in his throat, his footsteps falter.

"Haplo!" he cried in a fear-choked voice.

One of the mangled corpses started to move. An arm crawled toward a trunk, a leg slithered over to join it. The lazar's phantasm, shimmering in the darkness, was exerting its magical power, bringing its severed body back together.

"Run!" Haplo shouted.

"I—I can't!" Jonathan gasped. The man was frozen stiff with terror.

Alfred swayed on his feet, looked around dazedly. Prince Edmund's cadaver stood stock-still, unmoved by the threat.

Haplo gave a low, piercing whistle. The flames around the dog flickered and died, the animal shrank back to its normal size. It jumped lightly over the reassembling corpses, ran over, and nipped Alfred on a bare, bony ankle.

The pain brought the Sartan to his senses. He saw their danger, understood Jonathan's predicament. Grasping hold of the duke by the shoulders, Alfred dragged him past the lazar. The dog raced around them, darting forward to bark threateningly at the various twitching pieces of the corpses. Prince Edmund's cadaver marched gravely, solemnly behind. One of the dead hands clutched at him. He shook it off, heedless, uncaring.

"I'm all right," Jonathan said through stiff lips. "You can let go of me now."

Alfred glanced at him anxiously.

"Really," the duke assured him. He started to turn his head, drawn by a terrible fascination. "It ... it was just the shock of seeing.. ."

"Don't look back!" Haplo grabbed Jonathan, forced him around.

"You don't want to see what's going on. Do you know where we are?"

The catacombs had come to an end. They stood at the entrance to brightly lighted, sumptuously decorated corridors.

"The palace," said Jonathan.

"Can you lead us out, back into the city?"

The Patryn feared at first that Jonathan had been through too much, that he was going to fail him. But the duke drew on reserves of strength he undoubtedly never knew he had. Color tinged the pallid cheeks.

"Yes," said Jonathan, voice faint but steady. "I can. Follow me." He walked ahead, Alfred keeping by his side, the prince coming along behind.

Haplo cast a last glance back at the lazar. I should try to get hold of a weapon of some sort, he thought. A sword wouldn't kill them, but it would put them out of action long enough to escape—

A cold nose pressed into his hand.

"Don't hang around here with me," snapped Haplo, pushing the animal away. He started walking. "You like the Sartan so much, you go be his dog. I don't want you."

The animal grinned. Tail wagging, it trotted along close to Haplo's side.

+

The only one alive.

Haplo had seen many dreadful sights in his lifetime. The Labyrinth killed without mercy or compassion. But what he saw that day in the palace of Necropolis would haunt him the remainder of his life.

Jonathan knew his way around the palace, led them swiftly through the twisting corridors and confused maze of rooms. They moved warily, cautiously at first, keeping to the shadows, hiding in doorways, fearing at every corner to meet more of the lazar, searching for new victims.

The living hold us in bondage. We are slaves to the living. When the living are no more, we will be free.

The echo of Jera's voice lingered in the halls, but there was no sign of her or any other being, either living or half-living.

The dead, however, were everywhere.

Corpses littered the corridors, lying where they'd fallen, none of them resurrected, none of them treated with any ceremony at all. A woman cut down by an arrow held a murdered baby clasped in her arms. A man taken unaware, stabbed from behind, stared sightlessly at them, an almost comical expression of astonishment on the dead face.

Haplo yanked the sword from the body, appropriating it for his own use.

"You will not need that weapon," said the prince. "The lazar no longer pursue us. Kleitus has called them. They have more urgent business."

"Thanks for the advice, but I feel better with it, all the same."

Swiftly, working as he walked, keeping his group moving, the Patryn traced in blood several sigla on the blade. Looking up, he met Alfred's horrified stare.

"Crude, I admit," Haplo told him. "But I don't have time for anything fancy."

Alfred opened his mouth to protest.

"This spell might," the Patryn added coolly, "sever the magical life that binds those lazar, holds their bodies together. Unless you think you can remember that spell you cast on them?"

Alfred shut his mouth, averted his eyes. The Sartan looked ill, haggard. His skin was gray, his hands trembled, his shoulders were bent beneath a crushing weight. He was suffering acutely, and Haplo should have been exultant, should have reveled in his enemy's torment.

He couldn't, and the feeling angered him. He drew a sigil in the blood of his ancient enemy and felt only gut-wrenching pain. Like it or not, Alfred and I spring from the same source. Branches far removed from each other, one at the top of the tree, one at the bottom; one reaching toward the light, the other keeping to the shadow. But we each grow from the same trunk. The blade of the ax is biting into the trunk, intent on bringing down the whole tree. In the Sartan's doom, Haplo could read his own.

Do I take this knowledge of necromancy back to My Lord? Or do I conceal its discovery? That would mean lying to My Lord. Lying to the man who saved my life.

What am I thinking? Of course, I'll take the knowledge back to My Lord. I'll take Jonathan. What's the matter with me? I'm growing weak! Sentimental! All the fault of that damn Alfred. He goes back me, too. My Lord will deal with him.

And I'll watch and enjoy every minute ...

far)

Only one tefi alive.

They came to the antechamber, near the throne room. The courtiers who'd waited on Kleitus, currying his favor, hoping for even a glance from the dynastic eye, lay dead on the floor. None had been armed, none had been able to fight for their lives, although it appeared that a few had sought desperately to escape. They'd been stabbed from behind.

"They got what they wanted," said Jonathan, gazing at the bodies dispassionately. "Kleitus paid attention to them at last, every one."

Haplo glanced at the young man. Alfred was enduring vicariously every agony the dead had experienced. Jonathan, by contrast, might have been one of the corpses. He and the dead Prince Edmund bore an uncanny resemblance to each other. Calm, solemn, untouched by the tragedy.

'And where is Kleitus?' Haplo wondered aloud. 'And why did he leave these dead behind? Why not turn them into lazar?'

"You will note that there are no necromancers among this group," Alfred answered in a low, shaken voice. "Kleitus must maintain control. He will return, in a few days' time, and raise these dead, as has been done in the past."

"Except," added Jonathan, "that now Kleitus can communicate with the dead directly. Through the intervention of the lazar, the dead have gained intelligence."

Armies of dead advancing with purpose and resolve, bent on slaughtering those they envied and hated—the living.

"That is why we have found no one in the palace," said the prince. "Kleitus and Jera and their army have moved on. They are preparing to cross the Fire Sea, preparing to attack and destroy the last remaining people left alive on this world."

"Your people," said Haplo.

"They are my people no longer," said the prince. "Now my people are these." The white, glistening phantasm stood among the corpses, its cold light casting a pale glow over the chill faces. The whisperings of the unhappy spirits filled the air as if they were answering him.

Or pleading with him.

"We have to warn Baltazar. And what about your ship?" asked Alfred suddenly, turning to Haplo. "Will it be safe? Will we be able to leave?"

Haplo started to snap that, of course, his ship was safe, protected. But the words died on his lips. How could he be sure? He didn't know what powers these lazar possessed. If they destroyed his ship, he'd be trapped here until he could find a new one. Trapped, battling against armies of dead, battling against those who could never be stopped, never be defeated. Haplo's breathing shortened. The Sartan's panic was catching.

"What's he doing now? Where is Kleitus at this moment? Do you know?"

"Yes," the prince answered. "I hear the voices of the dead. He is mobilizing his forces, gathering his army together, preparing to send them forth. The ships swing at anchor, waiting. It will take some time for him to board all his troops." Haplo could have sworn the phantasm smiled. "The dead cannot be herded about like sheep now. They are intelligent, and intelligence brings independence of thought and action, and that leads, inevitably, to confusion."

"So we have time," Haplo said. "But we have to cross the Fire Sea."

"I know of a way," said the prince, "if you have the courage to use it."

It wasn't a question of courage anymore.

Alfred spoke Haplo's thought. "We have no choice."

CHAPTER \* 43

NECROPOLIS, ABARRACH

NECROPOLIS HAD FULFILLED THE DREAD PORTENT OF ITS NAME. MANGLED bodies lay huddled in doorways, struck down before they could reach refuge. Nor would they have escaped, even then. Doors had been split asunder, beaten down by the dead, in their efforts to wrest life from the living. They had been successful. The water that ran in the gutters was stained dark with blood.

The phantasm of Prince Edmund led them through the winding runnels of the City of the Dead. They avoided the main gate, which might be guarded, escaped the city through one of the rat holes. Once outside the walls, they could hear, in the distance, a dull rumbling sound that echoed off the high cavern ceiling and shook the ground on which they stood. The armies of dead, preparing for war.

Numerous pauka, still harnessed to their carts, roamed the outskirts of Necropolis. The animals were bewildered, frightened at the smell of blood. Owners and riders were dead, bodies left to lie where they'd fallen or resurrected and borne away to assist in the slaughter. Haplo and Jonathan commandeered a carriage, dragged the bodies of a man, a woman, and two children out of it. Alfred climbed inside, scarcely knowing what he was doing, acting completely under guidance, usually Jonathan's, but sometimes—roughly—Haplo's.

The carriage rattled off. The pauka appeared relieved to have someone in control of its life once more. Jonathan drove, Haplo sat beside him, keeping watch. The cadaver of Prince Edmund sat

upright in the passenger seat next to Alfred. The prince's phantasm acted as guide. They headed eastward for several miles, traveling in the direction of Rift Ridge. Reaching an intersection, the carriage turned southward toward the Fire Sea. The dog ran alongside, occasionally barking at the pauka, much to that animal's discomfiture. Jonathan drove as fast as he dared. The carriage rocked and bounced over the rock-strewn highway, fields of kairn grass whipped past them in a dizzying blur of greenish brown. Alfred clung to the side of the lurching carriage, expecting every moment to be pitched out of it or overturned in it. He rode in fear of his life, a thing he couldn't understand, for his life had very little meaning left to it.

What base animal instinct in us drives us? Alfred wondered to himself bitterly. Forces us to continue living, when it would be far easier to sit down and die.

The carriage rolled around a corner on two wheels. The Sartan was thrown violently against the chill form of the cadaver. The carriage righted itself. Alfred righted himself, Prince Edmund's corpse assisting him with its accustomed dignity.

Why do I cling to life? What is there left for me, after all? Even if I escape this world, I can never escape the knowledge of what I've seen, the knowledge of what my people have become. Why should I race to warn Baltazar? If he survives, he'll continue to look for Death's Gate. He'll figure out how to enter and carry the contagion of necromancy into the realms beyond. Haplo himself has threatened to bring the art to the knowledge of his lord.

Yet, Alfred pondered, the Patryn spoke of that when we first came. He hasn't mentioned it since. I wonder how he feels about it now. Sometimes I imagine I've seen the same horror that I've felt in my soul reflected in his eyes. And in the Chamber of the Damned, he was the young man seated next to me! He saw what I saw—

"He fights against it, as do you," said the prince, breaking in on Alfred's thoughts.

Startled, Alfred tried to speak, to protest, but the words were jounced out of his mouth. He nearly bit off his tongue. Prince Edmund understood, however.

"Only one out of the three of you opened his heart to the truth. Jonathan doesn't understand completely, yet, but he is near, much closer than you."

"I want... to know ... the truth!" Alfred managed to get out, shooting the words from between clenched teeth to keep from biting his tongue again.

"Do you?" asked the phantasm, and it seemed to Alfred that he saw it coolly smile. "Haven't you spent your life denying it?"

His fainting spells: used consciously at first to keep from revealing his magical powers, had now become uncontrollable. His clumsiness: a body at odds with its spirit. His inability—or was it refusal—to call to mind a spell that would give him too much power, unwanted power, power that others might try to usurp. Constantly putting himself in the role of observer, refusing to act for good or for evil.

"But what else could I have done?" Alfred asked defensively. "If the mensch once found out I had the power of a god, they would force me to use that power to intervene in their lives."

"Force you? Or tempt you?"

"You're right," Alfred admitted. "I know I'm weak. The temptation would have been too strong, was too strong. I gave in to it— saving the child Bane's life when his death would have averted the tragedies that followed."

"Why did you save the child? Why"—the prince's ghostly gaze shifted to Haplo—"did you save the man? Your enemy? An enemy who has vowed to kill you? Search your heart for the answer, the true answer."

Alfred sighed. "You'll be disappointed. I wish I could say I acted because of some noble ideal— chivalrous honor, self-sacrificing courage. But I didn't. In Bane's case, it was pity. Pity for an unloved child who would die without ever knowing a moments happiness. And Haplo? I walked in his skin, for a few brief moments. I understand him." Alfred's gaze went to the dog. "I think I understand him better than he understands himself."

"Pity, mercy, compassion."

"That's all, I'm afraid," said Alfred.

"That is everything," said the phantasm.

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The road on which they traveled was empty, deserted. It had been trampled by many feet, part of the army of the dead had passed this way, flowing out of the city onto the many highways leading to the Fire Sea. Helmets, shields, bits and pieces of armor, bones and, here and there, a fallen, shattered skeleton lay scattered in the army's wake. Farm carts or carriages were discovered abandoned, their passengers either murdered or they had fled the rumor of the dead army's coming.

Alfred had first believed Tomas to have been correct. They had not seen one living being since they emerged from the catacombs. He feared that everyone in or around Necropolis must have fallen victim to the dead's fury. But on their journey, he thought more than once that he caught a glimpse of furtive movement in the tall kairn grass, thought he saw a head lift, eyes—living eyes—peer fearfully out at them. But the carriage whirled past too swiftly for him to confirm what he'd seen or mention it to the others.

But it was a tiny crack of hope, splitting the darkness like light shining from beneath a closed door. His spirits raised, whether because of the newfound hope or the phantasm's comforting words, he couldn't tell. His brain was too jounced and jostled for coherent thought. He clung to the side of the carriage, hanging on to it in grim resolve. Life did have meaning and purpose. He wasn't certain what that was, yet. But he had decided at least to keep searching.

The carriage neared the Fire Sea, neared danger. Topping a rise, Alfred gazed down on the docks far below, gazed down on an army of dead, swirling and milling about the ships in chaos. He was reminded of a colony of coral grubs invaded by a hungry dragon hatchling. At first each grub sought only to escape the crunching jaws. After the initial confusion and panic, however, the threat united the insects and they turned, as one, to repel the invader. The mother dragon had rescued her young just in time.

Confusion and panic might reign on the docks at this moment, but a single goal would soon unite them.

The carriage dashed down the hill, veering in an easterly direction that would take them clear of the docks. Jonathan drove the maddened pauka at a breakneck pace. The army and ships vanished from Alfred's sight.

The wild ride finally came to a halt. The carriage brought up on a rock shore of the Fire Sea. The pauka collapsed in the traces, sinking to the ground, breathing heavily.

Before them, the vast ocean of flaming magma gleamed orange-red, its fiery light reflecting off the glistening black stalactites spiral-ing downward from the cavern's roof. Huge stalagmites, dark against the red background of the sea, formed a jagged-toothed shoreline. The magma washed and pushed against them sluggishly. A meandering stream of water, that had escaped from the city above plunged, hissing, into the sea, sending rolling clouds of steam into the hot, sulfurous air.

The living and the dead stood on the beach and stared out across the sea. Barely visible, in the distance, Alfred thought he could make out the opposite shore.

"I thought you said we'd find a boat here," said Haplo, eyeing the prince grimly, suspiciously.

"I said you would find the way to cross here," corrected Prince Edmund. "I said nothing about a boat." The white, gleaming arm of the phantasm raised, an ethereal finger pointed.

At first Alfred thought Edmund meant them to use their magic to cross the sea of flame.

"I can't," the Sartan said meekly. "I'm too weak. Its costing me nearly all my energy, just to stay alive."

He had never before felt the weight of his own mortality, never before realized that his powers had physical limits. He was beginning to understand the Sartan of Abarrach, beginning to understand them as he had begun to understand Haplo. He was walking in their skins.

The phantasm said nothing; again Alfred thought he saw a smile flicker on the translucent lips. It continued to point.

'A bridge," said Haplo. "There's a bridge."

"Blessed . . ." Alfred had been about to say, Blessed Sartan. The words died on his lips. That was one oath he'd never use again, at least not without serious thought.

Now that Haplo had pointed it out, Alfred could see the bridge (he supposed one could dignify it by that appellation). In reality it was nothing more than a long row of large, oddly shaped boulders that happened to be arranged in a straight line extending from one shoreline to the other. It looked almost as if a gigantic column of rock had crashed into the sea, its skeletal remains forming the bridge.

"The fallen colossus," said Jonathan, in understanding. "Except it was located in the middle of the ocean."

"It used to be in the middle of the ocean," said the prince. "The sea is shrinking, and now one may reach it and use it to cross."

"If we have the courage," Haplo murmured. He fondled the dog, scratching it on the head. "Not that it makes any difference." His eyes flicked to Alfred. "As you said, Sartan, we have no choice."

Alfred tried to reply, but his throat burned, the moisture in his mouth had gone dry. He could only stare at the broken bridge, at the huge gaps yawning between segments of the shattered column, at the magma sea, flowing beneath.

One slip, one false step . . .

And what has my life been, Alfred wondered dismally, but an endless series of slips and false steps?

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They scrambled down among the boulders on the shoreline. The way was treacherous—hands and feet lost their grip on wet rock, mists floated before their eyes, obscuring their vision. Alfred chanted runes until he lost his voice and came near losing his breath. He was forced to concentrate on each footstep, each handhold. By the time they reached the base of the broken colossus, he was exhausted, and the difficult part lay ahead of them.

They halted at the base to rest, survey the way before them. Jonathan's pallid face glistened with sweat, his hair straggled down around his temples. His eyes were sunken, dark shadows surrounded them. He wiped his hand across his mouth, licked his tongue across parched lips—they'd been attacked before they could carry off water—and gazed across at the opposite shore as if he fixed one end of his will on that dark horizon, planned to use it as a rope to pull himself along.

Haplo walked out on the first segment of broken colossus, examined the stone beneath his feet. The first segment, the base, was the longest and would be the easiest to cross. He squatted down on his haunches, stared curiously at the rock, ran his hand over it. Alfred sat gasping for breath on the shore, envying the Patryn his strength, his youth.

Haplo motioned. "Sartan," he said peremptorily.

"My name ... is Alfred."

Haplo glanced up, scowled, frowned. "I don't have time for games. Make yourself useful, if that's possible. Come take a look at this."

They all ventured out onto the colossus. It was wide—three large farm carts might have been driven abreast across it and left room on either side for a carriage or two. Alfred crept across it as gingerly as if it had been the branch of a small hargast tree spanning a rushing stream. Nearing Haplo, the Sartan's foot slipped, sending him sprawling on his hands and knees. He closed his eyes, fingers dug into the rock.

"You're safe," said Haplo in disgust. "Hell, you'd have to work at throwing yourself off this thing! Open your eyes, damn it. Look, look there."

Alfred opened his eyes, gazed fearfully around. He was a long way from the edge, but he was acutely conscious of the magma sea flowing beneath him, and that made the edge seem much closer. He wrenched his gaze from the orange-red viscous flow and stared down beneath his hands.

Sigla ... inscribed on the rock. Alfred forgot his danger. His hands traced lovingly the ancient runes carved on the stone.

"Can these help us in any way? Is their magic good for anything anymore?" Haplo asked in a tone that implied the magic had never been good for much in the first place.

Alfred shook his head. "No," he said, voice husky. "The magic of the colossus cannot help us. Their magic was meant to give life, to carry life from this realm below to those realms above."

The prince's cadaver raised its head, dead eyes looked above to a land it could see perhaps more clearly than the land on which it now walked. The expression on the face of the phantasm grew grim and sad.

"The magic is broken now." Alfred drew a deep breath, looked back at the shoreline, at the broken, jagged edges of the column's base. "The colossus didn't fall by accident. It couldn't have, its magic would have prevented such an occurrence. The colossus was knocked down, deliberately. Perhaps by those who feared it was sucking life out of Necropolis and carrying it to realms above. Whatever the reason, its magic is gone, can never be renewed."

Like this world, the world of the dead.

"Look!" cried Jonathan. His face, his eyes reflected the heat of the fire.

They could barely see, in the distance, the first ships setting out from the shoreline.

The dead had begun the crossing.

CHAPTER » 44

FIRE SEA, ABARRACH

THEY HURRIED FORWARD, TRAVELING AS FAST AS THEY DARED ACROSS the rune-inscribed column. They had an advantage over the ships, in that the shrinking Fire Sea flowed at its narrowest point there. They were much closer to the shore than Kleitus and his army. The sight of the ships gave them impetus, renewed strength. The sigla may have lost their magic, but the runes carved into the stone provided traction, sure footing on a slippery surface.

And then they came to the end of the broken segment. A huge, V-shaped gap separated one part of the colossus from another. The magma sea churned in between, roiling among the sharp, jagged edges.

"We can't cross that!" said Alfred, staring at the gap in dismay. "Not up here we can't." Haplo measured it with his eye. "But we might down below. Even you could make that jump, Sartan."

"But I'll slip! Fall in! I—I. . . I'll try." Alfred gulped, lowering his eyes before Haplo's narrow-eyed, angry glare.

"No choice. No choice. No choice," Alfred chanted, instead of the runes. What magical resources he had left, he had to conserve. And, somehow, the litany seemed to help.

"You're a fool," Haplo said, overhearing him. The Patryn stood at the bottom of the vee, legs akimbo, balanced easily, catlike, on uneven strata of rock. He gripped Alfred's thin arm, steadied the shaking man. "Jump for it."

Alfred stared fearfully across what looked to him to be an immense stretch of flowing lava. "No!" He shrank back. "I can't! I'll never make it! I—"

"Jump!" Haplo roared.

Alfred bent his knees, and suddenly he was flying through the air, propelled by a strong boost from behind. Arms flailing, as if he might flap his way across, he landed heavily on the edge of a lip of rock about twenty feet above the lava sea. He was slipping. His hands scrabbled for purchase. Pebbles slid beneath his fingers. He was falling, sliding into the magma beneath him.

"Hold on!" Jonathan shouted frantically.

Alfred made a wild grab at a jutting piece of rock. His fingers curled around it, and he managed to stop his fall. His hands were wet with sweat, he started to lose his grip, but his foot found a toehold, and he stopped himself. Arms and legs aching with the strain, he hauled himself up over the lip and hunched there, shivering in reaction, not daring to let himself believe he was safe.

He didn't have time to relax. Before he knew what was happening, Jonathan leapt across the gap, assisted from behind by Haplo's tireless arms. The young duke landed easily and gracefully. Alfred caught hold of him, balanced him.

"There isn't room for both of us. Go on up." Alfred told him. "I'll wait here."

Jonathan started to protest.

Alfred pointed. The top edge of the column protruded outward, forming another shelf, this one overhead. It would take strong arms to hoist oneself over that ledge.

Jonathan saw, understood, and began climbing up to the top. Alfred watched him anxiously, for a moment, and was intensely startled to find that the cadaver of Prince Edmund was standing on the shelf beside him. How the corpse managed to cross was beyond Alfred's ability to explain. He could suppose only that the phantasm had assisted its body.

The gleaming white shape was the cadaver's glistening shadow, barely distinguishable from the mists curling around them. The phantasm seemed so independent. Why does it bother to drag the shell along with it?

"Stand clear, Sartan!" Haplo shouted. "Go on up with the others!"

"I'll wait! Help you!"

"I don't want your"—the next words were unclear, lost in the churning sound of the magma—"help!"

Alfred pretended he didn't hear any of it, waited stolidly, back braced against the rock.

Haplo fumed on the shore, but there wasn't time to argue. He checked the sword that he had thrust into his belt, made sure it was secure. Leg muscles bunched. He launched himself outward, hurtled through the air above the magma, and landed like a fly against a wall on the smooth-sided rock beneath Alfred. He began to slip. The dog, across the way, barked loudly.

Alfred reached down, caught hold of the Patryn's rune-covered wrists, and pulled. Pain shot up his back, muscles gave way, feet scraped over the surface of the ledge on which he stood. He was losing his hold. He must let go or risk sliding over the edge.

Alfred refused to give up. He searched inside himself, found physical resources he never knew he possessed. He held on tightly and, with a last, desperate burst of energy, lunged backward. His feet slid out from beneath him, but not before he had pulled Haplo up onto the ledge.

The Patryn grabbed hold of rocks and Alfred and hung on until he caught his breath, then dragged himself the rest of the way over. Without warning, the dog sailed across in a graceful bound. Landing beside them, nearly crowding both off the ledge, the animal gazed at each of them with bright eyes, obviously enjoying itself immensely.

"More ships are crossing!" Jonathan reported from up above. "We've got to hurry!"

Alfred's body ached, muscles burned. A pain in his side was like someone jabbing him with a knife. He was cut and bruised and wondered if he'd have the strength to walk, let alone climb over that shelf. And how many segments of this colossus remained left to cross? How many gaps, perhaps wider than this? He shut his eyes, then, drawing a breath that brought his burning lungs no relief, he wearily prepared to go on.

"I suppose I should thank you—" Haplo began in his usual sneering tone.

"Forget it! I don't want your thanks!" Alfred yelled at him. It felt good to yell. Felt good to be angry and let his anger loose. 'And don't feel like you have to pay me back for saving your damn life, because you don't! I did what I had to do. That's all!"

Haplo stared at Alfred in blank astonishment. Then the Patryn's lips started to twitch. He tried to control himself, but he, too, was tired. He began to laugh. He laughed until he was forced to lean against the rock wall to support himself, laughed until tears crept from beneath his eyelids. Dabbing at blood seeping from a cut forehead, Haplo grinned, shook his head.

"That's the first time I ever heard you swear, Sar—" He paused.

'Alfred," he amended.

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They had made it safely across one gap but it was only the first of many. The steam-driven dragonships of the dead churned through the magma sea, black against fiery red. Alfred trudged

over the broken column, tried not to look at the ships, tried not to look at or think about jumping over the next crevice. One foot after the other, over and over and over and—

"We'll never reach the shore in—"

"Hush! Freeze! Stop!" Haplo hissed, cutting Jonathan off in mid-sentence.

Alfred jerked around, the alarm in the Patryn's tense call tore through the lethargy of aching body and despairing mind. The runes on Haplo's skin glowed, the normally blue color tinged purple in the red glare of the magma. The dog stood near its master, growling, ruff bristling, legs stiff. Frantically Alfred glanced behind, expecting to see hordes of dead following them across the colossus.

Nothing. Nothing was chasing them. Nothing blocked their path ahead. But something was wrong. The sea was moving, gathering itself together, rising up around them. A tidal wave? Of magma? He stared harder at the sea, attempting to convince himself it was an optical illusion.

Eyes! Eyes watching him. Eyes in the sea. Eyes of the sea. A fiery red head poked up from the depths of the magma, slid toward them. The unblinking eyes kept them under constant surveillance. The eyes were enormous. Alfred could have walked into the black slit of the pupils without ducking his head.

'A fire dragon,' Jonathan gasped.

"So this is how it ends," said Haplo softly.

Alfred was too tired to care. His first thought, in fact, was one of relief. I won't have to jump over another damn crack.

Smooth and sharp as a spear point, the dragon's head thrust upward. Its neck was long, narrow, and graceful, topped by a spiky mane that resembled stalagmites. Scales glowed bright red when the body lifted from the sea. Contact with air cooled them instantly, turning them black, with a lingering red glow, like coals in a banked fire. Only the eyes remained vivid, flame red.

"I don't have the strength to fight it," said Haplo.

Alfred shook his head. He lacked the strength to talk.

"We may not need to," Jonathan said. "They attack only when they feel threatened."

"But they have little love for us," added the prince, "as I have good reason to know."

"Whether it attacks us or not, the delay could prove fatal," Haplo pointed out.

"I have an idea." Jonathan walked slowly and deliberately across the colossus toward the approaching dragon. "Don't make any threatening moves or gestures."

The beast glanced at him, but the red eyes were far more intent on the phantasm of the prince.

"What are you?"

The dragon spoke to the prince, ignored Jonathan, ignored everyone else standing on the broken column. Haplo put his hand on the dog's head, keeping it quiet. The animal trembled, but obeyed its master.

"I have never seen anything like you."

The dragon's words were perfectly intelligible, clearly understood, but they weren't spoken aloud. The sound seemed to run through the body, like blood.

"I am what was always meant to be," said the phantasm.

"Indeed." The slit eyes flicked over the group. "And a Patryn, too. Stranded on a rock. What next? The fulfillment of the prophecy?"

"We are in desperate need, Lady," said Jonathan, with a low bow. "Many of the people in the city of Necropolis now lie dead—"

"Many of my people now lie dead!" The dragon made a hissing sound, its black tongue flickered. "What is this to me?"

"Do you see those ships, crossing the Fire Sea?" Jonathan pointed. The dragon did not turn her head, she was obviously aware of what was passing in her ocean. "They carry lazar and armies of the dead—"

"Lazar!" The slit eyes of the dragon narrowed "Bad enough the dead walk. Who brought lazar into Abarrach?"

"I did, Lady," said Jonathan. His hands clasped together, holding tight, keeping his pain within.

"You will get no help from me!" The dragon's eyes flared in anger. "Let the evil you have brought into this world take you down with it!"

"He is innocent of that charge. Lady. He acted out of love," stated the phantasm. "His wife died, sacrificed her life for his. He could not bear to let her go."

"Folly, then. But criminal folly. I will have nothing further—"

"I want to make amends, Lady," Jonathan said. "I have been given the wisdom to do so. Now, I am trying to find the courage. . . ." Words failed him. He swallowed, drew a deep breath. Hands clasped tighter. "My companions and I must reach the opposite shore, ahead of the lazar and the dead they command."

"You want me to carry you," said the dragon.

"No . . ." Alfred shook in his shoes.

"Shut up!" Haplo laid a silencing hand on the Sartan's arm.

"If you would so honor us, Lady." Jonathan bowed again.

"How can I be certain you will do what you say? Perhaps you will only make matters worse."

"He is the one of whom the prophecy speaks," said the prince.

Haplo's hand, on Alfred's arm, twitched. Alfred saw the man's lips twist, the brows knot in frustration. The Patryn kept silent, however. His major concern now was to reach his ship in safety.

'And you are with him in this?' the dragon queried.

"I am." Prince Edmund's cadaver stood straight and tall, the phantasm was its shining shadow.

"The Patryn, as well?"

"Yes, Lady." Haplo's words were brief, bitten off at the end. What else could he say, with those fire red eyes intent on him?

"I will take you. Be quick."

The dragon glided nearer the broken colossus, spike-maned neck and head towering over the puny figures who stood beneath. A sinuous, twisting body rose out of the sea, flat backed, spikes extending the full length of the spine. The tip end of a spiny tail could be seen slashing through the lava far, far behind it.

Jonathan descended swiftly, grabbing hold of one of the spikes and using it to steady his landing. The cadaver followed, its gleaming phantasm guided the corpse's steps. Alfred came after, touching the mane gingerly, expecting it to be hot. The scales were quite cool however, hard and shining as black glass.

The Sartan had ridden dragonback on Arianus and, although this dragon was considerably different from those in the air world, he wasn't nearly as frightened as he'd expected to be. Only Haplo and the dog remained standing on the column, the Patryn eyeing the dragon warily, his gaze shifting to the column ahead of him, as if measuring what his best decision might be. The dog whimpered and cringed and ducked behind its master, doing its best to avoid the dragon's eye.

Alfred knew enough about the Labyrinth to understand the Patryn's fear, his dilemma. Dragons in the Labyrinth are intelligent, malevolent, deadly; never to be trusted, always to be avoided. But the steam-powered ships of the dead were nearing the middle of the ocean. Haplo made his decision, jumped onto the dragon's back.

"Here, dog!" he called.

The animal ran back and forth on the column, made a tentative try at a jump, gave it up at the last moment, ran up and down the column again, whining.

"Hurry!" the dragon warned.

"Dog!" Haplo commanded, snapping his fingers.

The animal gathered itself together and made a desperate jump right into Haplo's arms, nearly bowling him over.

The dragon whipped around with a speed that caught Alfred unaware. He had let go of the mane and now almost slid off the back. Grabbing hold of a spike that stood taller than he did, he clung to it with both hands.

The fire dragon swam through the magma as easily as the dragons of Arianus flew through the air, using slithering motions and the push of its strong tail to propel the wingless, gigantic body forward. The hot wind of their passing blew Alfred's wispy hair back from his head, fluttered his robes behind him. The dog howled in terror the entire way.

The dragon moved at an angle to cut off the ships, then raced ahead of them. At home in her element, her speed was formidable. The iron ships could not match it. But they were now more than halfway across. The dragon was forced to cut close, swinging across the bow of the lead ship. The dead saw them. A hail of arrows rained down around them, but the dragon was sailing too rapidly for the archers to find a good target.

"My people," said the cadaver in its hollow voice.

The army of the dead of Kairn Telest was drawn up on the docks, prepared to meet the army of the dead of Necropolis and drive them back before they could establish a foothold.

Baltazar's strategy was sound, but he didn't know of the lazar, had no word of what had happened in Necropolis. He was prepared for war—a war between cities. He had no idea that now it was a war between the dead and the living. He had no suspicion that he and his people were among the last living beings on Abarrach and that, soon, they might be fighting for their lives against their own dead.

"We're going to make it," said Haplo, "but not by much." His gaze flicked to Alfred. "If you're coming back with me through Death's Gate, run straight for the ship. The duke and I will join you."

"Duke?" Alfred was puzzled. "But he won't come. Not voluntarily." And then he understood. "You don't mean to give him a choice, do you?"

"I'm taking the necromancer back to the Nexus. If you're coming along, head for the ship. You should thank me, Alfred," Haplo added with a grim smile. "I'm saving his life. How long do you think he could survive here?"

They were within sight of those waiting on shore. The cadaver of Prince Edmund, prompted by its phantasm, raised its arms. A cheer greeted him; swarms of the dead soldiers began running along the wharf to assist them, protect them from attack as they disembarked.

The dragon surged in among the docks, her momentum sent waves of lava crashing onto the shoreline. The ships of the dead arrived so close behind that Alfred could see the dreadful writhing image of the lazar Kleitus standing on the prow of the lead vessel. At his side—Jera.

CHAPTER \* 45

SAFE HARBOR, ABARRACH

HAPLO'S SHIP SWUNG AT ANCHOR, UNHARMED, SAFE, INTACT. WITHIN moments, they could be aboard, the Patryn's runes keeping them safe from assault. Alfred was in a quandary. What Haplo said was undoubtedly true. The duke would not survive long on Abarrach. None of those still living on Abarrach could survive the fury of the dead, driven to vengeance and destruction by the lazar.

At least I would be able to save one person, one Sartan. Mercy, compassion, pity... Surely I could devise some means of keeping a necromancer out of the hands of the so-called Lord of the Nexus! But what if I failed? What terrible tragedies would follow if a necromancer entered the other worlds? Wouldn't it be better for him to die here?

The troops of Kairn Telest raced along the docks, intent on saving their prince. Archers covered their advance, flights of arrows vaulted through the air to land, clattering, against the sides of the iron dragonships. The dead plucked the arrows from their chill flesh and tossed them into the magma, where they vanished with snake-like hisses. Kleitus tore out an arrow that had lodged in his breast and brandished it aloft.

"We are not your enemy!" he shouted, his voice ringing over the magma sea, silencing the army of the dead of Kairn Telest on the docks below. "They, the living"—he pointed to the black-robed figure of Baltazar—"are the true enemy! They have enslaved you, robbed you of your dignity!"

"Only when the living are dead, will the dead be free!" Jera cried.

"... dead be free . . ." echoed her tormented spirit.

The army of Kairn Telest hesitated, wavered. The air was filled with the moaning wails of its phantasms.

"Now's our chance!" said Haplo. "Jump for it!"

He leapt from the dragon's back to the stone dock. Alfred followed, landed in a confused jumble of hands and knees that took him some moments to sort out. When he was erect and more or less walking, he saw Haplo grip the duke firmly by the arm.

"Come along, Your Grace. You're going with me."

"Where? What do you mean?" Jonathan pulled back.

"Through Death's Gate, Your Grace. Back to my world." Haplo gestured toward his ship.

The duke glanced at it, saw safety. He hesitated, wavering, much as the dead around him. The dragon swam a short distance from shore, stopped, its slit eyes watching, waiting.

Jonathan shook his head. "No," he said softly.

Haplo's grip tightened. "Damn it, I'm saving your life! If you stay here, you'll die!"

"Don't you understand?" Jonathan said, looking at the Patryn with a strange, detached calm. "That is what I am meant to do."

"Don't be a fool!" Haplo lost control. "I know you think you communicated with some sort of higher power, but it was a trick! His trick!" He jabbed a finger at Alfred. "What you and I saw was a lie! We are the highest power in the universe! My Lord is the highest power. Come back with me and you will understand—"

A higher power! The revelation was devastating. Alfred staggered where he stood, his legs sinking beneath him. Now he understood, understood what had happened to him in the chamber! He remembered the feeling of peace and contentment that had filled him, understood the reason why he felt such sorrow when he'd awakened from that vision to discover the feeling was gone. But it had taken the Patryn to show him!

Deep within, I knew the truth, but I couldn't admit it to myself, Alfred realized. Why? Why did I refuse to listen to my heart?

Because, if there is a higher power, then we Sartan have made a dreadful, an appalling, an unforgivable mistake!

The idea was too awful to comprehend. His brain was barely capable of handling the flood of emotions that rolled over him, waves of concepts and new ideas slammed into him one after the other. The solid ground on which he stood was suddenly washed out from beneath him, casting him adrift on a perilous sea with no ship, no compass, no anchor.

A shaft whistled past Alfred, jolted him to conscious awareness of their surroundings, of their danger. The dead of Kairn Telest were raising their weapons, turning those weapons on their own.

A thrown spear had struck Haplo on the arm. Blood flowed from the wound that wasn't serious; but it was a mark of the Patryn's weakening magic that the point had penetrated the sigla tattooed on his skin.

"Can't you stop them?" Alfred cried at Prince Edmund, trusting him to do something, prevent what must be the massacre of the last living beings on Abarrach. "They're your people!"

The cadaver stood silent, more silent than death in this world. The phantasm's gleaming eyes were fixed on Jonathan.

"Leave us, Patryn," said the duke. "You have no part in what happens on Abarrach. We brought this on ourselves. We must do what we can to make amends. Return to your world and share with your people the knowledge you have gained in this one."

"Pah!" Haplo spit on the ground. "C'mon, dog!" The Patryn ran toward his ship. The dog, after one backward glance at Alfred, dashed after its master.

Kleitus's ship docked. The ramps were lowered, the dead swarmed out to join their brethren on land. The duke would soon be surrounded by an army. On board ship, Kleitus and Jera stood together. The duchess's hand was outstretched, she was shrieking at the dead to slay her husband.

Jonathan stood unmoved by the chaos. He stared up at his wife, his face pale with grief and sorrow. A brief, bitter struggle shadowed the eyes.

He knows what he must do, thought Alfred, but he is afraid. Is there any way for me to help? Frustrated, the Sartan wrung his hands. How can I help? I don't understand what's happening.

Another flight of arrows flew past Alfred like hordes of wasps. One stuck in his robes, another landed point first on the toe of his shoe. An arrow thudded into Haplo's thigh. He clutched at his leg, wed to keep running. Blood welled from between his fingers. His leg gave out, he collapsed onto the dock.

The dead cheered, several broke from their ranks and ran toward him. The dog whirled to face them, teeth bared, hackles raised. Haplo stood up, tried to limp on, but he knew he couldn't move fast enough to outpace the dead. He drew the sword, turned, and prepared to fight.

The arrows that showered down around Jonathan might have been drops of rain. He paid no attention to them, and they didn't touch him. He was calm, resolute. He raised his hand for quiet and such was the commanding presence of the young man with the grief-ravaged face that the dead fell silent, the lazar hushed their calls for revenge. Even the faint plaintive moaning of the phantasms sunk into stillness.

Jonathan raised his voice. "In ancient days, when we Sartan first came to this world we had created, we worked to build lives for ourselves and the mensch and the creatures that were a sacred trust to us. In the beginning, all went well with one exception: we did not hear from our brethren in the other worlds.

"Their silence was, at first, disquieting. Then it became alarming, for our world was failing us. Or, perhaps it is more correct to say that we were failing our world. Instead of studying how to conserve our resources, we wantonly exploited them, always believing that, in time, we would be connected with those other worlds. They would provide us with what we lacked.

"The mensch were the first to succumb to the poisons of this world that was growing chill and barren around us. The creatures were next. And then our own population began to dwindle. At that critical juncture, our people took two steps—one forward into light, one backward into darkness.

"One group of Sartan sought to fight death, to end dying. They turned to necromancy. Instead of conquering death, however, they became enslaved by it. At the same time, another group of Sartan pooled their magical talents and resources in an effort to establish contact with the other three worlds. They built a chamber, devoted to this purpose, and brought into it a table that was one of the last surviving relics of another place and time. They established contact.. ."

Jonathan's voice softened. "But not with our brethren in other worlds. They established contact with a higher order. They spoke to One who had been long, long forgotten."

"Heresy!" cried Kleitus and "Heresy!" came the sibilant echo rising from the dead.

"Yes, heresy." Jonathan shouted above the clamor. "That was the charge leveled at those Sartan long years ago. After all, we are the gods, are we not? We sundered worlds! Created new ones! We had defeated death itself! Look around you."

The duke spread his arms, turned to the left, to the right, gestured forward and behind. "Who has won?"

The dead were silent. Alfred, glancing up at Kleitus, standing on the prow of the dragonship, saw by the twisted, sneering smile on the lazar's crawling visage that the dynast was playing out the rope, allowing his victim to wrap the noose around his own neck. The lazar would cinch it tight and watch with pleasure as his victim's body twitched and writhed.

Jonathan was making matters worse, not better, but Alfred had no idea how to stop him ... or even if he should. Never before had the Sartan felt so completely, utterly helpless.

A cold touch on the back of his leg nearly sent Alfred leaping into the sea. He thought it was one of the hands of the cadavers, and he shuddered, waited for death, until he heard a soft, pathetic whine.

Alfred opened his eyes, sighed in relief. The dog stood at his side. Certain it had the Sartan's full attention, the animal darted sideways several steps, then darted back, and looked at Alfred expectantly.

The dog wanted him to go to its master, of course. Haplo stood on the pier, propped up against a bale of kairn grass. The Patryn's shoulders sagged. His face was deathly pale. Only his indomitable will and strong sense of survival kept him conscious.

Mercy, compassion, pity...

Alfred drew a deep breath. Expecting to be halted, challenged, cut down by arrow, spear, or sword, he gripped his courage in both hands and began to edge his way through the dead toward Haplo.

Jonathan continued his speech, a speech now pitiable in Alfred's estimation. He knew how it must end and so, he realized suddenly, did the young duke.

"Our ancestors feared these people who now came forward, crying out against the necromancers, warning that we must change or we would end up destroying not only ourselves, but the fragile balance that exists in the universe. The answer of our ancestors to murder the 'heretics', seal their bodies up in the chamber that became known as Damned' and surround it with runes of warding."

The dead eyes of the cadavers followed Alfred's movements, but they made no attempt to stop him. He reached Haplo's side, knelt down near the wounded man. "What. . . what can I do?" he asked in a low voice.

"Nothing," Haplo answered, teeth clenched against his pain, "unless you can shut that fool up."

"At least, while he's talking, we have time—" "For what?" Haplo demanded bitterly. "Write a last letter home, maybe?"

"They didn't do anything to me."

"Why should they bother? They know we're not going anywhere."

"But your ship—"

"Make one move toward it, and that move will be your last." Haplo drew a shuddering breath, bit off a groan. "Look on board the dragonship. The lady isn't paying attention to her husband's speech."

Alfred looked up, saw Jera looking directly at him. "She knows about the ship, about Death's Gate. Remember?" Haplo pushed himself into a more upright position, gasping at the agony the move caused him. The dog, standing over him, whimpered in sympathy "My guess is ... they want to take it for themselves, try to enter . . ."

"Enter worlds of the living! Enter to kill! That's . . . that's awful! We've got to do something!"

"I'm open to suggestion," Haplo said dryly. He had managed—at what terrible cost in pain Alfred couldn't begin to imagine—to hack off much of the shaft of the arrow in his thigh. But the arrow's head remained lodged in his flesh, his pant leg was soaked with blood. His shirt had stuck to the wound on his arm, forming a crude bandage. The deep slash would break open and begin to bleed the moment he moved.

"We might have one chance," he said softly, his gaze intent on the young duke. "You can see, of course, where this tale of his is leading?"

Alfred didn't answer.

"When they move in for the kill, we make a run for the ship. Once we're on board, the runes will protect us. I hope."

Alfred looked back at Jonathan, standing, alone.

"You mean . . . abandon him?"

Haplo's bloody hand snaked out, grabbed Alfred's collar, dragged the Sartan's face to within an inch of his.

"Listen to me, damn you! You know what will happen if these lazar come through Death's Gate! How many innocents will die? How many on Arianus? How many on Pryan? Balance that against one man's life on this world. You made him believe in this 'highei power.' You're the one who sent him to his death! You want to be responsible for bringing death itself through Death's Gate?"

Alfred's tongue felt swollen. He couldn't talk, could only stare at Haplo in wordless confusion.

Jonathan's voice, firm, strong, powerful, caught their attention. He drew even Jera's dead eyes.

"Your warding runes couldn't keep out those who went searching for the truth! I saw. I heard. I touched. I don't understand yet. But I have faith. And I will prove to you what I have discovered."

Jonathan took a step forward, raised his arms in appeal. "Beloved wife, I wronged you deeply. I would make amends. Slay me where I stand. I will die by your hands. Then raise me up. I will join your ranks, the ranks of the eternally damned."

The lazar that had once been Jera left Kleitus's side. It walked down the ramp that stretched from the ship to the pier. Her phantasm, trapped in its dead shell, surged as far ahead as it could, ephemeral hands outstretched in eager anticipation.

Tears slid down Jonathan's cheeks. "So you came to me as my bride, Jera . . ."

He waited for her. The dead gathered around them, waited. The corpse of Prince Edmund and its shadowy phantasm, floating free beside it, waited. Out in the magma sea, the dragon drifted on the burning lava, waited. The lazar of Kleitus, standing on board ship, laughed, and waited.

The cadaver's hands reached out as if to clasp her husband to her breast. The cruel fingers, strong in death, closed instead around Jonathan's throat.

"Now!" cried Haplo.

CHAPTER \* 46

SAFE HARBOR, ABARRACH

REACHED OUT A HAND TO ALFRED TO SUPPORT HIM. ALFRED cast a stricken glance back over his shoulder. He couldn't see Jonathan, for the wall of dead surrounding the young man. He saw fists flail, saw a sword flash, heard a muffled groan. When the sword was raised again, it was dark with blood.

Blackness crept toward Alfred, comforting, soothing oblivion, a place where he could hide and not be responsible for anything that happened, including his own death.

"Alfred, don't pass out! Damn it, Sartan, for once in your miserable life, accept the responsibility!"

Responsible. Yes, we're responsible. I'm responsible for this ... for all this. I've been like the dead myself, walking the land in a shell of a body, my soul buried in a tomb....

"There's nothing you can do for Jonathan," Haplo's voice grated, "except die with him. Help me reach the ship!"

The blackness receded, but seemed to take all feeling and rational thought with it. Numb, Alfred did as he was told, obeying Haplo like a puppet or a child. The Sartan put his arm around the Patryn's shoulder and back. He aided Haplo's limping footsteps, Haplo aided Alfred's limping spirit.

"Stop them!" Kleitus howled in fury. "I need that ship! Let me through to stop them!"

But a thousand dead, milling around the dock, eager to kill, stood between Kleitus and his prize. Some of the cadavers heard the dynast's cry; most heard only the screams of their victim, joining them in death.

"Don't look back!" Haplo commanded with what breath he had remaining. "Keep running!"

Alfred's arm ached with the strain of supporting Haplo, the fire of the magma sea glowing around him seemed to burn in his lungs. He tried calling on his magic, but he was too frightened, too exhausted, too weak. Sigla swam in his mind, burst in dazzling flashes before his eyes. A forgotten language, they meant nothing to him. Haplo sagged against his supporter, his footsteps slipped, although they never faltered their pace. Alfred glanced at him, saw the Patryn's face ashen gray, jaw clenched tight, sweat glistened on his skin. They were near their goal, the ship loomed above them. But shuffling footsteps sounded close behind.

The footsteps goaded Alfred on. He was close, very close— A blur of black robes rose up in front of them like a wall of night. "Damn it all..." Haplo sighed, sounding weary to the point of not caring.

In their fear of the dead, they'd forgotten the living. Baltazar stood before them. Pale, composed, black eyes red with the reflected light of the magma, he blocked their way to the ship. He raised grasping hands and Alfred shuddered in terror. But the hands clasped together, pleading.

"Take us with you!" Baltazar begged. "Take me, take my people! As many as we can crowd on board!"

Haplo regarded Baltazar intently, but for the moment the Patryn couldn't answer, he lacked the breath to speak. Alfred guessed that the necromancer had already tried to board; the Patryn's protective sigla had prevented him. The footsteps behind them grew louder. The dog barked a warning.

"I'll teach you the necromancy!" Baltazar said softly, urgently. "Think of the power in the worlds beyond! Armies of the dead to fight for you! Legions of the dead to serve you!"

Haplo flicked a glance at Alfred. The Sartan lowered his gaze. He was tired, defeated. He'd done all he could and it hadn't been enough. Hope—inexplicable and not clearly understood—had been born within him in the chamber. It had died with Jonathan. "No," said Haplo.

Baltazar's black eyes widened in astonishment, stared in disbelief, then narrowed in fury. The dark brows came together, the pleading hands clenched to fists. That ship is our only means of escape! Your living body will not tell me how to break the runes, but your corpse will!" He took a step toward Haplo,

The Patryn gave Alfred a push that sent the Sartan staggering into a bale of kairn grass.

"Not if my corpse is in there, it won't." Haplo pointed at the magma sea. Balancing precariously on his good leg, his sword in a bloodstained hand, he stood on the edge of the obsidian wharf, only a step or two from flesh-searing death.

Baltazar halted. Alfred was dimly aware of Kleitus's shouts growing louder, of more footsteps rushing toward them. The dog had ceased to bark, the animal stood at Haplo's side. Alfred picked himself up, not certain what he could do, trying desperately to summon his magic.

A chill voice sounded close by his ear.

"Let them go, Baltazar."

The necromancer cast the prince a sorrowful glance, shook his head. "You are dead, Edmund. You no longer have power over the living." Baltazar took a step nearer Haplo.

Haplo took a step nearer death.

"Let them go," repeated Prince Edmund sternly.

"Your Majesty dooms his own people!" Baltazar cried. Foam flecked the necromancer's lips. "I can save them! I—"

The cadaver raised its waxen hand, a bolt of lightning crackled, flashed out, and struck the ground at the necromancer's feet. Baltazar fell back, staring at the prince in fear and astonishment.

Prince Edmund gave Alfred a gentle shove. "Go to your friend. Help him on board the ship. You had better hurry. The lazar are coming to take you."

Dazed, stupefied, Alfred did as he was told and reached Haplo just as the Patryn's strength began to fail him. They hastened toward the ship, the Sartan assisting the flagging steps of his ancient enemy.

Alfred slammed up suddenly against an invisible barrier. He had the startling impression of sigla flashing blue and red around him. A word from Haplo, barely audible, caused the barrier to disappear. Alfred continued on, Haplo leaning on him heavily. He grimaced in pain with every movement.

Baltazar saw the defenses lowered, took a defiant step toward them.

"Do so, and I will kill you, my friend," said Prince Edmund, not in anger, but in sorrow. "What is one dead more or less in this world of ours?"

Alfred caught his breath in a choked sob.

"Just get us on board, damn you!" Haplo spoke through clenched teeth. "You'll have to do it. I can't. . . I've lost... too much blood . . ."

The ship floated above the magma sea, a wide gulf of burning red stretching between them and escape from Abarrach. No gangplank, no ropes. . . Behind them, Kleitus had made his way off his ship. He was marshaling the dead, leading them to the assault, urging them to seize the coveted winged ship, urging them to sail into Death's Gate.

Alfred blinked back his tears and he could see the sigla again, he could read them, understand. He wove the runes together in a bright and shining net that wrapped around him, around Haplo, around Haplo's dog. The net raised them in the air, an invisible fisherman hauling in his catch, and lifted them on board the Dragon Wing.

The runes of his enemy closed protectively behind the Sartan.

\*

Alfred stood on the bridge, stared out the porthole. The dead, led by the lazar, swarmed around the dragonship, beating unsuccessfully against the runes. Baltazar was nowhere to be seen. He was either dead, murdered by the lazar, or he'd managed to flee in time.

The people of Kairn Telest were abandoning Safe Harbor, escaping back to the Salfag Caverns or beyond. Alfred could see them, a long, thin, ragged line, straggling across the plain. The dead, momentarily distracted by their desire to seize the ship, were letting them go. It didn't matter.

Where could the living hide that the dead would not find them? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered . . .

Kleitus shouted a command. The other lazar ceased their fruitless struggle, gathered around their leader. The crowd of dead parted, and Alfred caught a glimpse of Jonathan lying still and unmoving on the pier. Jera bent over him, clasped the body in her dead arms. Her lazar began the chant that would restore him to terrible, tormented life.

Alfred turned away.

"What are the lazar doing?" Haplo crouched on the deck, his hands on the steering stone. The sigla tattooed on his hands glowed blue, but only a faint blue, barely discernible. He swallowed, removed his hands, flexed them, and shut his eyes.

"I don't know/ Alfred answered dispiritedly. "Does it matter?"

"Hell, yes, it matters! They may be able to unravel my magic. We're not out of this yet, Sartan, so quit blubbering and tell me what's going on."

Alfred gulped, looked back out the porthole. "The lazar are ... are plotting something. At least that's what it looks like. They're gathered around Kleitus. All of them except... Jera. She's ..." His voice died.

"That's what they're doing," said Haplo softly. "They're going to try to break down the runes."

"Jonathan was so certain." Alfred stared out the window. "He had faith—"

"—in nothing but your trickery, Sartan."

"I know you won't believe me, Haplo, but what happened to you in the chamber happened to me, as well. Just as it happened to Jonathan. I don't understand it." Alfred shook his head, added in a low voice, "I'm not certain I want to understand it. If we're not gods ... if there is some higher power..."

The ship moved beneath his feet, nearly throwing him off balance. He looked back at Haplo. The Patryn had his hands on the steering stone. The sigla glowed a bright, intense blue. Sails shivered, ropes tightened. The dragonship spread its wings, prepared to fly. On the pier, the dead began to clamor and clashed their weapons together. The lazar lifted their horrible visages, moved as a group toward the ship.

Apart from them, at the far end of the dock, Jonathan rose to his feet. He was a lazar, he had become one of the dead who was not dead, one of the living who was not living. He began walking toward the ship.

"Stay! Stop!" Alfred cried, pressing his face against the glass. "Can't we wait a minute longer?"

Haplo shrugged. "You can go back if you want to, Sartan. You've served your purpose. I don't need you any longer. Go on, get out!"

The ship began to move. Haplo's magical energies flowed through it, the blue light beamed brightly, welled up from between his fingers, surrounding him in a brilliant halo.

"If you're going, go!" he shouted.

I should, Alfred told himself. Jonathan had faith enough. He was willing to die for what he believed. I should be prepared to do the same.

The Sartan left the porthole, started toward the ladder that led up from the bridge. Outside the ship, he could hear the chill voices of the dead, shouting in fury, enraged at seeing their prey escape. He could hear Kleitus and the other lazar raise their voices in a chant. From the strain suddenly apparent on Haplo's face, they were attempting to break down the Dragon Wing's fragile, protective rune structure.

The dragonship jolted to a halt. It was caught, held fast like a fly in a web of the lazar's magic. Haplo closed his eyes, focused his mental powers, his concentration visible in the rigidity of the hands pressed against the steering stone. His fingers—red against the light welling up from beneath—seemed to be made of flame.

The dragonship lurched, sank a few feet.

"Perhaps the choice will be taken from me," Alfred murmured, almost relieved. He turned back to the porthole.

Haplo gasped, grit his teeth, and held on. The ship rose slightly.

A spell came, unbidden, to Alfred's mind. He could enhance the Patryn's failing energy. He could help break free of the web before the spider stung them.

The choice, far from being taken away, was being laid squarely on him.

The lazar that was Jonathan stood apart from the other lazar, the eyes of the soul not quite torn from the body gazed up at the ship, gazed through the runes, through the wood, through the glass, through flesh and bone into Alfred's heart.

"I'm sorry," Alfred said to the eyes. "I don't have the faith. I don't understand."

The Sartan turned away from the window. Walking over to Haplo, Alfred placed his hands on the Patryn's shoulders and began to chant.

The circle was joined. The dragonship gave a great shudder, broke free of the magical toils, lifted its wings and soared upward, leaving behind the fiery sea, leaving behind the dead and the living on the stone world of Abarrach.

\*

The ship floated before Death's Gate.

Haplo lay on a pallet on the deck, near the steering stone. He had collapsed moments after they'd freed themselves. Hovering on the brink of unconsciousness, he'd fought to keep himself awake, fought to guide their ship to safety. Alfred had watched over him anxiously, until Haplo ordered him irritably to go away and leave him alone.

"All I need is sleep. When we reach the Nexus, I'll be fine. You better find yourself a place to lie down, Sartan, or you'll end up breaking your neck when we go through Death's Gate. And this time, when we go through, keep your mind out of mine!"

Alfred stood by the porthole, staring out, his mind walking back on Abarrach, regret gnawing at him. "I didn't mean to pry into your past life. I don't have much control—"

"Shut up and sit down."

Alfred sighed and sat—or rather tumbled—into a corner. He huddled there dejectedly, his bony knees level with his chin.

The dog curled up beside Haplo, put its head on his chest. The Patryn settled himself comfortably, stroked the dog's ears with his hand. The animal closed its eyes, and its tail wagged contentedly.

"Sartan. You awake?"

Alfred kept silent.

'Alfred.' Grudgingly.

"Yes, I'm awake."

"You know what'll happen to you in the Nexus." Haplo didn't look at him when he spoke, he kept his gaze on the dog. "You know what My Lord will do to you."

"Yes," Alfred answered.

Haplo hesitated a moment, either deciding on his next words or deciding whether or not to say them. When he made his decision, his voice was hard and sharp, cutting through some barrier within himself.

"Then, if I were you, I wouldn't be around when I woke up." Haplo closed his eyes.

Alfred stared in amazement, then smiled gently. "I understand. Thank you, Haplo."

The Patryn didn't respond. His labored breathing grew even and easy. Lines of pain relaxed from his face. The dog, sighing, wriggled closer.

Death's Gate opened, drew them slowly inside.

Alfred leaned back against the bulkheads. Consciousness was slipping away from him. He thought he heard, though it may have been a dream, Haplo's sleepy voice.

"I never did find out about the prophecy. I don't suppose it matters. No one will be left alive down there to fulfill it. Who believes in that crap anyway? Like you said, Sartan. If you believe in a prophecy, you have to believe in a higher power."

Who believes? Alfred wondered.

SAFE HARBOR, ABARRACH

THE LAZAR, ANGERED AT LOSING THE DRAGONSHIP, TURNED THEIR WRATH on the living who yet remained on Abarrach. Kleitus led the armies of the dead in an attack on the small band of refugees from Kairn Telest.

The living were led by Baltazar, who barely escaped with his life from the docks. Protected by Prince Edmund, the necromancer hastened back to his people, hiding in the Salfag Caverns. He brought them the terrible news that their own armies of dead had turned against them.

The people of Kairn Telest fled the coming of the dead, running out into the open plains of the land that was itself, dying. They fled without hope, however, for among their number were many sick and many children, who could not stand the forced pace. The cycles of their suffering and hardship were mercifully brief. The dead were hard on their heels and soon the last living beings on Abarrach were brought to bay. They had no choice but to turn and fight.

During this time, I walked among the lazar, pretending to be one with them, for I knew that my hour had not yet come. Prince Edmund remained by my side. Although I knew his grief for his people was acute, he, too, waited for his hour.

The people of Kairn Telest chose for their field of battle a level plain not far from the Pillar of Zembar. They gave some thought to trying to protect the children, the sick and infirm, the elderly. In the end, they decided that it mattered little. Against the dead, there could be only one outcome. Men and women, old and young gathered what weapons they could and prepared to fight. They formed their ranks into a single line—families together, friend beside friend. The fortunate ones would be those who died first and swiftest.

The dead ranged themselves in ranks in the field across from the living. Their army was huge, outnumbering the people of Kairn Telest almost a thousand to one. Kleitus and the lazar walked before them, the dynast exhorting the cadavers to bring the dead necromancers among the Kairn Telest to him for resurrection.

I knew what was in Kleitus's mind, for I had attended his council meetings with the rest of his lazar. Once the Kairn Telest were destroyed, he planned to enter Death's Gate and from there pass on to other worlds. His ultimate goal—to rule over a universe of dead.

The trumpets of the cadavers sounded, blowing thin, iron notes that echoed through the kairn. The army of dead prepared to advance. The living of Kairn Telest closed ranks, silently awaiting their fate.

Prince Edmund and I stood together on the front lines of battle. His phantasm turned to face me and I saw then that he had been given the knowledge for which he'd been waiting.

"Bid me farewell, brother."

"Fare you well, my brother, on your long journey," I said. "May you know peace at last."

"I could wish the same for you," he said.

"When my work is done," I told him.

We walked together, side by side, and took our places among the foremost ranks of the dead. Kleitus watched us warily, suspiciously. He would have confronted us but the dead began to cheer, thinking that Edmund had himself come out to lead the battle against his own people.

Kleitus could do little against us. My strength and my power had grown during those last days, shining down on me like the sun I had never seen except in the visions of the Sartan from another world, the one who called himself Alfred. I knew its source. I knew the sacrifice I would have to make to use the power, and I was prepared.

Prince Edmund raised his hand, calling for silence. The dead obeyed, the cadavers ceased their hollow cries, the phantasms hushed their endless moaning.

"This cycle," Prince Edmund shouted, "death comes to Abarrach!"

The dead raised their voices in a mighty shout. The writhing visage of Kleitus darkened.

"You mistake my meaning. Death will not come to the living," Edmund's voice rang out, "but to us, to the dead. Let go of your fear, as I let go of mine. Trust in this one." He knelt down before me, looked up at me. "For he is the one of whom the prophecy spoke."

'Are you ready?' I asked.

"I am," he said firmly.

I began reciting the chant, the words I had first heard spoken by the Sartan, Alfred. Blessed be the One who sent him to us.

Prince Edmund's body stiffened, jerked, as if it felt again the spear plunge into its chest. The face contorted with both the physical pain and the mental, the knowledge of failure, the brief and bitter struggle life makes leaving the body, the world.

My heart was filled with pity, but I continued the chant. The body slumped down to the ground at my feet.

Kleitus, realizing what was happening, tried to stop me. He and the other lazar raged around me, but they were nothing more to me than the hot wind blowing from the sea of fire.

The dead spoke no word, only watched.

The living murmured and clasped hands, wondering if we offered hope or a deepening of their despair.

The corpse lay still and silent, the dreadful magical strings that animated it were severed. The phantasm of Edmund, his spirit, grew stronger and more clearly defined. For a brief instant he appeared to me and to his people as he had been in life—young, handsome, proud, compassionate.

His last look went to his people, to the living and the dead, and then he vanished, as the morning mists burn away in sunshine.

A battle was fought that day, but not between the living and the dead. It was fought between myself and the dead and Kleitus and the other lazar. When it was ended, the lazar had been beaten, their dread power reduced. They fled, plotting to increase their strength and continue the fight. Some of the dead joined them, fearful of giving up what they know, fearful of the unknown. But many more of the dead came to me afterward and begged me to release them.

Following the battle, the living of Kairn Telest made their way across the Fire Sea and entered the tragic city of Necropolis, joined there those few who had managed to survive the slaughter. Baltazar is their leader. The first law he passed was to prohibit the practice of necromancy. His first decree was that the bodies of the victims of the dead's vengeance be committed with reverence to the Fire Sea.

The lazar have disappeared, but their threat hangs like the dreary clouds of laze over the living of Necropolis. The city's gates are shut, the rat holes have been bricked up, the walls are heavily guarded. Baltazar is of the opinion that the lazar are searching for the means to enter Death's Gate and may perhaps have done so.

I think it quite likely that Kleitus does seek a way through Death's Gate, but I do not believe he has found the means to enter. He remains in this world, all the lazar remain in this world. I hear their voices, sometimes, during the sleepless hours of the long nights. I hear their cries of hatred and agony and torment. It is their hatred that binds them to this world, their hatred of me in particular, for they know that, in me, the prophecy has been fulfilled.

The torment we lazar endure is indescribable. The soul longs for freedom, yet cannot detach itself from the body. The body longs to give up its heavy burden, but is terrified to part from the soul. We cannot sleep, we cannot find rest. No food can give us sustenance, no drink can ease our terrible thirst. The body aches with fatigue, the restless spirit forces that body to constantly roam the world.

I walk the streets of Necropolis, streets that were once crowded but are now pitifully empty. I walk the deserted halls of the palace and listen to the echoes of my own footfalls. I walk the fields of Old Province, desolate and abandoned. I walk the fields of New Province and watch the living toil in place of the dead. I walk the shores of the shrinking Fire Sea. When the pain of my existence becomes too much to bear, I return again to the Chamber of the Blessed to find strength.

My suffering is my penance, my sacrifice. My beloved Jera walks with the lazar, out there, somewhere. Her hatred for me is sharp, keen, but only because her hatred must wage constant battle against her deeper love. When the time for waiting is ended, when my work is accomplished, I will take my beloved in my arms again and together we will find the peace now denied us. I keep that dream in my heart, the only dream allowed these sleepless eyes. It is my comfort, my hope. My love and the knowledge of my duty sustain me in my waiting. The time of the prophecy is not now, but soon.

"He will bring life to the dead, hope to the living, and for him the Gate will open." [1]

•A Collection of the Writings of Jonathan the Lazar, compiled by Baltazar, ruler of Necropolis, Abarrach.

## EPILOGUE

My Lord,

You may remove Abarrach completely from your calculations. I found evidence to indicate that the Sartan and the mensch did once inhabit that hunk of worthless, molten rock. The climate undoubtedly proved too harsh for even their powerful magic to sustain them. They apparently tried to contact the other worlds, but their attempts ended in failure. Their cities have now become their tombs.

Abarrach is a dead world.

My Lord will, I'm certain, understand why I do not make my report to him in person. An emergency has arisen that calls me away. On my return from Abarrach, I learned that the Sartan I discovered living on Arianus, the one who calls himself Alfred, has entered Death's Gate. Evidence indicates that he has gone to Chelestra, the fourth world the Sartan created, the world of water. I am following him there.

I remain your loyal and devoted son. [1]

HAPLO

Haplo, my loyal and devoted son, YOU ARE A LIAR.:

1 Haplo's report on the world of Abarrach, from the files of the Lord of the Nexus.

2 Scrawled on the margin of the report.

1 The Lord of the Nexus underestimated the magical forces that control Death's Gate and failed to provide Haplo with suitable protection for the journey. The ftrryn crash-landed and was rescued by the Geg Limbeck (see Dragon Wing, vol. 1 of The Death Gate Cycle).

2 Haplo characteristically makes no further mention of what he considers to be his failure on Pryan, but it may relate to the fact that he was very nearly killed by of giants whose magic proved far stronger than the Patryn's (see Elven , vol. 2 of The Death Gate Cycle).

3 Haplo, Abarrach, World of Stone, vol. 4 of Death Gate journals.

Baltazar, Remembrances of My Homeland, a journal chronicling the last \*ys of Kairn Telest kept by the necromancer to the king.

• 4\* WEIS AND HICKMAN

1 A word used by both Sartan and Rattryns to refer to the "lesser" races: humans, elves, dwarves.

1 Sartan have two names, private and public. As Alfred told Haplo previously in the story, a Sartan's private name can give those who know it power over them. A Sartan's private name, therefore, would be revealed only to those he or she loved and trusted.

1 A reference to a move in the game of rune-bone in which an opponent is stripped clean of all his runes. The game of rune-bone is vaguely similar in nature to a game known anciently (pre-Sundering) as mah-jongg.

1 Kairn is a Sartan word meaning "cavern," a variation on the dwarven word cairn, which means "pile of stones." It is interesting to note that the Sartan had no word of their own for cavern prior to their removal to Abarrach and were forced, apparently, to borrow a word from the dwarves.

2 Fought during the rebellion of the people of Thebis, who refused to pay one-third of their crops in taxes to the dynast. The rebellion failed and almost certainly led to the downfall of a once-great city-state. Fair-minded historians point out that although this tax burden does seem excessive, the people of Thebis thought nothing of charging the dynast and the people of Necropolis a fee of fifty bales of kairn grass per use of the Pillar of Thebis, which supplied much-needed water to the city of Necropolis.

1 A diminutive clay model of the dynast himself set within its own miniature duplicate of the palace. As originally designed, the dynast doll was attuned magically to the dynast and portrayed the current time by its position within its play palace. Thus when the doll went to bed, the hour was the dynast's sleeping hour. When the doll sat down to dinner, it was the dynast's dining hour. When the magic on Abarrach grew weaker, the dolls began to keep less-than-perfect time.

Refer to Magic in the Sundered Realms, Excerpt from a Sartan's Musings, Vol. 1.

1 Most probably a descendant of the pig, which was brought by the Sartan to this world following the Sundering. A large portion of the diet of the Sartan on Abarrach consists of meat, vegetables being extremely scarce, and the torb is their primary source. Torb graze on kairn grass and are raised in the New Provinces and brought to market in Necropolis.

1 The hour following the dynast's gaming hour when His Majesty orders the light of the gas lamps to be dimmed. During the dynast's slumber hours, the gas lamps are turned off completely.

1 From the proper name, Lazarus. Originally, in ancient times, the word was used to refer to a person with a loathsome disease, such as leprosy, considered to be living death. In more modern times, following the Sundering, Sartan practicing the forbidden art of necromancy used the word to refer to those who were brought back from the dead too quickly.

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman  
Deathgate Cycle 4  
Serpent Mage

## PROLOGUE

I VISITED MY WRATH UPON HAPLO THIS DAY. [1] AN UNPLEASANT TASK

Few would believe me, but it grieved me to do what had to be done. It would have been easier, perhaps, if I did not feel in some part responsible.

When it became clear to me that we Patryns were nearing our time, when we were almost strong enough to be able to break out of this heinous prison into which the Sartan hurled us and move once again to take our rightful place as leaders in the universe, I chose one among us to go forth and learn about the new worlds.

I chose Haplo. I chose him for his quickness of mind his independence of thought, his courage, his adaptability to new surroundings. And those, alas, are the very qualities that have led him to rebel against me. Therefore, I reiterate—in this way I am responsible for what has befallen.

Independence of thought. Necessary, I deemed, when facing the unknown territories of worlds created by our ancient enemy, the Sartan, and populated with mensch. [2] It was vital that he be able to react to any situation with intelligence and skill, vital that he not reveal to anyone on any of these worlds that we Patryns have broken free of our bonds. He behaved quite splendidly on two of the three worlds he visited, with a few minor lapses. It was on the third that he failed not only me but himself.

I caught him just before he would have left to visit the fourth world, the world of water, Chelestra. He was on board his dragonship, the one he took from Arianus, preparing to set sail for Death's Gate. He said nothing when he saw me. He did not appear surprised. It was as if he had been expecting me, perhaps even waiting for me, though it seemed, from the disorder on board the ship, that he had been preparing for a hasty departure. Certainly there is much turmoil within him.

Those who know me would call me a hard man, hard and cruel, but I was bred in a place far harder, far crueler. I have in my long life seen too much pain, too much suffering, to be touched by it. But I am not a monster. I am not sadistic. What I did to Haplo, I did out of necessity. I took no pleasure in the doing.

Spare the rod and spoil the child—an old mensch proverb.

Haplo, believe me when I say I grieve for you this night. But it was for your own good, my son.

Your own good.

## CHAPTER

### THE NEXUS

"DAMN IT! GET OUT OF THE WAY!" HAPLO KICKED AT THE DOG.

The animal cringed, slunk away, and endeavored to lose itself in the shadows of the hold, hide until its master's bad mood passed.

Haplo could see the sad eyes, however, watching him from the darkness. He felt guilty, remorseful, and that merely increased his irritation and anger. He glared at the animal, glared at the confusion in the hold. Chests and casks and boxes, coils of rope, and barrels had been tossed in hurriedly, to stand where they landed. It looked like a rat's nest, but Haplo dared not take time to rearrange them, stack them neatly, stow them away securely, as he had always done before.

He was in haste, desperate to leave the Nexus before his lord caught him. Haplo stared at the mess, ill at ease, his hands itching to sort it out. Turning on his heel, he stalked off, heading back to the bridge. The dog rose silently, padded soft-footed after him.

"Alfred!" He flung the word at the dog. "It's all Alfred's fault. That blasted Sartan! I should never have let him go. I should have brought him here, to my lord, let him deal with the miserable wretch. But who'd have guessed the coward would actually have nerve enough to jump ship! I don't suppose you have any idea how that happened?"

Haplo stopped, glowered suspiciously at the dog. The animal sat back, tilted its head, regarded him with bland innocence, though its tail wagged cheerfully at the sound of Alfred's name. Grunting, Haplo continued on his way, casting cursory glances to the left and right. He saw — with relief — that his vessel had sustained no lasting damage. The magic of the runes covering the hull had done its job, kept the Dragon Wing safe from the fiery environment of Abarrach and the lethal spells cast by the lazar in their efforts to hijack it.

He had only recently come through Death's Gate and knew that he should not be going back this quickly. He had lost consciousness on the journey from Abarrach. No, lost wasn't quite the correct term. He'd deliberately cast it aside. The resultant undreaming sleep had restored him completely to health, healed the arrow wound he'd taken in the thigh, removed the last vestiges of the poison given him by the ruler of Kairn Necros. When he awoke, Haplo was well in body, if not in mind. He was almost sorry to have awakened at all.

His brain was like the hold. Thoughts and ideas and feelings were in a tangle. Some were thrust away in dark corners, where he could still see them watching him. Others were tossed in any which way. Precariously and carelessly stacked, they would come tumbling down at the slightest provocation. Haplo knew he could organize them, if he took the time, but he didn't have time, he didn't want time. He had to escape, get away.

He'd sent his report on Abarrach to the lord via a messenger, giving as his excuse for not coming in person the need to hurry after the escaped Sartan.

My Lord, You may remove Abarrach completely from your calculations. I found evidence to indicate that the Sartan and the mensch did once inhabit that hunk of worthless, molten rock. The climate undoubtedly proved too harsh for even their powerful magic to sustain them. They apparently tried to contact the other worlds, but their attempts ended in failure. Their cities have now become their tombs. Abarrach is a dead world,

The report was true. Haplo had said nothing false about Abarrach. But its truth was polished veneer, covering rotten wood beneath. Haplo was almost certain his lord would know his servant had lied; the Lord of the Nexus had a way of knowing everything that went on in a man's head . . . and his heart.

The Lord of the Nexus was the one person Haplo respected and admired. The one person Haplo feared. The lord's wrath was terrible, it could be deadly. His magic was incredibly powerful. When still a young man, he had been the first to survive and escape the Labyrinth. He was the only Patryn—including Haplo—who had the courage to return to that deadly prison, fight its awful magics, work to free his people.

Haplo grew cold with fear whenever he thought about a possible encounter between his lord and himself. And he thought about it almost constantly. He wasn't afraid of physical pain or even death. It was the fear of seeing the disappointment in his lord's eyes, the fear of knowing that he had failed the man who had saved his life, the man who loved him like a son.

"No," said Haplo to the dog, "better to go on to Chelestra, the next world. Better to go quickly, take my chances. Hopefully, with time, I can sort out this tangle inside me. Then, when I return, I can face my lord with a clear conscience."

He arrived on the bridge, stood staring down at the steering stone. He'd made his decision. He had only to put his hands on the sigla-covered round stone and his ship would break the magical ties binding it to the ground and sail into the rose-hued twilight of the Nexus. Why did he hesitate?

It was wrong, all wrong. He hadn't gone over the ship with his usual care. They'd made it safely out of Abarrach and through Death's Gate, but that didn't mean they could make another journey.

He'd prepared the ship in a slapdash manner, jury-rigging what he could not take time to carefully repair. He should have strengthened rune structures that almost surely had been weakened by the journey, should have searched for cracks, either in the wood or the sigla, should have replaced frayed cables.

He should have, as well, consulted with his lord about this new world. The Sartan had left written lore concerning the four worlds in the Nexus. It would be folly to rush blindly into the world of water, without even the most rudimentary knowledge of what he faced. Previously, he and his lord had met and studied . . .

But not now. No, not now.

Haplo's mouth was dry, had a foul taste in it. He swallowed, but it did no good. He reached out his hands to the steering stone and was startled to see his fingers tremble. Time was running out. The Lord of the Nexus would have received his report by now. He would know that Haplo had lied to him.

"I should leave . . . now," Haplo said softly, willing himself to place his hands on the stone.

But he was like a man who sees dreadful doom coming upon him, who knows he must run for his life, yet who finds himself paralyzed, his limbs refusing to obey his brain's command.

The dog growled. Its hackles rose, its eyes shifted to a point behind and beyond Haplo.

Haplo did not look around. He had no need. He knew who stood in the doorway.

He knew it by countless signs: he'd heard no one approaching, the warning sigla tattooed on his skin had not activated, the dog had not reacted until the man was within arm's reach.

The animal stood its ground, ears flattened, the low growl rumbling deep in its chest.

Haplo closed his eyes, sighed. He felt, to his surprise, a vast sense of relief.

"Dog, go," he said.

The animal looked up at him, whimpered, begged him to reconsider.

"Get," snarled Haplo. "Go on. Beat it." The dog, whining, came to him, put its paw on his leg. Haplo scratched behind the furry ears, rubbed his hand beneath the jowl.

"Go. Wait outside."

Head lowered, the dog trotted slowly and reluctantly from the bridge. Haplo heard it flop down just outside the doorway, heard it sigh, knew it was pressed as close against the door as was possible to do and still obey its master's command.

Haplo did not look at the man who had materialized out of the twilight shadows inside his ship. Haplo kept his head lowered. Tense, nervous, he traced with his finger the runes carved upon the steering stone.

He sensed, more than heard or saw, the man come near him. A hand closed over Haplo's arm. The hand was old and gnarled, its runes a mass of hills and valleys on the wrinkled skin. Yet the sigla were still dark and easily read, their power strong.

"My son," said a gentle voice.

If the Lord of the Nexus had come raging aboard the ship, denouncing Haplo as a traitor, hurling threats and accusations, Haplo would have defied him, fought him, undoubtedly to the death.

Two simple words disarmed him completely.

"My son."

He heard forgiveness, understanding. A sob shook Haplo. He fell to his knees. Tears, as hot and bitter as the poison he'd swallowed on Abarrach, crept from beneath his eyelids.

"Help me, Lord!" he pleaded, the words coming as a gasp from a chest that burned with pain. "Help me!"

"I will, my son," answered Xar. His gnarled hand stroked Haplo's hair. "I will."

The hand's grip tightened painfully. Xar jerked Haplo's head back, forced him to look up.

"You have been deeply hurt, terribly wounded, my son. And your injury is not healing cleanly. It festers, doesn't it, Haplo? It grows gangrenous. Lance it. Purge yourself of its foul infection or its fever will consume you.

"Look at yourself. Look what this infection has done to you already. Where is the Haplo who walked defiantly out of the Labyrinth, though each step might have been his last? Where is the Haplo who braved Death's Gate so many times? Where is Haplo now? Sobbing at my feet like a child!

"Tell me the truth, my son. Tell me the truth about Abarrach."

Haplo bowed his head and confessed. The words gushed forth, spewing out of him, purging him, easing the pain of the wound. He spoke with fevered rapidity, his tale broken and disjointed, his speech often incoherent, but Xar had no difficulty following him. The language of both the Patryns and their rivals, the Sartan, has the ability to create images in the mind, images that can be seen and understood if the words cannot.

"And so," murmured the Lord of the Nexus, "the Sartan have been practicing the forbidden art of necromancy. This is what you feared to tell me. I can understand, Haplo. I share your revulsion, your disgust. Trust the Sartan to mishandle this marvelous power. Rotting corpses, shuffling about on menial errands. Armies of bones battering each other into dust." The gnarled hands were once again stroking, soothing.

"My son, had you so little faith in me? Do you, after all this time, not know me yet? Do you not know my power? Can you truly believe that I would misuse this gift as the Sartan have misused it?"

"Forgive me, My Lord," whispered Haplo, weak, weary, yet feeling vastly comforted. "I have been a fool. I did not think."

"And you had a Sartan in your power. You could have brought him to me. And you let him go, Haplo. You let him escape. But I can understand. He twisted your mind, made you see things that were not, deceived you. I can understand. You were sick, dying. . . ."

Shame burned. "Don't make excuses for me, My Lord," Haplo protested harshly, his throat raw from his sobs. "I make none for myself. The poison affected my body, not my mind. I am weak, flawed. I no longer deserve your trust."

"No, no, my son. You are not weak. The wound to which I was referring was not the poison given to you by the dynast, but the poison fed to you by the Sartan, Alfred. A far more insidious poison, one that affects the mind, not the body. It inflicted the injury of which I spoke earlier. But that wound is drained now, is it not, my son?"

Xar's fingers twined through Haplo's hair.

The Patryn looked up at his master. The old man's face was lined and marked with his toils, his tireless battles against the powerful magic of the Labyrinth. The skin did not sag, however, the jaw was strong and firm, the nose jutted out from the face like the tearing beak of a fierce flesh-eating bird. The eyes were bright and wise and hungry.

"Yes," said Haplo, "the wound is drained."

"And now it must be cauterized, to prevent the infection from returning."

A scraping sound came from outside the door. The dog, hearing a tone of dire threat in the lord's voice, jumped to its feet, prepared to come to its master's defense.

"Dog, stay," Haplo ordered. He braced himself, bowed his head.

The Lord of the Nexus reached down, took hold of Haplo's shirt, and, with one tear, rent the fabric in two, laying bare Haplo's back and shoulders. The runes tattooed on his flesh began to glow slightly, red and blue, his body's involuntary reaction to danger, to what he knew was coming.

He clenched his jaw, remained on his knees. The glow of the sigla on his body slowly faded. He lifted his head, fixed his gaze, calm and steadfast, upon his lord.

"I accept my punishment. May it do me good, My Lord."

"May it do so indeed, my son. I take no joy in the giving."

The Lord of the Nexus placed his hand on Haplo's breast, over his heart. He traced a rune with his finger; the nail was long, it drew blood from the flesh. But it did far worse to Haplo's magic. The heart-sigla were the first links in the circle of his being. At the lord's touch, they began to separate, the chain started to break.

The Lord of the Nexus drove the wedge of his magic inside the sigla, forced them apart. A second link slipped from the first, cracked. The third slid off the second, then the fourth and fifth. Faster and faster, the runes that were the source of Haplo's power, his defense against the power of other forces, broke and splintered and shattered.

The pain was excruciating. Slivers of metal pierced his skin, rivers of fire coursed through his blood. Haplo closed his mouth against the screams as long as he could. When they came, he didn't know them for his.

The Lord of the Nexus was skilled at his work. When it seemed Haplo must faint from the agony, Xar ceased the torment, talked gently of their past lives together, until Haplo had recovered his senses. Then the lord began again.

Night, or what the Nexus knows as night, drew its blanket of soft moonlight over the ship. The lord traced a sigil in the air; the torture ceased.

Haplo fell back on the deck and lay like one dead. Sweat covered his naked body, he shook with chills, his teeth chattered. A residue of pain, a flash of flame, a stabbing of a blade, surged through his veins, wrenched from him another agonized cry. His body twitched and jerked spasmodically, out of his control.

The Lord of the Nexus bent down and, once again, laid his hand on Haplo's heart. He could have killed him then. He could have broken the sigil, destroyed it past any hope of repair. Haplo felt the lord's touch, cool on his blazing skin. He shivered, choked back a moan, and lay rigid, perfectly still.

"Execute me! I betrayed you! I don't deserve ... to live!"

"My son," whispered the Lord of the Nexus in pitying tones. A tear dropped on Haplo's breast. "My poor son."

The teardrop closed and sealed the rune.

Haplo sighed, rolled over, began to weep. Xar gathered the young man close, cradled the bleeding head in his arms, rocked him, soothed him, and worked the magic until all Haplo's runes had been rejoined, the circle of his being reestablished.

Haplo slept, a healing sleep.

The Lord of the Nexus took off his own cape, a cloak of fine, white linen, and drew it over Haplo. The lord paused a moment to look at the young man. The remnants of the agony were fading, leaving Haplo's face strong and grim, calm and resolute—a sword whose metal has been strengthened by being passed through the fire, a granite wall whose cracks have been filled with molten steel.

Xar laid his hands upon the ship's steering stone and, speaking the runes, started it upon its journey through Death's Gate. He was preparing to leave when a thought struck him. He made a quick tour of the vessel, keen eyes peering into every shadow.

The dog was gone.

"Excellent."

The Lord of the Nexus left, well satisfied.

## CHAPTER \* 2

### SOMEWHERE BEYOND DEATH'S GATE

ALFRED AWOKE, A FRIGHTFUL YELL RINGING IN HIS EARS. HE LAY perfectly still, terrified, listening with fast-beating heart and sweaty palms and squinched-shut eyelids for the yell to be repeated. After long moments of profound silence, Alfred came at last to the rather confused confusion that the yell must have been his own.

"Death's Gate. I fell through Death's Gate! Or rather," he amended, shivering at the thought, "I was pushed through Death's Gate."

If I were you, I wouldn't be around when I woke up, Haplo had warned him, . . .

. . . Haplo had fallen asleep, fallen into one of the healing sleeps vitally necessary to those of his race. Alfred sat in the lurching ship, alone except for the dog, who lay protectively near its master. Alfred, looking around, realized how alone he was. He was terrified, and he tried to combat his fear by creeping nearer Haplo, seeking company, even if it was unconscious.

Alfred settled himself beside Haplo, occupied himself by studying the Patryn's stern face. He noticed that it did not relax in repose, but retained its grim, forbidding expression, as though nothing, not sleep, perhaps not even death, could bring perfect peace to the man.

Moved by compassion, by pity, Alfred stretched out a hand to smooth back a lock of hair that fell forward over the implacable face.

The dog raised its head, growled menacingly.

Alfred snatched his hand back. "I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking."

The dog, knowing Alfred, appeared to accept this as a plausible excuse. It settled back down.

Alfred heaved a tremendous sigh, glanced nervously around the lurching ship. He caught a glimpse through the window of the fiery world of Abarrach falling away from them in a confused swirl of smoke and flame. Ahead, he saw the rapidly approaching black hole that was Death's Gate.

"Oh, dear," Alfred murmured, shrinking. If he was going to leave, he had better get going.

The dog had the same idea. It leapt to its feet, started to bark urgently.

"I know. It's time," Alfred said. "You gave me my life, Haplo. And it's not that I'm ungrateful. But ... I'm too frightened. I don't think I have the courage."

Do you have the courage to stay? the dog seemed to ask in exasperation. Do you have the courage to face the Lord of the Nexus?

Haplo's lord—a powerful Patryn wizard. No fainting spell would save Alfred from this terrible man. The lord would prod and probe and drag forth every secret the Sartan had in his being. Torture, torment, lasting for as long as the Sartan remained alive . . . and the lord was certain to ensure his prey lived a long, long time.

The threat must have been sufficient to drive Alfred to action. At least that's what he supposed. He remembered finding himself standing on the upper deck, without the slightest notion how he had come to be there.

The winds of magic and time whistled around him, grabbed disrespectfully at the wisps of hair on his balding head, set his coattails to flapping. Alfred gripped the rail with both hands and stared out, horribly fascinated, into Death's Gate.

And he knew, then, that he could no more hurl himself bodily into that abyss than he could consciously end his own miserable and lonely existence.

"I'm a coward," he said to the dog. Bored, it had followed him up on deck. Alfred smiled wanly, looked down at his hands, clinging to the rail with a white-knuckled grip. "I don't think I could pry myself loose. I—"

The dog suddenly went mad, or so it seemed. Snarling, teeth slashing, it leapt straight at him. Alfred wrenched his hands from the rail, flung them up in front of his face, an instinctive, involuntary act of protection. The dog struck him hard on the chest, knocked him over the side. . . .

What had happened after that? Alfred couldn't remember, except that it was all very confused and all extremely horrible. He had a vivid impression of falling ... of falling through a hole that seemed far too small for a gnat to enter and yet was large enough to swallow the winged dragonship whole. He remembered falling into brightly lit darkness, of being deafened by a roaring silence, of tumbling head over heels while not moving.

And then, reaching the top, he'd hit bottom.

And that's where he was now, or so he supposed.

He considered opening his eyes, decided against it. He had absolutely no desire to see his surroundings. Wherever he was, it was bound to be awful. He rather hoped that he would lose himself in sleep, and if he was lucky, he wouldn't find himself again.

Unfortunately, as is generally the case, the more he tried to go back to sleep, the wider awake he woke. Bright light shone through his closed eyelids. He became aware of a hard, flat, cool surface beneath him; of various aches and pains in his body that indicated he'd been lying here for some time; of being cold and thirsty and hungry.

No telling where he'd landed. Death's Gate led to each of the four worlds created magically by the Sartan following the Sundering. It led also to the Nexus, the beautiful twilight land meant to hold the "rehabilitated" Patryns after their release from the Labyrinth. Perhaps he was there. Perhaps he was back on Arianus. Perhaps he hadn't really gone anywhere! Perhaps he'd open his eyes and find the dog, grinning at him.

Alfred clamped his eyes tightly shut; his facial muscles ached from the strain. But either curiosity or the stabbing pain shooting through his lower back got the better of him. Groaning, he opened his eyes, sat up, and looked nervously around.

He could have wept for relief.

He was in a large room, circular, lit by lovely, soft white light that emanated from the marble walls. The floor beneath him was marble, inlaid with runes—sigla he knew and recognized. The ceiling arched comfortably overhead, a dome supported by delicate columns. Embedded in the walls of the room were row after row of crystal chambers, chambers meant to hold people in stasis, chambers that had, tragically, become coffins.

Alfred knew where he was—the mausoleum on Arianus. He was home. And, he decided at once, he would never leave. He would stay in this underground world forever. Here he was safe. No one knew about this place, except for one mensch, a dwarf named Jarre, and she had no means of finding her way back. No one could ever find it now, protected as it was by powerful Sartan magic. The war between the elves and dwarves and humans could rage on Arianus and he would not be part of it. Iridal could search for her changeling son and he would not help. The dead could walk on Abarrach and he would turn his back on all except the familiar, the silent blessed dead that were his companions once more.

After all, one man, alone, what can I do? he asked himself wistfully.

Nothing.

What can I be expected to do?

Nothing.

Who could possibly expect me to do it?

No one.

Alfred repeated that to himself. "No one." He recalled the wonderful, awful experience on Abarrach when he had seemed to know with certainty that some sort of higher power for good was present in the universe, to know that he wasn't alone, as he had supposed all these years.

But the knowledge, his certainty, had faded, died with young Jonathan, who had been destroyed by the dead and the lazar of Abarrach.

"I must have imagined it," said Alfred sadly. "Or perhaps Haplo was right. Perhaps I created that vision we all experienced and didn't know I created it. Like my fainting, or like casting that spell that took the magical life from the dead. And, if that's true, then what Haplo said was true as well. I led poor Jonathan to his death. Deceived by false visions, false promises, he sacrificed himself for nothing."

Alfred bowed his head into his trembling hands, his thin shoulders slumped. "Everywhere I go, disaster follows. And therefore, I won't go anywhere. I won't do anything. I'll stay here. Safe, protected, surrounded by those I once loved."

He couldn't, however, spend the remainder of his life on the floor. There were other rooms, other places to go. The Sartan had once lived down here. Shaking, stiff, and sore, he endeavored to stand up. His feet and legs appeared to have other ideas, resented being forced back to work. They crumbled beneath him. He fell, persisted in trying to stand, and, after a moment, managed to do so. Once he was finally upright, his feet seemed inclined to wander off one way when he actually had it in mind to go the opposite.

Finally, all his body parts more or less in agreement as to the general direction he was headed, Alfred propelled himself toward the crystal coffins, to bid fond greeting to those he had left far too long. The bodies in the coffins would never return his greeting, never speak words of welcome to him. Their eyes would never open to gaze at him with friendly pleasure. But he was comforted by their presence, by their peace.

Comforted and envious.

Necromancy. The thought flitted across his mind, skittering like a bat. You could bring them back to life.

But the dread shadow lay over him only momentarily. He wasn't tempted. He had seen the dire consequences of necromancy on Abarrach. And he had the terrible feeling that these friends of his had died because of the necromancy, their life-force stolen from them, given to those who, he now suspected, didn't want it.

Alfred went straight to one coffin, one he knew well. In it lay the woman he loved. He needed, after the horrible sights of the restless dead on Abarrach, to see her calm and peaceful sleep. He placed his hands on the outside of the crystal window behind which she lay and, fondly, tears in his eyes, pressed his forehead against the glass.

Something was wrong.

Admittedly, his vision was blurred by his tears. He couldn't see well. Hastily, Alfred blinked, rubbed his hands over his eyes. He stared, fell back, startled, shocked.

No, it couldn't be. He was overwrought, he'd made a mistake. Slowly he crept back, peered inside the coffin.

Inside was the body of a Sartan female, but it wasn't Lya!

Alfred shivered from head to toe.

"Calm down!" he counseled. "You're standing in the wrong place. You've gotten turned around by that terrible trip through Death's Gate. You've made a mistake. You've looked into the wrong crystal chamber. Go back and start over."

He turned around and tottered once more to the center of the room, barely able to stand, his knees as weak as wet flax. From this distance, he carefully counted the rows of crystal chambers, counted them up, then counted them across. Telling himself that he'd been a row too far over, he crept back, ignoring the voice that was telling him he'd been in exactly the right place all along.

He kept his gaze averted, refusing to look until he was near, in case his eyes might play another trick on him. Once arrived, he shut his eyes and then opened them swiftly, as if hoping to catch something in the act.

The strange woman was still there.

Alfred gasped, shuddered, leaned heavily against the crystal chamber. What was happening? Was he going insane?

"It's quite likely," he said. "After all I've been through. Perhaps Lya was never there at all. Perhaps I only willed her to be there and now, after all this time away, I can't call her to mind."

He looked again, but if his mind was truly behaving irrationally, it was doing it in a most rational manner. The woman was older than Lya, close to Alfred's age, he guessed. Her hair was completely white; her face—a handsome face, he thought, gazing at it in sorrowful confusion—had lost the elasticity and smooth beauty of youth. But she had gained, in exchange, the becoming gravity and purpose of middle age.

Her expression was solemn and grave, yet softened by lines around that mouth that seemed to indicate a warm and generous smile had graced her lips. A line down the center of her forehead, barely visible beneath the soft folds of her hair, indicated that her life had not been easy, that she had pondered much, thought long and hard about many things. And there was a sadness about her. The smile that touched the lips had not touched them often. Alfred felt a deep hunger and an aching unhappiness. Here was someone he could have talked to, someone who would have understood.

But . . . what was she doing here?

"Lie down. I must lie down."

Blindly, his vision clouded by his confused thoughts, Alfred stumbled and groped his way along the wall that held many crystal chambers until he came to his own. He would return to it, lie down, sleep ... or maybe wake up. He might be dreaming. He—

"Blessed Sartan!" Alfred fell back with a hoarse cry.

Someone was in it! His chamber! A man of early middle years, with a strong, cold, handsome face; strong hands stretched out at his side.

"I am mad!" Alfred clutched at his head. "This . . . this is impossible." He stumbled back to stare at the woman who was not Lya. "I'll shut my eyes and when I open them, all will be well again."

But he didn't shut his eyes. Not trusting himself to believe what he thought he'd seen, he looked fixedly at the woman. Her hands were folded across her breast—

The hands. The hands moved! They rose . . . fell! She had drawn a breath.

He watched closely for long moments; the magical stasis in which they lay slowed breathing. The hands rose and fell again. And now that Alfred was over his initial shock, he could see the faint flush of blood in the woman's cheeks, a flush that he would never see in Lya's.

"This woman's . . . alive!" Alfred whispered.

He staggered across to the crystal chamber that had been his own, but was now another's, and stared inside it. The man's clothing—a plain, simple, white robe—stirred. Eyeballs beneath closed lids moved; a finger twitched.

Feverishly, his mind overwhelmed, his heart almost bursting with joy, Alfred ran from one crystal chamber to another, staring inside each.

There could be no doubt. Every one of these Sartan was alive!

Exhausted, his mind reeling, Alfred returned to the center of the mausoleum and tried to unravel the tangled skein of his thoughts. It was impossible. He couldn't find the end of the thread, couldn't find the beginning.

His friends in the mausoleum had been dead for many, many years. Time and again he'd left them, time and again he'd returned, and nothing had ever changed. When he'd first realized that he and he alone, out of all the Sartan on Arianus, had survived, he'd refused to believe it. He'd played a game with himself, told himself that this time, when he came back, he'd find them alive. But he never had, and soon the game became so exceedingly painful that he'd quit playing it.

But now the game was back on and, what's more, he'd won!

Admittedly these Sartan were strangers, every one of them. He had no idea how they came to be here, or why, or what had happened to those he'd left behind. But these people were Sartan and they were alive!

Unless, of course, he was truly insane.

There was one way to find out. Alfred hesitated, not certain he wanted to know.

"Remember what you said about retreating from the world? About no longer getting involved in other people's lives? You could leave, walk out of this chamber without looking back."

"But where would I go?" he asked himself helplessly. "This is my home, if anyplace to me is home."

Curiosity, if nothing else, propelled him to act.

Alfred began to chant the runes, singing them in a high-pitched nasal voice. As he chanted, his body swayed and he moved his hands in time to his rhythm. Then, lifting his hands, he traced the sigla in the air and, at the same time, formed their intricate patterns with his feet.

The body that was so incredibly clumsy when left on its own filled with magic and Alfred became, for an instant, beautiful. Grace flowed through every limb, radiance touched his sad face, bliss lit his smile. He gave himself to the magic, danced with it, sang to it, embraced it. Round and round the mausoleum he solemnly whirled, coattails flying, frayed lace fluttering.

One by one, crystal doors opened. One by one, those in the chamber drew their first breaths of air of an outside world. One by one, heads turned, eyes opened, gazing in wonder or confusion, loath to leave the sweet dreams that had entertained them.

Alfred, lost in the magic, noticed nothing. He continued his dance, weaving gracefully back and forth across the marble floor, feet moving in prescribed patterns. When the magical spell was cast, the dance coming to its end, he moved slower and slower, continuing the same graceful gestures, but smaller in scope. At last, he ceased to dance and, lifting his head, gazed about him, far more bewildered than those who had just risen from their dreams.

Several hundred men and women, all clad in soft white robes, had gathered in silence around Alfred, politely waiting for him to complete his magic before disturbing him. He came to a halt and they waited another respectful moment, to give him time to let go of the bliss and return to reality, tantamount to falling into an ice-cold lake.

A man, the same Sartan who had been in Alfred's crystal chamber, stepped forward. He was obviously the acknowledged spokesman of the group, for the others gave way deferentially, regarded him with trust and respect.

He was, as Alfred had seen already, a man in early midlife, and it was easy to see, from his appearance, how the mensch had once mistaken the Sartan for gods. His face was cast in strong lines; intelligence

molded the features and lit the brown eyes. His hair was trimmed short and curled over his forehead in a fashion that was familiar to Alfred, yet he couldn't quite recall where he'd seen it.

The strange Sartan moved with a casual grace the clumsy Alfred envied.

"I am Samah," said the man in a voice that was rich and mellow. He bowed in respectful greeting, an old-fashioned, courtly gesture that had gone out of style long before Alfred's childhood, but had been occasionally practiced among the elder Sartan.

Alfred made no response. He could do nothing except stare, transfixed. The man had given his Sartan name! This either meant that Samah trusted Alfred—a stranger, an unknown—as a brother or that he was so supremely secure in his own magical prowess he had no need to fear another gaining ascendancy over him. Alfred concluded the reason must be the latter. The man's power radiated from him, warming the wretched Alfred like the sun on a winter's day.

In ages past, Alfred would have given this man his own Sartan name without a thought, knowing that any influence such a man as this must have over him could only be good. But that had been an Alfred of innocence, an Alfred who had not seen the bodies of his friends and family stretched out in their crystal coffins, an Alfred who had not seen Sartan practicing the forbidden black art of necromancy. He longed to trust them, he would have given his very life to trust them.

"My name is ... Alfred," he said, with an awkward bob.

"That is not a Sartan name," said Samah, frowning.

"No," Alfred agreed meekly.

"It is a mensch name. But you are a Sartan, are you not? You are not a mensch?"

"Yes, I am. That is, no, I'm not," Alfred floundered, rattled.

The Sartan language, as the Patryn language, being magic, has the ability to conjure up images of the worlds and environment of the speaker. Alfred had just witnessed, in Samah's words, a realm of extraordinary beauty, a realm made entirely of water, its sun shining in its center. A world of smaller worlds—landmasses encased in bubbles of air, landmasses that were themselves magically alive though now they slept, drifting in their dreams around the sun. He saw a Sartan city, his people working, fighting . . .

Fighting. War. Battle. Savage monsters crawling from the deep, wreaking havoc, bringing death. The vastly conflicting images came together with a crash in Alfred's head, nearly depriving him of his senses.

"I am head of the Council of Seven," began Samah.

Alfred gaped; the breath left his body as completely as if he'd been knocked flat on the floor.

Samah. Council of Seven. It couldn't be possible. . . .

It occurred to Alfred, eventually, by the man's frown, that he was asking a question.

"I—I beg your pardon?" Alfred stammered.

The rest of the Sartan, who had been standing in respectful silence, murmured, exchanged glances. Samah looked around, quieted them without speaking a word.

"I was saying, Alfred"—Samah's tone was kind, patient. It made Alfred want to burst into tears—"that, as head of the Council, I have the right and the duty to ask questions of you, not from mere idle curiosity, but, considering these times of crises, out of necessity. Where are the rest of our brethren?"

He glanced about eagerly.

"I ... I am alone," Alfred said, and the word alone conjured up images that made Samah and all the rest of the Sartan stare at him in sudden, aching silence.

"Has something gone wrong?" Samah asked at last.

Yes! Alfred wanted to cry. Something has gone dreadfully wrong! But he could only stare at the Sartan in dismayed confusion, the truth thundering around him like the fearsome storm that rages perpetually on Arianus.

"I ... I'm not on Arianus, am I?" Alfred squeezed the words out of the tight feeling in his chest.

"No. What put such an idea into your head? You are on the world of Chelestra, of course," said Samah sternly, his patience starting to wear thin.

"Oh, dear," said Alfred faintly, and in a graceful, spiraling motion, he slid gently and unconsciously to the floor.

### CHAPTER \* 3

#### ADRIFT SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

#### MY NAME IS GRUNDLE. [1]

When I was a child, that is the first sentence I ever learned how to write. I'm not certain why I wrote it down here, or why I begin with it, except that I have stared at this blank page for a long time now and I knew that I had to write something or I would never write anything.

I wonder who will find this and read it? Or if anyone will. I doubt that I will ever know. We have no hope of surviving our journey's end.

{Except, of course, the perverse hope that a miracle will happen, that something or someone will come to save us. Alake says that to hope for such a thing, especially to pray for it, is wicked, since if we were saved our people would suffer. I suppose she is right, she being the most intelligent among us. But I notice she continues to practice her exercises in summoning and conjuration and she would not do so if she was practicing what she counsels.)

It was Alake who recommended that I write the account of our voyage. She says our people may find it, after we are gone, and take some comfort in it. Then, of course, it is also necessary to explain about Devon. All of which is true, but I suspect she gave me this task so that I would leave her alone and quit pestering her when she wanted to practice her magic.

And I suppose she's right. It's better to do this than to sit and do nothing except wait for death. But I have my doubts that any of our people will ever see this. I think it will more likely be some stranger.

It's odd for me to think a stranger may be reading this after I am dead. Odder still to find myself sharing my fears and doubts with a stranger, when I can't share them with those I love. Perhaps that person will be from another seamoons. If there are other seamoons, which I doubt. Still, Alake says it's sinful to think that the One might have made us and no one else. But we dwarves are great doubters, suspicious of anything that hasn't been around at least as long as we have.

I doubt that our deaths will accomplish anything.

I doubt that the Masters of the Sea will keep their word. Our sacrifice will be for nothing. Our people are doomed.

There. I've put it down at last. I feel better for it, though I will have to make certain now that Alake never sees this journal.

My name is Grundle.

It came much easier that time. My father is Yngvar Heavy-beard, Vater of the Gargan. My mother is Hilda. In her youth, she was said to be the most beautiful woman in all the seamoons. Songs have been made of my beauty, but I've seen a portrait done on her wedding day; I'm plain, compared to her. Her side whiskers came almost to her waist and were the honey color, which is extremely rare and prized among dwarves.

My father tells the story that when my mother stepped out onto the field of contest, the other contenders took one look at her and walked off, leaving her the unchallenged winner. My mother, I am told, was extremely put out at this, for she had practiced long at the ax-throw and could hit the target five times out of six. If I had stayed on Gargan, they would have been holding the marriage contests for me, since I'm near the end of the Time of Seeking.

That blot is a tear. Now I'm certain I can't let Alake see this!

Father or king. The queen is known as Muter—mother.

I wasn't crying for myself, mind you. I was crying for Hartmut. He loves me very much. And I love him. But I can't let myself think about him or the tears will wash out the ink on the page.

The person who finds this will probably be astonished to discover a dwarf writing this account. Our people have little use for such matters as reading and writing and ciphering. Writing makes the mind lazy, according to my people, who each keep the entire history of Gargan in their heads, plus the history of their individual families. Dwarves, in fact, have no written language of their own, which is why I am writing this in human.

We keep excellent accounts in our heads, as well—a marvel to human and elven purveyors. I have yet to see the dwarf who couldn't tell to the grain how much money he or she has made in a lifetime. Some old graybeards will go on for cycles!

I myself would never have learned to read and write, except that I am—or was—destined to be ruler of my people. And since I would be dealing so closely with our human and elven allies, my father and mother decided that I should be brought up among them and educated in their ways. And (I think they considered this more important!) they wanted me to educate the humans and elves in our ways.

At an early age, I was sent to Elmas—the elven seamoons—along with Alake, the daughter of the chieftain of Phondra. Alake is near my age mentally, if not in terms of actual cycles. (Humans lead such pitifully short lives, they are forced to grow up rapidly.) With us was Sabia, the elven princess, who joined us in our studies.

Beautiful, gentle Sabia. I will never see her again. But the One be thanked that she escaped this cruel fate.

We three girls spent many years together, driving our teachers to distraction and learning to love each other like sisters. Indeed, we became closer than most sisters I've known, for there was never any rivalry or jealousy between us.

Our only disagreements stemmed from learning to put up with the others' shortcomings. But our parents were wise in raising us together. For example, I had never much liked humans. They talk too loudly and too fast, are too aggressive, and keep bouncing from one subject to another, one place to another. They never seem to sit still or take time to think.

Being around humans over a long period of time taught me to understand that their impatience and ambition and their constant need for hurry, hurry, hurry is just their way of attempting to outrace their own mortality.

By contrast, I learned that the long-lived elves are not lazy dreamers, as most dwarves consider them, but people who simply take life at their leisure, without a worry or care for tomorrow, since they are certain to have almost innumerable tomorrows left to deal with it.

And Alake and Sabia were good enough to put up with my blunt honesty, a trait of my people. (I would like to think it is a good one, but it can be carried to extremes!) A dwarf will always tell the truth, no matter how little anyone else is prepared to hear it. We can also be very stubborn, and once we dig in our heels we stay put and rarely budge. An unusually stubborn human is said to have "feet like a dwarf."

In addition, I learned how to speak and write fluent human and elven (though our poor governess was always offended by the awkward way I held my pen). I studied the histories of their seamoons and their differing versions of the history of our world, Chelestra. But what I truly learned was affection for my dear sister-friends and, through them, their races.

We used to plan what we would do to bring our people even closer together when we at last came to rule, each of us on our own seamoons.

Never to be. We none of us will live that long.

I suppose I had better tell what happened.

It all began the day I was to bless the sun-chaser. My day. My wonderful day.

I could not sleep for excitement. Hurriedly I dressed myself in my best clothes—a long-sleeved blouse of plain and serviceable fabric (we have no use for frills), an overdress laced behind, and stout, thick boots. Standing before the looking glass in my bedroom in my father's house, I began the day's most important task: brushing and curling my hair and side whiskers.

The time seemed all too short before I heard my father calling for me. I made believe I hadn't heard him, stood looking at myself with a critical eye, wondering if I was fit to be seen in public. You mustn't think that such attention to my appearance was all for vanity's sake. As heir to the Gargan throne, I'm expected to both look and act the part.

I had to admit—I was pretty.

I cleared away the pots of oil, imported from the elves of Elmas, and replaced the curling tongs carefully in their stand by the grate. Sabia, who has servants falling all over her (and who has never once brushed her own long blonde hair), can't get over the fact that I not only dress myself, but clean up afterward. We Gargan are a proud and self-sufficient people and would never dream of waiting on each other in a menial capacity. Our Vater chops his own fire wood; our Mutter does her own laundry and sweeps her own floor. I curl my own hair. The only mark of distinction the royal family receives above all other Gargan is that we are expected to work twice as hard as anyone else.

Today, however, our family was to have one of the rewards for services rendered to the people. The fleet of sun-chasers had been completed. My father would ask the blessing of the One upon them, and I would have the honor of nailing a lock of my hair to the bow of the flagship.

My father yelled again. Swiftly, I left my room, hurried out into the hall.

"Where is the lass?" I heard my father demand of my mother. "The season will have passed us by. We'll be frozen solid by the time she's ready."

"This is her big day," said my mother soothingly. "You want her to look well. All her suitors will be there."

"Bah!" Father grumbled. "She's far too young to be thinking of such things."

"Perhaps. But what catches the eye now catches the head later," said my mother, quoting a dwarven proverb.

"Hunh!" My father snorted.

But, when he caught sight of me, his stomach puffed out with pride, and he said nothing more about my being late.

Father, I miss you so! Oh, how hard it is! How hard.

We left our house that is more like a cave bored straight into the mountain. All our homes and businesses are built inside the mountain, unlike human and elven structures that are built on the mountain slopes. It took me a long time to get used to living in the Elmas coral castle that seemed, in my mind, to cling precariously to the rock. I had dreams about its tumbling down the mountainside, carrying me with it!

The morning was beautiful. The rays of the season shimmered up through the waves. The sparse clouds that floated over the warren caught the sun's glow. My family joined the throngs of dwarves walking down the steeply sloping path to the shore of the Goodsea. Our neighbors called out to my father, more than a few coming up to slap him on his broad stomach—a typical dwarven form of greeting—and invite him to join them in the tavern after the ceremony.

My father slapped stomachs in return, and we continued down the mountainside. When on land, the Gargans travel everywhere on their own two feet. Carts are meant to haul potatoes, not people. And although we dwarves have grown accustomed to the sight of elves riding around in carriages and humans using beasts to bear their burdens, most Gargans consider such laziness to be a symbol of the weakness inherent in the other two races.

The only vehicle we dwarves use are our famous submersibles—ships designed to sail the Goodsea. Such ships—the dwarves' pride—were developed out of necessity since we have an unfortunate tendency to sink like stones in the water. The dwarf has not been born who can swim.

We Gargans are such clever shipbuilders that the Phondrans and the Elmas, who once built ships of their own, ceased to do so and came to rely solely on our craft. Now, with the help of financing from the humans and elves, we had constructed our masterpiece—a fleet of sun-chasers, enough submersibles to carry the populations of three seamoons.

"It's been generations since we have been called on to build the sun-chasers," stated my father. We had paused a moment to look proudly down from the steeply slanting roadway to the harbor at sea level, far below. "And never a fleet this big, designed to carry so many. This is a historic occasion, one that will be long remembered."

"And such an honor for Grundle," said my mother, smiling at me.

I returned my mother's smile, but said nothing. We dwarves are not noted for our sense of humor, but I am considered serious-minded and sober even for a dwarf and my thoughts today were concentrated on my duties. I have an extremely practical nature, not a shred of sentimentality or romance (as Sabia used to comment sadly).

"I wish your friends were here to see you today," my mother added. "We invited them, but, of course, they are extremely busy among their own people, preparing for the Sun Chase."

"Yes, Mother," I agreed. "It would have been nice if they could have come."

I would not alter dwarven life-style for the trapping of the seasun, but I could not help envying the respect accorded Alake by the Phondrans or the love and reverence shown Sabia by the Elmas. Among my people I am, most of the time, just another dwarf maiden. I comforted myself with the knowledge that I would be able to tell my friends all about it and (I must be honest) with the knowledge that neither would have a lock of her hair on the bow of a sun-chaser!

We reached the harbor, where the gigantic submersibles floated at anchor. Now that I was near them, I was overawed by the immensity of the ships, the amount of work that had gone into creating them.

The sun-chasers had been built to resemble black whales, their prows smooth and made of the drywood of Phondra, so-called because it is covered with a type of natural resin that protects it from water damage. Windows studded the hull, shining like jewels in the seasun. And the size! I couldn't believe it! Each sun-chaser, and there were ten of them, was nearly eight stadion in length. I marveled at the size, but then, I reminded myself, they have to carry the populations of three realms.

The sea breeze rose. I smoothed my whiskers, my mother patted my hair into place. The crowd of dwarves gathered at the wharf made way good-naturedly for us. The Gargans, though excited, were orderly and disciplined, none of the boisterous shoving and pushing that one would have seen in a similar gathering of humans.

We walked among them, nodding to left and right. The dwarven men put their hands to their forelocks, a sign of formal respect, suitable to the solemnity of the occasion. The women curtsied and prodded their offspring, who were staring open-mouthed at the great submersibles and who could not be made to turn their attention from these wonders to such an everyday sight as their king.

I walked beside my mother, the proper place for an unmarried young dwarf maid. I looked straight ahead, endeavoring to keep my eyes modestly lowered, my mind on what I was supposed to do. But I had difficulty preventing my glance from straying to the two long rows of leather-armored, clean-shaven young men standing at attention at the end of the wharf.

All dwarven males, at the Time of Seeking, are expected to serve in the military. The best had been chosen to act as honor guard for the Vater and his family this day. It was one of these young men who, more than likely, would win the privilege of being my husband. It wasn't really proper for me to have favorites, but I knew Hartmut would be able to easily defeat all comers.

He caught me looking at him and gave me a smile that made me go all warm inside. He is so good-looking! His russet hair is long and thick, his side whiskers are auburn, and his beard, when he is allowed to grow it after his marriage, will most certainly match. He has already attained the rank of fourclan master, a high honor for an unmarried dwarf.

The soldiers, at a word from their marshall, brought their arms—axes, the favored weapon—up in salute, whirled them around, and thudded the axheads on the ground.

I noted that Hartmut handled his ax with far greater dexterity than any other dwarf in his clan. This boded well for the future since ax-throwing, chopping, and ducking determine the winner of the marriage contest.

My mother caught hold of my sleeve, gave it a sharp tug.

"Stop staring at that young man!" she whispered. "What will he think of you?"

I obediently shifted my gaze to my father's broad back, but I was very much aware of passing close to Hartmut, who stood at the wharf's edge. And I heard him thump the head of the ax on the ground again, just for me.

A small ceremonial platform had been erected for us at the bow of the flagship, lifting us above the crowd. We climbed up onto the platform. My father stepped forward. The audience, though it had never been making much noise, quieted immediately.

"My family," [8] began my father, clasping his hands over his broad stomach, "many and many Times have passed since our people have been forced to make the Sun Chase. Not even the eldest among us"—a respectful nod to an elderly dwarf, whose beard was yellow with age and who stood in the place of honor at the very forefront of the crowd—"can remember back to the time our people chased the season and landed on Gargan."

"My father could remember it," piped up the old dwarf. "He made the journey when he was a little boy."

My father paused a moment, his thoughts scattered by the unexpected interruption. I looked over the heads of the crowd, back to the warren and its neat rows of bright-colored doors, and it occurred to me for the first time that I must actually leave this land of my birth and travel to another land, a strange land, a land that would have no doors leading into the safe, dark sanctuary of the mountain.

My eyes filled with tears. I lowered my head, ashamed to have anyone (particularly Hartmut) see me cry.

"A new realm awaits us, a seamoan large enough for all three races—humans, elves, dwarves—to live on, each in our own separate realm, but each trading, working together, sharing to build a prosperous world.

"The trip will be long," my father continued, "and tiring. And when we arrive, we face backbreaking labor and toil to rebuild our homes and businesses. It will be difficult to leave Gargan. Much that we love and value must, of necessity, be left behind us. But that which we prize and cherish above all else, we take with us. And that is each other. We could leave behind everything, every coin, every stitch of clothing, every cooking pot and cradle and bed, and, because we have each other, the dwarven nation would arrive at its destination strong and prepared to go forth and establish our greatness on this new world!"

My father, during his speech, had put his arm around my mother. My mother clasped hold of my hand. Our people cheered loudly. My tears dried.

"As long as we have each other," I said to myself. "As long as we are together, this new land will be our home."

I peeped shyly at Hartmut. His eyes were shining. He smiled at me, only for me. Everything was said between us in that look, that smile. The marriage contests can't be rigged, but most dwarves know the outcome in advance.

My father spoke on, discussing how, for the first time in Chelestran history, humans and elves and dwarves would be making the Sun Chase together.

In times past, we'd done the Sun Chase, of course, hastening after the season that drifts endlessly through the water that is our world. But then it had been the dwarves alone, fleeing the approaching longnight of ice that would slowly encase our seamoan.

I shoved the unhappy thought of leaving my homeland from my mind, began to think about the fun times aboard ship with Alake and Sabia. I'd tell them about Hartmut, point him out. Not that any human female or elven maid could properly appreciate how handsome he is.

My father coughed. I saw him staring at me. My mother nudged me in the ribs. I came back to the proceedings instantly, feeling my face burning. I held in my hand the lock of my hair, already cut and tied with a bright blue ribbon. My father handed me the hammer, my mother the nail. I took them both, turned to the broad wooden beam of the sun-chaser that towered high above me. The crowd was quiet, waiting for the chance to cheer wildly when the ceremony was completed.

Feeling all eyes (two eyes in particular) on me, I twined the ribboned lock of hair firmly around the nail, put the nail to the wooden hull, and was just about to rap the nail smartly with the hammer, when I heard a low murmur sweep through the crowd. It reminded me of the rising of the sea during one of the rare Chelestran storms.

My first thought, I remember, was one of extreme irritation that something or someone was ruining my big moment. Aware that the crowd's attention had been drawn from me, I lowered the hammer and glanced around indignantly to see what all the fuss was about.

Every Gargan—man, woman, and child—was staring out to sea. Some were pointing. Those shorter than the rest were standing on tiptoe, craning their necks to get a look.

"It figures," I grumbled, endeavoring to peer around the submersible and not having much luck. "Alake and Sabia have come after all, right in the middle of everything. Well, their timing was bad, but at least they'll be here to watch. I can always start over."

But I could tell by the expressions on the faces of the dwarves standing below me, who had clear view out to sea, that whatever was coming wasn't one of the gaily decorated swan ships we build for the elves, or one of the sturdy fishing ships we build for the humans. These would have been welcomed with much beard-wagging and the occasional hand-wave, about as demonstrative as dwarves ever get. Now beards were being stroked — a sign of dwarven unease — and mothers were quickly rounding up children who had strayed.

The marshall of the dwarven army ran to the platform.

"Vater, you must see this!" he shouted.

"Stay here," my father ordered us, and descending the platform, he hurried after the marshall.

The ceremony was obviously ruined. I was angry about that, angry about the fact that I couldn't see a thing, angry at Father for dashing off. I stood clutching the hammer and the lock of hair and cursed the fate that made me a princess, left me standing on this stupid platform when every other person in Gargan had a clear view of what was going on.

I didn't dare disobey my father — a dwarf maid who did that would have her side whiskers clipped in punishment, a humiliating experience — but surely it wouldn't hurt if I moved to the end of the platform. Perhaps I could see from there. I had taken a step and could hear my mother draw in her breath to order me back when Hartmut jumped up onto the platform and ran to us.

"The Vater has commanded me to keep you and your daughter safe in his absence, Muter," he said, with a respectful bow to my mother.

His eyes were on me, however.

Perhaps fate knew what it was about, after all. I decided to stay where I was.

"What's happening?" my mother was asking anxiously.

"A disturbance in the sea, nothing more," said Hartmut casually. "An oil slick of some sort is spreading and a few people thought they saw heads sticking up out of it, but I think they're looking through the bottom of an ale mug. Most likely it's a school of fish. The boats are setting out to investigate."

My mother seemed reassured. I wasn't. I saw Hartmut's eyes stray to his marshall, watching for orders. And though he was making a gallant attempt to smile, his face was grim.

"I think, Muter," he continued, "that until we establish just what's causing this oil slick, it might be wise if you were to step down from this platform."

"You're right, young man. Grundle, give me that hammer. You look silly standing there, hanging onto it. I'm going to go join your father. No, Grundle, you stay with the young guard." My mother bustled off the platform and sallied out into the crowd after my father. I sent my thanks and my blessing after her.

"I don't think you look silly," Hartmut said to me. "I think you look splendid."

I edged closer to the young dwarf, and now that my hand was free of the hammer, it could accidentally find its way into his hand. The boats were putting off from the beach, their rowers pulling on the oars, shooting out to sea. We left the platform and, along with the rest of the population of Gargan, hurried down to the water's edge.

"What do you think it is?" I asked in a low voice. "I don't know," said Hartmut, allowing his trouble to show now that we were alone. "We've heard odd tales all week. The dolphins report strange creatures swimming the Goodsea. Serpents whose skin is covered with oil that fouls the water and poisons any fish unlucky enough to wander into it." "Where did they come from?" I drew nearer. "No one knows. According to the dolphins, when the season began altering its course, it thawed out several seamoons that have been frozen for the One knows how long. Perhaps these creatures came from one of those moons."

"Look!" I gasped. "Something's happening." Most of the dwarves in their small boats had ceased to row. Some had shipped their oars and sat motionless in the water, staring out to sea. Others had nervously begun to pull back for shore. I could see nothing except the oil on the water—a greenish, brownish slime that smoothed out the waves and left a film on the sides of the boats it touched. I could smell it, too; a noxious odor that made me sick to my stomach.

Hartmut gripped my hand hard. The water was starting to recede! I'd never seen anything like it—as if some gigantic mouth were sucking the water out from under us!

Several boats were already beached, left stranded on the wet, oil-coated sand. Those boats standing farther out were being sucked along with the water! The sailors pulled on the oars, battling frantically to halt their forward motion. The submersibles sank lower and lower, then, rocking back and forth, they struck bottom with a tearing, grinding sound.

And then, an enormous head soared upward out of the waves. Its skin was gray-green and covered with scales that glistened in the weak sunlight with an ugly iridescence. Its head was small, the same size as the neck. It seemed to be all neck, unless one counted the back part as tail. The serpent moved in a horrible, sinuous curve. Its eyes were green when it first looked at us, but then the eyes changed, began to glow a dreadful fiery red. The serpent drew itself up and up and, as it rose, it sucked the water up with it.

It was huge, monstrous. It seemed half the height of the mountain, at least.

I watched the seawater rush away from me and I had the sudden, frightening feeling that I was about to be carried out into it. Hartmut put his arm around me. His body, thick and stocky, was solid and reassuring.

The serpent reached what seemed an impossible height, then down it dropped, smashed headfirst into the flagship, punching a huge hole in the ship's hull. The seawater surged back to shore in a great wave.

"Run!" my father shouted, his voice booming over the shocked cries of the crowd. "Run for the mountain!"

The Gargan turned and fled. Even in our fear, there was no confusion or disorder, no panic. Elder dwarves, who couldn't move fast enough, were whisked off their feet by their sons and daughters and carried bodily. Mothers grabbed infants, fathers lifted older children to their shoulders.

"Run on ahead, Grundle!" Hartmut told me. "I must return to my command."

He raced off, hefting his battle-ax, to rejoin the army that was grouping at the water's edge, prepared to cover the people's retreat.

I knew I should run, but my feet seemed to have gone numb; my legs were too weak to do anything more than keep me standing upright. I stared at the serpent, who had risen, unharmed, out of the wreckage of the submersible. Toothless mouth gaping in what might have been a noiseless laugh, it hurled itself down on another ship. Wood splintered and broke apart. Other creatures that looked exactly like the first rose out of the sea and started to break apart the remainder of the submersibles and any other boat they could find. The waves created by the creatures thundered down on the shoreline, completing the destruction.

Boats capsized, hurling their crews into the water. Some were simply swallowed up, the dwarves on board disappearing in the oil-covered foam. The army stood fast against the serpents. Hartmut was bravest of all of them, advancing into the water, his ax raised in challenge. The serpents ignored them, contented themselves with smashing all the boats in the harbor—except one, the royal ship, the one we used to sail back and forth to Phondra and Elmas.

The serpent paused, looked at us and at the havoc its creatures had wrecked. Its eyes had changed from red to green, their gaze was flat and unblinking. It turned its head from side to side in a slow, sweeping gesture, and whenever its dread gaze touched any of us, we shrank beneath it. When it spoke, the other serpents behind it ceased their destruction to listen.

The serpent spoke perfect dwarven.

"This message is for you and your allies, the humans and the elves. We are the new masters of the sea. You will sail it only with our permission and our permission can be obtained only by paying a price. What that price is to be, you will be told later. What you have seen today is a sample of our power, of what will happen to you if you do not pay. Heed well our warning!"

The serpent dove back down in the water and vanished. The others followed, swimming rapidly through the bits and pieces of wood floating on the slimy surface. We stood looking at the ruins of the sun-chasers. I remember the silence that fell over the people. No one even yet wept for the dead.

When all were certain that the serpents were finally gone, we began the grim task of retrieving the bodies of those who had died—all of them, it turned out, appeared to have been poisoned. Once pure and safe to drink, the seawater was now coated with a foul oil slick that killed anything unlucky enough to swallow it.

And that was how all this began. There is more, much more, to my story, but I hear Alake coming through the ship, looking for me, calling to me that it's time to eat. Humans! They think food is the cure-all for every problem. I like my dinner as well as the next dwarf, but, just now, I don't seem to have much appetite.

I must end for the moment.

## CHAPTER \* 4

### ADRIFT, SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

ALAKE KEEPS INSISTING THAT WE EAT—TO KEEP UP OUR STRENGTH, she says. What she thinks we're going to need our strength for is beyond me. Battle these dragon-snakes as I suppose we should call them now? Three of us? I said as much to her; curse the dwarves for our blunt tongues.

Alake was hurt, I could tell, though she was kind enough to say nothing to me in rebuke. Devon managed to cover our awkward moment, and he even made us laugh, though that put us close to tears. Then, of course, we all had to eat something, to please Alake. None of us ate very much, however, and all of us—even Alake—were glad, I think, when the meal ended. She left, going back to her magic. Devon went back to doing what he is always doing—dreaming of Sabia.

And I will go on with my story.

Once the bodies of the dead had been recovered and were spread out along the shoreline, their families, having identified them, were led away by friends to be comforted. At least twenty-five people had been killed. I saw the mortician dashing about aimlessly, a distracted look on his face. Never before had he had this many bodies to prepare for their final rest in the burial vaults in the mountain.

My father spoke to him, finally calmed him down. A detail of soldiers was sent to assist, Hartmut among them. It was a heavy, sorrowful task and my heart went out to him.

I was doing what I could to help, which wasn't much; I was too dazed by the sudden upheaval in my orderly life. Eventually I just sat on the platform and stared out to sea. The sun-chasers that had been left anywhere near intact floated belly-up in the water. There weren't many. They looked sad and forlorn, like dead fish. I still held the blue ribbon and lock of hair in my hand. I tossed it in the water, watched it drift away on the oil-coated surface.

My father and mother found me there. My mother put her arm around me, hugged me close. We stood long moments without speaking.

My father heaved a sigh. "We must take news of this to our friends."

"But how can we sink between the worlds? [1] What if those terrible creatures attack us?" my mother asked, frightened.

"They won't," my father said heavily, his gaze on the one ship the serpents had left unharmed. "Do you remember what they said? 'Tell your allies.'"

The next day, we sank down toward Elmas.

The elven royal city of Elmasia is a place of beauty and enchantment. Its palace, known as the Grotto, is built of pink and white filigree coral and stands on the banks of the seamoons' many freshwater lakes. The coral is alive and still growing. The elves would as soon think of killing themselves as they would of killing the coral, and so the shape of the Grotto alters on a continuing basis.

Humans and dwarves would consider this a nuisance. The elves, however, find it highly diverting and entertaining. If one room in the Grotto is closed off by the rapidly growing coral, the elves simply pack up their things and move to another that is certain to have been created in the interim.

Finding one's way through the palace is an interesting experience. Corridors that lead one place one day will take a person somewhere completely different the next. Because every room in the Grotto is certain to be one of surpassing beauty—the white coral glistens with an opalescent radiance, pink coral shines warmly—it doesn't really matter to most elves where they are. Some who come to the palace on business with the king may wander the Grotto for days before making the slightest attempt to find His Majesty.

No business is ever pressing in the elven community. The words hurry, haste, and urgent were not in the elven vocabulary before they began dealing with humans. We dwarves never dealt with either until only recently in our history.

Such diversities in human and elven natures once led to serious clashes among the two races. The Elmas, though generally easygoing, can be pushed only so far before they push back. But, after several destructive wars, both races came to see that they could gain more by working together than apart. The human Phondrans are a charming, if energetic, people. They soon learned how to manage the elves, and now they wheedle and flatter them into doing what they, the humans, want. This noted human charm worked even on the dour dwarves. Eventually, we, too, were won over by them.

The three races have lived and worked together, each on their own separate seamoons, in peaceful harmony for many generations. I have no doubt that we would have continued to do so for many generations more, had not the season—the source of warmth, light, and life for the seamoons—begun to leave us.

It was human wizards, who love to probe and prod and try to find out the why and the wherefore, who discovered that the season was altering its course and starting to drift away. This discovery led the humans into a perfect flurry of activity, quite marvelous to behold. They took measurements and made calculations, they sent out dolphins to scout for them, and questioned the dolphins for cycles on end, trying to find out what they knew of the history of the season.

According to Alake, this is the explanation the dolphins offered:

"Chelestra is a globe of water existing in the vastness of space. Its exterior, facing onto the frigid darkness of the Nothing, is made of ice, fathoms thick. Its interior, comprised of the Good-sea, is warmed by the season, a star whose flames are so extraordinarily hot that the water of the Goodsea cannot extinguish them. The season warms the water surrounding it, melts the ice, and brings life to the seamoons—small planets, designed by the Creators of Chelestra for habitation."

We dwarves were able to provide the humans with information concerning the seamoons themselves, information gleaned from long Times tunneling and delving into the sphere's interior. The spheres are a shell of rock with a hot interior comprised of various chemicals. The chemicals react with the rays of the season and produce breathable air that surrounds the seamoons in a bubble. The season is absolutely required to maintain life.

The Phondrans concluded that, in approximately four hundred cycles' time, the season would leave the seamoons far behind. The longnight would arrive, the Goodsea would freeze, and so would anyone left on Phondra, Gargan, and Elmas.

"When the season drifts away," reported the dolphins, who had witnessed this phenomenon firsthand, "the Goodsea turns to ice that slowly encases the seamoons. But such is the magical nature of these moons that most vegetable and some animal life on them remains alive, merely frozen. When the season returns, the moons thaw out and are once more habitable."

I remember hearing Dumaka of Phondra, chieftain of his people, relating the dolphins' information concerning the seamoons to the first emergency meeting of the royal families of Elmas, Phondra, and Gargan, the meeting that took place when we first heard about the season drifting off and leaving us.

That meeting was held on Phondra, in the big longhouse where the humans hold all their ceremonies. We three girls were hiding in the bushes outside, eavesdropping, as usual. (We were accustomed to spying on our parents shamelessly. We'd been doing it since we were little.)

"Bah! What does a fish know?" my father demanded scornfully. He never took to the notion of talking to dolphins.

"I find the idea of being frozen extremely romantic," stated Eliason, the elven king. "Imagine—sleeping away the centuries, then wakening to a new era."

His wife had just recently died. I suppose he found the thought of dreamless, painless sleep comforting.

My mother told me later she had a mental image of hundreds of dwarves, thawing out in a new era, their beards dripping all over the rugs. It didn't sound romantic to her at all. It sounded messy.

Dumaka of Phondra pointed out to the elves that while the idea of being frozen and coming back to life several thousand cycles later might indeed sound romantic, the freezing process itself had definite and painful drawbacks. And how could any of us be certain we would actually return to life?

"After all, we have only the word of a fish on that," my father stated, and his pronouncement brought general agreement.

The dolphins had brought news that a new seamoons, a much larger moon than any of ours, had just recently thawed out. The dolphins were only now beginning to inspect it, but they thought it would be a perfect place for us to live. It was Dumaka's proposal that we would build a fleet of sun-chasers, set off in pursuit of the seasoons, find this new seamoons as did the ancients.

Eliason was somewhat taken aback by the terms build and pursue, which implied a considerable amount of activity, but he wasn't opposed to the idea. Elves are rarely opposed to anything; opposition takes too much energy. In the same way, they are rarely in favor of anything, either. The Elmas are content to take life as it comes and adapt to it. Humans are the ones who are forever wanting to change and alter and tinker and fix and make better. As for us dwarves, as long as we get paid, nothing else matters.

The Phondrans and the Elmas agreed to finance the sun-chasers. We Gargan were to build them. The humans would supply the lumber. The elves would supply the magic that would be needed to operate the sun-chasers; the Elmas being clever with mechanical magics. (Anything to save themselves physical labor!)

And, with typical dwarven efficiency, the sun-chasers had been built and built well.

"But now," I heard my father say with a sigh, "it has all been for naught. The sun-chasers are destroyed."

This was the second emergency meeting of the royal families, called by my father. This time, we were meeting, as I said, on Elmas.

We girls had been left in Sabia's room to "visit" with each other. Instead, immediately on our parents' departure, we hastened to find a vantage point from which we could, as usual, listen in on their discussions.

Our parents were seated on a terrace facing out over the Goodsea. We discovered a small room (a new one) that had opened up above the terrace. Alake used her magic to enlarge an opening through which we could both see and hear clearly. We crowded as near this new window as possible, being careful to keep in the shadows to avoid being seen.

My father went on to describe the serpents' attack on the submersibles.

"The sun-chasers were all destroyed?" whispered Sabia, as wide-eyed as an elf, with their almond-shaped eyes, can get.

Poor Sabia. Her father never told her anything. Elven daughters lead such sheltered lives. My father always discussed all his plans with both me and my mother.

"Hush!" Alake scolded, trying to hear.

"I'll tell you later," I promised, squeezing Sabia's hand to keep her quiet.

"There's no possible way to fix them, Yngvar?" Dumaka was asking.

"Not unless those wizards of yours can turn splinters into solid boards again," my father growled.

He spoke sarcastically; dwarves have little tolerance for magic of any sort, considering most of it trickery, though they are hard-pressed to explain how it works. But I could tell that he was secretly hopeful the humans would come up with the solution.

The Phondran chief said nothing in response, however. A bad sign. Usually the humans are quick to claim their magic can solve any problem. Peeping from over the top of the window ledge, I saw that Dumaka's face was troubled.

My father heaved another sigh, and shifted his bulk uncomfortably in his chair. I sympathized with him. Elven chairs are made for slender elven buttocks.

"I'm sorry, my friend." My father stroked his beard, a sure sign that he was upset. "I didn't mean to bark at you. Those blasted beasts have got us by the side whiskers, though, and what we do now is beyond this dwarf to figure out."

"I think you're worried about nothing," said Eliason, with a languid wave of his hand. "You sailed to Elmas in perfect safety. Perhaps these serpents got it into their snakey heads that the sun-chasers were some sort of threat to them, and, once they smashed them to bits, they felt better about the whole thing and departed, never to bother us again."

" 'Masters of the Sea,' they called themselves," my father reminded them, his black eyes glistening. "And they meant it. We sailed here by their permission. I'm as certain of that as if I'd heard them give it me. And they were watching. I felt their green-red eyes upon me the whole way."

"Yes, I think you're right."

Dumaka stood up abruptly, walked over to a low wall of coral, and stood gazing down into the shining depths of the calm and placid Goodsea. Was it my imagination, or did I see now upon its surface a trace of shimmering oil?

"I believe you should tell them our news, my dear," said his wife, Delu.

Dumaka did not immediately reply, but kept his back turned, staring gloomily out to sea. He is a tall man, considered handsome by the humans. His rapid-fire speech, swift walk, and abrupt gestures always make him appear, in the realm of the easygoing Elmas, as if he were doing and saying everything in double-quick time. Now, however, he was not pacing or roaming about in frantic activity, trying to outrun the swift mortality that must inevitably overtake him.

"What's the matter with your father, Alake?" whispered Sabia. "Is he ill?"

"Wait and listen," said Alake softly. Her face was sad. "Grundle's parents aren't the only ones who have a fearful tale to tell."

Eliason must have found this change in his friend as disturbing as I did. He rose to his feet, moving with the slow, fluid grace of the elves, and laid a comforting hand on Dumaka's shoulder.

"Bad news, like fish, doesn't smell sweeter for being kept longer," Eliason said gently.

"Yes, you are right." Dumaka kept his gaze out to sea. "I had intended to say nothing of this to either of you, because I wasn't certain of the facts. The magi are investigating." He cast a glance at his wife, a powerful wizardess. She inclined her head in response. "I wanted to wait for their report. But . . ." He drew a deep breath. "It seems all too clear to me now what happened.

"Two days ago, a small Phondran fishing village, located on the coast directly opposite Gargan, was attacked and completely destroyed. Boats were smashed, houses leveled. One hundred and twenty men, women, and children lived in the village." Dumaka shook his head, his shoulders bowed. "All are now dead."

"Ach," said my father, tugging at his forelock in respectful sympathy.

"The One have mercy," murmured Eliason. "Was it tribal war?"

Dumaka looked around at those gathered on the terrace. The humans of Phondra are a dark-skinned race. Unlike the Elmas, whose emotions run skin-deep, so the saying goes, the Phondrans do not blush in shame

or pale in fear or anger. The ebony of their skin often masks their inner feelings. It is their eyes that are most expressive, and the chief's eyes smoldered in anger and bitter, helpless frustration.

"Not war. Murder."

"Murder?" It took Eliason a moment to comprehend the word that had been spoken in human. The elves have no term for such a heinous crime in their vocabulary. "One hundred and twenty people! But . . . who? What?"

"We weren't certain at first. We found tracks that we could not explain. Could not, until now." Dumaka's hand moved in a quick S-shape. "Sinuous waves across the sand. And trails of slime."

"The serpents?" said Eliason in disbelief. "But why? What did they want?"

"To murder! To kill!" The chieftain's hand clenched. "It was butchery. Plain out-and-out butchery! The wolf carries off the lamb and we are not angry because we know that this is the nature of the wolf and that the lamb will fill the empty bellies of the wolf's young. But these serpents or whatever they are did not kill for food. They killed for the pleasure of killing!"

"Their victims, every one, even the children, had obviously died slowly, in hideous torment, their bodies left for us to find. I am told that the first few of our people who came upon the village nearly lost their reason at the terrible sights they witnessed."

"I traveled there myself," said Delu, her rich voice so low that the girls were forced to creep nearer the window to hear her. "I have suffered since from terrible dreams that haunt me in the night. We could not even give the bodies seemly burial in the Goodsea, for none of us could bear to look upon their tortured faces and see evidence of the agony they had suffered. We magi determined that the entire village, or what was left of it, be burned."

"It was," added Dumaka heavily, "as if the killers had left us a message: 'See in this your own doom!'"

I thought back to the serpent's words: This is a sample of our power. . . . Heed our warning!

We girls stared at each other in a horrified silence that was echoed on the terrace below. Dumaka turned once again and was staring out to sea. Eliason sank down in his chair.

My father struck in with his usual dwarven bluntness. Pushing himself with difficulty out of the small chair, he stamped his feet on the ground, probably in an attempt to restore their circulation. "I mean no disrespect to the dead, but these were fisher folk, unskilled in warfare, lacking weapons ..."

"It would have made no difference if they had been an army," stated Dumaka grimly. "These people were armed; they have fought other tribes, as well as the jungle beasts. We found scores of arrows that had been fired, but they obviously did no harm. Spears had been cracked in two, as if they'd been chewed up and spit out by giant mouths."

"And our people were skilled in magic, most of them," Delu added quietly, "if only on the lowest levels. We found evidence that they had attempted to use their magic in their defense. Magic, too, failed them."

"But surely the Council of Magi could do something?" suggested Eliason. "Or perhaps magical elven weapons, such as we used to manufacture in times gone by, might work where others failed—no disparagement to your wizards," he added, politely.

Delu looked at her husband, apparently seeking his agreement in imparting further bad news. He nodded his head.

The wizardess was a tall woman, equaling her husband in height. Her graying hair, worn in a coif at the back of the neck, provided an attractive contrast to her dark complexion. Seven bands of color in her feathered cape marked her status as a wizardess of the Seventh House, the highest rank a human can attain in the use of magic. She stared down at her clasped hands, clasped fast to keep from trembling.

"One member of the Council, the village shamus, was in the village at the time of the attack. We found her body. Her death had been most cruel." Delu shivered, drew a deep breath, steeling herself to go on. "Around her dismembered corpse lay the tools of her magic, spread about her as if in mockery."

"One against many . . ." Eliason began.

"Argana was a powerful wizardess," Delu cried, and her shout made me jump. "Her magic could have heated the sea water to boiling! She could have raised a typhoon with a wave of her hand. The ground would have opened at a word from her and swallowed her enemies whole! All this, we had evidence that she had done! And still she died. Still they all died!"

Dumaka laid a soothing hand upon his wife's shoulder. "Be calm, my dear. Eliason meant only that the entire Council, gathered together, might be able to work such powerful magic that these serpents could not withstand it."

"Forgive me. I'm sorry I lost my temper." Delu gave the elf a wan smile. "But, like Yngvar, I have seen with my own eyes the terrible destruction these creatures brought upon my people."

She sighed. "Our magic is powerless in the presence of these creatures, even when they are not in sight. Perhaps the cause is due to the foul ooze they leave on anything they touch. We don't know. All we know is that when we magi entered the village, we each of us felt our power began to drain away. We couldn't even use our magic to start the fires to burn the bodies of the dead."

Eliason looked around the grim, unhappy group. "And so what are we to do?"

As an elf his natural inclination must have been to do nothing, wait, and see what time brought. But, according to my father, Eliason was an intelligent ruler, one of the more realistic and practical of his race. He knew, though he would have liked to ignore the fact, that his people's days on their seamoon were numbered. A decision had to be made, therefore, but he was quite content to let others make it.

"We have one hundred cycles left until the full effects of the wandering of the seasun will begin to be felt," stated Dumaka. "Time to build more sun-chasers."

"// the serpents let us," said my father ominously. "Which I much doubt. And what did they mean by payment? What could they possibly want?"

All were silent, thinking.

"Let us look at this logically," Eliason said finally. "Why do people fight? Why did our races fight each other, generations ago? Through fear, misunderstanding. When we came together and discussed our differences, we found ways to deal with them and we have lived in peace ever since. Perhaps these serpents, powerful as they seem, are, in reality, afraid of us. They see us as a threat. If we tried to talk to them, reassure them that we mean them no harm, that we want only to leave and travel to this new seamoon, then perhaps—" A clamor interrupted him.

The noise had come from the part of the terrace attached to the palace—a part hidden from my view—being short, it was difficult for me to see out the window.

"What's going on?" I demanded impatiently.

"I don't know . . ." Sabia was trying to see without being seen.

Alake actually poked her head out the opening. Fortunately, our parents were paying no attention to us.

"A messenger of some sort," she reported.

"Interrupting a royal conference?" Sabia was shocked.

I dragged over a footstool and climbed up on it. I could now see the white-faced footman who had, against all rules of protocol, actually run onto the terrace. The footman, seeming nearly about to faint, leaned to whisper something in Eliason's ear. The elven king listened, frowning.

"Bring him here," he said at last.

The footman hastened off.

Eliason looked gravely at his friends. "One of the message riders was attacked on the road and is, apparently, grievously wounded. He bears a message, he says, which is to be delivered to us, to all of us gathered here this day. I have ordered them to bring him here."

"Who attacked him?" asked Dumaka.

Eliason was silent a moment, then said, "Serpents."

"A message 'to all of us gathered here,' " repeated my father dourly. "I was right. They are watching us."

"Payment," said my mother, the first word she'd spoken since the conference began.

"I don't understand." Eliason sounded frustrated. "What can they possibly want?"

"I'll wager we are about to find out."

They said nothing further, but sat waiting, unwilling to look at each other, finding no comfort in seeing the reflection of their own dazed bewilderment on the faces of their friends.

"We shouldn't be here. We shouldn't be doing this," said Sabia suddenly. Her face was very pale; her lips trembled.

Alake and I looked at her, looked at each other, looked down at the floor in shame. Sabia was right. This spying on our parents had always been a game to us, something we could giggle over in the night after they'd sent us to our beds. Now it was a game no longer. I don't know how the other two felt, but I found it frightening to see my parents, who had always seemed so strong and wise, in such confusion, such distress.

"We should leave, now," Sabia urged, and I knew she was right, but I could no more have climbed down off that footstool than I could have flown out the window.

"Just a moment more," said Alake.

The sound of slippers feet, moving slowly, shuffling as if bearing a burden, came to us. Our parents drew themselves upright, standing straight and tall, disquiet replaced by stern gravity. My father smoothed his beard. Dumaka folded his arms across his chest. Delu drew a stone from a pouch she wore at her side and rubbed it in her hand, her lips moving.

Six elven men entered, bearing a litter between them. They moved slowly, carefully, in order to prevent jostling the wounded elf. At a gesture from their king, they gently placed the litter on the ground before him.

Accompanying them was an elven physician, skilled in the healing arts of his people. On entering, I saw him glance askance at Delu; perhaps fearing interference. Elven and human healing techniques are considerably different, the former relying on extensive study of anatomy combined with alchemy, the latter treating hurts by means of sympathetic magic, chants to drive out evil humors, certain stones laid on vital body parts. We dwarves rely on the One and our own common sense.

Seeing that Delu made no move toward his patient, the elven physician relaxed. Or it may have been that he suddenly realized it would make no difference if the human wizardess attempted to work her magic. It was obvious to us and to everyone present that nothing in this world would help the dying elf.

"Don't look, Sabia," Alake warned, drawing back and attempting to hide the gruesome sight from her friend.

But it was too late. I heard Sabia's breath catch in her throat and I knew she'd seen.

The young elf's clothes were torn and soaked in blood. Cracked and splintered ends of bones protruded through the purple flesh of his legs. His eyes were missing, they'd been gouged out. The blind head turned this way and that, the mouth opened and closed, repeating some words that I couldn't hear in a fevered sort of chant.

"He was found this morning outside the city gates, Your Majesty," one of the elves said. "We heard his screams."

"Who brought him?" Eliason asked, voice stern to mask his horror.

"We saw no one, Your Majesty. But a trail of foul ooze led from the body back to the sea."

"Thank you. You may go now. Wait outside."

The elves who had brought the litter bowed and left.

Once they were gone, our parents could give way to their feelings. Eliason cast his mantle over his head and averted his face, an elven response to grief. Dumaka turned away, strong body trembling in rage and pity. His wife rose and came to stand by his side, her hand on his arm. My father gathered his beard in great handfuls and pulled on it, bringing tears to his eyes. My mother yanked on her side whiskers.

I did the same. Alake was comforting Sabia, who had nearly passed out.

"We should take her to her room," I said.

"No. I won't go." Sabia lifted her chin. "Someday I will be queen, and I must know how to handle situations like this."

I looked at her with surprise and new respect. Alake and I had always considered Sabia weak and delicate. I'd seen her turn pale at the sight of blood running from a piece of undercooked meat. But, faced with a crisis, she was coming through it like a dwarven soldier. I was proud of her. Breeding will tell, they say.

We peeped cautiously out the window.

The physician was speaking to the king.

"Your Majesty, this messenger has refused all easeful medicine in order that he may deliver his message. I beg you listen to him."

Eliason removed his mantle at once and knelt beside the dying elf.

"You are in the presence of your king," said Eliason, keeping his voice calm and level. He took hold of the man's hand that was clutching feebly at the air. "Deliver your message, then go with all honor to the One and find rest."

The elf's bloody eye sockets turned in the direction of the voice. His words came forth slowly, with many pauses to draw pain-filled breaths.

"The Masters of the Sea bid me say thus: 'We will allow you to build the boats to carry your people to safety provided you give us in payment the eldest girl-child from each royal household. If you agree to our demand, place your daughters in a boat and cast them forth upon the Goodsea. If you do not, what we have done to this elf and to the human fisherman and to the dwarven shipbuilders is only a foretaste of the destruction we will bring upon your people. We give you two cycles to make your decision.' "

"But why? Why our daughters?" Eliason cried, grasping the wounded man by the shoulders and almost shaking him.

"I ... do not know," the elf gasped, and died.

Alake drew away from the window. Sabia shrank back against the wall. I climbed down off the footstool before I fell.

"We shouldn't have heard that," Alake said in a hollow voice.

"No," I agreed. I was cold and hot at the same time and I couldn't stop shaking.

"Us? They want us?" Sabia whispered, as if she couldn't believe it.

We stared at each other, helpless, wondering what to do.

"The window," I warned, and Alake closed it up with her magic.

"Our parents will never agree to such a thing," she said briskly. "We mustn't let them know we know. It would grieve them terribly. We'll go back to Sabia's room and act like nothing's happened."

I cast a dubious glance at Sabia, who was as white as curdled milk, and who seemed about to collapse on the spot.

"I can't lie!" she protested. "I've never lied to my father."

"You don't have to lie," Alake snapped, her fear making her sharp-edged and brittle. "You don't have to say anything. Just keep quiet."

She yanked poor Sabia out of her corner and, together, she and I helped the elven maid down the shimmering coral corridors. After a few false turns, we made it to Sabia's room. None of us spoke on the way.

All of us were thinking of the elf we'd seen, of the torture he'd endured. My insides clenched in fear; a horrid taste came into my mouth. I didn't know why I was so frightened. As Alake had said, my parents would never permit the serpents to take me.

It was, I know now, the voice of the One speaking to me, but I was refusing to listen.

We entered Sabia's room—thankfully, no servants were about—and shut the door behind us. Sabia sank down on the edge of her bed, twisting her hands together. Alake stood glaring angrily out a window, as if she'd like to go and hit someone.

In the silence, I could no longer avoid hearing the One. And I knew, looking at their faces, that the One was talking to Alake and Sabia, as well. It was left to me, to the dwarf, to speak the bitter words aloud.

"Alake's right. Our parents won't send us. They won't even tell us about this. They'll keep it a secret from our people. And our people will die, never knowing that there was a chance they might have been spared."

Sabia whispered, "I wish we'd never heard! If only we hadn't gone up there!"

"We were meant to hear," I said gruffly.

"You're right, Grundle," said Alake, turning to face us. "The One wanted us to hear. We have been given the chance to save our people. The One has left it up to us to make the decision, not our parents. We are the ones who must be strong now."

As she talked, I could see she was getting caught up in it all: the romance of martyrdom, of sacrifice. Humans set great store in such things, something we dwarves can never understand. Almost all human heroes are those who die young, untimely, giving up their brief lives for some noble cause. Not so dwarves. Our heroes are the Elders, those who live a just life through ages of strife and work and hardship.

I couldn't help but think of the broken elf with his eyes plucked out of his head.

What nobility is there in dying like that? I wanted to ask her.

But, for once, I held my tongue. Let her find comfort where she could. I must find it in my duty. As for Sabia, she had truly meant what she said about being a queen.

"But I was to have been married," she said.

The elven maid wasn't arguing or whining. She knew what we had to do. It was her one protest against her terrible fate, and it was very gentle.

Alake has just come in for the second time to tell me that I must sleep. We must "conserve our strength."

Bah! But I'll humor her. It's best that I stop here anyhow. The rest that I must write—the story of Devon and Sabia—is both painful and sweet. The memory will comfort me as I lie awake, trying to keep fear as far away as possible, in the lonely darkness.

## CHAPTER \* 5

### DEATH'S GATE CHELESTRA

#### CONSCIOUSNESS FORCED ITSELF ON HAPLO.

He awoke to searing pain, yet, in the same instant, he knew himself to be whole once more, and pain-free. The circle of his being was joined again. The agony he'd felt was the tail end of that circle being seized by the mouth.

But the circle wasn't strong. It was wobbly, tenuous. Lifting his hand was an effort almost beyond his strength, but he managed it and placed the fingers on his naked breast. Staring with the rune over his heart, slowly and haltingly, he began to trace, began to reconnect and strengthen, every sigil written upon his skin.

He started with the name rune, the first sigil that is tattooed over the heart of the squirming, screaming babe almost the moment it is forced from the mother's womb. The babe's mother performs the rite, or another female tribe member if the mother dies. The name is chosen by the father, if he lives or is still among the tribe. [1] If not, by the tribal headman.

'Children are extremely valued in the Labyrinth and are raised by the Squatters. Runners, such as Haplo, would often father children but, due to the nature of their lives, could not stay with a tribe to raise it. Female Runners, becoming pregnant, would move into a Squatter tribe until the babe was born, then give it to one of the Squatter families to raise. Occasionally drawing on the magic of either mother or wet nurse. And yet the name rune is the most important sigil on the body, since every other sigil added later traces its origin back to it first—the beginning of the circle.

Haplo moved his fingers over the name rune, redrawing its intricate design from memory.

Memory took him back to the time of his childhood, to one of the rare, precious moments of peace and rest, to a boy reciting his name and learning how to shape the runes. . . .

. . . "Haplo: 'single, alone.' That is your name and your destiny," said his father, his finger rough and hard on Haplo's chest. "Your mother and I have defeated the odds thrown for us already. Every Gate we pass from now on is a wink at fate. But the time will come when the Labyrinth will claim us, as it claims all except the lucky and the strong. And the lucky and the strong are generally the lonely. Repeat your name."

Haplo did so, solemnly running his own grimy finger over his thin chest.

His father nodded. "And now the runes of protection and healing."

Haplo laboriously went over each of those, beginning with the ones touching the name rune, spreading out over the breast, the vital organs of his abdominal region, the sensitive groin area, and around the back to protect the spine. Haplo recited these, as he'd recited them countless times in his brief life. He'd done it so often, he could let his mind wander to the rabbit snares he'd laid out that day, wondered if he might be able to surprise his mother with dinner.

"No! Wrong! Begin again!"

A sharp blow, delivered impersonally by his father with what was known as the naming stick, across the unprotected, rune-free palm of the hand, focused Haplo's mind on his lesson. The blow brought tears to his eyes, but he was quick to blink them away, for his father was watching him closely. The ability to endure pain was as much a part of this rough schooling as the recitation and the drawing of the sigla.

"You are careless today, Haplo," said his father, tapping the naming stick—a thin, pliable branch of a plant known as a creeping rose, adorned with flesh-pricking thorns—on the hard ground. "It is said that back in the days of our freedom, before we were thrown into this accursed jail by our enemies . . . Name the enemy, my son."

"The Sartan," Haplo said, trying to ignore the stinging pain of the thorns left stuck in his skin.

"It is said that in the days of our freedom, children such as you went to schools and learned the runes as a kind of exercise for the mind. But no longer. Now it is life or death. When your mother and I are dead, Haplo, you will be responsible for the sigla that will, if done correctly, grant you the strength needed to escape our prison and avenge our deaths on our enemy. Name the runes of strength and power."

Haplo's hand left the trunk of his body and followed the progression of the tattooed sigla that twined down his arms and legs, onto the backs of his hands and the tops of his feet. He knew these better than he knew the runes of protection and healing. Those "baby" runes had been tattooed onto him when he was weaned from the breast. He had actually been allowed to tattoo some of these newer sigla—the mark of an adult—onto his skin himself. That had been a proud moment, his first rite of entry into what would undoubtedly be a cruel, harsh, and brief life.

Haplo completed his lesson without making another mistake and earned his father's curt nod of satisfaction.

"Now, heal those wounds," his father said, gesturing to the thorns protruding from the boy's palm.

Haplo pulled out the thorns with his teeth, spat them on the ground, and, joining his hands, formed the healing circle, as he'd been taught. The red, swollen marks left behind by the thorns gradually disappeared. He exhibited smooth, if dirty, palms for his father. The man grunted, rose, and walked away.

Two days later, he and Haplo's mother would both be dead. Haplo would be left alone.

The lucky and the strong were generally lonely. . . .

Haplo's mind drifted on a cloud of agony and weakness. He traced the sigla for his father and then his father was a bloody, mangled body and then his father was the Lord of the Nexus, whipping Haplo with the cane of the rosebush.

Haplo grit his teeth and forced himself to blink back the tears and bite back the scream and concentrate on the runes. His hand traveled down his left arm, to the sigla he'd drawn there as a boy and those he'd redrawn as a man and those he'd added as a man, feeling his strength and power grow within him.

He was forced to sit up, in order to reach the sigla on his legs. His first attempt nearly made him black out, but he struggled out of the whirling mists and peered through the blinking lights of his mind, choked back the nausea, and sat almost upright. His hand, trembling with weakness, followed the runes on thighs, hips, knees, shins, feet.

He expected, every moment, to feel the sting of the thorny cane, the reprimand, "No! Wrong! Begin again!"

And then he was finished and he'd done it correctly. He lay back down on the deck, feeling the wonderful warmth flow through his body, spreading from the name rune at his heart through his trunk and into his limbs.

Haplo slept.

When he awoke, his body was still weak, but it was a weakness from prolonged fasting and thirst—soon cured. He dragged himself to his feet and peered outside the large window on the bridge, wondering where he was. He had a vague memory of having passed through the horrors of Death's Gate again, but that memory was literally ablaze with pain and he swiftly banished it.

He was not, at least, in imminent danger. The runes on his body glowed only very faintly, and that was in reaction to what he'd suffered and endured, not reacting to any threat. He could see nothing outside the ship except a vast expanse of aqua blue. He stared at it, wondered if it was sky, water, solid, gaseous, what. He couldn't tell, and he was too light-headed from hunger to try to reason it all out.

Turning, he stumbled through the ship, making his weary way down into the hold, where he had stored his supplies. He ate sparingly of bread dipped in wine, mindful of the adage "Never break a fast with a feast."

His strength restored somewhat, Haplo went back to the bridge, dressed himself in his leather breeches, white long-sleeved shirt, and leather vest and boots, covering every sign of the telltale runes that marked him as a Patryn to those who remembered their history lessons. He left only his hands free, for the moment, for he would need to steer the vessel, using the magical runes of the steering stone.

At least, he assumed he'd need to steer the vessel. Haplo stared into the aqua-blue whatever-it-was that surrounded him and tried to make sense of it, but he might have been sailing into a dome of air that spanned all the vistas of his vision or about to fly smack into a wall covered with blue paint.

"We'll walk onto the top deck and take a look around, eh, boy?" he said. Not hearing the usual excited bark that always greeted this statement, Haplo glanced about.

The dog was gone.

It occurred to Haplo, then, that he hadn't seen the animal since . . . since . . . well, it had been a long time.

"Here, boy!" Haplo whistled. No response.

Irritated, thinking the dog was indulging in a raid on the sausages, as happened from time to time, Haplo stomped back down to the hold, prepared to find the animal looking as innocent of wrongdoing as was possible with sausage grease smeared over its nose.

The dog was not there. No sausages were missing.

Haplo called, whistled. No response. He knew then, with a sudden pang of loneliness and unhappiness, that the dog was gone. But almost as soon as he experienced the aching pain, which was in some ways almost harder to bear than the burning pain of his torture, Haplo felt it ease, then disappear.

It was as if his being were opened like a door. A cold, sharp wind blew in and coated with ice every troubling doubt and feeling he'd been experiencing.

Haplo felt renewed, refreshed, empty. And the emptiness, he discovered, was far preferable to the raging turmoil and confusion that had previously churned inside him.

The dog. A crutch, as his lord had always said. The lucky and the strong were generally lonely. The dog had served Haplo's purpose.

"It's gone." He shrugged and forgot it.

Alfred. That miserable Sartan.

"I see it now. I was duped, tricked by his magic. Just as my people were duped and tricked before the Sundering. But not now. We will meet again, Sartan, and when we do, you won't escape me this time."

Haplo, looking back, was appalled to see how weak he'd grown, appalled to think he'd actually doubted and attempted to deceive his lord.

His lord. He owed this new freedom from doubt, this new feeling of ease, to his lord.

"As my father punished me when I was small, so my lord has punished me now. I accept it. I am grateful for it. I have learned from it. I will not fail you, My Lord."

He swore the oath, placing his hand upon the name rune over his heart. Then he walked out, alone, onto the upper deck of the elven ship called Dragon Wing.

Haplo paced the deck, looked up beyond the tall masts with the dragon-scaled wings, leaned over the rail to stare far below the ship's keel, walked forward to study what lay beyond the snarling dragon's head that was the prow. He caught sight of something in the distance. Not much, nothing more than a dark splotch against the blue, but from the tingling of the sigla on his skin and the creeping feelings of dread shriveling his bowels, he came to the conclusion that he was looking at Death's Gate.

Obviously, then, he'd passed through the Gate, since he certainly wasn't in the Nexus. His lord must have launched his ship on its way.

"And, since I was preparing to travel to the fourth world, to Chelestra, the world of water, this must be it," Haplo said, talking to himself, comforted by hearing a voice break the silence that surrounded him like the endless aqua blue.

His ship was moving; he knew that much, now that he could fix his sight on a point—Death's Gate—and see it dwindle and grow smaller behind him. And he could feel, standing out in the open on the deck, the wind created by their forward motion blow strong against his skin.

The air was cool and moist, but Haplo assumed that there must be more to a world of water than high humidity, and he again paced the length of the deck, trying to figure out where he was and where he was headed.

A world of water. He sought to envision it, although he was forced to admit that he'd failed in his attempts to envision the previous three worlds he'd visited. He imagined islands, floating on an endless sea. And once he'd imagined that, he couldn't very well picture anything else. Nothing else made sense.

But, if so, where were the islands? Was he, perhaps, in the air above them? But, if that was true, where was the vast expanse of water, glistening in the sun?

Haplo returned below decks to try to sort out the problem, see if perhaps the runes of the steering stone offered some clue.

But, at that moment, he found out what Chelestra was like. His ship slammed into a wall of water.

The force of the impact sent Haplo toppling over backward. The steering stone jolted from its mountings and went rolling about the deck. Haplo started to regain his feet, froze, listened in astounded horror to a crack and a booming sound, like thunder. The main mast had snapped, broken.

Haplo ran to the window, stared out to see what was attacking his ship.

Nothing. He couldn't see any enemy, only water.

Something fell over the window, blocking his view. He recognized it as part of the dragon's-wing sail that helped guide the vessel. Now it flapped and fluttered helplessly in the water like a drowning bird.

Other crashes, occurring amidships, and the sudden trickling of small streams of water onto the bridge brought an unwelcome revelation. He wasn't under attack.

"The damn ship's breaking apart!" Haplo swore, stared about in disbelief.

It was impossible. Every plank, every beam, every mast and sail, every splinter of this ship, was protected by rune-magic. Nothing could harm it.

The Dragon Wing had sailed without injury through the suns of Pryan. It had survived the Maelstrom of Arianus, floated unscathed on the molten lava sea of Abarrach. A powerful Sartan necromancer had tried unsuccessfully to break its spell. The dread lazar had sought to unravel its magic. Dragon Wing and its pilot had survived them all. But water, ordinary water, was causing it to shatter like flawed pottery.

The ship was wallowing sluggishly, timbers creaking and groaning, straining to survive, then giving way. Dragon Wing was breaking apart slowly; it hadn't been crushed, but it shouldn't be breaking apart at all.

Haplo still couldn't believe it, refused to believe it. He stood up with difficulty, fighting to balance himself on the listing deck. Water sloshed over his ankles.

He turned to look for the steering stone, wondering briefly as he searched why it should have been knocked loose. It, too, was covered with runes, protected by sigla that guided the ship. If he could retrieve the stone, replace it, he could steer his vessel out of the water and back to what he now concluded must have been some sort of air pocket.

Haplo located the steering stone; it had rolled up against the bulkheads. Its rounded top was barely visible above the rising water. He waded toward it, reached down to pick it up. His hand paused. He stared at the stone.

It was smooth, round, and completely blank. The sigla were gone.

Another crash. The water level was rising rapidly.

This must be a trick of his mind, a panicked reaction to what was happening. The sigla on the steering stone were inscribed deeply, magically, in the rock. They could not, by any possible means, be washed away. Haplo plunged his hands into the water in an effort to retrieve the stone. He drew it out, speaking the runes that should have caused its magic to activate.

Nothing happened. He might have been holding a rock dug from his lord's garden. And then, glaring at the stone in baffled, angry frustration, Haplo's gaze shifted to his hands.

Water dripped from his fingers, his wrists, his lower arms, ran from skin that was smooth and unblemished, as blank and bare as the rock.

Haplo dropped the stone. Oblivious to the water that was at his knees now, to the shattering crashes that told him Dragon Wing was in its death throes, he stared hard at his hands, tried in vain to trace the comforting, reassuring lines of the runes.

The sigla were gone.

Fighting a surge of panic that rose in him even with the level of the water, Haplo lifted his right arm. A trickle of the liquid streamed from the back of his hand—now bare—down his rune-covered arm. In amazed horror, he watched the drop of water slide down his skin, meander among the sigla tattooed on his flesh. In its wake, it left a clean trail of slowly fading, diminishing runes.

This, then, was what was happening to his ship. The water was dissolving the runes, wiping out any trace of magical power.

Unable to think of any explanation why the water should destroy the magic, Haplo could find no way to remedy the situation. His mind was in turmoil and chaos. Accustomed to relying all his life on his magic, he was suddenly rendered helpless as a mensch.

The water level on the bridge was high enough now to float Haplo off his feet. He felt a strange reluctance to leave the protection of his vessel, though he knew logically that it would very soon be able to offer no protection whatsoever. Its magic was diminishing, dying, even as his own magic was dying. The thought came to him that it would be better to die himself than to live like a mensch—or worse than a mensch, for some of them possessed magical skills, though on a very crude level.

The temptation to shut his eyes and let the water cover his head and end his anguish was a fleeting one. Haplo was angry, furious at what was happening to him, furious at whatever or whoever was responsible. He determined to discover who it was and why it was and make them pay. And he couldn't do that if he was dead.

Haplo gazed upward, hoping to see some sign of the surface. He became convinced that he saw light above him. Drawing in a last breath, he shoved aside the floating remnants of Dragon Wing and pushed and kicked his way through the water.

Powerful strokes of his arms propelled Haplo upward, fended off the pieces of drifting plank and boards. There was definitely light; he could look down and see the contrasting darkness of the water beneath him. But, no sign of the surface.

Haplo's lungs began to burn; bright spots danced in his eyes. He could not hold his breath much longer. Furiously, driven by a panicked fear of drowning, he swam upward.

I'm not going to make it. I'm going to die. And no one will ever know . . . my lord will never know . . .

The agony became too great. Haplo could bear it no longer. The surface, if surface existed, was too far above him. He lacked strength to keep fighting. His heart seemed likely to burst, his brain to explode, his chest flaming with excruciating pain.

Muscles acted in reflex the brain fought against. Haplo's mouth opened. He sucked in water through nose and mouth and, feeling a strange warming sensation run through his body, assumed he was dying.

He wasn't, and that astonished him.

Haplo didn't know a lot about drowning. He'd obviously never drowned himself, nor had he met anyone who had and come back to describe the event. He'd seen drowned bodies, however, knew that when the lungs were filled with water, they ceased functioning, along with all the other organs of the body. He was considerably surprised to discover that, in his case, this was not occurring.

If it had not seemed too improbable, Haplo could have sworn he was breathing in the water as easily as he had once breathed in the air.

Haplo hung motionless in the water and paused to consider this unusual and perplexing phenomenon. The rational, thinking, reasoning part of him refused to accept it, and if he dwelt consciously on the fact that the next breath he took would be filled with water, he caught himself holding his breath again, terror rising in him. But if he relaxed and didn't think about it, the breath came. Inexplicably, but it came. And, to some part of him, it made sense. A part of him long, long forgotten.

You have returned to what was. This was how and where you began life.

Haplo considered this, decided he would puzzle it out later. Now all that mattered was that he was alive, irrationally, but he was alive. And living presented an entirely new set of problems.

The water might be air to his lungs, but that was all it was. Haplo could tell by the empty, gnawing sensations in his belly that the water could not nourish him, nor quench his thirst. Nor could it bolster his rapidly flagging strength. Bereft of the magic that might have sustained him, he would survive drowning only to perish of thirst, hunger, fatigue.

His head cleared. Relieved of the panicked fight to avoid death, Haplo studied his surroundings. He could see now that the light he'd hoped was sunlight appeared to be shining, not above him, but somewhere to one side. He doubted now it was the sun, but it was light, and, hopefully, where there was light, there was life.

Catching hold of a scrap of lumber drifting from the wreckage of Dragon Wing, Haplo struggled out of his heavy boots and most of his clothes that added weight and drag. He gazed ruefully at his bare legs and arms. No trace of the runes remained.

Haplo rested himself as comfortably as he could upon the board and lay there, floating in the water that was neither cold nor hot but so near his own body temperature that he had no sensation of it at all against his skin.

He relaxed, consciously refusing to think, letting himself recover from shock and fright. The water supported him, buoyed him up. He could see, from the hair streaming past his face, that the water had a motion to it, a current, a tide that appeared to be running the direction he wanted to go. This strengthened his decision. It would be easier to travel with the tide than against it.

Haplo rested until, slowly, he felt his energy return. Then, using the plank for support, he began to swim toward the light.

## CHAPTER \* 6

### THE HALL OF SLEEP CHELESTRA

THE FIRST WORDS ALFRED HEARD, WHEN HE MANAGED TO ROUSE himself from his fainting spell, were not propitious to his recovery. Samah was speaking to the assembled Sartan, who were— Alfred imagined since he was keeping his eyes shut—gathered around a fallen brethren, staring at him in amazement.

"We lost many during the Sundering. Death took most of our brethren then, but I fear that here we have a casualty of a different nature. This poor man has obviously been driven out of his mind."

Alfred kept quiet, pretending he was still unconscious, wishing desperately that were the case!

He sensed people around him, he heard them breathing, heard robes rustling, though no one else spoke. Alfred was still lying on the cold floor of the mausoleum, though someone had been kind enough to place a pillow—probably from one of the crypts—beneath his bald head.

"Look, Samah. I believe he is reviving," came a woman's voice.

Samah—the great Samah! Alfred almost groaned, swallowed it in time.

"The rest of you, back away. Don't frighten him," the male voice that must belong to Samah ordered.

Alfred heard pity and compassion in the man's voice and nearly wept. He longed to rise up, fling his arms around this Sartan's knees, and acknowledge him Father, Ruler, Patriarch, Councillor.

What holds me back? Alfred wondered, shivering on the chill floor. Why am I deceiving them, my own brothers and sisters, by lying here, pretending to be unconscious, spying on them? It's a dreadful thing I'm doing. He thought with a jolt, This is something Haplo would do!

And at this terrible realization, Alfred groaned aloud.

He knew he had betrayed himself, but he didn't feel up to facing these people yet. He remembered Samah's words, I have the right and the duty to ask questions of you, not from mere idle curiosity, but, considering these times of crises, out of necessity.

And what, wondered Alfred miserably, will I answer?

His head rolled from side to side, seemingly of its own volition, for he tried to stop moving and couldn't. His hands twitched. His eyes opened.

The newly awakened Sartan stood around him, staring down at him, no one making any move to assist him. They were not being cruel or neglectful. They were simply bewildered. They had never seen or heard one of their own kind behave in such a bizarre manner and had no idea what to do to help him.

"Either he's reviving or having a fit," said Samah. "Some of you"—he gestured to several young Sartan men—"keep near him. He may need to be physically restrained."

"That will not be necessary!" protested the woman who knelt beside him.

Alfred fixed his gaze on her, recognized her as the woman he'd seen lying in what he'd thought was Lya's crypt.

She lifted his hand in hers and began to pat it soothingly. His hand responded, as usual, of its own accord. Certainly he wasn't the one who commanded his fingers to tighten over hers. But he was the one who was comforted by her. She clasped his hand strongly and warmly in return.

"I thought the time of defiance was over, Orla," said Samah.

The Councillor's tone was mild, but there was a hard edge to his voice that caused Alfred to blanch. He heard the Sartan around him stir restlessly, like children of an unhappy home, afraid their parents are going to fight again.

The woman's hand on Alfred's tightened; her voice, when she spoke, was sad.

"Yes, Samah. I suppose it is."

"The Council made the decision. You are part of the Council. You cast your vote, as did the others."

The woman said nothing aloud. But these words came suddenly into Alfred's head, shared with him by the shared touching of their hands.

"A vote in your favor, as you knew I would. Am I part of the Council? Or am I merely Samah's wife?"

Alfred realized, suddenly, that he wasn't meant to hear those words. Sartan could speak to each other silently sometimes, but generally only those who were very close, such as husband and wife.

Samah hadn't heard. He had turned away, his thoughts obviously on other, more important matters than a weak brother lying stretched out on the floor.

The woman continued to gaze at Alfred, but she wasn't seeing him. She was staring through him, at something that had happened long ago. Alfred didn't like to intrude upon such private, unhappy thoughts, but the floor was getting awfully hard. He moved just a tiny bit, to ease a cramp in his right leg. The woman came back to herself, and to him.

"How are you feeling?"

"Not . . . not very well," Alfred stammered.

He tried to make himself sound as ill as possible, hoping Samah, hoping all these Sartan, would go away and leave him alone.

Well, perhaps not all of them. His hand was, he discovered, still clinging tightly to the woman's. Orla was her name, apparently. Orla, a beautiful name, yet the images it brought to him were sad ones.

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Orla sounded helpless.

Alfred understood. She knew he wasn't ill. She knew he was shamming, and she was upset and confused. Sartan didn't deceive each other. They didn't lie to each other. They weren't afraid of each other. Perhaps Orla was beginning to share Samah's view—that they had an insane brother on their hands.

Sighing, Alfred closed his eyes. "Bear with me," he said softly. "I know I'm behaving strangely. I know you don't understand. I can't expect you to understand. You will, when you have heard my story."

He sat up then, weakly, with Orla's assistance. But he managed to regain his feet on his own, managed to stand up and face Samah with dignity.

"You are the head of the Council of Seven. Are the other Council members present?" Alfred asked.

"Yes." Samah's gaze flicked about the chamber, picking out five other Sartan. The stern eyes came to rest, finally, on the woman, Orla. "Yes, the Council members are all here."

"Then," said Alfred humbly, "I beg the favor of a hearing before the Council."

"Certainly, Brother," said Samah, with a gracious bow. "That is your right, whenever you are feeling up to it. Perhaps in a day or two—"

"No, no," said Alfred hastily. "There isn't time to wait. Well, actually there is time. Time's the problem. I mean ... I think you should hear what I have to say immediately, before . . . before . . ." His voice trailed off lamely.

Orla caught her breath with a gasp. Her gaze sought Samah's, and whatever tension had existed between them immediately eased and slackened.

The Sartan language, comprising, as it does, Sartan magic, has the ability to summon up images and visions that enhance the speaker's words in the minds of his hearers. A powerful Sartan, such as Samah, would have the ability to control these images, making certain that his listeners saw, as well as heard, exactly what he wanted.

Alfred, unfortunately, could no more control his mental processes than he could his physical. Orla and Samah and every other Sartan in the mausoleum had just witnessed astounding, frightening, and confusing sights. Sights that emanated directly from Alfred.

"The Council will convene immediately," Samah said. "The rest of you . . ." He paused, looked with troubled eyes on the other Sartan standing in the mausoleum, patiently waiting his command. "I think perhaps you should remain here until we know for certain how matters stand on the surface. I note that some of our brethren have not awakened. Find out if anything is amiss with them."

The Sartan bowed in silent, unquestioning acquiescence, and left to go about their duties.

Samah turned on his heel and headed out of the mausoleum, heading for a door separated from the chamber by a dark and narrow hallway. The five other Sartan Council members came after him. Orla walked near Alfred. She said nothing to him, courteously refrained from looking at him, giving him time to calm himself.

Alfred was grateful to her, but he didn't think it would help.

Samah strode the hall with swift, confident steps, as if he had walked these floors only yesterday. Preoccupied as he was, he apparently didn't notice that his long, sweeping robes were leaving small trails in a thick layer of dust.

Runes over the door lit with a blue radiance as Samah approached and began to chant. The door swung open, wafting a cloud of dust up from the floor.

Alfred sneezed. Orla was looking about her in perplexed astonishment.

They entered the Council room, which Alfred recognized by the round table adorned with sigla, standing in the center. Samah frowned at the sight of fine, soft dust that completely covered the table, obliterating the runes carved upon its surface. Coming to stand beside the table, he ran his finger through the dust, stared at it in pondering silence.

None of the other Council members approached the table, but remained near the door, whose runelight, once the door had opened, was beginning to fade. Samah, with a brief word, caused a white globe that hung suspended above the table to shine with a radiant white light. He gazed ruefully at the dust.

"If we attempt to clean this off, we'll none of us be able to breathe the air." He was silent a moment, then shifted his gaze to Alfred. "I foresee the path your words will likely travel, Brother, and I must admit that it fills me with a fear I had not thought myself capable of feeling. I think we should all sit down, but—this one time—there will be no need to take our accustomed places around the table."

Pulling out a chair, he brushed it off and held it for Orla, who walked to it with steady, measured tread. The other Council members moved chairs for themselves, stirring up such a quantity of dust in the process that for a moment it seemed a fog had rolled in on them. Everyone coughed and uttered swift chants to help clear the air. Yet the entire time they talked, the dust drifted down and around them, covered their skin and clothing.

Alfred remained standing, as was proper when appearing before the Council.

"Please, begin, Brother," Samah said.

"First, I must ask that you grant me leave to ask you questions," Alfred said, clasping his hands nervously before him. "I must have answers myself before I can proceed with any assurance that what I am about to tell you is right."

"Your request is granted, Brother," said Samah gravely. "Thank you." Alfred gave an awkward bob, intended for a bow. "My first question is: Are you an ancestor of the Samah who was Head of the Council during the time of the Sundering?"

Orla's eyes flicked quickly to Samah. The woman's face was exceedingly pale. The other Council members shifted in their chairs, some looking at Samah, others looking at the dust all around them.

"No," said Samah. "I am not a descendant of that man." He paused, perhaps considering the implications of his answer. "I am that man," he said at last.

Alfred nodded, breathed a gentle sigh. "Yes, I thought so. And this is the Council of Seven who made the decision to sunder the World, establish four separate and distinct worlds in its place. This is the Council who directed the fight against the Patryns, the Council who brought about our enemy's defeat and effected their capture. This is the Council who built the Labyrinth and imprisoned our enemies within it. This is the Council by whose direction some of the mensch were rescued from the destruction and transported to each of the four worlds, there to begin what you planned to be a new order, there to live together in peace and prosperity."

"Yes," said Samah, "this is the Council of which you speak."

"Yes," repeated Orla, softly, sadly, "this is that Council."

Samah shot her a displeased glance. Of the other Council members—four men and one more woman—two of the men and the woman frowned in agreement with Samah, the remaining two men nodded, apparently siding with Orla.

The rift in the Council gaped, chasm-like, at Alfred's feet, causing him to lose hold of his thoughts, that had never been grasped all that securely. He could only stare at his brethren, open-mouthed.

"We have answered your questions," Samah said, voice grating. "Have you any others?"

Alfred did, but he was having difficulty putting his questions in words proper to ask the head of the Council of Seven. At last he managed to say, lamely, "Why did you go to sleep?"

The question was simple. To his horror, Alfred heard echoing around it all the other questions that should have remained locked in his heart. They reverberated through the room in unspoken, anguished cries.

Why did you leave us? Why did you abandon those who needed you? Why did you shut your eyes to the chaos and destruction and misery?

Samah appeared grave and troubled. Alfred, appalled at what he'd done, could only stammer and flap his hands ineffectually in a vague effort to silence the voice of his own being.

"Questions beget questions, it seems," Samah said at last. "I see that I cannot easily answer yours unless you answer some of mine. You are not from Chelestra, are you?"

"No, Samah, I am not. I am from Arianus, the world of air."

"And you came to this world through Death's Gate, I presume?"

Alfred hesitated. "It might be more correct to say I came by accident ... or perhaps by dog," he added with a slight smile.

His words were creating pictures in the minds of those he addressed, pictures that they were obviously, from the bewilderment on their faces, having difficulty understanding.

Alfred could imagine their confusion. He could see in his mind Arianus, its various mensch races warring, its wonderful, marvelous machine doing absolutely nothing, its Sartan gone and forgotten. He could see in his mind his journey through Death's Gate, see Haplo's ship, see Haplo.

Alfred steeled himself for what he assumed must be Samah's next question, but apparently the images were coming so fast and furious that the Sartan had evidently shut them out completely in an attempt to concentrate on his own thoughts.

"You came accidentally, you say. You were not sent to wake us?"

"No," said Alfred, sighing. "There was, to be honest, no one to send me."

"Our people on Arianus did not receive our message? Our plea for help?"

"I don't know." Alfred shook his head, stared down at his shoes. "If they did, it was a long time ago. A long, long time ago."

Samah was silent. Alfred knew what he was thinking. The Councillor was wondering how best to ask a question he was deeply reluctant to ask.

At length, the Councillor glanced at Orla.

"We have a son. He is in the other room. He is twenty-five years of age, as counted at the time of the Sundering. If he had continued on in his life and had not chosen the Sleep, how old would he be?"

"He would not be alive," said Alfred.

Samah's lips trembled. He controlled himself, with an effort. "We Sartan live long. Are you certain? If he grew to be an old, old man?"

"He would not be alive, nor would his children be alive, nor the children of his children."

Alfred did not add the worst, that it was very likely the young man would have had no descendants at all. Alfred attempted to hide this fact, but he saw that the Councillor was beginning to understand. He'd seen in Alfred's mind the rows of crypts on Arianus, the dead Sartan walking the lava flows on Abarrach.

"How long have we slept?" Samah asked.

Alfred ran a hand over his balding head. "I can't say for certain, or give you numbers. The history, the time, differs from world to world." "Centuries?" "Yes. I believe so."

Orla's mouth moved, as if she would speak, but she said nothing. The Sartan appeared dazed, stunned. It must be a terrible thing, Alfred thought, to wake and realize that eons have passed while you slept. Wake to the knowledge that the carefully Grafted universe you imagined pillowed your slumbering head has fallen into ruin and chaos.

"It's all so ... confused. The only ones who might have any accurate record at all, the only ones who truly remember what happened, are the—" Alfred stopped, the dread words on his lips. He hadn't meant to bring that up, not yet at least.

"The Patryns." Samah finished his sentence. "Yes, I saw the man, our ancient enemy, in your mind, Brother. He was free of the Labyrinth. You traveled with him."

Orla's forlorn expression brightened. She sat forward eagerly. "Can we find comfort in this? I disapproved of this plan"—a glance at her husband—"but I would like nothing better than to have been proven wrong. Are we to understand that our hopes for reform worked? That the Patryns, when they emerged from the prison, had learned their lesson, hard as it was, and that they have forsaken their evil dreams of conquest and despotic rule?"

Alfred did not immediately respond.

"No, Orla, you can find no comfort anywhere," Samah said coldly. "Of course, we should have known. Look at the image of the Patryn in this brother's mind! It is the Patryns who have brought this terrible destruction upon the worlds!" He slammed his hand down upon the arm of the chair, sent up a cloud of dust.

"No, Samah, you are wrong!" Alfred protested, startled at his own courage in defying the Councillor. "Most of the Patryns are still locked in that prison of yours. They have suffered cruelly. Countless numbers have fallen victim to hideous monsters that could only have been created by warped and evil minds!

"Those who have escaped are filled with hatred for us, hatred that has been bred into them for countless generations. A hatred that is in every way justifiable, as far as I'm concerned. I ... I was there, you see, for a brief time ... in another body."

His newfound courage was rapidly evaporating beneath the blazing glare of Samah's eyes. Alfred shriveled up, shrank back into himself. His hands plucked at the frayed lace on the sleeves of his shirt hanging limply beneath the worn velvet of his top coat.

"What are you talking about, Brother?" Samah demanded. "This is impossible! The Labyrinth was meant to teach, to instruct. It was a game—a hard game, a difficult game—but nothing more than that."

"It turned into a deadly game, I'm afraid," said Alfred, but he spoke to his shoes. "Still, there might be hope. You see, this Patryn I know is a most complex man. He has a dog—"

Samah's eyes narrowed. "You seem very sympathetic to the enemy, Brother."

"No, no!" Alfred babbled. "I really don't know the enemy. I only know Haplo. And he's—"

But Samah was not interested. He brushed aside Alfred's words as so much dust. "This Patryn I saw in your mind was free, traveling through Death's Gate. What is his purpose?"

"Ex-exploration—" Alfred stammered.

"No, not exploration!" Samah rose to his feet, stared hard at Alfred, who fell back before the penetrating gaze. "Not exploration. Reconnaissance!"

Samah glowered, glanced in grim triumph at the other Council members. "It seems we have, after all, awakened at a propitious time, Brethren. Once again, our ancient enemy intends to go to war."

## CHAPTER \* 7

### ADRIFT, SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

MORNING. ANOTHER MORNING OF DESPAIR, OF FEAR. THE MORN-ings are the worst time for me. I wake from terrible dreams and for a minute I pretend I'm back in my bed in my home and I tell myself that the dreams are nothing more than that. But I can't ignore the fact that the horror-filled dreams might, at any time, become reality. We have not seen any sign of the dragon-snakes, but we know Someone is watching us. We are none of us seaman, we have no idea how to steer this ship, yet Something is steering it. Something guides it. And we have no idea what.

Dread keeps us from even venturing on the upper deck. We have fled to the lower part of the ship, where the Something seems content to leave us alone.

Each morning, Alake, Devon, and I meet and try to swallow the food for which we have no appetite. And we look at each other and we ask ourselves silently if today will be the day, the last day.

The waiting is the most awful part. Our terror grows in us daily. Our nerves are ragged, taut. Devon—good-natured Devon—quarreled with Alake over some little offhand remark she made about elves that he took completely the wrong way. I can hear them now, still raving at each other. It's not anger that harries them, but fear. I think the fear will drive us mad.

In remembering, I can, for a while, forget. I will tell about our leave-taking.

It was bitter and grievous. As it turned out, making that initial decision to give ourselves up to the dragon-snakes was the easy part. We composed ourselves, dried our tears, and talked over what we were going to say to our parents. We chose Alake as our speaker and went out to the terrace.

Our parents were not prepared for the sight of us. Eliason, having so recently lost his beloved wife to some elven malady, could not bear to look at Sabia, his only daughter and the very image of her lovely mother. He turned away, his eyes filled with tears.

At this, Sabia lost her courage. Going to him, she put her arms around him and her tears mingled with his. Of course, this said everything.

"You overheard!" Dumaka accused us, scowling. "You were listening again!"

I had never seen him so furious. Alake's carefully planned speech died on her trembling lips.

"Father, we mean to go. You cannot stop us . . ."

"No!" he roared in a fury, and began pounding on the coral with his clenched fist, beating it, smashing it until I saw the pink turn red with his blood. "No! I will die before I submit to this—"

"Yes, you will die!" Alake cried. "And our people will die! Is that what you want, Father?"

"Fight!" Dumaka's black eyes flashed fire, foam frothed on his lips. "We will fight them! The beasts are mortal, just as we are. They have a heart that can be slashed open, a head that can be cut off—"

"Yes," said my father stoutly. "We will do battle."

His beard was torn. I saw great clumps of it lying on the floor at his feet. That was the first time I fully understood what our decision meant. I don't think we had made it lightly, but we had made it considering only ourselves, thinking only of what we would suffer. Now I came to realize that though we might die and die horribly, we could only die once and it would be over and we would be safe with the One. Our parents (and those others who loved us) must suffer and die our deaths in their minds time and time again.

I was so ashamed, I couldn't face him.

He and Dumaka were ranting on about battle-axes and weapons they would manufacture and how the elves would enchant them. Eliason actually recovered enough to offer a few broken suggestions. I couldn't say a word. I began to think that maybe our people did have a chance, that we could fight the serpents and that our lives would be spared. And then I noticed Alake. She was strangely quiet, strangely calm.

"Mother," she said suddenly, coldly, "you have to tell them the truth."

Delu flinched. She cast her daughter a swift, smoldering glance that commanded silence, but it was too late. Her look made it worse, for we all saw plainly that she had something to hide.

"What truth?" demanded my mother sharply.

"I am not permitted to speak of it," Delu said thickly, keeping her eyes averted from us all. "As my daughter well knows," she added bitterly.

"You must, Mother," Alake persisted. "Or will you let them go blindly out to fight an enemy that cannot be defeated?"

"What does she mean, Delu?"

It was my mother again. She was the shortest person there. She is shorter even than I am. I can see her now, side whiskers quivering, chin jutting out, arms akimbo, feet planted firmly on the ground. Delu was tall and willowy; my mother came only to her waist. But, in my memory, it is my mother who stands tall to me that day, tall in her strength and courage.

Delu crumbled, a tree falling to my mother's blade. The human sorceress sank down onto a low bench, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap, her head bowed.

"I can't go into detail," she said in a low voice, "I shouldn't be telling you this much, but . . . but . . ." She swallowed, drew a quivering breath. "I'll try to explain. When a murder has been committed . . ."

(I pause here to note that humans do actually kill their own kind. I know you might find it difficult to believe, but it is the truth. One would think that considering their short life span they would hold life sacred. But no. They kill for the most paltry of reasons, greed, vengeance, and lust being chief among them.)

"When a murder has been committed and the murderer cannot be found," Delu was saying, "the members of the Coven can—by use of a spell whose very existence I should not now be revealing—gather information about the person who has perpetrated the deed."

"They can even conjure up an image of the person," Alake added, "if they find a lock of hair or traces of the murderer's blood or skin."

"Hush, child. What are you saying?" her mother reprimanded, but her protest was weak, her spirit crushed.

Alake continued. "A single thread can tell the Coven what the murderer wore. If the crime is recent, the shock of the outrage lingers in the very air and we can draw from it—"

"No, Daughter!" Delu looked up. "That is enough. Suffice it to say that we can conjure an image not only of the murderer but also, for lack of a better term, the murderer's soul."

"And the Coven performed this spell in the village?"

"Yes, Husband. It was magic. I was forbidden to tell you."

Dumaka did not look pleased, but he said nothing. Humans revere magic, hold it in awe and fear. Elves take a more practical view of it, but that may be because elven magic deals with more practical things. We dwarves never saw much point in either. Oh, certainly it saves time and labor, but one has to give up freedom to pay for it. After all, who ever really trusts a wizard? Apparently, not even a spouse.

"And so, Delu, you cast this spell on the beast's droppings or whatever they left behind." My mother single-mindedly dragged us all back to the subject at hand. "And just what did you find out about their souls?"

"That they have none," said Delu.

My mother flung her hands in the air in exasperation, glanced at my father as much as to say they'd wasted their time for nothing. But I knew, from Alake's expression, that more was coming.

"They have no souls," Delu continued, fixing her stern gaze on my mother. "Can't you understand? All mortal beings have souls. Just as all mortal beings have bodies."

"And it's the bodies we're worried about," snapped my mother.

"What Delu is trying to say," Alake explained, "is that these serpents have no souls and are, therefore, not mortal."

"Which means they are immortal?" Eliason stared at the girl in shock. "They can't be killed?"

"We are not certain," Delu said wearily, rising to her feet. "That is why I thought it best not to bring it up. The Coven has never encountered any creatures like this. We simply do not know."

"But that is what you surmise?" Dumaka asked.

Delu would have preferred not to answer, it seemed, but after a moment, she concluded she had no choice.

"If what we have discovered is true, then they are not serpents. They are a creature of the genus known anciently as 'dragon'. The ancients held the dragon to be immortal, but that was probably only because the dragon was nearly impossible to kill. Not that it couldn't be killed." She was briefly defiant, but her defiance quickly faded. "The dragon is extremely powerful. Especially in magic."

"We cannot fight the beasts," said my father, "and have any hope of winning. Is that what you are saying? Because what I am saying is that it makes no difference to me! We will not voluntarily give up one dwarf—any dwarf—to them. And so will say my people."

I knew he was right. I knew we dwarves would see ourselves destroyed as a race before we would sacrifice one of our kind. I knew I was safe. I was filled with relief . . . and my shame deepened.

Dumaka looked around, his dark eyes fierce. "I agree with Yvngar. We must fight them."

"But, Father," Alake argued. "How can you doom all our people to death for my sake—"

"I do not do this for your sake, Daughter," Dumaka countered sternly. "I do this for the sake of our people. We give up one daughter to them and who knows but that next time these 'dragons' will demand all our

daughters. And the time after that our sons. No!" He slammed his already bleeding hand on the coral. "We will fight. And so will say all our people!"

"I will not give up my precious child," Eliason whispered in a tear-choked voice.

He was holding onto Sabia as tightly as if he saw the coils winding around her already. Sabia clung to him, weeping for his grief more than for her own.

"Nor will my people ever agree to pay such a terrible price for their own well-being, even if, as Dumaka says, we could trust these snakes or dragons or whatever they be called.

"We will fight," Eliason continued, more resolutely. Then he sighed, and glanced around at us somewhat helplessly. "Though it has been many long, long epoches since elves went to battle. Still, I suppose the knowledge needed to make weapons is in our archives ..."

My father snorted. "And you think these beasts will wait around for you elves to read the books and then dig the ore and build the smithies before you can set blade to hilt. Bah! We must make do with what we have. I will send battle-axes—"

"And I will provide you with spears and swords," Dumaka struck in, hard-edged, battle lust burning.

Delu and Eliason began to discuss and debate various military enchantments and mantras and cantrips. Unfortunately, elven magic and human were so dissimilar that neither could offer the other much assistance, but they both seemed to find comfort in at least the appearance of doing something constructive.

"Why don't you girls go back to Sabia's room," suggested my mother. "You've had a shock." Coming over, she hugged me to her breast. "But I will always honor and remember my brave daughter, offering her life for her people."

My mother left to join my father in a spirited argument with Dumaka over battle-axes versus pole-axes, and we girls were forgotten.

And so that was that. They'd made their decision. I felt that I should be rejoicing, but my heart—which had been strangely light after we'd chosen to sacrifice ourselves—felt as heavy as lead in my breast. It was all I could do to carry the burden; my feet dragged through the glistening, coral hallways. Alake was grim and thoughtful. Sabia was still occasionally shaken by sobs, and so we said nothing to each other until we reached the elf maid's room.

Even then, we did not speak, at least aloud. But our thoughts were like streams of water, all traveling the same direction, at last converging. I knew this because I looked suddenly at Alake and found her looking at me. We both turned, at the identical moment, to look at Sabia, whose eyes widened. She sank weakly down upon her bed, and shook her head.

"No, you can't be thinking that! You heard what my father said ..."

"Sabia, listen to me." Alake's tone reminded me of times when we'd try to get the elf maid to agree to play a trick on our governess. "Are you going to be able to stand here in this room and watch your people being slaughtered before your eyes and say to yourself: 'I might have prevented this'?"

Sabia hung her head.

I went over to her, put my arm around her shoulders. Elves are so thin, I thought. Their bones are so fragile you might break them with a touch.

"Our parents will never permit us to go," I said. "And so we must take matters into our own hands. If there is a chance, even a tiny chance, that we could be the saviors of our people, then we must take it."

"My father!" mourned Sabia, beginning to cry again. "It will break my father's heart."

I thought of my father, of the clumps of beard lying on the floor at his feet, of my mother hugging me, and my courage almost failed me. Then I thought of the dwarves caught in the dragon-snake's hideous, toothless mouths. I thought of Hartmut, his battle-ax shining, but looking small and powerless compared to the gigantic beasts.

I think of him now, as I write, and of my father and my mother and my people, and I know that we did the right thing. As Alake said, I could not have stood and watched my people die and say to myself, I might have prevented this!

"Your father will have the elven people to think about, Sabia. He will be strong, for your sake, you may be sure of that. Grundle"—Alake's black eyes shifted to me, her manner was brisk, commanding—"what about the boat?"

"It's moored in the harbor," I said. "The captain and most of the crew will be ashore during the rest hours, leaving only a land-watch on board. We can handle them. I have a plan."

"Very well." Alake left that to me. "We'll sneak away in the time of the deep sleep. Gather together whatever you think you might need. I assume that there is food and water on board the vessel?"

"And weapons," I added.

That was a mistake. Sabia looked as if she might faint, and even Alake appeared dubious. I said no more. I didn't tell them that I, for one, meant to die fighting.

"I will take what I need for my magic," said Alake.

Sabia gazed at us helplessly. "I could take my lute," she offered.

Poor girl. I think she had some vague idea of charming the dragon-snakes with her song. I almost laughed, caught Alake's eye, and sighed instead. Actually, once I thought about it, her lute and my ax would probably accomplish about the same thing.

"Very well. We part now, to put together what we need. Be circumspect. Be quiet. Be secret! We'll send a message to our parents telling them that we're too upset to come down to dinner. The fewer people we see the better. Do you understand? You tell no one." Alake fixed her stern gaze on Sabia.

"No one . . . except Devon," the elf maid replied.

"Devon! Absolutely not! He'd talk you out of it." Alake has a low opinion of men.

Sabia bristled. "He is my chosen husband-to-be. He has a right to know. We keep nothing from each other. It is a matter of honor between us. He won't say anything to anyone if I ask him not to."

Her small, pointed chin quivered in defiance, her slender shoulders squared. Trust an elf to develop a backbone at the worst possible time.

Alake didn't like it, but she could see as well as I that Sabia wouldn't be argued out of this.

"You'll resist all his pleadings and tears and arguments?" Alake said crossly.

"Yes," said Sabia, a pretty flush coming to her pale cheeks. "I know how important this is, Alake. I won't fail you. And Devon will understand. You'll see. He is a prince, remember. He knows what it means to have a responsibility to our people."

I poked Alake in the ribs. "I have things to do," I said gruffly. "And there's not much time."

The season was drifting beyond the far shore into the night. Already, the sea was dimming into deep purple; the servants were flitting about the palace, lighting the lamps.

Sabia rose from her bed and started to pack her lute in its case. Obviously, our conversation was at an end.

"We'll meet back here," I said.

Sabia nodded cool agreement. I managed to get Alake, who still seemed inclined to want to stay and argue, out of the bedroom and into the hall. Through the closed door, I could hear Sabia begin to sing an elven song called "Lady Dark," a song sad enough to break the heart.

"Devon will never let her go! He'll tell our parents!" Alake hissed at me.

"We'll come back early," I whispered, "and keep an eye on them. If he starts to leave, we'll stop him. You can do it with your magic, can't you?"

"Yes, of course." Alake's dark eyes flashed. "Excellent idea, Grundle. I should have thought of it myself. What time should we return?"

"Dinner's in a signe. [1] He's staying here in the palace. He'll be worried when she doesn't appear, and he'll come to see what's wrong. That gives us time."

"But what if she sends him a message to come earlier?"

"He can't risk insulting her father by missing a meal."

I knew quite a bit about elven etiquette, having been forced to endure it during my stay here. Alake had lived here, too, but—typical of humans—she'd always done exactly as she pleased. To give Alake her due, she probably would have starved to death before getting through one of the elven dinners, which could sometimes stretch into cycles, with several hours between courses. I figured that Eliason would have small appetite for his meal this day, however.

Alake and I separated, each returning to our own quarters. I bustled about, making up a small bundle of clothing, whisker brush, and other necessities, just as if I were packing to go visit Phondra on a holiday. The excitement and daring of our scheme kept me from thinking through to what must be its dreadful conclusion. It was only when it came time to write a farewell letter to my parents that my heart began to fail me.

Of course, my parents wouldn't be able to read what I had written, but I planned to enclose a note to the elven king, asking him to read it to them. I tore up many sheets before I was able to say what I wanted, and then left it so covered with tears I'm not sure anyone could decipher it. I hope and pray it brought some comfort to my parents.

When I was finished, I stuffed the letter in my father's beard-trimming kit, where he would find it in the morning and not before. I lingered, then, in my parent's guest quarters, looking lovingly at each little thing belonging to them and wishing with all my heart that I could see them one last time. But I knew quite well that I could never deceive my mother and so I left hastily, while they were still at dinner, and returned to the part of the palace where Sabia lived.

Finding a quiet niche, needing to be alone, I settled myself in it and asked the One for strength and guidance and help. I was greatly comforted and a peaceful feeling came over me, giving me to know that I was doing the right thing.

The One meant us to overhear that conversation. The One will not forsake us. These dragon-snakes may be evil, but the One is good. The One will guard us and keep us. No matter how powerful these creatures are, they are not more powerful than the One who, so we believe, made this world and all in it.

I was feeling much better, and was just beginning to wonder what had happened to Alake when I saw Devon dash past me, heading for Sabia's rooms. I crept out of my niche, hoping to see which antechamber he entered (for, of course, he wouldn't be allowed into Sabia's bedroom), and I bumped into Alake.

"What took you so long?" I asked irritably in a low tone. "Devon's already here!"

"Magic rites," she told me loftily. "I cannot explain."

I might have known. I heard Devon's worried voice and the voice of Sabia's duenna [2] answering him, telling him that Sabia was unwell, but would see him in the sitting room, if he wanted to wait.

He headed in that direction. Doors shut.

Alake darted into the hall, I trotted after her and we scuttled into the music room that adjoined the sitting room only a split instant ahead of Sabia and her duenna.

"Are you quite up to this, my dear?" The duenna was hovering over Sabia like a hen with one chick. "You don't look at all well."

"I do have a frightful headache," we heard Sabia say in a weak voice. "Could you fetch me some lavender water to bathe my temples?"

Alake placed her hand upon the coral wall, muttered several words, and it dissolved beneath her fingers, creating an opening big enough for her to peek through. She created another hole at my level. Fortunately, elves fill their rooms with furniture and vases and flowers and birdcages, so we were well-concealed, although I had to peer through the leaves of a palm and Alake was eye-to-eye with a singing phurah bird.

Sabia was standing near Devon, as close as was considered proper between betrothed couples. The duenna returned with woeful news.

"Poor Sabia. We are out of lavender water. I can't imagine how. I know the bottle was filled only yesterday."

"Could you please be a dear, Marabella, and fill it again? My head does throb most awfully." Sabia put her hand to her forehead. "There is some in my mother's old room, I believe."

"I'm afraid she is very ill," said Devon anxiously.

"But your mother's room is on the other side of the Grotto," said the duenna. "I shouldn't leave you two alone . . ."

"I only intend to stay a moment," said Devon.

"Please, Marabella?" pleaded Sabia.

The elven princess had never been refused anything in her life. The duenna fluttered her hands in indecision. Sabia gave a faint moan. The duenna left. Knowing that many new rooms had been opened and several old hallways overgrown between here and Sabia's mother's room, I didn't expect the duenna to find her way back much before morning.

Sabia, in her gentle voice, began to explain everything to Devon.

I can't describe the painful scene that followed between the two of them. They had grown up together and loved each other dearly since childhood. Devon listened in horrified shock that gave way to outrage, and he argued and protested vehemently. I was proud of Sabia, who remained calm and composed, though what I knew she was suffering over his agony brought tears to my eyes.

"Honor-bound, I have told you our secret, Beloved," she said, clasping her hands over his, looking straight into his eyes. "You have the power to stop us, to betray us. But you will not, I know, because you are a prince and you understand I make this sacrifice for the good of our people. And I know, my dearest, that your sacrifice will be far harder than mine, but I know you will be strong for my sake, as I am strong for yours."

Devon sank to his knees, overcome by grief. Sabia knelt beside him, put her arms around him. I drew away from my spyhole, bitterly ashamed of myself. Alake moved away from hers, covered both over with her hand and a word of magic. She generally scoffed at love. I noticed now that she had nothing to say on the subject and that she was blinking her eyes quite rapidly.

We sat in the music room in the dark, not daring to light a lamp. I whispered to her my plan to steal the boat, which she approved. When I mentioned, however, that I had very little idea how to operate it, her face grew grave.

"I don't believe that will be a problem," she said, and I guessed what she meant.

The dragon-snakes would be watching for us.

She spoke to me something of the magic spells she was studying at her level (she had recently moved up to Third House, whatever that means). I knew she wasn't really supposed to be talking much about her magic, and I must admit I wasn't all that interested and I understood nothing of what she was saying. But she was trying to distract us, keep us from thinking about our fear, and so I listened with pretended interest.

Then we heard a door shut. Devon must have left. Poor fellow, I thought, and wondered very much what he would do. Elves had been known to sicken and die of grief, and I had little doubt that Devon would not long outlive Sabia.

"We'll give her a few moments to compose herself," said Alake, with unusual consideration.

"Not too long," I cautioned. "The household must have been in bed this past sign. We have to get out of this maze and through the streets and down to the wharf yet."

Alake agreed and, after a few tense moments, we both decided that we could take no more waiting and headed for the door.

The hallway was dark and deserted. We had thought up a plausible story, in case we ran into Marabella, but there was no sign of her or her lavender water. Creeping over to Sabia's bedchamber, we tapped lightly on the door and softly pushed it open.

Sabia was moving around her bedroom in the darkness, gathering up her things. Hearing the door open, she jumped and swiftly flung a filmy scarf around her head, then turned to face us.

"Who is it?" she whispered in fear. "Marabella?"

"It's only us," I said. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, yes. Just a moment."

She was in a flutter, obviously, for she stumbled about the room in the darkness as if she'd never been inside it before. Her voice, too, had changed, I noticed, but concluded that she must be hoarse from

sobbing. At length, falling over a chair, she made her way to us, clutching a silken bag out of which spilled lace and ribbons.

"I'm ready," she said in a muffled voice, keeping the scarf over her face, probably to hide her tear-swollen eyes and nose. Elves are so vain.

"What about the lute?" I asked.

"The what?"

"The lute. You were going to take your lute."

"Oh, uh. I ... I decided . . . not to," she said lamely, coughed, and cleared her throat.

Alake had been keeping watch in the hall. She beckoned to us impatiently. "Come on before Marabella catches us!"

Sabia hastened after her. I was about to follow, when I heard what I thought was a sigh coming from the darkness, and a rustle in Sabia's bed. I looked back, saw an odd shadow, and was about to say something when Alake pounced on me.

"Come on, Grundle!" she insisted, digging her nails into my arm and dragging me out.

I thought no more of it.

We three made our way out of the Grotto safely. Sabia led us, and we only got lost once. Thank the One elves never feel the need, as do humans, to post guards over everything. The streets of the elven city were deserted, as would be any dwarven road at this time. It is only in human villages that you find people wandering about at all hours of the night.

We reached the boat. Alake cast her magical sleep over the dwarves on watch and they toppled to the decks snoring blissfully. Then we faced what would be our most difficult challenge during that entire night—hauling the slumbering dwarves out of the boat and back to shore, where we planned to hide them among some barrels.

The sleeping dwarves were so much deadweight, and I was certain I'd torn my arms out of their sockets after wrestling with the first. I asked Alake if she didn't know a flying spell we could cast on them, but she said she hadn't gone that far in her studies yet. Oddly, weak, fragile Sabia proved unusually strong and adept at dwarf-hauling. Again, I thought this strange. Was I truly blind? Or had the One commanded me to shut my eyes?

We manhandled the last dwarf off and slipped onto the boat, which was really just a much smaller version of the submersible I've already described. Our first task was to search the berths and the hold, gathering the various axes and pole arms the crew had left about. We carried these up to the open deck, located behind the observation room.

Alake and Sabia began to throw them overboard. I cringed at the splashing sounds the arms made, certain that it must be heard by everyone in the city.

"Wait!" I grabbed hold of Alake. "We don't have to get rid of all of them, do we? Couldn't we keep one or two?"

"No, we must convince the creatures that we are defenseless," said Alake firmly, and tossed the last few over the rail.

"There are eyes watching us, Grundle," Sabia whispered in awe. "Can't you feel them?"

I could, and that didn't make me any happier about handing over our weapons to the dolphins. I was glad that I'd had the foresight to slip an ax beneath my bed. What Alake doesn't know won't hurt her.

We trailed back to the observation room, none of us saying anything, each wondering what would happen next. Once there, we stood staring at each other.

"I suppose I could try to run this thing," I offered.

But that wasn't necessary.

As Alake had foretold, the boat's hatches suddenly slammed shut, sealing us inside. The vessel, steered by no one that we could see, glided away from the pier and headed out into open sea.

The fevered excitement and thrill of our stealthy escape began to seep out of us, leaving us chilled; the full realization of what was likely to be our terrible fate was stark before us. Water swept over the deck and engulfed the windows. Our ship sank into the Goodsea.

Frightened and alone, we each reached out our hands to the others. And then, of course, we knew that Sabia wasn't Sabia.

It was Devon.

CHAPTER \* 8

THE HALL OF SLEEP CHELESTRA

IN THE COUNCIL CHAMBER, IN THE CITY OF THE SARTAN ON CHELESTRA, Samah's pronouncement that the Patryns must be going to war brought expressions of grim consternation to the faces of the Council members.

"Isn't this what they intend?" Samah demanded, rounding on Alfred.

"I ... I suppose it might be," Alfred faltered, taken aback. "We never really discussed . . ." His voice peetered out.

Samah regarded him thoughtfully, intently. "A most fortunate circumstance, Brother, that you have arrived here accidentally, wakened us at this precise moment."

"I—I'm not certain what you mean, Councillor," answered Alfred hesitantly, not liking Samah's tone.

"Perhaps your arrival wasn't quite by accident?"

Alfred wondered suddenly if the Councillor could be referring to some higher power, if there could be One who would dare rely on such an unworthy, inept messenger as the bumbling Sartan.

"I—I suppose it might have been . . ."

"You suppose!" Samah leapt on the word. "You suppose this and you suppose that! What do you mean 'suppose'?"

Alfred didn't know what he meant. He hadn't known what he was saying, because he'd been trying to figure out what Samah was saying. Alfred could only stutter and stare and look as guilty as if he'd come with the intent of murdering them all.

"I think you are being too hard on our poor brother, Samah," Orla intervened. "We should be offering him our grateful thanks, instead of doubting him, accusing him of being in league with the enemy."

Alfred stared, aghast. So that's what the Councillor had meant! He thinks the Patrins sent me! . . . But why? Why me?

A shadow passed over Samah's handsome face, a cloud of anger covering the sun's politic light. It was gone almost immediately, except for a lingering darkness in the smooth voice.

"I accuse you of nothing, Brother. I merely asked a question. Yet, if my wife believes I have wronged you, I ask you to forgive me. I am weary, undoubtedly a reaction from the stress of awakening and the shock of the news you have brought us."

Alfred felt called upon to say something in response. "I do assure you, Councillor, members of the Council"—he glanced at them pathetically—"that if you knew me, you would have no difficulty in believing my story. I came here accidentally. My entire life, you see, has been a sort of accident."

The other Council members appeared faintly embarrassed; this was no way for a Sartan, for a demigod, to talk or act.

Samah watched Alfred from beneath narrowed eyelids, not seeing the man, but seeing the images formed by his words.

"If there are no objections," the Councillor said abruptly, "I propose that we adjourn the Council until tomorrow, by which time, hopefully, we will have ascertained the true state of affairs. I suggest that teams be sent to the surface to reconnoiter. Are there any objections?"

There were none.

"Choose among the young men and women. Tell them to be wary and search for any traces of the enemy. Remind them to be particularly careful to avoid the seawater."

Alfred could see images, too, and he saw, as the Council members rose to their feet in apparent outward harmony and agreement, walls of bricks and thorns separating some from another. And no wall was higher or thicker than that dividing husband from wife.

There had been cracks in that wall, when they'd first heard the startling news of their long slumbering, and came to understand that the world had fallen apart around them. But the cracks were rapidly being filled in, Alfred saw, the walls fortified. He felt vastly unhappy and uncomfortable.

"Orla," Samah added, half-turning on his way out the door. The head of the Council always walked in the lead. "Perhaps you will be good enough to see to the needs and wants of our brother . . . Alfred." The mensch name came with difficulty to Sartan lips.

"I would be honored," said Orla, bowing in polite response. Brick by brick, the wall was growing, expanding.

Alfred heard the woman sigh softly. Her gaze, which followed after her husband, was wistful and sad. She, too, saw the wall, knew it was there. Perhaps she wanted to tear it down, but had no idea how to begin. As for Samah, he seemed content to let it be.

The Councillor walked out of the room, the others followed, three walking with him, two—after a glance at Orla, who only shook her head—removing themselves shortly afterward. Alfred remained where he was, ill at ease, not knowing what to do.

Cold fingers closed over his wrist. The woman's touch startled him. He nearly leapt out of his shoes, his feet slid in opposite directions, stirred up a cloud of choking dust. Alfred tottered and blinked, sneezed, and

wished himself anywhere else, including the Labyrinth. Did she think he was in league with the enemy? He cringed and waited fearfully for her to speak.

"How nervous you are! Please, calm yourself." Orla regarded him thoughtfully. "I suppose, though, that this must have been as great a shock to you as to us. You must be hungry and thirsty. I know I am. Will you walk with me?"

There was nothing terrifying—even for Alfred—in being invited to dine. He was hungry. He'd had little time and less inclination for food on Abarrach. The thought of dining once more in peace and quiet, with his brothers and sisters, was blessed. For these were truly his people, truly like those he knew before he had himself taken his long sleep. Perhaps that's why Samah's doubts disturbed him so. Perhaps that's why his own doubts disturbed him.

"Yes, I'd like that. Thank you," Alfred said, glancing at Orla almost shyly.

She smiled at him. Her smile was tremulous, hesitant, as if not often used. But it was a beautiful smile, and brought light to her eyes. Alfred stared at her in dumb admiration.

His spirits rose, flying so high that the walls and all thought of walls fell far down below him, out of sight, out of mind. He walked beside her, leaving the dusty chamber. Neither spoke, but moved together companionably, emerging onto a scene of quiet, efficient bustle. Alfred was thinking, and not being very careful with his thoughts, apparently.

"I am flattered at your regard for me, Brother," Orla said to him softly, a faint blush on her cheek. "But it would be more proper for you to keep such thoughts private."

"I ... beg your pardon!" Alfred gasped, his face burning. "It's just . . . I'm not used to being around . . ."

He made a fluttering gesture with his hand, encompassing the Sartan, who were busily employed in restoring life to what had been dead for centuries. Alfred darted a swift and guilty glance around, fearing to see Samah glowering at him. But the Councillor was deeply engrossed in discussion with a younger man in perhaps his midtwenties, who, by his resemblance, must be the son Samah had mentioned.

"You fear he's jealous." Orla tried to laugh lightly, but her attempt failed, ended in a sigh. "Truly, Brother, you haven't been around many Sartan, if you are mindful of such a mensch weakness."

"I'm doing everything wrong." Alfred shook his head. "I'm a clumsy fool. And I can't blame it on living among mensch. It's just me."

"But matters would have been different had our people survived. You would not have been alone. And you have been very much alone, haven't you, Alfred?"

Her voice was tender, pitying, compassionate.

Alfred was very near to tears. He tried to respond cheerfully. "It hasn't been as bad as you suppose. I've had the mensch . . ."

Orla's look of pity increased.

Alfred, seeing it, protested. "No, it isn't the way you imagine. You underestimate the mensch. We all did, I believe.

"I remember what it was like before I slept. We hardly ever walked among the mensch, and when we did, it was only to come to them as parents, visiting the nursery. But I have lived long among them. I've shared their joys and sorrows, I've known their fears and ambitions. I've come to understand how helpless and

powerless they feel. And, though they've done much that was wrong, I can't help but admire them for what they have accomplished."

"And yet," said Orla, frowning, "the mensch have, as I see in your mind, fallen to warring among themselves, slaughtering each other, elf battling human, human fighting dwarf."

"And who was it," asked Alfred, "who inflicted the most terrifying catastrophe ever known upon them? Who was it who killed millions in the name of good, who sundered a universe, who brought the living to strange worlds, then left them to fend for themselves?"

Two bright red spots blazed in Orla's cheeks. The dark line deepened in her forehead.

"I'm sorry," Alfred hastened to apologize. "I have no right ... I wasn't there . . ."

"You weren't there, on that world that seems so near to me in my heart, and yet which my head tells me is long lost. You don't know our fear of the growing might of the Patrins. They meant to wipe us out completely, genocide. And then what would have been left for your mensch? A life of slavery beneath the iron-heeled boot of totalitarian rule. You don't know the agony the Council underwent, trying to determine how best to fight this dire threat. The sleepless nights, the days of bitter arguing. You don't know our own, our personal agony. Samah himself—" She broke off abruptly, biting her lip.

She was adept at concealing her thoughts, revealing only those she wanted. Alfred wondered what she would have said had she continued.

They had walked a long distance, far from the Hall of Sleep. Blue sigla ran along the bottom of the walls, guiding their way through a dusty corridor. Dark rooms branched off it, rooms that would soon become temporary Sartan living quarters. For now, however, the two stood alone in the rune-lit darkness.

"We should be turning back. I had not meant to come this far. We've passed the dining area." Orla started to retrace her steps.

"No, wait." Alfred put a hand on her arm, startled at his own temerity in detaining her. "We may never have another chance to talk alone like this. And ... I must understand! You didn't agree, did you? You and some of the other Council members."

"No. No, we didn't."

"What did you want to do?"

Orla drew a deep breath. She wasn't looking at him; she remained turned away. For a moment, Alfred thought she wasn't going to answer, and she apparently thought so, too, but then, with a shrug, she changed her mind.

"You will find out soon enough. The decision to make the Sundering was talked of, debated. It caused bitter disputes, split families." She sighed, shook her head. "What action did I counsel? None. I counseled that we do nothing, except take a defensive stand against the Patrins, should we be attacked. It was never certain they would, mind you. It was only what we feared . . ."

"And fear was victorious."

"No!" Orla snapped angrily. "Fear wasn't the reason we made the decision, at last. It was the longing to have the chance to create a perfect world. Four perfect worlds! Where all would live in peace and harmony. No more evil, no more war . . . That was Samah's dream. That was why I agreed to cast my vote with his over all other objections. That was why I didn't protest when Samah made the decision to send ..."

Again, she stopped herself.

"Send?" Alfred prompted.

Orla's expression grew chill. She changed the subject. "Samah's plan should have worked. Why didn't it? What caused it to fail?" She glared at him, almost accusingly.

Not me! was Alfred's immediate protest. It wasn't my fault.

But, then again, maybe it was, he reflected uncomfortably. Certainly I've done nothing to make things better.

Orla walked back down the corridor, her steps brisk. "We've been away too long. The others will be worried about us."

The runelight began to fade.

"He is lying."

"But, Father, that's not possible. He's a Sartan—"

"A weak-minded Sartan, who has been traveling in the company of a Patryn, Ramu. J-te's obviously been corrupted, his mind taken over. We cannot blame him. He has had no Councillor to turn to, no one to help him in his time of trial."

"Is he lying about everything?"

"No, I don't believe so," Samah said, after a moment's profound thought. "The images of our people lying dead in their sleeping chambers on Arianus, the images of the Sartan practicing the forbidden art of necromancy on Abarrach, were too real, far too real. But those images were brief, fleeting. I'm not certain I understand. We must question him further to learn exactly what has happened. Mostly, though, I must know more about this Patryn."

"I understand. And what is it you would have me do, Father?"

"Be friendly to this Alfred, Son. Encourage him to talk, draw him out, agree with all he says, sympathize. The man is lonely, starved for those of his own kind. He hides in a shell he has built for his own defense. We will crack it with kindness and, once we have opened it, then we can set about his reclamation.

"I have, in fact, already started." Samah glanced complacently down the darkened corridor.

"Indeed?" His son's gaze followed.

"Yes. I've turned the wretched man over to your mother. He will be more likely to share his true thoughts with her than with us."

"But will she share her knowledge?" Ramu wondered. "It seems to me she has taken a liking to the man."

"She always did befriend every stray who came begging at our door." Samah shrugged. "But there is nothing more to it than that. She will tell us. She is loyal to her people. Just prior to the Sundering, she sided with me, supported me, abandoned all her objections. And so the rest of the Council was forced to go along. Yes, she'll tell me what I need to know. Especially once she understands that our goal is to help the poor man."

Ramu bowed to his father's wisdom, started to leave.

"All the same, Ramu." Samah stopped his son. "Keep your eyes open. I do not trust this . . . Alfred."

CHAPTER \* 9

## ADRIFT, SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

SOMETHING EXCEEDINGLY STRANGE HAS OCCURRED AND I HAVE been (mercifully) so busy that I have had no time to write until now. But at last all is quiet, the excitement has subsided, and we are left only to wonder: What will happen to us now?

Where shall I start? Thinking back, I see it all began with Alake's magical attempt to summon the dolphins and speak to them. We wanted to find out, if possible, where we were headed and what we faced, even if our fate was a terrible one. It is the "not knowing" that is so difficult to bear.

I have said that we were adrift in the sea. That is not precisely accurate, as Devon pointed out to us during our midday meal. We are traveling in a specific direction, guided by the dragon-snakes. We have no control over the ship. We cannot even get near the steering.

A terrible feeling comes over us when we walk in that direction. It saps the strength from our legs, leaves them wobbly and unable to move. It fills the heart and mind with images of death and dying. The one time we tried, we turned and fled in a panic, to hide, cowering, in our rooms. I dream of it still.

It was after that incident, when we'd recovered, that Alake decided to try to contact the dolphins.

"We haven't seen one since we embarked," she stated. "And that's very strange. I want to know what's going on, where we are headed."

Now that I thought of it, it was strange that we hadn't seen any fish. Dolphins are quite fond of company and are great gossips. They will generally flock around a ship, begging for news and passing along their own to anyone fool enough to listen.

"How do we ... er ... summon them?" I asked.

Alake seemed astonished that I didn't know. I don't understand why. No dwarf in his right mind would ever voluntarily summon fish! It was all we could do to get rid of the pesky things.

"I'll use my magic, of course," she said. "And I want you and Devon to be there with me."

I had to admit I was excited. I had lived among humans and elves, but had never seen any human magic, and I was surprised when Alake invited us. She said our "energies" would help her. I think, personally, she was lonely and afraid, but I kept my mouth shut.

Perhaps I should explain (as best I can) the Phondran and Elmas concept of magic. And the Gargan point of view.

Dwarves, elves, and humans all believe in the One, a powerful force that places us in this world, watches over us while we are here, and receives us when we leave. Each race takes a somewhat differing view of the One, however.

The basic dwarven credo is that all dwarves are in the One and the One is in all dwarves. Thus harm that befalls one dwarf befalls all dwarves and befalls the One as well—this is why a dwarf will never intentionally kill, cheat, or deceive another dwarf. (Not counting barroom brawls, of course. A sock on the jaw, delivered in a regular knock-'em-down, turn-'em-over, is generally considered beneficial to the health.)

In the old days, we dwarves believed the One to be interested mainly in ourselves. As for elves and humans, if they had been created by the One at all (and some held that they sprang up from the darkness, rather like fungi), it must have been an accident or else they were designed by a force opposing the One.

Long times of coexistence taught us to accept each other, however. We know now that the One has in care all living beings (although some old grandfathers maintain that the One loves dwarves, merely tolerates humans and elves).

Humans believe that the One rules all, but that—like any Phondran chieftain—the One is open to suggestion. Thus the humans are constantly badgering the One with supplications and demands. Phondrans also believe that the One has underlings, who perform certain menial tasks beneath the One's dignity. (That concept is so human!) These underlings are subject to human manipulation through magic, and the Phondrans are never happier than when altering the growing seasons, summoning winds, conjuring rain, and starting fires.

The Elmas take a far more relaxed view of the One. In their perspective, the One started everything off with a bang and now sits back lazily to watch it all go forward—like the bright, glittering, spinning toys Sabia used to play with as a child. The Elmas view magic not as something reverent and spiritual, but as entertainment or a labor-saving device.

Though only sixteen (no more than a babe to us, but humans mature rapidly), Alake was deemed quite skilled in magic already and I knew her mother's fondest wish was to hand her daughter the leadership of the Coven.

Devon and I watched Alake take her place before her altar, which she had set up in the empty cargo hold on deck two. It was, I must admit, a pleasure to watch her.

Alake is tall and well-made. (I have never, by the way, envied humans their height. An old dwarven proverb says, "The longer the stick, the easier to break." But I did admire Alake's graceful movements, like a frond bending in the water.) Her skin is a dark ebony. Her black hair is braided in countless tiny braids that hang down her back, each braid ending in beads of blue and orange (her tribal colors) and brass. If she lets her braids hang loose, the beads clash musically together when she walks, sounding like hundreds of tiny bells.

She wore the accepted dress of Phondra, a single piece of blue and orange cloth wound around the body, held in place by the cunning of the folds (a knack known only to Phondrans). The free end of the cloth is draped over the right shoulder (to show she is unmarried—married women place the fold over the left shoulder).

Silver ceremonial bracelets adorned her arms, silver bells hung from her ears.

"I've never seen you wear those bracelets, Alake," I said, making conversation to break the silence that was so terribly silent. "Are they yours or your mother's? Were they a gift?"

To my surprise, Alake, who is usually fond of showing off any new jewelry, made no reply and averted her face.

I thought she hadn't heard me. "Alake, I asked if—"

Devon jabbed me in the ribs with his sharp elbow. "Shush! Say nothing about her jewelry!"

"Why not?" I whispered back irritably. To be honest, I was getting sick and tired of tiptoeing around, fearful of offending someone.

"She wears her burial adornments," Devon returned.

I was shocked. Of course, I'd heard of the custom. At birth, Phondran girl-children are presented with silver bracelets and ear-jangles which, it is hoped, they will wear at their wedding and pass along to their own daughters. But, if a girl dies untimely, before her marriage, her bracelets and other jewelry are placed on the body when it is sent out to join the One in the Good sea.

I felt miserable, tried to think of something to say to make everything all right, realized that nothing I said would help. So I sat, scuffing my heels against the floor and trying to take an interest in what Alake was doing.

Devon sat beside me. The furniture aboard the ship was built for dwarves. I felt sorry for the elf, who looked most uncomfortable, his long legs, encased in the silken folds of Sabia's skirt, spraddled out on either side of his short-legged stool.

Alake was taking an interminable length of time to set up the objects on the altar, stopping to pray over each one.

"If all humans pray like this over every little thing, my guess is that the One fell asleep long ago!" I spoke in what I thought was an undertone, but Alake must have heard me, because she looked shocked and frowned at me in reproof.

I decided I'd better change the subject and, glancing over at Devon wearing Sabia's clothes, I came up with something I'd long wondered.

"How did you manage to persuade Sabia to let you go in her place?" I asked the elf.

Of course, that was wrong, too. Devon, who had been keeping up a cheerful front, immediately grew sad, and turned his face away.

Alake darted over to me, pinched me, hard.

"Don't remind him of her!"

"Ouch! This does it!" I growled, losing patience. "I'm not to speak to Alake about her ear-jangles. I'm not to talk to Devon about Sabia, despite the fact that he's wearing her clothes and looks uncommonly silly in a dress. Well, in case you've both forgotten, it's my funeral, too, and Sabia was my friend. We've been trying to pretend we're on a holiday cruise. We're not. And it's not right to keep our words in our bellies, as we dwarves say. It poisons the food." I snorted. "No wonder we can't eat."

Alake stared at me in startled silence. Devon had the ghost of a smile on his pale face.

"You are right, Grundle," he admitted, casting his gaze down ruefully at the tight-bodiced, ribbon-bedecked, lace-covered, flower-ornamented gown. Elven males are nearly as slender as elven females, but they tend to be broader through the shoulders, and I noticed that here and there a seam had given way under the strain. "We should talk about Sabia. I've wanted to, but I was afraid of hurting you both by bringing up sad memories."

Impulsively, Alake knelt at Devon's side, took his hand in hers. "I honor you, my friend, for your courage and your sacrifice. I know of no man I hold in higher esteem."

Rare praise, from a human. Devon was pleased and touched. His cheeks flushed, he shook his head. "It was my own selfishness," he said softly. "How could I go on living, knowing she had died and . . . how she had died. My death will be so much easier, thinking of her safe and well."

I wondered grumpily how he thought she'd feel any better, knowing he was dead in her place. But then, that's a man: elf, human, dwarf—all the same.

"So how did you convince her to let you go?" I persisted. Knowing Sabia as I did, having seen her strong in her determination, I found it difficult to believe she had given in easily.

"I didn't," Devon said, the color in his cheeks deepening. "If you must know, this convinced her." He raised a clenched fist, showed bruised knuckles.

"You socked her!" I gasped.

"You hit her!" Alake echoed.

"I begged her to let me go in her place. She refused. There was no talking her around and I did the only thing I could do to prevent her from going. I knocked her out. What else could I do? I was desperate. Believe me, both of you, hurting Sabia was the hardest thing I ever had to do in my life!"

I could believe that. An Elmas will suffer pangs of guilt for days over accidentally stepping on a spider.

"As for my jewelry," Alake said, turning the silver bracelet on her arm with her hand, "these are mine, Grundle, given to me by my mother when I was born. I couldn't leave them any other message about where I was going or what I was doing. I tried, but it was too hard to put my feelings into words. When my mother finds that these are gone, she will know. She will understand."

Alake went back to her altar. Devon tugged at the tight sleeve of his gown, which must have been cutting off his circulation. I could have sat down and cried. The words had come out, but they were hard to hear and I didn't see how I had helped matters.

"So much for dwarven proverbs," I muttered into my side whiskers.

"I am ready to begin now," said Alake, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Alake forbade me to write down the details of the ceremony, but I couldn't have done so, in any case, since I hadn't a clue as to what was going on. All I know is that it involved salted cod (a dolphin's favorite treat, if they can get it) and flute music and Alake chanting a lot of strange words and making fishlike noises. (Humans can speak the dolphin language. Dwarves could, I suppose, but why would we want to? Dolphins speak dwarven quite well.)

I dozed off, at one point, during the flute music, and was startled out of my nap when Alake spoke in normal words and voice.

"It is done. The dolphins should come to us now."

They might, I thought, if we threw the salt cod into the sea-water. I couldn't see that it was doing much good where it was, lying in a silver dish on the altar. Perhaps she figured the stench would draw them.

As you may have guessed, I don't set much store by human or elf magic, and you can imagine my surprise when we all heard and felt a bump on the hull of the ship.

"They've come," said Alake complacently, and hastened off to the waterlock to greet them, her beads clashing, her bare feet (humans rarely wear shoes) padding swiftly over the deck.

I glanced at Devon, who shrugged and raised his eyebrows. He'd been planning to call them with a magical dolphin whistle, which made no noise at all that I could hear. Devon assured me, however, that dolphins could hear it quite clearly and considered the sound very pleasant.

We both hurried after Alake.

Our ship consists of four decks, numbered from the bottom to the top. Not a large craft, compared to the sun-chasers, but it was only used by the royal family on their occasional sinkings into the other realms.

Deck four is the topmost deck (if you don't count the outside). Here is the observation room and, beyond that, the pilot's house, which none of us had the courage to go near. A ladder extends down from the observation room, through a shaft that opens onto each other deck. At the aft end of the observation room, a

huge set of windows provides a view of land or water, depending on where you are at the time. The sun, shining through the water, fills this room with cheerful, blue-green light. Outside, you can see the open deck, surrounded by a railing. Only a human would be crazy enough to go out there when the ship is moving.

The cargo hold is located on deck three. Behind that is the common room, for eating, drinking, ax-throwing practice, or just visiting. This room has numerous small windows set in the sides. Behind the common room are the cabins for the royal family and the ship's crew, a tool room, then the impeller room, with its magical elven crystals that propel the ship.

Decks two and one were mostly more cargo space, plus the waterlock—an important feature. If you're not a dwarf, you're probably wondering what a waterlock is. As I've mentioned, no dwarf can (or wants to learn) to swim. A dwarf who falls into the sea would likely sink to the bottom of Chelestra unless he's caught and brought back to solid ground. Thus, all ships are built with a waterlock, which can be used to rescue any dwarf who happens to tumble into the sea.

We found Alake standing near the bottom of the waterlock, her face pressed against one of the portholes, staring out into the water. Hearing us approach, she turned. Her eyes were wide.

"It's not the dolphins. It's a human. At least, I think it's a human," she added dubiously.

"It is or it isn't," I said. "Can't you tell?"

"Look for yourself." Alake sounded shaken.

Devon and I crowded to the porthole, the elf being forced to nearly bend double to get down to my level.

Sure enough, the thing looked to be a human male. Or perhaps it would be better to say, he didn't look elven or dwarven. He was taller than a dwarf, his ears weren't pointed, and his eyes were round, not almond-shaped. But he was the wrong color for a human, his skin being a kind of bread-dough white. His lips were blue, his eyes circled with purple splotches, sunken in his head. He was half-naked, clad only in a pair of brown tight-fitting pants and the remnants of a white tattered shirt. He clung to a fragment of board and was, it seemed to me, about done for.

The bump we had heard was, presumably, this man running into the hull of the ship. He could see us through the porthole and made, as we watched, a feeble attempt to beat against the ship's side. He was weak, apparently, for his arm sank down as if he lacked energy to lift it. He slumped over the board, legs dangling limply beneath him in the water.

"Whatever he is, he's not going to be one for long," I said.

"Poor man," murmured Alake, her dark eyes soft with pity. "We must help him," she said briskly, and headed for the ladder that led to deck two. "We'll bring him on board. Warm him, give him food." She glanced back, saw neither of us moving. "Come on! He'll be heavy. I can't manage by myself."

Humans. Always racing to act, to do something. Never stopping to think. Fortunately, she had a dwarf along.

"Wait, Alake. Stop a moment. Consider where we're bound. Think what's going to happen to us."

Alake frowned at me, angered at having her way thwarted. "Well, what of it? The man is dying! We can't leave him."

"It might be the kindest thing we could do for him," Devon told her gently.

"If we rescue him now, we could be saving him only to doom him to a horrible fate later."

I was sorry to have to be so blunt, but sometimes it's the only way to get through to humans. Alake, realizing finally what we were saying, seemed to shrivel up. I'll swear she grew smaller as we watched. Her body sagged against the ladder.

Lowering her eyes, she ran her hand aimlessly up and down the smooth wooden rungs.

The ship was speeding on. Soon we'd leave the man far behind. He'd seen this, apparently, and was making a feeble attempt with the remainder of his flagging strength to paddle after us. The sight was heartrending. I turned away. But I might have known Alake couldn't stand it.

"The One sent him," she said, starting to climb the ladder. "The One sent him to us, in answer to my prayer. We have to save him!"

"You prayed for a dolphin," I pointed out irritably.

Alake said nothing, but gave me a reprimanding glance. "Don't be blasphemous, Grundle. Can you work this thing?"

"Yes, but I'll need Devon's help," I grumbled, following.

Actually, I could have done it by myself, being stronger than the elf prince, but I wanted to talk to Devon. I told Alake to keep an eye on the floating human, took Devon to deck two, the topmost part of the waterlock. I peered through a window into its sunlit interior, turned the crank on the hatch to make certain it was tightly closed and sealed. Devon started to assist me.

"What if the One didn't send this man?" I whispered urgently in the elf's ear. "What if he was sent by the dragon-snakes to spy on us?"

Devon looked considerably shocked. "Do you suppose that's a possibility?" he asked, doing his best to help and only getting in my way.

I shoved him to one side. "Don't you?"

"I guess. But why would they? They have us. We can't escape, even if we wanted to."

"Why are they doing any of this? All I know is that I wouldn't be too quick to trust this human, if that's what he is. And I think you better go back to being Sabia."

I turned to head down the ladder. Devon came after me, tripping over his skirts.

"Yes, perhaps you're right. But what about Alake? She'll have to go along with us. You have to tell her."

"Not me. She'll think I'm just making another excuse to get rid of him. You tell her. She'll listen to you. Go on. I'll manage this by myself."

We were on deck one again. Devon went over to Alake and I was able, finally, to get on with the work undisturbed. I couldn't hear any of their conversation, but I could tell that at first Alake didn't agree with us, because I saw her shake her head, causing her ear-jangles to ring wildly.

But Devon was patient with her, far more than I could have been, and gradually argued her around. I saw her glance at me, then out at the man, her face troubled and thoughtful. Finally, she nodded unhappily.

Standing in front of the lower window that looks into the waterlock, I took hold of the levers and yanked down on them, hard. A panel located in the hull yawned open. Seawater, foaming and gurgling, poured into the waterlock, carrying with it numerous indignant fish (no dolphins) and the human.

I waited for the water to reach the proper level and slammed the panel shut.

"I've got him!" I cried.

We raced back up to deck two, the top of the waterlock. I opened it, peered down. If he'd been a dwarf, he would have been lying on the bottom and we would have had to use the claws to drag him out. But, being human, he'd managed to swim to the top of the water and floated there, only about an arm's length away.

"Alake and I can handle him, Devon," I said to him softly. "You go and put your scarf back on."

Devon left us. Alake came to help me, and between us we managed to drag the human over to the side and hoist him out onto the deck. I shut and sealed the waterlock, opened the bottom panel, let the irate fish swim out, and started the pumps to work. Then I came back to look at our catch.

I must admit that I nearly revised my opinion when we got the man on board and had a close look at him. If the dragon-snakes were going to send a spy, it seemed to me they would have chosen something better than this.

He was truly a pitiable sight, lying on the deck, shivering from head to toe, coughing, convulsing, spitting up fluid, and gasping like a fish out of water. Alake'd obviously never seen anything like it. Fortunately, I had.

"What's wrong with him?" she asked anxiously.

"His body temperature's dropped too low and he's having trouble making the adjustment from breathing water back to breathing air."

"How can you tell? What do we do for him?" Alake asked.

"Dwarves fall in the water sometimes, so I know what I'd do if he were a dwarf. Warm him up, inside and out. Put lots of blankets on him and give him all the brandywine he can drink."

"Are you certain?" Alake looked dubious. "I mean about the brandy?"

Drunk as a dwarf, so the saying is among the Phondrans. But who do you suppose buys most of our brandywine?

"You've got to fuddle his brain. That's what's causing him to gasp like that. His brain is telling his body it's supposed to be breathing water. Give his brain something else to think about and his body will go back to breathing air—as it was meant to," I added sternly.

"I see. Grundle, fetch me a bottle of the brandywine and my herb pouches. And, if you run into Dev— Sabia, tell him, I mean her, to bring me all the blankets he— she can find."

Well, we were certainly off to a great start. Fortunately, the human was so busy trying to stay alive that he didn't appear to have noticed Alake's confusion. I headed to the storeroom for the wine, blundered into Dev-Sabia on the way back. He was wound up in his scarf and veil, with a shawl over his shoulders to hide the ripped seams. I gave him Alake's instructions. He returned to his berth for the blankets.

I continued on my way, thinking about what Alake had said. It was odd that this human seemed so unused to being in the water. The Phondrans spend as much time in the Goodsea as they do on land and consequently never suffer from this condition, which we dwarves know as "water-poisoning." The man was obviously not a Phondran. Then, who was he and where had he come from?

It was more than one dwarf could figure out.

Arriving in the storeroom, I snagged one of the brandywine bottles, uncorked it, and took a mouthful just to make certain it was good.

It was. I blinked my eyes.

I took another mouthful or two, then popped the cork back on, wiped off my side whiskers, and hurried back to our passenger. Alake and Devon had lifted him into the bosun's chair—a chair attached to a rope that can be lowered up and down the shaft, used to handle the injured or those whose bulk made climbing ladders difficult. We hauled the man up to the crew's quarters on deck two, and helped him to a small cabin.

Fortunately, he was able to walk, though his legs were as wobbly as a newborn kitten's. Alake spread out a pile of blankets. He sank onto them weakly and we covered him with more. He was still gasping and looked to be in a considerable amount of pain.

I offered the brandy bottle. He seemed to understand, for he motioned me near. I put it to his lips, he took a gulp. His gasping changed to coughing, and I was afraid for a moment our cure was going to be the end of him, but he hung on. He managed to get down several more mouthfuls before he sank back weakly on the blankets. Already, his breathing had eased. He looked from one to the other of us, his eyes taking everything in, giving nothing back.

Suddenly, he tossed aside the blankets. Alake made a clucking sound, like a mother hen whose chick has wandered out from under her feathers.

The human ignored her. He was staring at his arms. He stared at his arms for the longest time, rubbing the skin almost frantically. He gazed at the back of his hands. Closing his eyes in what was obviously bitter despair, he sank back down on the blankets.

"What's the matter?" Alake asked, speaking human, coming over to kneel beside him. "Are you injured? What can we do to help?"

She started to touch his arm, but he drew away from her and snarled, like a wounded animal.

Alake persisted. "I'm not going to harm you. I only want to help."

He kept staring at her, and I saw his brow furrow in anger and frustration.

"Alake," I said quietly. "He can't understand you. He doesn't know what you're saying."

"But I'm speaking the human language . . ."

"Dev-Sabia, you try," I said, stuttering as badly as Alake. "Maybe he isn't human, after all."

The elf pulled the scarf down from around his mouth. "Where do you come from? What is your name?" he asked, speaking the musical Elmas language slowly and distinctly.

The stranger, frowning, shifted his eyes to Devon. The look of frustration changed to fury. Propping himself up on one arm, he shouted at us. We couldn't understand him, either, but we didn't need a translator.

"Get out!" he was yelling as plain as anything. "Get out and leave me alone!"

He collapsed back on the blankets, groaning. His eyes closed, he'd broken out in a sweat. But his lips continued to move, forming the words he no longer had the strength to utter.

"Poor man," said Alake softly. "He's lost and sick and afraid."

"That may be," I said, having my own opinion on the subject, "but I think we better do what he wants."

"Will . . . will he be all right?" Alake couldn't take her eyes off him.

"He'll be fine," I assured her, trying to edge her out the door. "If we stay, we'll only upset him."

"Grundle's right," Devon added. "We should leave him alone to rest."

"I think I should stay with him," Alake said.

Devon and I exchanged alarmed glances. The stranger's savage yell and his dark expression had unnerved us both. As if we didn't have trouble enough, it looked to me like we now had an insane human on our hands.

"Shh," I said, "you'll wake him. Let's talk out in the corridor."

We herded the reluctant Alake out of the room.

"One of us should keep an eye on him," Devon whispered in my ear.

I nodded, taking his meaning. One of us shouldn't be Alake.

"I'll bring my blanket out here . . ." She was already making plans to spend the night near him.

"No, no, you go to bed. I'll sit up with him. I'm experienced in this sickness." I cut off her protest. "He'll likely sleep for hours now, anyway. You should be well-rested and ready to tend him in the morning, when he wakes up."

She brightened at the prospect, but she still wavered, her gaze going to the door I had shut behind me. "I don't know ..."

"I'll call you if there's any change," I promised. "You don't want him to see you in the morning all red-eyed and sleepy, do you?"

That clinched it. Alake bid us good-night, took one last peep at her patient, smiled softly to herself, and went off down the corridor.

"What do we do now?" Devon demanded, when she was gone.

"How should I know?" I snapped irritably.

"Well, you're a girl. You know about these things."

"What things?" I asked, though I knew well enough what he was talking about.

"It's obvious. She's attracted to him."

"Pooh! I remember when she rescued a wounded wolf cub once. She took it home and treated it the same way."

"That's no wolf cub," said Devon gravely. "He's young and strong and handsome and well-built, even for a human. It was all Alake and I could do to drag him down the corridor."

Which brought up another problem. If this man went berserk and decided to tear the ship apart, we three would be hard-pressed to stop him. But what about the dragon-snakes? It was obvious they were still in control; the ship continued to rush through the water. Did they know this stranger was aboard? Did they care?

I took a swig of the brandywine. "Go to bed," I told Devon crossly. "We're not going to figure anything out tonight. Maybe something'll happen by morning."

Something did.

I went back into the room with the man and settled myself in a dark corner near the door. If the human woke, I figured I could be up and out of there before he knew what was happening.

His sleep was restless, disturbed. He thrashed about on the blankets, muttering in his own language, whose words all seemed to me to be dark and sharp-edged and filled with hatred and anger. Sometimes he'd cry out, and once he gave a fearful scream and sat bolt upright, staring straight at me. I was on my feet and nearly out the door before I realized he wasn't seeing me at all.

He lay back down. I returned to my seat. He clutched at the blankets, kept saying one word over and over. It sounded like "dog." And sometimes he would groan and shake his head and cry, "Lord!"

Finally, from sheer exhaustion, I think, he fell into a heavy slumber.

I suppose I can admit that I'd been keeping the fire of courage burning in my heart by dousing it liberally with brandywine. I was no longer feeling afraid of him. (I wasn't feeling much of anything, to be honest.) Watching the man fall into this deep sleep, I decided to see what I could learn about him. Maybe go through his pockets, if he had any.

After some little trouble, I got to my feet. (The ship seemed to be rolling more than I recalled.) I made my way over to him and crouched down. What I saw sobered me faster than my mother's blackroot powder.

I don't remember what came after, except that I found myself running down the corridor, screaming like a banshee.

Alake, clutching her sleeping gown around her, stood in her doorway, staring at me in panic. Devon shot out of his room like it was on fire. He was forced to sleep in his dress. Poor fellow. Sabia's dress was all the clothes he'd thought to bring along.

"We heard you yell! What is it?" They both clutched at me. "What's the matter?"

"The strange human!" I was gulping for breath. "He's . . . turned blue!"

Alake gasped, "He's dying!" and raced back down the corridor, toward his room.

We ran after her, Devon remembering just in time to grab his veil and wind it around his head.

I suppose my shrieks must have wakened the man. (Devon told me later that he thought all the dragon-snakes in Chelestra were after me.) The human was sitting up in his bed, staring at his hands and arms, turning them over and over, as if he couldn't believe the limbs were his.

I don't blame him. If such a thing had happened to me, I would have stared, too. How can I describe it? I know you won't believe me. But I swear before the One that the man's arms and backs of his hands, his bare chest, and neck, were covered with blue picture-writing.

We had all run into the cabin before we realized the man was fully conscious. He raised his head, looked directly at us. We shrank back. Even Alake was somewhat daunted. The stranger's face was stern, grim.

But, as though he sensed our fear, he made some attempt to smile at us reassuringly.

His was a face, I remember thinking, that wasn't used to smiling.

"Don't be frightened. My name's Haplo," he said to Alake. "What do they call you?"

We couldn't answer. The man had spoken Phondran.

Perfect, fluent Phondran.

And next he ...

But that will have to wait. Alake's calling me. Dinnertime.

I'm actually feeling hungry.

CHAPTER » 10

SURUNAN CHELESTRA

THE SARTAN, LED BY THE CAPABLE SAMAH, RETURNED TO LIFE WITH an energy that astounded and overwhelmed Alfred. The people went forth from the crypts out into a realm they had built for themselves long ago. Sartan magic soon brought life to their surroundings, which were so beautiful that Alfred often looked upon the landscape through a sheen of joyful tears.

Surunan. The word itself was derived from the root rune meaning center—the heart, the center of their civilization. At least that's what they'd intended it to be. Unfortunately, the heart had ceased beating.

But now it was alive once more.

Alfred walked its streets and marveled at its beauty. The buildings were made of rose and pearl marble, which had been brought with them from the old world. Shaped by magic, their tall spires soared into an emerald and turquoise sky. Boulevards and avenues and magnificent gardens, which had been sleeping as soundly as their makers, sprang into magical life and all led to the heart of Surunan—the Council Chamber.

Alfred had forgotten the pleasures of being with his own kind, of being able to share himself with others. He had hidden himself for so long, kept his true nature concealed, that it was a relief not to have to worry about revealing his own magical power. And yet even in this new and wonderful world, among his own people, he could not feel quite comfortable, or quite at ease.

There were two cities—an inner, central city, and an outer city that was much larger, if not as fine. The two were separated by high walls. Alfred, exploring the outer city, saw immediately that this was where mensch had once lived. But what had happened to them when the Sartan slept? The answer, from what he saw, might be a grim one. There was evidence, though the Sartan were doing their best to swiftly remove it, that devastating battles had been fought in this part of the city. Buildings had toppled, walls caved in, windows shattered. Signs, written in human, elven, dwarven, had been torn down, lay broken in the streets.

Alfred stared around sadly. Had the mensch done this to themselves? It seemed likely, from what he knew of their warlike natures. But why hadn't the Sartan stopped it? Then he remembered the images of horrible creatures he'd seen in Samah's thoughts. Who were they? Another question. Too many questions. Why had these Sartan gone back into hibernation? Why had they abandoned all responsibility to this world and to the others they had created?

He stood in the terraced garden of Samah's house one evening, thinking that there must be some terrible flaw within himself that kept bringing up such thoughts, some flaw that prevented him from being happy. He had, at last, everything he'd ever dreamed of possessing. He had found his people and they were all he'd hoped: strong, resolute, powerful. They were prepared to set right everything that had gone wrong. The crushing burdens that had been piled on top of him had been lifted. He had others to help him carry the load.

"What is wrong with me?" he asked himself sadly.

"I heard once," came a voice in answer, "of a human who had been locked up in a prison cell for years and years. When at last they opened the cell doors and offered the man his freedom, he refused to go out. He was frightened by freedom, by light and fresh air. He wanted to stay in his dark cell, because he knew it. He was safe there, and secure."

Alfred turned to see Orla. She was smiling at him; her words and tone were pleasant. But Alfred saw that she was truly concerned about his confused and unsettled state.

He blushed, sighed, and lowered his eyes.

"You have not left your cell, Alfred." Orla came to stand beside him, placed her hand on his arm. "You persist in wearing mensch clothes." This subject called to mind, perhaps, by the fact that Alfred was gazing intently at the shoes that housed his overlarge feet. "You will not tell us your Sartan name. You will not open your heart to us."

"And have you opened your hearts to me?" Alfred asked quietly, looking up at her. "What terrible tragedy occurred here? What happened to the mensch that used to live here? Everywhere I look, I see images of destruction, blood on the stones. Yet no one speaks of it. No one refers to it."

Orla paled, her lips tightened.

"I'm sorry." Alfred sighed. "It's none of my business. You have all been wonderful to me. So patient and kind. The fault is mine. I'm working to overcome it. But, as you said, I've been shut in the darkness so long. The light . . . hurts my eyes. I don't suppose you can understand."

"Tell me about it, Brother," Orla said gently. "Help me understand."

Again she was avoiding the subject, turning the conversation away from her and her people, sending it straight back to him. Why the reluctance to talk about it? Except that every time he mentioned it, he sensed fear, shame.

Our plea for help . . . Samah had said.

Why? Unless this was a battle the Sartan had been losing. And how was that possible? The only enemy capable of fighting them on their level was locked away in the Labyrinth.

Alfred was, without realizing what he was doing, pulling the leaves off of a flowering vinil. One by one, he tore them loose, stared at them, not seeing them, then dropped them to the ground.

Orla's hand closed over his. "The plant cries out in pain."

"I'm sorry!" Alfred dropped the flower, looked in horror at the ravages he'd committed. "I ... wasn't thinking. . . ."

"But your pain is the greater," Orla continued. "Please, share it with me."

Her gentle smile warmed him like spiced wine. Alfred, intoxicated, forgot his doubts and questions. He found himself pouring out thoughts and feelings he'd kept locked up so long, he wasn't fully aware of them himself.

"When I awoke, and discovered that the others were dead, I refused to admit the truth to myself. I refused to admit I was alone. I don't know how long I lived in the mausoleum on Arianus . . . months, maybe years. I lived in the past, remembering what life had been like when I was among my brethren. And soon, the past became more real to me than the present.

"Every night, I would go to sleep and tell myself that when I woke the next morning, I would find them all awake, too. I wouldn't be alone anymore. That morning, of course, never came."

"Now it has!" said Orla, closing her hand over his once again.

He looked at her, saw her eyes glimmer with tears, and came very near weeping himself. Clearing his throat, he swallowed hard.

"If so, the morning has been long in coming," he said huskily. "And the night that preceded it was very dark. I shouldn't be troubling you—"

"No, I'm sorry," she said hurriedly. "I shouldn't have interrupted you. Please, go on."

She continued to hold his hand. Her touch was warm, firm, comforting. Unconsciously, he moved nearer to her.

"One day, I found myself standing in front of the crypts of my friends. My own was empty and I remember thinking, 'I have only to climb back in, shut my eyes, and this pain will end,' Yes, suicide," Alfred said calmly, seeing Orla stare at him in horror and shock. "I had come to a turning point, as the mensch say. I finally admitted to myself that I was alone in the world. I could either go forth and be part of life, or abandon it. My struggle was bitter. In the end, I left behind all I had known and loved and went out into the world.

"The experience was dreadful, terrifying. More than once, I thought of running back, hiding myself forever in the tombs. I lived in constant fear that the mensch would discover my true powers and try to use me. Where before I had lived in the past and found comfort in my memories, I saw now that those memories were a danger. I had to put all thoughts of my former life out of my head, or be constantly tempted to use it, to draw on it. I had to adapt to the mensch way of life. I had to become one of them."

Alfred ceased talking, stared out into the night sky that was deep blue, streaked by lighter blue clouds.

"You cannot believe the loneliness," he said at last, so softly that Orla was forced to move closer to him to hear. "The mensch are so very, very lonely. The only means they have of communicating are physical. They must rely on words or a look or a gesture to describe what they feel, and their languages are so limited. Most of the time, they are unable to express what they truly mean, and so they live their lives and die without ever knowing the truth, about themselves or others."

"A terrible tragedy," murmured Orla.

"So I thought, at first," Alfred answered. "But then I came to realize that many of the virtues which the mensch possess have grown out of this inability to see into each other's souls, the way we Sartan do. They have words in their languages like faith, trust, honor. One human says to another, 'I have faith in you. I trust you.' He doesn't know what's in his friend's heart. He can't see inside. But he has faith in him."

"And they have other words we Sartan do not," said Orla, more sternly. She let go his hand, drew away from him. "Words such as deceit, lie, betray, treachery."

"Yes," Alfred agreed meekly. "But, I found that it all balanced itself out, somehow."

He heard a whine, felt a cold nose press itself against his leg. Reaching down his hand, Alfred absently fondled the dog's soft ears, patted it on the head to keep it quiet.

"I'm afraid you're right. I don't understand," said Orla. "What do you mean by balance?"

Alfred seemed to have a menschlike difficulty putting his thoughts into words. "It's just ... I'd see one mensch betray another and I'd be shocked and sickened. But, almost immediately after that, I'd come across an act of true selfless love, of faith, sacrifice. And I'd feel humbled and ashamed of myself for judging them.

"Orla." He turned to face her. The dog pressed closer and he scratched the animal behind its ear. "What gives us the right to judge them? What gives us the right to say that our way of life is the right way of life and that theirs is wrong? What gives us the right to impose our will on them?"

"The very fact that the mensch do have such words as murder and betrayal!" she replied. "We must, by guiding them with a firm hand, train them out of these debilitating weaknesses, lead them to rely solely on their strengths."

"But might we not," Alfred argued, "inadvertently train them out of everything—strengths and weaknesses both? It seems to me that the world we wanted to create for the mensch was a world where the mensch were totally subservient to our will. I'm sure I'm wrong," he continued humbly, "but I don't understand the difference between that and what the Patryns intended."

"Of course there's a difference!" Orla flared. "How can you even think of comparing the two?"

"I'm sorry," said Alfred in remorse. "I've offended you. And after all your kindness to me. Don't pay any attention to me. I— What's the matter?"

Orla was staring, not him, but at his feet. "Whose dog is that?"

"Dog?" Alfred glanced down.

The dog looked up, and wagged its plummy tail.

Alfred staggered back against the rock wall.

"Blessed Sartan!" he gasped. "Where did you come from?"

The dog, pleased that it now had everyone's attention, pricked its ears, cocked its head expectantly, and barked once.

Alfred went deathly pale. "Haplo!" he cried. "Where are you?" He searched around wildly.

At the sound of the name, the dog began to whine eagerly, barked again loudly.

But no one answered.

The dog's ears drooped. The tail ceased to wave back and forth. The animal sank to the ground, put its nose between its paws, sighed, and looked up at Alfred dejectedly.

Alfred, recovering his composure, stared at the animal.

"Haplo's not here, is he?"

The dog reacted to the name again, lifted its head, gazed about wistfully.

"Dear, dear," Alfred murmured.

"Haplo!" Orla spoke the name with reluctance, it might have been coated with poison. "Haplo! That is a Patryn word."

"What? Oh, yes, I believe it is," Alfred said, preoccupied.

"Means 'single.' The dog doesn't have a name. Haplo never gave it one. An interesting point, don't you think?" He knelt down beside the animal, stroked its head with a gentle, trembling hand. "But why are you

here?" he asked. "Not sick, are we? No. I didn't think so. Not sick. Perhaps Haplo sent you to spy on me? That's it, isn't it?"

The dog gave Alfred a reproachful glance. I expected better from you than this, it seemed to say.

"The animal belongs to the Patryn," Orla said.

Alfred looked up at her, hesitated. "You might say that. And then again . . ."

"It could be spying on us for him, right now."

"It could be," Alfred conceded the point. "But I don't think so. Not that we haven't used the animal for such purposes before—"

"We!" Orla drew back, away from him.

"I ... That is ... Haplo told it ... In Abarrach . . . The prince and Baltazar, a necromancer. I didn't really want to spy on them but I didn't have much choice ..."

Alfred saw he wasn't helping matters. He began again. "Haplo and I were lost in Abarrach—"

"Please!" Orla interrupted faintly. "Please quit saying that name. I—" She covered her eyes. "I see horrible things! Hideous monsters! Brutal death . . ."

"You see the Labyrinth. You see where you . . . where the Patrins have been imprisoned all these centuries."

"Where we imprisoned them, you were about to say. But, it's so real in your mind. As if you've been there . . ."

"I have been there, Orla."

To his vast astonishment, she turned pale, stared at him in fright.

Alfred was quick to reassure her. "I didn't actually mean I'd been there—"

"Of course," she said faintly. "It . . . it's impossible. Don't say such things, then, if you don't mean them."

"I'm sorry. I hadn't intended to upset you." Although Alfred was completely at a loss to know why she was upset. And frightened. Why frightened? More questions.

"I think perhaps you had better explain yourself," she said.

"Yes, I'll try. I was in the Labyrinth, but it was in Haplo's body. I traded minds with him, one might say. It was when we were going through Death's Gate."

"And did he trade places with you?"

"I think so. He never said anything, you see, but, then, he wouldn't. It was even difficult for him to call me by name. He used to call me Sartan. Just like that. With a sneer. I can't blame him. He has little cause to love us . . ."

Orla was frowning. "You fell into a Patryn's consciousness. I don't believe anything like that has ever happened to a Sartan."

"Probably not," Alfred agreed sadly. "I seem to be always falling into something—"

"You must tell Samah."

Alfred flushed, lowered his eyes. "I'd really rather not . . ." He began petting the dog.

"But this could be extremely important! Don't you see? You've been inside one. You can tell us how they think and why they react as they do. You can give us insight that may yet help us defeat them."

"The war is over," he reminded her, gently.

"But another one may come!" she said, fist clenching, driving into her palm.

"That's what Samah believes. Is that your belief, as well?"

"Samah and I have had our differences," Orla said briskly. "All know it. We have never hidden it. But he is wise, Alfred. I respect him. He is head of the Council. And he wants what we all want. To live in peace."

"Is that what he wants, do you think?"

"Well, of course!" Orla snapped. "What did you suppose?"

"I don't know. I wasn't certain."

Alfred recalled the expression on Samah's face when he said, It seems we have, after all, awakened at a propitious time, Brethren. Once again, our ancient enemy plans to go to war. His mind conjured up the image. Orla shared it with him. Her face softened.

"Talk to Samah. Be honest with him. And"—she sighed—"he will be honest with you. He will answer your questions. He will tell you what happened to us in Chelestra. And why we, as you think, abandoned our responsibilities."

Alfred's face burned. "I didn't mean—"

"No. In a way, you are right. But you should know the truth before you judge us. Just as we should know the truth before we judge you."

Alfred didn't know what to say. He could come up with no more arguments.

"And now," said Orla, folding her hands together in front of her, "what about the dog?"

"What about the dog?" Alfred looked uneasy.

"If this dog belongs to the Patryn, why is it here? Why has it come to you?"

"I'm not sure," Alfred began hesitantly, "but I think it's lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes. I think the dog has lost Haplo. The animal wants me to help it find its master."

"But that's nonsense! You're talking like a child's storybook. This creature may be intelligent enough for its kind, but it is still nothing more than a dumb animal—"

"Oh, no. This is a very extraordinary dog," Alfred said solemnly. "And if it is here in Chelestra, you may be certain that Haplo is here . . . somewhere."

The dog, assuming that with all this talk they must be making progress, lifted its head and wagged its tail.

Orla frowned. "You believe the Patryn is here, on Chelestra?"

"It certainly makes sense. This is the fourth world, the last world he was to visit before—" He stopped.

"—before the Patryns launch their attack."

Alfred nodded silently.

"I can understand why this knowledge that our enemy may be in this world disturbs you. Yet you seem more sad than upset." Orla stared down at the animal in perplexity. "Why are you so worried over a lost dog?"

"Because," Alfred replied gravely, "if the dog has lost Haplo, then I fear Haplo may have lost himself."

CHAPTER » 11

ADRIFT SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

LAY ON HIS PALLET ON BOARD THE STRANGE VESSEL, DOING nothing but resting and staring at his arms and his hands. The sigla were as yet only faintly visible—a blue as pale and weak as the eyes of that fool Sartan, Alfred. But the runes were there! They'd come back! And with them, his magic. Haplo closed his eyes, breathed deeply, a sigh of relief.

He recalled those terrible moments when he'd regained consciousness on board this ship, discovered himself surrounded by mensch, and known himself to be helpless, defenseless. He couldn't even understand what they were saying!

It hadn't mattered that they were females, barely old enough to be out of the nursery. It hadn't mattered that they had been gentle and kind, that they had regarded him with awe, sympathy, pity. What mattered was that they had been in control of the situation. Haplo, weak from exhaustion, hunger, bereft of his magic, had been at their mercy. For a moment, he had bitterly regretted seeking their help. Better he should have perished.

But, now, the magic was returning. His power was coming back. Like the sigla, the magic was weak still. He couldn't do much beyond the most rudimentary rune structures; he'd regressed back to his childhood magical abilities. He could understand languages, speak them. He could probably provide himself with food, if necessary. He could heal any minor hurts. And that was about it.

Thinking what he lacked, Haplo was suddenly angry, frustrated. He forced himself to calm down. To give way to his anger was to lose control again.

"Patience," he said to himself, lying back on his bed. "You learned it the hard way in the Labyrinth. Be calm and be patient."

He didn't appear to be in any danger. Though just exactly what the situation was wasn't clear. He'd tried to talk to the three mensch girls, but they'd been so astounded at his sudden use of their language—and the startling appearance of the runes on his skin—that they'd fled before he could question them further.

Haplo had waited, tensely, for some older mensch to enter and demand to know what was going on. But no one came. Lying still, straining to listen, Haplo heard nothing except the creaking of the ship's timbers. He would have almost supposed, if it hadn't seemed too improbable, that he and these girls were the only ones on board.

"I was too hard on them," Haplo counseled himself. "I'll have to take it easy, be careful not to startle them again. They could be of use to me." He looked around in satisfaction. "It seems likely that I've got myself another ship."

He was feeling stronger every moment, and had just about decided he would risk leaving his cabin to go in search of someone, when he heard a soft tapping on his door. Quickly, Haplo lay back down, pulled the blanket up around him, and pretended to be asleep.

The tapping repeated. He heard voices—three voices—debating what to do. The door creaked. It was being opened slowly. He could imagine eyes peering in at him.

"Go on, Alake!" That was the dwarf, her voice low and gruff.

"But he's asleep! I'm afraid I'll wake him."

"Just set the food down and go." An elf maid. Her voice was light and high-pitched, but Haplo caught himself thinking there was something not quite right about it.

Haplo heard the sound of bare feet padding into his room. He deemed it time to wake up now, slowly, careful not to frighten anyone. He drew a deep breath, stirred, and groaned. The footsteps came to an abrupt halt. He heard the girl suck in her breath.

Opening his eyes, Haplo looked up at her and smiled.

"Hullo," he said in her language. "Alake, isn't it?"

The girl was human and one of the most attractive human females Haplo'd ever seen. She'll be a beauty, he thought, when she grows up. Her skin was soft, velvet black; her hair was so black as to be almost blue and shone as brightly as a raven's wing. Her eyes were large and melting brown. Despite a very understandable amount of alarm, she remained where she was, didn't run away.

"That smells good," he continued, reaching out his hands for the food. "I don't know how long I drifted in the sea, without anything to eat. Days maybe. Alake, that's your name. Right?" he repeated.

The girl placed the dish in his hands. Her eyes were lowered. "Yes," she said shyly. "My name is Alake. How did you know?"

"A lovely name," he said. "Almost as lovely as the woman it graces."

He was rewarded with a smile and a flutter of long lashes. Haplo began to eat, some sort of stew and a loaf of slightly stale bread.

"Don't leave," he mumbled, his mouth full. He hadn't realized just how hungry he was. "Come in. Let's talk."

"We're afraid we're disturbing your rest," began Alake, glancing at her two companions, who had remained standing by the door.

Haplo shook his head, gestured with a hunk of bread. Alake sat down nearest him, but not close enough to be considered immodest. The elf maid crept inside the door and found a seat in a chair in the shadows. She moved awkwardly, lacking the grace Haplo normally associated with elves. But perhaps that was because she was wearing a dress that appeared to be too small for her. A shawl covered her arms. A long silken veil was wrapped around her head and face, leaving nothing showing except her almond-shaped eyes.

The dwarf stumped in on short, thick legs, squatted down comfortably on the floor, folded her arms across her chest, and regarded Haplo with deep suspicion.

"Where do you come from?" she demanded, speaking dwarven.

"Grundle!" Alake reprimanded. "Let him eat his dinner."

The dwarf ignored her. "Where do you come from? Who sent you? Was it the dragon-snakes?"

Haplo took his time answering. He cleaned his bowl out with the bread, asked for something to drink. The dwarf wordlessly passed over a bottle of some strong-smelling liquor.

"Would you rather have water?" Alake inquired anxiously.

Haplo thought privately that he'd had water enough to last him a lifetime, but he didn't want to lose his faculties in the bottom of a brandy bottle, and so he nodded.

"Grundle—" Alake began.

"I'll go," murmured the elf maid, and left the small room.

"My name is Haplo," he began.

"You told us that last night," Grundle stated.

"Don't interrupt!" Alake said, flashing her friend an angry glance.

Grundle muttered something and leaned back against the wall, her small feet propped out in front of her.

"The ship in which I sailed broke apart. I managed to escape, and drifted about in the water until you found me and were kind enough to take me on board." Haplo smiled again at Alake, who lowered her eyes and toyed with the brass beads in her hair. "As for where I'm from, you've probably never heard of the name, but it's a world much like your own."

That was a safe enough answer. He might have known it wouldn't satisfy the dwarf.

"A seamoons like ours?"

"Something similar."

"How do you know what our seamoons is like?"

"All know that the . . . um . . . seamoons of Chelestra are the same," Haplo answered.

Grundle jabbed a finger at him. "Why do you draw pictures on your skin?"

"Why do dwarves wear beards?" Haplo countered.

"That's enough, Grundle!" Alake snapped. "What he says makes perfect sense."

"Oh, he can talk well enough," the dwarf returned. "Not that he said much of anything, if you'll notice. But I'd like to hear what he's got to say about the dragon-snakes."

The elf maid had returned with the water. Handing the pitcher to Alake, the elf said, in a low voice, "Grundle is right. We need to know about the dragon-snakes."

Alake gave Haplo an apologetic glance. "Sabia and Grundle fear that you have been sent by the dragon-snakes to spy on us. I have no idea why, since we are their captives and we go to meet our doom willingly—"

"Wait! Slow down." Haplo raised a hand to halt the flood. He eyed the young women. "I'm not sure I understand what you're saying. But, before you explain, let me tell you that the person who sent me is my liege lord. He is a man, not a dragon. And from what I've seen of dragons in my world, I wouldn't do a damn thing for one except kill it."

Haplo spoke quietly, his tone and manner convincing. And, in this, he spoke the truth. Dragons in the Labyrinth are highly intelligent, fearsome beings. He'd seen other dragons during his travels. Some were evil, others purportedly good, but he'd found nothing in any of the creatures he trusted.

"Now," continued Haplo, seeing the dwarf opening her mouth, "suppose you tell me what you three are doing on board this ship all alone."

"Who says we're alone?" Grundle struck in, but her protest was faint and halfhearted.

It wasn't so much that the three girls believed him, Haplo realized, but that they wanted to believe him. After Haplo'd heard their story, he understood why.

He listened with outward composure to Alake tell their tale. Inwardly, he was fuming. If he had believed in a Higher Power controlling his destiny, which he most assuredly did not, despite Alfred's tricks to convince him otherwise, then he would have thought the Higher Power was laughing heartily. Weakened in his own magic, weaker than he'd ever been in his life, Haplo'd managed to get himself rescued by three sacrificial lambs trotting meekly to their deaths! "You can't be serious!"

"We are," said Alake. "It is for the sake of our people." "You chose to do this? You haven't tried to escape? To get away?"

"No, and we won't, either," said Grundle resolutely. "This was our decision. Our parents didn't even know we were leaving. They would have tried to stop us."

"And they would have been right!" Haplo glared at the three. Trotting along to their deaths . . . and taking him with them!

Alake's voice sank to a whisper. "You think we're fools, don't you?"

"Yes," Haplo answered bluntly. "These dragon-snakes, from what you've told me, have tortured and murdered people. And you think they're going to keep their word, accept three sacrifices, then meekly slither away?"

Grundle cleared her throat loudly, drummed her heels on the deck. "Then why make the bargain at all? What do the dragon-snakes get out of it? Why not just murder us and be done with it?"

"What do the dragon-snakes get out of it? I'll tell you what they get. Fear. Anguish. Chaos. In my land, we have creatures that live off fear, thrive off it. Think about it. These dragon-snakes, if they're as powerful as you say, could have come in the night and attacked your seamoons. But, no. What do they do? They come by day. They wreak havoc on small numbers of your people. They give messages, demand sacrifices. And look at the results!

"Your people are far more terrified now than they would have been if they'd had to beat off a sudden attack. And the three of you running off like this has only made things worse for your people, not better."

Alake wilted beneath Haplo's glowering gaze. Even the stubborn Grundle appeared to lose her defiant attitude, and began to tug uneasily at her side whiskers. Only Sabia, the elf maid, remained cool and calm. She sat on her stool, straight-backed, upright, looking distant and aloof, as if she alone were content with her decision. Nothing he said had made a difference to her.

Odd. But then the elf maid was odd. Haplo couldn't figure out why. There was something about her . . .

Her.

Haplo noticed, suddenly, the way Sabia was sitting. When she'd first sat down, she kept her knees close together, ankles demurely crossed beneath the long skirt. But during Alake's long retelling of their woeful tale, the elf maid had relaxed, forgotten herself. Now she was sitting spraddle-legged on the short stool, her knees akimbo, her hands resting on her knees, her feet tucked behind.

If I'm right, Haplo thought, this is certain to clinch it. They'll have no choice but to go along with me.

"What do you think's happening right now in your family?" Haplo demanded of Alake. "Instead of preparing for war, as he should be doing, your father is now afraid to do anything! He doesn't dare attack the dragon-snakes while they have you captive. He's gnawed by remorse, grows weaker with despair every day."

Alake was weeping silently. Sabia reached out, took hold of her hand. Haplo rose to his feet, began to pace the small cabin.

"And you." He rounded on the dwarf. "Your people? What are they doing? Arming themselves, or mourning the loss of their princess? All of them, waiting. Waiting in hope and in dread. And the longer they wait, the larger their fear grows."

"They'll fight!" Grundle insisted, but her voice cjuivered.

Haplo ignored her, continued to pace, ten steps each direction, every turn bringing him nearer Sabia, who was busy trying to comfort Alake.

Grundle sprang up suddenly from her stool, stood facing Haplo defiantly, small hands on her hips.

"We knew that our sacrifice might be for nothing. But it seemed to us that if there was the tiniest chance that the dragon-snakes would keep their part of the bargain, then it was worth it to save our people. And I still say so. What about you Alake? Sabia?"

Alake's brown eyes shimmered with tears, but she managed to nod emphatically.

"I agree," said Sabia, her voice muffled by the scarf. "We must go through with it. For the sake of our people."

"The dragon-snakes keep their part of the bargain, eh?" Haplo eyed them in grim amusement. "And how about you? What about you keeping your part of the bargain? If these beasts are, by some remote chance, fair and honorable, how do you think they'll react when they find out they've been cheated?"

Reaching out his hand, Haplo caught hold of Sabia's veil and yanked it off.

Sabia snatched furilely at the scarf. When that failed, she averted her face, lowered her head. "Really, sir, what are you doing?" Too late, she brought her knees together, crossed her ankles.

"Three royal daughters." Haplo raised an eyebrow. "What were you planning to tell the dragon-snakes? That elf maids all look like they've got an apple stuck in their throats? That all elf maids have strong jawlines and well-developed, muscular shoulders? That this is why their chests are flat? Not to mention other accoutrements not generally found on maidens." Haplo shifted his gaze meaningfully to the elf's groin.

Sabia blushed as deeply as if he had been a she. He stole a glance at Alake, who was staring at him, stricken, then at Grundle, who sighed and shook her head.

The young elf stood up, faced Haplo defiantly.

"You are right, sir. I thought only to save the girl I loved and was to have married. It never occurred to me that this deception would give the dragon-snakes the chance to claim that we'd broken faith with them."

"We never thought about that!" Alake clasped her hands together, fingers twisting nervously. "The dragon-snakes will be furious ..."

"Maybe it won't matter."

That was the dwarf, Grundle, causing trouble again. Haplo could have cheerfully strangled her.

"Devon's not a princess, but he's a prince. As long as the dragon-snakes have three people from royal households, what do they care if we're male or female?"

"They did say three daughters," Alake murmured, looking pathetically hopeful. "But perhaps Grundle's right ..."

Haplo decided that it was time to end this once and for all. "Did it ever occur to you that the dragons may not intend to kill you? They may have other plans for you, plans that require females. Breeding, for example?"

Alake moaned, covered her mouth with her hands. The elf put his arm around her comfortingly, said something to her in a low voice. Grundle was as pale as the dwarf's nut-brown skin would allow. She collapsed back onto a stool, stared unhappily at the deck beneath her feet.

I meant to frighten them. I succeeded, and that's all that matters, Haplo told himself coldly. Now they'll go along with me. No more arguments. I'll take over this ship, ditch these three mensch somewhere, and get on about my business.

"What do you want us to do, sir?" asked the elf.

"First, what's your real name?" Haplo growled.

"Devon of the House of—"

"Devon will do. What or who's steering this ship? Not you, I take it. Who else is on board?"

"We . . . don't know, sir." Devon said helplessly. "We assume it's the dragon-snakes. Their magic . . ."

"You haven't tried to change course? Stop the ship?"

"We can't even get close to the steerage. There's something horrible in there."

"What is it? Can you see it?"

"No," Devon admitted, ashamed. "We . . . couldn't get close enough to see anything."

"It's a terrible feeling, I tell you!" stated Grundle sullenly, defiantly. "Like walking into death."

"Which is exactly what you're doing now," Haplo snapped.

The three glanced at each other, lowered their heads. Children, lost and alone, facing a dreadful fate. Haplo regretted his harsh comment.

You don't want to frighten them too much, he cautioned. You're going to need their help.

"I'm sorry I upset you," he apologized gruffly. "But we have a saying in my world: The dragon is always smaller in the eye than in the mind."

"Meaning it's better to know the truth," said Alake, wiping away her tears. "You're right. I'm not nearly as frightened as I was. Though, if what you say is true, I have more reason to be."

"It's like having a tooth pulled," said Grundle. "You always suffer more thinking about it than having it done." She cocked a bright eye at Haplo. "You're pretty smart ... for a human. Where did you say you came from?"

Haplo looked sharply at the dwarf. A shrewd thinker, that one. He would have to keep an eye on her. Right now, though, he didn't have time to waste fending off her needling jabs.

"You shouldn't be as concerned about where I've been as where you're going unless we can get this ship turned around. Which way's the steerage from here?"

"But how will you do that?" Alake asked him, drawing near. Her eyes, when she looked at him, were warm and soft. "It's obviously being controlled by powerful magic."

"I have some knowledge of magic, myself," said Haplo. Ordinarily, he preferred to keep such knowledge to himself, but in this case, the mensch would see him using his magic. Better to prepare them in advance.

"Do you?" Alake drew a deep breath. "So do I. I've been admitted to the Third House. What House are you?"

Haplo recalled what little he knew of the human's crude talent for the arcane, remembered that they loved nothing more than to shroud even the most rudimentary magical spells in mystery.

"If you are that high in the ranking, you must know that I am not permitted to speak of it," he said.

His mild rebuke did him no harm with the human girl. By her shining eyes, her admiration for him increased.

"Forgive me," she said immediately. "It was wrong of me to ask. We'll show you the way."

The dwarf cast him another shrewd glance, tugged at her side whiskers.

Alake guided him through the small, narrow corridors of the ship. Grundle and Devon came along, the dwarf pointing out to him the various mechanical devices that powered the vessel, which she called a "submersible." Haplo, glancing out the portholes, could see nothing but water, lit by a soft, blue-green light, above, below, and all around.

He was beginning to think that this so-called world of water was, in truth, a world made of nothing but water. There must be land somewhere. Obviously, people who built boats to sail the seas didn't live in those seas like fish. He was intensely curious to know about the seamoons the dwarf had mentioned, must try to think of a way to find out that wouldn't start the wheels turning in the heads of these mensch. He also needed to know more about the seawater itself, whether his growing misgivings about it were true.

Grundle and Devon were, between them, explaining how the submersible operated. Built by dwarves, it was powered by a combination of dwarven mechanical ingenuity and elven mechanical magic.

It seemed, from what Haplo could piece together out of the somewhat confused explanation given him by the dwarf, that the main difficulty in sinking (sailing) a vessel was to get it away from the influence of the seamoons. Due to the gravitational push (not pull) of the moons, the submersibles, which were filled with air, were naturally less dense than the water around them and tended to float toward the worlds as though being drawn by a rope. In order to cause the submersible to sink, it was necessary to increase the density of the ship without flooding it full of water.

Here, Devon explained, was where the elven magic came in. Special magical crystals, engineered by the elven wizards, could increase or decrease their own mass on command. Called mass displacers, these crystals actually solved two problems for ships. First, by increasing the mass in the keel, the ships could sink into the sea as their density became greater than that of the water around them. Second, as the ship sank away from the influence of the outward-pressing gravity of the worlds, the mass displacers provided an artificial gravity for the occupants of the submersible.

Haplo only vaguely understood the concept, understood nothing of "outward-pressing gravity" and "mass displacers." Understood nothing, except that they were magic.

"But," said Haplo casually, appearing to be intensely interested in a rat's tangle of ropes, pulleys, and gears, "I didn't think magic worked in the seawater."

Alake looked startled, at first, then she smiled. "Of course. You are testing me. I would give you the correct response, but not in front of the uninitiated." She nodded at Grundle and Devon.

"Humpf!" grunted the dwarf, unimpressed. "This way to the pilot's house." She began to climb the ladder leading to the topmost deck. Devon and Alake went up after her.

Haplo followed, said nothing more. He hadn't missed Alake's surprised expression. Apparently, human and elven magic worked in the sea. And, since something was guiding the boat, dragon magic worked in the seawater, as well. Seawater that had, so to speak, washed away Haplo's magic. Or had it? Maybe his debilitation had been caused by the passage through Death's Gate. Perhaps . . .

A tingling sensation on Haplo's skin interrupted his ruminations. It was slight, barely felt, as if silken threads of cobwebs were brushing across his flesh. He recognized it, wished he'd thought to wrap the blanket around him. A quick glance confirmed his fears. The sigla on his skin were beginning to glow, a sign of danger. The light was faint, faint as the runes themselves, but his magic was warning him as best it could in his weakened state.

The mensch pulled themselves up over the top, but did not proceed farther. Devon's lips tightened. Grundle gave a sudden, loud, nervous "hem!" that made everyone jump. Alake began to whisper to herself, probably some sort of charm.

The tingling on Haplo's arms became almost maddening, like the tiny feet of myriad spiders crawling over him. His body was instinctively preparing itself to face danger. Adrenaline pumped, his mouth dried, his stomach muscles tightened. He tensed, searched every shadow, cursed the faint light of the sigla, cursed the fact that he was weak.

The dwarf lifted a quivering hand, pointed ahead, at a darkened doorway located at the end of the corridor. "That's . . . the steerage."

Fear flowed from out that doorway like a dark river, threatening to drown them in its suffocating tide. The mensch huddled together, staring with horrible fascination down the corridor. None of them had noticed his alteration yet.

Alake shivered. Grundle was panting like a dog. Devon leaned weakly against the bulkheads. It was obvious the mensch could not go on. Haplo wasn't certain he could.

Sweat trickled down his face. He was having difficulty breathing. And still no sign of anything! But he knew, now, where the danger was centered, and he was walking right toward it. He had never experienced fear like this, not in the darkest, most horrible cave in the Labyrinth. Every fiber of his being was urging him to run away as fast as he could. It took a concerted effort on his part to keep moving forward.

And, suddenly, he couldn't. He came to a halt, near the mensch. Grundle looked around at him. Her eyes widened, she let out a crowing gasp. Alake and Devon shuddered, turned to stare.

Haplo saw himself reflected in three pair of astounded, frightened eyes, saw his body glowing a faint, iridescent blue, saw his face strained and drawn, glistening with sweat.

"What's ahead of us?" he said, pointing. "What's beyond that door?" It took him three breaths to squeeze the words past the tightness in his chest.

"What's wrong with your skin?" Grundle cried shrilly. "You're lit up—"

"What's in there?" Haplo hissed through clenched teeth, glaring fiercely at the dwarf.

She gulped. "The ... the pilot's house. You see?" she added, growing bolder. "I was right. Like walking into death."

"Yeah, you were right." Haplo took a step forward.

Alake clutched at him. "Wait! You can't go! Don't leave us!"

Haplo turned. "Wherever it is they're taking you—will it be any better?"

The three stared at him, silently begging him to say he'd been wrong, to tell them everything was going to be all right. But he couldn't. Truth, harsh and bitter, like a cold wind, blew out hope's faint, flickering light.

"Then we'll come with you," said Devon, pale but resolute.

"No, you won't. You're going to stay right here, all three of you."

Haplo looked down the corridor, glanced again at his arms. The sigla's glow was faint, the runes on his body barely visible. He cursed softly, beneath his breath. A child in the Labyrinth could defend itself better than he could, at this moment.

"Do any of you have a weapon? You, elf? A sword, a knife?"

"N-no," Devon stammered.

"We were told not to bring any weapons," Alake whispered fearfully.

"I have an ax," Grundle said, tone defiant. "A battle-ax."

Alake stared at her, shocked.

"Bring it to me," Haplo ordered, hoping it wasn't some puny toy.

The dwarf looked at him long and hard, then ran off. She returned, puffing, carrying what Haplo was relieved to see was a sturdy, well-made weapon.

"Grundle!" said Alake reprovingly. "You know what they told us!"

"As if I'd listen to a bunch of snakes!" Grundle scoffed. "Will this do?"

She handed the ax to Haplo.

He grasped it, hefted it experimentally. Too bad he didn't have time to inscribe runes on it, enhance it with magical power. Too bad he didn't have the strength to do it, he reminded himself ruefully. Well, it was better than nothing.

Haplo started to creep forward. Hearing footsteps shuffling along behind him, he whirled around, glared at the mensch.

"You stay there! Understand?"

The three wavered, looked at each other, then at Haplo. Devon began to shake his head.

"Damn it!" Haplo swore. "What can three terrified kids do to help me? You'll only get in my way. Now keep back!"

They did as he told them, huddling against the walls, watching him with wide, frightened eyes. He had the feeling, though, that the minute he turned his back, they'd be creeping up behind.

"Let them take care of themselves," he muttered.

Ax in hand, he started down the corridor.

The sigla on his skin itched and burned. Despair closed in on him, the despair of the Labyrinth. You slept out of exhaustion, never to find easeful rest. You woke every day to fear and pain and death.

And anger.

Haplo concentrated on the anger. Anger had kept the Patryns alive in the Labyrinth. Anger carried him forward. He would not rush meekly to his fate like the mensch. He would fight. He ...

Haplo reached the door that led into the steerage, the door that threatened—guaranteed—death. Pausing, he looked, listened. He saw nothing but deep, impenetrable darkness, heard nothing but the beating of his own heart, his own short and shallow breathing. His grip on the ax was so tight his hand ached. He drew a breath, bounded inside.

Darkness closed over him, fell down on him like the nets the gibbering monklers of the Labyrinth use to snare the unwary. The faint glow of his sigla disappeared. He knew himself to be completely helpless, completely at the mercy of whatever was in here. He stumbled about in a blind panic, fighting to free himself. The ax slid from his sweat-damp hand.

Two eyes, slits of red-green flame, slowly opened. The darkness took shape and form around the eyes, and Haplo was aware of a gigantic serpentine head. He was aware, too, of a ripple in the darkness, a shimmer of doubt, astonishment.

"A Patryn?" The voice was soft, sibilant.

"Yes," Haplo answered, tense, wary. "I am a Patryn. What are you?"

The eyes closed. The darkness returned, strong, intense, guarding. Haplo stretched out a groping hand, hoping to find the steering mechanism. His fingers brushed against cold, scaly flesh. A viscous liquid clung to his skin, chilled his blood, began to burn his skin. His stomach wrenched in revulsion. Shuddering, he tried to wipe the slime off on his trousers.

The eyes opened again, their light eerie. The eyes were huge. It seemed he could have walked into the black, slit pupils without ducking.

"The Royal One bids me give you welcome and say to you, 'The time is at hand. Your enemy is awake.' "

"I don't know what you mean, what you're talking about," Haplo said warily. "What enemy?"

"The Royal One will explain everything if you will honor him with your presence. However, I am permitted to speak one word that may quicken your interest. I am to say, 'Samah.' "

"Samah!" Haplo breathed. "Samah!"

He couldn't believe what he'd heard. It didn't make sense. He wanted to question the creature, but, suddenly, his heart began to pound. The blood rushed to his head, fire filled his brain. He took a step, staggered, and pitched forward onto his face to lie still and unmoving.

The green-red eyes glittered, slowly shut.

CHAPTER \* 12

ADRIFT SOMEWHERE THE GOODSEA

So NOW WE'VE GOT THIS HUMAN, THIS HAPLO. I WANT VERY MUCH to trust him, and yet I don't. Is it just the prejudice of a dwarf against any of another race? That might have been so, back in the old days. But I would trust Alake with my life, the same with Devon. Unfortunately, my life appears to be not in their care, but in Haplo's.

It will be a relief to write down how I really feel about him. I can't say a word against him to Alake, who has fallen for this man deeper than a dwarf in his ale mug. As for Devon ... he was suspicious of him at the beginning, but after what happened with the dragon-snakes . . . well, you might have thought an elven warrior of ancient days had come to call him to arms.

Alake says that I am only chewing sour grapes because Haplo made me see that we acted like fools, running off to give ourselves to be sacrificed. But we dwarves are naturally skeptical and suspicious of strangers. We tend not to trust anyone until we get to know them several hundred cycles.

This Haplo has yet to say anything about where he comes from and who he is, and, beyond that, he's made one or two extremely curious statements and has behaved most peculiarly in regard to the dragon-snakes.

I admit I was wrong about one thing—Haplo is obviously not a spy sent by the dragons. It is difficult to see inside the man. A shadow covers him and his words. He walks in a darkness of his own creation, using it, I would guess, for protection and defense. Yet, sometimes, despite himself, the clouds are rent by a flash of lightning, both frightening and illuminating. Such a flash came from Haplo when we told him about the dragon-snakes.

In fact, thinking back on his reaction, I begin to see that he went out of his way to convince us we should try to seize control of the ship and flee to safety. Which makes what happened later all the more strange.

And I must give credit where it is due. Haplo is the bravest man I've ever met. I know of no dwarf, not even Hartmut, who could have walked down the dread corridor and into the steerage.

We kept behind, waiting for him, as he ordered.

"We should go with him," Devon said.

"Yes," agreed Alake faintly, but I noticed that neither of them moved a muscle. "I wish we had some no-fear weed. Then we wouldn't be afraid."

"Well, we don't. Whatever it is," I whispered. "As for wishes, I wish I was back home!"

Devon was that faint color of blue-green elves turn when they're sick or afraid. Sweat glistened on Alake's black skin, and she shivered like a leaf. I'm not ashamed to say that my shoes were as good as nailed to the deck. Otherwise I would have done the sensible thing and run for dear life.

We watched Haplo enter the steerage. Blackness covered him, swallowed him up whole. Alake gave a little cry and hid her face in her hands. Then we heard voices . . . Haplo's voice talking and another answering.

"At least nothing's killed him yet," I muttered.

Alake perked up, lifted her head. We all strained to hear what was being said.

The words were gibberish. We looked at each other questioningly. None of us understood.

"It's that same language he talked when he was out of his head," I whispered. "And whatever's in there understands it!"

Which was something I didn't like one bit, as I was just about to say, when Haplo suddenly gave a great cry that stopped my breathing. And then Alake gave a cry as if someone had torn out her heart. She darted down the passage, heading straight for the steerage!

Devon ran after Alake, leaving me to reflect on the brainless natures of elves and humans (and dwarves). I had no choice, of course, but to run after them.

I arrived in the steerage to find Alake bent over Haplo, who was lying unconscious on the deck. Devon, with more presence of mind than I would have given an elf, had picked up the battle ax and was standing over the two protectively.

I looked quickly about the steerage. It was darker than the inside of our mountain and smelled awful. The stench made me gag. It was horribly cold, but the strange, paralyzing feeling of terror that had kept us out of here before was gone.

"Is he dead?" I asked.

"No!" Alake was stroking back his hair. "He's fainted. He drove it away! Don't you see, Grundle?"

I saw the love and admiration in her eyes and my heart sank.

"He fought it and drove it away! He's saved us."

"He did. He truly did!" Devon said, gazing down at Haplo in awe.

"Give me that!" I said grumpily, and snatched the ax away from the elf, "before you cut off something valuable and really turn yourself into a girl! And what do you mean, he drove it away? That scream of his didn't sound like any battle cry to me."

But, of course, neither Alake nor Devon was paying the slightest attention to me. Their concern was for their hero. And, I had to admit, whatever had been in the steerage seemed to be gone now. But had Haplo driven it away? Or had the two of them reached a friendly agreement?

"We can't stay here," I pointed out, propping the ax up in a corner, as far from the elf (and Haplo) as possible.

"No, you're right," Alake agreed, looking around with a shudder.

"We could make a litter out of blankets," Devon suggested.

Haplo opened his eyes, found Alake hanging over him, her hand on his head. I never saw anyone move so swiftly. His actions were a blur. He struck out at Alake, flung her away from him, and was on his feet, crouched, ready to spring.

Alake lay on the deck, staring at him in shock. None of us moved or said a word. I was almost as frightened as I'd been before.

Haplo glanced around, saw only us, and seemed to come to his senses. But he was furious.

"Don't touch me!" he snarled in a voice colder and darker than the darkness in the steerage. "Don't ever touch me!"

Alake's eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "I didn't mean any harm. I feared you were hurt . . ."

Haplo bit off whatever else he'd been going to say, stared at poor Alake grimly. Then, with a sigh, he straightened, shook his head. His anger died. For an instant, the darkness over him seemed to lift.

"Here, don't cry anymore. I'm the one who's sorry," he said tiredly. "I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. I was . . . somewhere else. In a dream. A terrible place."

He frowned, and the darkness returned to cover him. "I react like that out of instinct. I can't help myself, and I might accidentally hurt one of you. So just . . . don't ever come near me when I'm asleep. All right?"

Alake gulped and nodded and even managed to smile. She would have forgiven him if he'd jumped up and down on her. I saw that plain enough and I think Haplo was beginning to see how it was with her. He looked kind of startled and confused and, for an instant, almost helpless. It was enough to make me laugh, except I felt like crying.

I thought he was going to say something and he thought so, too, but then he must have seen that it would only make things worse. He kept quiet, turned to examine the steerage.

Devon helped Alake to her feet. She smoothed her gown.

"You all right?" Haplo said gruffly, not looking at her.

"Yes," she answered shakily.

He nodded.

"So," I said, "did you drive the dragon-snake or whatever it was off? Can you take control of the ship?"

He looked at me. His eyes are like no one's eyes I've seen before. They run through you like needles.

"No. I didn't drive the dragon-snake off. And, no, we can't take over the ship."

"But the beast's not here!" I pointed out. "I can feel the difference. We all can. I'm going to try. I know something about steering a boat. . . ."

I didn't, but I wanted to see what would happen. I put my hands on the wheel. Sure enough, he was there beside me. His hand closed over my arm and his grip was like iron.

"Don't try it, Grundle." He wasn't threatening. He was very quiet, very calm. I felt my stomach twist into a knot. "I don't think it would be wise. The dragon-snake isn't gone. It was never really here. But that doesn't mean they're not watching, listening to us right now. Their magic is powerful. I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

He was implying that he wouldn't want the dragon-snakes to hurt me. But, looking into those eyes, I wasn't so sure that was what he truly meant. His grip on my arm tightened. Slowly, I let go of the wheel, and he let go of me.

"And now, I think we should all return to our cabins," Haplo said.

We didn't move. Alake and Devon looked stricken, their last hope gone. I could still feel his hand on my arm, see the marks of his fingers.

"You talked to them!" I blurted out. "I heard you! In your language! Or is it their language? I think you're in league with them!"

"Grundle!" Alake cried. "How could you!"

"It's all right." Haplo shrugged, smiled out of one corner of his mouth. "Grundle doesn't trust me, do you?"

"No," I said bluntly.

Alake frowned, clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Devon shook his head at me.

Haplo continued to regard me with that strange half-smile. "If it's any comfort to you, Grundle, I don't trust you, either. Elves, dwarves, humans. You're all friends, you tell me. Your races live together in peace. You expect me to believe that, after what I've seen? Or is this all some elaborate hoax, laid by my enemies?"

We were all silent. Alake looked unhappy, Devon uncomfortable. They had wanted so much to believe . . .

I pointed at Haplo's skin, at the blue markings I'd seen glow with an eerie, radiant light.

"You're a warlock," I said, using the human term. "Your magic is powerful. I felt it. We all felt it. Could you turn this ship around, take us back home?"

He was quiet a moment, eyeing me with a cold and narrow gaze. Then he said, "No."

"Can't or won't?" I demanded.

He didn't answer.

I cast Alake and Devon a glance of bitter triumph. "Come on. We better decide what we can do to help ourselves. Maybe we could swim for it—"

"Grundle, you can't swim," Alake said, sighing. She was on the verge of tears. Her shoulders sagged.

"There's no land near anyway," argued Devon. "We'd end up exhausted, half-starved. Or worse."

"Wouldn't that be better than the dragon-snakes?"

They finally realized what I was saying. They looked at each other, wavering, hesitating.

"Come on," I repeated.

I was near the door. Alake, drooping, started to come after. Devon had his arm around her. With what sounded like a curse, Haplo shoved roughly past us. Reaching the door, he blocked it with an outstretched arm.

"No one's going anywhere, except back to his or her room."

Alake stood tall, faced him with dignity. "Let us pass." She was trying hard to keep her voice from trembling.

"Stand aside, sir," said Devon in low tones.

I took a step forward.

"Damn it!" Haplo glared at us. "These dragon-snakes won't let you go. Try some fool stunt like jumping ship and you'll only end up getting hurt. Listen to me. Grundle was right. I can talk to these dragon-snakes. We . . . understand each other. And I promise you this. As far as it's in my power to prevent it, I won't let harm come to you." He looked at Alake and Devon and at me. "I swear it."

"By what?" I asked.

"What would you have me swear by?"

"The One, of course," Alake said.

Haplo appeared perplexed. "What One? Is it a human god?"

"The One is the One," Devon answered, at a loss to explain. Everyone knew about the One.

"The highest power," Alake replied. "Creator, Mover, Shaper, Finisher."

"Highest power, huh?" Haplo repeated, and I could see he didn't much like that idea. "You all believe in this One? Elves, humans, dwarves?"

"It's not a matter of believing," Devon said. "The One is."

Haplo eyed us narrowly. "Will you go to your rooms and stay there? No more talk of throwing yourselves into the sea?"

"If you swear by the One," I said. "That's an oath you can't break."

He smiled quietly, as if he knew better. Then, shrugging, he said. "I swear by the One. If it lies in my power to prevent it, no harm will come to you."

I looked at Alake and Devon. They both nodded their heads, satisfied.

"Very well," I growled, though I had seen his mouth twist when he spoke the words.

"I'll cook something," offered Alake, faintly, and she hurried away.

Devon—before I could stop him—picked up the ax. I could see battle-lust, the gleam of swords and armor, shining in the elf's eyes.

"Do you think, sir, you could teach me how to use this?"

"Not in a dress!" I told him, then stomped off to my room.

I wanted to be alone to think, to try to figure out what was going on. Especially, to try to figure out Haplo.

There was a knock on my door.

"I'm not hungry!" I called out irritably, thinking it was Alake.

"It's me, Haplo."

Startled, I opened the door a crack, peered out. "What do you want?"

"Seawater."

"Seawater?" Gone mad again, I thought.

"I need seawater. For an experiment. Alake told me you knew how to open the hatch."

"What do you want seawater for?"

"Forget it." Haplo turned away. "I'll ask Devon—"

"The elf!" I snorted in disgust. "He'd flood the ship. Come with me."

Which wasn't exactly the truth. Devon could probably have managed about the seawater, but I wanted to find out what this Haplo was up to now.

We went back through the submersible, heading toward the rear. I fetched a bucket from the galley.

"This be enough?" I asked.

Haplo nodded. Alake said something about dinner being ready in a short while.

"We won't be long," he said.

We continued on, passed Devon doing what he must have thought were some sort of exercises with the battle-ax.

"He'll slice off his foot!" I grumbled, cringing at the wild way he was swinging the ax around.

"Don't underestimate him," said Haplo. "I've traveled in lands where elves are quite adept at warfare. I suppose they could learn again. If they had someone to lead them."

"And someone to fight," I pointed out.

"But your people were ready to band together and fight these dragon-snakes. What if I could prove to you that the dragons aren't the real enemy? What if I could show you that the real enemy is far more subtle, his intentions far more terrible? What if I brought you a leader of great wisdom and power to fight against this foe? Would your people and the humans and the elves fight together?"

I sniffed. "You're saying that these dragon-snakes have wrecked our sun-chaser, murdered and tortured our people, just to prove to us that we have a more dangerous enemy?"

"Stranger things have happened," Haplo replied coolly. "Maybe it's all been a misunderstanding. Maybe they think you're aligned with the enemy."

His eyes were suddenly sharp needles again, piercing right through me. That was the second time he'd said something like that. I could see no sense in arguing, especially since I had no idea what he was talking about. I said nothing, therefore, and he dropped the subject.

We had reached the waterlock by this time anyway. I opened the panel just long enough to let water inside—about ankle deep—before shutting it again. I lifted the access hatch, grabbed my bucket, tied it to a rope, dropped it down into the water, filled it, and hauled it back up.

I held out the full bucket to Haplo. To my astonishment, he drew back, refused to touch it.

"Take it in there," he said, pointing to the hold.

I did as he said, growing more and more curious. The bucket was heavy and awkward to carry, water sloshed out, spilled on my shoes and the deck. Haplo was extremely careful to avoid stepping in even the smallest puddle.

"Set it down," he ordered, indicating a far corner.

I put the bucket down, rubbed my palms where the handle had bit into them.

"Thank you," he said, standing, waiting.

"You're welcome." Pulling up a stool, I seated myself comfortably.

"You can leave anytime now."

"I've got nothing better to do," I said.

He was angry, and I thought for a moment he was going to pick me up and throw me out. (Or try to, at any rate. Dwarves aren't easy to budge, once they've decided to stay put.) He glared at me. I glared right back, crossed my arms over my chest, and settled myself more firmly on the stool.

Then, a thought seemed to occur to him. "You might be useful, after all," he muttered, and let me be.

As for what happened next, I'm not certain I believe it myself, though I saw it with my own eyes.

Haplo knelt down on the deck and began to write on one of the wooden planks, using nothing but his fingertip!

I started to laugh, ended up almost choking to death.

When his finger touched the wood, a thin wisp of smoke curled up into the air. He drew a straight line, left a trail of flame behind. The fire died in an instant, leaving a brown, scorched mark, as if he'd been writing on the planks with a red-hot poker. But he wasn't. He was only using his own flesh, and it was setting the wood ablaze.

He worked rapidly, making strange marks on the deck, marks that looked similar — I thought — to those blue lines and swirls on his arms and the backs of his hands. He drew maybe ten of these in a circle, taking care to make certain that they were all connected. The smell of burning wood was strong. I sneezed.

Finally, he was finished. The circle was complete. He sat back, studied it a moment, and then nodded to himself in satisfaction. I stared hard at his fingers, could see no sign of any scorch marks.

Haplo rose to his feet and stepped onto the circle he'd drawn.

Blue light began to radiate up from the markings he'd burned on the deck and suddenly Haplo wasn't standing on the deck. He floated up in the air, seemingly supported by nothing except the blue light.

I gasped and jumped up so fast I upset my stool.

"Grundle! Don't leave," he said hastily. He moved, and the next thing I knew he was standing on the deck again. The blue light, however, continued to glow. "I want you to do something for me."

"What?" I asked, keeping as far from the weird light as I could.

"Bring the bucket over and pour water on the circle."

I stared at him suspiciously. "That's all?"

"That's all."

"What will happen?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe nothing."

"Why don't you do it, then?"

He smiled, trying to be pleasant. But his eyes were cold and hard. "I don't think the water agrees with me."

I thought it over. Dumping a pailful of water on some scorched planks wasn't liable to hurt me. And, I have to admit, I was extremely curious to see what would happen next.

He wasn't kidding about being worried about the water. The minute I picked up the bucket, Haplo backed into a corner, crouched behind a barrel, to keep from getting splashed.

I tossed the water onto the circle of strange marks that glowed with a blue light.

The light vanished instantly. And, as I watched, amazed, I saw the burn marks on the plank start to fade away.

"But, that's impossible!" I cried, dropping the bucket and backing off.

Haplo came out from behind the barrel. He walked across the deck, came to stand in front of the rapidly disappearing circle.

"You're getting your boots wet," I pointed out.

By the grim expression on his face, he didn't seem to care anymore. He lifted one foot, held it over the place where the circle had supported him. Nothing happened. His boot slammed down on the deck.

"In all my life, I've never seen or heard of anything—" He broke off, started some new thought. "Why? What can it mean?" His face darkened, he clenched his fist. "The Sartan."

Turning, without a word or a glance at me, he stormed out of the cabin. I heard his footfalls in the passageway, the slamming of his door. I crept over, stared down at the wet deck. The burn marks were almost completely gone. The wooden planks were wet, but unscarred.

The three of us, Alake, Devon, and I, ate dinner alone. Alake tapped on Haplo's door and called, but there was no answer. She returned, disappointed and downcast.

I didn't say anything to her or to Devon. To be honest, I wasn't certain they'd believe me and I didn't want to start an argument. After all, I have no proof of anything I saw except a couple of wet boards.

But at least I know the truth.

Whatever that truth may be.

More later. I'm so sleepy I can't hold the pen any longer.

CHAPTER \* 13

SURUNAN CHELESTRA

ALFRED SPENT MANY PLEASANT HOURS WALKING THE STREETS OF Surunan. Like its inhabitants, the city had awakened from its long, enforced slumber and returned swiftly to life. There were far more people than Alfred had first supposed. He must have discovered only one of many Sleeping chambers.

Guided by the Council, the Sartan worked to restore their city to its original beauty. Sartan magic made dead plants green, repaired crumbling buildings, wiped away all traces of destruction. Their city restored to beauty, harmony, peace, and order, the Sartan began to discuss how to do the same to the other three worlds.

Alfred reveled in the tranquility, the beauty his soul remembered. He delighted in the Sartan conversation, the multiplicity of wonderous images created by the magic of the rune language. He heard the music of the runes and wondered, his eyes moist with pleasure, how he could have ever forgotten such beauty. He basked in the friendly smiles of his brothers and sisters.

"I could live here and be happy," he said to Orla.

They were walking through the city, on their way to a meeting of the Council of Seven. The dog, who had not left Alfred's side since the night before, accompanied them. The beauty of Surunan was food to Alfred's soul, which, he realized now, had nearly withered up and died of starvation.

He could, he noted wistfully, actually walk the streets without falling over his feet or anyone else's.

"I understand how you feel," said Orla, looking about with pleasure. "It is as it used to be. It seems as if no time has passed at all."

The dog, feeling itself forgotten, whined and shoved its head into Alfred's dangling hand.

The touch of the cold nose made Alfred jump. Startled, he looked down at the dog, forgot to watch where he was going, and tumbled into a marble bench.

"Are you all right?" Orla asked in concern.

"Yes, thank you," Alfred mumbled, picking himself up and endeavoring to put himself back together.

He looked at Orla in her soft white robes, at all the other Sartan dressed alike in their white robes. And he looked down at himself, still wearing the faded purple velvet suit of the mensch court of King Stephen of Arianus. Frayed lace cuffs were too short for his long, gangly arms; the hose covering his ungainly legs were wrinkled and sagging. He ran his hand over his balding head. It seemed to him that the smiles of his brothers and sisters were no longer friendly, but patronizing, pitying.

Alfred wanted, suddenly, to grab his brethren by the collars of their long, white robes and shake them until their teeth rattled.

Time has passed! he wanted to shout. Eons. Centuries. Worlds that were young and newly born out of fire have cooled and grown old. While you slept, generations have lived and suffered and been happy and died. But what does that mean to you? Nothing more than the thick layers of dust covering your perfect white marble. You sweep it away and prepare to go on. But you can't. No one remembers you. No one wants you. Your children have grown and left home. They may not be doing that well on their own, but at least they're free to try.

"Something is the matter," said Orla solicitously. "If you're hurt, the Council can wait ..."

Alfred was startled to find himself trembling; his unspoken words churned inside him. Why not say them? Why not let them out? Because I may be wrong. Most probably I am wrong. Who am I, after all? Not very wise. Not nearly as wise as Samah and Orla.

The dog, accustomed to Alfred's sudden and erratic tumbles, had leapt lightly out of the way when he fell. It returned to gaze up at him with a certain amount of reproach.

I have four feet to worry about and you only have two, the dog advised him. One would think you could manage better.

Alfred was reminded of Haplo, of the Patryn's irritation whenever the Sartan stumbled over himself.

"I think," said Orla, eyeing the dog severely, "we should have left the animal behind."

"He wouldn't have stayed," said Alfred.

Samah appeared to be of the same opinion. He eyed the dog, sitting at Alfred's feet, suspiciously.

"You say that this dog belongs to a Patryn. You have said yourself that this Patryn uses the animal to spy on others. It shouldn't be in a Council meeting. Remove it. Ramu"—he gestured to his son, who was acting as Council Servitor—"remove the animal."

Alfred made no protest. The dog growled at Ramu, but—at a soft word from Alfred—suffered itself to be led out of the Council Chamber. Ramu returned, shutting the door behind him and taking up his proper place before it. Samah took his place behind the long, white, marble table. The six Council members took their places, three on his left and three on his right. All sat down simultaneously.

The Sartan, in their white robes, faces alight with wisdom and intelligence, were beautiful, majestic, radiant.

Alfred, seated on the Supplicant's Bench, saw himself by contrast—huddled, faded, and bald. The dog, tongue lolling, lay at his feet.

Samah's eyes skipped over Alfred, fixed on the dog. The head of the Council frowned, glanced at his son.

Ramu was astonished. "I put him out, Father, and"—he glanced behind him—"I shut the door! I swear!"

Samah motioned Alfred to stand and come forward, into the Supplicant's Circle.

Alfred did so, feet shuffling.

"I ask you to put the animal outside, Brother."

Alfred sighed, shook his head. "He'll just come right back in. But I don't think you need worry about him spying on us for his master. He's lost his master. That's why he's here."

"He wants you to look for his master, for a Patryn?"

"I believe so," said Alfred meekly.

Samah's frown darkened. "And this doesn't seem strange to you? A dog belonging to a Patryn, coming to you, a Sartan, for help?"

"Well, no," said Alfred, after a moment's reflection. "Not considering what the dog is. That is, what I think it is. Or might be." He was somewhat flustered.

"What is this dog, then?"

"I'd rather not say, Councillor."

"You refuse a direct request of the head of the Council?"

Alfred hunched his head into his shoulders, like a threatened turtle. "I'm probably wrong. I've been wrong about a great many things. I wouldn't want to give the Council misinformation," he concluded lamely.

"I do not like this, Brother!" Samah's tone was a whiplash. Alfred flinched beneath it. "I have tried to make allowances for you, because you have lived so long among mensch, bereft of the companionship, counsel, and advice of your own kind. But now you have walked among us, lived among us, eaten our bread, and yet you willfully persist in refusing to answer our questions. You will not even tell us your real name. One might think you distrusted us—your own people!"

Alfred felt the justness of this accusation. He knew Samah was right, knew the flaw to be in himself, knew he was unworthy to stand here, to be among his people. He wanted desperately to tell them all he knew, to fling himself prostrate at their feet, to hide beneath the hems of their white robes.

Hide. Yes, that's what I'd be doing. Hide from myself. Hide from the dog. Hide from despair. Hide from hope  
...

He sighed. "I trust you, Samah, members of the Council. It's myself that I don't trust. Is it wrong to refuse to answer questions to which I don't know the answer?"

"Sharing information, sharing your speculations, might benefit us all."

"Perhaps," said Alfred. "Or perhaps not. I must be the judge."

"Samah," Orla said gently, "this arguing is pointless. As you said, we must make allowances."

If Samah had been a mensch king, he would have ordered his son to take Alfred and wring the information out of him. And it seemed, for a moment, as if the Councillor was regretting he wasn't such a king. His hand clenched in frustration, his brow furrowed. But he mastered himself, continued on.

"I am going to ask you a question and I trust you will find it in your heart to answer."

"If I can do so, I will," Alfred replied humbly.

"We have urgent need to contact our brethren in the other three worlds. Is such contact possible?"

Alfred looked up, amazed. "But, I thought you understood! You have no brethren in the other worlds! That is," he added, shuddering, "unless you count the necromancers on Abarach."

"Even these necromancers, as you term them, are Sartan," said Samah. "If they have fallen into evil, all the more reason to try to reach them. And you yourself have admitted that you have not traveled to Pryan. You don't know for certain that our people are no longer on the world."

"But I have talked to one who has been there," Alfred protested. "He found a Sartan city, but no trace of any Sartan. Only terrible beings, that we created—"

"And where did you get this information?" Samah thundered. "From a Patryn! I see his image in your mind! And you would have us believe it?"

Alfred shrank into himself. "He would have no reason to

"He would have every reason! He and this lord who plans to conquer and enslave us!" Samah fell silent, glaring at Alfred. "Now, answer my question!"

"Yes, Councillor. I suppose you could go through Death's Gate." Alfred wasn't being very helpful, but he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"And alert this Patryn tyrant to our presence. No, not yet. We are not strong enough to face him."

"And yet," said Orla, "we may not have any choice. Tell Alfred the rest."

"We must trust him," said Samah bitterly, "although he does not trust us."

Alfred flushed, stared down at his shoes.

"After the Sundering came a time of chaos. It was a dreadful time," Samah said, frowning. "We knew there would be suffering and loss of life. We regretted it, but we believed that the greater good to come would make up for it."

"That is the excuse of all who wage war," said Alfred in a low voice.

Samah paled in anger.

Orla intervened. "What you say is true, Brother. And there were those who argued against it."

"But what is done is done and that time is long past," Samah said in stern tones, seeing several of the Council members shift restlessly in their seats. "The magical forces we unleashed proved far more destructive than we had anticipated. We found, too late, that we could not bring them under control. Many of our people sacrificed their own lives in an attempt to stop the holocaust that swept over the world. To no avail. We could only watch in helpless horror and, when all was ended, do what we could to save those who had managed to survive.

"The creation of the four worlds was successful, as was the imprisonment of our enemies. We took the mensch and brought them to havens of peace and safety. Such a world was Chelestra.

"This world was the one of which we were the proudest. It hangs in the darkness of the universe like a beautiful blue-white jewel. Chelestra is made completely of water. On the outside, it is ice; the chill of the space around it freezes the water solid. Within Chelestra's heart, we placed a seastar, which warms the water and warms as well the durnai, hibernating, living beings that drift around the seasun. The mensch call them seamoons. It was our intent, after the mensch had lived here many generations and become accustomed to it, that they should move onto these seamoons. We would remain here, on this continent."

"This isn't a seamoon?" Alfred looked confused.

"No, we needed something more solid, more stable. Something that more closely resembled the world we left behind. Sky, sun, trees, clouds. This realm rests on a huge formation of solid rock formed in the shape of a chalice. Runes cover its surface with intricate patterns of force both outside the stone and within.

"Inside the cup is a mantle of molten rock, covered by a surface crust not unlike our original world. Here we formed clouds, rivers and valleys, lakes and fertile land. Above all arches the dome of the sky that keeps the sea at bay while letting in the light of the seasun."

"You mean," said Alfred, awed, "that we are now surrounded by water?"

"The turquoise blue you see above you that you call sky is not sky as you know it, but water," said Orla, smiling. "Water that we could share with other worlds, worlds such as Abar-rach." Her smile faded. "We came here, out of despair, hoping to find peace. We found instead death, destruction."

"We built this city with our magic," Samah continued. "We brought the mensch to live here. For a time, all went well. Then, creatures appeared, coming up out of the deep. We couldn't believe what we saw. We, who had made all the animals of all the new worlds, had not made these. They were ugly, horrible to look on.

They smelled foul, of decay and putrefaction. The mensch called them dragons, naming them after a mythical beast of the Old World."

Samah's words created images in the mind. Alfred listened and saw and was carried back with the head of the Council to a far distant time. . . .

. . . Samah stood outside, upon the steps of the Council Chamber, and gazed in anger and frustration down upon the newly made city of Surunan. All around him was beauty, but he took no comfort in it. The beauty, instead, seemed a mockery. Beyond the high, glistening, flower-covered city walls, he heard the voices of the mensch beat against the marble like the pounding of a storm-tossed sea.

"Tell them to return to their homes," Samah ordered his son, Ramu. "Tell them all will be well."

"We told them, Father," Ramu replied. "They refuse."

"They are frightened," Orla explained, seeing her husband's face harden. "Panicked. You can't blame them. After all they've been through, all they've suffered."

"And what about all we've suffered. They never think of that!" Samah returned bitterly.

He was silent long moments, listening to the voices. He could distinguish the races among them: the raucous blaring of the humans, the flutelike laments of the elves, the booming bass of the dwarves. A terrible orchestra that, for the first time in its existence, was playing in concert, instead of each section trying to drown out the other.

"What do they want?" he asked finally.

"They are terrified of these so-called dragons. The people want us to open the gates to our part of the city," Ramu told him. "They think they will be safer inside our walls."

"They are just as safe in their own homes!" Samah said. "The same magic protects them."

"You can't blame them for not understanding, Father," Ramu replied scornfully. "They are like children, frightened by the thunder, who seek the safety of the parents' bed."

"Open the gates, then. Let them in. Make room for them where you can and do what you can to keep the damage they cause to a minimum. Make it clear to them that it is only temporary. Tell them that the Council is going out to destroy the monsters and, when this is done, we expect the mensch to return peacefully to their homes. Or as peacefully as can be expected of them," he added in acerbic tones.

Ramu bowed and went to do his father's bidding, taking with him the other servitors to assist.

"The dragons have done no great harm," said Orla. "I am sick of killing. I entreat you, again, Samah, to try to talk with them, find out something about them and what they want. Perhaps we can negotiate—"

"All this you said before the Council, Wife," Samah interrupted her impatiently. "The Council voted and the decision was made. We did not create these creatures. We have no control over them ..."

"And so they must be destroyed," Orla concluded coldly.

"The Council has spoken."

"The vote was not unanimous."

"I know." Samah was cold, still angry. "And to keep peace in the Council and in my home, I will talk to these serpents, learn what I can about them. Believe it or not, Wife, I, too, am sick of killing."

"Thank you, Husband," Orla said, attempting to slide her arm through his.

Samah stiffened, held himself away from her touch.

The Sartan Council of Seven left their walled city for the first time since they had arrived in this new world of their own creation. Joining hands, performing a solemn and graceful dance, the seven sang the runes and called upon the winds of ever-shifting possibility to carry them over the walls of the center city, over the heads of the wailing mensch, to the nearby shores of the sea.

Out in the water, the dragons awaited them. The Sartan looked on them and were appalled. The serpents were huge, their skin wrinkled. They were toothless and old, older than time itself. And they were evil. Fear emanated from the dragons, hatred gleamed in their red-green eyes like angry suns, and shriveled the very hearts of the Sartan, who had seen nothing like it, not even in the eyes of the Patryns, their most bitter enemy.

The sand, which had once been as white and gleaming as crushed marble, was now gray-green, coated by trails of foul-smelling slime. The water, covered with a thick film of oil, washed sluggishly up on the polluted shore.

Led by Samah, the Council members formed a line upon the sand.

The dragons began to slither and leap and writhe. Churning the seawater, the serpents stirred up great waves, sent them crashing to shore. The spray from the waves fell on the Sartan. The smell was putrid, brought a horrid image. They seemed to be looking into a grave in which lay moldering all the hastily buried victims of sinister crimes, all the rotting corpses of the battlefield, the dead of centuries of violence.

Samah, raising his hand, called out, "I am head of the Council, the governing body of the Sartan. Send one of your kind forward to talk with us."

One of the dragons, larger and more powerful than the rest, reared its head out of the water. A huge wave surged to shore. The Sartan could not escape it, and were drenched to the skin, their clothes and hair wringing wet. The water was cold, chilled them to the bone.

Orla, shivering, hastened to her husband's side. "I am convinced. You are right. These creatures are evil and must be destroyed. Let's do what we have to, quickly, and leave."

Samah wiped seawater from his face, looking at it, looking at his hand in awe and perplexity. "Why do I feel so strange? What is happening? As if my body were suddenly made of lead, heavy and clumsy. My hands don't seem to belong to me. My feet cannot move—"

"I feel it, too," cried Orla. "We must work the magic swiftly—"

"I am the Royal One, king of my people," called the serpent, and its voice was soft and barely heard and seemed to come from a far distance. "I will speak with you."

"Why have you come? What do you want?" Samah shouted above the crashing of the waves.

"Your destruction."

The words twisted and writhed in Samah's mind as the dragons twisted in the water, dipping their serpent heads in and flinging them back out, flailing and lashing their bodies and tails. The seawater foamed and boiled and surged erratically over the shore. Samah had never faced any threat as dire as this one and he was uncertain, uneasy. The water chilled him, numbing limbs, freezing feet. His magic could not warm him.

Samah raised his hands to draw the runes in the air. He began to move his feet in the dance that would paint the runes with his body. He lifted his voice to sing the runes to the wind and the water. But his voice sounded flat and raucous. His hands were like claws, tearing the air. His feet moved in opposing directions. Samah stumbled, clumsy, inept. The magic washed away.

Orla tried to come to her husband's aid, but her body unaccountably failed her. She wandered across the shore, her feet reacting to a will that was no longer under her control. The remaining members of the Council staggered along the shore or tumbled into the water, like drunken revelers.

Samah crouched in the sand, battling fear. He faced, he guessed, a terrible death.

"Where did you come from?" he cried in bitter frustration, watching the dragons surge into shore. "Who created you?"

"You did," came the reply.

The horrible images faded, leaving Alfred weak and shaken. And he had only been a witness. He could not imagine what it must have been like to have lived through the incident.

"But the dragon-snakes did not kill us that day, as you may have surmised," Samah concluded dryly.

He had related his tale calmly enough, but the usually firm, confident smile was thin and tight. The hand that rested upon the marble table shook slightly. Orla had gone extremely pale. Several of the other Council members shuddered, one let his head sink into his hands.

"There came a time when we longed for death," Samah continued, his voice soft, as if he spoke to himself. "The dragons made sport of us, drove us up and down the beach until we were faint and exhausted. When one of us fell, the great toothless mouth closed over the body, dragged the person to his feet. Terror alone put life in our bodies. And, at last, when we could run no more, when our hearts seemed as if they must burst and our limbs would no longer support us, we lay in the wet sand and waited to die. The dragons left us, then."

"But they came back, in greater numbers," Orla said. Her hands rubbed the marble table, as if she would smooth out its already smooth surface. "They attacked the city, their huge bodies battering into walls, killing and torturing and maiming any living thing they found. Our magic worked against them and we held them off for a long time. But we could see that the magic was starting to crumble, just as did the rune-covered walls surrounding our city."

"But why?" Alfred gazed from one to the other in shocked perplexity. "What power do these dragons have over our magic?"

"None. They can fight it, certainly, and they resist it better than any other living beings we have faced, but it was not, we soon discovered, the power of the dragons that left us helpless and defenseless on the beach. It was the seawater."

Alfred gaped, astonished. The dog lifted its head, its ears pricked. It had fallen asleep, nose on paws, during the recital of the battle with the dragons. Now it sat up, looked interested.

"But you created the seawater," said Alfred.

"As we—supposedly—created these dragon-snakes?" Samah gave a bitter laugh. He eyed Alfred shrewdly. "You have not come across anything like them in other worlds?"

"N-no. Dragons, yes, certainly, but they could always be controlled by magic, by mensch magic even. Or seemed to be," he added suddenly, thoughtfully.

"The water of the sea, this ocean that we named 'Goodsea'"—Samah spoke the word with irony—"has the effect of completely destroying our magic. We don't know how or why. All we know is that one drop of the seawater on our skin begins a cycle that breaks down the rune structure, until we are helpless—more helpless, in fact—than mensch.

"And that is why, in the end, we ordered the mensch out into the Goodsea. The season was drifting away. We lacked the magical energy to stop it; all our power had to be conserved to fight the dragons. We sent the mensch to follow the season, to find other seamoons, where they could live. The creatures of the deep, whales and dolphins and others the mensch had befriended, went with them, to help guard and defend them from the dragons.

"We have no idea whether the mensch made it safely or not. Certainly, they stood a better chance than we did. The seawater has no effect on them or their magic. In fact, they seem to thrive on it. We stayed behind, waiting for the season to leave us, waiting for the ice to close over us ... and over our enemy. We were fairly certain, you see, that the dragons wanted us. They cared little for the mensch."

"And we were right. The dragons kept up the attack on our city," Orla continued, "but never in numbers sufficient to win. Victory did not seem to be their goal. Pain, suffering, anguish— that is what they wanted. Our hope was to wait, buy time. Each day the sun's warmth lessened, the darkness gathered around us. Perhaps the dragons, intent on their hatred for us, did not notice. Or perhaps they thought their magic could overcome it. Or, perhaps, at the end, they fled. All we know is that one day the sea froze and on that day the dragons did not appear. On that day, we sent a final message to our people in the worlds beyond, asking that in a hundred years they come to wake us. And we went to sleep."

"I doubt if they ever got your message," said Alfred. "Or if they did, they couldn't have come. Each world had its own problems, it seems." He sighed, then blinked. "Thank you for telling me. I understand better now and I ... I'm sorry for the way I've been acting. I thought . . ." He stared at his shoes, shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"You thought we had abandoned our responsibility," Samah said grimly.

"I've seen it before. On Abarrach . . ." Alfred gulped.

The Councillor said nothing, looked at him expectantly. All the Council members were looking at him expectantly.

Now you understand, they were telling him. Now you know what to do.

Except that he didn't. Alfred spread trembling hands.

"What is it you want of me? Do you want me to help fight the dragons? I know something about the creatures, those we have on Arianus. But they seem to me to be very weak and ineffectual dragons, compared to these serpents you've described. And as for experimenting with seawater, I'm afraid—"

"No, Brother," Samah interrupted. "Nothing so difficult. You told Orla that the arrival of this dog on Chelestra meant that the dog's master was also on Chelestra. You have the animal. We want you to find the master and bring him to us."

"No," said Alfred, flustered, nervous. "I couldn't . . . He let me go, you see, when he could have taken me prisoner to the Labyrinth—"

"We have no intention of harming this Patryn." Samah's tone was soothing. "We only want to ask him questions, discover the truth about the Labyrinth, his people's suffering. Who knows, Brother, but that this could be the beginning of peace negotiations between our people? If you refuse, and war breaks out, how could you live with yourself, knowing that it had once been in your power to prevent it?"

"But I don't know where to look," Alfred protested. "And I wouldn't know what to say. He wouldn't come—"

"Wouldn't he? To face the enemy he has longed to challenge? Consider it," Samah added before the flustered Alfred had time to think up another argument. "Perhaps you can use the dog as your means of getting him to return."

"Surely, you aren't going to refuse a request of the Council?" asked Orla softly. "A request that is so reasonable? One that affects the safety of us all?"

"No, of ... of course not," Alfred said unhappily.

He looked down at the dog.

The animal cocked its head, thumped its plummy tail on the floor, and grinned.

CHAPTER \* 14

THE GOODSEA CHELESTRA

LAY FLAT ON HIS BED, STARING AT THE BACKS OF HIS HANDS.

The sigla tattooed on the skin were a deeper, darker blue; his magic was growing stronger every moment. And the runes were beginning to glow faintly, the prickling sensation tingled over his body—the warning signal of danger, far away still, yet rapidly approaching.

The dragon-snakes. Without a doubt.

It seemed to Haplo that the ship had picked up speed. The vessel's motion was less smooth, more erratic, and he sensed an increased vibration in the deck beneath his feet.

"I could always ask the dwarf. She would know," Haplo muttered.

And, of course, he should tell the mensch that they were nearing the lair of the dragon-snakes. Warn them to make themselves ready . . .

To do what? Die?

Devon, the slender, delicate elf, had nearly decapitated himself with the battle-ax.

Alake had her magic spells, but hers were cantrips that any child in the Labyrinth could perform by the time it was past its second Gate. Against the awesome power of the dragon-snakes, it would be like pitting that child against an army of snogs.

Grundle. Haplo smiled, shook his head. If any one of those mensch could deal with the dragon-snakes, it would be the dwarf maid. If nothing else, she'd be too stubborn to die.

He ought to go tell them, do what he could to prepare them. He sat up.

"No," he said suddenly, and flung himself back on the bed. "I've had enough dealings with the mensch for one day."

What in the name of the Labyrinth had possessed him to make that promise to them? Not letting them come to harm! He'd be damn lucky if he could keep himself alive.

He clenched his hands to fists, studied the sigla drawn taut over bones and tendons. Raising his arms, he looked at the sharp, clean outline of the muscles beneath the tattooed skin.

"Instinct. The same instinct that led my parents to hide me in the bushes and lead the snogs away from me. The instinct to protect those weaker than ourselves, the instinct that allowed our people to survive the Labyrinth!"

He sprang to his feet, began pacing his small cabin. "My lord would understand," he reassured himself. "My lord feels the same. Every day of his life, he returns to the Labyrinth, returns to fight and defend and protect his children, his people. It's a natural emotion . . ." Haplo sighed, swore softly. "But it's damn inconvenient!"

He had other, more urgent matters to think about than keeping three mensch kids alive. The foul seawater that washed away his rune magic faster than ordinary water washed away dirt. And the dragon-snakes' promise.

At least, he assumed it was a promise.

Samah. The great Samah. Head of the Council of Seven. The Councillor who had engineered the Sundering, the Councillor who had brought about the Patryn's downfall, imprisonment, and eons of suffering.

Councillor Samah. Many things had died in the Labyrinth, but not that name. It had been handed down from generation to generation, breathed with the last dying breath of father to son, spoken with a curse from mother to daughter. Samah had never been forgotten by his enemies, and the thought that Samah might be discovered alive filled Haplo with unspeakable joy. He didn't even think to ask how it was possible.

"I'll capture Samah and take him to my lord—a gift to make up for my past failures. My lord will see to it that Samah pays and pays dearly for every tear shed by my people, for every drop of blood. Samah will spend his lifetime paying. His days will be filled with pain, torment, fear. His nights with horror, agony, terror. No rest. No sleep. No peace, except in death. And soon, very soon, Samah will be begging to die."

But the Lord of the Nexus would see to it that Samah lived. Lived a very long life . . .

A violent pounding on the door brought Haplo out of a blood-gilded reverie. The pounding had been going on for some time, but he'd been hearing thunder in his waking dreams of vengeance and hadn't noticed.

"Perhaps we shouldn't bother him, Grundle," came Devon's soft voice through the door, "He might be asleep ..."

"Then he jolly well better wake up!" answered the dwarf.

Haplo rebuked himself for his lapse; such a slip would have cost him his life in the Labyrinth. Stalking over to the door, he yanked it open so suddenly that the dwarf, who had been beating on it with the handle of the battle-ax, tumbled inside.

"Well? What do you want?" Haplo snapped.

"We . . . we've wakened you," said Alake, her gaze shifting nervously from him to the rumpled bed.

Devon stammered. "W-we're sorry. We didn't mean—"

"The ship's picking up speed," stated Grundle. Her own gaze rested suspiciously on Haplo's skin. "And you're glowing again."

Haplo said nothing, glared at her, trusting she'd take the hint and go away. Alake and Devon were already sidling backward.

But Grundle was not to be intimidated. She rested the battle-ax on her shoulder, planted her feet firmly on the swaying deck, and looked Haplo in the face. "We're getting close to the dragon-snakes, aren't we?"

"Probably," he said, and started to close the door.

Grundle's stocky body blocked it.

"We want you to tell us what to do."

How the hell should I know? Haplo felt like shouting back at her in exasperation. I've come near a magical power like this in the Labyrinth, but nothing this strong. And all these dragon-snakes have to do is toss a bucket of seawater on me and I'm finished!

The mensch stood quietly, looking at him, trusting him (well, two of them trusted him), all of them silently pleading, hoping.

Who had given them that hope? And did he have the right to destroy it?

Besides, he told himself coldly, they might be useful. In the back of his mind was a plan . . .

"Come in," he said grudgingly, holding the door open wide.

The mensch trooped inside.

"Sit down," Haplo told them.

There was only the bed. Alake looked at it—rumped, still warm from Haplo's body. Her lashes fluttered, brushed against her cheeks. She shook her head.

"No, thank you. I will stand. I do not mind. . . ."

"Sit!" Haplo ordered grimly.

She sat, perched on the very edge of the bed. Devon took his place beside her, long legs spraddled uncomfortably. (Dwar-ven beds are built low to the floor.) Grundle plopped herself down near the head of the bed, her short legs swinging back and forth, heels scuffing against the deck. All three looked up at him, faces serious, solemn.

"Let's get one thing straight. I don't know any more about these dragon-snakes than you do. Less, maybe."

"They spoke to you," Grundle informed him.

Haplo ignored her.

"Shush, Grundle," whispered Alake.

"What we do to protect ourselves is mostly common sense. You"—Haplo shifted his gaze to the elf—"better keep pretending to be a girl. Cover your face and head and don't take the scarf off, no matter what. And keep your mouth shut. Keep quiet and let me do the talking. That goes for all of you," Haplo added with a meaningful glare at the dwarf.

Grundle snorted and tossed her head. She had placed the battle-ax between her legs and was nervously rapping the haft on the deck. The ax reminded Haplo of something.

"Are there any more weapons aboard? Small ones. Like knives?"

Grundle sniffed in scorn. "Knives are for elves. Dwarves don't use such puny weapons."

"But there are knives on board," offered Alake. "In the galley."

"Cooking knives," muttered Haplo. "Are they sharp, small? Could Devon hide one in his belt? Could you hide one . . . somewhere." He gestured at Alake's tight, form-fitting clothes.

"Of course they're sharp!" stated Grundle indignantly. "I'd like to see the day a dwarf would craft a dull knife! But they could be sharp as this ax and still not penetrate the hide of those foul beasts."

Haplo was silent, trying to think of the easiest, gentlest way to say what he had in mind. There was, he decided at last, no easy, gentle way. "I wasn't thinking about using them on the dragon-snakes." He said nothing more, hoping they'd get the idea.

They did . . . after a moment.

"You mean," said Alake, her black eyes large and wide, "that we're to use them ... on ... on ..." She swallowed.

"Yourselves," said Haplo, deciding to be brisk, matter-of-fact. "Death can sometimes come as a friend."

"I know," said Alake, shivering. "I saw how my people died."

"And I saw the elf the dragon-snakes tortured," Devon added.

Grundle said nothing, for a change. Even the feisty dwarf looked subdued.

Devon drew a deep breath. "We understand what you are saying and we're grateful, but I'm not sure we could . . ."

You could, Haplo told him silently. When the horror and the agony and the torment become more than you can bear, you'll be desperate to end it.

But how can I say that to them? Haplo wondered bitterly. They're children. Beyond a splinter in the foot or a fall and a bump on the head, what do they know of pain and suffering?

"Could you . . ." Devon licked his lips. He was trying very hard to be brave. "Could you . . . show us how?" He flicked a glance to the girls on either side of him. "I don't know about Alake and Grundle, but I never had to ... do anything like this." He smiled ruefully. "I'm pretty certain I'd botch it up."

"We don't need knives," said Alake. "I wasn't going to say anything, but I have certain herbs with me. A small amount is used to ease pain, but if you chew a whole leaf—"

"—it eases you right into the next life," Grundle concluded. She regarded the human with grudging admiration. "I didn't know you had it in you, Alake." A thought seemed to occur to her, however. "But what do you mean, you weren't going to tell us?"

"I would have," Alake replied. "I would have given you the choice. As I said," she added softly, lifting her black eyes to Haplo, "I saw how my people died."

He realized, then, that she was in love with him.

The knowledge did nothing to make him feel any better. In fact, it made him feel worse. It was just one more damn thing he had to worry about. But why should he? What difference did it make to him whether he broke the heart of this wretched human or not? She was, after all, only a mensch. But he could tell by the way she looked at him that he'd have to revise his notion of her being a child.

"Good. Good for you, Alake," he said, sounding as cold and dispassionate as possible. "You've got these herbs hidden where the dragon-snakes won't find them."

"Yes, they're in my—"

"Don't!" He raised his hand. "Don't say. What none of the rest of us know, the creatures can't wring out of us. Keep the poison safe and keep it secret."

Alake nodded solemnly. She continued to gaze at him, her eyes warm and liquid.

Don't do this to yourself. It's impossible, Haplo wanted to tell her.

Perhaps I should tell her. Perhaps that would be best. But how can I explain? How can I explain that to fall in love in the Labyrinth is to inflict a deliberate wound on yourself? Nothing good can come of love. Nothing but death and bitter sorrow and empty loneliness.

And how can I explain that a Patryn could never seriously love a mensch? There were instances, according to what Haplo knew about the pre-Sundering days, when Patryns, men and women both, had found pleasure among the mensch. Such liaisons were safe and amusing. But that had been long ago. His people took life more seriously now.

Aiake lowered her eyes, her lips were parted in a shy smile. Haplo realized that he had been staring at her and, undoubtedly, she was getting the wrong impression.

"Go on, now. Clear out," he said gruffly. "Go back to your cabins and make yourself ready. I don't think we have long to wait. Devon, you might take one of those knives, just to be on the safe side. You, too, Grundle."

"I'll show you where to find them," Alake offered.

She smiled at Haplo as she left, cast him a sidelong glance from beneath her long eyelashes, then led the way out the door.

Devon followed after her. The elf studied Haplo on the way out, and the elf's eyes were suddenly cool and shadowed. He said nothing, however. It was Grundle who stopped on the threshold, jaw outthrust, side whiskers bristling.

"You hurt her"—the dwarf raised a small, threatening fist— "and, snakes or no snakes, I'll kill you."

"I think you have other matters to concern you," said Haplo quietly.

"Humpf!" Grundle snorted, and shook her whiskers at him.

Turning her small back, she stumped off, battle-ax bouncing on her shoulder.

"Damn!" Haplo slammed shut the door.

The Patryn paced his small cabin, making plans, discarding them, making others. He had just come to the point of admitting to himself that this was all nonsense, that he was trying futilely to control what he had no control over, when his room was suddenly plunged into darkness.

Haplo stopped in his tracks, blind, disoriented. The submersible hit something, the jolt sent him flying. He crashed up against one of the walls. A grinding sound coming from below led him to guess the ship had run aground.

The vessel rocked, shifted, listed to one side, then seemed to settle itself. All movement, all sound, ceased.

Haplo stood absolutely still, holding his breath, listening.

His cabin was no longer dark. The sigla on his skin glowed a bright blue, bathing himself and every object in the small cabin with an eerie, shimmering light. Haplo had only once before seen the runes react this strongly to danger and that had been in the Labyrinth, when he'd accidentally stumbled upon the cave of a blood dragon, the most feared of all the fearsome creatures in that hellish place.

He'd turned tail and run then, run until his leg muscles burned and cramped and his lungs ached, run until he'd been literally sobbing with pain and exhaustion, and then he'd run some more. His body was telling him to run for it now. . . .

He stared at the glowing sigla, felt the almost-maddening tingling sensation pricking him to action. But the dragon-snakes had not threatened him. They had done just the reverse, promising him—or seeming to promise him—revenge on an ancient enemy.

"It could be a trick," he reasoned. "A trick to lure me here. A trap? But why?"

He looked again at the runes on his skin, was reassured. He was strong, his magic was strong, back to normal. If it was a trap, these dragon-snakes were going to discover they'd caught more than they'd bargained for—

Cries, shouts, footsteps, jarred Haplo from his thoughts.

"Haplo!" It was Grundle, howling.

He flung open his door. The mensch came running toward him, racing down the corridor. Alake lit their way, holding in her hand a lantern containing some sort of spongelike creature that gave off a bright, white light. [2] The mensch appeared considerably startled to see Haplo, whose skin was glowing as brightly as their lantern. They stumbled to a halt, huddled together, stared at him in awe.

In the darkness, the sigla shining brilliantly, he must be a marvelous spectacle.

"I ... I guess we don't need this," said Alake faintly, and dropped the lantern.

It fell to the deck with a clatter that went through Haplo like sharp knives.

"Shut up!" he hissed.

The three gulped, nodded, exchanged frightened glances. They must think the dragon-snakes are spying on us. Well, perhaps they are, Haplo thought grimly. Every trained and inbred instinct warned him to tread softly, walk warily.

He motioned, with his hand, for them to come closer. They moved down the passageway, trying their best to be quiet. Alake's beads jangled, Grundle's heavy boots thumped on the deck with a hollow sound, Devon got tangled up in his skirts, tripped, stumbled into a wall.

"Hush!" Haplo commanded softly, furiously. "Don't move!"

The mensch froze. Making less noise than the darkness, Haplo crept over to Grundle, knelt beside her. "What's happened? Do you know?" The dwarf nodded, opened her mouth. Haplo drew her near him, pointed to his ear. Her whiskers tickled his cheek.

"I think we've sailed into a cave."

Haplo considered. Yes, that made sense. It would explain the sudden darkness.

"Is this place where the dragon-snakes live, do you think?" asked Alake.

She had moved over to stand beside Haplo. He could feel her slender body trembling, but her voice was firm.

"Yes, the dragon-snakes are here," Haplo said, looking at the glowing sigla on his hands.

Alake edged closer. Devon drew a deep, shivering breath, pressed his lips tightly together. Grundle humped and frowned.

No screams, no tears, no panic. Haplo was forced to give the mensch grudging credit for that much courage.

"What do we do?" asked Devon, trying very hard to keep his voice from cracking.

"We stay here," said Haplo. "We don't go anywhere or do anything. We wait."

"We're not going to be waiting very long," Grundle observed.

"What? Why not?" Haplo demanded.

In answer, she pointed above his head. Haplo looked up. The light shining from his skin illuminated the wooden planks above them. They were wet, shining. A drop of water fell to the floor at Haplo's feet. Another followed, and another.

Haplo sprang back, flattened himself against the wall. He stared at the water on the deck, looked up at the drops that were falling from the overhead. The drops had merged into a trickle, the trickle was rapidly becoming a stream.

"The ship's breaking apart," stated Grundle, then frowned. "Dwarven submersibles don't break apart, though. It must be the snakes."

"They're driving us out. We'll have to swim," said Alake. "Don't worry, Grundle. Devon and I will help you."

"I'm not worried," said the dwarf. Her gaze slid to Haplo.

For the first time in his life, he knew stark terror—weakening, debilitating. His fear robbed him of his ability to think, to reason. He could do nothing except stare with a terrible fascination at the water that was creeping nearer and nearer his feet.

Swim! He almost laughed. So it is a trap! They lure me here, then see to it that I'm helpless.

Water splashed on his arm. Haplo flinched, wiped it off hastily. Too late. Where the seawater touched the skin, the sigla's glow darkened. The water was rising, it sloshed over the toes of his boots. He could feel the circle of his magic slowly begin to crack and crumble.

"Haplo! What's wrong!" Alake cried.

A section of the hull gave way. Wood snapped and splintered. Water cascaded in through the gaping hole. The elf lost his footing, slid beneath the torrent. Alake, clinging to an upright beam, caught hold of Devon's wrist, saved him from being washed down the corridor. He staggered to his feet.

"We can't stay here!" he shouted.

The water was level with Grundle's waist and the dwarf maid was starting to panic. Her nut-brown complexion had gone sallow. Her eyes were round, her chin beginning to quiver. Dwarves can breathe the

seawater, in the same manner as elves and humans, but—probably because their solid bodies are so ungainly in the water—they don't like the sea, don't trust it.

Grundle had never been in water up over her ankles. Now it was rising to her chest.

"Help! Alake, Devon! help m-me!" she shrieked, flailing about with her arms, splashing wildly. "Alakeeeee!"

"Grundle! It's all right!"

"Here, catch hold of my hand. Ouch! Don't pinch. I've got you. Let loose a bit. There, take Alake's hand, too."

"I have you, Grundle. You're going to be fine. Relax. No, don't swallow the water. Duck your head down and take a breath just as you would the air. No! Don't! You'll choke! She's choking. Grundle . . ."

The dwarf sank beneath the water, came up coughing and sputtering, increasing her panic.

"We better get her to the surface!" cried Devon.

Alake cast a worried look in Haplo's direction.

He had neither moved nor spoken. The water was up to his thighs. The light from his skin had all but died out.

Haplo saw her look, saw that she was concerned about him. He almost laughed out loud.

"Go on!" he snarled.

More planks were giving way, the water was almost to Grundle's nose. The dwarf maid fought to keep her head above it, panted and gurgled.

Devon winced in pain. "She's tearing my hand off, Alake! Come on!"

"Go!" Haplo commanded angrily.

The hull gave way with a shattering crash. Water surged inside the ship, closed over Haplo's head. He lost sight of the mensch, lost sight of everything. It was as if night had taken on liquid shape and form. He knew a moment's panic equal to the dwarf's. He held his breath until it hurt, not wanting to breathe the darkness. A part of his despairing mind told him it would be far easier to drown. His body refused to let him, however.

He gasped, began to breathe water. After a few moments, his head cleared. He couldn't see, and groped his way among the wreckage. Shoving broken timbers to one side, he managed to free himself.

He swam aimlessly, wondering if he was going to be doomed to flounder about in this watery night until he collapsed from exhaustion. But even as the thought took shape in his mind, his head popped up out of the water. Gratefully, he sucked in air.

Floating on the surface, he trod water quietly, and looked around him.

A large campfire had been built on the shore. Wood crackled and burned, offering comforting warmth and light. Its ruddy glow was reflected off the cavern's rock ceiling and walls.

Haplo sensed fear, coming from outside him. Overwhelming terror surrounded him. The walls were covered with some sort of sticky green-brown substance that seemed to ooze from the rock like blood. He had the strange impression that the cave itself was wounded, that it lived in fear. Fear and horrible pain.

Ridiculous.

Haplo glanced swiftly behind him, to either side, but could see little. Here and there, a gleam of firelight played on wet rock.

The sound of splashing drew his attention. Three figures— black shadows against the orange firelight— emerged from the water. Two of the figures were helping the third, who could not walk. By this, the musical sound of clashing beads, and a muffled groan from the third figure, Haplo judged them to be his mensch.

He saw no sign of the dragon-snakes.

Alake and Devon managed to drag Grundle partway up the shore. Once there, obviously exhausted, they let loose of her hands. All sank down to rest. But Alake had only taken a few deep breaths before she was back on her feet, heading again for the water.

"Where are you going?" The elf's clear voice echoed in the cavern.

"I've got to find him, Devon! He may need help. Did you see his face—"

Haplo, muttering imprecations beneath his breath, swam for the shore. Alake heard the sound of his splashing. Unable to see what or who was making the noise, she froze. Devon hurried to her side. Metal glinted in his hand.

"It's me!" Haplo called to them. His stomach scraped against solid ground. He stood up, walked, dripping, out of the water.

"Are . . . are you all right?" Alake reached out a timid hand, withdrew it at the sight of the scowl on Haplo's face.

No, he wasn't all right. He was all wrong.

Ignoring both the human and the elf, he stomped past them, strode swiftly to the fire. The sooner he dried off, the sooner his magic would return. The dwarf lay in a sodden heap on the sand. He wondered if she was dead. A muffled groan reassured him.

"She hurt?" he asked, reaching the fire.

"No," answered Devon, coming up from behind.

"She's scared, more than anything," Alake added. "She'll come around. What . . . what are you doing?"

"Taking off my clothes," Haplo grunted. He had stripped off his shirt and his boots, was now unlacing his leather trousers.

Alake gave a strangled cry. She hastily averted her face, covered her eyes with her hands. Haplo grunted again. If the girl had never seen a naked man before, she was going to see one now. He had neither the time nor the patience to indulge a human female's sensibilities. Though his warning magic was gone, the sigla washed away, he had the distinct feeling that they weren't alone in this cave. They were being watched.

Flinging his trousers to the sand, Haplo crouched by the blaze, held out his hands and arms to the warming fire. In satisfaction, he watched the droplets of water evaporate, begin to dry. He glanced around.

"Pull your scarf over your head," he ordered Devon. "Sit by the fire. It'd look suspicious if you didn't. But keep your face out of the light. And put that damn knife away!"

Devon did as he was told. He thrust the knife in his breast, dragged a strip of wet cloth up over his head and face. Shivering, he crept near the fire, started to squat down, legs crossed.

"Don't sit like a man!" Haplo hissed. "On your knees. That's it. Alake, bring Grundle over here. And wake her up. I want everyone conscious and alert."

Alake nodded, not taking time to reply. She hastened over to the prostrate dwarf.

"Grundle, you've got to get up. Haplo says so. Grundle"— Alake's voice lowered—"I can feel the evil. The dragon-snakes are here, Grundle. They're watching us. Please, you've got to be brave!"

The dwarf groaned again, but she sat up, huffing and wheezing and blinking water out of her eyes. Alake helped her to her feet. The two started walking toward the fire.

"Wait!" Haplo breathed.

Slowly, he rose.

Behind him, he heard Alake draw in her breath sharply, heard Grundle mutter something in dwarven, then fall silent. Devon melted back into the shadows.

Red-green eyes appeared out of the darkness, made the light of the fire seem dim by contrast. The eyes were slanted, snake eyes and there were many of them, innumerable, far more than Haplo could count. They towered over him, their height unbelievable. A sound came of giant, heavy bodies undulating over sand and rock. A stench, foul and putrid, seemed to coat his nose and mouth with the flavor of death, decay. His stomach clenched. Behind him, he heard the mensch whimper in terror. One of them was retching.

Haplo didn't turn around. He couldn't turn around. The dragon-snakes slithered into the firelight. Flames shone on huge, scaled, shining bodies. He was overwhelmed by the enormity of the creatures that loomed before him. Enormous not only in size, but in power. He was awed, humbled. He no longer regretted the loss of his magic, for it would have been of no use. These beings could crush him with a breath. A whisper would hammer him into the ground.

Hands clenched at his side, Haplo waited calmly for death.

The largest among the dragon-snakes suddenly reared its head. The green-red eyes burned, seemed to bathe the cavern in an unholy radiance. Then the eyes closed, the head sank to the sand before Haplo, who stood naked in the firelight.

"Patryn," it said reverently. "Master."

CHAPTER \* 15

DRAKNOR

CHELESTRA

"WELL, TEAR OUT MY WHISKERS BY THE ROOTS!"

Haplo heard the dwarf's awed murmur, felt something of the same himself. The gigantic dragon-snake prostrated its head on the ground before the Patryn. Its fellows had drawn back a respectful distance, their scaled necks arched, heads bowed, slit-eyes closed.

Haplo remained tense, wary, alert. Dragons were intelligent, tricky creatures, not to be trusted.

The dragon-snake lifted its head, reared its body almost to the cavern's high ceiling. The mensch gasped and cried out. Haplo raised a hand.

"Be quiet," he ordered.

The dragon-snake was, apparently, merely shifting to a more comfortable position. It wound its body round and round, looping in upon itself, and came to rest with its head pillowed on its own coils.

"Now, we can speak together more comfortably. Please, Patryn, be seated. Welcome to Draknor."

The dragon-snake spoke the Patryn language, a rune-based language that should have presented images to Haplo's mind, as well as words. But he saw nothing, heard only the sound, and it was flat and lifeless. A shiver crawled over the Patryn's skin. It was as if the dragons had reduced the power of the runes to nothing more than shapes and figures, to be manipulated at will.

"Thank you, Royal One." Haplo seated himself again, never taking his eyes from the dragon-snake.

The snake's own slit-eyed gaze slid to the mensch, who had not moved. "But why do our young guests keep from drying themselves at the fire? Is the blaze too hot? Perhaps not hot enough. We know so little of you frail beings, we cannot judge properly ..."

Haplo shook his head. "They're afraid of you, Royal One. After what you did to their people, I can hardly blame them."

The dragon-snake shifted its coils. Its eyelids closed, a soft, sibilant sigh escaped its toothless mouth. "Ah, I fear we've made a terrible mistake. But we will make it up to them."

The red eyes opened, the snake's tone was anxious. "You have influence over them? They trust you? Yes, of course. Assure them that we mean them no harm. We will do everything in our power to make their stay among us comfortable. A warm place to sleep? Food, dry clothing? Precious jewels, gold, silver? Will all this make them happy, soothe their fright?"

The ground in front of Haplo was suddenly littered with bowls and baskets and dishes and trays containing every type of luscious food imaginable: mounds of fragrant fruit, plates of steaming meat, bottles of wine, casks of foaming ale.

Clothing of all make and description billowed in the air like multicolored, silken birds, fluttered down to land at Alake's feet, draped over Devon's nerveless arms, sparkled in Grundle's startled eyes. Caskets of emeralds and sapphires and pearls spilled their shining contents into the sand. Mounds of golden coins gleamed in the fire's light.

Another fire sprang up in the distance, revealing a cave within a cave.

"It is warm and dry," said the dragon-snake. Speaking to the mensch, it had switched to the human language. "We have filled it with sweet grasses for your beds. You must be exhausted and hungry." It spoke in elven. "Please, take our gifts, retire for the night." It concluded in dwarven. "You need have no fear. Your slumber will be safe, blessed. My people will guard it."

The other dragon-snakes wove their bodies in a sinuous dance, the words "safe . . . blessed" hissed through the echoing cave.

The mensch, having expected death, torture, torment, were completely disarmed and bewildered by the lavish gifts. They stood staring, dazed and, if anything, more frightened.

Grundle was the first to recover her tongue. A circlet of silver had dropped out of the air, onto her head, over one eye. Floundering through a heap of cloth and mounds of food, she stomped over to Haplo.

Hands on her hips, she pointedly ignored the dragon-snakes, spoke to the Patryn as if no one else was on the beach except the two of them.

"What is all this? What's going on? What are you two talking about in that dark language of yours?"

"The dragon-snake says there's been a mistake. It's trying to make amends. I think—" Haplo began, but he didn't get far.

"Amends!" Grundle raised a clenched fist, whipped around to face the dragon-snake. "For destroying the sun-chasers, for butchering Alake's people, for torturing that poor elf! I'll give the beast amends. I'll—"

Haplo caught hold of her, dragged her down, squirming and kicking. "Stop it, you little fool! You want to get us all killed?"

Panting, Grundle glared up at him. He held her fast until he felt the sturdy body relax in his grip.

"I'm all right now," she told him sullenly.

He let her up. She crouched at his side, rubbing her bruised wrists. Haplo motioned to the other two to come join them.

"Listen to me, all of you!" he said. "I'm going to try to find out what's going on. But in the meantime, you three will accept the dragon's hospitality with a good grace. We might yet come out alive—you and your people. That's why you came, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Haplo," said Alake. "We'll do what you say."

"I don't suppose we have much choice, do we?" Devon asked, his words muffled by the wet scarf around his head.

Grundle nodded grudgingly. "But I still don't trust them!" she added, shaking her whiskers at the snakes in defiance.

"Good." Haplo smiled. "I don't either. Keep your eyes and ears open, your mouths shut. Now, do as the dragon-snake suggests. Go to that cave. You and Alake and . . . uh—"

"Sabia."

"Sabia. You three go into that cave and try to get some sleep. Take dry clothes with you and some wine and whatever else you want. Food, maybe."

Grundle sniffed. "It's probably poisoned."

Haplo checked an exasperated sigh. "If they wanted to kill you, they could have dropped an ax on your head, instead of that." He pointed to the silver crown, which had once more slipped down over one eye.

Removing the circlet, the dwarf regarded it suspiciously, then she shrugged.

"You make sense," she said, sounding surprised.

Tossing the silver to the sand, she grabbed a basket of bread in one hand, hefted a small barrel of ale with the other, and trudged off toward the cave.

"Go with her," Haplo told Alake, who was lingering near him. "You'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Yes, I know. I ... I will take your clothes and dry them for you," Alake offered.

She darted Haplo a sidelong glance, then swiftly averted her gaze and started to pick up his wet trousers.

"No need," Haplo said, laying a gentle hand on her arm. "Thank you, but the dragon-snakes have provided clothing for me, as well. However, you might want to pick out something for ... her . . . Sabia. Something that fits better."

"Yes, you're right." Alake seemed relieved to have a task to perform.

She began to sort among the vast amount of raiments scattered about the sand. Finding what she wanted, she looked back at Haplo with a smile, cast a cool, defiant glance at the dragon-snakes, then hurried off after Grundle.

Devon, still keeping to the shadows, was gathering up food and wine. He was about to follow the others to the cave, when HapJo beckoned.

"Two of you sleep. One stays awake. Understand?" He spoke softly, in elven.

Devon made no response, merely nodded and went on his way.

Haplo turned back to the dragon-snake, who had rested quietly the entire time, its head on its coiled body, its eyes blinking lazily in the firelight.

"Truly," it said, when the three had disappeared into the cave, "you Patryns have a way with the mensch. If your people had been free to help them, all these centuries, what marvelous things might they have accomplished. Alas, it was not to be."

The dragon-snake sadly mused to itself long moments, then shifted its great bulk.

"However, now that you have escaped your unjust incarceration, you will, no doubt, make up for wasted time and opportunity. Tell me about your people and your plans."

Haplo shrugged. "Our story is long, Royal One, and, though it is bitter to us, would probably be boring to others." He had no intention of telling these creatures anything about his people. His body was dry; he could see the faint outlines of the sigla returning to his skin. "Do you mind if I get dressed?"

He had noticed, suddenly, a number of weapons, lying among the piles of jewels and clothing. He wanted a closer look.

"Please. By all means. How thoughtless of me not to have suggested it. But then"—the snake glanced complacently at its own scaled skin—"we tend not to think in such terms."

Haplo rummaged among the mass of clothing, found what he needed, and dressed himself. All the while his eyes were on a sword. He wondered how he could manage to pick it up without arousing the snake's ire.

"But the sword is yours, Master," said the dragon-snake calmly.

Haplo looked at it in wary astonishment.

"It is not wise to go unarmed in the presence of your enemy," the dragon-snake remarked.

Haplo lifted the sword, hefted it experimentally, liked the way it felt. Almost as if it had been made for his hand. He found a swordbelt, buckled it on, slid the weapon in its sheath. "By enemy, I take it you mean the Sartan, Royal One."

"Who else?" The dragon-snake appeared confused. Then, suddenly, it understood. "Ah, you refer to us. I should have known. You formed your opinion of us after talking to them." It glanced at the cave.

"Provided they told me the truth," Haplo said.

"Oh, they did. I'm certain." The dragon-snake sighed again and its sigh was echoed by its fellows. "We acted hastily and perhaps were, shall we say, overzealous in our efforts to intimidate them. But all creatures have a right to defend themselves. Is the wolf called cruel when he goes for the throat of the lion?"

Haplo grunted, glanced at the display of magical power that was manifest on the ground all around him. "You want me to believe you're frightened of a handful of elves, humans, and dwarves?"

"Not the mensch," hissed the dragon-snake. "Those who stand behind the mensch! Those who brought them here!"

"The Sartan."

"Yes! Your ancient enemy and ours."

"You're saying that the Sartan are here, on Chelestra."

"An entire city of them. Led by one whose name is not unfamiliar to you."

"Samah?" Haplo frowned. "So you said to me on board the ship, Royal One. But it can't be the same Samah, the Councillor responsible for imprisoning us—"

"The one! The same!" The dragon-snake reared up from among its coils, its red-green eyes flared. Whispering to itself, seething, it slowly calmed, settled back down. "By the way, what are you called, Patryn?"

"Haplo."

"Haplo." The snake seemed to taste the word, found it to its liking. "Then, Haplo, I will tell you how it is that this Samah has returned again to a universe he and those of his accursed race nearly destroyed.

"After the Sundering, Samah and his Council of Seven looked over the four new worlds they had created and chose the most beautiful among them on which to make their home. They brought with them their favorites among the mensch, to serve as their slaves, and founded their city of Surunan on a magically created landmass which they call the Chalice.

"Imagine their surprise when they discovered that their beautiful world was already inhabited."

"Your people, Royal One?"

The dragon-snake modestly lowered its head in acquiescence.

"But where did you come from? Who created you?"

"You did, Patryn," said the dragon-snake softly.

Haplo frowned, puzzled. But before he could question further, the dragon-snake had continued on.

"At first, we welcomed these newcomers to our world. We hoped for prosperous, peaceful interaction with them. But Samah hated us, because he could not enslave us, as he enslaved the wretched mensch. He and the other Council members attacked us, completely without provocation. Naturally, we defended ourselves. We did not kill them, however, but sent them running back to their city in disgrace."

"You defeated Samah?" Haplo asked, dubious. "The most powerful of all the Sartan who ever lived?"

"You may have noticed a certain odd property of this seawater . . ." said the dragon snake suggestively.

"I didn't drown in it, if that's what you mean, Royal One. I can breathe it the same as air." "I wasn't referring to that."

Haplo shook his head. "I can't think of anything else." "Indeed?" The snake shifted its bulk slightly, almost as if it were laughing. "I would have guessed the seawater to have the same effect on the magic of both races—Sartan and Patryns. Most peculiar."

Haplo could scarcely breathe. The terrible joy that filled his being produced an actual, physical pain in his chest. He needed an outlet for his emotion, reached for some food, though he wasn't hungry.

The seawater in this world destroyed Sartan magic! And on this world, surrounded by seawater, was the Patryn's most hated enemy. Haplo lifted a wineskin, nearly dropped it. His hands shook with elation. Carefully, he laid the wineskin back down. Be calm. Be wary. Don't trust these creatures.

He tried to appear casual. He took a bite of something, not knowing or caring what. "But all this you describe must have happened many generations ago. How is it possible that Samah is alive, Royal One? Perhaps you've made a mistake."

"No mistake," said the dragon-snake. "But . . . the food. Is it to your liking? Will you have more of anything?"

Haplo hadn't tasted what he put in his mouth. "No, thank you. Please go on."

The snake obliged. "We hoped that, after we had chastised them, the Sartan would leave us alone, allow us to pursue our lives in peace. But Samah was furious at us. We had made him look the fool in the eyes of the mensch, who, seeing these godlike creatures brought so low, began to talk openly of revolt. He vowed revenge on us, no matter what the cost to his people or to the innocent mensch.

"Using their magical powers—you may guess, by the way, that the Sartan had now an extreme aversion to seawater— Samah and the Council wrenched loose the seastar from its stationary position in the center of this world. The season began drifting away. The water grew colder, the temperature in both their Chalice and in our seamoons began to drop. Thus, though it meant that they themselves would be forced to abandon the world, fleeing through Death's Gate, the Sartan hoped to freeze us to death.

"Of course they would have, in the process, frozen the mensch, as well. But what were a few thousand humans, dwarves, and elves, compared to the vast numbers already sacrificed to Sartan ambition during the Sundering? The mensch discovered this evil plot, however, and rebelled against their masters. They built ships and fled into the Goodsea, chasing after the season.

"The mensch exodus appalled and alarmed the Sartan. They didn't want this world for themselves any longer, but neither did they intend to leave it to the mensch. They swore that not one mensch should survive. At this point, we had a choice to make."

The dragon-snake sighed, raised its head, looked at its fellows with pride. "We could have gone with the mensch. They begged us to go, to protect them from whales and other fearsome creatures of the deep brought here by the Sartan to keep the mensch in line. But we knew that we were the only ones who could stand between the mensch and the fury of the Sartan. We chose to stay behind, though it meant that we must suffer.

"We saved the mensch and prevented the Sartan from fleeing through Death's Gate. The ice closed in on them and on us. They had no choice but to seek refuge in the Sleep. We hibernated, knowing that someday the seastar would drift this direction again. Our enemies would awake, and so would we."

"But why, then, Royal One, did you attack the mensch? You were once their saviors."

"Yes, but that was long, long ago. They have forgotten all about us and the sacrifice we made." The dragon-snake sighed heavily, sank back down on its coils. "I suppose that we should have taken the passage of time into account and made allowances, but we were thrilled over returning to this beautiful world and eager to make the acquaintance of the descendants of those for whom we had risked all to save."

"We came upon the mensch too suddenly, without warning. Admittedly, we are not lovely to look upon. Our smell, I am told, offends the nostrils. Our size intimidates. The mensch were horribly frightened and attacked us. Hurt by such ingratitude, we, I regret to say, fought back. Sometimes we do not know our own strength."

The dragon-snake sighed again. Its fellows, deeply affected, whispered in grief, lowered their heads into the sand.

"When we were able to view the matter in a calmer light, we at once acknowledged that much of the blame lay with us. But how could we rectify it? If we came upon the mensch again, they would only redouble their efforts to kill us. And so we decided to bring the mensch to us. One of each race, a daughter of each of the royal households. If we could convince these gentle damsels that we meant no harm, then they would return to their people, offer our apologies, and all would be well. We would all live in peace and harmony."

Gentle damsel. Grundle? Haplo chuckled to himself at the thought. But he said nothing, brushed it aside, brushed aside any doubts he might have had over the dragon-snake's veracity.

Parts of the snake's story didn't exactly fit the facts as he'd heard them from the mensch, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was a chance to strike a blow, a telling blow, at the Sartan.

"Peace and harmony are all very well, Royal One," Haplo said, watching the snake closely, feeling his way, "but the Sartan will never allow it. Once they know you have returned, they'll do their best to destroy you."

"Too true," agreed the dragon-snake. "Destroy us and enslave the mensch. But what can be done? Our numbers are few; many of us did not survive the hibernation. And the Sartan, or so we hear from our spies, the gushni, are stronger than ever. They've received reinforcements through Death's Gate."

"Reinforcements." Haplo shook his head. "That's not possible . . ."

"One has come, at least," The dragon-snake spoke with conviction. "A Sartan who travels freely through Death's Gate, visiting other worlds. He disguises himself as a mensch, calls himself by a mensch name. He pretends to be bumbling and clumsy, but we know him for what he is. He is the one we call Serpent Mage. And he is far more powerful than Samah himself."

The dragon-snake's eyes narrowed. "Why do you laugh, Patryn?"

"I'm sorry, Royal One," said Haplo, grinning, "but I know this Sartan. And you don't need to worry about him. He doesn't pretend to be bumbling and clumsy. He is bumbling and clumsy. And he doesn't travel through Death's Gate. More likely he fell through it, by accident."

"He's not powerful?"

Haplo jerked a thumb toward the cave. "Those mensch in there are more powerful."

"You astonish me," stated the dragon-snake, and it did truly seem surprised. It cast a slit-eyed, red-green glance at its fellows. "All our information led us to believe quite the opposite. He is the Serpent Mage."

"Your information's wrong," said Haplo, shaking his head, unable to keep from laughing again at the thought. Alfred, a Serpent Mage! Whatever that was, he wasn't.

"Well, well, well. My, my, my," mused the dragon-snake. "This does require some rethinking. But, we seem to have strayed from your original point. I asked what could be done about the Sartan. You, I think, have the answer."

Haplo took several steps nearer the dragon-snake, ignoring the faint warning glow of the sigla on his skin.

"These three races of mensch get along well together. They were, in fact, preparing to unite to go to war against you. What if we convinced them that they had a more dangerous foe?"

The dragon-snake's eyes opened wide, the red-green glow turned completely red, was blinding in its intensity. Haplo squinted against it, was forced to shield his eyes from the glare with an upraised hand.

"But these mensch are peace-loving. They won't fight."

"I have a plan, Royal One. Believe me, if it comes to their survival, they'll fight."

"I see the shape of your plan in your mind and you are right, it will work." The dragon-snake closed its eyes, lowered its head. "Truly, Haplo, you Patryns deserve to be the masters of this world. We bow before you."

The dragon-snakes all prostrated their heads in the dust, gigantic bodies writhed in homage. Haplo felt suddenly exhausted, so weary that he staggered where he stood, almost fell.

"Go, now, to your well-deserved rest," whispered the dragon-snake.

Haplo stumbled off across the sand, heading for the cave where the mensch sheltered. He could not remember ever feeling this tired before, assumed it must be a reaction to the loss of his magic. He entered the cave, cast one glance around at the mensch, assured them they were safe, then slumped to the ground, sank into a deep and dreamless sleep.

The king dragon-snake rested its head comfortably once again on its coils, red-green eyes gleamed.

## CHAPTER \* 16

### SURUNAN CHELESTRA

ALFRED, ACCOMPANIED BY THE DOG, LEFT THE COUNCIL MEETING as soon as he possibly could and began to roam about Surunan. His joy in his newfound realm had been destroyed. He looked at beauty that could no longer touch him; listened to a language that was his own, yet sounded foreign to him; felt himself a stranger in what should have been his home.

"Find Haplo," he muttered to the dog, who, hearing the beloved name, began to whine eagerly. "How do they expect me to find Haplo? And what am I to do with him if I find him?"

Distraught and confused, he wandered the streets aimlessly.

"How can I find Haplo when even you can't find your master?" he demanded of the dog, who gazed up sympathetically but was unable to supply an answer.

Alfred groaned. "Why don't they understand? Why can't they just let me alone?"

He stopped, suddenly, looked around. He had traveled farther than he had intended, farther than he'd ever been before. He wondered bleakly if his body—as usual—had decided to run away and had not bothered to inform his brain of the decision.

" 'We only want to ask the Patryn questions.' Samah's words, and the Councillor wouldn't lie to me. He couldn't lie. One Sartan can never lie to another.

"Why, then," Alfred asked the dog unhappily, "don't I trust Samah? Why do I trust him less than I trust Haplo?"

The dog was unable to say.

"Perhaps Samah's right." Alfred continued, a prey to misery. "Perhaps the Patryn has corrupted me. I wonder if they have the power to do that? I never heard of a Sartan falling under a Patryn's enchantment, but I suppose it's possible." He sighed, passed his hand over his bald head. "Especially with me."

The dog saw that Alfred was not, after all, going to produce Haplo on the spot. Panting in the heat, it flopped down at the Sartan's feet.

Alfred was tired and hot himself. He looked about wearily for a place to rest. Not too distant stood a smallish square building made of the eternal white marble that the Sartan loved and which Alfred was beginning to find a trifle boring. A covered porch, supported by innumerable white marble columns, surrounded it, gave it the stolid, formal look of a public building, not the more relaxed air of a private residence.

Strange that it should stand so far from the other public buildings, located in the heart of the city, Alfred thought as he approached it. The cool shadowy portico offered a welcome respite from the bright sunlight that shone interminably on the Sartan city. The dog trotted along after him.

Reaching the porch, Alfred was disappointed to find no benches where he could sit and rest. Assuming that there must be some inside, he waited until his eyes had adjusted to the shadowy interior, then read the runes inscribed upon the large, bronze double doors.

He was puzzled and considerably startled to find runes of warding. The sigla weren't very strong, nothing like the ones that had tried to bar their way into the Chamber of the Damned on Abarrach. [1] These runes were far milder, advised Alfred in a friendly fashion that the nice, polite, and proper thing for him to do would be to leave. If he had business inside, he was told to seek permission to enter from the Council.

Any other Sartan—Samah, for example, or Orla—would have smiled, nodded, and immediately turned around and left. Alfred started to do just that. He fully intended to do just that—turn around and leave.

In fact, half of him did turn around. The other half, unfortunately, chose that moment to decide to open the door a crack and take a peep inside, with the result that Alfred stumbled over himself, fell through the door, and landed flat on his face in the dust.

A game, thought the dog, and bounded in after the Sartan. The animal began licking Alfred's face and biting playfully at his ears.

Alfred endeavored to induce the playful animal to remove itself from his person. Kicking and flailing on the dust-covered floor, he accidentally struck the door with his foot. The door swung shut, closing with a boom that sent dust flying into the air. Both Alfred and the dog began to sneeze.

Alfred took advantage of the dog's preoccupation with the dust up its nose to rise hurriedly to his feet. He was uneasy without quite knowing why. Perhaps it was the absence of light. The building's interior wasn't cloaked with the absolute blackness of night, but it was shrouded in a murky duskiness that distorted shapes, made the ordinary seem strange and consequently ominous.

"We'd better leave," said Alfred to the dog, who, rubbing its nose with its paws, sneezed again and seemed to think this an excellent idea.

The Sartan groped his way through the gloom to the double doors, started to open them, discovered that there was no handle. He stared at the entrance, scratching his head.

The doors had shut completely, not a crack remained. It was as if they had become part of the wall. Alfred was quite perplexed. No building had ever done this to him before. He peered intently at where the doors had been, expecting sigla to light up, advising him that he was wrongfully attempting to enter an egress and suggesting that he take the back stairs.

Nothing of the sort appeared. Nothing of any sort appeared.

Alfred, uneasiness growing, sang a few runes in a quavering voice, runes that should have opened the door, provided a way out.

The runes shimmered, then faded. Negating magic at work on the door. Whatever spell he cast would instantly be countered by a negative spell of the same power.

Alfred groped about in the dusky shadows, searching for a way out. He stepped on the dog's tail, bruised his shin on a marble bench, and scraped the flesh off his fingers trying to open a crack that he thought might be another door, but turned out to be a flaw in one of the marble blocks.

Apparently whoever came into this building was meant to stay in this building. Odd. Extremely odd. He sat down on the bench to consider the matter.

Admittedly, the sigla on the outside had requested that he not go in, but it had been a request, not a prohibition. Also admittedly, he had no business inside here, nor had he obtained permission from the Council to enter.

"Yes, I'm in the wrong," he said to the dog, petting it to keep it near him, finding comfort in its presence, "but I can't be too wrong, otherwise they would have laid far stronger warding spells on the door that would definitely keep people out. And obviously people come in here, or at least they did once long ago.

"And because it doesn't say anything about there being another way out," he continued, thinking, "that must mean that there is another way out and everyone who came in knew about it. The way out was common knowledge and therefore they didn't bother to put up directions. I don't know about it, of course, because I'm a stranger, but I should be able to find it. Perhaps there's a door on the side or around back."

Feeling more cheerful, Alfred sang a light-shedding rune that appeared in the air over his head (absolutely fascinating the dog) and headed for the building's interior.

Now that he could see clearly, Alfred was able to get a much better picture of his surroundings. He was in a hallway that ran the length of the building's front and, from what he could tell by advancing to the end, then turned a sharp right angle, continued on down the side. Dim light filtered in through several skylights in the ceiling—skylights that, observed Alfred, could use a good cleaning.

He was reminded of one of Bane's toys—a box that had another, smaller box nesting inside it, and another smaller box inside that.

A door in the center of the wall opposite the doors through which he had come offered entry into the next smaller of the boxes. Alfred studied this door and the walls around it carefully, telling himself that if there were runes of warding upon it, he would heed their warning. The door was smooth, however, had no advice or help to offer.

Alfred pushed on it gingerly.

The door opened, swinging easily on silent hinges. He entered, keeping the dog close at hand, and propped the door open with his shoe, when it seemed likely to shut behind him. Hobbling, one shoe on and one off, he entered the room and stood looking around in amazement.

"A library," he said to himself. "Why, it's nothing more than a library."

Alfred wasn't quite sure what he'd expected (vague thoughts of nasty beasts with long, sharp teeth had been lurking in the back of his mind), but it wasn't this. The room was huge, open, airy. A large skylight of frosted glass softened the glare of the sun, provided light to read by that was also easy on the eyes. Wooden tables and chairs filled the central portion of the room. The walls were honeycombed with large holes bored into the marble, and in each of these holes was housed neat stacks of gold scroll tubes.

There was no dust at all in this room; strong runes of preserving and protection adorned the walls, to prevent the scrolls from deteriorating.

Alfred spotted a door on the far wall.

"Ah, the way out."

He headed for it, moving slowly in order to make his way through the maze of tables and do as little damage to them and himself as possible. This proved difficult, for he discovered, as he traversed the room, that the various scroll compartments were labeled and catalogued for ease of access, and his attention kept wandering.

The Ancient World. He read the various categories: Art . . . Architecture . . . Entomology . . . Dinosaurs . . . Fossils . . . Machines . . . Psychology . . . Religion . . . Space Program (Space? What did that mean? Empty space? Open space?) . . . Technology . . . War . . .

Alfred's footsteps lagged, came to a stumbling halt. He gazed about him in ever-increasing awe. Nothing more than a library, he'd said to himself. What a fool! This was the library. The Great Library of the Sartan. His people on Arianus had assumed it was lost in the Sundering. Alfred looked to another wall: The History of the Sartan, And, below that, much less extensive, though with numerous subcategories: The History of the Patrins.

Alfred sat down rather suddenly. Fortunately, a chair happened to be in the vicinity or he would have fallen to the floor. All thoughts of leaving vanished from his head. What wealth! What richness! What fabulous treasure! The story of a world he knew only in his dreams, a world that had been whole, then was wrenched violently apart. The story of his people and that of their enemy. Undoubtedly, the events that led up to the Sundering, Council meetings, discussions . . .

"I could spend days here," Alfred said to himself, dazed and happy, happier than he could remember being in vast eons of time. "Days! Years!"

He felt moved to express his homage for this vault of knowledge, for those who had kept it safe, perhaps sacrificed objects precious to them personally to save what would be of immense value to future generations. Rising to his feet, he was about to perform a solemn dance (much to the dog's amusement) when a voice, dry and brittle, shattered his euphoria.

"I might have known. What are you doing here?"

The dog leapt up, hackles bristling, began barking frantically at nothing.

Alfred, the very breath scared out of him, clutched weakly at a table and stared around him, eyes bulging.

"Who . . . who's there? . . ." he gasped.

One figure, then two, materialized, in front of him.

"Samah!" Alfred heaved a sigh of relief, collapsed into a chair. "Ramu . . ." Removing a handkerchief from a shabby pocket, Alfred mopped his head.

The head of the Council and his son, faces grim and accusing, came to stand in front of Alfred.

"I repeat—what are you doing here?"

Alfred looked up, began to tremble in every limb. The sweat chilled on his body. Samah was obviously, dangerously, angry.

"I ... I was looking for the way out . . ." replied Alfred, meekly.

"Yes, I imagine you were." The Councillor's tone was cold, biting. Alfred shrank away from it. "What else were you looking for?"

"N-nothing . . . I—"

"Then why come here, to the library? Shut that beast up!" Samah snapped.

Alfred reached out a shaking hand, grabbed hold of the dog by the scruff of its neck, and pulled it near. "It's all right, boy," he said in a low voice, though he wondered why the dog should believe him when he didn't believe himself.

The dog quieted, at Alfred's touch; its barking changed to a rumbling growl, deep in its chest. But it never took its eyes off Samah and, occasionally, when it thought it could get away with it, its lip curled, showing a fine set of sharp teeth.

"Why did you come to the library? What were you looking for?" Samah demanded again. He emphasized his words with a blow of his hand upon the table, causing both it and Alfred to shiver.

"It was an accident! I ... I came here by accident. That is," Alfred amended, withering beneath Samah's burning gaze, "I came to this building on purpose. I was hot . . . you see . . . and the shade ... I mean, I didn't know it was a library . . . and I didn't know I wasn't supposed to be here ..."

"There are runes of prohibition on the door. Or at least there were, the last time I looked," Samah stated. "Has something happened to them?"

"N-no," Alfred admitted, gulping. "I saw them. I only meant to take a quick peep inside. Curiosity. It's a terrible failing of mine. But . . . well ... I tripped, you see, and fell through the door. Then the dog jumped on me and my feet must have . . . that is, I think I probably . . . I'm not sure how, but I guess I . . . kicked the door shut," he finished miserably.

"Accidentally?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Alfred babbled. "Quite ... by accident." His mouth was drying up. He was drying up. He coughed. "And . . . and then, you see, I couldn't find the way out. So I came in here, searching for it—"

"There is no way out," Samah said.

"There isn't?" Alfred blinked like a startled owl.

"No. Not unless one has the key-sigil. And I am the only one with the key. You obtain it from me."

"I—I'm sorry," Alfred stammered. "I was just curious. I didn't mean any harm."

"Curiosity—a mensch failing. I might have known you would be afflicted by it. Ramu, check to see that nothing has been disturbed."

Ramu hastened off. Alfred kept his head lowered, his eyes looking anywhere, at anything, to avoid meeting Samah's. He glanced at the dog, still growling. He glanced at Ramu, noted absently that he went straight for one certain compartment under History of the Sartan and examined it carefully, even going to the trouble of magically checking to find out if any of Alfred's presence lingered in the vicinity.

Acutely wretched and unhappy, Alfred thought nothing of this at the time, though he did note that Ramu spent far less time checking the other compartments, barely giving most of them a glance, until he came to the ones marked Patrins. These, too, he inspected thoroughly.

"He hasn't been near them," he reported to Samah. "He probably didn't have time to do much."

"I wasn't going to do anything!" Alfred protested. He was beginning to lose his fear. The more he thought about it, he decided he had a right to be angry at this treatment. He drew himself up, faced Samah with dignity. "What do you think I was going to do? I entered a library! And since when is the collected knowledge and wisdom of my people forbidden to me? And why is it forbidden to others?"

A thought occurred to him. "And what are you doing here? Why did you come, unless you knew I was here . . . You did know I was here! You have some sort of alarm—"

"Please, calm yourself, Brother," Samah said soothingly, his anger seeming to suddenly evaporate, like rain when the sun comes out. He went so far as to start to lay a conciliatory hand on Alfred's arm—a move the dog didn't like, apparently, for it thrust its body protectively between Alfred and the head of the Council.

Samah cast the dog a cold glance, withdrew his hand. "You have a bodyguard, it seems."

Alfred, flushing, attempted to shove the animal to one side. "I'm sorry. He—"

"No, no, Brother. It is I who should be making the apology." Samah shook his head, sighed ruefully. "Orla tells me I am working too hard. My nerves are frayed. I overreacted. I forgot that, being a stranger, you had no way of knowing our rules concerning the library. It is, of course, open to all Sartan.

"But, as you can judge"—he waved his hand toward the ancient-history section—"some of these scrolls are old and very fragile. It would never do, for example, to permit small children to get hold of them. Or those who might be browsing through out of idle curiosity. Such people, inadvertently, of course, and meaning no harm, might yet do irreparable damage. I don't think you can blame us, if we like to know who enters our library?"

No, Alfred had to admit, that sounded reasonable enough. But Samah wasn't the type of man to rush here because he feared children were smearing grape jelly on his precious manuscripts. And he had been afraid. Angry and afraid, his anger covering his fear. Alfred's eyes, of their own accord, strayed to that compartment, the first compartment Ramu had checked.

"Serious scholars are welcome, certainly," Samah was continuing. "They have only to come before the Council and request the key."

Samah was watching him closely. Alfred tried to stop his eyes from looking at the compartment, tried to keep them focused on Samah, but it was a struggle. They kept wanting to dart in that direction. Alfred wrenched them back. The strain was too much. His eyelids began to twitch, he started to blink uncontrollably.

Samah stopped talking, stared at him. "Are you well?"

"Forgive me," Alfred murmured, shading his eyes with his hand. "A nervous disorder."

The Councillor frowned. Sartan did not suffer from nervous disorders. "Do you understand, Brother, why we like to monitor the comings and goings of all who enter?" he asked somewhat tightly. It was obvious his patience was wearing thin.

Do I understand why a library turns into a trap, sounds an alarm, and holds those who enter hostage until the head of the Council comes to interrogate them? No, thought Alfred, I really don't understand that at all.

But he only nodded and mumbled something that might have been certainly he understood.

"Come, come!" Samah said, with a forced smile. "An accident, as you say. No harm done. I am certain you are sorry for what you did. And Ramu and I are sorry for nearly scaring you to death. And now, it is dinnertime. We will tell our tale to Orla. I'm afraid, Ramu, your mother will have a laugh over this mistake at our expense."

Ramu gave a sickly chuckle, looked anything but jocular.

"Please, be seated, Brother," Samah said, gesturing to a chair. "I will go and open the way out. The runes are complex. It takes some time to render them and you appear to be fatigued. No need to stand around waiting. Ramu will remain here to keep you company in my absence."

Ramu will remain to make certain I don't spy on you, discover the way out. Alfred sank down into the chair, placed his hand on the dog's head, stroked the silky ears. I might be doing more harm than good, he considered, but it seems to me that I have a right to ask.

"Samah," he called, halting the head of the Council on his way to the far door. "Now that I know the rules of the library, could I have your permission to enter? The mensch are somewhat a hobby of mine, you see. I once did a study on the dwarves of Arianus. I note that you have several texts ..."

He knew the answer, saw it in Samah's eyes.

Alfred's voice dried up. His mouth opened and closed several times, but nothing more followed.

Samah waited patiently until he was certain Alfred was finished.

"Certainly you may study here, Brother. We would be most happy to make any and all documents relative to your work available to you. But not now."

"Not now," Alfred repeated.

"No, I'm afraid not. The Council wants to inspect the library and make certain that no damage was done during the long Sleep. Until we have time to devote to this task, I recommended to the Council that the library be closed. And we must take care that, from now on, no one enters 'by accident.' "

The Councillor turned upon his heel and left, disappearing out the door on the far wall that opened to a spoken sigil, a rune uttered in a voice soft and low. The door shut behind him.

Alfred heard, beyond it, the sound of chanting, but he was unable to distinguish any of the words.

Ramu sat down across from Alfred and began to make friendly overtures to the dog; overtures that were coldly rebuffed.

Alfred's eyes slid, once more, to the forbidden scroll compartment.

CHAPTER \* 17

GARGAN

CHELESTRA

WE ARE HOME. HOME!

I am torn between joy and sadness, for a terrible tragedy occurred while we were gone . . . But I'll write down all, everything in its proper time and place.

As I work on this, I'm sitting in my room. Around me are all my dear possessions, just the way I left them. This astonished me beyond words. Dwarves are very practical-minded about death, unlike two other races I could mention. When a dwarf dies, his family and friends hold a night of mourning for their loss and a day of celebration for the dead one's gain in now being a part of the One. Following that, all the dwarf's possessions are distributed among family and friends. His room is cleaned out and another dwarf moves in.

I had assumed that the custom would have been followed in my case and was prepared for the fact that Cousin Fricka would, by now, be ensconced in my room. In fact, I don't mind admitting that I was looking forward to bouncing my obnoxious relative and her curly side whiskers out the door and down the stairs.

Living space is a problem for dwarves on the seamoons. Since dwarves prefer to dwell below ground level, they build their homes in tunnels beneath the seamoons' landmass. Unfortunately, due to the fact that the inner core of the moon is, in reality, a living being, the dwarves found themselves unable to go beyond a certain point. The dwarves don't know the moon is alive; they struck a protective mass through which they could not penetrate.

However, it seems that my mother could not get it into her head that I was truly dead. She steadfastly refused to believe it, although Aunt Gertrude (so my father told me) actually went so far as to hint that my mother had lost her mind. At which point, according to my father, my mother decided to demonstrate her skill in ax-throwing, offering in a rather vigorous and alarming fashion to "part Gertrude's hair" or words to that effect.

While my mother was hauling the battle-ax down from its place on the wall, my father mentioned casually to my aunt that while my mother's throwing arm was still strong, her aim was not what it had been in their youth. Aunt Gertrude remembered suddenly that she had business elsewhere. She pried Fricka out of my room (probably with a winch) and they flounced off.

But I've wandered down a side tunnel, as the saying goes. The last I wrote, we were heading in our ship toward certain death and now we're home safe and sound, and I really have no idea how or why.

No heroic battles in the dragon-snake cave. Just a lot of talk in a language none of us understood. Our ship broke up. We had to swim to the surface. The dragon-snakes found us, and instead of murdering us, they gave us presents and sent us into a cave. Then Haplo stayed up all night talking to them. When he finally came back, he said he was tired and didn't want to talk and he'd explain everything some other time. But he assured us that we were safe and told us we could sleep securely and that in the morning we'd be going home!

We were astounded and discussed it quietly (Alake made us whisper so as not to disturb Haplo). We couldn't unravel the tangle, however, and finally, being exhausted ourselves, we fell asleep.

The next morning, more food appeared, along with more presents. And, peeping out of the cave, I saw to my astonishment that our submersible, good as new, was moored on the shore. There was no sign of the dragon-snakes.

"The dragons fixed your ship," said Haplo, between mouth-fuls of food. "We'll use it to sail back home."

He was eating something Alake had cooked and she was sitting beside him, watching him with adoring eyes.

"They did it for you," she said softly. "You saved us, as you promised. And now you're taking us home. You will be a hero to our people. Whatever you want will be yours, whatever you ask for will be granted."

She was hoping, of course, that he'd ask to marry the chieftain's daughter—meaning her.

Haplo shrugged and said he hadn't done all that much. But I could tell he was pleased with himself. I noted that the blue marks had started coming back on his skin. Also that he took extreme care to avoid touching or even looking at a large jug full of water I'd brought in to wash the sleep out of my eyes.

I whispered to Devon, "I wonder where the bitter pill is in all this candy."

"Only think, Grundle," he whispered back, sighing rapturously, "in a few days I'll be with Sabia!"

He hadn't heard a word I'd said! And I'll wager he hadn't heard Haplo either, for that matter. Which just goes to show you how love—at least among humans and elves—can addle the brain. Thank the One we dwarves are different! I love Hartmut down to the last strand of hair in his beard, but I'd be ashamed to let my feelings reduce my mental capacities to the consistency of gruel.

But, there, I shouldn't talk that way. Now that—

No, I'm getting ahead of myself.

"All right, but remember, no one ever gets something for nothing," I said, but I said it into my whiskers. I was afraid that if Alake heard me, she'd scratch my eyes out.

As it was, I think Haplo did hear me. He has sharp ears, that one. I was glad. Let him know that one of us isn't planning to swallow this without chewing on it first. He glanced at me and kind of half-smiled in that dark way of his that gives me the shivers.

When he finished eating, he said we were free to leave. We could take all the food and presents with us. At this, I saw even Alake was offended.

"No amount of gold or precious jewels can bring back the people those monsters murdered, or make up for what we have suffered," she said, casting a disdainful glance at the mounds of riches and wealth.

"I would sooner toss such blood money in the Goodsea, except it might poison the fish," Devon said angrily.

"Suit yourselves." Haplo shrugged again. "But you might need it, when you sail to your new homeland."

We looked at each other. We'd been so frightened and worried about the dragon-snakes, we'd completely forgotten about another danger that loomed over our people—the loss of the season.

"Will the dragon-snakes let us build more sun-chasers?" I asked dubiously.

"Better than that. They've offered to use their magic to fix the ones they destroyed. And they've given me information about this new homeland, important information."

We badgered him with questions, but Haplo refused to answer, saying that it would not be proper to tell us before discussing a matter of this importance with our parents. We were forced to admit he was right.

Alake looked at the gold, said it was a shame it should go to waste. Devon remarked that several bolts of the silken fabric were Sabia's favorite colors. I'd already pocketed some of the jewels (as I wrote earlier, we

dwarves are a practical lot), but I gladly took a few more, just so the others wouldn't think I was being snooty.

We loaded ourselves, the presents, and the food on board the submersible. I checked the ship over thoroughly. Admittedly, the dragon-snakes were strong on magic, but I mistrusted that they knew anything about shipbuilding. However, the snakes appeared to have put it back together exactly the way it was before they broke it and I decided it was safe to sink in.

We each took up residence in our old rooms. Everything was as it had been when we left. I even found this—my journal, exactly where I left it. No water damage. Not a drop of ink smeared. Astounding! It made me kind of queasy. I wondered, more than once on that journey, if it had all really happened or if it had only been a strange and terrible dream.

The ship launched itself, under the same magical power as before, and we were headed back home.

I'm certain the journey took the same amount of time going as coming, but it seemed far longer to us. We laughed and talked excitedly about the first things we'd do when we reached our homelands and how we'd probably be considered heroes and what everyone would make of Haplo.

We spent a lot of time talking about Haplo. At least Alake and I did. She came into my cabin quite late the first night of our trip back home. It was that quiet period just before you go to bed when the aching for home comes over you so badly sometimes that it makes you think you'll die of it. I was feeling the same way myself, and I must admit that maybe a tear or two had trickled into my whiskers when I heard Alake's gentle tap on my door.

"It's me, Grundle. Can I talk to you? Or are you sleeping?" "If I was, I'm not now," I told her grumpily, to hide the fact that I'd been crying. For all I knew, she'd dose me with herbs or something.

I opened the door. Alake came in and sat on the bed. I took one look at her—she was shy and proud and fluttery and happy—and I knew what this conversation was going to be about.

She sat on the bed, twisting the rings on her fingers. (I saw that she'd forgotten to take off her funeral jewelry. We dwarves aren't particularly superstitious, but if there was ever a bad omen, that was it. I meant to tell her, but just as I was about to say something she started to talk, and I never had the chance.) "Grundle," she said, making up her mind to astonish me. "I'm in love."

I decided to amuse myself a little. It's fun to tease Alake, because she takes everything so seriously.

"I'm sure I wish you two all the best," I said slowly, stroking my whiskers, "but how do you think Sabia will take it?"

"Sabia?" Alake was startled. "Why, I suppose she'll be happy for me. Why shouldn't she?"

"She's unselfish. We all know that. And she loves you dearly, Alake, but she's pretty fond of Devon, too, and I don't think—"

"Devon!" Alake could barely speak for shock. "Do you . . . Did you think I meant I was in love with Devon?" "Who else?" I asked as innocently as possible.

"Devon's very nice," Alake was going on, "and he's been very kind and helpful. And I will always think of him with the highest regard, but I could never fall in love with him. After all, he's little more than a boy."

A boy who's about one hundred times older than you, I could have said, but I kept my mouth shut. Humans tend to be touchy about their age.

"No," Alake continued softly, her eyes glowing like candlelight at dusk, "I'm in love with a man. Grundle . . ." She gulped, swallowed, then said, in a rush, "It's Haplo!"

Of course, she expected me to fly backward around the room in shock and was considerably put out when I didn't.

"Humpf," was all I said.

"You're not surprised?"

"Surprised! Try painting 'I love you' in white paint across your forehead next time," I suggested.

"Oh, dear. Has it been that obvious? Do you ... do you think he knows? It would be dreadful if he did."

Alake glanced at me sidelong, pretending to be afraid, but I could tell that deep down she was hoping I'd say, "Yes, of course, he knows."

Which I could have said truthfully, because the man would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb and a fool on top of it not to have known. I could have said this and it would have made Alake happy, but, of course, I didn't. It was all wrong and I knew it and I knew Alake would get hurt and the whole thing made me cross.

"He's old enough to be your father," I pointed out.

"He is not! And what if he is?" Alake argued, with the sort of logic one comes to expect from humans. "I've never met another man as noble and brave and strong and handsome. He stood there alone, Grundle. In front of those horrible creatures, naked, no weapons, not even his magic.

"You see, I know about the water and how it affects his magic, so don't say anything to me about that!" she added defiantly. "We humans can't do rune-magic ourselves, but our legends tell about people who could once, long ago. Haplo obviously wants to hide his power, and so I've said nothing.

"He was prepared to die for us, Grundle."

(No use my saying a word. She wouldn't have heard me.)

"How could I not love him? And then, to see those dreadful dragon-snakes bow down to him! He was magnificent! And now they're sending us home, giving us gifts, promising us a new homeland! And all because of Haplo."

"That may be," I said, feeling crosser than ever because I was forced to admit that what she said was true, "but what is he getting out of this? Have you asked yourself that? What does he mean, coming around asking me how many men my father has in his army and asking Devon if he thinks the elves would fight if they had to and whether or not they still remembered how to make magical weapons and wanting to know if your Coven could persuade the dolphins and whales to be on our side if it came to war?"

It occurs to me that I have forgotten to mention that Haplo had been asking those very questions of us that day.

"Grundle, you are mean-spirited and ungrateful!" Alake cried, and burst into tears.

I hadn't meant to make her cry. I felt about as low as a dragon-snake's belly. Going over to her, I patted her hand.

"I'm sorry," I said awkwardly.

"I asked him why he wanted to know such things," Alake continued, between sobs, "and he said that we should always be prepared for the worst and though this new homeland might look like a perfect place, it might be dangerous . . ." She stopped to wipe her nose.

I said I understood, which I did. What Haplo said made sense. What he said always made sense. And that made this nagging, rotten feeling of distrust and suspicion inside me all the harder to bear. I apologized again, and teased Alake until she cheered up and dried her eyes.

But dwarves are always truthful, and I couldn't help but tell her, "The only reason I said those things is that . . . well . . . it's just that . . . Haplo doesn't love you, Alake."

I cringed, waiting for another storm. To my surprise, however, Alake was quite calm. She even smiled, sadly, but it was a smile.

"Oh, I know that, Grundle. How could I expect him to love me? He must have thousands of women longing for him."

I thought I should encourage this line of thinking.

"Yes, and maybe he's got a wife somewhere—"

"He doesn't," Alake said quickly, too quickly. She looked down at her hands. "I asked him. He said he'd never found the right one, yet. I'd love to be the right one for him, Grundle. But I know I'm not worthy now. Perhaps someday I will be, if I keep trying."

She looked up at me, her eyes shining with her tears, and she was so lovely and seemed older and more mature than I'd ever known her and she glowed with a kind of inner light.

I said, then and there, that if love could do that for her then it must not be bad, no matter what happened. Besides, maybe when we reach home, Haplo will leave, go back to wherever it is he came from. After all, what could he possibly want with us? But I kept this thought to myself.

We hugged each other and had a good cry and I didn't say anything else awful about Haplo. Devon heard us and came in and Alake broke down and told him and he said he thought love was the most wonderful, beautiful thing in the whole world and we talked about Sabia and then they both made me confess that I wasn't a stranger to love myself and I broke down and told them about Hartmut and we all laughed and all cried and couldn't wait to get home.

Which made what happened when we got there all the more terrible.

I've been putting off writing this. I wasn't certain I could do it, for one thing. It makes me so terribly sad. But I've told everything and I can't very well go on with this story and leave out the most important part.

Being saved from the dragons and returning safely to our homelands would constitute a happy ending in most tavern tales I've heard. But the ending wasn't happy. And I have a feeling it isn't the end, yet, either.

The moment our submersible left the dragon-snakes' lair, we were besieged by—what else—a bunch of pesky dolphins. They wanted to know everything, all about what had happened, how we'd escaped. We'd barely told them before they swam off, eager to be the first to spread the news. There never was a more gossip-loving fish.

At least our parents would hear the good news and have time to recover from their initial shock at learning we were still alive and well. We started arguing among ourselves, trying to decide which of us got to go home first, but that was soon settled. The dolphins returned with a message saying that we were to meet our parents together on Elmas, the elven seamoon.

This suited us fine. To be honest, we were a bit nervous, now, as to our parents' reaction. We knew they'd be happy to have us back again, but after the kisses and tears we figured we could expect a severe scolding, if not worse. We had, after all, disobeyed their orders and run off without thinking of the suffering and misery we'd cause.

We even went so far as to mention this to Haplo, hinting that he would do us another great service if he would stay with us and smooth things over with our mothers and fathers.

He only grinned and said he'd protected us from the dragon-snakes, but when it came to parental wrath, we were on our own.

But we weren't thinking about stern lectures and punishment when the submersible landed and the hatch opened and we saw our parents standing there, waiting for us. My father took me in his arms and held me close and I saw, for the first time in my life, tears in his eyes. I would have listened to the sternest lecture, then and there, and loved every word.

We introduced them to Haplo. (The dolphins had, of course, already told our parents how he had saved us.) Our parents were grateful, but it was obvious that all of them were a little overawed by the man and his blue-marked skin and his air of quiet self-assurance. They managed to get out only a few, broken words of gratitude, which he accepted with a smile and a shrug, saying that we'd rescued him from the sea and that he'd been happy to return the favor. He said nothing more, and our parents were glad to turn back to us.

For a while, it was all embraces and words of affection. Devon's parents were there, waiting for their son. They were as glad to have him back as any of the other parents, but I saw, when I was in shape to see anything, that they still seemed sad, when they should have been overjoyed. The elven king was there, too, to welcome Devon, but Sabia wasn't.

Then I noticed, for the first time, that her father was dressed in white—the elven color of mourning. I saw all the elves around us—and there were many, waiting to welcome us—were clad in white, something that happened only when one of the royal family has died.

A chill constricted my heart. I looked at my father with what must have been a wild and terror-stricken expression, because he only shook his head and put his finger to my lips, to silence my questions.

Alake had been asking for Sabia. Her eyes met mine, and they were wide with fear. We both looked at Devon. Blind with joy, his vision clouded by rainbows, he hadn't seen a thing. He broke free of his parents' embrace (was it my imagination or were they trying to hold him back?) and went to the elven king.

"Where is Sabia, Sire?" Devon asked. "Is she mad at me for striking her? I'll make it up to her, I promise! Tell her to come out ..."

The One lifted the clouds from his eyes. He saw the white clothing, saw the elven king's face scarred and ravaged by grief, saw the petals of white flowers that had been scattered over the Goodsea.

"Sabia!" Devon shouted, and he started to run toward the coral castle that stood shimmering behind us.

Eliason caught hold of him.

Devon struggled violently, then he collapsed in the man's arms. "No!" he cried, sobbing. "No! I never meant ... I wanted to save her ..."

"I know, my son, I know," Eliason said, stroking Devon's hair, soothing him as he might have soothed a child of his own. "It wasn't your fault. Your intentions were the best, the noblest. Sabia"—he could not speak her name without a catch in his throat, but he mastered himself—"Sabia is with the One. She is at peace. We must take comfort in that. And now, I think it is time for the families to be alone together."

Eliason took charge of Haplo with the gracious dignity and politeness that is characteristic of the elves, no matter what personal sorrows afflict them. Unhappy king. How he must have longed to be alone with his child!

Once we were inside, in a new part of the castle that had grown during our absence, my mother explained to me what had happened.

"The moment she woke up, Sabia knew what Devon had done. She knew he had sacrificed his own life for her and that his death would be a terrible one. From then on," my mother said, wiping her eyes on the hem of her sleeve, "the poor girl lost all interest in living. She refused to eat, refused to leave her bed. She drank water only when her father sat beside her and held the glass to her lips. She wouldn't talk to anyone, but lay for hours, staring out her window. When she slept at all, her sleep was broken by horrible dreams. They said her cries could be heard throughout the castle.

"And then one day, she seemed to be better. She got up out of bed, dressed herself in the dress she'd been wearing when you three were last together, and went about the castle singing. Her songs were sad and strange and no one liked to hear them, but they hoped this meant she was well again. Alas, it meant quite the opposite.

"That night, she asked her duenna to fetch her something to eat. The woman, thrilled that Sabia was hungry, hurried off, unsuspecting. When she returned, Sabia was gone. Frightened, the duenna woke the king. They searched."

My mother shook her head, unable to continue for her tears. Finally, she had recourse to the sleeve again, and went on.

"They found her body on the terrace where we met that day, the terrace where you overheard us talking. She'd thrown herself out a window. She was lying on almost the very same place where the elf messenger died."

I'm going to have to end this for now. I can't go on without crying.

The One guards your sleep now, Sabia. Your terrible dreams are at an end.

CHAPTER \* 18

SURUNAN CHELESTRA

THE LIBRARY OF THE SARTAN HAUNTED ALFRED, PURSUED HIM LIKE the specter in some old wives' tale. It reached out its cold hand to touch him and wake him in the night, crooking a beckoning finger, tried to draw him to his doom.

"Nonsense!" he would say to himself and, turning over, would attempt to banish the ghost by burying it in slumber.

This worked for the night, but the shade did not disappear with morning's light. Alfred sat at breakfast, pretending to eat, when in reality all he could think about was Ramu examining that one compartment. What was in it that was so closely guarded?

"Curiosity. Nothing more than curiosity." Alfred scolded himself. "Samah is right. I've lived around the mensch far too long. I'm like that girl in the ghost stories Bane's nurse used to tell him. 'You may go into any room in the castle except the locked room at the top of the stairs.' And is the fool girl satisfied with all the other one hundred and twenty-four rooms in the castle? No, she can't eat or sleep or have any peace at all until she's broken into the room at the top of the stairs.

"That's all I'm doing to myself. The room at the top of the stairs. I'll stay away from it. I won't think about it. I'll be satisfied with the other rooms, rooms that are filled with so much wealth. And I will be happy. I will be happy."

But he wasn't. He grew more unhappy with each day that passed.

He attempted to keep his restlessness hidden from his host and hostess and succeeded, or so Alfred fondly imagined. Samah watched him with the attentiveness of a Geg watching a leaky steam valve on the Kicksey-winsey, wondering when it's going to erupt. Intimidated by Samah's awe-inspiring and daunting presence, humbled by the fact that he knew he'd been in the wrong, Alfred was cringing and subdued in the Councillor's presence, barely able to lift his eyes to Samah's stern and implacable face.

When Samah was gone from home, however—and he was gone a great deal of the time on Council business—Alfred relaxed. Orla was generally on hand to keep him company, and the haunting spirit was not nearly as bothersome when he was with Orla as it was during the infrequent times when he was on his own. It never occurred to Alfred to wonder that he was rarely left alone anymore or to think it odd that Orla herself wasn't involved in Council business. He knew only that she was sweet to devote so much time to him—a thought that made him feel all the more wretched on the occasions when the ghost of the library reappeared.

Alfred and Orla were seated on her terrace, Orla busying herself by softly singing protective runes on the fabric of one of Samah's robes. Chanting the words, she traced the patterns with her deft fingers on the cloth, putting her love and concern for her husband into each sigil that sprang up at her command.

Alfred watched sadly. Never in his life had a woman sung the protective runes for him. One never would now. Or, at least, not the one he wanted. He was suddenly wildly and insanely jealous of Samah. Alfred didn't like the way the Councillor treated his wife—so cold and unresponsive. He knew Orla was hurt by it, he'd witnessed her silent suffering. No, Samah wasn't good enough for her.

And I am? he asked dolefully.

Orla glanced up at him, smiling, prepared to continue their conversation on the healthy state of her rosebushes.

Alfred, caught, was unable to hide the images of the ugly, tangled, thorny vines that were twisting around inside him—and it was painfully obvious he hadn't been meditating on the roses.

Orla's smile faded. Sighing, she laid aside her work.

"I wish you wouldn't do this to me ... or to yourself."

"I'm sorry," said Alfred, looking and feeling wretched.

His hand went to pet the dog, who, seeing his friend's un-happiness, offered sympathy by laying its head on his knee.

"I must be an extraordinarily wicked person. I'm well aware that no Sartan should have such improper thoughts. As your husband says, I've been corrupted by being around mensch too long."

"Perhaps it wasn't the mensch," suggested Orla softly, with a glance at the dog.

"You mean Haplo." Alfred stroked back the dog's ears. "Actually Patrins are very loving, almost fiercely loving. Did you know that?"

His sad gaze was on the dog and he missed Orla's look of astonishment.

"They don't think of it as such. They call love by other names: loyalty, a protective instinct to ensure the survival of their race. But it is love, a dark sort of love, but love nevertheless, and even the worst of them feels it strongly. This Lord of the Nexus—a cruel, powerful, and ambitious man—risks his own life daily to go back into the Labyrinth to aid his suffering people."

Alfred, caught up in his emotion, forgot where he was. He stared into the dog's eyes. Liquid, brown, they drew him in, held him until nothing else seemed real to him.

"My own parents sacrificed their lives to save me, when the snogs were chasing us. They might have escaped, you see, but I was only a child and I couldn't keep up with them. And so they hid me and lured the snogs away from me. I saw my parents die. The snogs tortured them. And later, strangers took me in, raised me as their own."

The dog's eyes grew soft, sad. "And I have loved," Alfred heard himself saying. "She was a Runner, like myself, like my parents. She was beautiful, strong, and lean. The blue runes twined around her body that pulsed with youth and life beneath my fingers when I held her in my arms at night. We fought together, loved, laughed. Yes, there is sometimes laughter, even in the Labyrinth. Often it is bitter laughter, the jests dark and grim, but to lose laughter is to lose the will to live.

"She left me, eventually. A village of Squatters, who had offered us shelter for the night, was attacked, and she wanted to help them. It was a stupid, foolish notion. The Squatters were outnumbered. We would have only died ourselves, most likely. I told her so. She knew I was right. But she was frustrated, angry. She'd come to love those people, you see. And she was afraid of her love, because it made her feel weak and powerless and hurting inside. She was afraid of her love for me. And so she left me. She was carrying my child. I know she was, though she refused to admit it. And I never saw her again. I don't even know if she is dead, or if my child lives—"

"Stop it!"

Orla's cry startled Alfred, shocked him out of his reverie. She had risen from her seat, was backing away, staring at him in horror.

"Don't do this to me anymore!" She was deathly pale, struggled for breath. "I can't bear it! I keep seeing those images of yours, the wretched child, watching his parents raped, murdered, their bodies torn apart. And he can't scream, he's so afraid. I see that woman you talk about. I feel her pain, her helplessness. I know the pain of bearing a child and I think of her alone, in that terrible place. She can't scream, either, afraid that her cries will bring death to her and her baby. I can't sleep nights for thinking of them, for knowing that we ... I ... I am responsible!"

Orla covered her face with her hands, to blot out any more images, and began to sob. Alfred was appalled at himself, uncertain how those images—that were really Haplo's memories—got into his head.

"Sit . . . Good dog," he said, shoving the animal's head (was it grinning at him?) off his knee.

Hurriedly, he approached Orla. He had some vague notion of offering her his handkerchief. But his arms appeared to have other ideas. He watched in amazement to see them steal around the woman's body, pull her close. She rested her head on his breast.

A tingling thrill shot through him. He held her, loved her with every fiber of his being. He stroked her shining hair with an awkward hand and, because he was Alfred, said something stupid.

"Orla, what knowledge is in the library of the Sartan that Samah doesn't want anyone to know about?"

She struck him, shoved him back so violently that he tripped over the dog and fell into the rosebushes. Her anger blazed in her eyes and burned in her cheeks—anger and . . . was it Alfred's imagination or did he see the same fear in her eyes that he'd seen in Samah's?

Without a word, Orla turned and left him, walking from her garden in hurt, offended dignity.

Alfred struggled to disentangle himself from the thorns that were pricking him painfully. The dog offered assistance. Alfred glared at it.

"It's all your fault!" he said crossly.

The animal cocked its head, looked innocent, denied the charge.

"It is, too. Putting such ideas into my head! Why don't you go off and find that blasted master of yours and leave me alone! I can get myself into quite enough trouble without your help."

Cocking its head in the other direction, the dog appeared to agree that this was true. It seemed to think the conversation had reached its logical conclusion, however, for it stretched luxuriously, bending forward over its forepaws, back over its hind end, and finally shook itself all over. Then, it trotted over to the garden gate, looked at Alfred expectantly.

Alfred felt himself go hot and cold, both at the same time— a most uncomfortable sensation.

"You're telling me that we're alone now, aren't you? No one's with us. No one's watching us."

The dog wagged its tail.

"We can . . ." Alfred swallowed. "We can go to the library."

The dog wagged its tail again, its expression long-suffering and patient. It obviously considered Alfred slow and thickheaded, but was magnanimously willing to overlook these minor faults.

"But I can't get inside. And if I could, I can't get back out. Samah would catch me . . ."

The dog was afflicted by a sudden itch. Plopping down, it scratched vigorously, fixed Alfred with a stern gaze that seemed to say, Come, come. It's me, remember?

"Oh, very well."

Alfred cast a furtive glance around the garden, half-expecting Samah to leap out of the rosebushes and lay violent hands upon his person. When no one came, Alfred began to sing and dance the runes.

He stood outside the library. The dog dashed up to the door, sniffed at it with interest. Alfred slowly followed, gazed at the door sadly. The warding runes had, as Samah had promised, been strengthened.

" 'Due to the current crisis situation and the fact that we cannot spare the staff needed to assist our patrons, the library is closed until further notice.' " Alfred read the sign aloud.

"It makes sense," he insisted. "Who's interested in doing any research anyway. They're spending all their time trying to rebuild and establish their city, trying to decide what to do about the Patrins, and wondering where the rest of our people are and how to get in touch with them. They have to deal with the necromancers on Abarrach and these dragon-snakes ..."

The dog didn't agree.

"You're right," Alfred heard himself arguing, his own inner being as rebellious as his limbs and appendages. "If I had all those problems to solve, where would I turn? To the wisdom of our people. Wisdom recorded in there."

Well, the dog demanded, bored with sniffing at the door, what are we waiting for?

"I can't get inside," Alfred said, but the words came out a whisper—a halfhearted, faint, and ineffectual lie.

He knew how to get in without being detected. The idea had come to him, suddenly, last night.

He hadn't wanted it to come. And when it did, he'd told it in no uncertain terms to go away. But it wouldn't. His stubborn brain had gone right ahead making plans, examining the risks and deciding (with a cold-bloodedness that shocked Alfred) that the risks were minimal and worth running.

The idea had come to him because of that stupid story told by Bane's nurse. Alfred caught himself hoping irritably that she'd come to a bad end. She had no business telling such nightmare tales to a susceptible child. (Never mind the fact that Bane himself was a nightmare personified.)

Thinking about that tale, Alfred had found himself remembering Arianus and the time he'd lived at the court of King Stephen. One memory led to another memory, and that led to another, until his mind had carried him, without him being aware of where he was headed, to the time the thief broke into the treasure vault.

Money is water, on Arianus, where the life-sustaining liquid is in short supply and is, therefore, considerably valuable. The royal palace had stockpiles of the precious commodity, kept for use in times of emergency (such as when the elves succeeded in cutting off the water shipments). The vault where the barrels were stored was located in a building behind the palace walls, a building of thick walls and heavy bolted doors, a building guarded day and night.

Guarded—except on the roof.

Late one night, a thief, using a most ingenious system of ropes and pulleys, managed to make his way from a neighboring roof to the top of the water vault. He was drilling through the hargast-wood timbers when one gave way with a shattering crash, literally dropping the unlucky thief into the arms of the guards below.

How the thief had proposed to get away with enough water to make this dangerous feat worth his while was never learned. It was assumed he had accomplices, but, if so, they escaped and he never revealed them, not even under torture. He met his death alone, accomplishing nothing except to ensure that guards now patrolled the roof.

That and he'd provided Alfred with a plan for breaking and entering the library.

Of course, it was always possible that Samah had enveloped the entire building in a magical shell, but, knowing the Sartan as he did, Alfred considered it unlikely. They had considered runes politely advising people to keep out sufficient protection and they would have been, had not Alfred's wayward feet flung him inside. The Councillor had strengthened the magic, but the thought that anyone (much less Alfred) would have the temerity to deliberately enter a place he'd been commanded to avoid would be unthinkable.

It is unthinkable, Alfred thought miserably. I am corrupt. This is insanity!

"I ... I must get away from here . . ." he said faintly, mopping his forehead with his lace cuff.

He was firm, resolved. He was going to leave. He didn't care what was in the library.

"If there is anything—which there probably isn't—then surely Samah has an excellent reason for not wanting stray scholars to poke at it—although what that reason could be is beyond me—not that it's any of my business."

This monologue continued for some time, during which Alfred made up his mind to leave and actually turned around and started down the path, only to find himself walking up it again almost immediately. He turned back, started home, found himself walking to the library.

The dog trotted after him, back and forth, until it grew tired, flopped down about halfway either direction, and watched Alfred's vacillation with considerable interest.

Finally, the Sartan made up his mind. "I'm not going inside," he said decisively, did a little dance, and began to sing the runes.

The sigla wove their magic around him, lifted him up into the air. The dog jumped excitedly to its feet, and began to bark loudly, much to Alfred's consternation. The library was located far from the center of the Sartan city, far from the homes of the inhabitants, but it seemed to the nervous Alfred that the animal's yelps must be audible in Arianus.

"Shush! Nice dog! No, don't bark. I—"

Attempting to hush the dog, Alfred forgot where he was going. Or at least that was the only explanation he could give for finding himself hovering over the roof of the library.

"Oh, dear," he said weakly, and dropped like a rock.

For long moments, he cowered on top of the roof, terrified that someone had heard the dog and that crowds of Sartan would be flocking around, wondering and accusing.

All was quiet. No one came.

The dog licked his hand and whined, urged him to once more take to the air, a feat the animal found highly entertaining.

Alfred, who had forgotten the dog's unique ability to show up where least expected, nearly crawled out of his skin at the unexpected slobber of a wet tongue.

Sitting back weakly against the parapet, he petted the animal with a shaking hand and looked around. He had been right. The only sigla visible were the perfectly ordinary runes of strength and support and protection from the elements that could be found on the roofs of any Sartan building. Yes, he'd been right, and he hated himself for being right.

The roof was constructed of massive beams of some tree Alfred didn't recognize, but they gave off a faint, woody, pleasing aroma. Probably a tree that the Sartan had brought with them from the ancient world, through Death's Gate. [1] These large beams were placed at intervals along the roof; smaller planks crisscrossed beneath, filling in the gaps. Intricate sigla, traced on the planks and the beams, would keep out rain and rodents and wind and sun, would keep out everything . . .

"Except me," Alfred said, gazing at the sigla unhappily.

He sat for long moments, unwilling to move, until the larcenous part of his nature reminded him that the Council meeting could not last much longer. Samah would return home and expect to find Alfred there, become suspicious if Alfred was not.

"Suspicious," said Alfred faintly. "When did one Sartan ever use that word about another? What is happening to us? And why?"

Slowly, he leaned over and began to draw a sigil on the wooden beam. His voice accompanied his work, his chant sad and heavy. The runes sank down through the wooden beams of a tree never known in this world, and they carried Alfred down into the library with them.

Orla paced about her house, restless, ill at ease. She wished Samah were at home, was perversely glad he wasn't. She knew she should go back out into the garden, should go back out to Alfred, apologize for

behaving like such a fool, smooth the incident over. She should have never let it affect her like that, should have never let him affect her like that!

"Why did you come?" she demanded of his absent figure sadly. "All the turmoil and unhappiness was over. I could once more hope for peace. Why did you come? And when will you go?"

Orla took another turn about the room. Sartan dwellings are large and spacious. The rooms are made of cool, straight lines, bent, here and there, into perfect arches supported by upright columns. The furniture is elegant and simple, providing only what is necessary for comfort, nothing for show or display- One could walk among the few furnishings with ease.

That is, a normal person could walk among them with ease, she amended, straightening a table that Alfred had knocked askew.

She put the table to rights, knowing Samah would be extremely irritated to find it out of its proper order. But her hand lingered on it; she smiled to herself, seeing, once again, Alfred blundering into it. The table stood next to a couch, was well out of the flow of traffic. Alfred had been far away from it, with no intention of being anywhere near it. Orla recalled watching in wonder those too-large feet of his veering off in the direction of the table, stumbling over each other in their haste to reach it and knock it over. And Alfred, watching in bemused bewilderment, like a nursemaid with a flock of unruly children. And he had looked at Orla in helpless, pleading apology.

I know I'm responsible, his eyes said, but what can I do? My feet simply won't behave!

Why did that wistful expression of his tug at her heart? Why did she long to hold those clumsy hands, long to try to ease the burden that rested on those stooped shoulders?

"I am another man's wife," she reminded herself. "Samah's wife."

They had loved each other, she supposed. She'd borne him children, they must have . . . once.

But she remembered the image Alfred had conjured for her, an image of two people loving each other fiercely, passionately, because this night was all they had, because all they had was each other. No, she realized sadly. She'd never truly loved.

She felt no pain inside her, no ache, nothing. Only spacious, large emptiness, defined by cool, straight lines, supported by upright columns. What furniture existed was neat, orderly, occasionally shifting position, but never actually rearranged. Until those too-large feet and those wistful, searching eyes and those clumsy hands blundered into her and threw everything into wild disarray.

"Samah would say that it is a mothering instinct, that since I am past my childbearing years, I have the need to mother something. Odd, but I can't remember mothering my own child.

I suppose I did. I suppose I must have. All I seem to remember is wandering about this empty house, dusting the furniture."

Her feelings for Alfred weren't motherly, however. Orla remembered his awkward hands, his timid caresses, and blushed hotly. No, not motherly at all.

"What is there about him?" she wondered aloud.

Certainly nothing visible on the surface: balding head, stooped shoulders, feet that seemed intent on carrying their owner to disaster, mild blue eyes, shabby mensch clothes that he refused to change. Orla thought of Samah: strong, self-possessed, powerful. Yet Samah had never made her feel compassion, never made her cry for someone else's sorrow, never made her love someone for the sake of loving.

"There is a power in Alfred," Orla told the straight and uncaring furniture. "A power that is all the more powerful because he is not aware of it. If you accused him of it, in fact"—she smiled fondly—"he would get that bewildered, astonished look on his face and stammer and stutter and . . . I'm falling in love with him. This is impossible. I'm falling in love with him."

And he's falling in love with you.

"No," she protested, but her protest was soft and her smile did not fade.

Sartan did not fall in love with other people's spouses. Sartan remained faithful to their marriage vows. This love was hopeless and could come only to grief. Orla knew this. She knew she would have to remove the smiles and tears from her being, straighten it up, return it to its straight lines and empty dustiness. But for a short time, for this one moment, she could recall the warmth of his hand gently stroking her skin, she could cry in his arms for another woman's baby, she could feel.

It occurred to her that she'd been away from him an interminable length of time.

"He'll think I'm angry at him," she realized, remorseful, remembering how she'd stalked off the terrace. "I must have hurt him. I'll go explain and . . . and then I'll tell him that he has to leave this house. It won't be wise for us to see each other anymore, except on Council business. I can manage that. Yes, I can definitely manage that."

But her heart was beating far too rapidly for comfort, and she was forced to repeat a calming mantra before she was relaxed enough to look firm and resolved. She smoothed her hair and wiped away any lingering traces of tears, tried a cool, calm smile on her face, studied herself anxiously in a mirror to see if the smile looked as strained and borrowed as it felt.

Then she had to pause to try to think how to bring the subject into conversation.

"Alfred, I know you love me . . ."

No, that sounded conceited.

"Alfred, I love you . . ."

No, that would certainly never do! After another moment's reflection, she decided that it would be best to be swift and merciless, like one of those horrid mensch surgeons, chopping off a diseased limb.

"Alfred, you and the dog must leave my house this night."

Yes, that would be best. Sighing, not holding out much hope that this would work, she returned to the terrace.

Alfred wasn't there.

"He's gone to the library."

Orla knew it as well as if she could look across the miles and peer through the walls and see him inside. He'd found a way to enter that wouldn't alert anyone to his presence. And she knew that he would find what he sought.

"He won't understand. He wasn't there. I must try to make him see my images!"

Orla whispered the runes, traced the magic with her hands, and departed on its wings.

The dog growled, warningly, and jumped to its feet. Alfred looked up from his reading. A figure clad in white was approaching, coming from the back of the library. He couldn't see who it was: Samah, Ramu? . . .

Alfred didn't particularly care. He wasn't nervous, wasn't assailed by guilt, wasn't afraid. He was appalled and shocked and sickened and he was, he was startled to discover, glad to be able to confront someone.

He rose to his feet, his body trembling, not with fear, but with his anger. The figure stepped into the light he had magically created to read by.

The two stared at each other. Quick indrawn breaths slipped to sighs, eyes silently exchanged words of the heart that could never be spoken.

"You know," said Orla.

"Yes," answered Alfred, lowering his gaze, flustered.

He'd been expecting Samah. He could be angry with Samah. He felt a need to be angry, to release his anger that bubbled inside him like Abarrach's hot lava sea. But how could he vent his anger on her, when what he truly wanted to do was take her in his arms? . . .

"I'm sorry," Orla said. "It makes things very difficult."

"Difficult!" Fury and indignation struck Alfred a blow that left him reeling, addled his brain. "Difficult! That's all you can say?" He gestured wildly to the scroll lying open on the table before him. "What you did . . . When you knew . . . This records everything, the arguments in the Council. The fact that certain Sartan were beginning to believe in a higher power. How could you . . . Lies, all lies! The horror, the destruction, the deaths . . . Unnecessary! And you knew—"

"No, we didn't!" Orla cried.

She strode forward, came to stand before him, her hand on the table, the scroll, that separated them. The dog sat back on its haunches, looking at each with its intelligent eyes.

"We didn't know! Not for certain! And the Patryns were growing in strength, in power. And against their might, what did we have? Vague feelings, nothing that could ever be defined."

"Vague feelings!" repeated Alfred. "Vague feelings! I've known those feelings. They were ... it was . . . the most wonderful experience! The Chamber of the Damned, they called it. But I knew it as the Chamber of the Blessed. I understood the reason for my being. I was given to know I could change things for the better. I was told that if I had faith, all would be well. I didn't want to leave that wonderful place—"

Why, if Samah feared the scroll's discovery, didn't he burn it?

"I believe," writes Alfred, in an addendum to this section, "that Samah had an innate regard for the truth. He tried to deny it, attempted to suppress it, but he could not bring himself to destroy it."

"But you did leave!" Orla reminded him. "You couldn't stay, could you? And what happened in Abarrach when you left?"

Alfred, troubled, drew back from her. He looked down at the scroll, though he wasn't seeing it; his hand toyed with its edges.

"You doubted," she told him. "You didn't believe what you'd seen. You questioned your own feelings. You came back to a world that was dark and frightening, and if you had caught a glimpse of a greater good, a power vaster and more wondrous than your own, then where was it? You even wondered if it was a trick. . . ."

Alfred saw Jonathon, the young nobleman he'd met on Abarrach, murdered, torn apart by the hands of a once-loving wife. Jonathon had believed, he'd had faith, and he'd died horribly because of it. Now, he was probably one of those tormented living dead, the lazar.

Alfred sat down heavily in the chair. The dog, grieving for the man's unhappiness, padded silently over and nuzzled him with its nose. Alfred rested his aching head in his arms.

Gentle, cool hands slid around his shoulders. Orla knelt beside him. "I know how you feel. I truly do. We all felt the same. Samah, the rest of the Council. It was as if ... How did Samah put this? We were like humans drunk on strong wine. When they're intoxicated, everything looks wonderful to them and they can do anything, solve any problem. But, when the effects of the spirits wear off, they're left sick and hurting and feeling worse than they did before."

Alfred raised his head, looked at her bleakly. "What if the fault is ours? What if I had stayed on Abarrach? Did a miracle happen there? I'll never know. I left. I left because I was afraid."

"And we were afraid, too." Orla's fingers tightened over his arm in her earnestness. "The darkness of the Patryns was very real and this vague light that some of us had experienced was nothing but the tiny flicker of a candle flame, likely to be blown out with a breath. How can we put our faith in this? In something we don't understand?"

"What is faith?" Alfred asked gently, not talking to her but to himself. "Believing in something you do not understand. And how can we poor mortals understand that vast and terrible and wonderful mind?"

"I don't know," she whispered brokenly. "I don't know."

Alfred grasped her hand. "This was what you fought over. You and the other Council members! You and . . . and"—it was difficult for him to say the word—"your husband."

"Samah didn't believe in any of it. He said it was a trick, a trick of our enemy's."

Alfred heard Haplo speaking, the Patryn's words were almost an echo. A trick, Sartan! You tricked me . . .

". . . opposed the Sundering," Orla was continuing. "We wanted to wait before taking such drastic action. But Samah and the others were afraid—"

"And with good cause, so it appears," came a grim voice. "When I returned home and discovered you both gone, I had an idea where you might be found."

Alfred quailed at the sound, shivered. Orla, very pale, rose slowly to her feet. She remained standing near him, however, her hand resting on his shoulder in protective support. The dog, having been negligent in its duties, was apparently attempting to make up for it by barking at Samah with all its energy.

"Shut the beast up," said Samah, "or I will kill it."

"You can't kill it," Alfred replied, shaking his head. "No matter how hard you try, you can't kill this animal or what it represents."

But he rested his hand on the animal's head. The dog suffered itself to be gentled into silence.

"At least now we know who and what you are," stated the Councillor, eyeing Alfred grimly. "A Patryn spy, sent to learn our secrets." His gaze shifted to his wife. "And corrupt the trusting."

Resolutely, with dignity, Alfred rose to his feet. "You are wrong. I am a Sartan, to my sorrow. And as for learning secrets"—he gestured to the scroll—"it seems the secrets I have discovered were meant to be kept from our own people, not from the so-called enemy."

Samah was livid with rage, unable to speak.

"No," Orla whispered, looking earnestly at Alfred, her hand biting into his arm. "No, you're wrong. The time wasn't right—"

"Our reasons for doing what we did are not his concern, Wife!" Samah interrupted. He paused, waiting to speak until he had mastered his anger. "Alfred Montbank, you will remain a prisoner here until the Council meets and we decide what measures to take."

"A prisoner? Is that necessary?" Orla protested.

"I deem it so. I was coming to tell you the news we have just received from the dolphins. This man's Patryn ally has been discovered. He is here in Chelestra and, as we feared, he is in league with the dragon-snakes. He has met with them, he and representatives from the mensch royal families."

"Alfred," said Orla, "can this be true?"

"I don't know," Alfred replied wretchedly. "Haplo might do something like this, I'm afraid, but you must understand that he—"

"Listen to him, Wife. Even now, he seeks to defend this Patryn."

"How can you?" Orla demanded, drawing away from Alfred, regarding him with mingled sorrow, pain. "You would see your own people destroyed!"

"No, he would see his own people victorious," said Samah coldly. "You forget, my dear, he is more Patryn than Sartan."

Alfred made no reply, but stood clasping and unclasping his hands over the back of the chair.

"Why do you stand there and say nothing?" Orla cried. "Tell my husband he's wrong! Tell me I'm wrong!"

Alfred lifted mild blue eyes. "What can I say that you would believe?"

Orla stared at him, started to reply, then shook her head in frustration. Turning her back on him, she walked out of the room.

Samah regarded Alfred grimly.

"This time, I will post a guard. You will be called."

He stalked off, accompanied by the dog's defiant growl.

Ramu appeared in his father's place. Coming to the table, the son cast Alfred a baleful glance and laid firm hands upon the scroll. Deliberately and with great care, he rolled it up tightly, slid it into the scrollcase, and returned it to its proper place. He then took up a position at the back of the room, as far from Alfred as a Sartan could get and still keep an eye on him.

There was no need to guard him, however. Alfred would not have attempted to escape had the door been left standing wide open. He sat despondent, hunched in misery—a prisoner of his own people, the people he had hoped so long to find. He was in the wrong. He'd done a terrible thing and he couldn't, for the life of him, imagine what had prompted him to do it.

His actions had angered Samah. Worse, Alfred had hurt Orla. And all for what? To meddle in affairs that were not any of his business, affairs that were beyond his understanding.

"Samah is far wiser than I am," he said to himself. "He knows what is best. He is right. I am not Sartan. I am part Patryn, part mensch. Even"—he added, with a sad smile for the faithful animal, lying at his feet—"a little bit of dog. Most of all, though, I'm a fool. Samah wouldn't attempt to suppress such knowledge. As Orla said, he was waiting for a more appropriate time. That's all.

"I will apologize to the Council," he continued, sighing, "and I will gladly do whatever they ask of me. And then I will leave. I can't stay here any longer. Why is it?" He looked at his own hands, shook them in frustration. "Why do I break everything I touch? Why do I bring ruin on those I care about? I'll leave this world and never return. I'll go back to my crypt in Arianus and I'll sleep. Sleep a long, long time. Perhaps, if I'm lucky, I'll never wake up.

"And you," said Alfred, glaring bitterly at the dog. "You're on your own. Haplo didn't lose you, did he? He sent you away deliberately. He doesn't want you back! Well, good riddance, I say. I'll leave you here, too. Both of you!"

The animal cringed at his angry tone and baleful stare. Ears and tail drooping, the dog sank down at Alfred's feet and lay there, watching him with sad, sorrowful eyes.

## CHAPTER + 19

### PHONDRA CHELESTRA

MUCH TO HAPLO'S AMAZEMENT, THE ROYAL FAMILIES, REUNITED with their children, decided to depart. Each family, it seemed, intended to return home, to rest and relax and, when they felt strong enough, discuss the idea of making the Sun Chase.

"What is this? Where are you going?" Haplo demanded of the dwarves, about to board their submersible. The humans were heading for theirs.

"We are going back to Phondra," said Dumaka.

"Phondra!" Haplo stared at him, openmouthed. Mensch! he thought in disgust. "Listen, I know you've had a shock and I'm sorry for your loss. I truly am." His glance went to Alake, sobbing in her mother's arms. "But you don't seem to understand that important things are happening, things that involve you and your people. You've got to take action now!

"For instance," he said, hoping to catch their attention, "did you know that the seamoons you're planning to inhabit is already inhabited?"

Dumaka and Delu frowned, grew attentive. The dwarves halted, turned around. Even Eliason lifted his head, a vague flicker of disquiet in the elf's sunken eyes.

"The dolphins said nothing of this," returned Dumaka sternly. "How do you know? Who told you?"

"The dragon-snakes. Look, I know you don't trust them. I don't blame you. But I have reason to believe that this time they're telling the truth."

"Who is living there? Those horrible creatures?" Yngvar guessed, scowling.

"No, not the dragon-snakes, if that's who you mean. They have their own seamoons. They don't need or want another. The people living on the moon in which you're interested are not dwarven, elven, or human. I don't think you've ever heard of them. They call themselves Sartan."

Haplo glanced around quickly, saw no signs of recognition, and breathed an inward sigh of relief. That made things easier. It might have been difficult, had these people any distant memories of the Sartan, to get them to move against those they must consider gods. He hurried on, while he had their attention.

"The dragon-snakes have promised to rebuild your ships, using their own magic. They're sorry for what they did. It was all a misunderstanding. I'll explain it to you when there's more time.

"For now, I'll tell you this much, so you can start making plans. The seamoons are everything the dolphins told you. Actually, it isn't really a seamoons. It's a permanent structure. And it's huge, big enough for all your people to live on together. And you'll be able to live in this realm for generations, without having to worry about building more sun-chasers."

Dumaka looked dubious. "You are certain you are discussing . . . what was the name?"

"Surunan," supplied his wife.

"Yes, Surunan."

"Yeah, that's the place," said Haplo, not wanting to have to speak the Sartan name. "It's the only place anywhere near the seasoons. It's there ... or nowhere for your people, I'm afraid."

"Yes," said Eliason softly, "we had ourselves come to that determination."

"Which brings us to our problem. What the dolphins didn't tell you was that . . . this place ... is now the home of these Sartan. To give the dolphins credit, I don't think they knew. The Sartan haven't lived there very long."

Well, they had, but now wasn't the time to go into all that.

The mensch exchanged glances. They seemed dazed, unable to cope with this new situation.

"But who are these Sartan? You speak of them as if they were horrible creatures, who will turn us away," said Delu. "How do you know they won't be glad to have us live on their realm?"

"And how many of these Sartan are there?" asked her husband.

"There aren't many, a thousand or so. They inhabit one city in the realm. The rest of the land is going to waste."

Yngvar brightened. "Then what do we have to worry about? There's room for all."

"I agree with the dwarf. We will make Surunan productive and prosperous."

Haplo shook his head. "Logically, what you say makes sense. And the Sartan should be agreeable to you moving in, but I'm afraid they may not. I know something of these Sartan. According to the dragon-snakes, a long, long time ago, when the seasoons was new, your ancestors used to live in this same realm with the Sartan. And then, one day, the Sartan told your ancestors to leave. They put your people in ships and sent them out into the Goodsea, not knowing, not caring, whether your people lived or died. It's not likely the Sartan will be happy to see you come back again."

"But, if that's the only place for us to go, how could they turn us away?" Eliason looked amazed.

"I'm not saying they will," Haplo said, shrugging. "I'm just saying they might. And you need to think about what you'll do if they refuse to let you. That's why you need to meet together, make plans, decisions."

He looked at the mensch expectantly.

They looked at each other.

"I will not go to war," said the elven king.

"Come now, man!" Yngvar snorted. "No one wants to fight, but if these Sartan prove unreasonable—"

"I will not go to war," Eliason repeated with maddening calm.

Yngvar began to argue. Dumaka attempted to reason.

"The sun will not leave us for many cycles," said Eliason brokenly. He waved his hand. "I cannot think of such things now—"

"Can't think about the welfare of your own people!"

Grundle, tearstreaks drying on her face, stalked across the pier and came to stand before the elven king, her head about level with his waist.

"Grundle, you should not speak so to your elders," reprimanded her mother, but she didn't say it very loudly and her daughter didn't hear her.

"Sabia was my friend. Every cycle that passes from now to the end of my life, I'll think of her and miss her. But she was willing to give her life to save her people. It would be a disgrace to her memory if you, her father, couldn't do as much!"

Eliason stood staring at the dwarf as if he were in a dream and she some strange apparition sprung out of nowhere.

Yngvar, the dwarf king, sighed and tugged at his beard. "My daughter speaks true words, Eliason, even if she does hurl them with all the grace and charm of an ax-thrower. We share your grief, but we also share your responsibility. The lives of our people come first. This man, who has saved our children, is right. We must meet and plan what is to be done, and soon!"

"I agree with Yngvar," Dumaka spoke up. "Let us hold the meeting on Phondra, fourteen cycles hence. Will that give you time enough to conclude the mourning period?"

"Fourteen cycles!"

Haplo was about to protest. He caught the dwarf's keen-eyed glance warning him to keep silent, and shut his mouth. Later, he would discover that the elven mourning period—during which no elf related to the deceased by either blood or marriage may conduct any type of business—generally lasted for months, sometimes longer.

"Very well," said Eliason with a deep sigh. "Fourteen cycles. I will meet you on Phondra."

The Elmas departed. The Phondrans and Gargans returned to their submersibles, prepared to go back to their respective sea-spheres. Dumaka, prodded by Alake, came up to Haplo.

"You must forgive him, sir, forgive us all if we seem ungrateful to you for what you've done. The tears of great joy and terrible grief have drowned all gratitude. You would do honor to my lodge, if you would agree to be our guest."

"I am the one who would be honored to share your dwelling, Chief," Haplo answered solemnly, feeling strangely as if he were back in the Labyrinth, talking to the headman of one of the Squatter tribes.

Dumaka said the appropriate words of pleasure and motioned toward his submersible.

"Will Eliason come, do you think?" Haplo asked as they boarded the vessel, the Patryn taking considerable care to avoid stepping in any water.

"Yes, he will come," Dumaka replied. "He's very reliable, for an elf."

"How long has it been since the elves went to war?"

"War?" Dumaka was amused, his teeth flashed white against his dusky skin. "The elves?" He shrugged. "Forever."

Haplo expected to spend his time on Phondra chafing with impatience, fuming at the forced inaction. He was surprised, after his first day or two, to discover that he was actually, grudgingly, enjoying himself.

Compared to the other worlds in which he'd traveled, Phondra most closely resembled his own. And while Haplo had never supposed he would be homesick for the Labyrinth, life with Dumaka's tribe brought back memories of some of the few pleasant and restful times in the Patryn's harsh life—those spent in the camps of the Squatters.

Dumaka's tribe was the largest on Phondra and the strongest, one reason he was chieftain over the entire human population. It had taken numerous wars to settle the question, apparently, but now he was undisputed ruler and, in general, most of the other tribes approved his leadership.

Dumaka did not hold power alone, however. The Coven wielded a strong influence in the community, whose people revered magic and all those who could use it.

"In the old days," Alake explained, "the Coven and the chieftains were often at odds, each believing they had the best right to govern. My father's own father died that way, murdered by a warlock, who thought that he should be chief. The war that followed was bitter and bloody. Countless numbers perished. My father swore that if the One made him chief, he would bring about peace between the tribes and the Coven. The One granted him victory over his enemies and it was then that he married my mother, daughter of the Priestess of the Coven.

"My parents divided the power between them. My father rules on all disputes that occur over land or possessions; he gives laws and stands in judgment. My mother and the Coven deal with all things magical. Phondra has been at peace for years now."

Haplo looked around at the tribal village — the lodges made of poles and thatched grass; the women, babies on their hips, laughing and talking; the younger men, honing weapons, preparing to set off in pursuit of some wild beast. A group of men too old to go on the hunt sat in the warm, waning sunlight, reliving hunts of long ago. The air was soft to the touch, scented with smells of smoked meat, alive with the shrill cries of children having a play hunt of their own.

"It seems a pity it must all end," Alake said softly, her eyes glimmering.

Yes, it was a pity, Haplo caught himself thinking. He tried to shake off the thought, but he could not deny that in this place, with these people, he felt at peace and relaxed for the first time in a very long time.

It was merely a reaction to his fear, he decided. A reaction to the initial terror of the dragon-snakes, to the even greater terror of believing he'd lost his magic.

I must have been weaker than I knew. I'll use this time to regain my strength, for I'll soon need it. When I face the ancient enemy. When we go to war against the Sartan.

There's nothing I can do to hurry it, anyway, he told himself. It won't do to offend these mensch. I need them, need their numbers, if not necessarily their skill at arms.

He had been thinking a lot about the forthcoming battle. The elves would be worse than useless. He must find something for them to do, keep them out of the way. The humans were warriors, trained and skilled and easily roused to blood lust. The dwarves, from what he had gathered from talking to Grundle, were solid, tough. Slow to anger, but that wouldn't be a problem. Haplo thought it likely that the Sartan would inadvertently provide all the provocation he needed.

His only concern was that these Sartan might prove to be like Alfred. Haplo considered the matter briefly, shook his head. No, from what he knew of Samah, from the records left in the Nexus, the Councillor was as different from Alfred as the light and lush world of air differed from the dark, smothering world of stone.

"I'm sorry, but I must leave you alone for a time . . ."

Alake was saying something to him, something about having to go to her mother. She was looking at him anxiously, fearful of offending him.

Haplo smiled at her. "I'll be fine on my own. And you don't have to worry about entertaining me, much as I enjoy your company. I'll just look around." He waved a hand. "Get to know your people."

"You like us, don't you?" asked Alake, returning his smile.

"Yes," said Haplo and only when the word was spoken did he realize he meant it. "Yes, I like your people, Alake. They remind me ... of someplace I was, once."

He fell silent, abruptly, not particularly welcoming some of the memories, yet oddly grateful to greet them after a long absence.

"She must have been very beautiful," said Alake, somewhat downcast.

Haplo looked up at her swiftly. Women! Mensch, Patryn, all alike. What gave them that uncanny ability to crawl inside a man's skull, inside the dark places he thought hidden to all?

"She was," he said, and he hadn't meant to say that either. It was this place. Too much like home. "You'd better run along. Your mother will be wondering where you are."

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," she said softly. Reaching out her hand, she touched his, clasped his fingers.

Her skin was smooth and soft, her hand strong. His fingers tightened over hers, he drew her hand closer, not thinking what he was doing. Only knowing that she was beautiful and she warmed some cold part of him.

"A little pain is good for us," he said to her. "Reminds us we're alive."

She didn't understand, but she was reassured by his manner, and left him. Haplo's gaze followed her until the hungry, lonely ache inside him made him feel just a little bit too much alive for comfort.

Standing up, stretching in the warm sun, he went off to join the young warriors in the hunt.

The hunt was long, exciting, strenuous. Whatever beast it was—and Haplo never did catch the name—was cunning, vicious, and savage. The Patryn deliberately refused to use his magic. He found he enjoyed the hard, physical exertion, enjoyed pitting wits and muscle against an enemy.

The stalking and chasing lasted for hours, the kill itself, involving nets and spears, was tense and danger-edged. Several of the men were injured; one came close to being gored by the swordlike horn on top of the

brutish head. Haplo flung himself on the young man, dragged him out of harm's way. The horn grazed the Patryn's skin but, protected as he was by the runes, did no true damage.

Haplo had never been in any danger, but the humans didn't know that and acclaimed him the hero of the day. At the end of the hunt, when the young men returned, singing, to the camp, he enjoyed their comradeship, the feeling that he was, once again, one with a community.

This feeling wouldn't last long. It never had in the Labyrinth. He was a Runner. He would grow restless and uneasy, chafe against walls only he could see. But for now, he permitted himself the pleasure.

"I'm building up their confidence in me, their trust." That was his excuse. Pleasantly weary, he walked back to his hut, planning to lie down and rest before tonight's feasting. "These men will follow me anywhere, now. Even to war against a far superior enemy."

He lay on his pallet, the warm ache of fatigue relaxing his muscles and his mind. A unwelcome thought occurred to him— his lord's instructions.

You are to be an observer. Take no action that might give yourself away as a Patryn. Do not alert the enemy to our presence.

But the Lord of the Nexus could not have foreseen that Haplo would run into Samah the Councillor. Samah, the Sartan who had imprisoned the Patrins in the Labyrinth. Samah, who had been responsible for the deaths, the sufferings, the torments endured by Haplo's people through countless generations.

"When I return, it will be with Samah, and my lord will once again trust me and think of me as his son ..."

Haplo must have fallen asleep, for he jerked awake, alarmed, aware of someone inside his hut with him. He reacted swiftly, instinctively, and startled Alake, who took an involuntary step or two back away from him.

"I'm . . . sorry," muttered Haplo, seeing, by the lambent light of the campfires outside his hut, who it was. "I didn't mean to jump at you. You took me by surprise, that's all."

"Never disturb the sleeping tiger," said Alake. "So my father says. I called out and you answered, but you must have been dreaming. I'm sorry for waking you. I will leave . . ."

Yes, it had been a dream. Haplo was still trying to calm the rapid beating of his heart.

"No, don't go."

The dream lurked, on the fringes of his mind. He wasn't anxious to let it get at him again.

"That smells good," he said, sniffing at savory odors drifting on the soft night air.

"I brought you some food," Alake said, gesturing outdoors. The Phondrans never ate inside the lodge, but always out in the Open—a sensible precaution, one that kept the dwellings clean and free of rodents. "You missed supper and I thought . . . that is, my mother thought . . . you might be hungry."

"I am. Tell your mother thank you very much for her thoughtfulness," said Haplo gravely.

Alake smiled, pleased to have pleased him. She was always doing something for him, bringing him food, small gifts, something she'd made herself. . . .

"You have upset your pallet. I will straighten it for you."

She took a step forward. Haplo was walking toward the lodge entrance. Somehow, the two managed to collide. Before Haplo knew what was happening, soft arms encircled him, soft lips sought his, warmth and fragrance surrounded him.

Haplo's body reacted before his brain could take control. He was half in the Labyrinth, still. The girl was more a part of his dream than reality. He kissed her hard, fiercely, his passion that of a man, forgetting he held a child. He pressed her close, started to draw her down on his pallet.

Alake gave a faint, scared gasp.

Haplo's brain took charge, jerked him to his senses.

"Get out!" he ordered, thrusting Alake roughly away from him.

She stood, shivering, in the doorway, staring at him. She'd been unprepared for the ardence of his passion, perhaps unprepared for her own body's response to what had before been maiden dreams and fantasies. She was frightened of him, frightened of herself. But she had come to know, suddenly, her own power.

"You love me!" she whispered.

"No, I don't," Haplo returned harshly.

"You kissed me . . ."

"Alake—" Haplo began, exasperated, then stopped.

He swallowed the cold, callous words he'd been ready to speak. It wouldn't do to hurt the girl, who would almost assuredly go weeping to her mother. He couldn't afford to offend the rulers of the Phondrans and, as much as it irritated him to admit it, he didn't want to hurt Alake. What had happened had been his own damn fault.

"Alake," he began again, lamely, "I'm too old. I'm not even your race . . ."

"Then what are you? You're not elven or dwarven . . ."

I belong to people beyond your comprehension, child. A race of demigods, who might stoop to take a mensch for a toy, but would never take one for a wife.

"I can't explain, Alake. But, you know I'm different. Look at me! Look at the color of my skin. My hair and eyes. And I'm a stranger. You know nothing about me."

"I know all I need to know," the girl said softly. "I know that you save my life . . ."

"You saved mine."

She drew nearer, her eyes warm and glowing. "You are brave, the bravest man I've ever known. And handsome. Yes, you are different, but that is what makes you special. And you may be old, but I am old, too, for my years. Boys my own age bore me."

She reached out for him. Haplo kept his hands at his sides.

"Alake," he said, able at last to think rationally, saying what he should have said in the first place, "your parents would never approve."

"They might," she faltered.

"No." Haplo shook his head. "They will repeat everything that I have said to you. They would be angry and they would have a right to be angry. You are a royal daughter. Your marriage is very important to your people. You have responsibilities. You must marry a chieftain or a chieftain's son. I'm nobody, Alake."

She drooped. Her head bowed, her shoulders shook. Tears glimmered on her lashes. "You kissed me," she murmured.

"Yes, I couldn't help myself. You are very beautiful, Alake."

She lifted her head, looked at him, her heart in her eyes. "There will be a way. You will see. The One will not keep two who love each other apart. No," she said, raising a hand, "you need have no fear. I understand, and I will not tell my father or my mother. I will say nothing of this to anyone. It will be our secret, until the One shows me how we may be together."

She gave him a soft, tremulous kiss on his cheek, then turned and fled from his lodge.

Haplo stared after her, frustrated, angry at her, at himself, at the absurd circumstances that had dumped him into this situation. Would she keep her word, say nothing to her parents? He considered going after her, but he had no idea what he'd say. How could he tell her that he hadn't been kissing her, that he'd been kissing a memory conjured by his surroundings, the hunt, the dream?

## CHAPTER \* 20

### PHONDRA CHELESTRA

HAPLO WAS ON HIS GUARD THE NEXT CYCLE, WAITING FOR THE look or sign indicating Dumaka had discovered his guest trifling with his daughter's affections.

But Alake was true to her word, proving stronger than Haplo had suspected. When she was in his company (a circumstance Haplo went out of his way to avoid, but sometimes couldn't help), Alake was demure, polite, proper. She no longer brought him little presents, no longer selected the choicest morsels from the cooking pot for his pleasure.

And then he had other problems to worry about.

The dwarven contingent arrived on the twelfth cycle. Yngvar brought a large group, consisting of the Elders and several military officers.

The dwarves were welcomed formally by Dumaka, his wife, members of the tribal council and the Coven. A nearby cave, whose cool chambers were used for storing fruits and vegetables and a rather remarkable wine made by the humans, was cleared out and turned over to the dwarves for the duration of their stay on Phondra. As Yngvar told Haplo, no dwarf could sleep soundly beneath a roof covered with grass. He wanted the feel of something substantial—like a mountain—over his head.

Haplo was glad to see the dwarves. Their arrival took unwanted attention away from him and it meant that the time for action was that much nearer. Haplo was ready for action now, the incident with Alake having effectively managed to dispel his lapse into idyllic euphoria.

He was eager for news, and the dwarves brought some.

"The dragon-snakes are rebuilding the sun-chasers," stated Yngvar. "As he said they would." The dwarf gave a nod toward Haplo.

The heads of the royal houses met privately together after dinner. Formal discussions, involving all members of the respective governments, would not take place until the elves arrived. Haplo had been invited, because he was a guest. He took care to keep out of the conversation, watched and listened quietly.

"These are good tidings," said Dumaka.

The dwarf twisted his beard, frowning.

"What is wrong, Yngvar? Is the work progressing too slowly? Is it slipshod? Ill done?"

"Oh, it's done well enough," the dwarven king grumbled. He shifted one leg out from beneath the other, trying, in vain, to make himself comfortable. [1] "It's how it's done that bothers me. Magic."

He grunted, rolled over on one rump, groaned, and began to rub his leg. "I mean no offense, ma'am," he added, nodding brusquely at Delu, who had bristled at his disparaging tone, black eyes flashing indignantly. "We've been through this before. You elves and humans know how we dwarves feel about magic. We know how you feel. We have come, thank the One, to both respect each other's thinking and not try to change it. And if I had thought that either of your magics or both would have salvaged the sun-chasers, I would have been the first to suggest using it."

The dwarf's eyes narrowed, he forgot his discomfort. "But those ships were broken into a thousand bits. A thousand, thousand bits, if you will. I could have sat on the largest piece of all that was left and it would have been no more to me than a splinter in my arse!"

"My dear," rebuked his wife, flushing. "You're not in the tavern."

"Yes, yes. We understand. Go on," persisted Dumaka impatiently. "What are you saying? The work is progressing or it isn't?"

Yngvar was not to be hurried, despite the fact that his toes had gone numb. He rose abruptly to his feet, marched over to what appeared to be a large ceremonial drum, and plopped himself down on it with a sigh of relief. Delu looked considerably shocked; her husband silenced her words of protest with a look.

"The work," said the dwarf slowly, glowering from beneath his bushy eyebrows, "is finished."

"What?" Dumaka exclaimed.

"The ships were built"—Yngvar snapped his fingers—"in less time than it took me to do that."

Haplo smiled, well pleased.

"That is not possible," argued Delu. "You must be mistaken. Our most powerful sorcerers—"

"—are as children compared to these dragon-snakes," stated Yngvar bluntly. "I am not mistaken. I have never seen such magic. The sun-chasers were so many splinters, floating on the water. The dragon-snakes came up to look at the ships, surrounded them. Their green eyes glowed red, brighter than the furnace in which we forge our axes. They spoke strange words. The sea boiled. The pieces of wood flew into the air and, as if one knew another, rushed together as a bride rushes to the arms of her groom. And there they stand—the sun-chasers. Exactly as we built them. Except that now"—the dwarf added, glowering—"none of my people will go near them. And that includes me."

Haplo's satisfaction turned instantly to gloom. Damn! Another problem! He should have foreseen the mensch reaction. As it was, even Delu looked troubled.

"This truly is a wondrous feat," she said in a low voice. "I would like to hear it described in more detail. Perhaps, if you could meet with the Coven tomorrow . . ."

Yngvar snorted. "If I never see another wizard, it will be too soon. No, I will not argue. I have said all I am going to say on the subject. The sun-chasers are there, floating in the harbor. The Coven is welcome to

come look at the ships, sink them, dance in them, fly them, if you have a mind to. No dwarf will set so much as a hair of his beard on a single plank. This I swear!"

"Are the dwarves prepared to let themselves be turned into blocks of ice?" Dumaka asked, glowering.

"We have boats enough of our own—boats built with sweat, not magic—to take our people off our doomed seamount."

"And what about us?" Dumaka shouted.

"Humans are not the concern of the dwarves!" Yngvar shouted back. "Use the cursed boats if you want."

"You know perfectly well we need a dwarven crew—"

"Superstitious fools!" Delu was saying.

Haplo got up, walked out. From the sounds of the argument raging behind him, no one was likely to notice his absence.

He stalked off toward his own lodge and nearly fell over Grundle and Alake, crouched in a grove of trees.

"What the— Oh, it's you," Haplo said irritably. "I thought you two'd had your fill of listening in on other people's conversations?"

They'd chosen a secluded spot, near the back end of the chieftain's lodge, shadowed from the bright light of the camp-fires that shone full on their faces when they stood up.

Alake looked ashamed. Grundle only grinned.

"I wasn't going to listen," Alake protested. "I came to see if my mother needed me to fetch more wine for our guests and I found Grundle hiding here. I told her it was wrong, that we shouldn't do this anymore, that the One had punished us—"

"The only reason you found me hiding here was that you came planning to hide here yourself!" Grundle retorted.

"I did not!" Alake whispered indignantly.

"You did so. What else were you doing traipsing around the back of the longhouse instead of the front?"

"Whatever I was doing is my business—"

"Both of you go on home," Haplo ordered. "It's not safe here. You're away from the firelight, too close to the jungle. Go on, now,"

He waited until he saw them headed on their way, then started for his own lodge. Footsteps echoed his. He glanced around, saw Grundle tagging along behind.

"Well, what are you going to do about our parents?" she asked him, jerking a thumb in the direction of the longhouse.

Loud, angry voices could be heard, echoing through the night air. People passing by looked at each other worriedly.

"Shouldn't you be somewhere else?" Haplo said irritably. "Won't someone miss you?"

"I'm supposed to be in the cave asleep, but I stuffed a bag of potatoes in my blanket roll. Everyone'll think it's me. And I know the guard on duty. His name's Hartmut. He's in love with me," she said matter-of-factly. "He'll let me back in. Speaking of love, when's the wedding?"

"What wedding?" Haplo asked, his thoughts on how to solve the current problem.

"Yours and Alake's."

Haplo came to a stop, glared at the dwarf.

Grundle gazed back, smiling, innocent. Numerous tribe members were eyeing them curiously. Haplo caught hold of the dwarf's arm, hustled her into the privacy of his lodge.

"Uh-oh," she said, shrinking away from him in mock terror. "You're not going to try to seduce me, now, are you?"

"I didn't seduce anybody," Haplo said grimly. "And keep your voice down. How much do you know? What did Alake tell you?"

"Everything. Mind if I sit? Thanks." She plopped herself on the floor, began plucking leaves out of her side whiskers. "Whew! It was really hot, squatting in that bush. I could have told those dragon-snakes they were making a mistake, showing off their power like that. Not that they would have listened to me."

She shook her head, her expression suddenly grave, solemn. "Do you know, I think they did it on purpose. I think they knew magic like that would frighten my people. I think they meant to frighten them!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Why would they want to frighten you when they're trying to save you? And never mind that now anyway. What did Alake tell you? Whatever she said, I didn't try to take advantage of her."

"Oh, I know that." Grundle waved a deprecating hand. "I was just teasing. I have to admit ..." she added grudgingly.

"You treated Alake better than I expected you to. I guess I misjudged you. I'm sorry."

"What did she tell you?" Haplo asked for the third time, "That you two were going to be married. Not now. Alake's not a fool. She knows that this crisis is no time for her to bring up matrimony. But when the sun-chasers take us all to a new realm—if that ever happens, which now I'm beginning to doubt—then she figures you'll both be free to get married and start a new life together."

So, Haplo said to himself bitterly, here I've been thinking all along that she'd come to her senses. All she's been doing, apparently, is entrenching herself deeper in her fantasies. "Do you love her?" Grundle asked.

Haplo turned, frowning, thinking the dwarf was teasing him again. He saw, instead, that she was very much in earnest. "No, I don't."

"I didn't think so." Grundle gave a small sigh. "Why don't you just tell her?"

"I don't want to hurt her."

"Funny," said the dwarf, studying him shrewdly, "I'd have said you were the kind of man who didn't much care whether he hurt other people or not. What's your real reason?"

Haplo squatted down on his haunches, eyes level with the dwarf maid. "Let's say that it wouldn't be in anybody's best interests if I did anything to upset Alake. Would it?" Grundle shook her head. "No, I guess

you're right." He breathed a sigh, stood up. "Listen, the shouting's stopped. I'd say the meeting's broken up."

Grundle clambered hastily to her feet. "That means I better get going. If I'm caught missing, Hartmut's the one who'll end up in trouble. I hope my parents settled everything with the humans. Deep down, you know, my father really respects Dumaka and Delu. It's just that the snakes frightened him so badly."

She started to dart out the door. Haplo caught hold of her, pulled her back.

Yngvar was stumping past, his face a sullen red in the firelight, arms swinging wildly as he muttered to himself. His wife tromped along at his side, her lips pressed together tightly, too angry to speak.

"I don't think they resolved anything," said Haplo.

Grundle shook her head. "Alake's right. The One sent you to us. I will ask the One to help you."

"The same One whose oath I swore?" asked Haplo.

"What else?" said Grundle, looking at him in astonishment. "The One who guides the waves, of course."

The dwarf dashed out the door, her short legs pumping as she ran off into the night. He watched the small figure bob among the campfires, saw that she would easily outdistance her parents. Yngvar's anger carried him along at a swift pace, but Haplo guessed the rotund king would soon get winded. Grundle would reach the cave in plenty of time to replace the sack of potatoes with her own stout body, save lover Hartmut from having his beard cut off or whatever form of punishment was measured out to guards derelict in their duties.

Haplo turned from the door, flung himself on his pallet, stared into the darkness. He thought about the dwarves and their reliance on this One, wondered if he could somehow use this to his advantage.

"The One who guides the waves!" he repeated, amused.

He closed his eyes, relaxed. Sleep began to sever the ties that bound brain to body, snipping them one by one to let the mind drift free until dawn would catch it, drag it back. But before the last cord was cut, Haplo heard an echo of Grundle's words in his mind. But it wasn't the dwarf's voice that spoke them. The words seemed, in fact, to come to him out of a very bright white light, and they were slightly different.

The One who guides the Wave.

Haplo blinked, jerked to wakefulness. He sat up, stared into the darkness of his lodge.

"Alfred?" he demanded, then wondered irritably why he should have the feeling the Sartan was present.

He lay back down, shoved the dwarves, Alake, the Sartan, the One, the dragon-snakes, and whoever else was crowded into his lodge out into the night, and gave himself up to sleep.

## CHAPTER \* 21

### PHONDRA CHELESTRA

THE ELVES WERE TWO CYCLES LATE—TO THE SURPRISE OF NO ONE, except possibly Haplo.

Dumaka hadn't expected Eliason that soon, was astonished beyond measure when the dolphins brought word that the elves were sailing into Phondran waters. He sent everyone in the village into a mad scramble to open, clean out, and prepare the elven guesthouses.

These houses were special, having been built exclusively to house the elves, who—like the dwarves—demanded special arrangements. For example, no elf would consider sleeping on the ground. This was not a matter of comfort. Long ago, elven alchemists, perhaps in a vain attempt to try to harness the drifting season, had discovered the nature of the chemical reaction between season and seamount that produced the breathable air surrounding the moons.

The chemical reaction, so the alchemists deduced, took place between the surface of the seamount and the season. The next logical step was that a similar reaction would naturally take place between anything that rested on the surface for any length of time—this included elves or any other living creature.

Only inanimate objects were ever permitted to rest on the ground in the elven kingdom, and then the most valuable of these was moved periodically to prevent any unfortunate alteration. Animals that slept on the ground were not encouraged in Elmas and had been gradually phased out, in favor of birds, monkeys, cats, all those who live in trees.

Elves will eat no food that has been grown on the ground or in it. They will not stand long in one place, nor stand long at all, if they can help it, but will sit down and pull their feet up into the chair.

One of the earliest and most devastating wars between the Phondrans and the Elmas was the War of the Bed. An elven prince had traveled to human lands to open negotiations to avert a war. All went well until the human chieftain led the elf to his quarters for the night. The elf took one look at the pallet spread on the bare ground, assumed the human was out to murder him, and declared war on the spot.

Since then, humans and elves have come to respect, if not agree with, each other's beliefs. Elven guesthouses in Phondra are furnished with crude beds made of tree limbs lashed together with rope. And, in their own homelands, the elves have learned to avert their eyes when their human guests take the blankets from the bed and spread them out on the floor. (Eliason had even ceased the practice of attempting to shift his sleeping human guests into beds without their knowledge, ever since one fell out during the night and broke his arm.)

The guest quarters in the village were barely finished by the time the elven ship docked. Dumaka and Delu were on hand to greet their guests. Yngvar was there, as well, though the dwarven contingent and the humans kept well apart. Grundle and Alake were present, but separated, each standing with her own family.

One reason the elves are extremely amenable to the constantly shifting nature of their coral dwellings. All furniture, clothing, bedding, and suchlike would have to be moved anyway.

It is a widely held belief among the Elmas that the short life span of humans is due entirely to their unfortunate habit of sleeping on the ground. Phondrans, on the other hand, view the tall elven beds with horror, are terrified that they will roll off in the night and kill themselves. The Gargan find the entire argument ridiculous. As long as there is solid stone above him, a dwarf could sleep standing on his head. Unfortunately, however, this is one reason many dwarves do not travel comfortably by ship.

The rift between the two races had deepened. Both sets of parents forbade their daughters to talk to one another. Haplo, seeing the two girls exchange secretive, flashing-eyed glances, guessed just how long that rule would be obeyed. He hoped grimly that they wouldn't get caught, precipitate another crisis. At least, the enforced separation had given Alake something else to think about besides the Patryn. He supposed he should be grateful.

The royal families greeted each other with every show of friendship—for the sake of their followers. Dumaka included Haplo as a highly honored guest and the Patryn was at least relieved to note that even the dwarf thawed out somewhat in Haplo's presence. But none of them could hide the fact that they were not meeting in peace as they would have normally. Handshakes were formal and stiff, voices were cold and carefully modulated. No one called anyone by his or her given name.

Haplo could have cheerfully drowned every one of them.

The dolphins had been the cause of this latest trouble. They had gleefully carried the news about the dwarves refusing to travel in the sun-chaser to the elves. Eliason was disposed to side with Dumaka, although, elflike, he had sent word that he would not be rushed into making a decision. This pleased neither. Consequently, Eliason had managed to anger both dwarves and humans before he even arrived.

All of which caused Haplo to literally gnash his teeth in frustration. He had one bit of consolation and it was negative—the dragon-snakes were nowhere to be seen. He was afraid the sight of the formidable creatures might harden the dwarves' determination against them.

A time for a meeting was set, later that evening, and then Yngvar and his contingent stomped off.

Eliason looked after the angry dwarf sadly, shook his head. "What is to be done?" he asked Dumaka.

"I have no idea," the human chieftain growled. "If you ask me, his beard's grown into his brain. He claims he and his people would rather freeze to death than set foot on the sun-chasers. They probably would, too. They're just stubborn enough."

Haplo, unobtrusive and silent, kept his distance, but lingered near, hoping to hear something that would help him figure out what to do.

Dumaka put a hand on Eliason's shoulder. "I am sorry, my friend, to add this trouble to the heavy burden of your sorrow. Although," he added, studying the elf intently, "you carry it better than I would have thought possible."

"I had to let the dead go," replied Eliason softly, "in order to look after the living."

The young elf, Devon, stood on the pier, staring out over the water. Alake was beside him, talking to him earnestly. Grundle, with a wistful glance at both of them, had been dragged off by her parents.

But it was obvious that Alake's words were falling on deaf ears. Devon paid no attention to her, didn't respond in any way.

Dumaka's grim expression softened. "So young, to be dealt such a heavy blow."

"Three nights running," said Eliason, in low tones, "we discovered him in that room where my daughter . . . where she . . ." He swallowed, turned exceedingly pale.

Dumaka squeezed his arm in silent sympathy, to indicate he understood.

Eliason drew a deep breath. "Thank you, my friend. We found him . . . there, staring out the window at the stones below. You can imagine what terrible deed we feared he contemplated. I brought him with me, hoping that the company of his friends would draw him out of the shadows that surround him. And it was for his sake I left earlier than I had intended."

"Thank you, Devon," Haplo muttered.

Alake, after a helpless glance at her father, finally suggested that Devon might want to see his quarters, and offered to show him the way. He responded like one of the automatons the Gags used on Arianus, trailing after Alake with listless step and bowed head. He didn't know where he was, obviously cared less.

Haplo remained hanging about Eliason and Dumaka, but it was soon apparent that the two rulers were going to talk of Devon and his sorrows and nothing of major importance.

Just as well, Haplo decided, leaving them. They're not likely to get into a fight over that subject. And I have at least two out of five mensch speaking to each other.

He couldn't help but think back to his time spent on Arianus, time spent trying to spread discord between elves and humans and dwarves. Now he was working twice as hard to bring the three mensch races together.

"I might almost believe in this One," he said to himself. "Somebody must be getting a big laugh out of all this."

The ceremonial drum was beating, calling the royal families to conference. Everyone in the village turned out to watch the various parties wend their way to the longhouse. At any other time, such a meeting would have been cause for jubilation; the Phondrans would have been chattering among themselves, pointing out to their children such curiosities as the remarkable length of dwarven beards, the sunlight blondness of elven hair.

But this day, the Phondrans stood in silence, quieting irritably the children's high-pitched questions. Rumor had blown through Phondra like the embers of a campfire, stirred by a high wind. Wherever it fell, small blazes started up, spread rapidly through the tribes of the realm. Other humans from other tribes had traveled here in their long narrow boats, to witness the meeting.

Many of these were witches and warlocks, belonging to the Coven, and were welcomed by Delu, made guests of her own lodgehouse. Others were chieftains, owing their loyalty to Dumaka, and were welcomed by him. Still others were nobody in particular, just curious. These invariably had some guestfriend or relative among the tribe. Nearly every lodge had at least one extra blanket spread on its floor.

All gathered to watch the procession, consisting of the three royal families, representatives of other Phondran tribes, the Phondran Coven, the Elmas Guildsmen, the Gargan Elders—all of the latter acting as witnesses for their people. The humans were silent, faces strained and tense, worried and anxious. Everyone knew that no matter what was decided in the meeting, their fate—for good or ill—depended on the outcome.

Haplo had started for the lodge early, intending to slip inside before any of the dignitaries arrived. But, glancing out to sea, he was disconcerted and none too pleased to see the long sinuous necks and green-red slit eyes of the dragon-snakes.

He couldn't help feeling a qualm, an uncomfortable tightening of stomach muscles, a chill in his bowels. The sigla on his skin began to glow a faint blue.

Haplo wished irritably the snakes hadn't come, hoped none of the others saw them. He'd have to remember to try to keep everyone from the water's edge.

The drum beat loudly, then stopped. The members of the three families met outside the lodgehouse, were making a show of friendship—grudging on the part of the dwarves, stiff and constrained on the part of everyone else.

Haplo was wondering how he could manage to evade getting caught up in the formalities, when two figures, one tall and one short, loomed in his path. Hands grabbed his arms. Alake and Grundle dragged him into the jungle shadows.

"I don't have time for games—" he began impatiently, then took a good look at their faces. "What's happened?"

"You've got to help us!" Alake gasped. "We don't know what to do! I think we should tell my father—"

"That's the last thing we want to do!" Grundle snapped. "The meeting's just getting started. If we break it up now, who knows when they'll ever get back together?"

"But—"

"What's happened?" Haplo demanded.

"Devon!" Alake's eyes were wide and frightened. "He's . . . disappeared."

"Damn!" Haplo swore beneath his breath.

"He's gone for a walk. That's all," Grundle said, but the dwarf's nut-brown complexion was pale, her side whiskers trembled.

"I'm going to tell my father, he'll call out the trackers." Alake started to run away.

Haplo caught hold of her, hauled her back.

"We can't afford to interrupt the meeting. I'm a fair tracker myself. We'll find him, bring him back quietly, without fuss. Grundle's right. He's probably just gone off for a walk, to be by himself. Now, where and when did you last see him?"

Alake had been the last to see him.

"I took him to the elven guesthouse. I stayed with him, tried to talk to him. Then Eliason and the other elves returned to prepare for the meeting and I had to leave. But I waited around, hoping to get a chance to talk to him when Eliason and the rest left. I went back to the guesthouse. He was there, alone."

"I told him that Grundle and I had found a place in back of the longhouse where we could . . . well, that is ..."

"Listen in?" Haplo suggested.

"We have a right," Grundle stated. "This all happened because of us. We should be there."

"I agree," said Haplo quietly, to calm the irate dwarf. "I'll see what I can do. Now, finish telling me about Devon."

"At first, he seemed almost angry to see me. He said he didn't want to listen to anything our parents said. He didn't care. Then, suddenly, he cheered up. He was almost too cheerful, somehow. It was . . . kind of awful." She shuddered.

"He told me he was hungry. He knew dinner would be a long time coming, what with the meeting and all, and he asked me if I could find him something to eat. I told him I could and tried to persuade him to come with me. He didn't want to leave the guesthouse, he said. The people staring at him made him nervous.

"I thought it would be good if he ate something; I don't think he's eaten in days. And so I left to fetch food. There were other elves with him. On the way, I ran into Grundle, looking for me. I brought her along, thinking she might be able to cheer up Devon. When we got back to the lodge"—Alake spread her hands—"he was gone."

Haplo didn't like the sounds of any of this. He'd known people in the Labyrinth who suddenly couldn't take it anymore, couldn't stand the pain, the horror, the loss of a friend, a mate. He'd seen the ghastly cheerfulness that often came after a severe despondency.

Alake saw the grim expression on his face. She moaned, covered her mouth with her hand. Grundle tugged at her side whiskers in black gloom.

"He's probably just taking a walk," Haplo repeated. "Did you look for him in the village? Maybe he went after Eliason?"

"He didn't," said Alake softly. "When we got back to the guesthouse, I searched around back. I found . . . tracks. His tracks, I'm certain. They lead right into the jungle."

That clinches it, thought Haplo. Aloud, he added, "Keep quiet. Try to act as if nothing's the matter, and take me there, quickly."

The three hurried back to the elven guesthouse. They took a circuitous route, kept to the fringes of the crowds, avoided the assembly gathered around the longhouse.

Haplo could see Dumaka, greeting the dwarven dignitaries. He was glancing about, perhaps in search of the Patryn. At that moment, Eliason stepped forward, prepared to present his party. Haplo was thankful to note that there were numerous elves present; he hoped they all had long names.

Alake led him to the back of the guesthouse, pointed to the moist ground. The tracks were footprints—too long and narrow for dwarves—and undoubtedly made by booted feet. Phondrans, without exception, all went barefoot.

Haplo swore silently beneath his breath.

"Have the other elves in the guesthouse missed him yet?"

"I don't think so," Alake replied. "They're all outside, watching the ceremony."

"I'll go look for him. You two stay here, in case he comes back."

"We're going with you," said Grundle.

"Yes. He's our friend." Alake joined her.

Haplo glared at them, but the dwarf's jaw was set firm, her small arms crossed defiantly over her chest. Alake regarded him calmly, steadfastly. There would be an argument, and he didn't have time.

"Come on, then."

The two girls started down the path, stopped when they realized Haplo wasn't following.

"What is it? What are you doing?" Alake asked. "Shouldn't we hurry?"

Haplo had squatted down, was quickly tracing sigla in the mud over the elf's footprints. He breathed soft words; the sigla flashed green, and suddenly began to grow and sprout. Plants and weeds sprang up, covering the path, obliterating any sign of the elf's footprints.

"This is no time," snapped Grundle, "to start a garden."

"They'll be looking for him soon." Rising to his feet, Haplo watched the plants completely overrun the path. "I'm making certain no one comes after us. We'll do what needs to be done, tell whatever story we need to tell. Agreed?"

"Oh!" murmured Alake, biting her lip.

"Agreed?" Haplo stared at the two grimly.

"Agreed," Grundle said, subdued.

"Agreed," Alake repeated unhappily.

They left the campsite behind, followed the elf's footprints into the jungle.

At first, Haplo thought that perhaps Grundle might have inadvertently guessed the truth. It appeared that the despondent young elf was simply intent on trying to walk off his misery. The tracks kept to the open path. Devon hadn't bothered to conceal his whereabouts, he wasn't attempting to hide from anyone, and he must have known that Alake, at least, would come after him.

And then, abruptly, the tracks ended.

The path continued on, smooth, unmarked. The plant life on each side was dense, too dense to penetrate without leaving some sort of trace, and not a leaf was disturbed, not a flower crushed, a stalk bent.

"What'd he do? Grow wings?" the dwarf grumbled, peering into the shadows.

"So to speak," said Haplo, looking up into the trailing vines.

The elf must have taken to the trees. A swift glance farther into the jungle's dark shadows showed him something else.

His first thought was, Damn! Another elven mourning period!

"You girls go back now," he said firmly, but suddenly Alake gave a shriek, and before he could stop her, she had plunged into the undergrowth.

Haplo jumped after her, dragged her back, shoved her hard into Grundle. The two fell over each other. Haplo ran on, glancing back over his shoulder to make certain he'd delayed the two from following.

The dwarf, in her thick boots, had become entangled in the vines. Alake seemed prepared to leave her friend to fend for herself, started after Haplo. Grundle set up a howl of rage that could be heard for miles.

"Shut her up!" Haplo ordered, crashing through the thick jungle foliage.

Alake, anguish twisting her face, turned back to help Grundle.

Haplo reached Devon.

The elf had formed a noose out of vines, wrapped it around his neck, and jumped from a tree limb to what he had hoped would be his death.

Looking at the limp body, swinging grotesquely in a spiral on its vine, Haplo thought at first the young man had succeeded. Then he saw two of the elf's fingers twitch. It might be a death spasm, it might not.

Haplo shouted the runes. Blue and red sigla flashed through the air, burst on the vine, severed it. The body plunged down into the undergrowth.

Reaching the young man, Haplo grabbed hold of the vine around the neck, wrenched it loose. Devon wasn't breathing. He was unconscious, his face discolored, lips blue. The vine had cut into the flesh of his slender neck, left it bruised and bleeding. But, Haplo saw after a swift, cursory examination, the elf's neck wasn't broken, the windpipe wasn't crushed. The vine had slipped, apparently, sliding up the neck instead of snapping it, as Devon had undoubtedly intended. He was still alive.

But he wouldn't be alive long. Haplo felt for a pulse, life fluttered faintly beneath his fingers. The Patryn sat back on his heels, considering. He had no idea if what he intended would work or not. As far as he knew, it had never been tried on a mensch. But he seemed to remember Alfred saying something about using his magic to heal the child, Bane.

If Sartan magic worked on a mensch, Patryn magic should work as well ... or better.

Haplo took hold of the elf's flaccid hands, Devon's left hand in Haplo's right, the Patryn's left hand holding the elf's right hand fast. The circle was joined.

Haplo shut his eyes, concentrated. He was dimly aware, behind him, of Alake and Grundle. He heard them come to a halt, heard Alake whimper, Grundle's breath whistle through her teeth. Haplo paid no attention to them.

He was giving his own life strength to Devon. Runes on his arms glowed blue. The magic flowed from him to the elf, carried Haplo's life with it, carried Devon's pain and suffering back to Haplo.

The Patryn experienced, vicariously, the terrible grief, the burning guilt, the bitter, gnawing regret that had tormented Devon, sleeping and waking, and had finally driven him to seek solace in oblivion. Haplo felt the shriveling fear right before the jump—the brain's instinct for self-preservation making a last desperate attempt to fight back.

Then the decision. Pain, the horrible feeling of suffocation, the knowledge, peaceful and serene, that death was near and the torment would soon all be over . . .

Haplo heard a groan, heard the rustle of the plants. He gasped for breath, opened his eyes.

Devon stared up at him, face anguished, twisted, bitter. "You had no right," he whispered hoarsely, his throat sore and bruised from the vine's grip. "I want to die! Let me die, damn you! Let me die!"

Alake cried out. "No, Devon! You don't know what you're saying!"

"He knows," said Haplo grimly. He sat back on his heels, wiped his hand across his sweaty forehead. "You and Grundle go on back to the path. Let me talk to him." "But—"

"Go!" Haplo yelled angrily.

Grundle tugged on Alake's hand. The two made their way back slowly through the trampled leaves and slashed plants to the path beyond.

"You want to die," Haplo said to the elf, who averted his head, shut his eyes. "Go ahead, then. Hang yourself. I can't stop you. But I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until after we get all this business about the sun-chasers settled, because I assume there'll be another long period of grieving over you, and the delay could endanger your people."

The elf refused to look at him. "They'll be all right. They have something to live for. I don't." His words were a hoarse croak. He grimaced at the pain.

"Yeah? Well, what do you think your parents will have to live for after they cut your body down from that tree limb? You have any idea what their last memory of you will be? Your face bloated, skin discolored, black as rotting fungus; your eyes bugged out of your head, your tongue sticking out of your mouth?"

Devon blanched, cast Haplo a hate-filled glance, and turned his head again. "Go away," he muttered.

"You know"—Haplo continued as if he hadn't heard—"if your body hangs there long enough, the carrion birds'll come. The first thing they go for is the eyes. Your parents may not even recognize their son—or what's left of him, when the birds are finished, not to mention the ants and the flies—"

"Stop!" Devon tried to shout, but it came out a sob.

"And there's Alake and Grundle. They lost one friend, now they'll lose another. You didn't give them a thought, either, I suppose? No, just yourself. The pain, I can't bear the pain," Haplo mimicked the elf's light, piping voice.

"What do you know about it?" Devon cried.

"What do I know about it ... about pain," Haplo repeated softly. "Let me tell you a story, then I'll leave you to kill yourself, if that's what you want. I knew a man, once, in the Laby— a place I lived. He was in a fight, a terrible fight, for his life. In that place, you have to fight to stay alive, you don't fight to die. Anyway, this man was hurt horribly. Wounds ... all over his body. His suffering was beyond belief, beyond endurance.

"The man defeated his enemies. The chaodyn lay dead around him. But he couldn't go on. He hurt too much. He could have tried to heal himself with his magic, but it didn't seem to him to be worth the effort. He lay on the ground, letting the life seep out of him. Then something happened to change his mind. There was a dog . . .

"The dog." Haplo paused, a strange, lonely ache constricting his heart. All this time, how could he have forgotten the dog?

"What happened?" Devon whispered, blue eyes intent upon the man. "What happened . . . with the dog?"

Haplo frowned, rubbed his chin; sorry, in a way, he'd brought it up, glad, in a way, to remember.

"The dog. The animal had fought the chaodyn and it had been hurt, too. It was dying, in such pain that it couldn't walk. Yet, when the dog saw the man's suffering, it tried to help him. The dog didn't give up. It started to crawl, on its belly, to get help. Its courage made the man feel ashamed.

"A dumb brute, with nothing to live for—no hopes or dreams or ambitions—and it fought to go on living. And I had everything. I was young, strong; I'd won a great victory. And I was about to throw it all away . . . because of the pain."

"Did the dog die?" Devon asked softly. Weak as a sick child, like a child, he wanted to hear the end of the story.

The Patryn wrenched himself back from his memories. "No, the man healed the dog, healed himself." He hadn't noticed his lapse, hadn't noticed that he and "the man" had gotten rather mixed. "He rose to a position of power among his people. He changed the course of people's lives . . ."

"Saved people from dragon-snakes? Or maybe themselves?" Devon asked, with a twisted, rueful smile.

Haplo stared at him, then grunted. "Yeah, maybe. Something like that. Well, what's it going to be? Shall I leave you here to try again?"

Devon glanced up at the cut vine, dangling over his head. "No. No, I'll come . . . with you." He tried to sit up, and fainted.

Haplo reached out his hand, felt for the pulse. It was stronger, steadier. He brushed aside a lock of flaxen hair caught in the dried blood on the neck.

"It will get better," he told the unconscious young man. "You won't forget her, but the remembering won't hurt as much."

CHAPTER \* 22

PHONDRA CHELESTRA

THE MEETING OF THE ROYAL FAMILIES OPENED WITH STIFF FORMALITIES, cold glances, unspoken resentment. From there, it moved to open hostility, hot words, and bitter recriminations.

Eliason's position against war had not altered with the passage of time.

"I am quite willing to set sail in the sun-chasers and find this new realm," he stated. "And I will undertake to negotiate with these ... er ... Sartan, since all know that elves are skilled in such diplomatic endeavors. I cannot see how these Sartan could refuse such a reasonable request, particularly when we explain how we will bring them much-needed goods and services. My advisers, having given the matter considerable study, have determined that this Sartan race must be relatively new to this realm themselves. We think it likely they'll actually be quite glad to see us."

Eliason's face darkened. "But if not, if the Sartan refuse, well, after all, it is their realm. We will simply look elsewhere."

"Fine," said Dumaka sourly. "And while you are looking, what will you eat? Where will you find the food to feed your people? Will you grow corn in the cracks in the deck? Or has elven magic come up with a way to pull bread out of air? We have calculated that we can carry barely enough supplies for the journey as it is, considering all the mouths we'll have to feed. There will be room for no more."

"The supply of fish is plentiful," said Eliason mildly.

"Of course," Dumaka retorted, "but not even an elf could live exclusively on a diet of fish! Without fruits and vegetables, the mouth-sickness will come upon our people."

Yngvar looked horrified at the mere thought of being forced to live on fish. The dwarf planted his feet firmly on the ground, glared round at the assembly. "You argue over who stole the pie when the pie hasn't even been cooked yet! The sun-chasers are cursed; the dwarves will have nothing to do with them. And, after consultation with the Elders, we have determined that we will allow no one to have anything to do with them, lest the curse will come back on us. It is our intention to scuttle the things, send them to the bottom of the Goodsea. We will build more ourselves, without the help of snakes."

"Yes, that's a good idea," said Eliason. "There will be time—" "There will not be time!" Dumaka fumed. "You elves were the ones who figured up how many cycles we had—"

"You dwarves are worse than superstitious children!" Delu was arguing loudly. "The ships are no more cursed than I am!" "And who's certain about you, Witch?" Hilda flashed back, side whiskers bristling.

At that moment, one of the doorkeepers, attempting to give the impression he was deaf and blind to the turmoil around him, crept into the longhouse and whispered something to Dumaka. The chieftain nodded, gave an order. Everyone else had ceased talking, wondering what this interruption portended. No one ever disturbed a royal meeting unless it was a matter of life and death. The doorkeeper departed swiftly on his errand. Dumaka turned to Eliason.

"Your guards have discovered the young man, Devon, to be missing. They've searched the camp, but no trace of him can be found. I've called out the trackers. Don't worry, my friend," the chief said, his anger forgotten at the sight of the elf's anxiety. "We'll find him."

"A young fool's gone for a walk!" Yngvar snapped irritably. "Why all the fuss?"

"Devon has been very unhappy of late," said Eliason in a low voice. "Very unhappy. We fear . . ." His voice failed. He shook his head.

"Ach!" said Yngvar gravely, in sudden understanding. "That's the way of it, is it?"

"Grundle!" Hilda called out sharply, loudly. "Grundle! Come in here, this instant!"

"What are you doing, Wife? Our daughter's in the cave—"

"Take the sack off your head," [3] Hilda retorted. "Our daughter's no more in that cave than I am." She stood up, raised her voice threateningly. "Grundle, I know you're out there, spying! Alake, this is serious. I won't tolerate any more nonsense from you girls!"

But there was no answer. Yngvar looked solemn, tugged at his beard. Stepping outside, he motioned to one of his attendants, a young dwarf named Hartmut, and sent him off toward the cave.

Yngvar returned to the longhouse, where Eliason was also on his feet. "I should go help search—"

"And do what? End up losing yourself in the jungle? Our people will find him. All will be well, my friend—we pray to the One."

"We pray to the One," Eliason repeated, and sat back down, his head in his hands.

Then Yngvar spoke, "Aye, but where's that Haplo got to? Has anybody seen him? Wasn't he supposed to be here? This meeting was his idea in the first place."

"You dwarves are suspicious of everything!" Dumaka shouted. "First, the dragon-snakes' magic. Now Haplo! And after he saved our children—"

"He saved our children, but what do we truly know of him, Husband?" Delu asked. "Perhaps he brought them back, only to carry them off again!"

Reference to a popular dwarven drinking game, the rules of which are far too complex to describe and probably wouldn't be believed anyway.

"She's right!" Hilda came to stand by the human woman's side. "I say your trackers start looking for this Haplo!"

"Fine!" said Dumaka, exasperated. "I'll send the trackers out looking for everyone—"

"Chief!" The doorkeeper shouted, "They've found them! All of them!"

Elves, humans, and dwarves rushed out of the longhouse. By this time, everyone in camp knew either what had occurred or what was rumored to have occurred. The royal families joined a throng heading toward the elven guesthouse.

Human trackers escorted Haplo, Grundle, and Alake from the jungle. Haplo carried Devon in his arms. The elf had regained consciousness, smiled weakly, shamefaced at the attention.

"Devon! Are you hurt? What happened?" Eliason shouldered his way through the crowd.

"I'm . . . fine," Devon managed, his voice coming out a croak.

"He'll be all right," Haplo said. "He had a nasty fall, got hung up in a vine. Let him rest. Where shall I put him?"

"This way." Eliason led the Patryn to the elven guesthouse.

"We can explain everything," Grundle announced.

"I've no doubt of that," her father muttered, eyeing his daughter grimly.

Haplo carried Devon into the guesthouse, deposited the young man on his bed.

"Thank you," said Devon softly.

Haplo grunted. "Get some sleep."

Devon, taking the hint, closed his eyes.

"He needs rest," said Haplo, coming to stand between Eliason and the young elf. "I think we should let him alone."

"But I want my physician to see to him—" Eliason began anxiously.

"That won't be necessary. He's going to be all right. But now he needs rest," Haplo repeated.

Eliason looked past Haplo at the young elf lying exhausted, disheveled, on the bed. The girls had cleaned him up, washed the blood away, but the burns and marks left by the vine were plainly visible on his neck. The elven king looked back at Haplo.

"He fell," the Patryn repeated coolly. "Got tangled in a vine."

"Will it happen again, do you think?" Eliason asked quietly.

"No." Haplo shook his head. "I don't think so. We had a talk . . . about the dangers of climbing trees in the jungle."

"Thank the One," Eliason murmured.

Devon had fallen asleep. Haplo led the elven king back outside the guesthouse.

"Alake and I took Devon for a walk," Grundle was explaining to an attentive crowd. "I know I disobeyed you, Father"—the dwarf gave Yngvar a sidelong glance—"but Devon looked so unhappy and we thought this might cheer him—"

"Humpf!" Yngvar snorted. "Very well, Daughter. We will discuss your punishment later. For now, go on with your story."

"Grundle and I wanted to speak to Devon alone," Alake said. "There were too many people in the village, too much going on, and so we suggested a walk in the jungle. We talked and talked and it was hot and we were thirsty and then I noticed that one of the sugarjuice trees had fruit on it. I guess what happened was my fault, because I suggested that Devon climb up—"

"And he was nearly at the top," inserted Grundle, gesturing dramatically, "when he slipped and down he went, headfirst into a tangle of chokevines."

"They wrapped around his neck! He was caught. I . . . we didn't know what to do!" Alake's eyes were wide. "I couldn't get him down. He was too far off the ground. Grundle and I ran back to the village to get help. The first person we found was Haplo. He came with us and cut Devon down from the vines."

Alake looked at Haplo, standing on the edge of the crowd. Her eyes shone.

"He saved Devon's life," she said softly. "He used his magic and healed him! I saw it. Devon wasn't breathing. The vines had wrapped around his neck. Haplo put his hands on him and his skin glowed blue and suddenly Devon opened his eyes and . . . he was alive."

"Is this true?" Dumaka asked Haplo.

"She's exaggerating, she was upset." The Patryn shrugged. "The boy wasn't dead. He was out cold. He would have come around. ..."

"I was upset," Alake said, smiling, "but I wasn't exaggerating."

Everyone began to talk at once: Yngvar halfheartedly scolded his daughter for running away. Delu stated that it was foolish to attempt to climb a sugarjuice tree by oneself and that Alake should have known better than to allow it. Eliason said he thought the girls showed good sense in running for help and that they should thank the One Haplo had been there to avert another tragedy.

"The One!" said Grundle, pouncing on the startled elven king. "Yes, you thank the One, who sent us this man"—she pointed her short, stubby finger at Haplo—"and then you turn around and toss the rest of the gifts the One provides into the Goodsea!"

Everyone in camp fell silent, stared at the dwarf maid.

"Daughter," Yngvar began sternly.

"Hush!" Hilda counseled, treading on his foot. "The child makes sense."

"And why will you throw these blessings away?" Grundle glared round at all of them. "Because you don't understand them and so you're afraid of them." A scathing glance at the dwarves. "Or because you might have to fight to obtain them." The elves came in for their share of her ire.

"Well, we decided—Alake, Devon, and I. We're taking the sun-chaser with Haplo. We're sailing to Surunan. We'll go alone, if we have to—"

"No, you won't, Grundle," Hartmut said stoutly, coming to stand beside her. "I'll go with you."

"We'll go!" cried several young humans and "We'll come, too!" shouted numerous young elves.

The cry was taken up by almost all the young people around. Grundle exchanged glances with Alake. The dwarf-maid turned to her parents.

"Well, what have you started now, Daughter?" her father asked dourly. "Open rebellion against your own father?"

"I'm sorry, Father," Grundle answered, flushing. "But I truly believe it's for the best. You wouldn't let our people freeze . . . or the humans ..."

"Of course, he wouldn't," said Hilda. "Admit it, Yngvar. Your feet grew too big for your head. You were looking for a way to back down. Our daughter's given you one. Will you take it?"

Yngvar rumbled his beard. "I don't see that I have much choice," he said, trying hard to frown and not quite succeeding. "The lass will be leading my own army against me, if I'm not careful."

He grunted and stomped off. Grundle looked after him anxiously.

"Relax, dear," said Hilda, smiling. "He's really quite proud of you."

And, indeed, Yngvar was stopping on his way to tell everyone, "That's my daughter!"

"And my people will go." Eliason bent down and kissed the dwarf soundly. "Thank you, Daughter, for showing us our folly. May the One bless and guide you always." His eyes filled with tears. "And now, I must return to Devon."

Eliason left hurriedly.

Grundle was tasting power, obviously found it sweeter than sugarjuice, more intoxicating than dwarven ale. She glanced around, elated, for Haplo, saw him standing in the shadows, watching quietly.

"I did it!" she cried, running over to him. "I did it! I said what you told me! They're going! All of them!"

Haplo kept silent, his face was dark, expression impenetrable.

"It was what you wanted, wasn't it?" Grundle demanded, irritated. "Wasn't it?"

"Yeah, sure. It was what I wanted," Haplo answered.

"It's wonderful!" Alake came over to him, her smile dazzling. "All of us, sailing to new lives!"

Two muscular humans ran over, lifted the dwarf-maid to their shoulders, and bore her off in triumph. Alake began to dance. A procession started, the humans chanting, elves singing, dwarven deep bass rivaling the booming of the drum.

Sailing to new lives.

Sailing to death.

Haplo turned on his heel, walked into the darkness, leaving the bright firelight and revelry behind.

CHAPTER \* 23

SURUNAN CHELESTRA

ALFRED HAD NOT BEEN FORCED TO SPEND ALL THIS TIME A PRISONER in the library. The Sartan Council met not once but on numerous occasions; the members were apparently having difficulty arriving at a decision concerning Alfred's transgression. Alfred was permitted to leave the library, return to the house. He would be confined to his room until the Council had reached a decision concerning him.

The Council members were forbidden to discuss the proceedings, but Alfred was certain that Orla was the one coming to his defense. The thought warmed him, until he noticed that the wall between husband and wife had grown even higher, thicker. Orla was grave and reserved. Her husband cold with anger. They rarely spoke to each other. Alfred's resolve to leave strengthened. He wanted only to make his apologies to the Council, then he would be gone.

"There is no need to lock me inside my room," Alfred told Ramu, who served as his guard. "I give you my word as a Sartan that I will not attempt to escape. I ask only one favor of you. Could you see to it that the dog is allowed fresh air and exercise?"

"I suppose we must comply," Samah said ungraciously to his son, when Alfred's request was reported.

"Why not dispose of the animal?" Ramu asked indifferently.

"Because I have plans for it," Samah replied. "I believe I will ask your mother to perform the task of walking the creature." He and his son exchanged significant glances.

Orla refused her husband's request. "Ramu can walk the animal. I want nothing to do with it."

"Ramu has his own life now," her husband reminded her sternly. "He has his family, his own responsibilities. This Alfred and his dog are our responsibility. One for which you have only yourself to thank."

Orla heard the rebuke in his voice, was conscious of her guilt for having failed in that responsibility once already. And she had failed her husband again, tying up the Council with strings of arguments.

"Very well, Samah," she agreed coldly.

She went early to Alfred's room the next morning, prepared to undertake the onerous task. She was cool, aloof, reminded herself that no matter what she had said in his defense to the Council, she was angry with this man, disappointed in him. Orla rapped sharply on his door.

"Come in," was the meek reply.

Alfred didn't ask who it was, didn't suppose, perhaps, he had the right to know.

Orla entered the room.

Alfred, standing by the window, flushed crimson when he saw her. He took a tentative step toward her. Orla raised a warding hand.

"I've come for the dog. I suppose the animal will accompany me?" she said, regarding it dubiously.

"I ... I think so," said Alfred. "G-good dog. Go with Orla." He waved his hand and, much to his astonishment, the animal went. "I want to thank—"

Orla turned and walked out of the room, careful to shut the door behind her.

She led the dog to the garden. Sitting down on a bench, she looked expectantly at the animal. "Well, play," she said irritably, "or whatever it is you do."

The dog made a desultory turn or two about the garden, then returned and, laying its head on Orla's knee, gave a sigh and fixed its liquid eyes on her face.

Orla was rather nonplussed at this liberty, and was uncomfortable with the dog so near. She wanted very much to be rid of it and barely resisted an impulse to leap to her feet and run off. But she wasn't certain how the dog might react, seemed to vaguely recall, from what little she knew about the animals, that sudden movement might startle them into vicious behavior.

Gingerly, reaching down her hand, she patted its nose.

"There ..." she said, as she might have spoken to an annoying child, "go away. There's a good dog."

Orla had intended to ease the dog's head off her lap, but the sensation of running her hand over the fur was pleasant. She felt the animal's life-force warm beneath her fingers, a sharp contrast to the cold marble bench on which she rested. And when she stroked its head, the dog wagged its tail, the soft brown eyes seemed to brighten.

Orla felt sorry for it, suddenly.

"You're lonely," she said, bringing both hands to smooth the silky ears. "You miss your Patryn master, I suppose. Even though you have Alfred, he's not really yours, is he? No," Orla added with a sigh, "he's not really yours."

"He's not mine, either. So why am I worried about him? He's nothing to me, can be nothing to me." Orla sat quietly, stroking the dog—a patient, silent, and attentive listener, one who drew from her more than she'd intended to reveal.

"I'm afraid for him," she whispered, and her hand on the dog's head trembled. "Why, why did he have to be so foolish? Why couldn't he have left well enough alone? Why did he have to be like the others? No," she pleaded softly, "not like the others. Let him not be like the others!"

Taking the dog's head in her hand, cupping it beneath the chin, she looked into the intelligent eyes that seemed to understand. "You must warn him. Tell him to forget what he read, tell him it wasn't worth it—"

"I believe you are actually growing to like that animal," Samah said accusingly.

Orla jumped, hurriedly withdrew her hand. The dog growled. Rising with dignity, she shoved the animal aside, tried to wipe its drool from her dress.

"I feel sorry for it," she said.

"You feel sorry for its master," said Samah.

"Yes, I do," Orla replied, resenting his tone. "Is that wrong, Samah?"

The Councillor regarded his wife grimly, then suddenly relaxed. Wearily, he shook his head. "No, Wife. It is commendable. I am the one who is the wrong. I've . . . overreacted."

Orla was still inclined to be offended, held herself aloof. Her husband bowed coldly to her, turned to leave. Orla saw the lines of tiredness on his face, saw his shoulders slump with fatigue. Guilt assailed her. Alfred had been in the wrong, there was no excusing him. Samah had countless problems on his mind, burdens to bear. Their people were in danger, very real danger, from the dragon-snakes, and now this . . .

"Husband," she said remorsefully, "I am sorry. Forgive me for adding to your burdens, instead of helping to lift and carry them."

She glided forward, reached out, laid her hands on his shoulders, caressing, feeling his life-force warm beneath her fingers, as she'd felt the dog's. And she yearned for him to turn to her, to take her in his arms, to hold her fast. She wanted him to grant her some of his strength, draw some of his strength from her.

"Husband!" she whispered, and her grasp tightened.

Samah stepped away from her. He took hold of her hands in his, folded them one on top of the other, and lightly, dryly, kissed the tips of her fingers.

"There is nothing to forgive, Wife. You were right to speak in this man's defense. The strain is telling on both of us."

He released her hands.

Orla held them out to him a moment longer, but Samah pretended not to see.

Slowly, she lowered her hands to her sides. Finding the dog there, pressing against her knee, she absently scratched it behind its ear.

"The strain. Yes, I suppose it is." She drew a deep breath, to hide a sigh. "You left home early this morning. Has there been more news of the mensch?"

"Yes." Samah glanced about the garden, not looking at his wife. "The dolphins report that the dragon-snakes have repaired the mensch ships. The mensch themselves held a joint meeting and have decided to set sail for this realm. They are obviously planning on war."

"Oh, surely not," Orla began.

"Of course they mean to attack us," Samah interrupted impatiently. "They are mensch, aren't they? When, in their entire bloody history, did they ever solve a problem except by the sword?"

"Perhaps they've changed . . ."

"The Patryn leads them. The dragon-snakes are with them. Tell me, Wife, what do you think they intend?"

She chose to ignore his sarcasm. "You have a plan, Husband?"

"Yes, I have a plan. One I will discuss with the Council," he added, with an emphasis that was perhaps unconscious, perhaps deliberate.

Orla flushed, faintly, and did not reply. There had been a time when he would have discussed this plan with her first. But not now, not since before the Sundering.

What happened between us? She tried to remember. What did I say? What did I do? And how, she wondered bleakly, am I managing to do it all over again?

"At this Council meeting, I will call for a vote to make our final decision concerning the fate of your 'friend.'" Samah added.

Again the sarcasm. Orla felt chilled, kept her hand on the dog to urge it to stay near her.

"What will happen to him, do you think?" she asked, affecting nonchalance.

"That is up to the Council. I will make my recommendation." He started to turn away.

Orla stepped forward, touched him on the arm. She felt him flinch, draw back from her. But, when he faced her, his expression was pleasant, patient. Perhaps she had just imagined the flinch.

"Yes, Wife?"

"He won't be ... like the others?" she faltered.

Samah's eyes narrowed. "That is for the Council to decide."

"It wasn't right, Husband, what we did long ago," Orla said determinedly. "It wasn't right."

"Are you suggesting that you would defy me? Defy the decision of the Council? Or, perhaps, you already have?"

"What do you mean?" Orla asked, staring at him blankly.

"Not all who were sent arrived at their destination. The only way they could have escaped their fate was to have foreknowledge of it. And the only people who had that knowledge were the members of the Council . . ."

Orla stiffened. "How dare you suggest—"

Samah cut her short. "I have no time for this now. The Council will convene in one hour. I suggest you return that beast to its keeper and tell Alfred to prepare his defense. He will, of course, be given a chance to speak."

The Councillor walked out of the garden, heading for the Council building. Orla, perplexed, troubled, watched him, saw Ramu join him, saw them put their heads together in serious and earnest conversation.

"Come," she said, sighing, and led the dog back to Alfred.

Orla entered the Council chamber strong with resolve, her attitude defiant. She was prepared to fight now as she should have fought once before. She had nothing to lose. Samah had practically accused her of complicity.

What stopped me then? she asked herself. But she knew the answer, though it was one she was ashamed to admit.

Samah's love. A last, desperate attempt to hold onto something I never truly had. I betrayed my trust, betrayed my people, to try to cling with both hands to a love I only truly held with the tips of my fingers.

Now I will fight. Now I will defy him.

She was fairly certain she could persuade the others to defy Samah, as well. She had the impression several of them were feeling not quite right about what they'd done in the past. If only she could overcome their fear of the future . . .

The Council members took their places at the long marble table. When all were present, Samah entered, sat in his chair at the center.

Prepared for a stern and judgmental Councillor, Orla was astonished and surprised to see Samah relaxed, cheerful, pleasant. He gave her what might be taken for an apologetic smile, shrugged his shoulders.

Leaning over to her, he whispered, "I'm sorry for what I said, Wife. I'm not myself. I spoke hastily. Bear with me."

He seemed to wait with some anxiety for her reply.

She smiled at him tentatively. "I accept your apology, Husband."

His smile broadened. He patted her hand, as if to say, Don't worry, my dear. Your little friend will be all right.

Astonished, puzzled, Orla could only sit back in her chair and wonder.

Alfred entered, the dog trotting along faithfully at his heels. The Sartan took his place—again—before the Council. Orla could not help thinking how shabby Alfred looked—gaunt, stooped-shouldered, poorly made. She regretted she hadn't spent more time with him before the meeting, hadn't urged him to change out of the mensch clothes that were obviously having an irritating effect on the other Council members.

She'd left him hurriedly after returning the dog, though he'd tried to detain her. Being with him made her uncomfortable. His eyes, clear and penetrating, had a way of breaking down her guard and sneaking inside her in search of the truth, much as he'd sneaked inside the library. And she wasn't ready for him to see the truth inside her. She wasn't prepared to see it herself.

"Alfred Montbank"—Samah grimaced over the mensch name, but he had apparently given up his attempts to urge Alfred to reveal his Sartan name—"you are brought before this Council to answer two serious charges.

"The first: You willfully and knowingly entered the library, despite the fact that runes of prohibition had been placed on the door. This offense you committed two times. On the first occasion," Samah continued, though it seemed Alfred wanted to speak, "you claimed you entered by accident. You stated that you were curious about the building and, on approaching the door, you . . . um . . . slipped and fell through it. Once inside, the door shut and you couldn't get out, and you entered the library proper searching for the exit. Is this testimony that I've repeated substantially true?"

"Substantially," Alfred answered.

His hands were clasped before him. He did not look directly at the Council, but darted swift glances at them from beneath lowered eyes. He was, Orla thought unhappily, the very picture of guilt.

"And on this occasion, we accepted this explanation. We explained to you why it was that the library was prohibited to our people, and then we left, trusting that we would have no need to say anything further on the subject.

"Yet, in less than a week, you were again discovered in the library. Which brings us to the second, and more serious, charge facing you: This time, you are accused of entering the library deliberately and in a manner which indicates you feared apprehension. Is this true?"

"Yes," said Alfred sadly, "I'm afraid it is. And I'm sorry. Truly very sorry to have caused all this trouble, when you have other, greater worries."

Samah leaned back in his chair, sighed, and then rubbed his eyes with his hand. Orla sat regarding him in silent astonishment. He was not the stern, awful judge. He was the weary father, forced to administer punishment to a well-loved, albeit irresponsible, child.

"Will you tell the Council, Brother, why you defied our prohibition?"

"Would you mind if I told you something about myself?" Alfred asked. "It would help you understand . . ."

"No, please, Brother, go ahead. It is your right to say whatever you like before the Council."

"Thank you." Alfred smiled, faintly. "I was born on Arianus, one of the last Sartan children born on Arianus. That was many hundred years after the Sundering, after you went to your Sleep. Things weren't going well for us on Arianus. Our population was decreasing. Children weren't being born, adults were dying untimely, for no apparent reason. We didn't know why then, though, perhaps," he said softly, almost to himself, "I do now. That, however, is not why we're here.

"Life for the Sartan on Arianus was extremely difficult. There was so much needed to be done, but not enough people to do it. The mensch populations were increasing rapidly. They had gained in magical talent and in mechanical skills. There were far too many of them for us to control. And that, I think, was our mistake. We weren't content to advise or counsel, offer our wisdom. We wanted to control. And since we couldn't, we left them, retreated below ground. We were afraid.

"Our Council decided that since there were so few of us remaining, we should place some of our young people in stasis, to be brought back to life some time in the future when, hopefully, the situation had improved. We were confident, you see, that by then we would establish contact with the other three worlds.

"There were many of us who volunteered to enter the crystal chambers. I was one of them. It was a world," Alfred said quietly, "I was glad to leave.

"Unfortunately, I was the only one to come back."

Samah, who had seemed to be only half-listening, a patient, indulgent expression on his face, sat up straight at this and frowned. The other members of the Council murmured among themselves. Orla saw the anguish, the bitter loneliness of that time, reflected on Alfred's face, felt her heart wrung with compassion, pity.

"When I woke, I discovered that all the others, all my brothers and sisters, were dead. I was alone in a world of mensch. I was afraid, terribly afraid. I feared the mensch might find out who and what I was, discover my talent for magic, try to make me use that talent to aid them in their ambitions.

"At first, I hid from them. I lived ... I don't know how many years of my life in the underground world to which the Sartan had retreated long ago. But, during those rare times I visited the mensch in the worlds above, I couldn't help but see what dreadful things were happening. I found myself wanting to help them. I knew I could help them, and it occurred to me that helping them was what we Sartan were supposed to be doing. I began to think that it was selfish of me to hide myself away, when I might, in some small way, try to make things right. But, instead, as usual, I only seemed to have made things all wrong."

Samah stirred, somewhat restlessly. "Truly your story is tragic, Brother, and we are grieved to have lost so many of our people on Arianus, but much of this we knew already and I fail to see—"

"Please, bear with me, Samah," Alfred said, with a quiet dignity that was, Orla thought, most becoming to him. "All that time I spent with the mensch, I thought of my people, missed them. And I knew, to my regret, that I'd taken them for granted. I had paid some attention to their stories of the past, but not enough. I had never asked questions, I wasn't interested. I knew, I realized, very little about being a Sartan, very little about the Sundering. I grew hungry for that knowledge. I'm still hungry for it."

Alfred gazed at the members in wistful pleading. "Can't you understand? I want to know who I am. Why I'm here. What I'm expected to do."

"These are mensch questions," said Samah, rebuking. "Not worthy of a Sartan. A Sartan knows why he is here. He knows his purpose and he acts upon his knowledge."

"Undoubtedly, if I had not been so much on my own, I would have never been forced to ask such questions," Alfred answered. "But I didn't have anyone to turn to." He stood tall, no longer crushed with awe, no longer meek, apologetic. He was strong with the lightness of his cause. "And it seems, from what I read in the library, that others asked the same questions before me. And that they found answers."

Several Council members glanced uneasily at each other, then all eyes turned to Samah.

He looked grave and sad, not angry. "I understand you better now, Brother. I wish you had trusted us enough to tell us this before."

Alfred flushed, but did not lower his gaze to his shoes, as he was wont. He regarded Samah steadily, intently, with that clear-eyed gaze that had often disturbed Orla.

"Let me describe our world to you, Brother," said the Councillor, leaning forward, fingertips together on the top of the table. "Earth, it was called. Once, many thousands of years ago, it was ruled exclusively by humans. Consistent with their warring, destructive nature, they unleashed a dreadful war upon themselves. The war did not destroy the world, as so many had feared and predicted. But it changed the world irretrievably. New races, they say, were born out of the cataclysmic smoke and flame. I doubt the truth of that. I believe these races were always present, but had remained hidden in the shadows, until the light of a new day should dawn.

"Magic came into the world then, supposedly, though all know that this ancient force has been in existence since the beginning of time. It, too, was waiting for the dawn.

"There had been many religions in the world over the centuries; the mensch being glad to toss all their problems and frustrations into the lap of some nebulous Supreme Being. Such Beings were numerous and varied. They were never seen, capricious, demanded to be taken on faith and faith alone. No wonder, when we Sartan came to power, the mensch were thankful to switch their allegiance to us, to flesh and blood beings, who laid down strict laws that were fair and just.

"All would have been well, had it not been that our opposite number, the Patryns, rose to power at the same time. The mensch were confused, many began to follow the Patryns, who rewarded their slaves with power and wealth seized at the expense of others.

"We fought our enemy, but battle proved difficult. The Patryns are subtle, tricky. A Patryn would never be crowned king of a realm, for example. They left that to the mensch. But you would be sure to find one of their number acting in the role of 'adviser' or 'councillor.' "

"And yet," Alfred inserted mildly, "from what I have read, the Sartan were often to be found in such roles themselves."

Samah frowned at the implication. "We were true advisers; we offered counsel and wisdom and guidance. We did not use the role to usurp thrones, to reduce the mensch to little more than puppets. We sought to teach, to elevate, to correct."

"And if the mensch didn't follow your advice," Alfred asked in a low voice, clear eyes unwavering, "you punished them, didn't you?"

"It is the responsibility of the parent to chastise the child who has behaved heedlessly, foolishly. Certainly we made the mensch see the error of their ways. How would they learn otherwise?"

"But what about freedom of will?" Alfred took several steps toward Samah, passion carrying him forward. "Freedom to learn on their own? To make their own choices? Who gave us the right to determine the fate of others?"

He was earnest, articulate, confident. He moved with grace, with ease. Orla thrilled to hear him. He was speaking aloud the questions she had asked often in her own heart.

The Councillor sat silent during the onslaught, cold, unassailable. He let Alfred's words hang in the quiet, tense atmosphere for a moment, then caught and returned them with studied calm.

"Can a child raise itself, Brother? No, it cannot. It needs parents to feed it, teach it, guide it."

"The mensch are not our children," Alfred returned angrily. "We did not create them! We did not bring them into this world. We have no right to try to rule their lives!"

"We did not try to rule them!" Samah rose to his feet. His hand flattened on the table, as if he might have struck it, but he controlled himself. "We permitted them to act. Often, we watched their actions with deep sadness and regret. It was the Patryns who sought to rule the mensch. And they would have succeeded, but for us!"

"At the time of the Sundering, the power of our enemy was growing exceedingly strong. More and more governments had fallen under their sway. The world was embroiled in wars, race against race, nation against nation, those who had nothing slitting the throats of those who had everything. No darker time had ever been and it seemed worse must come.

"And then it was that the Patryns managed to discover our weakness. Through vile trickery and magic, they convinced some of our people that this nebulous Supreme Being, whom even the mensch had now ceased to worship, actually did exist!"

Alfred started to speak.

Samah raised his hand. "Please, let me continue." He paused a moment, put his fingers to his forehead, as if it ached. His face was drawn, fatigued. With a sigh, he resumed his seat, looked back at Alfred. "I do not fault those who fell victim to this subterfuge, Brother. All of us, at one time or another, long to rest our head upon the breast of One stronger, wiser than ourselves; to surrender all responsibility to an All-Knowing, All-Powerful Being. Such dreams are pleasant, but then we must wake to reality."

"And this was your reality. Tell me if I'm wrong." Alfred regarded them with pity, his voice soft with sorrow. "The Patryns were growing stronger. The Sartan were splintering into factions. Some of them began denying

their godhood. They were prepared to follow this new vision. And they threatened to take the mensch with them. You were on the verge of losing everything."

"You are not wrong," Orla murmured. Samah cast her an angry glance that she felt but did not see. She was looking at Alfred.

"I make allowances for you, Brother," the Councillor said. "You were not there. You cannot possibly understand."

"I understand," said Alfred clearly, firmly. He stood straight and tall. He was, Orla thought, almost handsome. "At last, after all these years, I finally understand. Who did you truly fear?"

His gaze swept over the Council. "Was it the Patryns? Or did you fear the truth: the knowledge that you aren't the moving force in the universe, that you are, in fact, no better than the mensch you've always despised? Isn't that what you truly feared? Isn't that why you destroyed the world, hoping to destroy truth as well?"

Alfred's words echoed throughout the silent hall.

Orla caught her breath. Ramu, face dark with suppressed fury, cast a questioning glance at his father, as if seeking permission to do or say something. The dog, who had flopped down at the Sartan's feet to doze through the boring parts, sat up suddenly and glared around, feeling threatened.

Samah made a slight, negating gesture with his hand, and his son reluctantly settled back in his chair. The other Council members looked from Samah to Alfred and back to their Councillor again, more than a few shaking their heads.

Samah stared at Alfred, said nothing.

The tension in the room grew.

Alfred blinked, seemed suddenly to realize what he'd been saying. He began to droop, his newfound strength seeping from him.

"I'm sorry, Samah. I never meant—" Alfred shrank backward, stumbled over the dog.

The Councillor rose abruptly to his feet, left his chair, walked around the table and came to stand beside Alfred. The dog growled, ears flattened, teeth barred, tail swishing slowly side to side.

"Shush!" said Alfred unhappily.

The Councillor reached out his hand. Alfred cringed, expecting a blow. Samah put his arm around Alfred's shoulders.

"There, Brother," he said kindly, "don't you feel better now? Finally, you have opened up to us. Finally, you trust us. Think how much better it would have been for you if you had come to me or to Ramu or Orla or any of the Council members with these doubts and problems! Now, at last, we can help you."

"You can?" Alfred stared at him.

"Yes, Brother. You are, after all, Sartan. You are one of us."

"I'm s-sorry I broke into the library," Alfred stammered. "That was wrong. I know. I came here to apologize. I don't . . . don't know what got into me to say all those other things—"

"The poison has been festering inside you long. Now it is purged, your wound will heal."

"I hope so," Alfred said, though he seemed dubious. "I hope so." He sighed, looked down at his shoes. "What will you do to me?"

"Do to you?" Samah appeared puzzled. "Ah, you mean punish you? My dear Alfred, you have punished yourself far more than such an infraction of the rules warrants. The Council accepts your apology. And any time you would like to use the library, you have only to ask either myself or Ramu for the key. I think you would find it extremely beneficial to study the history of our people."

Alfred gaped at the man, all power of speech lost in unparalleled astonishment.

"The Council has some additional, minor business," Samah said briskly, removing his hand from Alfred's shoulders. "If you will seat yourself, we will attend to our work swiftly and then we can depart."

At a gesture from his father, Ramu silently brought Alfred a chair. He collapsed into it, sat huddled, drained, dazed.

Samah returned to his place, began to discuss some trivial matter that could well have waited. The other Council members, obviously uncomfortable and eager to leave, weren't listening.

Samah continued to talk, patiently, quietly. Orla watched her husband, watched his deft, facile handling of the Council, watched the play of intelligence on his strong, handsome face. He had successfully won over poor Alfred. Now, slowly, surely, he was winning back the loyalty and confidence of his followers. The Council members began to relax under the influence of their leader's soothing voice; they could even laugh at a small joke.

They will leave, Orla thought, and the voice they hear will be Samah's. They will have forgotten Alfred's. Odd, I never noticed before how Samah manipulates us.

Except now it is them, not us. Not me. Not anymore.

Not anymore.

The meeting came to an end at last.

Alfred didn't listen, he was lost in troubled reveries, was roused only when people began to move.

Samah stood up. The other Council members were at ease, feeling better. They bowed to him, to each other (not to Alfred, they ignored Alfred), and took their leave.

Alfred wavered unsteadily to his feet.

"I thought I had the answer," he said to himself. "Where did it go? How could I lose it so suddenly? Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps the vision was, as Samah said, a trick of Haplo's."

"I have noticed that our guest seems extremely fatigued," Samah was saying. "Why don't you, Wife, take Alfred back to our house and see to it that he relaxes and eats something."

The Council members had all filed out by now. Only Ramu lingered behind.

Orla took Alfred's arm. "Are you all right?"

He still felt dazed, his body shook, feet stumbled over themselves. "Yes, yes," he answered vaguely. "I think I would like to rest, however. If I could just go back to my room and ... lie down."

"Certainly," said Orla, concerned. She glanced around. "Are you coming with us, Husband?"

"No, not just yet, my dear. I need to arrange with Ramu to attend to that small matter on which the Council just voted. You go ahead. I will be home in time for dinner."

Alfred let Orla guide him toward the door. He was almost out of the Council Chamber when it occurred to him that the dog wasn't following. He glanced around for the animal, could not, at first, find it. Then he saw the tip of a tail, sticking out from under the Council table.

An unwelcome thought came to him. Haplo had trained the dog to act as a spy. He often ordered it to tag along with unsuspecting people, whose words were then carried through the dog's ears to the Patryn's. Alfred knew, in that moment, that the dog was offering this very same service to him. It would stay with Ramu and Samah, listen in on what they said.

"Alfred?" said Orla.

The Sartan jumped, guilt assailing him. He whirled around, didn't watch where he was going, and smashed nose first into the doorframe.

"Alfred . . . Oh, dear! What have you done? Your nose is bleeding!"

"I seem to have run into the door . . ."

"Tilt your head back. I'll sing you a rune of healing."

I should call the dog! Alfred trembled. I should never permit this. I am worse than Haplo. He spied on strangers. I'm spying on my own kind. I have only to say the word, call it, and the dog will come to me.

Alfred looked back. "Dog—" he began.

Samah was watching him with disdainful amusement, Ramu with disgust. But both were watching him.

"What were you saying about the dog?" Orla asked, looking anxious.

Alfred sighed, closed his eyes. "Only that I . . . I sent it home."

"Where you should be right now," Orla told him.

"Yes," said Alfred. "I'm ready to leave."

He had reached the outer door of the Council hall, when he heard, through the dog's ears, father and son start to talk.

"That man is dangerous." Ramu's voice.

"Yes, my son. You are right. Very dangerous. Therefore we must never relax our vigilance over him again."

"You think that? Then why did you let him go? We should do to him what we did to the others."

"We cannot now. The other Council members, especially your mother, would never agree. This is all part of his clever plan, of course. Let him think he has fooled us. Let him relax, think himself unwatched, unsuspected."

"A trap?"

"Yes," Samah answered complacently, "a trap to catch him in the act of betraying us to his Patryn friend. Then we will have enough evidence to convince even your mother that this Sartan with the mensch name means to encompass our downfall."

Alfred sank onto a bench, just outside the Hall of the Council of Sartan.

"You look terrible," said Orla. "I think your nose must be broken. Are you faint? If you don't feel able to walk, I can—"

"Orla." Alfred looked up at her. "I know this is going to sound ungrateful, but could you please leave me?"

"No, I couldn't possibly—"

"Please. I need to be alone," he said gently.

Orla studied him. Turning, she looked back toward the hall, stared into the shadowy interior intently, as if she could see within. Perhaps she could. Perhaps, though her ears did not hear the voices inside the hall, her heart did. Her face grew grave and sad.

"I'm sorry," she said, and left him.

Alfred groaned and rested his head in his shaking hands.

CHAPTER \* 24

PHONDRA CHELESTRA

EVENTS HAVE HURTLED DOWN ON us LIKE BOULDERS FROM THE mountaintop. Some seemed likely to flatten us, but we managed to duck and so survived.

We spent several more days on Phondra, for we had a great deal of planning to do, as you may well imagine. Many factors had to be determined: how many people were to be in each sun-chaser, what we could and could not take with us, how much food and water would be necessary for the duration of the journey, and a lot of other details that I won't bother to put down. It was bad enough having to listen and worry about them all.

Alake and I have finally been allowed to sit in on the royal meetings. It was an extremely proud moment for us.

During the first meeting, Alake and I concentrated on being serious, solemn, and earnest. We paid strict attention to every word and we were ready with our opinions, despite the fact that no one ever asked us for them.

But by the next afternoon, when my father and Dumaka were busy drawing—for the sixth time—a diagram of one of the sun-chasers in the dirt to determine how many water barrels could be safely stowed in the hold, Alake and I began to discover that being a ruler was, as she put it, a royal pain.

Here we were, stuck inside the longhouse, which was hot and stuffy, forced to listen to Eliason drone on about the merits of fish oil and why casks of it were considered an absolute necessity by the elves. Outdoors (we could see plainly through the slats in the log walls) the most interesting things were going on.

Alake's quick eye caught sight of Haplo, pacing restlessly about the camp. Devon walked with him. Our elf friend had almost completely recovered from his accident. The scars on his neck were healing. Other than an extremely raspy voice, he was back to being his old self. (Well, almost. I guess he will never be the merry, carefree Devon we once knew, but then I suppose none of us will ever be the same again.)

Devon spent most of his time with Haplo. They never seemed to say much to each other, but each seemed glad of the other's company. At least, I assume Haplo liked having the elf around. It's hard to tell what Haplo's thinking. For example, he's been in an extremely dark humor these past few days, which is odd, considering everything worked out the way he wanted. But then, I got the distinct feeling he was impatient, in a hurry to be gone, and was fed up with the delay.

I was watching the two of them walk past, thinking regretfully that if Alake and I had been spying, as usual, we would have left long before this (or fallen asleep!), when I saw Haplo suddenly stop in midstride, look in our direction. His face was grim. Turning, nearly bowling over the startled elf, he headed for the longhouse.

I perked up, having the feeling something was about to happen. Alake had seen him coming, too, and was smoothing her hair and adjusting her ear-jangles. She sat up straight and pretended to look deeply interested in the subject of fish oil, when only a moment before she'd been rolling her eyes and trying not to yawn. It was enough to make a cat laugh. As it was, I snorted and caught a stern, reproving look from my mother.

The doorkeeper entered, apologized for interrupting, and announced that Haplo had something to say. Of course, he was graciously received. (He'd been invited to attend these meetings, but he had better sense.)

He began by saying he hoped we were making progress, reminding us again that we didn't have much time. I thought his look, as he said this, was dark.

"What are you discussing?" he asked, his gaze going to the diagram on the floor.

None of the others seemed inclined to answer, so I told him. "Fish oil."

"Fish oil," Haplo repeated. "Every day, the Sartan grow stronger, your sun drifts farther, and you sit here yammering about fish oil."

Our parents looked ashamed. My father ducked his head, chewed on his beard. My mother sighed loudly. Eliason, his pale skin flushed, started to say something, floundered, and fell silent.

"It is hard to leave our homelands," said Dumaka finally, staring down at the diagram of the boat.

At first, I couldn't figure out what that had to do with fish oil, but then it occurred to me that all of the arguing and discussion over petty details were just our parents' way of stalling, of refusing to face the inevitable. They knew they had to leave, but they didn't want to. I felt suddenly like bursting into tears.

"I think we were hoping for a miracle," said Delu.

"The only miracle you're going to get is the one you make yourselves," Haplo answered irritably. "Now, look, here is what you take and how you take it."

He told them. Squatting down on the floor near the diagram, he explained everything. He told us what to take, how to pack it, what each man, woman, and child could carry, how much room to allot, what we'd need when we reached Surunan, what we could leave behind because we could make it when we got there. He told what we'd need in case of war.

We listened, dazed. Our parents presented feeble arguments.

"But what about—"

"Not necessary."

"But we should take—"

"No, you should not."

In less than an hour, everything was settled.

"Be ready to sail for your homes tomorrow. Once there, send out the word for your people to start gathering at the appointed locations." Haplo stood up, brushed the dirt off his hands. "The dwarves will sail the sun-chasers to Phondra and Elmas. Allow a full cycle at each city or village for loading everyone on board.

"The fleet will reassemble at Gargan in"—Haplo made a swift calculation in his head—"fourteen cycles' time. We should travel together; there's safety in numbers. Any who lag behind"—a stern glance at the elves—"will be left behind. Understood."

"Understood," said Eliason, with a faint smile.

"Good. I'll leave you all to work out the final details. Which reminds me, I'm in need of a translator. I want to ask the dolphins some questions concerning Surunan. I was wondering if I could borrow Grundle?"

"Take her," my father said, with what sounded suspiciously like relief.

I was on my feet, glad to escape, and heading for the door when I heard a smothered sound, caught sight of Alake's pleading eyes. She'd give every ear-jangle she owned and probably her ears along with them to go with Haplo.

I tugged at the sleeve of his shirt. "Alake speaks dolphin a lot better than I do. In fact, I don't speak it at all. I think she should come with us."

He gave me an exasperated look, but I ignored him. After all, Alake and I were friends. He couldn't go on avoiding her forever.

"Besides," I said, out of the corner of my mouth, "she'll only follow us." Which was true enough and got me off the hook.

So he said, not very graciously, that he'd be pleased if Alake would come, too.

"And Devon?" I asked, seeing the elf hanging about, lost and forlorn.

"Why not?" I thought I heard him mutter. "Invite the whole damn village. Have a parade."

I waved to Devon, whose face brightened. He joined us eagerly. "Where are we going?"

"Haplo wants to talk to the dolphins. We're going along to translate. By the way," I added, something just occurring to me, "the dolphins speak our languages, you know. And so do you. Why don't you talk to them yourself?"

"I tried. They won't talk to me."

"Really?" Devon stared at him, amazed. "I never heard of such a thing."

I had to admit I was pretty surprised, myself. Those gossipy fish will talk to anyone. Usually you can't get them to shut up.

"I'll speak with them," offered Alake. "Perhaps it's just because they've never seen anyone quite like you."

Haplo grunted, said nothing more. He was, as I have stated, in a dark and morose mood. Alake looked at me, worried, raised her eyebrows. I shrugged my shoulders, glanced at Devon, who shook his head. None of us had a clue what was bothering the man.

We reached the seashore. The dolphins were hanging about, as usual, hoping for someone to come along and toss them a juicy tidbit of news or cod or listen to whatever it was they had to say. But, when they saw Haplo coming, they all flipped their tails, turned, and swam out to sea.

"Wait!" Alake cried, standing on the shore and stomping her foot. "Come back here."

"There, you see." Haplo waved his hand impatiently.

"What do you expect? They're only fish," I said.

He stood glaring at them in frustration and at us in resentment. It occurred to me that he didn't really want us there, probably didn't want us to hear whatever it was he thought he might hear, but he didn't have much choice.

I went down to the water's edge, where Alake was talking with one of the dolphins who had slowly and reluctantly swum back. Haplo stayed behind, keeping well away from the water.

"What's the problem?" I asked.

Alake squeaked and whistled. I wondered if she knew how truly ridiculous she sounded. You'd never catch me lowering myself to fish-talk. She turned around,

"Haplo's right. They're refusing to talk to him. They say he's in league with the dragon-snakes, and they hate and fear the dragon-snakes."

"Listen, fish," I said to the dolphin, "we're not crazy about the dragon-snakes ourselves, but Haplo has some sort of hold on them. He got them to let us go and made them repair the sun-chasers."

The dolphin shook its head violently, splattering water all over both of us. It began to squeak shrilly, alarmingly, flapping its flippers in the water.

"What's the matter with it?" Devon came over to join us.

"That's nonsense!" Alake cried angrily. "I don't believe you. I won't stay here and listen to such talk." She turned her back on the frantic dolphin and walked up the beach to where Haplo was standing.

"It's useless," she said. "They're behaving like spoiled children. Let's go."

"I need to talk to them," Haplo said.

"What did the thing say to her?" I asked Devon softly.

He glanced over at the two of them, motioned me closer.

"It said that the dragon-snakes are evil, more evil than we can imagine. And that Haplo's just as evil as they are. He has a private hatred for these Sartan. Once, long ago, his people fought the Sartan and lost. Now, he wants revenge. He's using us to get it. When we've destroyed the Sartan for him, he'll turn us over to the dragon-snakes."

I stared at him. I couldn't believe it, and yet, in a way, I could. I felt sick inside and afraid. Judging by his looks, Devon wasn't faring much better. Dolphins often exaggerate the truth, or sometimes come up with only part of the truth, but it is, generally, the truth. I've never known one to lie. We both eyed Haplo, who was trying to persuade Alake to return and talk to the dolphins again.

"What do you think?" I asked Devon.

The elf took his time answering. "I think the dolphins are wrong. I trust him. He saved my life, Grundle. Saved my life by giving me some of his own."

"Huh?"

That made no sense at all. I was about to say as much to Devon, when he shushed me. Alake was returning to the water's edge, followed by Haplo. Seeing him this near the sea, in danger of being splashed, I concluded the matter must be serious.

Alake summoned the dolphin before her with her best imperious air, bracelets clashing, arm stabbing downward. Her eyes flashed, her voice was stern. Even I was impressed. The dolphin swam to her meekly.

"Listen to me," Alake said, "you will answer the questions this man puts to you to the best of your ability or from this moment on, you dolphins will be shunned by every human, elf, and dwarf."

"Exceeding our authority a bit, aren't we?" I poked her in the ribs.

"Shut up." Alake pinched me. "And agree to go along."

We did. Both Devon and I stoutly insisted that no elf or dwarf would ever talk to a dolphin again. At this dire threat, the dolphins gasped and floundered and flopped around in the water, sounding agonized and swearing that they were only interested in our welfare. (Overdoing it, if you ask me.) Finally— after pathetic bleatings, which we ignored—one of the fish agreed to talk to Haplo.

And then, after all this, what do you suppose was Haplo's question? Did he ask about Sartan defenses? About how many men manned the battlements? About how good they were at ax-heaving? No.

Alake, having cowed the dolphins, looked at him expectantly. Haplo spoke the fish's language fluently.

"What he's saying?" I asked Devon.

Devon looked dazed. "He's asking them how the Sartan are dressed!"

Well, of course, Haplo could have asked nothing that would have caught the dolphins' fancy more (which, it occurs to me, may have been the reason he asked it). Dolphins have never understood our strange propensity for draping the body in cloth, just as they've never understood our other odd habits, such as living on dry land and expending all that energy walking when we might be swimming.

But, for some reason, they find the wearing of clothing particularly hilarious and, as such, are continually fascinated by it. Let an elf matron attend a ball in a puffed-sleeve gown when long tight sleeves are in fashion and every dolphin in the Goodsea will have heard about it by morning.

As it was, we were treated to a graphic account (Alake translating, for my benefit) of what the Sartan were wearing, which—all in all—I thought sounded pretty boring.

"The dolphins say that the Sartan all dress alike. The males wear robes that fall in long, loose folds from the shoulders and the females wear a similar design, except that theirs are cinched around the waist. The robes are plain-colored, either white or gray. Most have simple designs along the bottom, and some are trimmed in gold. The dolphins suspect that the gold denotes some type of official ranking. They don't know what."

Devon and I sat down in the sand, both of us glum and uncommunicative. I wondered if he was thinking about what I was thinking about. I had my answer when I saw him frown and heard him repeat, "He saved my life."

"The dolphins don't think much of the Sartan," Alake was saying to me, in low tones. "Apparently, the Sartan ask the dolphins continually for information, but when the dolphins ask the Sartan questions, the Sartan refuse to answer."

Haplo nodded; this information obviously didn't surprise him much. In fact, I could see he wasn't surprised by anything he heard, as if he knew it all beforehand. I wondered why he asked, why he bothered. He had joined us, sitting in the sand, his arms propped up on his bent knees, hands clasped. He looked relaxed, prepared to sit here for several signs.

"Is there . . . anything else you want to know?" Alake glanced at him then over at us to see if we knew what was going on.

We weren't any help. Devon was busy digging holes in the sand, watching them fill with water and tiny sea creatures. I felt angry and unhappy and began tossing rocks at the dolphin, just to see how close I could come to hitting it.

The stupid fish, tickled by the dress question, I suppose, swam out of my range, started to giggle and cavort.

"What's so funny?" Haplo asked. He seemed relaxed, but from where I was seated, I could see a glint in his eye, a bright flash like sun off hard, cold steel.

Of course, the dolphin was eager to tell.

"What?" I asked.

Alake shrugged. "Only that there is one Sartan who dresses much differently from the others. He looks different from the others."

"Different? How?"

Casual conversation, except I saw that Haplo's hands had tightened.

The dolphins were eager to describe it. Several more swam up at this point, all talking at once. Haplo listened intently. It took Alake some moments to sort out who was squeaking what.

"The man wears a coat and knee breeches, like a dwarf, only he's not a dwarf. He's much taller. He has no hair on the top of his head. His clothes are shabby and worn out, and the dolphins say he seems as worn out as his clothes."

I watched Haplo out of the corner of my eye; a shiver crept over me. His expression had changed. He was smiling, but his smile was unpleasant, made me want to look away. The fingers of his hands were clasped so tightly together that the knuckles, beneath their blue marks, had all turned white. This was what he'd wanted to hear. But, why? Who was this man?

"The dolphins don't think that this man is a Sartan."

Alake continued talking in some perplexity, expecting every moment for Haplo to end what seemed a boring conversation. He listened with quiet interest, however, saying nothing, encouraging the dolphins silently to continue.

"He doesn't go around with the Sartan. The dolphins see him walking on the pier alone a lot. They say he looks much nicer than the Sartan, whose faces seem to have stayed frozen when the rest of them thawed out. The dolphins would like to talk to him, but he has a dog with him that barks at them when they come too close—"

"Dog!"

Haplo's whole body flinched, as if someone'd hit him. And I'll never forget, if I live to be four hundred, the tone of his voice. It made my hair stand on end. Alake was staring at him in astonishment. The dolphins, sensing a choice morsel of gossip, swam as close as they possibly could without actually beaching themselves.

"Dog . . ." Devon's head jerked up. I don't think he'd been paying much attention, up to this point. "What about a dog?" he whispered to me.

I shook my side whiskers at him, to keep him quiet. I didn't want to miss whatever Haplo was going to do or say next. He didn't say or do anything, however. Just sat there.

For some reason, I recalled a recent evening spent at our local tavern, enjoying the usual brawl. One of my uncles was hit over the head with a chair. He sat on the floor for quite a while, and the expression on his face was identical to the expression on Haplo's.

First my uncle looked dazed, stunned. Pain brought him to his senses; his face kind of twisted, and he moaned a little. But by then, too, he realized what had happened to him, and he was so angry he forgot that he hurt. Haplo didn't moan. He didn't make any sound that I heard. But I saw his face twist, then darken in anger. He jumped to his feet and, without a word, stalked off back toward camp.

Alake cried out, and would have run after him, if I hadn't been holding onto the hem of her dress. As I told you, the Phondrans don't believe in buttons or anything of that type. They wrap the cloth around themselves. While ordinarily the folds are quite secure, one good tug in a strategic location can pretty well undo the whole business.

Alake gasped, grappled with folds of falling fabric, and by the time she was properly redraped, Haplo was out of sight.

"Grundle!" She pounced on me. "What did you do that for?"

"I saw his face," I answered. "Obviously, you didn't. Believe me, he wanted to be alone."

I thought she was going to fly off after him and I was on my feet, prepared to stop her, when she sighed, suddenly, and shook her head.

"I saw his face, too," was all she said.

The dolphins were squeaking in excitement, begging to know the gory details.

"Go on! Get out of here!" I said, and began chucking rocks in earnest.

They swam off, with hurt and offended squeaks. But I noticed that they only swam out of range of my throwing arm and that they kept their heads out of the water, mouths open, beady little eyes watching eagerly.

"Stupid fish!" snapped Alake, tossing her head, making her ear-jangles clash like bells. "Vicious gossips. I don't believe anything they say."

She kept glancing at us uneasily, wondering if we'd overheard what the dolphins said about Haplo and the dragon-snakes. I tried to look innocent, but I must not have succeeded.

"Oh, Grundle! Surely you don't think for a moment what they said was true! That Haplo's using us! Devon"—Alake turned to the elf for support—"tell Grundle that she's wrong. Haplo wouldn't do ... what they said. He just wouldn't! He saved your life, Devon."

But Devon wasn't listening. "Dog," he repeated thoughtfully. "He said something to me about a dog. I wish I ... I just can't remember . . ."

"You have to admit, Alake," I said reluctantly, "that we don't know anything about him. Where he comes from, even what he is. Now this man with no hair on his head and the shabby clothes. Haplo obviously knew the man was with the Sartan; he wasn't the least surprised to hear about him. He was surprised about the dog, though, and from the look of him, the surprise wasn't pleasant. Who is this strange man? What does he have to do with Haplo? And what's the big deal about a dog?" I looked hard at Devon as I spoke.

The elf was no help. He only shrugged. "I'm sorry, Grundle. I wasn't feeling very good at the time . . ."

"I know all about Haplo I need to know," said Alake angrily, twitching the folds of her dress back into place. "He saved our lives, saved you twice, Devon!"

"Yes," said Devon, not looking at Alake, "and how nicely it all worked out for him."

"It did, didn't it?" I said, thinking back. "He was the hero, the savior. No one's ever questioned a thing he says. I think we should tell our parents—"

Alake stomped her foot. Bracelets and ear-jangles rang wildly. I'd never seen her so angry. "You do, Grundle Heavybeard, and I'll never speak to you again! I swear it by the One!"

"There's a way we can find out for certain," Devon said soothingly, to calm her down. He stood up, brushed the sand off his hands.

"What's that?" Alake demanded, sullen, suspicious.

"Spy—"

"No! I forbid it! I won't have you spying on him—"

"Not on him," said Devon. "On the dragon-snakes."

Now I felt as if I'd been hit over the head with a chair. The very idea took my breath away.

"I agree with you, Alake," Devon argued persuasively, "I want to believe in Haplo. But we can't get around the fact that dolphins generally know what's going on—"

" 'Generally'!" Alake repeated bitterly.

"Yes, that's what I mean. What if they've got part of it wrong and part of it right? What if, for example, the dragon-snakes are using Haplo? What if he's in just as much danger as we are? I think, before we tell our parents or anybody, we should find out the truth."

"The elf's got a point," I admitted. "At least for now, the dragon-snakes seem to be on our side. And snakes or no snakes, we can't stay on the seamoons. We've got to reach Surunan. And if we bring this up . . ."

I didn't need to finish my sentence. We could picture, all too well, how this information would start the squabbling and the distrust and the suspicion all over again.

"Very well," said Alake.

The thought of Haplo being in danger had won her over, of course. I regarded Devon with newfound admiration. Eliason had been right. Elves did make good diplomats.

"We'll do it," Alake said. "But when? And how?"

Trust a human. Always had to have a plan.

"We'll have to wait and watch for a time," Devon said. "There's bound to be opportunity on the trip."

A sudden, horrible thought struck me. "What if the dolphins tell our parents what they told us?"

"We'll have to watch them, see that they don't talk to our parents or anyone else for that matter," said Alake, after a moment's pondering, during which none of us came up with anything more helpful. "With any luck, our people will be too busy to take time out to gossip."

A forlorn hope. I didn't mention that it was not only probable but logical that our parents would ask the dolphins for information before we set out on the journey. I was surprised they hadn't thought to do it yet, but I guess they had more important things on their minds—like fish oil.

We all agreed to keep close watch, be ready with arguments in case we failed. Alake was to warn Haplo, discreetly, without giving anything away, that it might be best if no one spoke to dolphins for a while.

After that, we parted, to make preparations for the great journey and to begin keeping an eye on our parents.

It's a good thing they have us around. I've got to go. More later.

CHAPTER \* 25

PHONDRA

CHELESTRA

HIS DOG WAS WITH ALFRED.

There was no doubt in Haplo's mind that the dog the dolphins mentioned was his dog and it was with Alfred. The thought irritated Haplo, bothered him more than he cared to admit, rankled like a poisoned barb in his flesh. He found himself thinking about the dog when he should have been concentrating on more important matters—such as the journey ahead, the war against the Sartan.

"It's only a damn dog," he told himself.

Elves and dwarves were boarding their submersibles, preparing to travel back to their homelands and ready their people for the great Sun Chase. Haplo stayed with them until the last possible moment, reassuring the dwarves, prodding the elves to action, solving problems both real and imaginary. They hadn't all agreed to go to war, not yet. But he was leading them toward it, gently, without their being aware of his intent. And Haplo had little doubt that the Sartan would finish whatever it was he started.

The humans, with typical human impetuosity, wanted to sail the submersibles to Surunan directly, land their people on the shore, and then open up negotiations.

"We will be arguing from a position of strength," stated Dumaka. "The Sartan will see our numbers, see that we have already established a foothold. They will see, too, that we arrive in peace with peaceful intent. They will look out over the walls of their city and see women and children ..."

"They'll look out over their walls and see an army," Yngvar growled. "They'll grab their axes first and think about talking later."

"I agree with Yngvar," said Eliason. "We don't want to intimidate these Sartan. I suggest that we halt the fleet near Surunan, close enough for the Sartan to see our ships and be impressed by our numbers, but far enough away that they do not feel threatened. . . ."

"And what's wrong with a little threatening?" Dumaka argued. "I suppose you elves plan to go groveling and crawling in on your bellies, prepared to wash their feet."

"Certainly not. We elves know how to behave politely, present our proposals in a civilized manner without loss of dignity."

"Now you're saying we humans are not civilized!" Dumaka flared.

"If the boot fits . . ." Yngvar began, at which point Haplo intervened.

"I think it would be best to go with Eliason's plan. What if, as Yngvar suggests, the Sartan decided to attack? You'd have your families strung out on the beaches, defenseless. Far better to keep on board the ships. There's a place to moor the submersibles not far from Draknor, where the dragon-snakes live.

"Don't worry," Haplo added hastily, noting the scowls that met this proposal, "you won't be that close to the snakes. You can take advantage of their air bubble to bring your ships to the surface. And by the time you reach this point, you'll be glad to breathe fresh air again. Once you're here, you ask the Sartan for a meeting, and then open negotiations."

His plan was accepted. Haplo smiled quietly. He could almost certainly count on the mensch to talk themselves into trouble.

Which brought him to his next topic of conversation: weapons. In particular, magical elven weapons.

No weapon made by mensch, magic or otherwise, could stand up against the power of the Sartan rune-magic. But Haplo had devised a plan that would make everyone equal, a plan that would, in fact, give the mensch the edge. He hadn't told anyone about his plan yet, not the mensch, not even his allies, the dragon-snakes. Too much was at stake: victory over the ancient enemy, Samah helpless and at the Patryn's mercy. Haplo would tell everyone when they needed to know and not a moment before.

Although no elf living could remember a time of warfare, the magical weapons they'd once developed were celebrated in story and legend. Eliason knew all about them, described them all to Haplo. The two of them endeavored to determine which weapons the elves could manufacture swiftly, which weapons they could learn to use effectively—or at least learn how to inflict more damage on an enemy than on themselves.

After some discussion, Haplo and Eliason settled on the bow and arrow. The elven king was quite enamored of archery—a sport still used by some elves as a form of entertainment at parties. The magical arrows hit whatever target they were ordered to hit after being fired and therefore aim wasn't all that critical.

The humans were already skilled in the use of bow and arrow, plus numerous other weapons. And although their weapons weren't magically enhanced (nor would the humans use elven weapons, considering them suitable only for weaklings), the Coven had the power to summon the elements to assist in the battle.

This point settled, the Gargans, Phondrans, and Elmas took friendly leave of each other. Dwarves and elves sailed off to their homelands, and Haplo breathed a sigh of relief.

Walking back to his lodge, he was thinking to himself that, at last, everything seemed to be working out.

"Haplo," said Alake. "May I speak with you? It's about the dolphins."

He glanced at her impatiently, irritated at the interruption. "Yes? What about them?"

Alake bit her lip, looked abashed. "It's urgent," she said softly, in apology. "Otherwise I wouldn't bother you. I know what important matters you have on your mind ..."

It occurred to Haplo that the dolphins might have told the girl things she hadn't told him. He had no way of knowing, he'd been involved in meetings since then.

He forced himself to pause, to smile at the girl, seem glad to see her. "I'm going back to my lodge. Will you walk with me?"

Alake returned his smile—how easy it was to please her—and fell into step beside him, moving gracefully to the pleasing silvery sounds of the bells and beads she wore.

"Now," he said, "tell me about the dolphins."

"They don't mean any harm, but they do like to stir up excitement and, of course, it's difficult for them to understand how important it is for us to find a new seamount. The dolphins can't figure out why we want to live on land. They think we should live in the water, as they do. And then they're really frightened of the dragon-snakes . . ."

Alake wasn't looking at him while she talked. Her eyes were averted; her hands, he noted, were nervously twisting the rings on her fingers.

She knows something, Haplo concluded grimly. Something she isn't telling.

"Sorry, Alake," he said, still smiling at her, "but I'm afraid I don't find fish much of a threat."

"But I thought . . . that is, we thought . . . Grundle and Devon agree . . . that if the dolphins talked to our people, they might say things. The dolphins, I mean. Things that would upset our parents and maybe cause more delays."

"What things, Alake?" Haplo came to a halt. They were near his lodge, no one else was around. "What did the dolphins say?"

The girl opened her eyes wide. "Nothing!" she began, faltered, hung her head. "Please don't make me tell you."

It was well she couldn't see the expression on Haplo's face. He drew a deep breath, controlled the impulse to seize the girl and shake the information out of her. He did take hold of her, but his touch was gentle, caressing.

"Tell me, Alake. The lives of your people could be at stake."

"It doesn't have anything to do with my people—"

"Alake." Haplo's grip on her tightened.

"They said terrible things about . . . about you!"

"What things?"

"That the dragon-snakes were evil, that you were evil. That you're only using us." Alake raised her head, her eyes flashed. "I don't believe it! I don't believe a word. Neither do Grundle and Devon. But if the dolphins were to tell my parents . . ."

Yes, Haplo thought, that would finish it. Of all the damn, fool, stupid things to happen! His grand design, about to be wrecked by a bunch of fish!

"Don't worry," she said quickly, seeing the dark expression on his face. "I have an idea."

"What is it?" Haplo was only half-listening, trying to figure out how to solve this latest crisis.

"I thought," Alake suggested shyly, "that I might tell the dolphins to go on ahead of us ... act as scouts. They'd like that. They love to feel important. I could say it was my father's suggestion. ..."

Haplo considered. It would keep the fish from causing trouble. By the time the mensch reached Surunan, it would be too late for them to back out, no matter what the dolphins told them.

"That's a good idea, Alake."

Her face was radiant. It took so little effort to make her happy, would take so little. A voice, which sounded very much like the voice of his lord, spoke in Haplo's ear.

You could get this girl to do anything you want. Be nice to her. Give her a few trinkets, whisper sweet things to her in the night, promise her marriage. She would become your slave, do anything for you, even die for you. And, when you're finished, you can always cast her aside. After all, she is only a mensch.

The two were still standing outside his lodge. Haplo had his hands on the girl's arms. Alake moved closer, pressing her body nearer. He had only to draw her inside his hut and she would be his. She'd been startled the first time, taken by surprise. But now she'd had time to dream about lying in his arms. Her fear had been subdued by desire.

And in addition to the pleasure she would give him, she would be useful, too. A spy on her parents, on the dwarves and the elves. She would report back to him every word, every thought. And he would ensure that what she knew, she'd keep to herself. Not that she was likely to betray him, but this would make it certain. . .

He fully intended to go through with her seduction, was surprised to watch himself pat her on the arms, as if she were an obedient child.

"A good idea," he repeated. "We don't have a moment to lose. Why don't you go take care of the dolphins right now?" He took a step backward, away from her.

"Is that what you want?" she asked him, her voice low and breathless.

"You said yourself how important this was, Alake. Who knows but that, even now, your father isn't on his way to talk to the dolphins."

"He isn't," she said, drooping. "He's in the lodge, talking with Mother."

"Then now's a perfect time."

"Yes," she said, but she lingered a moment longer, perhaps hoping he'd change his mind.

She was young, lovely.

Haplo turned from her and entered his hut, flung himself on his pallet as if exhausted. He waited, unmoving, in the cool darkness until he heard her soft footfalls passing through the dust. She was hurt, but not nearly as hurt as she would have been.

"After all, since when do I need a mensch to help me? I work alone. And damn Alfred, anyway," he added incongruously. "This time, I'll finish him."

The sun-chasers arrived on schedule. Two stayed to take aboard Dumaka's tribe. Others traveled around the shores of the seamount, gathering up the remainder of the human population of Phondra.

Haplo was pleasantly surprised at the dispatch and efficiency of the humans, who managed to collect everyone on board the submersibles with a minimum of fuss and confusion. Looking around the deserted camp, he was reminded of how easily the Squatters had been able to pack up their belongings and move on.

"Our people used to be nomads," Dumaka explained. "We traveled to different parts of Phondra, following the game, gathering fruits and vegetables. Such a life caused wars, however. Men always imagine that the antelope are fatter in another man's portion of the jungle.

"Peace has come to us slowly, we have worked long and hard for it. I am saddened to think we may be forced to go back to war."

Delu came to him, put her arm around him. The two of them looked wistfully around their now-empty, all-but-deserted village.

"All will be well, Husband. We are together. Our people are together. The One who guides the waves is with us. We'll carry peace in our hearts and offer it to these Sartan as our greatest gift."

Hopefully, they'll spit in your face, Haplo thought. His one worry was Alfred. Alfred would not only take these mensch into his home, he'd give them the shabby velvet coat off his back. But Haplo was coming to think Alfred wasn't a typical Sartan. The Patryn expected better things of Samah.

Once the humans were taken on board the submersibles, they shed only a few tears at leaving their homeland. Those tears soon dried in the excitement of the trip, the anticipation of a new and purportedly rich world.

There was no sign of the dragon-snakes.

Haplo sailed on the largest of the submersibles with the chief and his family, friends, and members of the Coven. The sun-chaser was similar to the much smaller submersible he'd sailed in before, except that it boasted several levels.

They reached Gargan, found the dwarves packed and ready to go, but did not find the elves, to no one's surprise. Even Haplo had made allowances for them to be late; his dire threat of leaving them behind had only been intended to prod them on.

"It'll be chaos," Yngvar predicted dourly. "But I've sent my best men to captain the vessel and thrown in the army to boot. We'll have them here in time, if not on time."

The elven contingent arrived only four cycles late; the submersibles moving slowly, rolling in the sea like overfed whales.

"What's the meaning of this?" Yngvar demanded.

"We're overloaded, that's what, Vater!" the dwarven captain raved, on the verge of tearing out his beard. "It would have been easier to drag the seamount behind us. We might as well. The blasted elves brought along everything else! See for yourself!"

The dwarves had taken care to build bunks for the elves, but the Elmas took one look at them and refused to sleep in anything so crude. They had then attempted to bring their own heavy, ornately carved wooden bed frames aboard, at which the dwarven captain told them there was either room for the beds or for the elves, take their pick.

"I was hoping for the beds," said the dwarf dourly to Yngvar. "At least they don't make any noise."

The elves eventually agreed to sleep in the bunks, then proceeded to drag aboard goose-feather mattresses, lace-edged sheets, silk blankets, and down pillows. And this was only the beginning. Every elven family had valuable heirlooms that simply could not be left behind—everything from fanciful magical clocks to harps that played themselves. One elf arrived with a full-grown tree in a pot; another with twenty-seven songbirds in twenty-seven silver cages.

Finally, everyone and everything was stowed aboard. The elves were, for the most part, satisfied, though it was impossible to move through the sun-chaser without tripping over something or someone.

Then began the truly difficult part—leaving their homeland. The humans, accustomed to constant moving about, had been matter-of-fact. The dwarves, though giving up their beloved caves was a wrench, took the departure with stoic calm. The elves were shattered. One dwarf captain reported that with all the tears shed in his ship, he had more water on the inside than the out.

At last, however, the huge fleet of sun-chasers was assembled and ready to sail to their new homeland. The heads of the royal households gathered on the deck of the flagship to lead the people in prayer, asking the One to grant them a safe journey and a peaceful landing.

Their prayers concluded, the dwarven sea captains began exchanging a flurry of signals and the submersibles sank beneath the waves.

They had only traveled a short distance when a first officer, face white and panicked, approached Yngvar, knuckled his forehead to the dwarven king, and said something to him in low tones.

Yngvar frowned, glanced at the others. "Dragon-snakes," he reported.

Haplo had been aware of the snakes' presence a long time: the sigla on his skin itched and burned. He rubbed at it irritably; the runes on his hands glowed a faint blue.

"Let me talk to them," he said.

"How can any of us 'talk' to them?" Yngvar demanded gruffly. "We're underwater!"

"There are ways," said Haplo and headed off for the bridge, accompanied—whether he wanted them or not—by the mensch royalty.

The warning blue glow of the runes shone through his shirt, reflected in the wide eyes of the mensch, who'd heard this phenomenon described by their children, but who'd never witnessed it.

It was useless for Haplo to try to tell himself that the dragon-snakes did not present a threat. His body was reacting to them as centuries of instinct had trained it to react. The only thing he could do was ignore the warning and hope that over time, his body would come to understand.

He entered the steerage, found the dwarven crew huddled together, muttering among themselves. The captain pointed out to sea.

The dragon-snakes hung in the water, huge bodies undulating with sinuous grace, eyes red slits in the green water.

"They're blocking our way, Vater. I say we turn back."

"And go where?" Haplo asked. "Back to your homeland and sit waiting for the ice to come? I'll talk to them."

"How?" Yngvar asked again, but the word came out a gargle.

A shimmering, ghostly image of a dragon-snake appeared on the bridge. Fear flowed from it like chill water. Those members of the dwarven crew who could still move did so, fleeing the bridge with loud cries. Those who were frozen in terror stood staring, shivering. The captain held his ground, though his beard quivered and he was forced to keep his hand on the wheel to steady himself.

The royal families remained, too, for which courage Haplo gave them grudging credit. His own instinct was to run, swim, tear the wooden planks apart with his bare hands in order to escape. He fought against his fear, and managed to subdue it, though he had to work to find saliva enough in his mouth to speak.

"The sun-chaser fleet is assembled, Royal One. We are sailing for Surunan as we planned. Why do you stand in our path?"

Slit eyes—merely a reflection of the real eyes—glowed red, gazed steadfastly at Haplo.

"The distance is far, the way is long. We have come to guide you, Master."

"A trick!" breathed Yngvar, teeth clicking together.

"We can find our own way," added Dumaka.

Delu raised her voice suddenly in a chant, held up some kind of rock she wore on a chain around her neck, probably some crude mensch form of protective magic.

The red eyes of the dragon-snake narrowed to slits.

"Shut up, all of you!" Haplo snarled. He kept his own gaze fixed on the dragon-snake. "We thank you for your offer, Royal One. And we will follow. Captain, keep your vessel in the dragon's wake, order all the other sun-chasers to do likewise."

The dwarf looked to his king for confirmation. Yngvar's face was dark with anger and terror; he started to shake his head.

"Don't be a fool," Haplo warned him in a quiet undertone. "If they wanted to kill you, they would have done so long before now. Accept their offer. It's no trick. I guarantee it ... with my life," he added, seeing the dwarf king still hesitate.

"We have no choice, Yngvar," said Eliason.

"And you, Dumaka?" the dwarf demanded, breathing heavily. "What do you say?"

Husband and wife exchanged glances. Delu shrugged in bitter acquiescence. "We have our people to consider."

"Go ahead, then." Dumaka agreed, frowning.

"Very well," stated Yngvar. "Do as he says."

"Yes, Vater," the captain answered, but he cast Haplo a sullen glance. "Tell the creature it must take itself off my bridge. I can't run my ship without a crew."

The dragon-snake was already starting to disappear, fading from view slowly, leaving behind the vague uneasiness and half-remembered fears that assail a sleeper waking suddenly from a bad dream.

The mensch breathed deep sighs of relief, though their dark looks did not brighten. The submersible's crew and officers returned, shamefaced, avoiding their captain's irate glare.

Haplo turned and left. On his way out, he nearly ran down Grundle, Alake, and Devon, emerging rather hastily from the shadows of a nearby doorway.

"You're wrong!" Alake was saying to Devon.

"For your sake, I hope I—"

"Shush!" Grundle caught sight of Haplo.

The three fell silent. He had obviously interrupted an important conversation, and he had the feeling it was about him. The other two had heard the dolphins, too, apparently. Devon looked ashamed, kept his gaze averted. Grundle, however, stared at Haplo defiantly.

"Spying again?" he said. "I thought you'd learned your lesson."

"Guess not," muttered Grundle, as he passed.

The remainder of the voyage was peaceful. They didn't see the dragon-snakes, their dread influence could no longer be felt. The submersible sailed along in the wake left by the huge bodies, swimming far ahead.

Life aboard ship was boring, claustrophobic, uneventful.

Haplo was certain that the three mensch were up to something. But, after a few days of keeping a close eye on them, he concluded he must be mistaken.

Alake avoided him, devoted herself to her mother and her studies of magic, in which she had developed a renewed interest. Devon and a host of younger elves spent their time practicing shooting arrows at a target they had set up. Grundle was the only one who gave Haplo cause for concern, and then only as a minor annoyance, like a gnat.

More than once, he caught her trailing after him, staring at him, her expression grave and thoughtful, as if she was having difficulty making up her mind about him. And when she discovered him looking at her, she'd give him an abrupt nod or shake her side whiskers at him, turn around, and stump off. Alake had said Grundle didn't believe the dolphins. Apparently, Alake'd been wrong.

Haplo didn't waste time trying to argue with the dwarf. After all, what the dolphins had told the young people was true. He was using the mensch.

He spent most of his waking hours with them, molding them, shaping them, leading them to do what he wanted. His task wasn't easy. The mensch, terrified of their dragon-snake allies, might come to greatly admire the would-be enemy.

This was Haplo's one fear, the one toss of the rune-bone that would end his game. If the Sartan welcomed the mensch with open arms, clasped them to their bosoms, so to speak, Haplo was finished. He'd escape, of course. The dragon-snakes would see to that. But he'd have to go back to the Nexus empty-handed, make a humiliating report to his lord.

Faced with that choice, Haplo wasn't certain he would go back at all. Better to die . . .

Time passed quickly, even for the Patryn, impatient to at last meet his greatest foe. He was lying in his bed when he heard a grinding sound, felt a jolt pass through the ship. Voices cried out in alarm, only to be reassured the next moment by their king.

The submersibles floated upward, broke through the water. Open air and sunshine—bright sunshine—surrounded them.

The sun-chasers had caught the sun.

## CHAPTER \* 26

### SURUNAN CHELESTRA

ALFRED SPENT MOST OF HIS DAY AND A GREATER PORTION OF HIS night listening to the echo of the conversation he'd overheard between Samah and his son. He heard it all, over and over again in his mind, but one portion kept returning to him, louder and more persistent than the rest.

We should do to him what we did to the others.

What others?

Those who had discovered that they were not gods, that they were (or should be) worshipers? Those who had found out that the Sartan were not the sun, but just another planet? What had happened to them? Where were they?

He glanced around, almost as if he expected to find them sitting in Orla's garden. The heretics weren't in Chelestra. They weren't on the Council. Despite the fact that there was some division, the Council members, with the exception of Orla, appeared to be solidly behind Samah.

Perhaps all Ramu meant was that the heretics had been counseled, finally converted back to proper Sartan ways of thinking. This was a comforting thought, and Alfred wanted very much to believe it. He spent almost an entire hour convincing himself it must be true. That nagging unfortunate part of him that seemed to be always going off on its own (and taking his feet with it) argued that he was, as usual, refusing to face reality.

The internal argument was wearing, left him worn out and unhappy. He was tired of it, tired of being by himself, forced to argue with himself. He was immeasurably cheered at the sight of Orla entering the garden in search of him.

It had seemed to Alfred as if she had been avoiding him.

"Ah, here you are." Orla spoke briskly, impersonally. She might have been talking to the dog, snoozing at Alfred's feet. The animal opened an eye to see who was here, yawned, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Startled by Orla's detached tone, Alfred sighed. She obviously loathed him now. He supposed he couldn't really blame her.

"Yes, I'm here," he replied. "Where did you think I would be—the library?"

Orla flushed in anger, then paled. She bit her lip. "I'm sorry," she said, after a moment. "I suppose I deserved that."

"No, I'm the one who is sorry," Alfred said, appalled at himself. "I don't know what's come over me. Won't you please sit down?"

"No, thank you," Orla said, her flush deepening. "I can't stay. I came to tell you that we've received a message from the mensch. They have arrived on Draknor." Her voice hardened. "They want to arrange a meeting."

"What is Draknor? One of the durnai?"

"Yes, poor creature. The durnai were meant to hibernate until the season drifted away, then we would wake them and they would follow it. Most durnai, after we left, never woke up. I doubt if even the mensch, who have lived on the durnai all this time, are aware that they have been living on a living being.

"Unfortunately, the dragon-snakes realized at once that the durnai were alive. They attacked one, woke it, and have tormented the durnai ever since. According to the dolphins, the dragon-snakes have devoured it slowly, gnawed at it bit by bit. It lives in perpetual agony and fear.

"Yes," Orla added, seeing Alfred grow pale with horror. "It is these creatures who have allied themselves with your Patryn friend. And with the mensch."

Alfred was sickened. He glanced down at the dog, slumbering peacefully. "I can't believe it. Not even of Haplo. He is a Patryn—ambitious, hard, cold. But he's not a coward. He's not cruel. He takes no delight in tormenting the helpless, he does not enjoy inflicting pain."

"Yet he is there, in Draknor, and the mensch are with him. But they won't be content to stay there. They want to move here, to this realm." Orla looked around her garden, lush and beautiful in night's soft darkness. "That is what this meeting is about."

"Well, of course, they can't stay on Draknor. It must be dreadful. There is plenty of room for them here," said Alfred, feeling more cheerful than he had in days.

He was actually looking forward to being in company with the mensch again. They might be quarrelsome, disruptive, but they were interesting.

Then he saw the expression on Orla's face.

"You do plan to let them move onto Surunan, don't you?" he asked.

He saw the answer in her eyes, and stared at her, appalled. "I can't believe it! You'd turn them away?"

"It isn't the mensch, Alfred," Orla said. "It's those who are with them. The Patryn. He's asked to come to the meeting."

"Haplo?" Alfred repeated in astonishment.

At the sound of the name, the dog sprang to its feet, ears pricked, eyes searching.

"There, there," said Alfred, petting the animal, calming its excitement. "There, there. He's not here now. Not yet."

The dog gave a little whimper, and settled back down, nose on paws.

"Haplo, coming to a meeting of the Sartan," Alfred mused, disquieted by the news. "He must be very confident, to reveal himself to you. Of course, you already know he's on Chelestra, and he's probably aware that you know. Still, this isn't like him."

"Confident!" Orla snapped. "Of course he's confident! He's got the dragon-snakes, not to mention several thousand mensch warriors—"

"But perhaps the mensch only want to live in peace," Alfred suggested.

"Do you honestly believe that?" Orla looked at him in wonder. "Can you be that naive?"

"I admit I'm not as wise or as intelligent as the rest of you," Alfred stated humbly. "But shouldn't you at least listen to what they have to say?"

"Of course the Council will listen to them. That's why Samah has agreed to the meeting. And he wants you to be present. He sent me to tell you."

"Then you didn't come to me on your own," Alfred said softly, staring down at his shoes. "I was right. You have been avoiding me. No, don't worry about it. I understand. I've made things difficult enough for you. It's just that I missed talking to you, I missed hearing your voice. I missed"—he lifted his eyes— "looking at you."

"Alfred, please, don't. I've said this to you before—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I think it would be a good idea if I left this house, perhaps even left Chelestra."

"Oh, Alfred, no! Don't be ridiculous. You belong here, with us, with your people—"

"Do I?" Alfred asked her seriously, so seriously he stopped the words on her lips. "Orla, what happened to the others?"

"Others? What others?" she asked, perplexed.

"The others, the heretics. Before the Sundering. What happened to them?"

"I ... I don't know what you mean," she said.

But Alfred saw that she did. She had gone extremely pale; her eyes were wide and frightened. Her lips parted, as if she would say something more, but no sound came from them. Turning hurriedly, she almost ran from the garden.

Alfred sat down unhappily on the bench.

He was beginning to be extremely frightened ... of his own people.

The meeting between the Sartan and the mensch was arranged by the dolphins, who, as Alake had said, loved to feel important. What with swimming back and forth from one group to another, suggesting times, changing times, confirming times, discussing where and how and with whom, the dolphins were quite busy and did not think to mention their suspicions concerning Haplo and the dragon-snakes.

Or perhaps, in the excitement of the occasion, the dolphins simply forgot all about the Patryn. As Grundle said, what do you expect from the mind of a fish?

Haplo was on guard, always present when the dolphins were around, careful to request that the dolphins speak one of the mensch languages so that he knew what was being said.

It was a needless precaution.

The royal heads of household had far more urgent worries, didn't have time to listen to idle gossip. The mensch were currently arguing over where to hold the meeting with the Sartan: on Sartan ground, as the Sartan wanted, or to insist that the Sartan sail out and meet the representatives of the three races midway.

Dumaka, who had already decided he didn't like these Sartan, was in favor of forcing them to come to him.

Eliason said it would be more polite for them to go to the Sartan. "We're the ones coming as beggars."

Yngvar grumbled that he didn't care where the meeting was held as long as it was on dry land. He was sick and tired of living in a damn boat.

Haplo sat quietly nearby, watching, listening, saying nothing. He would let them argue, get it out of their systems, and then he would step in and tell them what to do.

As it turned out, the Sartan insisted that the meeting be held on Surunan or there would be no meeting.

Haplo smiled quietly. Out in a ship, in the magic-nullifying waters of the Goodsea, the Sartan would be completely at the mercy of the mensch ... or anyone the mensch happened to have with them.

But it was early days for thinking of that. The mensch were in no mood to fight. Not yet.

"Meet the Sartan on Surunan," Haplo advised. "They want to try to impress you with their strength. It won't hurt if you allow them to think they've succeeded."

"Impress ME!" Delu repeated in disdain.

The dolphins sped back with the mensch agreement, returned to say that the Sartan had invited the royal representatives to come early the next morning. They were to appear before the Sartan Council, present their requests in person to that august body.

The royal representatives agreed.

Haplo returned to his berth. He had never, in his life, experienced such excitement. He needed quiet, solitude, to calm his racing heart, burning blood.

If all his plans worked out, and he could see—at this point—no reason why they shouldn't, he would return to the Nexus in triumph, with the great Samah as prisoner. This victory would vindicate him, pay for his mistakes. Once again, he would be held in high esteem by his lord, the man he loved and revered above all others.

And, while he was at it, Haplo intended to get his dog back, too.

## CHAPTER » 27

### SURUNAN CHELESTRA

ALFRED KNEW QUITE WELL WHY HE'D BEEN INVITED TO ATTEND THE meeting between the mensch and the Sartan Council members, a meeting to which, under normal circumstances, he would have never been asked. Samah knew that Haplo would be accompanying the mensch. The Councillor would be watching Alfred carefully, closely, in an attempt to catch some sort of communication between them.

Had Alfred and Haplo met under normal circumstances, Alfred would have had no cause to worry. Haplo would have disdained to acknowledge Alfred's presence at all, much less speak to him. But now Alfred had the dog. How he had managed to end up with the dog, how Haplo had managed to lose the dog, were questions beyond the Sartan's ability to answer.

Alfred had the feeling that once Haplo saw the dog, he would demand the dog back. Samah would most likely get what he wanted tonight—evidence that Alfred was in collusion with a Patryn. And there wasn't anything Alfred could do to stop it.

He considered not attending the meeting, considered hiding himself somewhere in the city. He considered, wildly, fleeing back through Death's Gate. He was forced to reject all these ideas for a variety of reasons—the main one being that Ramu attached himself to Alfred, stayed with him everywhere he went.

Ramu marched Alfred and the dog to the Council hall, led them both into the Council chambers. The other Council members were present, already seated. They glanced at Alfred, looked severe, and averted their

gazes. Ramu indicated a chair, requested that Alfred be seated, then stood directly behind him. The dog curled up at the Sartan's feet.

Alfred attempted to catch Orla's eye, but failed. She was quiet, composed, as cold as the marble table on which she rested her hands. She, like the others, refused to look at him directly. Samah, however, more than made up for his colleagues.

Alfred glanced in the Councillor's direction and was disconcerted to find Samah's stern eyes glaring straight at him. Alfred tried not looking at the Councillor, but that was worse, for he could feel the eyes, if he could not see them, and their hard, suspicious glare made him shrivel up inside.

Absorbed in his own vague terrors, yet having no idea what he feared, Alfred wasn't aware of the mensch's arrival until he heard those Council members around him start to mutter and whisper.

The mensch walked into the Council Chamber. Heads held high, they walked proudly, tried not to look awed and daunted at the marvelous sights they'd seen on their way.

The Council members weren't paying all that muttering attention to the mensch, however. Their eyes were fixed on one figure, on the blue-tattooed skin of the Patryn, who entered last and who kept back behind the mensch, retreating to a shadowy corner of the large room.

Haplo knew they were watching him. He smiled quietly, folded his arms across his chest, leaned back comfortably against the wall. His eyes flicked over the Council members, rested briefly on Samah, then their gaze came to rest on one person.

Blood rushed to Alfred's face. He could feel the heat, hear it beating in his ears, wondered miserably that it wasn't gushing out his nose.

Haplo's smile tightened. He glanced from Alfred to the dog slumbering quietly beneath the table, unaware that it's master had entered. The Patryn's eyes came back to Alfred.

Not yet, Haplo said to him silently. I won't do anything yet. But just wait.

Alfred groaned inwardly, his arms and legs curled up like those of a dead spider. Now everyone in the room was staring at him: Samah. Orla. Ramu. All the other Council members. He saw scorn, contempt, in every gaze except Orla's. But in hers, he saw pity. If Death's Gate had been anywhere nearby, he would have hurled himself into it without a second thought.

He paid no attention to the proceedings. He had the vague impression that the mensch said some polite words, introduced themselves. Samah rose to his feet, was responding, introduced the Council members (not using their true Sartan names, but giving the mensch equivalent).

"If you do not mind," Samah added, "I will speak the human language. I find it the language best suited to conduct such business as this. I will, of course, provide translations for the elves and dwarves—"

"There is no need for that," said the elf king, speaking flawless human. "We all understand each other's languages."

"Indeed?" Samah murmured, lifting an eyebrow.

By this time, Alfred had calmed himself enough to study the mensch, listen to what they were saying. He liked what he saw and heard. The two dwarves—husband and wife—had the fierce pride and dignity of the best of their race. The humans—again husband and wife—had the quick movements and quicker tongues of their people, but these were tempered by intelligence and common sense. The elf was alone and looked pale and sorrowful—recently bereaved, Alfred guessed, noting the man's white clothing. The elven king had

the wisdom of his years, and he had, in addition, the wisdom his people had accumulated over the years—a wisdom Alfred had not seen in many of the elves of other worlds.

And the three disparate races were unified! This was not a hastily arranged alliance, made for the sake of the moment, but a unity that had obviously lasted a long, long time. One that had been carefully nurtured until it had taken root and was now strong and unbending. Alfred was very favorably impressed, and he could only suppose that Samah and the rest of the Sartan must be impressed as well.

The Council members, who had risen to be introduced, returned to their chairs.

"Please, be seated," Samah said to the mensch, with a gracious wave of his hand.

The mensch glanced around. There were no chairs.

"Is this some type of joke?" Dumaka demanded, scowling. "Or are we to sit on the cold stone floor?"

"What do you— Ah, an oversight. I apologize," Samah said, apparently just now realizing his mistake.

The Councillor sang several runes. Chairs made of solid gold sprang into existence, one directly behind each mensch. The dwarf, feeling something suddenly touching his backside, jumped in alarm. Turning, seeing the chair where no chair had been before, he sucked in a deep breath, let it out in a curse.

The humans were momentarily stunned. The elf alone remained calm, unperturbed. Coolly, Eliason took a seat in the chair. Folding his hands in his lap, he drew his legs off the floor, as was the elven custom.

Delu sat down with graceful dignity, yanked her glowering husband down into his chair. Dumaka's fist was clenched, the veins stood out sharply beneath his glistening skin.

Yngvar gave the chair a dark glance, the Sartan an even darker one.

"I will stand," said the dwarf.

"As you please." Samah was about to continue speaking, when the elf interrupted.

"What about a chair for Haplo? Our friend?"

Eliason made a graceful gesture, nodded at the Patryn, who was still standing.

"You refer to this man as 'friend,' do you?" Samah asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

The mensch heard the danger, failed to understand.

"Yes, certainly, he is our friend," Delu replied. "That is," she amended, with a warm glance at Haplo, "we would be honored if he considered himself as such."

" 'Savior' is what my people call him," said Eliason quietly.

Samah's eyes narrowed. He leaned forward slightly, hands folded on the table before him. "What do you know about this man? Nothing, I'll wager. Do you know, for instance, that he and his people have long been our most bitter enemies?"

"We were all once bitter enemies," said Yngvar. "Dwarves, humans, elves. We made peace. Perhaps you should do the same."

"We could help negotiate, if you like," Eliason offered, obviously in earnest.

The unexpected response took Samah by surprise, left him momentarily at a loss for words. Alfred fought a sudden wild impulse to applaud. Haplo, standing in the corner, smiled quietly.

Samah recovered himself. "Thank you for the offer, but the differences that divide his people and ourselves are beyond your comprehension. Heed my warning. This man is a danger to you. He and his people want only one thing and that is complete rule over you and your world. He will stop at nothing to attain his goal: tricks, deceptions, treachery, lies. He will appear to be your friend but, in the end, he will prove to be your deadliest enemy."

Dumaka bounded to his feet in anger. Eliason forestalled him, the elf's smooth words soothing the human's anger like oil over rough seas.

"This man, at the risk of his own life, saved the lives of our children. He negotiated a peaceful settlement between our people and the dragon-snakes. He was in large part responsible for bringing us here safely to a realm where we hope we can establish our homes. Are these the acts of an enemy?"

"These are the tricks of an enemy," Samah replied coldly. "However, I will not argue with you. I see he has completely deluded you."

It seemed the mensch would have spoken. The Councillor raised his hand imperiously for silence, continued on.

"You have come requesting that we share our realm with you. We grant your request. Your people will be allowed to move onto those portions of Surunan designated for your habitation. We will establish a government for you, provide laws for you to follow. We will work with you to help improve your economic situation. We will educate you and your children. All this and more we will do for you, provided that you do something for us in return."

Samah glanced pointedly at Haplo. "You will rid yourselves of this man. Order him to leave. If he is your 'friend,' as you claim, he will understand that we have only your best interests at heart and he will be happy to comply."

The mensch stared at the Councillor, so shocked that for long moments they could not speak.

"Best interests!" Dumaka managed at last to find words for his astonishment. "What do you mean—best interests?"

"Government over us? Laws for us?" Yngvar thumped himself on the chest. "Dwarves govern dwarves, no one else makes decisions for us—not humans, not elves, not you!"

"No matter how many golden chairs you can pull out of the air!" Hilda sniffed.

"We humans choose our own friends. And we choose our enemies!" Delu cried passionately.

"Peace, friends," said Eliason mildly. "Peace. We agreed I was to speak?"

"Go ahead, then," Dumaka growled, resuming his seat.

The elven king rose to his feet, took a step forward, made a graceful bow.

"We seem to be laboring under a misunderstanding. We came to ask you and your people if you would be kind enough to share your realm with our peoples. Surunan is certainly large enough for all. Looking around, as we sailed in, we could see that much of this precious land is now going to waste.

"We will develop the land, make Surunan prosperous. We will provide you with many goods and services you undoubtedly now lack. We will, of course, be more than pleased to include your people in our alliance. You will have an equal vote—"

"Equal!" Samah's astonishment was boundless. "We are not your equals! In intelligence, magical power, wisdom, we are far superior. I make allowances," he said, pausing to regain his composure, "because you do not know us as yet—"

"We know enough." Dumaka was again on his feet, Delu standing at his side. "We came in peace, offering to share this realm with you in peace, in equal partnership. Do you accept our offer or not?"

"Partnership! With mensch!" Samah's hand struck the marble table. "There will be no equal partnership. Take yourselves back to your boats and find another realm where you can all be 'equal.'"

"You know very well that there is no other realm," said Eliason gravely. "Our request is reasonable. There is no reason why you should not grant it. We do not seek to take over your land, only use that portion of it that you are not using."

"We consider such demands unreasonable. We are not just 'using' this world. We created it! Your ancestors worshiped us as gods!"

The mensch stared at Samah, incredulous.

"If you will excuse us, we will take our leave," said Delu, with dignity.

"We worship one god," Yngvar stated. "The One who created this world. The One who guides the waves."

The One who guides the waves. Alfred, who had been hunched miserably in his chair, angry, frustrated, longing to intervene but fearing only to make matters worse, sat suddenly bolt upright. A jolt surged through his body. The One who guides the waves, Where had he heard that before? What other voice had spoken it?

Or something like it. For that wasn't quite right.

The One who guides the waves.

I am in a room, seated at a table, surrounded by my brothers and sisters. White light shines down upon us, peace and serenity envelop me. I have the answer! I have found it, after all these years of fruitless searching. I know it now, and so do all the others. Haplo and I ...

Alfred's gaze went irresistibly to Haplo. Had he heard? Did he remember?

Yes! Alfred saw it in Haplo's face—in the eyes, dark and suspicious, returning Alfred's stare, in the grimly tightened lips. He saw it in the tattooed arms folded across the chest, barring entry. But Alfred knew the truth. He remembered the Chamber of the Blessed on Abarrach, he remembered the shining light, the table. He remembered the voice, the One . . .

The One who guides the Wave!

"That's it!" Alfred cried, leaping out of his chair. "The One who guides the Wave! Haplo, don't you remember? On Abarrach? In the chamber? The light! The voice that spoke. It was in my heart, but I heard it clearly and so did you. You must remember! You were sitting beside . . ."

Alfred's voice faded. Haplo was gazing at him with bitter hatred and enmity. Yes, I remember, he said silently. I can't forget, no matter how much I want to. I had everything figured out. I knew what I wanted, how

to get it. You destroyed all that. You made me doubt my lord. You made me doubt myself. I'll never forgive you.

At the sound of the beloved name, the dog had wakened. Its tail wagged violently, it stood up on trembling legs, stared at its master.

Haplo whistled, slapped his thigh. "Here, boy," he called.

The dog began to whine. It crept out from beneath the table, started forward, then looked back at Alfred. The dog stopped. Whimpering, it looked back at Haplo. Then it made a complete circle, returned to where it had started, at the feet of the Sartan.

Alfred reached down his hand. "Go on," he urged. "Go to him."

The dog whined again, started for Haplo again, made another circle, came back.

"Dog!" Haplo commanded sharply, angrily.

Alfred was concentrating his attention on the Patryn and the dog, but he was also uncomfortably aware of Samah, who was watching the entire incident. Alfred recalled the words he'd just said to Haplo, realized how they must sound to the Councillor, foresaw more questions, more interrogation, and he sighed heavily.

For the moment, however, none of that was important. What was important was the dog . . . and Haplo.

"Go with him," Alfred pleaded, gave the dog a gentle push on its hind end.

The animal refused to budge.

Haplo cast Alfred a look that would have been a blow, had he been close enough. Turning on his heel, the Patryn stalked out the door.

"Wait, Haplo!" Alfred cried. "You can't leave him! And you. You can't let him go," he said to the dog.

But the animal wouldn't move and Haplo didn't stop walking.

"They must be brought back together!" Alfred said to himself, fondling the grieving animal. "And it must be soon. He remembers the dog now and he wants it back—a good sign. If Haplo should ever completely forget ..."

Alfred sighed, shook his head gloomily.

The humans started to walk out after Haplo.

Samah glared at the mensch. "If you leave now, if you follow after your 'friend,' you will never be allowed back."

Eliason said something to the others, speaking in low tones. Dumaka shouted "No!" angrily, but his wife rested a restraining hand on his arm. "I don't like it," Yngvar was heard to mutter. "We have no choice," his wife replied. Eliason cast them all one last, questioning glance. Dumaka turned away. Delu nodded mutely.

Eliason turned back to the Sartan. "We accept your offer. We accept all your terms, with one exception. We will not ask this man, our friend, to leave us."

Samah raised an eyebrow. "Then in that case, we are at an impasse. For we will not allow you to set foot upon this land so long as you harbor a Patryn among you."

"You can't mean that!" cried Alfred, shocked into speaking. "They've agreed to the rest of your demands—"

Samah glanced at him coldly. "You are not part of the Council, Brother. I thank you not to interfere with Council business."

Alfred went pale, gnawed his lower lip, but kept silent.

"And where would you have our people go?" Dumaka demanded.

"Ask your friends," Samah answered. "The Patryn and the dragon-snakes."

"You sentence us to death," Eliason said quietly. "And perhaps you sentence yourselves. We came to you in peace and in friendship. We made what we considered a reasonable request. In turn, we have been humiliated, patronized, treated like children. Our people are peaceful. I did not believe, before this, that I would ever advocate the use of force. But now—"

"Ah, at last the truth is told." Samah was cool, haughty. "Come, come. This is what you intended all along, wasn't it? You and the Patryn have this all planned—war. You want to destroy us. Very well. Go to war against us. If you are fortunate, you might live to regret it."

The Councillor spoke the runes. Sigla, blazing red and yellow, sizzled in the air, burst above the startled mensch with the ferocity of a thunderclap. Heat burned their skin, dazzling light blinded them, shock waves knocked them to the floor.

The magical spell ended abruptly. Silence fell over the Council Chamber. Dazed and shaken by this exhibition of magical power—a power beyond their comprehension—the mensch looked around for the Councillor.

Samah had disappeared.

Frightened and angry, the mensch picked themselves up and stalked out.

"He doesn't mean it, does he?" Alfred turned to Orla. "He can't possibly be serious—going to war against those weaker than ourselves, those we were meant to protect? Never has such a vile thing happened. Never in our history. He can't mean it!"

Orla refused to meet his eyes, acted as if she hadn't heard him. She gave the departing mensch a fleeting glance, then left the Council Chamber without answering Alfred.

He didn't need an answer. He knew it already. He'd seen the expression on Samah's face, when the Councillor worked his terrifying magic.

Alfred recognized that expression. He'd felt it on his own face countless times, had seen it reflected in the mirror of his own soul.

Fear.

CHAPTER » 28

NEAR DRAKNOR CHELESTRA

"OUR PARENTS ARE BACK." GRUNDLE [1] CREPT AS SILENTLY AS A dwarf possibly could into the small cabin Alake shared with her parents. "And they don't look happy."

Alake sighed.

"We have to find out how the meeting went," said Devon. "Will they come here, do you think?"

"No, they're in Eliason's cabin, right next door. Listen." Grundle cocked her head. "You can hear them."

The three leaned near the wall. Muffled voices could be heard, but they were low and their words indistinguishable.

Grundle pointed to a small knothole.

Alake understood her meaning, placed her hand on the knothole, and began to run her fingers round and round the edge, whispering. The hole gradually, imperceptibly, grew larger. Alake peered through it, turned to her companions, motioned them near.

"We're in luck. One of Mother's feathered staves is standing right in front of it."

The three gathered close, ears to the wall.

"I have never seen magic like that." Delu's voice was heavy with defeat. "How can we fight against such awesome power?"

"We won't know until we try," stated her husband. "And I am for trying. I would not speak to a dog the way they spoke to us."

"Ours is a terrible choice," said Eliason. "The land is theirs, by right. It is the right of these Sartan to refuse us permission to move into their realm. But, by so doing, they doom our people to death! And it does not seem to me that they should have the right to do that. I do not want to fight them, neither can I watch my people die."

"You, Yngvar," Haplo said. "What do you think?"

The dwarf was silent a long time. Grundle, standing on tiptoe, put her eye to the knothole. Her father's craggy face was stern. He shook his head.

"My people are brave. We would fight any human or elf or whatever these call themselves"—he waved a disparaging hand in the general direction of the Sartan—"if they fought fairly, using ax and sword and bow. My people are not cowards."

Yngvar glowered around, daring someone to accuse him of such a thing. Then he sighed. "But against magic such as we saw today? ... I don't know. I don't know."

"You don't have to fight their magic," said Haplo.

They stared at him.

"I have a plan. There's a way. I wouldn't have brought you here otherwise."

"You . . . knew about this?" Dumaka asked, frowning with suspicion. "How?"

"I told you. My people and theirs are . . . similar." He pointed to the sigla, tattooed on his skin. "This is my magic. If it gets wet with seawater, my magic fails. I'm helpless. More helpless than any of you. Ask your daughter, Yngvar. She saw me. She knows. And the same thing happens to the Sartan."

"What are we supposed to do?" Grundle whispered gruffly. "Invade the city with a bucket brigade?"

Devon pinched her. "Shush!"

But their elders looked almost as perplexed.

"It's simple. We flood the city with seawater," Haplo explained.

All stared at him, silently digesting this strange notion. It sounded far too easy. There must be something wrong. Each mulled it over in his or her mind. Then, slowly, hope began to kindle fire in eyes that had been dark with gloom.

"The water doesn't hurt them?" Eliason asked anxiously.

"No more than it hurts me," said Haplo. "The water makes us all equal. And no blood is shed."

"It does seem that this is the answer," said Delu hesitantly.

"But all the Sartan have to do is keep from getting wet," Hilda inserted. "Beings as powerful as these can surely manage that."

"The Sartan may avoid the rising water for a time. They could all fly to the rooftops, roost like chickens. But they can't stay up there forever. The water will rise higher and higher. Sooner or later, it must engulf them. And when it does, they will be helpless. You can sail your submersibles into Surunan, take over, never swing an ax, never shoot an arrow."

"But we can't live in a world full of water," Yngvar protested. "When it drains off, the Sartan's magic will come back, won't it?"

"Yes, but by that time, there will be a change of leadership among the Sartan. He doesn't know it yet, but the Councillor you met today is going to be taking a trip." Haplo smiled quietly. "I think you'll find it far easier to negotiate when he's gone. Especially if all you have to do is remind the Sartan that you have the power to bring the seawater back anytime you choose."

"And will we?" Delu was dazed. "Will we have the power?"

"Of course. You simply ask the dragon-snakes. No, no, wait! Hear me out. The dragon-snakes bore holes into the rock foundation. Water flows in, rises, 'dampens' the spirits of the Sartan, and, when they surrender, the dragon-snakes cause the water to recede. The dragon-snakes can use their magic to erect gates at the bore holes, to keep the water out. Any time you ask them, the dragon-snakes can reopen the gates, do it all over again, if necessary. As I said, I don't think it will be."

Grundle pondered, examined the idea from all angles, as she knew her father and mother were doing, searching for a flaw. She could find none and, apparently, neither could those listening to Haplo in more conventional fashion.

"I'll talk to the dragon-snakes, explain the plan to them," Haplo was offering. "I'll go to Draknor, if I can use one of your boats. I won't bring the serpents on board your ship again," he added hastily, seeing faces pale at the thought.

Alake was radiant.

"It's a splendid plan! No one will get hurt. And you thought he was in league with the dragon-snakes." She glared at Grundle.

"Shhh," said the dwarf maid irritably, and pinched Alake.

Humans, elves, dwarves, looked relieved, spoke hopefully.

"We will make it up to the Sartan," Eliason said. "They don't know us yet, that's the problem. When they see that all we want is to live peaceful, productive lives and not bother them in the least, they will be happy to let us stay."

"Without their laws and without their godhood," Dumaka stated grimly.

The others agreed. The talk reverted to plans of moving onto Surunan, of who would live where and how. Grundle had heard all this before; the rulers had discussed little else during the entire voyage.

"Shut that thing," she said. "I've got a plan of my own."

Alake shut the knothole. She and Devon looked at the dwarf expectantly.

"This is our chance," said Grundle.

"Chance for what?" Devon asked.

"Chance to find out what's really going on," the dwarf said in a low voice, with a meaningful glance at her companions.

"You mean . . ." Alake couldn't finish.

"We follow Haplo," said Grundle. "We'll find out the truth about him. He might be in danger," she added hastily, seeing Alake's dark eyes glitter in anger. "Remember?"

"That's the only reason I'll condone this," Alake said in lofty tones. "The only reason I'll go."

"Speaking of danger," Devon said somberly. "What about the dragon-snakes? We couldn't even get close to the bridge the time the dragon-snake came on board. When Haplo first confronted them. Remember?"

"You're right," Grundle admitted, subdued. "We were all of us scared silly. I couldn't move. I thought you were going to faint."

"And that dragon-snake wasn't even real," Alake pointed out. "Just a ... a reflection or some such thing."

"If we do get close, our teeth will be chattering so loudly we won't be able to hear what they're saying."

"At least we'll be able to defend ourselves," Devon said. "I'm a fair shot with my bow—"

Grundle snorted. "Arrows, even magic ones, won't have any effect on those monsters. Right, Alake?"

"What? I'm sorry, I was thinking. You mentioned magic. I've been working on my spells. I've learned three new defensive ones. I can't tell you about them, because they're secret, but they worked beautifully against my teacher."

"Yeah, I saw him. Has his hair grown back yet?"

"How dare you spy on me, you little beast!"

"I wasn't. As if I cared! I happened to be passing by, when I heard a sound and smelled smoke. I thought the ship was on fire and so I looked through a keyhole—"

"There! You've admitted it—"

"The dragon-snakes," inserted Devon with elven diplomacy. "And Haplo. They're what's important. Remember?"

"I remember! And a fat lot of good magic arrows or magic fire or magic anything's going to do us if we can't get close to the blasted creatures anyway."

"She's got a point, I'm afraid." Devon sighed.

"And Alake's got an idea," said Grundle, eyeing her friend closely. "Haven't you?"

"Maybe. It's something we shouldn't do. We could get into real trouble."

"Yes, so?" Grundle and Devon brushed aside such mundane considerations.

Alake glanced around, although there was no one in the small cabin except themselves. Motioning her friends near, she leaned in toward them.

"I've heard my father tell that in the old days, when one tribe fought another, some of the warriors chewed an herb that took away fear. My father never used it. He said that fear was a warrior's best weapon in a fight, it sharpens his instincts—"

"Pah! If your insides feel like they're going to be your out-sides any minute, it doesn't matter how sharp your instincts are—"

"Hush, Grundle!" Devon squeezed the dwarf's hand. "Let Alake finish."

"I was about to say, before I was interrupted"—Alake glanced sternly at Grundle—"that in this case we really don't need to have particularly sharp instincts because we don't intend to fight anything. We just want to sneak up on the dragon-snakes, listen to what they talk about, and then sneak away. This herb would help take away our fear of them."

"Is it magic?" Grundle asked suspiciously.

"No. Just a plant. Like lettuce. Its properties are inherent. All you have to do is chew it."

The three looked at each other.

"What do you think?"

"Sounds good to me."

"Alake, can you get hold of it?"

"Yes, the herbalist brought some along with her. She thought some of the warriors might want it if we went to war."

"All right, then. Alake gets the herb for us. What's it called?"

"No-fear weed."

"Weed?" Grundle frowned. "I don't think—"

Voices out in the passageway interrupted them. The meeting was breaking up.

"When will you leave, Haplo?" Dumaka's deep tones carried clearly through the closed door.

"Tonight."

The three companions exchanged glances.

"Can you get the weed by then?" Devon whispered.

Alake nodded.

"Good, then. It's all settled. We go." Grundle held out her hand.

Devon placed his hand over the dwarf's. Alake grasped both.

"We go," each said firmly.

Haplo spent the remainder of the day ostensibly learning how to operate one of the small, two-person submersibles, used by humans and elves for fishing. He studied the operation of the dwarven boat carefully, asked questions—far more than would have been needed simply to sail the vessel the short distance to Draknor. He went over every inch of the craft, rousing the suspicions of dwarves by his intense interest.

But the Patryn was profuse in his praise of dwarven carpentry and navigation skills, and, eventually, the captain and crew were looking for things, to impress him.

"This will serve my purpose well," said Haplo, glancing around the submersible in satisfaction.

"Of course," growled the dwarf. "Yer only taking her far as Draknor. You ain't plannin' to circumnavigate the bleedin' world."

Haplo smiled quietly. "You're right, friend. I'm not planning to circumnavigate the world."

He was planning to leave it. Just as soon as the dragon-snakes flooded Surunan, which he hoped would be tomorrow. He'd capture Samah. This ship would carry him—and his prisoner—through Death's Gate.

"I'll put the runes of protection on the inside of the vessel, instead of the outside," he said to himself, once he was alone, back in his cabin. "That should solve the problem of the seawater."

"And that reminds me. I'll need to take back a sample of the water to my lord, have it analyzed, determine if there isn't some way to nullify its debilitating effects against us. And perhaps he can discover how this strange water came into existence. I doubt if the Sartan created it. . . ."

Haplo heard a thump in the corridor outside his cabin.

"Grundle," he guessed, shaking his head.

He'd spotted the mensch trailing behind him all day. Her heavy tread, heavier boots, and her huffing and snorting would have alerted a blind and deaf man to her presence. The Patryn wondered vaguely what mischief she was up to now, but gave the matter little thought. One nagging concern continued to prey on his mind, drove all else out.

The dog. Once his dog. Now, apparently, Alfred's.

Haplo took from his belt two daggers, given to him by Dumaka, and laid them on the bed, examined them carefully. Good weapons, well-made. He called on his magic. The sigla on his skin glowed blue, flared red. Haplo spoke the runes, placed his finger on the flat of the knife's blade. The steel hissed and bubbled, smoke drifted upward in a thin line. Runes of death began to form on the blade, beneath Haplo's tracing finger.

"Let the damn dog do what it wants." Haplo took extreme care drawing the runes on which his life might depend, yet he'd done this so many times he could allow his mind to turn to other matters. "I lived for a long

time without the animal and I can do it again. The dog came in handy, admittedly, but I don't need it. I don't want it back. Not now. Not after it's been living with a Sartan."

Haplo completed his work on one side of the dagger. He sat back, studied it carefully, searching for the tiniest flaw, the smallest break in the intricate pattern. There wouldn't be any, of course. He was good at what he did.

Good at killing, cheating, lying. He was even good at lying to himself. Or at least he'd been good once. He used to actually believe his own lies. Why couldn't he believe them anymore?

"Because you're weak." He sneered at himself. "That's what my lord would say. And he'd be right. Caring about a dog. Caring about mensch. Caring about a woman who left me long ago. Caring about a child of mine who might be stranded back there in the Labyrinth. A child alone. And I don't have the courage to go back and search for it ... for her!"

A mistake. A broken, incomplete sigil. None of the rest would work now. Haplo swore savagely, bitterly, swept the daggers off the bed.

The brave Patryn, risking his life to enter Death's Gate, risking his life to explore new, uncharted worlds.

Because I'm afraid to go back to one world I do know. That's the real reason I was ready to give up and die that long time ago in the Labyrinth. [2] I couldn't take the loneliness. I couldn't take the fear.

And then, he'd found the dog.

And now, the dog was gone.

Alfred. It was all Alfred's doing. Damn him to hell and back again.

A loud drumming, which sounded suspiciously like the heels of heavy boots beating against a wooden deck, came from outside Haplo's cabin. Grundle must be getting bored.

The Patryn stared grimly at the daggers lying on the deck. Work botched; He was losing control.

Let Alfred have the damn dog. He was welcome to it.

Haplo picked up the daggers, carefully began his work over again, this time giving it his full and undivided attention. At last, he etched the final sigil onto the dagger's blade. Sitting back, he studied the dagger. This time, all was correct. He started to work on the next.

Task complete, he wrapped the two rune-enhanced daggers safely and securely in what the dwarves called oilcloth. The cloth was completely waterproof; Haplo knew, he'd tested it. The oilcloth would protect the daggers, keep them from losing their magic, just in case something happened and he lost his.

Not that he was expecting trouble, but it never hurt to be prepared. To be honest—and he supposed bitterly that this must be his day for honesty—he didn't trust the dragon-snakes, though logic told him he had no reason not to. Perhaps his instincts knew something his brain didn't. He'd learned, in the Labyrinth, to trust his instincts.

Haplo walked to the door, flung it open.

Grundle tumbled inside, falling flat on her face. Nonplussed, she picked herself up, dusted herself off, then glared at Haplo.

"Shouldn't you be going?" she demanded.

"Just now," he said, with his quiet smile.

He thrust the oilskin pouch into the belt around his waist, hiding it beneath the folds of his shirt.

"About time," Grundle snorted, and stomped off.

That afternoon, Alake went to the herbalist, complaining of a sore throat and cough. While the herbalist was preparing an infusion of chamomile and peppermint and droning on about how terrible it was that most young people didn't seem to have any respect these days for the old ways and how nice it was that Alake was different, Alake managed to pluck several leaves of the no-fear weed the herbalist had growing in a small tub.

Clutching the leaves in one hand, keeping that hand hidden behind her back, Alake accepted the tea, listened carefully to instructions that the brew was to be drunk without delay, the dose repeated again before bedtime.

She promised she would, as well as she could speak considering her bad cough. On leaving, she added the no-fear weed leaves to the tea mixture, returned hastily to her room.

That night, Devon and Grundle met in Alake's quarters.

"He's gone," Grundle reported. "I watched him board the submersible. He's a strange one. I heard him inside his cabin, talking to himself. I couldn't understand much, but he sounded upset. You know, I don't think he's coming back."

Alake scoffed. "Don't be silly. Of course he's coming back. Where else would he go?"

"Maybe back to wherever he lives."

"That's nonsense. He promised to help our people. He wouldn't leave us now."

"What makes you think so, Grundle?" Devon asked.

"I don't know," the dwarf replied, unusually solemn and thoughtful. "Something about the way he looked . . ." She sighed gloomily.

"We'll find out, soon enough," Devon predicted. "Did you get the herbs?"

Alake nodded, handed each a leaf of the no-fear weed. Grundle stared at the gray-green leaf in disgust, sniffed at it, sneezed. Holding her nose, she popped it into her mouth, chewed it rapidly, and gulped it down.

Devon licked the leaf delicately with the tip of his tongue and nibbled at it.

"You look like a rabbit!" Grundle laughed nervously.

Alake, solemn and serious, placed her leaf in her mouth with a reverent air. Closing her eyes, she said a silent prayer before she chewed and swallowed it.

Then all three sat and stared at each other, waiting for their fear to go away.

CHAPTER 4 29

DRAKNOR CHELESTRA

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YER TAKING THAT THERE BOAT?"

The dwarven deckhand had popped up out of nowhere seemingly, was glowering at the three young people.

"You are speaking to a royal chieftain's daughter, sir," said Alake, drawing herself up imperiously. "And to the daughter of your king."

"That's right," said Grundle, marching forward.

The deckhand, abashed, snatched the shapeless hat off his head and bobbed from the waist. "Pardon, missy. But my orders are to watch over these here boats. No one takes one without the Vater's permission."

"I know that," Grundle snapped. "And we've got my father's permission. Show him, Alake."

"What?" Alake jumped, stared at her.

"Show him the permission letter from my father." Grundle winked, glanced significantly at the pouch that hung from a braided belt encircling the human's waist.

The top edges of several small, tightly rolled parchments were barely visible, peeping out over the edge.

Alake flushed, her eyes narrowed. "These are my spells!" she mouthed angrily. "I'm not showing them to anyone."

"Women," said Devon hurriedly, taking hold of the deckhand's arm and drawing him away. "They never know what they have in their pouches."

"It's all right," Grundle shot back. "You can show him. He can't read!"

Alake glared at her.

"Come on! We don't have much time! Haplo's probably left by now."

Alake sighed. Reaching into her pouch, she drew forth one of the parchments.

"Will this do?" she asked, unrolling it, thrusting it beneath the deckhand's nose, snapping it back up again before he could do more than blink.

"I ... I guess so." The dwarf ruminated. "Just to be on the safe side, I think I'll go ask the Vater himself. You don't mind waiting, do you?"

"No, go ahead. Take your time." Grundle was gracious.

The deckhand departed. The moment his back was turned, the three climbed through a hatch in the hull and from there into the small submersible, which hung onto the side of the mothership rather like a young dolphin clinging to its parent. Grundle shut both hatches—the one on the hull and the one in the submersible, and detached the vessel from the sun-chaser.

"Are you sure you know how to operate this thing?" Alake had as much use for mechanical devices as Grundle had for magic.

"Sure," Grundle said promptly. "I've been practicing. I thought, if we ever got a chance to spy on the dragon-snakes, we'd need a boat to do it."

"Very clever," Alake conceded magnanimously.

The water around Draknor, unlike the rest of the Goodsea, was dark and murky.

"Like swimming through blood," Devon remarked, peering out the porthole in search of Haplo's small vessel.

The two girls agreed complacently. The no-fear weed had lived up to its reputation.

"What's he doing?" Alake wondered uneasily. "He's been inside his ship the longest time."

"I told you," Grundle said. "He's not coming back. He's probably fixing it up to live in for a while—"

"There he is," Devon cried, pointing.

Haplo's submersible was easily recognized: it belonged to Yngvar and was therefore marked with the royal crest.

Assuming that Haplo knew where he was going, which they did not (none of them having been taught the mysteries of navigating the Goodsea ), the mensch tagged along behind.

"Maybe he'll see us. Grundle, keep back," Alake said worriedly.

"Pooh. In this muck, he can't see us. Not even if we were on his—"

"—tail," said Devon hurriedly.

Grundle was steering. Alake and Devon stood behind her, peering eagerly over her shoulder. The no-fear weed was working quite effectively. They were agreeably tense and excited but not afraid. Suddenly, however, Grundle turned around to her friends with a stricken look.

"I just thought of something!"

"Watch where you're going!"

"Do you remember the last time we saw the dragon-snake? It talked with Haplo. Remember?"

Both nodded.

"And it spoke his language. We couldn't understand a word! How can we find out what they're saying when we don't know what they're saying?"

"Oh, dear," said Alake, looking downcast. "I hadn't thought of that."

"So what do we do?" Grundle asked, deflated, her excitement for the adventure gone. "Go back to the sun-chaser?"

"No," said Devon decisively. "Even if we can't understand what they're saying, we can use our eyes and maybe we'll learn something that way. Besides, Haplo might be in danger. He might need our help."

"And my side whiskers might grow until they touch my feet!" Grundle retorted.

"Well, what do you want to do?" Devon asked.

Grundle looked at her friend. "Alake?"

"I agree with Devon. I say we go on."

"I guess we go on," said Grundle, shrugging. Then she cheered up. "Who knows? We might find some more of those jewels."

Haplo sailed the submersible slowly toward Draknor, taking his time, trying to avoid running aground again. The water was dark and foul-looking. He could barely see through it, had no idea where he was or which direction he was headed. He was letting the dragon-snakes guide him, letting them draw him toward them.

The sigla on his skin glowed bright blue. It took enormous force of will for him to steer the ship closer to Draknor's shore, when every instinct screamed for him to turn around and sail away.

The submersible surfaced, bobbed up out of the water, with a suddenness that startled him. A large stretch of beach was visible, white sand glowing in the darkness with an eerie, ghostly light that emanated from some unknown source, perhaps the crushed and crumbled rock itself.

No welcoming fire burned this time. Either he was unexpected, which Haplo couldn't believe, or he was unwelcome. He adjusted the oilskin pouch, felt it press heavy and reassuring against his skin.

Beaching the vessel, Haplo jumped from the deck to the shore, being careful to avoid getting his feet wet. He landed safely on the white sand, took a moment to get his bearings.

The beach extended several leagues before him. Tall rock formations, their jagged peaks black against the Goodsea, rose up out of the sand.

Odd mountains, Haplo thought, eyeing them with disgust. They reminded him of gnawed and broken bones. He glanced around, wondering where the dragon-snakes were. His gaze glanced across a dark opening in the side of one of the mountains. A cave.

Haplo began to walk across the deserted, barren beach. The sigla on his skin burned like fire.

The three mensch sailed into the cove so close behind Haplo they were practically nose to rudder. Once there, however, they kept their distance.

Peering with difficulty through the dark water, they saw the Patryn beach his ship, watched him jump out, then stop and look around, as if wondering which way to go.

Apparently, he made a decision. He started walking purposefully along the shoreline.

When he was out of earshot, the three guided their small submersible into shore, tied it to a formation of coral that thrust up out of the water like "a finger, warning us away," Grundle said.

The three laughed.

They waded through the shallow water, forced to hurry to keep Haplo in sight.

Tailing him was easy. The Patryn's skin gave off a radiant blue glow.

They crept after him silently.

Or rather, Devon crept after Haplo silently. The elf glided over the sand with graceful ease, treading so lightly his feet never seemed to touch the ground.

Grundle fondly imagined she was emulating Devon, and she did manage to move quietly—for a dwarf. Her thick boots clumped, her breath came in wheezing huffs, and she only spoke when she should have kept quiet half-a-dozen times.

Alake could move nearly as softly as the elf, but she had forgotten, in the excitement of the moment, to take off her ear-jangles and her beads. One of her magic spells required a small silver bell, wrapped in a pouch. Alake slipped once, the bell gave out a small, muffled ring.

The three froze, holding their breaths, certain Haplo must have heard them. The only fear that the no-fear weed had not been able to dispel was the fear that the Patryn would catch them and send them home.

Haplo kept walking. He obviously hadn't heard. The three breathed a sigh of relief and continued on.

That the dragon-snakes might have heard them was a thought that never crossed their minds.

Haplo came to a dead standstill outside the cavern. He'd only experienced terror like this once before, standing with his lord outside the Gate of the Labyrinth. His lord had been able to enter.

Haplo had not.

"Enter, Patryn," hissed a voice from the darkness. "Have no fear. We bow before you."

Sigla flared red and blue on Haplo's skin, its light illuminating the darkness beyond. Comforted more by the sight of the power of his magic than by the serpent's assurance, Haplo walked to the cavern's opening.

Looking in, he saw them.

The light of his runes reflected off the dragon-snakes' shining scales. Their bodies were draped over each other in a hideous, tangled coil, making it impossible to tell where one left off and the other began.

It seemed that most were asleep, for their eyes were closed. Haplo moved silently as a Patryn learns to move in the Labyrinth, but he had barely set foot in the cavern when two of the slit red eyes opened, fixed their red-green gaze upon him.

"Patryn," the king snake said. "Master. You honor us with your presence. Please, come closer."

Haplo did as the serpent requested, the sigla on his skin itching and burning, nearly driving him wild. He scratched the back of his hand. The reptile's giant head loomed over him; its body remained resting comfortably on the back of one of its neighbors.

"How did the meeting go between the mensch and the Sar-tan?" the dragon-snake asked, blinking its eyes lazily.

"As well as you might expect," Haplo said shortly. He intended to explain his plan, give the snakes their orders, then depart. He loathed these creatures. "The Sartan—"

"Pardon me," the serpent interrupted, "but could we speak human? We find that conversing in your language wearies us. Admittedly the human language is crude and awkward, but it does have its moments. If you don't mind. . . ."

Haplo did mind. He didn't like it, wondered what was behind this sudden change. They'd spoken his language well enough the first time they'd met, spoken it at length. He considered refusing, just to assert his own authority, decided that was pointless. What did it matter what language they talked? He didn't want to draw this out any longer than necessary.

"Very well," he said, and continued to explain his plans, speaking the human tongue.

The three mensch watched Haplo enter the cave. His skin was a bright, flaring blue.

"That must be where the snakes live," exclaimed Grundle.

"Hush!" Devon clapped his hand over her mouth.

"We can't go in after him," Alake whispered, worried.

"Maybe there's a back entrance."

The three circled around the side of the mountain. They poked and prodded among huge, fallen boulders. Walking was treacherous. The ground was wet and slick with a dark liquid that oozed out of the rocks. They stumbled and fell, Grundle cursed beneath her breath.

The mountainside was covered with huge gouges. "As if something had taken large bites out of it," Alake said. But none of these gouges led them inside the cavern.

Growing discouraged, they were about to give up when, suddenly, they found exactly what they'd hoped to find.

A small tunnel opened directly into the side of the mountain. The three crept in, examined it. The cave was dry, the way smooth and easy to travel.

"I hear voices!" Grundle said excitedly. "It's Haplo!"

She listened closely, her eyes grew wide. "And I can understand what he's saying. I've learned to speak his language!"

"That's because he's speaking human," said Alake.

Devon hid his smile. "At least now we'll know what they're saying. I wonder if we can get any closer."

"Let's follow this," said Grundle, pointing. "It seems to be heading the right way."

The three entered the tunnel which, by the most remarkable chance, appeared to lead them exactly the direction they wanted to go. They hurried along it eagerly. Haplo's voice became louder and clearer to them each moment, as did the voices of the dragon-snakes. The sides of the tunnel gave off a lovely, phosphorescent glow, lighting their way-

"You know," said Alake, pleased, "it's almost as if this had been constructed exactly for us."

"So this means war," the dragon-snake said.

"Did you have any doubts, Royal One?" Haplo gave a brief laugh.

"Some, I must admit. The Sartan are unpredictable. There are those of their race who are truly selfless, who would welcome the mensch with arms outstretched, would take them into their own dwellings, even though it meant they went without a roof above their heads."

"Samah isn't one of those," said Haplo.

"No, we never supposed he was."

The dragon-snake seemed to smile, though how it was possible for the reptilian face to alter expression was beyond Haplo.

"And when will the mensch attack?" the dragon-snake pursued.

"That's what I came to talk to you about, Royal One. I want to make a suggestion. I know this doesn't go along with the plan we originally discussed, but I think this will work out better. All we have to do—to defeat the Sartan—is flood their city with sea water."

Haplo explained, in much the same terms as he had explained it to the mensch. "The seawater will nullify their magic, leave them easy prey for the mensch. . . ."

"Who can then go in and slaughter them indiscriminately. We approve." The dragon-snake nodded its head lazily.

Several of its neighbors opened their eyes, blinked in sleepy agreement.

"The mensch won't slaughter anyone. I was thinking more in terms of surrender—total and unconditional. And I don't want the Sartan to die. I intend to take Samah and maybe a few more back to my lord for questioning. It would be helpful if they were alive enough to answer," the Patryn concluded wryly.

The slit eyes narrowed dangerously. Haplo tensed, wary.

The serpent sounded almost jocular, however. "And what would the mensch do with the sodden Sartan?"

"By the time the water drains away and the Sartan have dried out, the mensch will have moved onto Surunan. The Sartan will have a tough time evicting several thousand or so humans, elves, and dwarves who have already set up housekeeping. And then, of course, the mensch, with your assistance, Royal One, could always threaten to open the seagates and flood the city again."

"We would be curious to know why you formulated such a plan, in opposition to our own. What did you find wrong with forcing the mensch into open warfare?"

The hissing voice was cold, its tone lethal. Haplo couldn't understand. What was wrong?

"These mensch can't fight," he explained. "They haven't fought a war in who knows how long? Oh, the humans skirmish among themselves, but hardly anyone gets hurt. The Sartan, even without their magic, could inflict serious casualties. I think my way is better, easier. That's all."

The dragon-snake lifted its head slightly, slid its body down off its reptile pillow, and slithered across the cavern floor toward Haplo. He stood his ground, kept his gaze fixed firmly on the slit red eyes. Instinct told him that to give in to his fear, to turn and run, would mean his death. His only chance was to face this out, try to discover whatever it was the serpents were truly after.

The flat, toothless head halted an arm's length from him.

"Since when," asked the dragon-snake, "does a Patryn care how mensch live ... or how they die?"

A shudder went through Haplo, starting at the core of his being, twisting his insides. He opened his mouth, was about to make some reply.

"Wait!" the dragon-snake hissed. "What have we here?"

A form began to coalesce out of the dank cavern air. It shimmered and shifted, faded in, faded out again, wavering either in its magic or in its decision or perhaps some of both.

The dragon-snake watched with interest, though Haplo noted it slid back, moved nearer the knot of its fellows.

The Patryn saw enough of the wavering figure to know who it was—the one person he didn't need. What the devil was he doing here? Perhaps it's a trick. Perhaps Samah sent him.

Alfred stepped out of thin air. He glanced around vaguely, eyes blinking in the darkness, and immediately spotted Haplo.

"I'm so glad I found you!" Alfred sighed in relief. "You can't imagine how difficult that spell is—"

"What do you want?" Haplo demanded, tense, on edge.

"I'm returning your dog," said Alfred cheerfully, with a wave of his hand at the animal materializing in the air behind him.

"If I'd wanted the beast, which I don't, I would have come for it myself—"

The dog, being somewhat quicker on the uptake than Alfred, caught sight of the dragon-snakes. It began to bark in wild, frantic alarm.

Alfred realized, apparently for the first time, where his magic had taken him. The dragon-snakes were now all wide awake. Bodies writhing, they loosed themselves from their tangled knot with slippery speed.

"Oh . . . m-m-my gracious," stammered Alfred, and dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

The king dragon-snake's head darted toward the dog.

Haplo leapt over the comatose body of the Sartan, caught hold of the animal by the scruff of its neck.

"Dog, quiet!" he commanded.

The dog whined, looked at Haplo plaintively, as if uncertain of its welcome. The dragon-snake pulled back.

The Patryn jerked a thumb in Alfred's direction. "Go to him. Keep an eye on your friend."

The dog obeyed, first casting a threatening glance at the dragon-snakes, warning them to keep their distance. Padding over to Alfred, the animal began to lick the Sartan's face.

"Does that annoying creature belong to you?" asked the dragon-snake.

"It used to, Royal One," Haplo stated. "But now it's his."

"Indeed." The serpent's slit eyes flared, quickly cooled. "It still seems attached to you."

"Forget the damn dog!" Haplo snarled, patience wearing thin, rubbed by his fear. "We were discussing my plan. Will you—"

"We discuss nothing in the presence of the Sartan," interrupted the dragon-snake.

"You mean Alfred? But he's out cold!"

"He is very dangerous," hissed the dragon-snake.

"Yeah," said Haplo, looking at the Sartan, lying in a crumpled heap on the ground.

The dog was licking Alfred's bald head.

"And he seems to know you quite well."

Haplo's skin prickled with danger. Damn and blast that fool Sartan anyway! I should have killed him when I had the chance. I will kill him, my very next opportunity . . .

"Kill him now," said the dragon-snake.

Haplo tensed, stared grimly at the creatures. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because he may have been sent to spy on me. And if he was, I want to know why, who sent him, what he planned to do. You should want to know, too, since you think he's so dangerous."

"It matters little to us. And he is dangerous, but we can take care of ourselves. He is a danger to you, Patryn. He is the Serpent Mage. Do not let him live! Kill him . . . now."

"You call me 'master,' " said Haplo coolly. "And yet you're giving me orders. Only one man, my lord, has such power over me. Someday perhaps, I will kill the Sartan, but that day will come in my own time, at my own choosing."

The red-green flame in the serpent's eyes was almost blinding. Haplo's own eyes burned and stung. He fought the impulse to blink. If once he looked away, he had the feeling he would see nothing but his own death.

Then suddenly it was dark. The dragon-snake's eyelids closed over the flame.

"We are concerned solely for your own well-being, Master. Of course, you know best. Perhaps, as you suggest, it would be wise to question him. You may do so now."

"He won't talk if you're around. In fact, he won't regain consciousness if you're around," Haplo added. "If you don't mind, Royal One, I'll just take him out. . . ."

Moving slowly, purposefully, keeping an eye on the dragon-snake, Haplo took hold of Alfred's flaccid arms and hefted the man, who was no lightweight. Haplo positioned the Sartan's limp body on his shoulder.

"I'll carry him to my boat. If I find out anything from him, I'll let you know."

The dragon-snake's head weaved back and forth slowly, sinuously.

Debating whether or not to let me go, Haplo thought. He wondered what he'd do if the snake refused, ordered him to stay. He supposed he could throw Alfred to them. . . .

The snake's eyes closed, flared open. "Very well. In the meantime, we will confer on your plan."

"Take all the time you need," Haplo grunted. He had no intention of coming back. He started out the cave.

"Pardon me, Patryn," said the dragon-snake, "but you seem to have forgotten your dog."

Haplo hadn't forgotten. That had been his plan. Leave the animal behind, let it act as his ears for him. He glanced back at the dragon-snakes.

They knew.

"Dog, come here."

Haplo clasped his arm around Alfred's legs. The Sartan dangled down the Patryn's back, arms flopping like some ungainly, grotesque doll. The dog trotted along after them, now and then giving the Sartan's hand a comforting lick.

Once outside the cave, Haplo sighed deeply, wiped his forehead with his hand. He was unnerved to find himself shaking.

Devon, Alake, and Grundle arrived at the tunnel's outlet in time to see Alfred stumble out of the air. Crouching prudently in the shadows, concealed behind several large boulders, the three watched and listened.

"The dog!" breathed Devon.

Alake clasped his hand, counseled silence. She shivered, and looked uneasy when the dragon-snakes ordered Haplo to kill Alfred, but her face cleared when the Patryn told him he would do so in his own time.

"A trick," she whispered to the other two. "It's a trick to rescue the man. I'm sure Haplo doesn't mean to really kill him."

Grundle looked as if she'd like to argue, but Devon took hold of her hand and squeezed it warningly. The dwarf subsided into a muttering silence. Haplo left, taking Alfred with him. The dragon-snakes began talking.

"You saw the dog," said their king, continuing to speak human, even among themselves.

The three young people, accustomed to hearing the human language by now, never gave this odd occurrence a second thought.

"You know what the dog means," the dragon-snake continued ominously.

"I don't!" whispered Grundle loudly.

Devon squeezed her hand again. The dragon-snakes nodded their understanding.

"This will not do," their king said. "This does not suit. We have been lax, the terror has subsided. We trusted that we had found the perfect tool in this Patryn. He has proven weak, flawed. And now we find him in company with a Sartan of immense power. A Serpent Mage, one whose life the Patryn held in his hands and yet did not take!"

Hisses of anger breathed through the darkness. The three young people exchanged puzzled glances. Each was beginning to notice a faint flutter in the stomach, a chill creeping over the body—the no-fear weed was wearing off, and they had not thought to bring more with them. They huddled near each other for comfort.

The king dragon-snake raised its head, twisted round to take in everyone in the cave. Everyone.

"And this war he proposes. Bloodless! Painless! He talks of 'surrender'!" The serpent hissed the words in derision. "Chaos is our life's blood. Death our meat and drink. No. Surrender is not what we had in mind. The Sartan grow more frightened every day. They now believe that they are alone in this vast universe they created. Their numbers are few, their enemies many and powerful.

"The Patryn did have one good suggestion, and I am indebted to him for it—flood their city with seawater. What subtle genius. The Sartan will watch the water rise. Their fear will change to panic. Their only hope—escape. They will be forced to do what they were strong enough to resist doing ages before. Samah will open Death's Gate!"

"And what of the mensch?"

"We will trick them, turn friends into enemies. They'll slaughter each other. We will feed off their pain and terror and grow strong. We will need our strength, to enter Death's Gate."

Alake was shivering. Devon put his arm around her, comfortingly. Grundle was crying, but she did so silently, her lips clamped tight. She wiped away a tear with a grimy, trembling hand.

"And the Patryn?" asked one. "Does he also die?"

"No, the Patryn will live. Remember: chaos is our goal. Once we pass through Death's Gate, I will visit this self-styled Lord of the Nexus. I will endear myself to him by bringing him a present—this Haplo, a traitor to his own kind. A Patryn who befriends a Sartan."

Fear grew on the three young people, invaded their bodies, an insidious disease. They burned and chilled, limbs shook, stomachs clenched with sickness. Alake tried to speak. Her facial muscles were stiff with fright, her lips quivered.

"We must . . . warn Haplo," she managed to gasp.

The others nodded in agreement, neither being able to respond aloud. But they were too terrified to move, afraid the slightest sound would bring the dragon-snakes down upon them.

"I must go to Haplo," Alake said faintly. She reached out her hands, grasped the cavern wall, and dragged herself to her feet. Her breath came in short, sharp pants. She started to try to leave.

But whatever light had shone them their way here was gone. A terrible smell, of living flesh rotting away, nearly made her gag. She seemed to hear, far away, a dismal wail, as of some huge creature, crying in agony.

Alake walked ahead into the noisome shadows.

Devon started to follow, discovered he couldn't free his hand from Grundle's panicked, deathlike grip.

"Don't!" she pleaded. "Don't leave me." The elf's face was chalk white, his eyes glittered with unshed tears. "Our people, Grundle," he whispered, swallowing. "Our people."

The dwarf gulped, bit her lip. She let go—reluctantly—of his hand.

Devon fled. Clambering to her feet, Grundle stumbled after.

"Are the mensch children leaving?" asked the king dragon-snake.

"Yes, Royal One," answered one of his minions. "What is your command?"

"Kill them slowly, one at a time. Allow the last survivor to remain alive long enough to tell Haplo what they overheard."

"Yes, Royal One." The dragon-snake's tongue flickered with pleasure.

"Oh," added the king dragon-snake offhandedly, "make it appear as if it was the Sartan who murdered them. Then return the bodies to their parents. That should end all thought of a 'bloodless war.' "

## CHAPTER \* 30

### DRAKNOR CHELESTRA

THE SUBMERSIBLE LOOKED STRANGELY PATHETIC AND HELPLESS, beached on the shoreline, like a dying whale. Haplo dumped the unconscious Alfred none too gently on the ground. The Sartan flopped and groaned. Haplo stood over him grimly. The dog kept some distance from both, watched each anxiously, uncertainly.

Alfred's eyes flickered open. For a dazed moment, he obviously had no idea where he was or what had happened. Then memory returned, and so did his fear.

"Are . . . are they gone?" he asked in a quavering voice, propping himself up on bony elbows and staring around in a panic.

"What the hell were you trying to do?" Haplo demanded.

Seeing no dragon-snakes, Alfred relaxed, looked rather shamefaced. "Return your dog," he said meekly.

Haplo shook his head. "You honestly expect me to believe that. Who sent you? Samah?"

"No one sent me." Alfred gathered the various parts of his gangling body together and, putting them into some semblance of order, managed to stand up. "I left of my own accord, to return the dog. And to ... to talk with the mensch." He faltered some, on this last statement.

"The mensch?"

"Yes, well, that was my intent." Alfred flushed in embarrassment. "I commanded the magic to take me to you, assuming that you would be on board the sun-chasers with the mensch."

"I'm not," said Haplo.

Alfred ducked his head, glanced around nervously. "No, I can see that. Shouldn't . . . shouldn't we be leaving?"

"I'll be leaving soon enough. First you're going to tell me why you followed me. When I leave, I don't want to walk into some Sartan trap."

"I told you," Alfred protested. "I wanted to return your dog. It's been very unhappy. I thought you would be with the mensch. It never occurred to me that you might be somewhere else. I was in a hurry. I didn't think—"

"I can believe that!" Haplo said impatiently, cutting off the excuses. He eyed Alfred intently. "But that's about all I believe. Oh, you're not lying, Sartan, but, as usual, you're not telling the truth, either. You came to return my dog. Fine. And what else?"

Alfred's flush deepened, flooding his neck and the top of his balding head.

"I thought I would find you with the mensch. And I would be able to talk to them, urge them to be patient. This war will be a terrible thing, Haplo. A terrible thing! I must stop it! I need time, that's all. The involvement of those . . . those hideous creatures ..."

Alfred looked again toward the cave, shuddered, glanced back at Haplo, at the sigla on his skin that glowed a vibrant blue. "You don't trust them, either, do you?"

Once again, the Sartan was in Haplo's mind, sharing his thoughts. The Patryn was damn sick and tired of it. He'd said the wrong thing in that cavern. These mensch can't fight. . . . The Sartan could . . . inflict serious casualties.

And he heard again the hissing response. Since when does a Patryn care how mensch live ... or how they die?

Since when?

I can't even blame that on Alfred. It all happened before he bumbled in. It was my doing. My undoing, Haplo thought bitterly. The danger was present from the beginning. But I wouldn't admit it. My own hatred blinded me. Just as the serpents knew it would.

He eyed Alfred, who, sensing some sort of inner battle within Haplo, kept quiet, waited anxiously for the outcome.

Haplo felt the dog's cold nose press against his hand. He glanced down. The animal looked up, wagged its tail gently. Haplo stroked its head, the dog crowded near him.

"The war with the mensch is the least of your problems, Sartan," Haplo said finally.

He gazed back at the cave, which could be clearly seen, despite the darkness, a hole of black torn out of the side of the mountain. "I've been near evil before. In the Labyrinth. . . . But never anything like that." He shook his head, turned back to Alfred. "Warn your people. As I'm going to warn mine. These dragons don't want to conquer the four worlds. They want to destroy them."

Alfred blanched. "Yes . . . Yes. I sensed that. I'll talk to Samah, to the Council. I'll try to make them understand—"

"As if we would talk with a traitor!"

Runes flared, sparkling in the night like a cascade of stars. Samah stepped from the midst of the magic.

"Why am I not surprised." Haplo smiled grimly, glanced at Alfred. "I almost trusted you, Sartan."

"I swear, Haplo!" Alfred cried. "I didn't know— I didn't mean—"

"There is no need to continue to try to deceive us, Patryn," said Samah. "Every move this 'Alfred'—your compatriot— makes has been watched. It must have been quite easy for you to seduce him, to draw him into your evil designs. But surely, considering his ineptness, by now you must be regretting your decision to make use of such a clumsy, bumbling oaf."

"As if I'd sink so low as to make use of any of your weak and sniveling race," Haplo scoffed. Silently, he was saying, If I could capture Samah, I could leave this place now! Leave the dragon-snakes and the mensch, leave Alfred and the damn dog. The submersible's ready, the runes will take us safely back through Death's Gate. . . .

Haplo cast a sidelong glance at the cavern. The dragon-snakes were nowhere to be seen, although they must have known of the presence of the Sartan Councillor on their isle. But Haplo knew they were watching, knew it as surely as if he could see the green-red eyes glowing in the darkness. And he felt them urging him on, felt them eager for the battle.

Eager for fear, chaos. Eager for death.

"Our common enemy's in there. Go back to your people, Councillor," Haplo said. "Go back and warn them. As I intend to go back and warn mine."

He turned, started walking toward his ship.

"Halt, Patryn!"

Glowing red sigla exploded, a wall of flame blocked Haplo's escape. The heat was intense, scorched his flesh, seared his lungs.

"I'm going back and you're coming back with me, as my prisoner," Samah informed him.

Haplo turned to face him, smiled. "You know I won't. Not without a fight. And that's just what they want." He pointed toward the cave.

Alfred extended trembling, pleading hands. "Councillor, listen to him! Haplo's right—"

"Silence, traitor! Don't you think I understand why you side with this Patryn? His confessions will seal your guilt. I am taking you with me to Surunan, Patryn. I prefer that we go peacefully, but, if you choose to fight . . ." Samah shrugged. "So be it."

"I'm warning you, Councillor," Haplo said quietly. "If you don't let me go, the three of us will be lucky to escape with our lives." But as he talked, he was already beginning to construct his magic.

Anciently, open warfare between Patryn and Sartan had been rare. The Sartan—maintaining as they did to the mensch that warfare was wrong—had their image to consider and would generally refuse to be drawn into a fight. They found subtler means to defeat their enemy. But occasionally battle could not be avoided and a contest would be waged. Such battles were always spectacular, generally deadly. They were held secretly, in private. It would never do for the mensch to see one of their demigods die.

Battle between two such opponents is long and tiring, both mentally and physically. Some warriors were known to collapse from sheer exhaustion alone. Each opponent must not only prepare his own offense, drawing his magic from the countless possibilities that are present at that particular moment, but he must also prepare a defense against whatever magical attack his opponent might be launching.

Defense is mainly guesswork, although each side claimed to have developed ways to fathom the mental state of an opponent and therefore be able to anticipate his next move.

Such was the battle both were proposing to wage. Haplo had been dreaming of it, yearning for it, all his life. It was every Patryn's dearest wish, for though much had been lost to them through the eons, they had held fast to one thing: hatred. But now that the moment he'd lived for was finally here, Haplo could not savor it. He tasted nothing but ashes in his mouth. He was conscious of the audience, of the slit red eyes, watching every move.

Haplo forced the thought of the dragon from his mind, forced himself to concentrate. Haplo called upon the magic, felt it answer. Elation surged through him, submerged all fear, all thoughts of the dragons. He was young and strong, at the height of his power. He was confident of victory.

The Sartan had one advantage that the Patryn didn't anticipate. Samah must have fought in such magical battles before. Haplo had not.

The two faced each other.

"Go on, boy," Haplo said quietly, giving the dog a shove. "Go back to Alfred."

The animal whimpered, didn't want to leave.

"Go!" Haplo glared at it.

The dog, ears drooping, obeyed.

"Stop it! Stop this madness!" Alfred cried.

He dashed forward with some wild intent of hurling himself bodily between the combatants. Unfortunately, Alfred wasn't watching where he was going and fell, headlong, over the dog. The two went down in a confused and yelping tangle in the sand.

Haplo cast his spell.

The sigla on the Patryn's skin flared blue and red, twisted suddenly into the air, wound together to form a chain of steel that glimmered red in the firelight. The chain streaked out with the speed of lightning to bind Samah in its strong coils, Patryn rune-magic would render him helpless.

Or that was how it was supposed to work.

Samah had apparently anticipated the possibility that Haplo would try to take him prisoner. The Councillor invoked the possibility that when the Patryn's attack was launched against him, he wouldn't be there to receive it. And he wasn't.

The steel chain wrapped around air. Samah stood some distance away, regarding Haplo with disdain, as he might have regarded a child throwing stones at him. The Councillor began to sing and dance.

Haplo recognized an attack. He was faced with an agonizing decision, and one that had to be made in a heartbeat. He could either defend against an attack—and to do so would require that he instantly sort through myriad possibilities open to his enemy—or he could launch another attack himself, hoping to catch Samah defenseless, in midspell. Unfortunately, such a maneuver would leave Haplo defenseless, as well.

Frustrated and angry over being thwarted by an enemy he'd considered a pushover, Haplo was anxious to end the battle swiftly. His steel chain still hung in the air. Haplo instantly rearranged the magic, altered the sigla's form into that of a spear, and hurled it straight at Samah's breast.

A shield appeared in Samah's left hand. The spear struck the shield; the chain of Haplo's magic began to fall apart.

In the same instant, a gust of wind sprang up off the waters. Taking the shape and form of a huge fist, the wind smote Haplo, buffeted him, sent him reeling.

The Patryn landed heavily on the sandy beach.

Groggy and dazed from the blow, Haplo swiftly regained his feet, his body reacting with the instincts learned in the Labyrinth, where to give in to even a moment's weakness meant death.

Haplo spoke the runes. The sigla on his body flared. He opened his mouth to give the command that would end this bitter contest. His command changed to a startled curse.

Something wrapped itself tightly around his ankle. It began tugging at him, trying to yank him off his feet.

Haplo was forced to abandon his spell. He looked to see what had hold of him.

A long tentacle of some magical sea creature had reached out of the water. Preoccupied with his own spell-casting, Haplo had not noticed it sliding across the beach toward him. Now it had him; its coils, shining with Sartan runes, wound around and around Haplo's ankle, his calf, his leg.

The creature's strength was incredible. Haplo fought to free himself, but the more he struggled, the tighter the tentacle grasped. It jerked him off his feet, flung him to the sand. Haplo kicked at it, tried to wriggle free. Again, he was faced with a terrible decision. He could expend his magic to free himself, or he could use his magic to attack.

Haplo twisted to get a look at his enemy. Samah watched complacently, a smile of triumph on his lips.

How the hell can he think he's won? Haplo wondered angrily. This stupid monster isn't deadly. It's not poisoning me, crushing the life out of me.

It's a trick. A trick to gain time. Samah figures I'll expend my energy trying to free myself instead of attacking. Surprise, Samah!

Haplo's full mental powers concentrated on re-forming the spell he had been about to cast. The sigla flared in the air, were coming together, humming with power, when the Patryn felt water wash over the toe of his boot.

Water . . .

Suddenly Haplo saw Samah's ploy. This was how the Sartan would defeat him: simple, yet effective.

Dunk him in seawater.

The Patryn cursed, but refused to give way to panic. He commanded the rune structure to shift their target, altered them to a flight of flaming arrows, sent them darting into the creature that had hold of him.

The creature's tentacle was wet with seawater. The magical arrows struck it, sizzled, and went out.

Water lapped over Haplo's foot, up his leg. Frantic now, he dug his hands into the sand, tried to hold on, to stop himself from being pulled into the sea. His fingers left long tracks behind them. The creature was too strong and Haplo's magic was weakening, the complex rune-structures starting to break apart, unravel.

The daggers! Flipping over onto his back, squirming in the grasp of the ever-tightening coils, Haplo ripped open his shirt, grabbed the oilskin, and feverishly began to unwrap the weapons.

Cold logic stopped him, the logic of the Labyrinth, the logic that had led more than once to his survival. The water was up to his thighs. These daggers were his only means of defense and he had been about to get them wet. Not only that, but he would reveal their existence to his enemy . . . enemies. He couldn't forget their audience, who must be disappointed to see the end of the show.

Better to accept defeat—bitter though it was—and retain the hope of fighting back, then risk all in a desperate strike that would get him nowhere.

Clasping the oilskin pouch tightly to his breast, Haplo closed his eyes. The water surged up over his waist, his breast, his head, engulfed him.

Samah spoke a word. The tentacle released its hold, disappeared.

Haplo lay in the water. He had no need to look at his skin to know what he would see: bare flesh, a sickly white in color.

He lay so long and so still, the waves gently lapping over his body, that Alfred must have become alarmed.

"Haplo!" he called, and the Patryn heard clumsy, shuffling footsteps heading his direction, heading inanely into the seawater.

Haplo raised up. "Dog, stop him!" he shouted.

The dog dashed after Alfred, caught hold of his coattails, dragged him backward.

Alfred fell. Legs spraddled, arms'akimbo, he sat down heavily in the sand. The dog stood next to him, looking pleased with itself, though it occasionally glanced Haplo's way with an anxious air.

Samah gave Alfred a look of contempt and disgust.

"The animal has more brains than you do, seemingly."

"But . . . Haplo's hurt! He might be drowning!" Alfred cried.

"He's no more hurt than I am," Samah replied coldly. "He's shamming, most likely plotting some evil, even now. Whatever it is, he must do it without his magic."

The Councillor walked to the shore, maintaining a safe distance from the waterline. "Stand up, Patryn. You and your cohort will accompany me back to Surunan, where the Council will decide what to do with you."

Haplo ignored him. The water had destroyed his magic, but it had also calmed him, calmed his fever, his rage. He could think clearly, begin to try to sort out his options. One question came insistently to mind: Where were the dragon-snakes?

Listening . . . Watching . . . Savoring the fear, the hatred. Hoping for a deadly conclusion. They wouldn't intervene, not as long as the battle raged. But the battle had ended. And Haplo had lost his magic.

"Very well," said Samah. "I will take you with me as you are."

Haplo sat up in the water. "Try it."

Samah began to sing the runes, but his voice cracked. He choked, coughed, tried again. Alfred stared at the Councillor in astonishment. Haplo watched, smiled grimly.

"How—" Samah rounded on the Patryn furiously. "You have no magic!"

"Not me," said Haplo calmly. "Them." He pointed a wet finger at the cave.

"Bah! Another trick!" Samah again attempted to cast his spell.

Haplo stood up, splashed through the water, back toward the shore. He was being watched. They were all being watched.

He groaned in pain, glared at Samah. "I think you've broken one of my ribs."

His hand pressed against his side, pressed against the hidden daggers. His skin would have to be dry, in order to use the weapons. But that shouldn't be too difficult to manage.

He groaned again, stumbled, and fell; dug his hands deep into the warm, dry sand. The dog watched him, whined and whimpered in sympathy.

Alfred, his forehead wrinkled in concern, was heading in Haplo's direction, his own hands outstretched.

"Don't touch me!" Haplo snarled. "I'm wet!" he added, hoping the fool would take the hint.

Alfred, looking hurt, backed away.

"You!" Samah accused. "You are the one blocking my magic!"

"Me?" Alfred gaped, gabbled incoherently. "I ... I ... Me? No, I couldn't possibly—"

Haplo had one thought: to return to the Nexus, to carry the warning. He lay on the warm sand, hunched over, groaned as if in acute agony. His hand, dry from the sand, slid inside his shirt, inside the oilcloth.

If Samah tries to stop me, he'll die. Lunge, stab for the heart. The dagger's runes will unravel any protective magic he's cast around himself.

Then the real fight begins.

The dragons. They had no intention of letting any of them escape.

If I can make it to the submersible, its magic should be powerful enough to keep them at bay. Long enough for me to make it back safely to Death's Gate.

Haplo's hand closed over the dagger's hilt.

A terror-filled scream pierced the air. "Haplo, help us! Help!"

"That sounds like a human's voice!" Alfred cried in astonishment, peering through the darkness. "What are mensch doing here?"

Haplo paused, dagger in his hand. He had recognized the voice: Alake's.

"Haplo!" she cried again, desperate, frantic.

"I see them!" Alfred pointed.

Three mensch, running for their lives. The dragon-snakes slithered behind, driving their victims like sheep to the slaughter, teasing them, feeding off their panic.

Alfred ran to Haplo, extended his hand to help him up. "Quickly! They don't stand a chance!"

An odd sensation stole over Haplo. He'd done this, or something like this, before. . . .

. . . The woman gave Haplo her hand, helped him to stand. He didn't thank her for saving his life. She didn't expect it.

Today, maybe the next, he'd return the favor. It was that way in the Labyrinth.

"Two of them," he said, looking down at the corpses.

The woman yanked out her spear, inspected it to make certain it was still in good condition. The other had died from the electricity she'd had time to generate with the runes. Its body still smoldered.

"Scouts," she said. "A hunting party." She shook her chestnut hair out of her face. "They'll be going for the Squatters."

"Yeah." Haplo glanced back the way they'd come.

Wolfen hunted in packs of thirty, forty creatures. There were fifteen Squatters, five of them children.

"They don't stand a chance." It was an offhand remark, accompanied by a shrug. Haplo wiped the blood and gore from his dagger.

"We could go back, help fight them," the woman said.

"Two of us wouldn't do that much good. We'd die with them. You know that."

In the distance, they could hear hoarse shouts—the Squatters calling each other to the defense. Above that, the higher-pitched voices of the women, singing the runes. And above that, higher still, the scream of a child.

The woman's face darkened, she glanced that direction, irresolute.

"C'mon," urged Haplo, sheathing his dagger. "There may be more of them around here."

"No. They're all in on the kill."

The child's scream rose to a shrill shriek of terror.

"It's the Sartan," said Haplo, his voice harsh. "They put us in this hell. They're the ones responsible for this evil."

The woman looked at him, her brown eyes flecked with gold. "I wonder. Maybe it's the evil inside us."

A terror-filled scream, the cry of a child. A hand stretched out to him. A hand not taken. Emptiness, a sadness for something irretrievably lost.

The evil inside us.

Where did you come from? . . . Who created you? Haplo recalled his words to the dragon-snakes.

You did, Patryn.

The dog barked sharp warning. It ran up to him, eager, anxious, begging to be ordered to attack.

Haplo scrambled to his feet. "Don't touch me," he told Alfred harshly. "Keep away from me. Don't get any water on you! It'll disrupt your magic," he explained impatiently, seeing Alfred's confusion. "For whatever that's worth."

"Oh, yes!" Alfred murmured, and backed up hastily.

Haplo drew his dagger, drew both daggers.

Instantly, Samah spoke a word. This time, his magic worked. Glowing sigla surrounded the Patryn, closed like manacles over his hands and bound his feet. The dog jumped back with a startled yelp, fled to Alfred.

Haplo could hear almost hear the dragon's gloating laughter. "Let me go, you fool! I might be able to save them."

"I will not fall for your trickery, Patryn." Samah began to sing the runes. "You don't expect me to believe you care about these mensch!"

No, Haplo didn't expect Samah to believe it, because Haplo didn't believe it himself. It was instinct, the need to protect the helpless, the weak. The look on his mother's face as she shoved her child into the bushes and turned to fight her enemy.

"Haplo, help us!"

Alake's screams rang in his ears. Haplo fought to escape his bonds, but the magic was too strong. He was being carried off. The sand, the water, the mountains began to fade from his sight. The cries of the mensch grew faint and far away.

And then, suddenly, the spell ended. Haplo found himself back standing on the beach. He felt dazed, as though he'd been dropped from a great height.

"Go on, Haplo," said Alfred, standing beside him, stooped body upright, thin shoulders squared. "Go to the children. Save them, if you can."

A hand closed over his. Haplo looked down at his wrists. The manacles were gone. He was free.

Samah was cold with rage, his face contorted in fury. "Never in all the history of our people has a Sartan helped a Patryn. This dooms you, Alfred Montbank! Your fate is sealed!"

"Go on, Haplo." Alfred ignored the Councillor's ravings. "I'll see to it that he doesn't interfere."

The dog was racing in circles around Haplo, barking warnings, darting a few steps toward the dragon-snakes, dashing back to urge his master on.

His master, once again.

"I owe you one, Alfred," said Haplo. "Though I doubt if I'll live to repay it."

He drew the daggers, their runes flared red and blue. The dog sped off, heading straight for the dragon-snakes.

Haplo followed.

CHAPTER \* 31

DRAKNOR CHELESTRA

THE DRAGON-SNAKES HAD ALLOWED THE MENSCH TO LEAVE THE cave safely, kept them in sight the entire time. The three reached the shoreline. They could see Haplo and his ship. Fear was dispelled. Hope returned. The three began to run toward him.

The dragon-snakes poured out of the cave, a hundred sinuous bodies surged over the ground in a writhing, slime-covered mass.

The three mensch heard their hissing, turned around in terror.

The serpents' red-green gaze caught the three, held them, fascinated. Tongues flicked out, tasting the air, smelling, savoring fear. The dragon-snakes closed in on their prey. But it was not their intent to kill swiftly.

Fear made them strong, terror gave them power. They were always disappointed to see a victim die.

The snakes lowered their flame-eyed gazes, slowed their advance to a lazy crawl.

The mensch, freed of the paralyzing fascination, screamed and began running across the beach.

The dragon-snakes hissed in pleasure and slid rapidly behind.

They kept close to the young people, close enough to let them smell the dank, putrid odor of the death they brought, close enough to let them hear the sounds that would be the last sounds they heard—except their own, dying screams. The giant bodies, sliding over the sand, ground it beneath them. Flat heads, looming over the mensch, cast horrid, swaying shadows before them.

And the dragon-snakes watched, in glee, the battle between Patryn and Sartan, thrived on the hatred, and grew stronger still.

The mensch were weakening and, as their bodies weakened, so did their sheer terror. The dragon-snakes needed to prod their prey a bit, stir them back to action.

"Take one," commanded the king dragon-snake, from his place at the head of the advance. "The human. Kill her."

Day was dawning. Night was fading, the darkness lifting, as much as it could lift from this place of darkness. The sun's light glimmered over the murky water. Haplo cast a shadow as he ran.

"We must help him!" Alfred urged Samah. "You can help him, Councillor. Use your magic. Between us, maybe we can defeat the dragons ..."

"And while I fight dragons, your Patryn friend escapes. Is that your plan?"

"Escape?" Alfred blinked watery blue eyes. "How can you say that? Look! Look at him! He's risking his life—"

"Bah! He's in no danger! The foul creatures are his to command! His people created them."

"That's not what Orla told me," Alfred retorted angrily. "That's not what the dragon-snakes said to you on the beach, is it, Councillor? 'Who created you?' you asked them. 'You did, Sartan.' That was their answer, wasn't it?"

Samah's face was livid. He raised his right hand, started to trace a sigil in the air.

Alfred raised his left, traced the same sigil, only in reverse, nullified the magic.

Samah moved sideways in a sliding dance step, murmuring words beneath his breath.

Alfred slid gracefully the opposite direction, repeated the same words, backward.

Again, Samah's magic was nullified.

But, behind him, Alfred could hear a furious hissing, the thrashing of reptile bodies, Haplo's hoarse voice shouting instructions to the dog. Alfred longed to look to see what was happening, but he did not dare move his complete attention from Samah.

The Councillor, drawing upon all his power, began to weave another spell. The magic rumbled in the distance, runes crackled. The tremendous, confusing storm of possibilities was coming down, full force, upon Alfred.

He began to feel faint.

Haplo's only goal was to rescue the mensch. Once he had them, however, he had no idea what to do, no plan of attack. Why bother? he demanded of himself bitterly. The battle was hopeless from the start. It was taking all his concentration to rid himself of the fear that threatened to lay hold of him, wring him inside out, drop him, retching up his guts, in the sand.

The dog had outdistanced him, reached the mensch already. The three were nearly finished, exhaustion and terror had drained them of their strength. Ignoring the serpents, the dog dashed around the mensch, herded them together, urged them on when it seemed they might lag.

One of the snakes came too close. The dog dashed toward it, growling a warning.

The dragon-snake slid back.

Devon collapsed onto the ground. Grundle grasped him by the shoulder, shook him.

"Get up, Devon!" she pleaded. "Get up!"

Alake, with a courage born of despair, stood over her fallen friend and turned to face the dragon-snakes. She raised a hand that trembled, but did not lose its firm grip on the object it held—a wooden stick. She

presented it boldly, and began to cast her spell, taking time to speak the words clearly and distinctly, as her mother had taught her.

The stick burst into magical flame. Alake waved the firebrand in the eyes of the dragon-snakes, as she would have waved it in the eyes of some predator cat, stalking her chickens.

The dragon-snakes hesitated, drew back. Haplo saw their game, forgot his fear in his rage. Devon, with Grundle's assistance, was regaining his feet. The dog barked and jumped, trying to draw the serpent's attention to itself, away from the mensch.

Alake, proud, beautiful, exultant, thrust the firebrand at the snakes. "Leave this place! Leave us!" she cried.

"Alake, get down!" Haplo shouted.

The snake struck with incredible swiftness, head darting forward faster than the eye could follow, the brain could comprehend. It was a blur, nothing more. A blur that darted out and darted back.

Alake screamed, fell, writhing in pain, to the ground.

Grundle and Devon knelt down beside her. Haplo almost stumbled over them. He grasped the dwarf by the shoulder, jerked her to her feet.

"Run ahead!" he shouted. "Get help!"

Help. What help? Alfred? What am I thinking? Haplo asked himself angrily. It had been a reflexive response. But, at least, it would get the dwarf out of the way.

Grundle blinked, understood, and, after a wild, despairing look at Alake, the dwarf turned and took off for the water's edge.

The dragon-snake's head hovered in the air, loomed over its victim, over Haplo. Its eyes were on the Patryn, on the blue-flaring, rune-lit daggers in his hands. The snake was confident, but wary. It had little respect for the Patryn, but was smart enough not to underestimate its enemy.

"Devon," said Haplo, keeping his voice deliberately calm, "how's Alake?"

The elf's choked sob answered him. He could hear the girl's screams. She wasn't dead, more was the pity. Poisoned, he guessed, her flesh torn by the dragon's bone-hard mouth.

He risked a quick glance back. Devon gathered Alake in his arms, and held her close, soothing her. The dog was by his side, growling menacingly at any snakes that looked their direction.

Haplo placed his body between the serpent and the mensch. "Dog, stay with them."

He faced the dragon-snake, daggers raised.

"Take him," ordered the king.

The dragon-snake's head dove down. Jaws gaped wide, venom dripped. Haplo dodged it, as best he could, but several drops fell on him, burned through the wet shirt and into the skin.

He was aware of searing pain, but it wasn't important now. He kept his gaze and his attention fixed on his target.

The serpent lunged for him.

Haplo leapt backward, brought both hands together, drove both daggers into the dragon's skull, between the slit red eyes.

The rune-enhanced blades bit deep. Blood spurted. The dragon-snake roared in pain, reared its head up and back, carrying Haplo, trying to hang onto the daggers, with it.

His arms were nearly ripped from their sockets. He was forced to let go and dropped to the ground. Crouching low, he waited.

The wounded dragon-snake flailed and thrashed about blindly in its death throes. At last, with a shudder, it lay still. The slit-eyes were open, but the fire was gone. The tongue lolled from the toothless mouth. The daggers remained firmly entrenched in the bloody head.

"Go for your weapons, Patryn," said the king dragon-snake, red-green eyes gleaming with pleasure. "Seize them! Fight on! You've killed one of us. Don't give up now!"

It was his only chance. Haplo lunged, hand outstretched, made a desperate grab.

A snake's head swooped down. Pain exploded in his arm. Bone shattered, blood burned with the poison. His right hand fell useless. Haplo kept going, made another try with his left.

The serpent started for him again. A hissed command from its king halted it.

"No, no! Don't end it yet! The Patryn is strong. Who knows? He might be able to reach his ship."

If I could make it to my ship . . .

Haplo laughed at the thought. "That's what you want, isn't it? You want to see me turn and run. And you'll let me get— how far? Within arm's reach? Maybe even set my foot on it. And then what? Snatch me away. Take me into that cave?"

"Your terror will feed us a long, long time, Patryn," whispered the dragon-snake.

"I'm not going to play. You'll have to find your fun somewhere else."

Deliberately, Haplo turned his back on the snakes, crouched down beside the two young people. The dog posted guard behind its master, growling at any serpent that came too close.

Alake was quiet now, she no longer moaned. Her eyes were closed, her breathing ragged and shallow.

"I ... I think she's better," said Devon, swallowing hard.

"Yes," Haplo said quietly. "She's going to be well soon." He heard, behind him, the huge bodies slide close. The dog's growl intensified.

Alake opened her eyes, smiled up at him.

"I am better," she breathed. "It . . . doesn't hurt anymore."

"Haplo!" Devon said warningly.

Haplo glanced behind him. The snakes had begun to circle around, some moving to the left, others moving to the right. Their bodies slid over the ground, curving, coiling, flat heads always facing his direction. Slowly, inexorably, they were surrounding him. The dragon-snakes began to hiss—soft, sibilant whispers of death. The dog ceased to growl, crept back to be near its master.

"What's the matter?" Alake whispered. "You killed the dragon-snake. I saw you. They're gone now, aren't they?"

"Yes," said Haplo, taking her hands in his. "They're gone. The danger's over. Rest easy, now."

"I will rest easy. You will watch over me? . . ."

"I will watch over you."

She smiled, closed her eyes. Her body shuddered, then lay still.

Samah spoke the first rune, started to speak the second. The magic was gathering around him in a light-spangled cloud.

A small person, howling at the top of her lungs, sprang on him, clutched at him, her momentum nearly carrying them both over.

His spell disrupted, Samah stared down at a young female dwarf. Her grimy hands tugged at his robes, practically dragged them off him.

"Rescue . . . Alake fell . . . Haplo alone . . . dragons ... he needs . . . help!" The dwarf panted, pulled on Samah's robes. "You . . . come!"

Samah thrust the mensch aside. "Another trick."

"Come! Please!" the dwarf begged, and burst into tears.

"I will help," said Alfred.

The dwarf gulped, looked at him dubiously. Alfred turned to face Samah.

The Councillor was speaking the runes again, but this time Alfred did not stop him. Samah's body shimmered, started to fade.

"Go to the aid of your Patryn friend!" he called. "See what thanks you get!"

The Councillor disappeared.

The dwarf maid was too upset and frightened to be startled. She clasped Alfred's wrinkled hand. She had, more or less, regained her breath.

"You must help! The dragon-snakes are killing him!"

Alfred started forward, intent on doing what he could, although what that would be, he wasn't certain. But he had forgotten, in his preoccupation with Samah, the horror of the creatures. Now, he stared at them, aghast: long reptile bodies whipping and lashing in the sand, eyes red as flame, green as the ugly sea, toothless jaws slavering, tongues dripping venom.

The weakness swept again over Alfred. He recognized it, fought against it, but not very hard. Swaying, he let go, let it take him away from the fear . . .

Small fists pummeled him.

Alfred, dazed, opened his eyes. He was lying in the sand.

A dwarf stood over him, beating him on the breast with her fists, shouting at him. "You can do magic! I saw you! You brought him his dog! Help him, damn you! Help Alake and Devon! Damn you! Damn you!"

The dwarf collapsed, buried her face in her hands.

"There . . . don't cry," said Alfred, reaching out timidly, awkwardly to pat the small, heaving shoulder. He looked back at the dragon-snakes and his heart nearly failed him. "I want to help," he said pathetically, "but I don't know how."

"Pray to the One," the dwarf said fiercely, raising her head. "The One will give you strength."

"Perhaps you're right," said Alfred.

"Alake!" Devon cried, shaking the lifeless body. "Alake!" "Don't wish her back," Haplo said. "Her pain is over." Devon raised a stricken face. "Do you mean she's . . . But you can save her! Bring her to life! Do it, Haplo! Like you did for me!"

"I don't have my magic!" Haplo shouted harshly. "I can't save her. I can't save you. I can't even save myself!"

Devon laid Alake's body gently on the ground. "I was afraid to live. Now I'm afraid to die. No, I don't mean that. It's not the dying. That's easy." He reached out, took hold of Alake's chill hand. "It's the pain, the fear . . ."

Haplo said nothing. There was nothing to say, no comforting words to offer. Their end was going to be a horrible one. He knew it, so did Devon, so did Grundle.

Grundle? Where was she?

Haplo remembered. He'd sent her back for help. For Alfred. The Sartan was hopelessly inept, but Haplo had to admit he'd seen Alfred do some fairly remarkable things ... if he hadn't passed out first.

Haplo jumped to his feet. His sudden movement startled the dog, startled the dragon-snakes. One of them lashed out from behind him, its forked tongue flicked across his back like a whip of flame, seared the flesh from his bones. The pain was intense, paralyzing; every nerve in his body sizzled with the agony. He slumped to his knees, defeated.

Grundle stood on the shoreline, alone—a small, pathetic figure. No sign of Alfred.

Haplo pitched down flat on the sand. He was vaguely aware of Devon crouching over him, of the dog making a heroic, if futile, dash at the snake who had attacked him. Nothing was real now except the pain. It burned in his vision, filled his mind with fire.

The serpent must have struck him again, because suddenly the pain intensified. And then the dog was licking his face, nuzzling his neck, yelping and whining eagerly. It no longer sounded frightened.

"Haplo!" Devon shouted. "Haplo, don't go! Come back! Look and see!"

Haplo opened his eyes. The black mists that had been closing over him receded. He looked around, saw the pallid face of the elf, turned skyward.

A shadow passed across Haplo, a shadow that cooled the flames of the snake's venom. Blinking, trying to clear his vision, Haplo gazed upward.

A dragon flew above them, a dragon such as Haplo had never seen in all his life. Its beauty made the soul shrink in awe. Green polished scales flashed like emeralds. Its wings were golden leather, its mane of gold

shone and glistened brighter than Chelestra's water-bound sun. The body was enormous, its wingspan seemed, to Haplo's dazed mind, to extend from horizon to horizon.

The dragon flew low, screamed in warning, dove down on the snakes. Devon ducked, involuntarily raised an arm over his head. Haplo didn't move. He lay still, watching. The dog barked and yelped like a thing possessed. Leaping in the air, it snapped playfully at the beast as it thundered overhead.

The rushing beat of dragon's wings stirred up clouds of sand. Haplo coughed, sat up to try to see.

The dragon-snakes fell back. Bodies flattening, they slid away, reluctantly, from their victims. Slit-eyes aimed malevolently at this new threat.

The dragon soared far above the serpents, wheeled, and dove again, taloned claws extended.

The king snake reared its head to meet the challenge. It spewed venom, attempted to hit the dragon's eyes.

The dragon struck, pinioned the snake's body. Claws sank deep into the scaled flesh.

The serpent writhed and twisted in fury. Its head coiled around, it snapped at the dragon, but the dragon was careful to keep just out of reach of the venomous jaws. Other snakes were rushing to their leader's aid. The dragon, great wings straining, lifted the king snake from the ground, soared into the air. The serpent dangled from its claws.

The king snake fought, lashing with its tail, striking out again and again with its head.

The dragon flew higher, until it was almost lost to Haplo's sight. Far up over the craggy mountains of Draknor, the dragon loosed its hold on the snake, let it fall.

The dragon-snake plummeted, twisting and shrieking, down onto the mountain, onto the sharp bones of the tormented creature it had used for its lair. The seamoons shook with the force of the snake's fall. Rocks cracked and splintered, the mountain caved in on top of the snake's carcass.

The dragon came back, circled overhead, glittering eyes seeking another kill.

The serpents coiled in defensive posture, the red-green eyes darted uneasy glances at each other.

"If we can catch the dragon on the ground, attack it in a body, we can defeat it!" hissed one.

"Yes," said another. "A good idea. You challenge it, lure it down from the sky! Then I'll attack it."

"Why me? You challenge it!"

They argued among themselves, none of them daring to commence the fight that would lure the dragon down from its safe haven in the air. None was willing to risk its own slimy skin to save its fellows, and they had no king, now, to command them. Leaderless, faced with a powerful enemy, the like of which they had never encountered, they deemed it best to make a strategic retreat. The dragon-snakes slid rapidly across the sand, heading for the dark safety of what was left of their shattered mountain.

The dragon pursued them, harassing them, harrying them, until it had driven every one of them into the cave. Then it wheeled, flew back, hovered over Haplo. He tried to look directly at it, but the shining light of its being made his eyes water.

You are wounded. Yet you must find the strength to return to your ship. The dragon-snakes are disorganized for the moment, but they will soon regroup and I do not have the power to fight them all.

The dragon didn't speak aloud. Haplo heard the voice in his mind. It sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it.

He forced his pain-racked body to stand. Yellow flares burst in his eyes; he staggered, would have lost his balance.

Devon was there beside him, the elf holding him, propping him up. The dog pattered around him, anxious and wanting to help. Haplo remained standing quietly, until the weakness passed, then he nodded, unable to speak, and took a feeble step. Suddenly, he stopped.

"Alake," he said, and looked down at the body. His gaze shifted grimly to the cave where he could see the slits of red eyes, watching.

The dragon understood him. I will care for her. Have no fear. They will not disturb her rest.

Haplo nodded again, wearily, and shifted his gaze to his goal, his submersible. And there was Grundle, standing in the sand, apparently rooted to the spot.

They lurched across the beach. The slender elf, finding reserves of strength he never knew he had, guided the injured Patryn's faltering steps, held him up when he would have fallen. Haplo lost sight of the dragon, forgot about it, forgot the snakes, concentrated on fighting the pain, fighting to remain conscious.

They came level with Grundle, who still had not moved. She was staring at them with wide eyes. She made no sound, only a garbled rattle.

"I can walk . . . from here!" Haplo gasped.

He staggered forward, caught himself on the submersible's wood prow. Propping himself up, he pointed back at the stammering dwarf. "Go . . . get her."

"What's the matter with her, do you think?" Devon asked, worried. "I've never seen her like that."

"Scared silly, maybe." Haplo groaned. He had to climb on board, quick. "Just grab her . . . bring her along."

Hand over hand, he pulled himself along the rail of the ship's upper deck, heading for the hatch.

"What about him?" He heard Grundle cry shrilly.

Haplo glanced back, saw a huddled figure lying in the sand.

Alfred.

"It figures," Haplo muttered bitterly.

He was about to say, "Leave him," but, of course, the dog had raced over to sniff at, paw over, and lick the unconscious Sartan. Well, after all, Haplo remembered grudgingly, I do owe him.

"Bring him along, if you must."

"He turned into the dragon," Grundle said, voice quivering in awe.

Haplo laughed, shook his head.

"He did!" the dwarf averred solemnly. "I saw him. He . . . turned himself into a dragon!"

The Patryn looked from the dwarf to Alfred, who had regained his senses—what senses were his to regain.

He was making feeble, flapping motions with his hands, trying to temper the dog's wet, enthusiastic welcome.

Haplo turned away, too weak to care or argue.

Finally persuading the dog to let him alone, Alfred reassembled himself and tottered to his feet. He stared blankly around at everything and everyone. His gaze wandered to the cave, and he remembered. He cringed.

"Are they gone?"

"You should know!" Grundle yelled. "You chased them away!"

Alfred smiled wanly, deprecatingly. He shook his head, glanced down at the impression his body had left in the sand.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, child. I wasn't much help to anyone, not even myself."

"But I saw you!" the dwarf continued stubbornly.

"Hurry up, Sartan, if you're coming," Haplo called out. Only a few more steps . . .

"He's coming, Patryn. We will see to that. You will have company in your prison."

Haplo stopped, leaned against the rail. He had barely strength enough to lift his head.

Samah stood before him.

CHAPTER \* 32

SURUNAN

CHELESTRA

HAPLO CAME BACK TO CONSCIOUSNESS SLOWLY, RELUCTANTLY, knowing he must wake to pain within and without, knowing he must wake to the knowledge that his carefully ordered life had been consumed in flames, scattered like ashes on the seawater.

He lay for long moments without opening his eyes, not from wariness or caution, as he might have done under similar circumstances, but from sheer weariness. Living, from now on, was going to be a constant struggle for him. When he'd started this journey, long ago, on Arianus, he'd had all the answers. Now, at the finish, he was left with nothing but questions. He was no longer confident, no longer sure. He doubted. And the doubt frightened him.

He heard a whine; a shaggy tail brushed against the floor. A wet tongue licked his hand. Haplo, eyes still closed, rubbed the dog's head, ruffled the ears. His lord would not be pleased to see the animal return. But then, there was a lot his lord wasn't going to be pleased to see.

Haplo sighed and, when it became apparent he couldn't go back to sleep, groaned and opened his eyes. And, of course, the first face he would see on awakening belonged to Alfred.

The Sartan hovered over him, peered down at him anxiously.

"Are you in pain? Where does it hurt?"

Haplo was strongly tempted to shut his eyes again. Instead, he sat up, looked around. He was in a room in what must be a private house, a Sartan house—he knew it by instinct. But now it was no longer a house, it was a Sartan prison. The windows sparkled with warding runes. Powerful sigla, burning with a vivid red light, enhanced the closed and barred door. Haplo glanced down ruefully at his arms and body. His clothes were wet, his skin bare.

"They've been bathing you in seawater—Samah's orders," said Alfred. "I'm sorry."

"What are you apologizing for?" Haplo grunted, glowering at the Sartan in irritation. "It's not your fault. Why do you insist on apologizing for things that aren't your fault?"

Alfred flushed. "I don't know. I guess I've always felt that they were my fault, in a way. Because of who and what I am."

"Well, it isn't, so quit sniveling about it," Haplo snapped. He had to lash out at something and Alfred was the closest thing available. "You didn't send my people to the Labyrinth. You didn't cause the Sundering."

"No," said Alfred sadly, "but I didn't do much to set right what I found wrong. I always . . . fainted."

"Always?" Haplo glanced at the Sartan sharply, reminded suddenly of Grundle's wild tale. "How about back there on Draknor. Did you faint then?"

"I'm afraid so," said Alfred, hanging his head in fortification. "I'm not sure, of course. I don't seem to be able to remember much of anything that went on. Oh, by the way." He cast Haplo an uneasy, sidelong glance. "I'm afraid I . . . er . . . did what I could for your injuries. I hope you won't be too angry, but you were in terrible pain—"

Haplo looked down again at his bare skin. No, he wouldn't have been able to heal himself. He tried to be angry, it would have felt good to be angry, but he couldn't muster the energy to feel much of anything now.

"You're apologizing again," he said, and lay back down.

"I know. I'm sorry," said Alfred.

Haplo glared at him.

Alfred turned around and headed back across the small room to another bed.

"Thank you," Haplo said quietly.

Alfred, astonished, looked to see if he'd heard correctly. "Did you say something?"

Haplo damn well wasn't going to repeat himself. "Where are we?" he asked, though he already knew. "What happened after we left Draknor? How long have I been out?"

"A day and night and half another day. You were badly hurt. I tried to convince Samah to allow your magic to return, to let you use it to heal yourself, but he refused. He's frightened. Very frightened. I know how he feels. I understand such fear."

Alfred fell silent, stared long at nothing. Haplo shifted restlessly. "I asked you—"

The Sartan blinked and came out of his reverie.

"I'm sorry. Oh! There I go, apologizing again. No, no. I won't do it anymore. I promise. Where was I? The seawater. They have been bathing you in it twice a day." Alfred glanced at the dog and smiled. "Your friend

there put up quite a fight whenever anyone came near you. He nearly bit Samah. The dog will listen to me now. I think the animal's beginning to trust me."

Haplo snorted, didn't see the need to pursue that subject further. "What about the mensch? They get home safely?"

"As a matter of fact, no. That is, they're safe enough," Alfred amended hastily, seeing Haplo frown, "but they didn't go home. Samah offered to take them. He's been quite good to them, in fact, in his own way. It's just that he doesn't understand them. But the mensch—the dwarf maid and the elven lad—refused to leave you. The dwarf was extremely stubborn about it. She gave Samah a piece of her mind."

Haplo could picture Grundle, chin outthrust, shaking her side whiskers at the Sartan Councillor. The Patryn smiled. He wished he could have seen it.

"The mensch are here, staying in this house. They've been to see you as often as the Sartan would allow. In fact, I'm surprised they haven't come to visit before now. But, then, of course, this is the morning of the—"

Alfred stopped in some confusion.

"The what?" Haplo demanded, suddenly suspicious.

"I really hadn't intended to mention it. I didn't want to worry you."

"Worry me?" Haplo gazed at the Sartan in amazement, then burst out laughing. He laughed until he felt tears burn in his eyes, drew in a deep, shuddering breath. "I'm in a Sartan prison, stripped of my magic, taken captive by the most powerful Sartan wizard who ever lived, and you don't want to worry me."

"I'm sor—" Alfred caught Haplo's baleful gaze, gulped, and kept quiet.

"Let me guess," said Haplo grimly. "Today is the day the Council meets to decide what to do with us. That's it, isn't it?"

Alfred nodded. Returning to his bed, he sat down, long, ungainly arms dangling dejectedly between his legs.

"Well, what can they do to you? Slap you on the wrist? Make you promise to be a good boy and stay away from the nasty Patryn?"

It was supposed to have been a joke. Alfred didn't laugh.

"I don't know," he said in low, fearful tones. "You see, I overheard Samah talking once and he said—"

"Hush!" Haplo warned, sat up.

A voice, a female voice, had begun to chant outside the door. The glowing runes of warding faded, began to disappear.

"Ah," said Alfred, brightening, "that's Orla!"

The Sartan was transformed. Stooped shoulders straightened, he stood up tall, looked almost dignified. The door opened and a woman, ushering two mensch before her, stepped inside.

"Haplo!" Grundle cried, and, before the Patryn knew what was happening, she dashed forward and flung herself into his arms.

"Alake's dead!" she wailed. "I didn't mean for her to die. It's all my fault!"

"There now," he said, patting her awkwardly on the broad, solid back. She clung to him, blubbering.

Haplo gave her a little shake. "Listen to me, Grundle."

The dwarf gulped, sniffed, gradually quieted.

"What you three did was dangerous, foolhardy," Haplo said sternly. "You were wrong. You shouldn't have gone there by yourselves. But you did, and nothing can change that. Alake was a princess. Her life was dedicated to her people. She died for her people, Grundle. For her people"—the Patryn looked at Sartan—"and maybe for a lot of other people, as well."

The Sartan woman who had come in with them put her hand to her eyes and turned her face away. Alfred, going to her, hung about her timidly, his arm starting of its accord to steal around the woman's shoulders, to offer her comfort. The arm hesitated, drew back.

Blast the man! thought Haplo. He can't even make love to a woman properly.

Grundle snuffled a little, hiccuped.

"Hey, come on, now," Haplo told her gruffly. "Cut it out. Look, you're upsetting my dog."

The dog, who appeared to have taken this personally, had been adding his howls to hers. Grundle wiped away her tears, and managed a wan smile.

"How are you, sir?" Devon asked, sitting on the end of the bed.

"I've been better," Haplo said. "But so have you, I'll wager."

"Yes, sir," Devon answered.

He was pale and unhappy. His terrible ordeal had left its mark on him. But he seemed more assured, more confident. He had come to know himself.

He wasn't the only one.

"We have to talk to you!" Grundle said, pulling on Haplo's wet sleeve.

"Yes, it's very important," Devon added.

The two exchanged glances, looked over at the Sartan: Alfred and the woman he called Orla.

"You want to be alone. That's all right. We'll leave." Alfred started to shuffle off.

The woman, smiling, laid her hand on his arm. "I don't think that would be possible." She cast a significant glance at the door. The warding runes were not alight, but footsteps could be heard pacing outside—a guard.

Alfred seemed to shrivel up. "You're right," he said in a low voice. "I wasn't thinking. We'll sit here and we won't listen. We promise."

He sat down on the bed, patted a place beside him. "Please, sit down."

The woman looked at the bed, then at Alfred. She flushed deeply. Haplo thought back to Alake, looking the same, reacting the same.

Alfred turned a truly remarkable shade of red, jumped to his feet.

"I never meant— Of course, I wouldn't— What must you think? No chairs. I only intended—"

"Yes, thank you," said Orla faintly, and sat down at the end of the bed.

Alfred resumed his seat at the opposite end of the bed, gaze fixed on his shoes.

Grundle, who had been watching with considerable impatience, took hold of Haplo's hand, dragged him off into a corner, as far from the Sartan as possible. Devon followed. The two, serious and solemn, began to tell their tale in loud whispers.

It might have seemed impossible, being in the same room with three people having an intense discussion and not listening, but the two Sartan managed it admirably. Neither of them heard a word spoken, both being far too intent on voices within to pay much attention to those without.

Orla sighed. Her hands twisted together nervously and she glanced at Alfred every few seconds, as if trying to make up her mind whether or not to speak.

Alfred, sensing her tension, wondered at the cause. A thought occurred to him.

"The Council. It's meeting now, isn't it?"

"Yes," Orla answered, but without a voice.

"You're . . . you're not there?"

She started to reply, but ended up only shaking her head. "No," she said, after a moment's pause. Lifting her chin, she spoke more firmly. "No, I'm not there. I quit the Council."

Alfred gaped. To his knowledge, no Sartan had ever done such a thing. None had ever even contemplated it, so far as he knew.

"Because ... of me?" Alfred asked timidly.

"Yes. Because of you. Because of him." She looked at the Patryn. "Because of them." Her gaze went to the mensch.

"What did— How did Samah—?"

"He was furious. In fact," Orla added complacently, with a smile, "I'm on trial myself now, along with you and the Patryn."

"No!" Alfred was appalled. "He can't! I won't allow you to—"

"Hush!" Orla rested her hand on his lips. "It's all right." She took hold of Alfred's hand, the hand that was clumsy, rawboned, too large. "You've taught me so much. I'm not afraid anymore. Whatever they do to us, I'm not afraid."

"What will Samah do?" Alfred's fingers closed over hers. "What happened to others, my dear? What happened to those of our people, who, long ago, discovered the truth?"

Orla turned to face him. Her eyes met his steadily, her voice was calm.

"Samah cast them into the Labyrinth."

CHAPTER \* 33

## SURUNAN CHELESTRA

HEARD THE DRAGON-SNAKES SAY THAT, HAPLO," GRUNDLE asserted, looking frightened at the memory. "They said it was all a trick and they were going to make our people slaughter each other and they were going to take you prisoner—"

"To your lord," Devon struck in. "The dragon-snakes plan to take you back to your lord and denounce you as a traitor. They said all that. We heard them."

"You have to believe us!" Grundle insisted.

The Patryn had listened closely, frowned at what he heard, but he hadn't spoken.

"You do believe us, don't you?" Devon asked.

"I believe you."

Hearing conviction in his voice, the two relaxed, looked reassured. Haplo heard the echo of the snake's words. Chaos is our life's blood. Death our meat and drink.

On Abarrach, he'd found evidence that there might be a power for a greater good. If that was true, then he thought it quite likely that here, on Chelestra, he had discovered its opposite.

He wondered if Alfred had heard, and glanced across the room. Obviously not. The Sartan looked as white if he'd just taken a spear through the heart.

"Sartan!" Haplo said sharply. "You need to hear this. Tell them what you told me," he urged Grundle, "about the dragon-snakes and Death's Gate."

Alfred turned his head toward the dwarf. Shaken, he was obviously only half-listening. Orla, more composed, gave Grundle serious attention.

Abashed at this audience, Grundle began her story somewhat flustered, grew more confident as she went along.

"I didn't understand hardly any of it. I did, at the beginning, all about how they planned to flood your city with seawater and that would ruin your magic and you'd have to escape. But then they began to talk about something called 'Death's Gate'?"

She looked to Devon for verification. The elf nodded.

"Yes, that was it. 'Death's Gate.' "

Alfred was suddenly attentive. "Death's Gate? What about Death's Gate?"

"You tell them," Grundle urged the elf. "You know the exact words they used. I never can remember."

Devon hesitated, to make certain he had it right. "They said: 'They will be forced to do what they were strong enough to resist doing ages before. Samah will open Death's Gate! And then they said something after that about entering Death's Gate ...'"

Orla gasped, rose to her feet, her hand pressed to her breast. "That's what Samah means to do! He talks of opening Death's Gate if the mensch attack us!"

"And that will unleash this terrible evil on the other worlds," Haplo said. "The dragon-snakes will grow in numbers and in power. And who will be left to fight them?"

"Samah must be stopped," said Orla. She turned to the dwarf and the elf. "Your people must be stopped."

"We don't want war," Devon returned gravely. "But we must have a place to live. You leave us little choice."

"We can work it out. We'll bring everybody together, negotiate—"

"It is late for that, 'Wife.' " Samah appeared, standing in the doorway. "War has begun. Hordes of mensch are sailing for our city. They are being led by the dragon-snakes."

"But . . . that's not possible!" Grundle cried. "My people are afraid of the dragon-snakes."

"The elves would not follow the dragon-snakes without good reason," stated Devon, eyeing Samah narrowly. "Something must have happened to force them to make such a drastic decision."

"Something did happen, as you well know. You and the Patryn."

"Us!" Grundle exclaimed. "How could we do anything! We've been here with you! Though we'd like to do something," she added, but it was a mutter, into her whiskers.

Devon poked her in the back, and she subsided.

"I think you should explain yourself, Samah," Orla intervened, "before you accuse children of starting a war."

"Very well, 'Wife.' I will explain."

Samah used the word as a whip, but Orla did not flinch beneath it. She stood calmly beside Alfred.

"The dragon-snakes went to the mensch and told them that we Sartan were responsible for the unfortunate death of the young human female. The dragons claimed that we took the other two children captive, that we are holding them hostage."

His cold gaze turned to Devon and Grundle. "All very well planned—the way you two persuaded us to take you along. The Patryn's idea, of course."

"Yeah, sure," muttered Haplo tiredly. "I thought it up right before I passed out."

"We didn't plan anything like that!" Grundle protested, her lower lip quivering. "We told you the truth! I think you're a wicked man!"

"Hush, Grundle." Devon put his arms around her. "What are you going to do to us?"

"We do not make war against children," said Samah. "You will be returned safely to your families. And you will carry with you this message for your people: Attack us at your own peril. We know all about your plan to flood our city with seawater. You think that this will weaken us, but your 'friends' the Patryn and his evil minions, have willfully misled you. You will not find a city of a few helpless Sartan. You will find a city of thousands of Sartan, armed with the power of centuries, armored by the might of other worlds—"

"You're going to open Death's Gate," said Haplo.

Samah did not deign to respond. "Repeat my words to your people. I want it to be remembered that we gave them fair warning."

"You can't be serious!" Alfred extended pleading hands. "You don't know what you're saying! Opening Death's Gate would mean . . . disaster. The dragon-snakes would be able to enter other worlds. The dreadful lazar on Abarrach are waiting for just such a chance to enter this one!"

"So is my lord," Haplo said, shrugging. "You'd be doing him a favor."

"This is what the dragons want you to do, Samah," Orla cried. "These children know. They overheard the dragons' plotting."

"As if I'd believe them ... or any of you." Samah glanced around at them all in disdain. "At the first breach in the walls, I will open Death's Gate. I will summon our brethren from the other worlds. And there are Sartan on other worlds. You cannot fool me with your lies.

"As for your lord"—Samah turned to Haplo—"he will be cast back into the Labyrinth along with the rest of your evil race. And this time, there will be no escape!"

"Councillor, don't do this." Alfred's voice was calm, sad. "The true evil isn't out there. The true evil is here." He placed his hand on his heart. "It is fear. I know it well. I've given way to its power most of my life.

"Once, long ago, Death's Gate was meant to stand open, to lead us from death into a new and better existence. But the time for that is past. Too much has changed. If you open Death's Gate now, you will discover, to your bitter sorrow and regret, that you have uncovered a darker and more sinister aspect to the name Death's Gate—a name that was once meant to stand for hope."

Samah listened in silence, with exemplary patience.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

"I am," replied Alfred humbly.

"Very well. It is time these mensch were returned to their families." Samah gestured. "Come, children. Stand together. Don't be afraid of the magic. It will not harm you. You will seem to sleep, and when you wake up, you will be safely with your people."

"I'm not afraid of you." Grundle sniffed. "I've seen better magic than you could ever hope to make."

Glancing conspiratorially at Alfred, she winked.

Alfred looked extremely confused.

"You remember what is it you have to say to your people?" Samah asked.

"We remember," said Devon, "and so will our people. We'll remember your words as long as we live. Farewell, Haplo." The elf turned to him. "Thank you not only for my life, but for teaching me to live it."

"Good-bye, Haplo," said Grundle. She went over to him, hugged him around his knees.

"No more eavesdropping," he said severely.

Grundle heaved a sigh. "I know. I promise."

She stood a moment, fumbling at something she had nicked inside a pocket of her dress. The object was large, too large for the pocket, and now it was stuck fast. Grundle tugged, the pocket tore. Wrenching the object loose, she held it out to Haplo. It was a book, its leather-bound cover worn and stained with what might have been tears.

"I want you to have this. It's a journal I kept when we left to go to the dragon-snakes. I asked the lady"—Grundle nodded at Orla—"to fetch it for me. She did. She's nice. I was going to write some more in it, I was going to write the end, but ... I couldn't. It's too sad.

"Anyway," she continued, wiping away a stray tear, "just ignore all the bad things I say about you at the beginning. I didn't know you then. I mean . . . You'll understand? . . ."

"Yes," said Haplo, accepting the gift. "I'll understand."

Devon took Grundle's hand, the two stood together before Samah. The Councillor sang the runes. Fiery trails of sigla formed in the air, encircled the dwarf and the elf. Their eyes closed, heads drooped, they leaned against each other. The runes flared, and the two were gone.

The dog gave a dismal howl. Haplo rested his hand on the animal's head, counseling silence.

"That's accomplished," said Samah briskly. "Now, we have a most unpleasant task. The sooner we get it done, the better.

"You, who call yourself Alfred Montbank. Your case has been brought before the Council. After careful deliberation, we have found you guilty of consorting with the enemy, of plotting against your own people, of attempting to deceive us with lies, of speaking heresy. We have passed sentence upon you. Do you, Alfred Montbank, concede that the Council has the right and the wisdom to pass such sentence upon you that will enable you to learn from your mistakes and make reparation for them?"

The speech was a mere formality, always asked of each person who came before the Council. But Alfred listened to it intently, appeared to be considering each word carefully.

" 'Learn from my mistakes and make reparation for them,' " he repeated to himself. He looked up at Samah and when he answered, his voice was firm and steadfast. "Yes, Councillor, I do."

"Alfred, you can't!" Orla flung herself upon her husband. "Don't go through with this, Samah! I beg you! Why won't you listen?"

"Be silent, Wife!" Samah thrust her back, away from him. "Your sentence, too, has been passed. You have a choice. You can go with him or remain among us. But either way, you will be stripped of your powers of magic."

Orla stared at him, her face livid. Slowly, she shook her head. "You're insane, Samah. Your fear has driven you mad."

Coming to stand beside Alfred, she took hold of his arm. "I choose to go with him."

"No, Orla," Alfred told her, "I can't allow it. You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. You forget," she reminded him, smiling at him tremulously, "I've shared your visions." She looked over at the Patryn. "I know what we face and I'm not afraid."

Haplo wasn't paying attention. The Patryn had been studying the Sartan who stood guard at the door, calculating the odds on jumping the man and making good his escape. The chances were slim, almost hopeless, but it beat hanging around here, waiting for Samah to give him another bath.

He tensed, prepared to attack. Samah turned suddenly, spoke to the guard. Haplo forced himself to relax, tried to look nonchalant.

"Ramu. Take these two to the Council Chamber and make them ready for the sending. We must cast this spell immediately, before the mensch attack. Gather together all the members of the Council. They will all be needed to perform magic of this magnitude."

"What spell of sending?" Haplo was instantly on his guard, thinking it had something to do with him. "What's going on?"

Ramu entered, stood beside the door.

Alfred walked forward, Orla at his side. The two moved calmly, with dignity. And for once, Haplo noted in wonder, Alfred didn't fall over anything.

Haplo moved to block Alfred's path. "Where are they sending you?"

"To the Labyrinth," Alfred answered.

"What?"

Haplo laughed, thinking this was some bizarre plot to trap him, though for what purpose he couldn't imagine. "I don't believe it!"

"Others were sent before us, Haplo. We are not the first. Long ago, during the Sundering, the Sartan who discovered and embraced the truth were cast into prison along with your people."

Haplo stared, dazed. It didn't make sense. It wasn't possible. And yet he knew Alfred was telling the truth. The Sartan couldn't lie.

"You can't do this!" Haplo protested to Samah. "You're sentencing them to death!"

"Drop the concerned act, Patryn. It will gain you nothing. You will be joining your 'friend' soon enough, after we have questioned you fully concerning this so-called Lord of the Nexus and his plans."

Haplo ignored the man, turned to Alfred. "You're going to let him send you to the Labyrinth? Just like that? You've been there! In my mind! You know what it's like. You won't last two minutes. You or her! Fight, damn it! For once in your life, stand up and fight!"

Alfred paled, looked troubled. "No, I couldn't . . ."

"Yes, you can! Grundle was right. You were the dragon, weren't you? You saved our lives on Draknor. You're powerful, more powerful than Samah, more powerful than any Sartan who has ever lived. The dragon-snakes know it. Serpent Mage, they call you. He knows it. That's why he's getting rid of you."

"Thank you, Haplo," Alfred said gently, "but even if what you say is true, and I did turn myself into a dragon, I can't remember how I did it. No, it's all right. Please, understand."

He reached out, rested a hand on the Patryn's muscle-clenched arm. "All my life I've been running away from what I am. Either that, or fainting. Or apologizing." He was calm, almost serene. "I'm not running anymore."

"Yeah," said Haplo harshly. "Well, you better not faint either. Not in the Labyrinth." He jerked his arm away from the Sartan's touch.

"I'll try to remember." Alfred smiled.

The dog whimpered, crowded close, rubbing its muzzle against Alfred's leg. He patted it gingerly. "Take care of him, boy. Don't lose him again."

Ramu stepped between them, began to chant the runes.

Sigla flashed, blinding Haplo. The heat drove him back. When he could see again, the red runes of warding burned before the door, blocked the windows.

The Sartan were gone.

CHAPTER \* 34

SURUNAN CHELESTRA

LAY BACK DOWN ON THE BED. NOTHING HE COULD DO EX cept wait. His skin was starting to dry. The sigla on his body were visible once again, faintly. It would take a long time for his magic to return fully, time he guessed he didn't have. The Sartan would be back soon, douse him with water, then try to force him to talk.

That should prove entertaining.

In the meantime, he supposed, he should try to get what rest he could. The loss of his magic made him feel tired, weak. He wondered if this was a real, physical reaction or only in his mind. He wondered about other things, lying on his back, attempting to comfort the grieving dog.

Sartan men and women in the Labyrinth. Sent there with their enemies. What had happened to them? Presumably, of course, the Patryns, in their fury, would have turned on them, killed them.

But what if they didn't? Haplo mused. What if those longtime enemies were forced to put aside their hatred and their anger and work together in order to survive? And what if, during the long, dark nights, they lay down together; sought comfort in each other's arms, a respite from their terror? Could it be that, long ago, Patryn and Sartan blood had mingled?

The thought staggered Haplo. It was too overwhelming to comprehend. The possibilities it presented were too confusing.

His hand stroked the dog's head, which rested on his chest. The animal's eyes closed, it sighed and nestled near him, on the bed. Haplo was almost asleep himself when the world rippled.

His eyes flared open. He tensed, alarmed, panicked by the terrifying sensation, yet unable to move a muscle to combat it. The ripple effect began at his feet, spread upward, carried sickness and dizziness with it. He could only watch, feel it, helpless to act.

Once before, he'd experienced this. Once before, the world around him had rippled. Once before, he had seen himself, without shape or dimension, pasted flat against his surroundings that were themselves as thin and brittle as a dead leaf.

The waves spread above him, bending the room, bending the walls, the ceiling. The red warding runes that barred the doors and windows winked out, but Haplo could not take advantage of their absence. He couldn't move.

Last time, the dog had vanished, too. He grabbed hold of it. This time, it remained, dozing quietly, sleeping through everything.

The ripple effect passed as swiftly as it had come. The red warding runes flared again. The dog snored.

Drawing a deep breath, letting it out, Haplo stared up at nothing.

The last time the world had rippled, Alfred had been the cause. Alfred had entered Death's Gate.

The Patryn woke suddenly, body tingling with alarm. It was night, the room was dark or would have been, but for the glowing runes. He sat up, trying to remember, isolate the sound that had brought him wide awake from a deep sleep. He was so intent on listening that he didn't notice, at first, the sigla on his skin gleaming a bright blue.

"I must have slept a long time," he said to the dog, who had itself been roused from slumber. "I wonder why they didn't come for me? What do you suppose is going on, boy?"

The dog seemed to think it had some idea, for it jumped off the bed and padded over to the window. Haplo, having the same idea, followed. He drew as close to the runes as he could, ignoring the magical heat that burned his skin, his own magic unable to protect long against it. Shielding his eyes with his hand, he squinted against the sigla's flaring brilliance, tried to look outside.

He couldn't see much in the night; shadows running through the shadows, darker shapes of darkness. But he could hear their shouts; it was the shouting that had wakened him.

"The wall is breached! The water is flooding our city!"

Haplo thought he heard footsteps at the door. He tensed, turned, prepared to fight. It was foolish of them to have allowed him to regain his magic. He'd teach them how foolish.

The footsteps hesitated a moment, then began to retreat. Haplo walked to the door, listened until the sound faded away. If there had been a Sartan guard, he wasn't there now.

The runes of warding were still strong, however, still powerful. Haplo was forced to draw back from the door; fighting the heat was draining his strength.

Besides, no need to waste his energy.

"Might as well relax, boy," he advised the dog. "We'll be out of here, soon enough."

And then where would he go? What would he do?

Back to the Labyrinth. To look for Alfred. To look for others . . .

Smiling quietly, Haplo returned to his bed, stretched out comfortably, and waited for the seawater to rise.

## APPENDIX

### MAGICAL BATTLE

BETWEEN PATRYN AND SARTAN;

### A FURTHER EXPLANATION

BOTH SARTAN AND PATRYN MAGIC IS BASED ON THE THEORY OF POSSibilities.' A contest between the two can best be described as a lethal version of a children's game known as Knife, Paper, Stone. [2] In this game, each child provides himself with three objects: a small knife, a piece of paper, and a rock. These objects are hidden behind the back. Opponents face each other and, at a given signal, both grab an object and bring it forth in mock battle. The goal is to try to guess which weapon out of three possible weapons the opponent will use this round and be prepared to counter his attack.

The various outcomes are determined thus:

Knife cuts paper. (Whoever produces the knife wins this round.)

Stone crushes knife.

Paper covers stone.

See "Magic in the Sundered Realms, Excerpts from a Sartan's Musing" in Dragon Wing, vol. i of The Death Gate Cycle.

One theory holds that this game was played by mensch children desirous of emulating Sartan (or Patryn) heroes.

\*3-90\*

WEIS AND HICKMAN

Knife, Paper, Stone is, of course, an extremely simplified version of a magical battle between Patryn and Sartan, each of whom would have at his or her disposal innumerable possibilities for attack and defense.

Ancient duels between the two were rarely fought "in hot Wood" as was the fight between Samah and Haplo. Both races had their images to consider and a battle would take place only after a challenge had been issued and accepted. A Patryn was always ready to fight in public view. A Sartan might agree, but only if he or she felt that such a public display of prowess and courage would prove instructive to the mensch.

Public duels were held in arenas and provided absolutely marvelous shows, although the presence of a crowd rather hampered some of the more spectacular magical effects. It would never do, for example, to call down a lightning bolt on one's enemy and mistakenly electrocute half the audience. Thus these public battles rarely ended in death, but were similar to a chess tournament where one opponent attempts to place the other in checkmate.

Private contests were much more serious, fought on a more lethal scale, and almost always ended in death for either one or both opponents. They were held in secret places, known only to the two races, where destructive forces could be unleashed without endangering innocent bystanders. Sometimes the two fought alone, but more often family members and members of the Council attended to serve as witnesses. They were never permitted to intervene.

It should be noted here that the Sartan Council was always publicly opposed to these duels and would endeavor, until the last moment, to stop the fight.

Despite the limitless number of possibilities available, most wizards generally followed a set pattern, based on the dictates of logic. The first spells to be cast were usually either defensive or distractive in nature. They were easy, requiring little effort on the part of the spellcaster, and enabled him to study and feel out his opponent. Thus, a Sartan wizard might attempt to distract his enemy by sending a million snakes into combat; the Patryn might counter by surrounding himself with a wall of fire.

Such distractions and defenses would give way to powerful offensive spells and equally powerful defenses. Opponents were required to see an attack coming and react to it within seconds, all the while guarding against attacks (such as lightning bolts) against which one could not defend oneself. The slightest miscalculation, the blinking of an eye, a momentary weakening, almost always proved fatal.

Excerpt from a treatise, untitled, discovered in the library of the Sartan on Chelestra.

'Xar A Chronicle of Power, vol. 24. The personal daily journal of the Lord 01 the Nexus. (Xar was not his real name. It is not a Patryn name at all in fact, and is undoubtedly one he devised himself, possibly a corruption of the ancient word tsar, derived from Caesar.)

"The term used by both Sartan and Patryns to refer to the lesser races-numans, elves, dwarves. It is interesting to note that this word is borrowed from one of the many pre-Sundering human languages (probably German) and means "people.""

^References to Haplo's journeys to the worlds of Arianus, Pryan, and most lately to Abarrach, recorded in previous volumes of The Death Gate Cycle.

Lazar: the terrible necromancers of Abarrach, the Realm of Fire, whose living souls are trapped in dead bodies.

Since the Sartan language is magic in and of itself, Sartan have two names: a private name which is magical and could possibly give another Sartan power over them and a public name that tends to nullify magic.

Dear Stranger, a journal kept by Grundle Heavybeard, princess of Gargan.

3One of many small, habitable landmasses created by the Sartan. Their name derives from the fact that these small moons orbit the season of Chelestra, albeit on the inside, not the outside.

4Dwarves make several stages of progression through life, beginning with the Time of Weaning, proceeding through the Time of Seeking, and advancing into the Time of Sense. Dwarves are not permitted to marry until they reach the Time of Sense, when it is considered that the hot blood of the Seeking time has cooled into the common sense of adulthood. This is equivalent in human terms to about fifty years of age. After the Time of Sense, at approximately the age of two hundred, dwarves pass into the Time of Wisdom.

The season's position relative to the seamoons makes it appear, to those standing on these particular moons, as if the sun is in the water beneath them. Light shines from the water, therefore, not the sky. The sky itself often appears a turquoise color that comes from mosses growing on the surface of the air-caverns of the seamoon.

Dwarven standard of measure: 1 stadion = 620 dwarf feet. The stadion is also a dwarven footrace that commemorates the combined Times of the reign of the first two kings. Whether the race was named after the standard or vice versa is not known.

7Dwarven military service is organized around family clans whose young men serve together as a unit. Units, known as regos, are organized under the clan master. Hartmut commands a rego consisting of four clans, thus his title. Above him are the rego master, the marshall, the clan master, and, finally, the Vater.

\*The dwarves on Chelestra believe that they are all descendants of the only two dwarves to have survived the Sundering and that they are, therefore, all related to each other. While the legend is highly suspect, it does help explain the solid unity of the dwarfs, who have a strong regard for family. In this sense, the royal family are viewed more as parent figures than as monarches.

Dwarves use the more appropriate term sinking rather than sailing to describe travel in a submersible. Humans and elves prefer the ancient terminology.

2Humans were the first to communicate with the dolphins and learn their language. Elves think dolphins amusing gossips, entertaining conversationalists, fun to have at parties. Dwarves, who learned how to talk to the dolphins from the humans, use dolphins mainly as a source of information on navigation. Dwarves-being naturally suspicious of anyone or anything that is not a dwarf-do not trust the dolphins, however.

Humans and elves claim that the dolphin is not a fish, but a species similar to themselves, because dolphins give birth to their young the same way they do. Dwarves have no use for such a nonsensical notion. Anything that swims like a fish is a fish, according to dwarves.

The name rune does not offer the babe much magical protection. Most of that comes from the tit, as the saying goes, from

Runners, such as Haplo's parents, would cease their Run and move in with a Squatter tribe until the child was old enough to keep up with them. Such instances were very rare. The fact that Haplo has any memory at all of his biological parents is quite remarkable among Patryns.

2 Although Chelestra is a world made up entirely of water, there are places where large pockets of gases collect to form gigantic bubbles. One of these bubbles surrounds Death's Gate, probably placed there purposefully by the Sartan, in order to allow time for the traveler to make the transition from one world to another, and to prepare his vessel for entry into the sea.

'You will note Alfred does not use a formal title, such as "sir" or "my lord" when speaking to the Head of the Council, which was the ruling body in Sartan society. Such distinctions of rank or class were supposedly unknown in Sartan society at the time of the Sundering. It would, however, have been more correct of Alfred to refer to Samah as Brother. The fact that Alfred does not indicates his continued distrust of his own people.

Time on the seamoons is regulated by the passage of the season from under one shore to its rising on the opposite side. Human wizards determined this to be a 150-degree arc and split the day into two sextans of 75 degrees. Each sextan is divided into 5 signe; a signe is made up of 60 minutes.

2 A duenna is a member of the royal court who acts as chaperon to unmarried women.

As related in Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

A position of honor, granted to those deemed most likely to be full members of the Council at some future date. The post is often hereditary, but is open to all Sartan. Applicants come before the Council and must pass certain secret tests, pertaining not only to their abilities in magic, which must be superior, but to their general knowledge. Servitors act as pages, runners, and must be prepared to defend the Council members in the unlikely event that they are ever attacked. There are seven Servitors, but only two attend regular Council sessions.

By safe, Haplo means that no children could come of such a dalliance, since the various races are not genetically compatible.

The pricklebulb fish. Spherical with long razor-edged fronds, it emits a bright light that serves as a lure for its victims. If it feels threatened, its light glows even brighter, until it blinds the potential predator and drives it away. For this reason, it is wise to keep the lantern well fed and comfortable.

'Human translation: the Dark Place.

Similar in appearance to jellyfish, each has a shared intelligence with all the others, each one contains all the knowledge of the entire group. They make excellent spies, since what one learns is instantly passed on to every other gushni Jn Chelestra. They cannot speak and are probably linked to the dragon-snakes telepathically.

1 Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

2 A reference to the elven practice of hiding bad-tasting medicine in sugared rose petals.

Most likely cedar.

'The people of the Labyrinth can be divided generally into two groups: the Runners and the Squatters. The Runners are those who, like Haplo, seek to escape the Labyrinth. They travel alone; their lives are restless, short. The Squatters have banded together to form tribes for protection and to provide for the continuance of

the race. They are nomadic, but do not move as fast or far as the Runners. Survival, not escape, is their primary goal.

Humans, when in their own homeland of Phondra, have no use for furniture. They sit on the ground, sleep on the ground—a practice both elves and dwarves consider barbaric and another reason that meetings of the royal houses were generally held on Elmas.

A reference to what the dwarves know as scurvy.

Dwarves have a low regard for fish and eat it only when no other, more substantial, food is available. A slang word among dwarves for fish is elmas-fleish, or "elf-meat."

Reference to the startling and horrifying discovery that the dead were being brought to life in Abarrach, recounted in *Fire Sea*, vol. 3, *The Death Gate Cycle*. It is theorized that for one person to be brought to life untimely, another will die untimely.

2 A reference to Alfred's adventures with the child Bane, the assassin Hugh the Hand, and his first meeting with Haplo, recounted in *Dragon Wing*, vol. 1 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

3A more complete history of the Patrins can be found in *Fire Sea*, vol. 3 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

The next several pages of Grundle's journal chronicle events previously related. Since—with one exception—they correspond with Haplo's account, these passages will be deleted. The exception is Devon's attempted suicide, which Grundle describes as an "accident while picking sugarfruit." It is interesting to note that even in her own private writings, she loyally perpetuates the deception.

2This is, however, the last entry in Grundle's journal.

As stated previously, Grundle leaves us no record of later events. We must refer, therefore, to this account, which is taken from Haplo's *Chelestra: World of Water*, volume four, *Death Gate journals*.

Reference to Haplo's fight with the chaodyn, *Dragon Wing*, vol. 1 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

3Dwarves do not like green vegetables; the potato, the carrot, and the onion are the only vegetables in the dwarven diet, and even these they will not eat raw.

Sound is the most reliable form of communication in the sea. Ship captains know and utilize the various distinct sounds that the seamoons—the dur-nai—make as they drift through the water. These sounds are detected by "elf ears," magical devices made by elven wizards that pick up the sounds and transmit them through a hollow tube to the ship's captain. By noting the various locations of these sounds and their distances, the position of the ship can be determined.

Unfortunately, however, the captains would be familiar only with their own local waters. Out of those waters, they must now rely on the dragon-snakes for guidance.

'For further information on these magical battles, see Appendix I.

2Extremely unlikely, considering the wide degree of difference in the magical constructs of each race. Most battles were won through sheer luck, though you would never find the victor who would admit it.

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman  
Deathgate Cycle 5  
THE HAND OF CHAOS

## INTRODUCTION

TO THE

FOUR REALMS

I AM CALLED HAPLO.

My name means single, alone. It was given to me by my parents as a sort of prophecy, for they knew they would not survive the prison into which my people, the Patryns, had been cast—the prison of dark and terrible magics known as the Labyrinth.

I became a Runner—one who fights the Labyrinth. I was one of the lucky ones I made it through the Final Gate, though I very nearly perished in the attempt. If it had not been for this sausage-stealing dog who sits here beside me, I would not be here, penning this account. The dog gave me the will to live when I would have given up and died. He saved my life.

The dog gave me the will to live, but my lord Xar gave me a reason to live, a purpose.

Xar was the first Patryn to escape the Labyrinth. He is old and powerful, highly skilled in the rune-magic that gives both the Patryns and our enemies, the Sartan, our strength. Xar escaped the Labyrinth, then immediately went back into it. No other has ever had the courage to do so, and even now he risks his life daily to rescue us.

Many of us have emerged from the Labyrinth. We live in the Nexus, which we have made into a beautiful city. But have we been rehabilitated as our captors had intended?

An impatient people, we learned patience in that hard school. A selfish people, we learned self-sacrifice, loyalty. Above all, we learned to hate.

It is my lord Xar's goal—our goal—to take back the world that was snatched from us, to rule it as we were always meant to rule, and to inflict dire punishment on our enemies.

The realms used to be but one world, one beautiful green-blue world. It belonged to us and the Sartan, for our rune-magic made us powerful. The other, lesser races, whom we call mensch—the humans, elves, and dwarves—worshipped us as gods.

But the Sartan thought we Patryns were gaining too much control. The balance of power started to shift in our favor. Furious, the Sartan did the only thing they could to stop us. Using their rune-magic—the magic based on probabilities—the Sartan sundered the world and cast us into prison.

They formed four new worlds out of the rubble of the old, each from an element of the original: air, fire, stone, water. The four are connected by the magical Death's Gate—conduits through which those possessing the rune-magic may safely travel. The four worlds should have worked to support each other: Pryan, the world of fire, would supply energy to Abarrach, the world of stone. Abarrach would supply ores and minerals to Chelestra, world of water, and so forth. All was to be coordinated and fueled by a wondrous machine, the Kicksey-winsey, which the Sartan constructed on Arianus.

But the plans of the Sartan went awry. Their populations on each of the worlds began to mysteriously dwindle and die out. The Sartan on each world called for help from the others, but their pleas went unanswered. Each world had its own troubles.

I discovered this, you see, because it was my task—assigned to me by Xar—to travel to each of the worlds. I was to spy them out and discover what had happened to our ancient enemy. And so, I visited each realm. The complete record of my adventures can be found in my journals, which have come to be known as The Death Gate Cycle.

What I learned was a complete surprise. My discoveries changed my life—and not for the better. When I set forth, I had all the answers. Now, I am left only with questions.

My lord blames my unsettled state of mind on a Sartan I met during my travels. A Sartan who calls himself by a mensch name—Alfred Montbank. And at first, I agreed with my lord. I blamed Alfred, I was convinced he was tricking me.

But now, I am not so certain. I doubt everything—myself... my lord.

Let me try to teil you—in brief—what happened to me.

## ARIANUS

The first world I visited was the world of air, Arianus. It is made up of floating continents that exist on three levels. The Low Realm is the home of the dwarves, and it is here, on Drevlin, that the Sartan built the great and wondrous machine, the Kicksey-winsey. But before the Sartan could get the machine working, they began to die. Panic-stricken, they placed their young people into a state of suspended animation, hoping that when they awoke, the situation would have stabilized.

But only one of the Sartan survived—Alfred. He awoke to find himself the only one of his friends and family still alive. The knowledge appalled him, terrified him. He felt responsible for the chaos into which his world had fallen—for the mensch were, of course, on the brink of all-out war. Yet he was afraid of revealing the truth about himself. His rune-magic would give him the power of a demigod over the mensch. He feared that the mensch would try to force him to use his magic for their own destructive ends. And so Alfred hid his power, refused to use it even to save himself. Today, whenever he is threatened, instead of fighting back with his strong magic, Alfred faints.

The dog and I crash-landed on Arianus and nearly died. We were rescued by a dwarf named Limbeck. The dwarves on Arianus are slaves to the Kicksey-winsey, serving it mindlessly as it works away mindlessly, lacking any direction. But Limbeck is a revolutionary, a freethinker. The dwarves were, at that time, under the thumb of a strong nation of elves, who had set up a dictatorship on the Mid Level of Arianus. The elves therefore control the only supply of fresh water in the world, water that comes from the Kicksey-winsey.

The humans, who also dwell in the Mid Realm, have been at war with the elves over water for most of the history of Arianus. The war raged on during my time there, and the battle continues now—with one significant difference. An elven prince has arisen who wants peace, unity among the races. This prince has started a rebellion against his own people, but the only result, so far, has been to cause more chaos.

I managed to assist Limbeck, the dwarf, in leading his people in a revolt against both the humans and elves. And when I left, I brought with me a human child—a changeling named Bane—who had figured out the secret to the Kicksey-winsey. Once the machine is up and running, as the Sartan intended it to be, then my lord will use its power to begin his conquest of the other worlds.

I would have liked to have brought another mensch back with me—a human named Hugh the Hand. A highly skilled assassin, Hugh was the one of the few mensch I've met whom I could have accepted as a trusted ally. Unfortunately, Hugh the Hand died fighting Bane's father, an evil human wizard. And who did I get for a traveling companion?

Alfred.

But that is skipping ahead.

While I was on Arianus, I came across Alfred, who was acting as a servant to the child Bane. I am ashamed to admit it, but Alfred discovered I was a Patryn long before I knew he was a Sartan. When I found out, I intended to kill him, but, at the moment, I had enough to do to save my own life...

But that is a long story.\* Suffice it to say, I was forced to leave Arianus without settling my score with the one Sartan who had fallen into my grasp.

\*Dragon Wing, vol. I of The Death Gate Cycle.

## PRYAN

The next world the dog and I visited was Pryan, world of fire. Pryan is a gigantic world, a hollow sphere of rock, its size nearly incomprehensible to the mind. Its sun burns in the center. Life and vegetation exist on the rock's inner crust. Because the world does not rotate, Pryan's sun shines continually— there is no night. Consequently, Pryan is a world of jungle life so thick and heavy that few who live on the planet have ever seen the ground. Entire cities are built in the limbs of huge trees, whose strong branches support lakes, even oceans.

One of the first people I met on Pryan was a daft old wizard and the dragon who appears to be the old man's keeper. The wizard calls himself Zifnab (when he can remember to call himself anything at all!), and gives every indication of being a raving lunatic. Except that there are times when his madness is all too sane. He knows too much, this befuddled old fool; knows too much about me, about the Patryns, about the Sartan, about everything. He knows too much, yet tells exactly nothing.

Here on Pryan, as on Arianus, the mensch are at war with each other. Elves hate the humans, the humans mistrust the elves, the dwarves hate and mistrust everybody. I should know. I traveled with a bunch of humans, elves, and a dwarf. You never saw such quarreling and bickering and fighting. I grew sick of them and left. I have no doubt that they've all probably killed each other by now. That, or the tytans have slaughtered them.

The tytans.

I encountered many fearsome monsters in the Labyrinth, but few equaled the tytans. Gigantic humanoids, blind, with limited intelligence, the tytans are magical creations of the Sartan, who used them as overseers for the mensch. So long as the Sartan survived, they kept the tytans under control. But on Pryan, as on Arianus, the Sartan race mysteriously began to dwindle. The tytans were left without instruction, without supervision. Now they wander Pryan in large numbers, asking all the mensch they meet these strange questions:

"Where are the citadels? What is our purpose?"

When they receive no answer, the tytans fly into a rage and beat the wretched mensch to death. Nothing, no one, can withstand these terrible creatures, for they possess a rudimentary form of Sartan rune-magic. They came very close to destroying me, in fact, but that too is another tale.\*

\* Elven Star, vol. 2 of The Death Gate Cycle.

And what is the answer to their question? Where are the citadels? What are the citadels? This became my question as well. And I found at least part of the answer.

The citadels are shining cities, built by the Sartan upon their arrival on Pryan. As near as I can determine from records the Sartan left behind, the citadels were intended to gather energy from Pryan's constantly burning sun and transmit that energy to the other worlds, through Death's Gate, via the power of the Kicksey-winsey. But Death's Gate remained closed; the Kicksey-winsey didn't work. The citadels are empty, deserted. Their lights shine feebly, if at all.

## ABARRACH

I traveled next to Abarrach, world of stone.

And it was on this journey I picked up my unwanted traveling companion: Alfred, the Sartan.

Alfred had been navigating Death's Gate in a futile attempt to locate Bane, the child I'd taken from Arianus. Alfred bungled it, of course. The man can't walk without falling over his own shoelaces. He missed his destination and landed in my ship.

At this point, I made a mistake. Alfred was now my captive. I should have returned him immediately to my lord. Xar would have been able to elicit, painfully, all the secrets of this Sartan's soul.

But my ship had just entered Abarrach. I was loath to leave it, loath to travel back through Death's Gate—a fearsome, disturbing journey. And, to be honest, I wanted to keep Alfred around awhile. Passing through Death's Gate, we had—quite unintentionally—switched bodies. For a short while, I found myself in Alfred's mind, with his thoughts, fears, memories. He found himself in mine. Each of us returned to his own body, but I know I was not quite the same—though it was long before I could admit it to myself.

I had come to know and understand my enemy. And that made it difficult to continue to hate him. Besides, as it turned out, we needed each other for our very survival.

Abarrach is a terrible world. Cold stone on the outside, molten rock and lava on the inside. The mensch the Sartan brought here could not long live in its hellish caverns. It took all our magical strength—both Alfred's and mine—to survive the blistering heat rising from the molten oceans, the poisonous fumes that fill the air. But people live on Abarrach.

And so do the dead.

It was here, on Abarrach, that Alfred and I discovered debased descendants of his race—the Sartan. And it was here we found the tragic answer to what had happened to his people. These Sartan on Abarrach had begun to use the forbidden art of necromancy. The Sartan were raising the dead, giving them a semblance of cursed life, using the corpses of their own people as slaves. According to Alfred, this arcane art was prohibited anciently because it was discovered that whenever one of the dead is brought back to life, one of the living will die untimely. Either the Sartan on Abarrach had forgotten the prohibition—or were ignoring it.

Having survived the Labyrinth, I thought myself hardened, inured to the sight of almost any atrocity. But the walking dead of Abarrach still haunt my darkest dreams. I tried to convince myself that necromancy would prove a most valuable skill to my lord. An army of the dead is indestructible, invincible, undefeatable. With such an army, my lord could easily conquer the other worlds, without the tragic waste of the lives of my people.

I very nearly ended up a corpse myself, on Abarrach. The thought of my body continuing to live on in mindless drudgery horrified me. I could not bear the thought of this happening to others. I resolved, therefore, not to tell my lord that the art of necromancy was being practiced by the Sartan on that wretched world. That was my first act of rebellion against my lord.

It was not to be my last.

Another experience happened to me on Abarrach, one that is painful, perplexing, irritating, confusing, yet inspires me with awe whenever I recall it.

Fleeing pursuit, Alfred and I stumbled into a room known as the Chamber of the Damned. Through the magic of that chamber I was transported back in time, thrust again into another body, the body of a Sartan. And it was then, during this strange and magical experience, that I encountered a higher power. I was given to know that I was not a demigod, as I had always believed, that the magic I controlled was not the strongest force in the universe.

Another, stronger force exists, a benevolent force, a force that seeks only goodness and order and peace. In the body of this unknown Sartan, I longed to contact this force, but before I could, other Sartan—fearful of our newfound truth—swept into the chamber and cut us down. Those of us gathered in that chamber died there. All knowledge of us and our discovery was lost, except for a mysterious prophecy.

When I awoke, in my own time, in my own body, I could only imperfectly remember what I had seen and heard. And I tried very hard to forget even that much. I didn't want to face the fact that—compared to this power—I was as weak as any mensch. I accused Alfred of attempting to trick me, of creating this illusion himself. He denied it, of course. He swore that he had experienced exactly the same thing that I did.

I refused to believe him.

We barely escaped Abarrach with our lives.\* When we left, the Sartan on that dreadful world were busy destroying each other, turning the living into lazar—dead bodies whose souls are eternally trapped inside their lifeless shells. Different from the ambulating corpses, the lazar are far more dangerous, for they have minds and purpose—dark and dread purpose.

I was glad to leave such a world. Once inside Death's Gate, I let Alfred go his way, as I went mine. He had, after all, saved my life. And I was sick of death, of pain, of suffering. I'd seen enough.

I knew well what Xar would do to Alfred, if my lord got hold of him.

\*Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

## CHELESTRA

I returned to the Nexus, made my report on Abarrach to my lord in the form of a message, for I feared that if I had to face Xar, I could not hide the truth from him. But Xar knew I lied. He sought me out before I had a chance to escape from the Nexus. He chastised me, very nearly killed me. I deserved the punishment. The physical pain I endured was far easier to bear than the pain of my guilt. I ended up telling Xar everything I had found on Abarrach. I told him about the art of necromancy, about the Chamber of the Damned, about the higher power.

My lord forgave me. I felt cleansed, whole. All my questions had been answered. I once more knew my purpose, my goal. They were Xar's. I was Xar's. I traveled to Chelcstra—the world of water—strong in my resolve to renew my lord's faith in me.

And here an odd circumstance occurred. The dog—my constant companion ever since he saved my life in the Labyrinth—disappeared. I searched for the beast, for though he is a nuisance sometimes, I'd grown used to having him around. He was gone. I felt bad about this, but only for a while. I had more important matters on my mind.

Chelestra is a world comprised solely of water. Drifting in the cold depths of space, its outer surface is made up of solid ice. But inside Chelestra, the Sartan placed a sun that burns magically in the water, lights and warms the world's interior.

The Sartan intended to control the sun, but they discovered that they lacked the power. And so the sun drifts freely through the water, warming only certain areas of Chelestra at one time, leaving others to freeze until the sun's return. Mensch live on Chelestra, on what are known as seamoons. Sartan live on Chelestra, as well, although I did not know this at first.

My arrival on Chelestra was not propitious. My ship plunged into the water and instantly began breaking apart. The destruction was astonishing, since my ship was protected by rune-magic on the outside and very few forces—certainly not ordinary seawater—could break down the powerful runes.

Unfortunately, this was not ordinary seawater.

I was forced to abandon my vessel and found myself swimming in a vast, unending ocean. I knew I must surely drown, but I discovered—to my pleasure and amazement—that I could breathe the water as easily as I breathed air. I also discovered—with far less pleasure—that the water had the effect of completely destroying my rune-magic, leaving me powerless, helpless as a mensch.

On Chelestra, I uncovered additional evidence of a higher power. However, this power is not working for good, but for evil. It thrives on fear, feeds on terror, delights in inflicting pain. It lives only to promote chaos, hatred, destruction.

Embodied in the forms of enormous dragon-snakes, the evil power very nearly seduced me into serving it. I was saved by three mensch children, one of whom later died in my arms. I saw the evil for what it was. I came to understand that it was intent on destroying everything—including my people.

I determined to fight it, though I knew I could not win against it. This power is immortal. It lives within each of us. We created it.

At first, I thought I fought alone, but someone joined me in the battle—my friend, my enemy.

Alfred, too, had arrived on Chelestra, at about the same time I did, although we landed in far different places. Alfred found himself in a crypt similar to the one where most of his people lay dead on Arianus. But the people in the crypt on Chelestra were alive—the Sartan Council, those who had been responsible for the sundering of the world centuries ago.

Threatened by the evil dragon-snakes, unable to fight them due to the fact that the seawater nullified their magic, the Sartan sent out a call for help to their brethren. Then they placed themselves in suspended animation to await the coming of other Sartan.

The only one who came—and he did so by accident—was Alfred.

Needless to say, he was not quite what the Council expected.

The head of the Council, Samah, is a mirror image of my lord, Xar (though neither would thank me for the comparison!). Both are proud, ruthless, ambitious. Both believe that they wield the ultimate power in the universe. The thought that there might be a stronger force, a higher power, is anathema to both of them.

Samah discovered that Alfred not only believed in this higher power, but that he had actually come close to contacting it. Samah considered this open rebellion. He attempted to break Alfred, destroy his faith. It was rather like trying to break bread dough. Alfred meekly absorbed every punch, every blow. He refused to recant, refused to accept Samah's dictates.

I must admit I almost felt sorry for Alfred. At last he had found the people he so longed to find, only to discover that he couldn't trust them. Not only that, he came to learn a terrible truth about the Sartan's past.

With the help of an unlikely confederate (my very own dog, to be exact), Alfred accidentally stumbled (literally) into a secret Sartan library. Here he discovered that Samah and the Council had discovered the

existence of this higher power. The Sundering had not been necessary. With the help of this power, the Sartan could have worked for peace.

Samah did not want peace, however. He wanted the world his way—and only his way. And so he broke the world apart. Unfortunately, when he tried to put it back together, the world crumbled into smaller and smaller pieces, began to slip through his fingers.

Alfred now knew the truth. Alfred became a threat to Samah.

But it was Alfred—meek, bumbling Alfred, who fainted at the very mention of the word "danger"—who joined my fight against the dragon-snakes.\* He saved my life, the lives of the mensch, and very probably the lives of his own ungrateful people.

\*Serpent Mage, vol. 4 of The Death Gale Cycle.

Despite this—or perhaps because of it—Samah sentenced Alfred to a dire fate. Samah cast Alfred and Orla, the woman who loves him, into the Labyrinth.

Now I am the only one left who knows the truth about the danger we face. The evil forces embodied in the dragon-snakes do not seek to rule us—they desire nothing that constructive. Suffering, agony, chaos, fear—this is their goal. And they will attain it, unless we all join together to find some way to stop them. For the dragon-snakes are powerful, far more powerful than any of us. Far more powerful than Samah. Far more powerful than Xar.

I must convince my lord of this—a task that will not be easy. He already suspects me of being a traitor. How can I prove to him that my loyalty to him, to my people, was never greater than it is now?

And Alfred, what do I do about Alfred? The kind, vague, and bumbling Sartan will not long survive the Labyrinth. I could return there to save him ... if I dared.

But—I must admit to myself—I am afraid.

I am more afraid now than I have ever been in my life. The evil is very great, very powerful, and I face it alone, as my name foretold.

Alone, except for a dog.

## PROLOGUE

I WRITE THIS AS I SIT IN A SARTAN PRISON CELL, AWAITING MY FREEDOM\*

\*Written in the human language, in Haplo's hand, the entry can be found in the back of the journal left the Patryn by the dwarf maid, Grundle. Patryns typically use mensch language to record events and thoughts, considering their own magical nine language far too powerful to be used indiscriminately.

It will be a long time coming, I think, for the level of the seawater that will free me is rising very slowly. Undoubtedly the water level is being controlled by the mensch, who do not want to harm any of the Sartan, but merely rid them of their magic.\* The seawater of Chelestra is breathable as air, but a wall of water sent crashing through the land would cause a considerable amount of destruction. Remarkably practical-minded of the mensch to think of such an angle. I wonder, though, how they have managed to force the dragon-snakes—the serpents—to cooperate.

\* Reference to the fact that the seawater on the world of Chelestra nullifies the powerful magics of both Sartan and Patryn. See Serpent Mage, vol. 4 of The Death Gate Cycle.

The serpents\* of Chelestra...

\* "Dragon-snake" is a mensch term, coined by Grundle. The Sartan word for the creature is "serpent." Haplo adopts the Sartan word used in this volume, a change from his previous work. Why he made the change is unclear. One reason suggests itself—he did not want to confuse these false "dragons" with the true dragons who inhabit the worlds. Haplo used a Sartan word because the Patryns, having never encountered this evil, have no word for it.

I knew evil before them—I was born in, survived, and escaped the Labyrinth. But I have never known evil like them. It is these creatures who have taught me to believe in a higher power—a power over which we have little control, a power that is inherently evil.

Alfred, my old nemesis, you would be horrified, reading that statement. I can almost hear you stuttering and stammering in protest.

"No, no! There is a corresponding power for good. We've seen it, you and I." That is what you would tell me.

Did you see it, Alfred? And if so, where? Your own people denounced you as a heretic, sent you to the Labyrinth, or so they threatened. And Samah doesn't seem to me to be the type who makes threats lightly. What do you think of your power for good now, Alfred? ... as you fight for your life in the Labyrinth.

I'll tell you what I think of it. I think it's a lot like you— weak and bumbling. Although I must admit that you came through for us in our fight against the serpents—if that was you who turned into the serpent mage, as Grundle claimed.

But when it came to standing up for yourself against Samah (and I'll lay odds that you could have taken the bastard), you "couldn't remember the spell." You let yourself and the woman you love be led meekly away, sent to a place where, if you are still alive, you probably wish you weren't.

The seawater is starting to seep under the door now. Dog doesn't know what to make of it. He's barking at it, trying to convince it to turn around and leave. I know how he feels. It is all I can do to sit here calmly and wait, wait for the tepid liquid to creep over the toe of my boot, wait for the terrible feeling of panic that comes when I feel my magic start to dissolve at the water's touch.

The seawater is my salvation. I have to remind myself of that. Already, the Sartan runes that keep me prisoner in this room are beginning to lose their power. Their red glow fades. Eventually it will wink out altogether and then I will be free.

Free to go where? Do what?

I must return to the Nexus, warn my lord of the danger of the serpents. Xar will not believe it; he will not want to believe. He has always held himself to be the most powerful force in the universe. And, certainly, he had every reason to think that was true. The dark and dreadful might of the Labyrinth could not crush him. Even now, he defies it daily to bring more of our people out of that terrible prison.

But against the magical power of the evil serpents—and I begin to think they are only evil's minions—Xar must fall. This dread, chaotic force is not only strong, it is cunning and devious. It works its will by telling us what we want to hear, by pandering to us and fawning on us and serving us. It does not mind demeaning itself, it has no dignity, no honor. It uses lies made powerful because they are lies we tell ourselves.

If this evil force enters Death's Gate, and nothing is done, to stop it, I foresee a time when this universe will become a prison house of suffering and despair. The four worlds—Arianus, Pryan, Abarrach, and Chelestra—will be consumed. The Labyrinth will not be destroyed as we had hoped. My people will emerge from one prison only to find themselves in another.

I must make my lord believe! But how, when at times I am not certain that I truly believe myself,...

The water is up to my ankle. Dog has given up barking. He is eyeing me with reproach, demanding to know why we don't leave this uncomfortable place. He tried lapping the water and got it up his nose.

No Sartan are visible on the street beneath my window, where the water now flows in a wide and steady river. I can hear, in the distance, horn calls—the mensch, probably, moving onto the Chalice, as the Sartan call this haven of theirs. Good, that means there will be ships nearby—mensch submersibles. My ship, the dwarven submersible I magically altered to take me through Death's Gate, is moored back on Draknor, the ?Hide? of the serpents.

I don't look forward to going back there, but I have no choice. Rune-enhanced, that ship is the only vessel on this world that can carry me safely through Death's Gate. I have only to glance down at my legs, now wet with seawater, to see blue runes tattooed on my skin fading. It will be a long time before I will be able to use my magic to alter another ship. And I am running out of time. My people are running out of time. With luck, I can slip into Draknor unnoticed, steal back my ship, and leave. The serpents must all be intent on assisting the attack on the Chalice, although I think it is odd, and perhaps a bad sign, that I've seen nothing of them. But, as I said, they are devious and cunning and who knows what they are plotting?

Yes, dog, we're going. I trust dogs can swim. It seems to me I remember hearing somewhere that all the lower forms of animals can swim enough to keep themselves afloat.

It is man who thinks and panics and drowns.

## CHAPTER 1

### SURUNAN

#### CHELESTRA

THE SEAWATER RAN SLUGGISHLY THROUGH THE STREETS OF SURUNAN, the city built by the Sartan. The water rose slowly, flowed through doors and windows, eased over low rooftops. Fragments of Sartan life floated on the water's surface—an unbroken pottery bowl, a man's sandal, a woman's comb, a wooden chair.

The water seeped into the room of Samah's house used by the Sartan as a prison cell. The prison room was located on an upper floor and was, for a time, above the rising tide. But, eventually, the seawater slid under the door, flowed across the floor, crept up the room's walls. Its touch banished magic, canceled it, nullified it. The dazzling runes, whose flesh-searing heat kept Haplo from even approaching the door, sizzled... and went out. The runes that guarded the window were the only ones yet left unaffected. Their bright glow was reflected in the water below.

Prisoner of the magic, Haplo sat in enforced idleness watching the runes' reflections in the rising seawater, watched them move and shift and dance with the water's currents and eddies. The moment the water touched the base of the runes on the window, the moment their glow began to glimmer and fade, Haplo stood up. The water came to his knees. The dog whined. Head and shoulders above the water, the animal was unhappy.

"This is it, boy. Time to leave." Haplo thrust the book in which he'd been writing inside his shirt, secured it at his waist, tucked it between pants and skin.

He noticed, as he did so, that the runes tattooed on his body had almost completely faded. The seawater that was his blessing, that was allowing him to escape, was also his curse. His magical power gone, he was helpless as a newborn child, and had no mother's comforting, protecting arms to cradle him.

Weak and powerless, unsettled in mind and in soul, he must leave this room and plunge into the vast sea whose water gave him life as it washed away his life, and it would carry him on a perilous journey.

Haplo thrust open the window, paused. The dog looked questioningly at its master. It was tempting to stay here, to stay safe in his prison. Outside, somewhere beyond these sheltering walls, the serpents waited. They would destroy him, they must destroy him; he knew the truth. Knew them for what they were — the embodiment of chaos.

This knowledge of the truth was the very reason he had to leave. He had to warn his lord. An enemy greater than any they'd yet faced—more cruel and cunning than any dragon in the Labyrinth, more powerful than the Sartan—was poised to destroy them.

"Go on," Haplo said to the dog, and gestured.

Cheered at the prospect of finally leaving this soggy, boring place, the dog leapt gleefully out the window, splashed into the water in the street below. Haplo drew in a deep breath—an instinctive reaction, not really necessary, for the seawater was breathable as air—and jumped in after.

The Chalice was the only stable land mass in the water world of Chelestra. Built by the Sartan to more closely resemble the world they had sundered and fled, the Chalice was encased in its own protective bubble of air. The water that surrounded it gave the illusion of sky, through which Chelestra's water-bound sun shone with a rippling brightness. The serpents had broken through the barrier and now the Chalice was flooding.

Haplo found a piece of wood, caught hold of it, used it to keep himself afloat. He paddled in the water, stared around, attempted to get his bearings, and saw, with relief, the top of Council Hall. It stood on a hill and would be the last place to be submerged by the rising tides. There, undoubtedly, the Sartan had taken refuge. He squinted in the sunlight that sparkled off the water, thought he could detect people on the roof. They would keep themselves dry, free of the magic-debilitating seawater as long as possible.

"Don't fight it," he advised them, though they were much too far away to hear him. "It only makes it worse, in the end."

At least now he had some idea where he was. He propelled himself forward, heading for the tops of the city walls that he could see thrusting up out of the water. The walls divided the Sartan portion of the city from what had once been the mensch portion. And beyond that lay the shoreline of the Chalice; the shoreline and mensch landing parties and a ship to carry him to Draknor. On that tortured seamoon was moored his own dwarven submersible, altered with the magic of the runes, strengthened to carry him through Death's Gate. His only hope of escape.

But also, on Draknor, the serpents.

"If so," he said to the dog, who was paddling along valiantly, front paws working like a small machine, back legs not quite certain what to make of this strange swimming business but doing their best to hold up their end, "this is going to be one short trip."

His plans were vague, couldn't be formed until he knew where the snakes were... and how to avoid them.

He pushed forward, balanced on the wood, kicking through the water. He could have abandoned the plank and given himself to the sea, breathing it as effortlessly as air. But he detested those first few moments of terror that came with purposefully drowning oneself, the body refusing to accept the mind's reassurance that it was only returning to the womb, to a world it had once known. He clung to the plank, kicked until his legs ached.

It occurred to him suddenly that this plank was an ominous sign. Unless he was much mistaken, it had come from one of the wooden dwarven submersibles, and it had been broken, both ends splintered.

Had the serpents become bored with this peaceful takeover of Surunan, then turned on and butchered the mensch?

"If so," Haplo muttered, "I've got myself to blame for it."

He kicked harder, faster, needing desperately to find out what was happening. But he soon tired, his muscles burned and cramped. He was swimming against the tide, against the flow of the seawater that was being channeled into the city. The loss of his magic made him feel unusually weak; he knew that from past bitter experience.

The tide carried him up against the city walls. He caught hold of a turret, climbed up the side, planning not only to rest but to reconnoiter, to try to catch a glimpse of what lay ahead on the shore. The dog attempted to stop, but the current carried it on past. Haplo leaned out at a perilous angle, caught hold of the dog by the scruff of its neck. He hauled it in—the animal's back legs scrabbling for purchase—and heaved it up onto the balustrade with him.

From this vantage point, he had an excellent view of the harbor of Surunan, the shoreline beyond that. Haplo looked out, nodded grimly.

"We needn't have worried, boy," he said, smacking the dog's wet and shaggy flank. "At least they're safe."

The animal grinned, shook itself.

The fleet of mensch submersibles was drawn up in a more or less orderly line in the harbor. The sun-chasers bobbed on the surface. Mensch lined the bows, pointing and shouting, leaning over the rails, jumping into the water. Numerous small boats plied back and forth between ship and shore, probably ferrying the dwarves, who could not swim. The humans and elves—far more at home in the water—were directing the work of several huge whales, pushing crudely built, heavily loaded rafts into the harbor.

Eyeing the rafts, Haplo glanced down at the wooden plank that he'd dragged up with him. That's why they'd broken up the submersibles. The mensch were moving in.

"But... where are the serpents?" he asked the dog, who lay, panting, at his feet.

Nowhere in sight, apparently. Haplo watched as long as he could, driven by the need to escape this world and return to the Nexus and his lord, yet constrained by the equal need to reach that world alive. Patience, caution—hard lessons to learn, but the Labyrinth was an excellent teacher.

He saw no sign of serpent heads looming out of the water. Perhaps they were all under the surface, boring the holes into the foundation of the Chalice through which the seawater was pouring,

"I need to find out," Haplo said to himself in frustration. If the snakes knew he was free and was planning to flee Chelestra, they'd stop him, if they could.

He weighed the alternatives. Taking time to talk to the mensch meant delay, risked revealing his presence to them. They'd welcome him with joy, want to hang on to him, use him. He didn't have time to fool with the mensch. But not taking the time to find out what was going on with the serpents might mean an even greater delay—perhaps a deadly one.

He waited several moments, hoping for some sign of the snakes. Nothing. And he couldn't stay on this damn wall forever. Deciding to trust to opportunity, Haplo plunged back into the water. The dog, with a wild bark, splashed in beside him.

Haplo swam into the harbor. Hanging on to the wood, he kept himself low in the water, steered clear of the flow of traffic. He was well known by sight among the mensch and wanted to avoid them as much as possible. Clinging to his plank, he peered closely into the dwarven boats. It was in his mind to talk to

Grundle, if he could find her. She had more sense than most mensch, and, though she would undoubtedly make a fuss over him, he figured he could extract himself from her affectionate clutches without too much difficulty.

He didn't find her, however. And still no sign of any serpents. But he did come across a small submersible—used to rescue dwarves who had the mischance to fall into the water—secured to a post. He drifted near, eyeing it intently. No one was around; it appeared to have been abandoned.

A whale-driven raft had just arrived on shore. Numerous dwarves were gathered around, preparing to unload its cargo... Haplo guessed that the crew of this submersible were among them.

He swam over to it. This was too good to pass up. He'd steal it, sail to Draknor. If the serpents were there... well... he'd deal with that when the time came...

Something large and alive and slick-skinned bumped into him. Haplo's heart lurched. He gulped in his breath and a mouthful of water at the same time, started to choke and cough. Kicking himself backward, away from the creature, he struggled to breathe and readied himself to fight.

A shining head with two beady eyes and a wide-open, laughing mouth popped out of the water directly in front of him. Two more heads shot up on either side of him, four swam about him in rollicking delight, nosing him and prodding him.

Dolphins.

Haplo gasped, spit out water. The dog attempted a furious bark, which proceeding highly amused the dolphins and nearly drowned the dog. Haplo dragged its forelegs up onto the plank, where the animal lay panting and glaring.

"Where are the dragon-snakes?" Haplo demanded, speaking in the human tongue.

Previously, the dolphins had refused to talk to him or have anything to do with him. But that was when they'd assumed him to be—rightly enough—on the side of the serpents. Now their attitude toward him had changed. They began to squeak and whistle in excitement and a few started to swim off, eager to be the first to spread the news around the mensch that the mysterious man with the blue-tattooed skin had reappeared.

"No! Wait, don't go. Don't tell anyone you've seen me," he said hastily. "What's going on here? Where are the dragon-snakes?"

The dolphins squeaked and gabbled. In seconds, Haplo heard everything he wanted to know and quite a lot that he didn't.

"We heard that Samah took you prisoner..."

"The snakes brought poor Alake's body back to..."

"Parents prostrate with grief ..."

"Snakes said you..."

". . . and the Sartan..."

"Yes, you and the Sartan were responsible ..."

"You double-crossed..."

"Betrayed your friends... \*\*

"Coward..."

"No one believed..."

"Yes, they did..."

"No, they didn't. Well, maybe for a moment..."

"Anyway, the snakes used their magic to bore holes in the Chalice..."

"Gigantic holes!"

"Huge!"

"Immense!"

"Floodgates."

"Opened at once... a wall of water..."

"Tidal wave ..."

"Nothing survive... Sartan crushed!"

"Flattened..."

"City destroyed..."

"We warned the mensch about the dragon-snakes and their bore holes..."

"Grundle and Devon returned..."

"Told the true story. You are a hero..."

"No, he isn't. That was the one called Alfred."

"I was only being polite..."

"Mensch were worried..."

"They don't want to kill the Sartan..."

"They're afraid of the dragon-snakes. Dwarven ships went to investigate ..."

"But the snakes are nowhere in sight..."

"The dwarves opened the floodgates just a crack and..."

"Stop! Shut up!" Haplo shouted, managing at last to make himself heard. "What do you mean 'the snakes are nowhere in sight'? Where are they?"

The dolphins began to argue among themselves. Some said the serpents had returned to Draknor, but the general consensus seemed to be that the snakes had swum through the holes and were attacking the Sartan in Surunan.

"No, they're not," said Haplo. "I just came from Surunan, and the city's quiet. The Sartan are, as far as I know, safely inside their Council Chamber, trying to keep dry."

The dolphins looked rather disappointed at this news. They meant no harm to the Sartan, but it had been such a great story. They were now all in agreement.

"The dragon-snakes must have gone back to Draknor."

Haplo was forced to agree himself. The serpents had returned to Draknor. But why? Why had they left Surunan so abruptly? Why had they abandoned the chance to destroy the Sartan? Abandoned their plans to foment chaos among the mensch, turn them against each other?

Haplo couldn't answer the questions, supposed bitterly it didn't matter. What mattered was that the serpents were on Draknor and so was his ship.

"I don't suppose any of you have been to Draknor to find out?" he asked.

The dolphins squealed in alarm at the thought, shook their heads emphatically. None would get near Draknor. It was a terrible place of great sadness and evil. The water itself was poison, killed anything that swam in it.

Haplo forwent mentioning that he himself had swum in the water and survived. He couldn't blame these gentle creatures for not wanting to go near Draknor. He wasn't pleased at the prospect of returning to that tortured seamount himself. But he had no choice.

Now his main problem was ridding himself of the dolphins. Fortunately, that was simple. They loved to feel important.

"I need you fish to carry a message from me to the mensch leaders, to be delivered to every member of the royal family in person, in private. Understand? It's extremely important."

"We'll be only too glad..."

"You can trust..."

"Implicitly..."

"Tell every person..."

"No, not every..."

"Just the royal..."

"Every person, I tell you..."

"I'm sure that's what he said..."

Once he got them quiet long enough to hear, Haplo imparted the message, taking care that it was complicated and involved.

The dolphins listened intently and swam off the moment Haplo shut his mouth.

When he was certain that the dolphins' attention was no longer on him, he and the dog swam to the submersible, climbed aboard, and sailed off.

## CHAPTER 2

### DRAKNOR

#### CHELESTRA

HAPLO HAD NEVER COMPLETELY MASTERED THE DWARVEN SYSTEM OF navigation, which, according to Grundle, relied on sounds emitted by the seamoons themselves. At first he was concerned about being able to find Draknor, but he soon discovered that the seamoon was easy to find... too easy. The serpents left a trail of foul ooze in their wake. The path led to the murky black waters surrounding the tormented seamoon.

Darkness swallowed him. He had sailed into the caverns of Draknor. He could see nothing and, fearful of running aground, slowed the submersible's forward progress until it barely moved. He could swim through the foul water, if he had to; he'd done it before. But he hoped swimming wouldn't be necessary.

His hands were dry, and his lower arms where he'd rolled up the wet sleeves. The runes were extremely faint, but they were visible. And though they gave him the magical power of a child of two, the faint blue of the sigla was comforting. He didn't want to get wet again.

The submersible's prow scraped against rock. Haplo steered it swiftly upward, breathed a sigh when it continued, unimpeded. He must be nearing the shore. He decided to risk bringing the vessel to the surface...

The runes on his hands! Blue. Faint blue.

Haplo brought the ship to a full stop, stared down at the sigla. Faint blue color, not nearly as blue as the veins beneath his skin on the back of his hands. And that was odd. Damn odd!

Weak as they were, the sigla should have been glowing— his body's reaction to the danger of the serpents. But the sigla weren't reacting as they had in the past and, he realized, neither were his other instincts. He'd been too preoccupied piloting the submersible to notice.

Before, when he'd come this close to the snakes' lair, he could scarcely move, scarcely think for the debilitating fear that flowed from the monsters.

But Haplo wasn't afraid; at least, he amended, he wasn't afraid for himself. His fear ran deeper. It was cold and twisted him inside.

"What's going on, boy?" he asked the dog, who had crowded near him and was whimpering against his leg.

Haplo patted the animal reassuringly, though he himself could have used reassurance. The dog whined and edged closer.

The Patryn started the vessel again, guided it toward the surface, his attention divided between the gradually brightening water and the sigla on his skin. The runes did not alter in appearance.

Judging by the evidence of his own body, the serpents were no longer on Draknor. But if they weren't on Draknor and they weren't with the mensch and they weren't battling the Sartan, where were they?

The submersible surfaced. Haplo scanned the shoreline rapidly, found his ship, smiled in satisfaction to see it whole, undamaged. But his fear grew stronger, though the sigla on his skin gave him no reason to be afraid.

The body of the king serpent, slain by the mysterious "serpent mage" (who might or might not have been Alfred), lay on the cliffs above. No sign of living serpents was visible.

Haplo beached the submersible. Cautious, wary, he opened the hatch, climbed up onto the top deck. He carried no weapons, though he'd found a cache of battle-axes inside the ship. Only blades enhanced by magic would bite through the flesh of the serpents, and Haplo was too weak in his own magic now to impart its power to metal.

The dog followed him, growled a warning. Its legs stiffened, its hackles rose. Its gaze was fixed on the cave.

"What is it, boy?" Haplo asked, tensing.

The dog quivered all over, looked at its master, pleading permission to race to the attack.

"No, dog. We're heading for our own ship. We're getting out of here."

Haplo jumped off the deck, landed on the foul, slime-covered sand, began to edge his way along the shoreline toward his rune-inscribed ship. The dog continued to growl and bark and came along with Haplo only reluctantly and after repeated commands.

Haplo was within arm's length of reaching his vessel when he caught a glimpse of movement near the cavern's entrance.

He waited, watching. He was cautious, but not particularly worried. He was now close enough to his ship to seek the safety of its protective runes. The dog's growl became a snarl; its upper lip curled, revealing sharp teeth.

A man emerged from the cave.

Samah.

"Easy, boy," said Haplo.

The leader of the Sartan Council walked with the bowed head and listless tread of someone deep in thought. He had not come by boat; no other submersibles were moored along the shore. He had come by magic, then.

Haplo glanced at the sigla on his hands. The runes were a little darker in color, but they did not glow, were not warning him of the advance of an enemy. By this and by logical deduction, Haplo guessed that Samah's magic, like Haplo's own, must be spent. Probably waterlogged. The Sartan was waiting, resting, to regain strength enough for his return journey. He posed no threat to Haplo. Just as Haplo posed no threat to him.

Or did he? All things equal, both bereft of their magic, Haplo was the younger of the two, the stronger. The fight would be crude, undignified, menschlike—two men rolling about on the sand, pummeling each other. Haplo thought it over, sighed, shook his head. He was just too damn tired.

Besides, Samah looked to have suffered a beating already. Haplo waited quietly. Samah did not glance up from his troubled musings. He might conceivably have walked past the Patryn without seeing him. The dog, unable to contain itself, remembering past wrongs, barked a sharp warning—the Sartan had come close enough.

Samah raised his head, startled at the sound but not, apparently, startled to see either the dog or its master. The Sartan's lips tightened. His gaze shifted from Haplo to the small submersible floating behind him.

"Returning to your lord?" Samah asked coldly.

Haplo saw no need to reply.

Samah nodded; he hadn't expected a response. "You'll be glad to know your minions are already on their way. They have preceded you. No doubt a hero's welcome awaits you." His tone was bitter, his gaze dark with hatred and, lurking beneath, fear.

"On their way..." Haplo stared at the Sartan, then, suddenly, he understood. Understood what had happened, understood the reason for his seemingly unreasonable fear. Now he knew where the serpents were... and why.

"You bloody fool!" Haplo swore. "You opened Death's Gate!"

"I warned you we would do so, Patryn, if your mensch lackeys attacked us."

"You were warned, Sartan. The dwarf told you what she overheard. The serpents wanted you to open Death's Gate. That was their plan all along. Didn't you listen to Grundle?"

"And so now I should be taking advice from mensch?" Samah sneered.

"They have more sense than you do, seemingly. You opened Death's Gate, intending to do what? Flee? No, that wasn't your plan. Help. You sought help. After what Alfred told you. You still don't believe him. Nearly all your people are gone, Samah. You few on Chelestra are all that's left, except for a couple of thousand animated corpses on Abarrach. You opened the Gate, but it was the serpents who passed through it. Now they'll spread their evil throughout the four worlds. I hoped they stopped long enough to thank you!"

"The power of the Gate should have stopped the creatures!" Samah replied in a low voice. His fist clenched. "The serpents should not have been able to enter!"

"Just as mensch can't enter without your help? You still don't understand, do you, Sartan? These snakes are more powerful than you or I or my lord or maybe all of us put together. They don't need help!"

"The serpents had help!" Samah retorted bitterly. "Patryn help."

Haplo opened his mouth to argue, decided it wasn't worth it. He was wasting time. The evil was spreading. It was now even more imperative that he return to warn his lord.

Shaking his head, Haplo started for his ship. "C'mon, dog."

But the animal barked again, refused to budge. The dog looked at Haplo, ears cocked.

Don't you have something you want to ask, master?

A thought did occur to Haplo. He turned back.

"What happened to Alfred?"

"Your friend?" Samah mocked. "He was sent to the Labyrinth—the fate of all who preach heresy and conspire with the enemy."

"You know, don't you, that he was the one person who might have stopped the evil."

Samah was briefly amused. "If this Alfred is as powerful as you claim, then he could have prevented us from sending him to prison. He didn't. He went to his punishment meekly enough."

"Yes," said Haplo softly. "I'll bet he did."

"You value your friend so dearly, Patryn, why don't you go back to your prison and try to get him out?"

"Maybe I will. No, boy," Haplo added, seeing the dog's gaze go longingly to Samah's throat. "You'd be up sick half the night."

He returned to his ship, cast off the moorings, dragged the dog—who was still growling at Samah—inside, slammed the hatch shut behind him. Once on board, Haplo hastened to the window in the steerage compartment to keep an eye on the Sartan. Magic or no magic, Haplo didn't trust him.

Samah stood unmoving on the sand. His white robes were damp and bedraggled, the hem covered with slime and the ooze of the dead serpents. His shoulders sagged; his skin was gray. He looked exhausted to the point of falling, but—probably aware that he was under scrutiny—he remained standing upright, jaw thrust out, arms folded across his chest.

Satisfied that his enemy was harmless, Haplo turned his attention to the runes burned into the wooden planks of the ship's interior. He traced each one again in his mind—runes of protection, runes of power, runes to take him once again on the strange and terrifying journey into Death's Gate, runes to ensure his safety until he reached the Nexus. He spoke a word, and the sigla began to glow soft blue in response.

Haplo breathed a deep sigh. He was guarded, protected. He allowed himself to relax for the first time in a long, long while. Making certain his hands were dry, he placed them on the ship's wheel. It, too, had been enhanced by runes. The mechanism wasn't as powerful as the steering stone he'd used aboard Dragon Wing. But Dragon Wing and the steering stone were now at the bottom of the sea—if Chelestra's sea had a bottom. The rune-magic on the wheel was crude, it had been hurriedly done. But it would take him through Death's Gate and that was all that mattered.

Haplo guided his ship away from the shoreline. He glanced back at the Sartan, who seemed to dwindle in size as the expanse of black water separating them grew larger.

"What will you do now, Samah? Will you enter Death's Gate, search for your people? No, I don't think so. You're scared, aren't you, Sartan? You know you made a terrible mistake, a mistake that could mean the destruction of all you've worked to build. Whether you believe the serpents represent a higher, evil power or not, they're a force you don't understand, one you can't control.

"You've sent death through Death's Gate."

## CHAPTER 3

### THE NEXUS

XAR, LORD OF THE NEXUS, WALKED THE STREETS OF HIS QUIET, TWILIGHT land, a land built by his enemy. The Nexus was a beautiful place, with rolling hills and meadows, verdant forests. Its structures were built with soft, rounded corners, unlike the inhabitants, who were sharp-edged and cold as steel. The sun's light was muted, diffused, as if it shone through finely spun cloth. It was never day in the Nexus, never quite night. It was difficult to distinguish an object from its shadow, hard to tell where one left off and the other began. The Nexus seemed a land of shadows.

Xar was tired. He had just emerged from the Labyrinth, emerged victorious from a battle with the evil magicks of that dread land. This time, it had sent an army of chaodyn to destroy him. Intelligent, giant, insectlike creatures, the chaodyn are tall as men, with hard black-shelled bodies. The only way to destroy a chaodyn utterly is to hit it directly in the heart, kill it instantly. For if it lives, even a few seconds, it will cause a drop of its blood to spring into a copy of itself.

And he'd faced an army of these things, a hundred, two hundred; the numbers didn't matter for they grew the moment he wounded one. He had faced them alone, and he'd had only moments before the tide of bulbous-eyed insects engulfed him.

Xar had spoken the runes, caused a wall of flame to leap up between him and the advance ranks of the chaodyn, protecting him from the first assault, giving him time to extend the wall.

The chaodyn had attempted to outrun the spreading flames that were feeding off the grasses in the Labyrinth, springing to magical life as Xar fanned them with magical winds. Those few chaodyn who ran through the fire, Xar had killed with a rune-inscribed sword, taking care to thrust beneath the carapace to reach the heart below. All the while, the wind blew and the flames crackled, feeding off the shells of the dead. The fire jumped from victim to victim now, decimating the ranks.

The chaodyn in the rear watched the advancing holocaust, wavered, turned, and fled. Under cover of the flames, Xar had rescued several of his people, Patryns, more dead than alive. The chaodyn had been holding them hostage, using them as bait to lure the Lord of the Nexus to do battle. The Patryns were being cared for now by other Patryns, who also owed their lives to Xar.

A grim and stern people, unforgiving, unbending, unyielding, the Patryns were not effusive in their gratitude to the lord who constantly risked his life to save theirs. They did not speak of their loyalty, their devotion—they showed it. They worked hard and uncomplaining at any task he set them. They obeyed every command without question. And each time he went into the Labyrinth, a crowd of Patryns gathered outside the Final Gate, to keep silent vigil until his return.

And there were always some, particularly among the young, who would attempt to enter with him; Patryns who had been living in the Nexus long enough for the horror of their lives spent in the Labyrinth to fade from their minds.

"I will go back," they would say. "I will dare it with you, my Lord."

He always let them. And he never said a word of blame when they faltered at the Gate, when faces blanched and the blood chilled, legs trembled and bodies sank to the ground.

Haplo. One of the strongest of the young men. He'd made it farther than most. He'd fallen before the Final Gate, fear wringing him dry. And then he'd crawled on hands and knees, until, shuddering, he shrank back into the shadows.

"Forgive me, Lord!" he'd cried in despair. So they all cried.

"There is nothing to forgive, my child," said Xar, always.

He meant it. He, better than anyone, understood the fear. He faced it every time he entered and every time it grew worse. Rarely was there a moment, outside the Final Gate, that his step did not hesitate, his heart did not shiver. Each time he went in, he knew with certainty that he would not return. Each time he came back out, safely, he vowed within himself that he would never go back.

Yet he kept going back. Time and again.

"The faces," he said. "The faces of my people. The faces of those who wait for me, who enclose me in the circle of their being. These faces give me courage. My children. Every one of them. I tore them out of the horrible womb that gave them birth. I brought them to air and to light.

"What an army they will make," he continued, musing aloud. "Weak in numbers, but strong in magic, loyalty, love. What an army," he said again, louder than before, and he chuckled.

Xar often talked to himself. He was often alone, for the Patryns tend to be loners.\* And so he talked to himself, but he never chuckled, never laughed.

\*Those whom the Patrins accept into the circle of their being are few. They are fiercely loyal to these they term "family" either by blood or by vow. These circles of loyalty (Patrins would scorn to call it affection) are generally kept to the death. Once broken, however, the circle can never be mended.

The chuckle was a sham, a crafty bit of play-acting. The Lord of the Nexus continued to talk, as might any old man, keeping company with himself in the lonely watches of the twilight. He cast a surreptitious glance at his hand. The skin showed his age, an age he could not calculate with any exactness, having no very clear idea when his life began. He knew only that he was old, far older than any other who had come out of the Labyrinth.

The skin on the back of his hand was wrinkled and taut, stretched tight, revealing clearly beneath it the shape of every tendon, every bone. The blue sigla tattooed on the back of the hand were twisted and knotted, but their color was dark, not faded by the passage of time. And their magic, if anything, was stronger.

These tattooed sigla had begun to glow blue.

Xar would have expected the warning inside the Labyrinth, his magic acting instinctively to ward off attack, alert him to danger. But he walked the streets of the Nexus, streets that he had always known to be safe, streets that were a haven, a sanctuary. The Lord of the Nexus saw the blue glow that shone with an eerie brightness in the soft twilight, he felt the sigla burn on his skin, the magic burn in his blood.

He kept walking as if nothing were amiss, continued to ramble and mutter beneath his breath. The sigla's warning grew stronger, the runes shone more brightly still. He clenched his fist, hidden beneath the flowing sleeves of a long black robe. His eyes probed every shadow, every object.

He left the streets of the Nexus, stepped onto a path that ran through a forest surrounding his dwelling place. He lived apart from his people, preferring, requiring quiet and peace. The trees' darker shadows brought a semblance of night to the land. He glanced at his hand; the rune's light welled out from beneath the black robes. He had not left the danger behind, he was walking straight toward its source.

Xar was more perplexed than nervous, more angry than afraid. Had the evil in the Labyrinth somehow seeped through that Final Gate? He couldn't believe it was possible. Sartan magic had built this place, built the Gate and the Wall that surrounded the prison world of the Labyrinth. The Patrins, not particularly trusting an enemy who had cast them inside that prison, had strengthened the Wall and the Gate with their own magic. No. It was not possible that anything could escape.

The Nexus was protected from the other worlds—the worlds of Sartan and mensch—by Death's Gate. So long as Death's Gate remained closed, no one could leave or enter who had not mastered the powerful magic required to travel it. Xar had mastered the secret, but only after eons of long and difficult study of Sartan writings. He had mastered it and passed his wisdom on to Haplo, who had ventured forth into the universe.

"But suppose," Xar said to himself beneath his breath, his eyes darting side to side, attempting to pierce the darkness that had always before been restful, was now ominous, "suppose Death's Gate were opened! I sensed a change when I came out of the Labyrinth—as if a breath of air stirred suddenly within a house long closed up and sealed shut. I wonder..."

"No need to wonder, Xar, Lord of Patrins," came a voice from out of the darkness. "Your mind is quick, your logic infallible. You are correct in your assumption. Death's Gate has been opened. And by your enemies."

Xar halted. He could not see the speaker, hidden in shadows, but he could see eyes, flickering with a strange red light, as if they reflected a distant fire. His body warned him that the speaker was powerful and might prove dangerous, but Xar heard no note of threat or menace in the sibilant voice. The speaker's words were respectful, even admiring, and so was his tone.

Yet Xar remained on his guard. He had not grown old in the Labyrinth by falling victim to seductive voices. And this speaker had already committed a grave error. He had somehow penetrated into the lord's head, desecrated his thoughts. Xar had been talking beneath his breath. No one, standing at that distance from him, could have overheard. "You have the advantage of me, sir," said Xar calmly.

"Come closer, that these aged eyes of mine, which are easily confused in the shadows, can see you."

His eyesight was sharp, sharper than it had been in his youth, for now he knew what to look for. His hearing was excellent. The speaker didn't need to know that, however. Let him think he faced a frail old man.

The speaker was not fooled. "Your aged eyes see clearer than most, I'll wager, Lord. But even they can be blinded by affection, misplaced trust."

The speaker walked out of the forest, onto the path. He came to stand directly in front of the Lord of the Nexus, spread his hands to indicate he earned no weapon. Torchlight flared, a burning brand materialized in the speaker's hands. He stood in its light, smiling with quiet confidence.

Xar stared at the man, blinked. Doubt crept into his mind, increased his anger. "You look like a Patryn. One of my people," he said, studying the man. "Yet I don't know you. What trick is this?" His voice hardened. "You had best speak quickly. The breath won't be in your body long."

"Truly, Lord, your reputation has not been exaggerated. No wonder Haplo admires you, even as he betrays you. I am not a Patryn, as you have surmised. I appear in this guise in your world in order to maintain secrecy. I can appear in my true form, if such is your pleasure, my lord Xar, but my true form is somewhat daunting. I deemed it best for you to decide if you wanted to reveal my presence to your people."

"And what is your true form, then?" Xar demanded, ignoring, for the moment, the accusation regarding Haplo.

"Among the mensch, we are known as 'dragon,' my lord."

Xar's eyes narrowed. "I have dealt with your species before and I see no reason why I should let you live any longer than I let them. Particularly as you stand in my homeland."

The false Patryn smiled, shook his head. "Those whom you refer to by that appellation are not true dragons, merely distant cousins. [2] Much as the ape is said to be a distant cousin of the human. We are far more intelligent, far more powerful in magic."

"All the more reason you should die..."

"All the more reason we should live, especially since we live only to serve you, Lord of the Patrins, Lord of the Nexus, and, shortly, Lord of the Four Worlds."

"You would serve me, eh? You say 'we'? How many of you are there?"

"Our numbers are enormous. They've never been counted."

"Who created you?"

"You did, Patryn, long ago," said the serpent, softly hissing.

"I see. And where have you been all this time?"

"I will tell you our story, Lord," answered the serpent coolly, ignoring the sarcastic tone. "The Sartan feared us, feared our power, just as they feared you Patrins. The Sartan cast your people into prison, but—since we are of a different species—they determined to exterminate us. The Sartan lulled us into a false sense of

security by pretending to make peace with our kind. When the Sundering came, we were caught completely off guard, defenseless. We barely escaped with our lives. To our grief, we were powerless to save your people, who had always been our friends and allies. We fled to one of the newly created worlds and hid there to nurse our wounds and regain our strength.

"It was our intent to seek out the Labyrinth and attempt to free your people. Together, we could rally the mensch, who were left dazed and helpless by their terrible ordeal, and we could defeat the Sartan. Unfortunately, the world in which we chose to live—Chelestra—was also the choice of the Sartan

2 The serpent is, of course, lying to Xar. Since this evil has no true form of its own, it borrows any form that suits its needs.

Council. The mighty Samah himself established his city, Surunan, populated it with thousands of enslaved mensch.

"He soon discovered us and our plans to overthrow his tyrannical rule. Samah vowed that we would never leave Chelestra alive. He closed and sealed Death's Gate, dooming himself and the rest of the Sartan on other worlds to isolation—only for a short time, or so he thought. He meant to make quick work of us. But we proved stronger than he'd anticipated. We fought back, and, though many of our kind gave up their lives, we forced him to free the mensch and at length drove him to seek the safety of the Sartan stasis chamber.

"Before the Sartan abandoned their world, they had their revenge on us. Samah cut adrift the season that warms the water of Chelestra. We could not escape; the bitter chill of the ice surrounding this world of water overtook us. Our body temperatures dropped, our blood grew cold and sluggish. It was all we could do to manage to return to our seamoons and take refuge inside their caverns. Ice locked us in, sent us into an enforced hibernation that lasted centuries. [3]

"At length, the season returned and brought with it warmth and renewed life for us. With it came a Sartan, one who is known as Serpent Mage, a powerful wizard who has been traveling Death's Gate. He awoke the Sartan and freed them from their long sleep. But by now, you, Lord, and some of your people had also attained your freedom. We sensed it, far away as we were. We felt your hope shine on us and it was warmer than the sun. And then Haplo came to us and we bowed to him and pledged him our help to defeat the Sartan. Defeat Samah, the ancient enemy."

The serpent's voice dropped low. "We admired Haplo, trusted him. Victory over Samah was within our grasp. We intended to bring the Sartan leader to you, Lord, as proof of our devotion to your cause. Alas, Haplo betrayed us, betrayed you. Samah fled, as did the Serpent Mage—the Sartan responsible for poisoning Haplo's mind. The two Sartan escaped, but

3 Again, the serpent is relating its own version of the truth, which is considerably different from the story told by the Sartan, found in Serpent Mage, vol. 4 of The Death Gate Cycle. It is interesting to note, as does Haplo, in his somewhat bitter commentary on this section of Xar's journal, that the serpents are adept at telling people exactly what they want to hear.

not before Samah had been driven by his fear of us and his fear of you, great Xar, to open Death's Gate!

"The Sartan can no longer stop us from returning to assist you. We entered Death's Gate and we present ourselves to you, Xar. We would call you 'Lord.' " The serpent bowed.

"And what is the name of this 'powerful' Sartan to whom you keep referring?" Xar asked.

"He calls himself by the mensch name 'Alfred,' Lord."

"Alfred!" Xar forgot himself, lost his composure. His hand beneath the black robe clenched into a fist. "Alfred!" he repeated beneath his breath. He glanced up, saw the eyes of the serpent glint red. Xar quickly regained his calm.

"Haplo was with this Alfred?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Then Haplo will bring him to me. You need not fear. You have obviously misunderstood Haplo's motives. He is cunning, is Haplo. Intelligent and clever. He may not be a match for Samah—if this is truly the same Samah, which I much doubt—but Haplo is more than a match for this Sartan with the mensch name. Haplo will be here shortly. You will see. And he will have Alfred with him. And then all will be explained.

"In the meantime," Xar added, cutting short the serpent, who would have spoken, "I am very tired. I am an old man and old men need their rest. I would invite you to my house, but I have a child staying with me. A very sharp child, quite intelligent for a mensch. He would ask questions that I would prefer not to answer. Keep hidden in the forest. Avoid going around my people, for they will react to you as I have." The Lord of the Nexus held forth his hand, exhibited the runes that glowed a vibrant blue. "And they might not be as patient as I have been."

"I am honored by your concern, my lord. I will do as you command."

The serpent bowed again. Xar turned to take his leave. The serpent's words followed him.

"I hope that this Haplo, in whom my lord has placed such faith, will be found worthy of it." But I most sincerely doubt it!

Unspoken words whispered from the twilight shadows. Xar heard them plainly, or perhaps he was the one who gave them utterance in thought, if not aloud. He glanced back over his shoulder, irritated at the serpent, but the serpent was gone. It had apparently slunk into the woods without a sound, without the rustle of a leaf, the cracking of a twig. Xar was further irritated, then angered at himself for having let the serpent upset him.

"A lack of confidence in Haplo is a lack of confidence in myself. I saved his life. I brought him out of the Labyrinth. I raised him up, trained him, assigned him this most important task, to travel Death's Gate. When he first had doubts, I chastised him, cleansed him of the poison inflicted by the Sartan, Alfred. Haplo is dear to me. To discover that he has failed me is to discover that I have failed!"

The glow of the sigla on Xar's skin was beginning to fade, though it still gleamed brightly enough to light the lord's path through the fringes of the forest. He irritably forbore the temptation to look backward again.

He didn't trust the serpent, but then he trusted very few. He would have liked to have said "none." He trusted no one. But that would have been wrong.

Feeling older and wearier than usual, the lord spoke the runes and summoned out of the magical possibilities an oaken staff, strong and sturdy, to aid his tired steps.

"My son," he whispered sadly, leaning heavily on the staff. "Haplo, my son!"

## CHAPTER 4

### DEATH'S GATE

THE JOURNEY THROUGH DEATH'S GATE IS A TERRIBLE ONE—A FRIGHTENING collision of contradictions slamming into the consciousness with such force that the mind blacks out. Haplo had once attempted to remain conscious during the journey [1]; he still shuddered when he recalled that frightful experience. Unable to find refuge in oblivion, his mind had jumped into another body, the nearest body—that of Alfred. He and the Sartan had exchanged consciousness, relived each other's most profound life experiences.

Each had learned something about the other then; neither could quite view the other the same as before. Haplo knew what it was like to believe yourself to be the last member of your race, alone in a world of strangers. Alfred knew what it was like to be a prisoner in the Labyrinth.

"I guess Alfred knows firsthand now," Haplo said, settling down beside the dog, prepared to sleep as he always did now before entering Death's Gate. "Poor bastard. I doubt if he's still alive. He and the woman he took with him. What was her name? Orla? Yes, that was it. Orla."

The dog whimpered at the mention of Alfred's name, laid its head in Haplo's lap. He scratched the dog's jowls. "I guess the best to hope for Alfred would be a quick death."

The dog sighed and gazed out the window with sad, hope-

1 Fire Sea. vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

fill eyes, as if expecting to see Alfred bumble his way back on board any moment.

Guided by the rune-magic, the ship left behind the waters of Chelestra, entered the huge pocket of air that surrounded Death's Gate. Haplo roused himself from musings that weren't offering either help or consolation, checked to make certain that the magic was working as it should, keeping his ship protected, holding it together, propelling it forward.

He was astounded to notice, however, that his magic was doing remarkably little. The sigla were inscribed on the inside of the ship, not the outside, as he'd always done before, but that should not make a difference. If anything, the runes should be working harder to compensate. The cabin should be lit with a bright blue and red light, but the interior was only suffused with a pleasant glow that had a faint purplish tinge.

Haplo fought down a brief moment of panicked doubt, carefully went over every rune structure inscribed on the interior of the small submersible. He found no flaw and he wouldn't, he knew, because he'd gone over it twice previously.

He hurried over to the window in the steerage, stared out. He could see Death's Gate, a tiny hole that looked much too small for a ship of any size larger than a ...

He blinked, rubbed his eyes.

Death's Gate had changed. Haplo couldn't think why, couldn't understand for a moment. Then he had the answer.

Death's Gate was open.

It had not occurred to him that opening the Gate would make any difference. But it must, of course. The Sartan who designed the Gate in the beginning would have provided themselves with quick, easy access to the other three worlds. It was logical, and Haplo berated himself for being thickheaded, for not having thought of this before. He could probably have saved himself time and worry.

Or could he?

He frowned, considering. Entering Death's Gate might be easier, but what would he do once he was inside? How was it controlled? Would his magic even work? Or would his ship come apart at the seams?

"You'll have your answer soon enough," he told himself. "You can't very well go back."

He controlled an urge to pace nervously about the small cabin, focused his attention on Death's Gate.

The hole that had previously appeared too small for a gnat to pass through now loomed large. No longer dark and forbidding, the entrance was filled with light and color. Haplo couldn't be certain, but he thought he caught glimpses of the other worlds. Quick impressions slid into his mind and then out, moving too rapidly for him to focus on any in particular, like images seen in a dream.

The steamy jungles of Pryan, the molten-rock rivers of Abarrach, the floating islands of Arianus passed swiftly before his eyes. He saw, too, the soft shimmering twilight of the Nexus. This faded and from it emerged the stark and terrifying wasteland of the Labyrinth. Then, very briefly—gone so fast that he wondered if he'd truly seen it—he caught a glimpse of another place, a strange place he didn't recognize, a place of such peace and beauty that his heart constricted with pain when the vision vanished.

Dazed, Haplo watched the images shift rapidly from one to the other, was reminded of an elven toy [3] he'd seen on Pryan. The images began to repeat themselves. Odd, he thought, wondering why. They went through his mind again, in the same order, and he finally understood.

He was being given a choice: destination. Where did he want to go?

Haplo knew where he wanted to go. He just wasn't certain how to get there anymore. Before, the decision had been locked into his magic—he sorted through the possibilities and selected a site. The rune structure necessary to effect such a determination had been complex, extremely difficult to devise. His lord had spent innumerable hours studying the Sartan books [3] until he learned the key, then spent additional time

2 Undoubtedly an elven "collide-a-scope." One looks down a hollow wooden tube at the end of which is a glass ball containing bits of different colored glass. When the ball is rotated, the glass pieces "collide" to form a variety of shapes, visible to the viewer.

3 Xar discovered in the Nexus a small library of Sartan books written on various topics, including: a history of the Sundering, incomplete descriptions of the four worlds, and details on how to travel through Death's Gate. The books are written in the Sartan rune language. Xar taught himself to read the language—a laborious task that took him many years.

translating the Sartan language into Patryn in order to teach it to Haplo.

Now everything had changed. Haplo was sailing closer and closer to the Gate, his ship moving faster and faster, and he had no idea how to control it.

"Simplicity," he told himself, fighting his rising panic. "The Sartan would have made it simple, easy to travel."

The images flashed past his vision again, whirling faster and faster. He had the horrible sensation of falling, as one does in a dream. Pryan's jungles, Arianus's islands, Chelestra's water, Abarrach's lava—all spun around him, beneath him. He was tumbling into them, he couldn't stop himself, Nexus twilight...

Desperately, Haplo latched onto that image, grabbed hold of it, clung to it in his mind. He thought of the Nexus, remembered it, summoned images of its twilight forests and ordered streets and people. He closed his eyes, to concentrate better, and to blot out the terrifying sight of spinning into chaos.

The dog began to yelp, not with warning, but with glad excitement and recognition.

Haplo opened his eyes. The ship was flying peacefully over a twilight land, illuminated by a sun that never quite rose, never quite set.

He was home.

Haplo wasted no time. On landing his ship, he traveled directly to his lord's dwelling place in the forest to give his report. He walked rapidly, abstracted, absorbed in his thoughts, paying very little attention to his

surroundings. He was in the Nexus, a place that held no danger for him. He was considerably startled, therefore, to be roused out of his musings by the dog's angry growl.

The Patryn glanced instinctively at the sigla on his skin, saw, to his surprise, that they gave off a faint blue glow.

Haplo writes: "We assumed that the Sartan left the books behind to taunt us, never thinking that we would have the patience or the desire to learn to read and make use of them. But now, knowing that Sartan were once in the Labyrinth, I wonder if we are wrong. Perhaps Xar was not the first one to escape the Labyrinth. Perhaps a Sartan emerged and left these books—not for us—but for those of his people he hoped would follow."

Someone stood on the path before him.

Haplo quieted the dog with a hand on its head, a hand whose sigla were glowing brighter every moment. The runes tattooed on his skin itched and burned. Haplo waited, unmoving, on the path. No use hiding. Whatever was in the forest had already seen him and heard him. He would remain and find out what danger lurked so near his lord's mansion, deal with it if necessary.

The dog's growl rumbled in its chest. Its legs stiffened, the hackles rose on the back of its neck. The shadowy figure came closer, not bothering to hide, but taking care to keep out of the few patches of light that filtered through open places amid the thick leaves. The figure had the form and height of a man, moved like a man. Yet it wasn't a Patryn. Haplo's defensive magic would have never reacted so to any of his own kind.

His puzzlement increased. The idea that a foe of any sort should exist in the Nexus was untenable. His first thought was Samah. Had the head of the Sartan Council entered Death's Gate, found his way here? It was possible, though not very likely. This would be the last place Samah would come! Yet Haplo could think of no other possibility. The stranger drew nearer and Haplo saw, to his astonishment, that his fears had been groundless. The man was a Patryn.

Haplo didn't recognize him, but this was not unusual. Haplo had been gone a long while. His lord would have rescued many Patryns from the Labyrinth during the interim.

The stranger kept his gaze lowered, glancing at Haplo from beneath hooded eyelids. He nodded a stern, austere greeting—customary among Patryns, who are a solitary and undemonstrative people—and appeared likely to continue on his way without speaking. He was traveling the opposite direction from Haplo, heading away from the lord's dwelling.

Ordinarily Haplo would have responded with a curt nod of his own and forgotten the stranger. But the sigla on his skin itched and crawled, nearly driving him frantic. The blue glow illuminated the shadows. The other Patryn's tattoos had not altered in appearance, remained dark. Haplo stared at the stranger's hands. There was something odd about those tattoos.

The stranger had drawn level with him. Haplo had hold of the dog, forced to drag the excited animal back or it would have gone for the man's throat. Another oddity.

"Wait!" Haplo called out. "Wait, sir. I don't know you, do I? How are you called? What is your Gate?" [4]

Haplo meant nothing by the question, was hardly aware of what he asked. He wanted only to get a closer look at the man's hands and arms, the sigla tattooed on them.

"You are wrong. We have met," said the stranger, in a hissing voice that was familiar.

Haplo couldn't recall where he'd heard it and was now too preoccupied to think about it. The sigla on the man's hands and arms were false; meaningless scrawls that not even a Patryn child would have drawn. Each individual sigil was correctly formed, but it did not match up properly to any other.

The tattoos on the man's arms should have been runes of power, of defense, of healing. Instead, they were mindless, a jumble. Haplo was suddenly reminded of the rune-bone game played by the Sartan on Abarlach, of the runes tossed at random on a table. This stranger's runes had been tossed at random on his skin.

Haplo jumped forward, hands reaching, planning to seize the false Patryn, find out who or what was attempting to spy on diem.

His hands closed over air.

Overbalanced, Haplo stumbled, fell onto his hands and knees. He was up instantly, looking in all directions.

The false Patryn was nowhere in sight. He had vanished without a trace. Haplo glanced at the dog. The animal whimpered, shivered all over.

Haplo felt like doing the same. He poked halfheartedly among the trees and brush lining the path, knowing he wouldn't find anything, not certain he wanted to find anything.

4 Reference to the number of Gates in the Labyrinth through which a Patryn has passed. The number of Gates gives a fair indication of what type of life the person led. A Squatter, for example, would have passed through relatively few Gates compared to a Runner. The Lord of the Nexus standardized the classification process in terms of age, using the runes tattooed on a person's body combined with cycles discovered in the Labyrinth to judge a Patryn's true age.

The question Haplo has asked would be the equivalent of one mensch asking another about his occupation.

Whatever it was, it was gone. The sigla on his arms were starting to fade, the burning sensation of warning cooled.

Haplo continued on his way, not wasting further time. The mysterious encounter gave him all the more reason to hurry. Obviously, the stranger's appearance and the opening of Death's Gate were not coincidence. Haplo knew now where he'd heard that voice, wondered how he could have ever forgotten.

Perhaps he had wanted to forget.

At least now he could give the stranger a name.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE NEXUS

"SERPENTS, LORD," SAID HAPLO. "BUT NOT SERPENTS AS WE KNOW them. The most deadly snake in the Labyrinth is a worm compared to these! They are old, old as man himself, I think. They have the cunning and the knowledge of their years. And they have a power, Lord, a power that is vast and... and..." Haplo paused, hesitated.

"And what, my son?" encouraged Xar gently.

"Almighty," answered Haplo.

"An omnipotent force?" Xar mused. "You know what you are saying, my son?"

Haplo heard the warning in the voice.

Be very careful of your thoughts, your surmises, your deductions, my son, the tone cautioned. Be careful of your facts, your judgment. For by acknowledging this power almighty, you place it above me.

Haplo was careful. He sat long without answering, staring into the fire that warmed the lord's hearth, watched its light play over the blue sigla tattooed on his hands and arms. He saw again the runes on the arms of the false Patryn: chaotic, unintelligible, without meaning, without order. The sight brought back the wrenching, debilitating fear he'd experienced in the serpents' lair on Draknor.

"I've never felt fear like that," he said suddenly, speaking aloud the thoughts in his mind.

Though he came in on the middle of Haplo's mental conversation, Xar understood. The lord always understood.

"The fear made me want to crawl into some dark hole, Lord. I wanted to curl up and lie there cowering. I was afraid... of my fear. I couldn't understand it, couldn't overcome it."

Haplo shook his head. "And I was born in fear, raised with fear, in the Labyrinth. What was the difference, Lord? I don't understand."

Xar did not respond, sat unmoving in his chair. He was a quiet, attentive listener. He never betrayed any emotion, his attention never wandered, his interest was always completely focused on the speaker. People talk to such a rare type of listener; they talk eagerly, oftentimes incautiously. Their thoughts are focused on what they are saying, not on the person listening. And so Xar, with his magical power, was often able to hear the unspoken, as well as the spoken. People poured their minds into the lord's empty well.

Haplo clenched his fist, watched the sigla stretch smoothly, protectively over the skin of his hand. He answered his own question.

"I knew the Labyrinth could be defeated," he said softly. "That's the difference, isn't it, Lord. Even when I thought I would die in that place, I knew in my hour of dying a bitter triumph. I had come close to defeating it. And though I had failed, others would come after me and succeed. The Labyrinth, for all its power, is vulnerable."

Haplo raised his head, looked at Xar. "You proved that, Lord. You defeated it. You have defeated it, time and again. I defeated it, finally. With help." He reached down his hand, scratched the dog's head.

The animal lay snoozing at his feet, basking in the warm glow of the fire. Occasionally, it opened its eyes a glittering slit, fixed their gaze on Xar.

Just checking, the dog seemed to say.

Haplo did not notice, from where he was sitting, his dog's wary, watchful observation. Xar, seated opposite, did.

Haplo fell silent again, stared into the fire, his expression grim and dark. He had no need to continue, Xar understood completely.

"You are saying that this power cannot be defeated. Is that it, my son?"

Haplo stirred restlessly, uncomfortably. He cast the lord a troubled glance, shifted his gaze swiftly back to the fire. His face flushed, his hand unclenched, clenched again on the arm of the chair.

"Yes, Lord. That is what I am saying." He spoke slowly, heavily. "I think this evil power may be checked, halted, driven back, controlled. But never beaten, never ultimately destroyed."

"Not by us, your people, as strong and powerful as we are?" Xar put the question mildly, not arguing, merely requiring additional information.

"Not by us, Lord. As strong and powerful as we are." Haplo smiled at some inner thought, a sardonic smile.

The Lord of the Nexus was angered by this, although, to the casual observer, his expression appeared as placid and calm as before. Haplo did not notice, he was lost in a tangle of dark thoughts. But one other person was watching their conversation, eavesdropping on it. And this person was not a casual observer. He knew well what the lord was thinking.

This person, hidden away in a dark room, doted on the lord and thus had come to know every fleeting expression on the man's face. The unseen watcher now saw, illuminated by the firelight, the narrowing of Xar's eyes, the minute darkening of certain lines amidst the cobweb of wrinkles on Xar's forehead. The unseen observer knew his lord was angry, knew that Haplo had made a mistake, and the observer reveled in the knowledge.

The observer was so elated that he injudiciously wriggled at the thought, with the result that the stool on which he was seated scraped across the floor. The dog's head lifted instantly, ears pricked.

The observer froze. He knew the dog, remembered it, respected it. Wanted it. He did not move again, held still to the point of holding his breath, afraid even breathing might give him away.

The dog, hearing nothing further, apparently concluded it was a rat, and resumed its fitful nap.

"Perhaps," said Xar casually, making a small movement with his hand, "you think that the Sartan are the ones who are capable of defeating this 'almighty power.' "

Haplo shook his head, smiled into the fire's dying blaze. "No, Lord. They are as blind as—" He checked the words, afraid of what he'd been about to say.

"—as I am," Xar finished dryly.

Haplo looked up swiftly, the flush in his cheeks darkened. It was too late to recall the thought, too late to deny it. Any attempt at explanation would make him sound like a whining child, trying to weasel out of just punishment.

Haplo rose to his feet, faced the Lord of the Nexus, who remained seated, gazing up at him with dark, unfathomable eyes.

"Lord, we have been blind. And so have our enemies. The same things have blinded us both: hatred and fear. The serpents—or whatever force they are or represent—have taken advantage of it. They have grown strong and powerful. "Chaos is our life's blood," the serpents said. 'Death our meat and drink.' And now that they have entered Death's Gate, they can spread their influence throughout the four worlds. They want chaos, they want bloodshed, they want us to go to war, Lord!"

"And thus you counsel we should not, Haplo? You say we should not seek revenge for the centuries of suffering inflicted on our people? Not avenge the deaths of your parents? Not seek to defeat the Labyrinth, free those still left trapped within? Should we let Samah pick up where he left off? He will, you know that, my son. And this time, he will not imprison us. He will destroy us, if we let him! And is it your counsel, Haplo, that we let him?"

Haplo stood before the lord, staring down at him.

"I don't know, Lord," he said brokenly, fists clenching, unclenching. "I don't know."

Xar sighed, lowered his eyes, rested his head in his hand. If he had been angry, if he had railed and shouted, accused and threatened, he would have lost Haplo.

Xar said nothing, did nothing but sigh.

Haplo fell to his knees. Grasping the lord's hand, he pressed it to his lips, clasped it, held it fast. "Father, I see hurt and disappointment in your eyes. I beg your forgiveness if I've offended you. But the last time I was in your presence, the time before I sailed to Chelestra, you showed me that my salvation lay in telling you the truth. I have done so, Father. I've bared my soul to you, though it shames me to reveal my weakness.

"I don't offer counsel, Lord. I'm quick-thinking, quick to act. But I'm not wise. You are wise, Father. That is why I bring this very great dilemma to you. The serpents are here, Father," Haplo added in grim, dark tones. "They are here. I've seen one of them. He has disguised himself as one of our people. But I knew him for what he was."

"I am aware of this, Haplo." Xar clasped the hand that held his.

"You know?" Haplo sat back on his haunches, expression startled, wary.

"Of course, my son. You say I am wise, but you must not think I am very bright," Xar said with some asperity. "Do you imagine that I do not know what is happening in my own homeland? I have met the serpent and talked with him, both last night and today."

Haplo stared, silent, stunned.

"He is, as you say, powerful." Xar bestowed the compliment magnanimously. "I was impressed. A contest between we Patryns and these creatures would be interesting, though I have no doubt who would be the victor. But such a contest is not to be feared. It will never come about, my son. The serpents are our allies in this campaign. They have pledged their allegiance to me. They have bowed before me and called me Master."

"So they did with me," said Haplo in a low voice. "And they betrayed me."

"That was you, my son," said Xar, and the anger was back, this time visible to both the seen and the unseen observers. "This time they bowed to me."

The dog jumped to its feet with a "whuff," glared about fiercely.

"Easy, boy," Haplo said absently. "It was just a dream."

Xar glanced at the animal with displeasure. "I thought you got rid of that creature."

"He came back," Haplo replied, troubled, uneasy. He rose to his feet from where he knelt beside his lord, remained standing, as if thinking the interview might be at an end.

"Not precisely. Someone brought the dog back to you, didn't he?" Xar stood up.

A tall man, the lord was easily Haplo's equal in height, very probably his match in physical strength, for Xar had not permitted age to soften his body. He was more than Haplo's equal in magical prowess. Xar had taken the younger Patryn apart once, the time of which Haplo spoke, the time he'd lied to his lord. Xar could have killed Haplo then, but the lord chose to let him live.

"Yes, Lord," Haplo said. He stared down at the dog, at the floor. "Someone did bring him back to me."

"The Sartan called Alfred?"

"Yes, Lord," Haplo answered without voice.

Xar sighed. Haplo heard the sigh, closed his eyes, bent his head. The lord rested his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"My son, you have been deceived. I know it all. The serpents told me. They did not betray you. They saw your danger, sought to help you. You turned on them, attacked them. They had no choice but to defend themselves..."

"Against mensch children?" Haplo lifted his head, his eyes flashed.

"A pity, my son. They said you were fond of the girl. But you must admit, the mensch acted as mensch always do: recklessly, foolishly, without thinking. They aspired too high, meddled in affairs they could not possibly understand. In the end, as you well know, the dragons were forgiving. They helped the mensch defeat the Sartan."

Haplo shook his head, turned his gaze from his lord to the dog.

Xar's frown deepened. The hand on Haplo's shoulder tightened its grip. "I have been extremely lenient with you, my son. I have listened patiently to what some might term fantastic metaphysical speculations. Do not mistake me," he added, when Haplo would have spoken. "I am pleased that you brought these thoughts to me and shared them. But, once having answered your doubts and questions—as I believe I have—I am displeased to see you continue in your wrong-thinking.

"No, my son. Let me finish. You claim to rely on my wisdom, my judgment. And once you used to do so, Haplo, implicitly. This was the main reason I chose you for these delicate tasks which, up to now, you have performed satisfactorily. But do you now rely on me, Haplo? Or have you come to rely on another?"

"If you mean Alfred, Lord, you're wrong!" Haplo snorted derisively, made a swift, negating gesture with his hand. "He's gone now, anyway. Probably dead."

He stood staring down at the fire or the dog or both for long moments. Then suddenly, resolutely, he raised his head, looked directly at Xar.

"No, Lord, I do not rely on any other. I am loyal to you. That is why I came to you, brought you this information. I will be only too glad to be proven wrong!"

"Will you, my son?" Xar studied Haplo searchingly.

Seeming satisfied with what he saw, the lord relaxed, smiled, clapped Haplo affectionately on the shoulder. "Excellent. I have another task for you. Now that Death's Gate is opened and our enemies the Sartan are aware of us, we must move swiftly, more swiftly than I had intended. Within a short time, I leave for Abarrach, there to study the art of necromancy ..."

He paused, cast a sharp glance at Haplo. The younger Patryn's expression did not alter; he made no opposition to this plan. Xar continued.

"We do not have sufficient numbers of Patryns to form an army, as I had hoped. But, if we have armies of the dead to fight for us, then we do not need to waste our people. It is imperative, therefore, that I go to Abarrach, imperative that I go now, for I am wise"—dry emphasis on the word—"enough to know that I must study long and hard before I can master the art of raising the dead.

"But this trip poses a problem. I must go to Abarrach but, at the same time, it is imperative that Bane returns to Arianus, the Realm of Air. Let me explain. It involves the great machine of Arianus. The machine the mensch call, somewhat fancifully, the Kicksey-winsey.

"In your report, Haplo, you stated you found information left by the Sartan which indicated that they built the Kicksey-winsey in order to bring the floating islands of Arianus into alignment."

Haplo nodded. "Not only bring the islands into line, Lord, but then shoot a geyser of water up to those that are now dry and barren."

"Whoever rules the machine, rules the water. And whoever rules the water, rules those who must drink it or perish."

"Yes, Lord."

"Review for me the political situation as it was when you left Arianus."

Xar remained standing. This summary was obviously meant to be brief, and was probably for Haplo's benefit more than the lord's own. Xar had read Haplo's report many times, knew it from memory. Haplo, however, had visited three other worlds since he'd been to Arianus. He spoke hesitantly, trying to refresh his memory.

"The dwarves—known on Arianus as Gegs—live in the lower isles, down in the Maelstrom. They are the ones who run the machine, or rather they serve it, for the machine runs itself. The elves discovered that the machine could supply water for their empire, located in the Mid Realm of Arianus. Neither the humans nor the elves, who live in the Mid Realm, are able to collect water in any amount, due to the porous nature of the continents.

"The elves traveled into the lower realms in their magical dragonships, took the water from the dwarves, paid them in worthless trinkets and refuse left over from the elven kingdoms. A dwarf named Limbeck discovered the elven exploitation of the dwarven people. He is now—or he was when I left—leading the rebellion against the elven empire by, as you say, cutting off their water supplies.

"The elves have other problems, as well. An exiled prince is leading his own rebellion against the tyrannical regime currently in power. The humans, led by a strong king and queen, are themselves uniting and fighting against the elven rule."

"A world in chaos," said Xar, with satisfaction.

"Yes, Lord," responded Haplo, face flushing, wondering if this was, perhaps, a subtle rebuke for words spoken earlier, a reminder that the Patrins wanted worlds in chaos.

"The child Bane must go back to Arianus," Xar repeated. "It is vital that we take control of the Kicksey-winsey before the Sartan can return and claim it. Bane and I have undertaken a lengthy study of the machine. He will put the Kicksey-winsey into operation, start the process to realign the islands. This will, no doubt, further disrupt the lives of the mensch, causing terror, panic. In the midst of the turmoil, I will enter Arianus with my legions, restore order. I will be looked upon as a savior."

Xar shrugged. "Conquering Arianus—the first world to fall to my might—will be easy."

Haplo started to ask a question, paused, checked himself. He stared moorily into the flickering embers.

"What is it, my son?" Xar urged gently. "Speak freely. You have doubts. What are they?"

"The serpents, Lord. What about the serpents?"

Xar pursed his lips. His eyes narrowed alarmingly. His long, thin, strong hands clasped behind his back, maintaining the calming circle of his being. He had rarely been so angry.

"The serpents will do what I tell them to do. As will you, Haplo. As will all my subjects."

He had not raised his voice, nor altered its gentle modulations. But the unseen observer in the back room shivered and scrunched together on his stool, thankful that he wasn't the one shriveling in the heat of the old man's ire.

Haplo knew he had displeased his lord. He recalled a time of punishment. His hand went instinctively to the name-rune tattooed over his heart—the root and source of all his magical power, the starting of the circle.

Xar leaned forward, suddenly, laid his hand over Haplo's, laid his gnarled old hand over Haplo's heart.

The Patryn flinched, drew in a quick breath, but otherwise held still. The unseen observer ground his teeth. Much as he was gleefully enjoying Haplo's downfall, the observer was also bitterly jealous of Haplo's obvious closeness to his lord—a closeness the observer could never hope to share.

"Forgive me, Father," Haplo said simply, speaking with dignity, out of sincere contrition, not out of fear. "I will not fail you. What is your command?"

"You will escort the child Bane to Arianus. Once there, you will assist him in the operation of the Kicksey-winsey. You will do whatever else you need to do in order to foment chaos and turmoil in the world. That should be easy. This dwarven leader, this Limbeck, likes and trusts you, doesn't he?"

"Yes, Lord." Haplo had not stirred beneath the lord's touch on his heart. "And when that is accomplished?"

"You will wait on Arianus for my instructions."

Haplo nodded in silent acquiescence.

Xar held him a moment longer, feeling Haplo's life beating beneath his fingers, knowing he could end that life in a second, if he chose; knowing that Haplo knew it, as well.

Haplo gave a great, shuddering sigh, bowed his head.

The lord pressed him close. "My son. My poor troubled son. You bear my touch with such courage ..."

Haplo lifted his head. His face was flushed, he spoke savagely. "Because, my lord, there is no pain you or anyone could inflict on me worse than the pain I bear within myself."

Wrenching free of the lord's hold, Haplo walked abruptly from the room, from his lord's presence. The dog jumped to its feet, hurried after him, paws pattering quietly across the floor. There came the sound of a door slamming shut.

Xar stared after him, not greatly pleased. "I grow tired of these doubts, this whining. You will have one more chance to prove yourself loyal..."

The observer left his stool, slid out into the room, which was now dark with shadows. The fire had almost completely died.

"He didn't ask leave to go, Grandfather," noted the observer in a shrill voice. "Why didn't you stop him? I would have had him whipped."

Xar glanced about. He was not startled at the child's presence, or by the fact that he'd been listening. Xar was even somewhat amused at the vehemence in the tone.

"Would you, Bane?" Xar asked, smiling at the boy fondly, reaching out a hand to ruffle the fair hair. "Remember something, child. Love breaks a heart. Hatred strengthens it. I want Haplo broken, contrite, repentant."

"But Haplo doesn't love you, Grandfather," cried Bane, not completely understanding. He crowded close to the old man, looking up at him with adoring eyes. "I'm the only one who loves you. And I'll prove it. I will!"

"Will you, Bane?" Xar patted the boy approvingly, caressed him fondly.

A Patryn child would have never been encouraged to feel such affection, much less permitted to reveal it. But Xar had taken a fancy to the human child. Having lived a solitary life, the lord enjoyed the boy's company, enjoyed teaching him. Bane was bright, intelligent, and extraordinarily skilled in magic—for a mensch. Besides all this, the Lord of the Nexus found it rather pleasant to be worshiped.

"Are we going to study the Sartan runes tonight, Grandfather?" Bane asked eagerly. "I learned some new ones. I can make them work. I'll show you..."

"No, child." Xar withdrew his hand from the boy's head, his body from the child's clinging grasp. "I am weary. And there is study I must undertake before I journey to Abarrach. You run along and play."

The boy looked downcast. He kept silent, however, having learned the hard lesson that arguing with Xar was both futile and dangerous. Bane would remember the rest of his life the first time he'd thrown a floor-kicking, breath-holding tantrum in an effort to get his way. The ploy had always worked around other adults. It didn't work with the Lord of the Nexus.

The child's punishment had been swift, hard, severe.

Bane had never respected any adult until that moment. From then on, he respected Xar, feared him, and came to love him with all the passion of an affectionate nature granted him from his mother's side, darkened and corrupted by his evil father.

Xar left for his library, a place Bane was not permitted to enter. The child returned to his room to draw again the elementary Sartan rune-structure that he had finally, after much exhaustive toil, managed to reproduce and make functional. Once alone in his room, Bane paused. An idea had come to him.

He examined the idea to make certain it had no flaw, for he was a shrewd child and had learned well the lord's lessons in proceeding on any venture cautiously and with forethought.

The scheme appeared flawless. If Bane was caught, he could always whine or cry or charm his way out. Such tricks didn't work with the man he'd adopted as Grandfather, but Bane had never known them to fail with other adults.

Including Haplo.

Snatching up a dark cloak, throwing it over his thin shoulders, Bane slipped out of the lord's house, and merged with the twilight shadows of the Nexus.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE NEXUS

TROUBLED, HAPLO LEFT HIS LORD'S HOUSE AND WALKED WITHOUT ANY very clear idea where he was going. He wandered the forest paths; there were several, crisscrossing, leading to different parts of the Nexus. Most of his mental processes were given to reconstructing the conversation with his lord, trying to find in it some hope that Xar had heeded his warning and would be on his guard against the serpents.

Haplo wasn't very successful in finding hope. He couldn't blame his lord. The serpents had seduced Haplo with their flattery, their attitude of abject debasement and fawning servility. They had obviously fooled the Lord of the Nexus. Somehow, Haplo had to convince his lord that it was the serpents, not the Sartan, who were the real danger.

Most of his mind running on this worrisome topic, Haplo watched for any sign of the serpent, thinking vaguely that he might catch the creature in an unguarded moment, force it to confess its true purpose to Xar. Haplo saw no false Patryn, however. Probably just as well, he admitted to himself morosely. The creatures were cunning, highly intelligent. Little chance one would permit itself to be coerced.

Haplo walked and considered. He abandoned the forest and headed across twilight meadows for the city of the Nexus.

Now that Haplo had seen other Sartan cities, he knew the Nexus for one of theirs.

A towering, pillared, crystal spiral balanced on a dome formed of marble arches in the city's center. The center spire was framed by four other spires, matching the first. On a level beneath stood eight more gigantic spires. Large marble steppes flowed between the spires. Here, on the steppes, were built houses and shops, schools and libraries—those things the Sartan considered necessary to civilized living.

Haplo had seen this identical city standing on the world of Pryan. He had seen one very similar on Chelestra. Studying it from a distance, looking at the city with the eyes of one who has met its siblings and sees a disconcerting family resemblance, Haplo thought he could at last understand why his lord did not choose to live within the marble walls.

"It is just another prison, my son," Xar had told him. "A prison different from the Labyrinth and, in some ways, far more dangerous. Here, in their twilight world, they hoped we would grow soft as the air, become as gray as the shadows. They planned for us to fall victim to luxury and easy living. Our sharp-edged blade would turn to rust in their jeweled scabbard."

"Then our people should not live in the city," Haplo had said. "We should move from these buildings, dwell in the forest." He had been young and full of anger then.

Xar had shrugged. "And let all these fine structures go to waste? No. The Sartan underestimate us, to think we would be so easily seduced. We will turn their plan against them. In these surroundings that they provide, our people will rest and recover from their terrible ordeal and we will grow strong, stronger than ever, and ready to fight."

The Patrins—the few hundred who had escaped the Labyrinth—lived in the city, adapted it to their own use. Many found it difficult, at first—coming from a primitive, harsh environment—to feel settled and comfortable inside four walls. But Patrins are practical, stoic, adaptable. Magical energy once spent fighting to survive was now being channeled into more constructive uses: the art of warfare, the study of controlling weaker minds, the building up of supplies and equipment necessary to carrying a war into vastly differing worlds.

Haplo entered the city, walked its streets, which glimmered like pearl in the half-light. He had always before experienced a pride and fierce exultation when he traveled through the Nexus. The Patrins are not like the Sartan. The Patrins do not gather on street corners to exchange high-minded ideals or compare philosophies or indulge in pleasant camaraderie. Grim and dour, stern and resolute, occupied on important business that is one's own concern and no other's, Patrins pass each other in the street swiftly, silently, with sometimes a nod of recognition.

Yet there is a sense of community about them, a sense of familial closeness. There is trust, complete and absolute.

Or at least there had been. Now he looked around uneasily, walked the streets warily, with caution. He caught himself staring hard at each of his fellow Patrins, eyeing them suspiciously. He'd seen the serpents as gigantic snakes on Arianus. He'd seen one as one of his own people. It was obvious to him now that the creatures could take on any form they chose.

His fellow Patryns began to notice Haplo's odd behavior, cast him dark, puzzled glances that instinctively shifted to the defensive if his suspicious stares appeared about to invade personal boundaries.

It seemed to Haplo that there were a lot of strangers in the Nexus, more than he'd remembered. He didn't recognize half the faces he saw. Those he thought he should know were altered, changed.

Haplo's skin began to glow faintly, the sigla itched and burned. He rubbed his hand, glared furtively at everyone passing by him. The dog, pattering along happily, noticed the change in its master and was instantly on guard itself.

One woman, wearing long, flowing sleeves that covered her arms and wrists, passed by too closely, or so Haplo thought.

"What are you doing?" He reached out, grabbed her arm roughly, shoved the fabric up to see the sigla beneath it.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" The woman glared at him, broke his grip on her arm with a practiced, easy twist of her wrist. "What's wrong with you?"

Other Patryns halted in their pursuit of private affairs, banded instantly and instinctively together against the possible threat.

Haplo felt foolish. The woman was, indeed, a Patryn.

"Tin sorry," he said, lifting empty hands, bare and unprotected palms facing out, the sign of harmless intent, a sign that he would not use his magic. "Hush, dog. I—I thought maybe ..."

He couldn't tell them what he'd thought, couldn't tell them what he'd feared. They wouldn't believe him, any more than Xar had believed him.

"Labyrinth sickness," said another, older woman in flat, practical tones. "I'll take care of him."

The others nodded. Her diagnosis was likely correct. They had seen this type of reaction often, especially to those newly come from the Labyrinth. A mindless terror takes possession of the victim, sends him racing into the streets, imagining he is back in that dread place.

The woman reached to take Haplo's two hands in her own, to share the circle of their beings, restore his confused and wandering senses.

The dog glanced up at its master questioningly. Should I allow this? Or not?

Haplo caught himself staring fixedly at the sigla on the woman's hands and arms. Did they make sense? Was there order, meaning, purpose in them? Or was she a serpent?

He backed away a step, shoved his hands in his pockets.

"No," he mumbled. "Thank you, but I'm all right. I'm... I'm sorry," he repeated again, to the first woman, who was regarding him with cool pity.

Hunching his shoulders, keeping his hands in his pockets, Haplo strode away rapidly, hoping to lose himself in the winding streets. The dog, confused, fell into step behind him, its unhappy gaze fixed on its master.

Alone and unseen, Haplo leaned against a building and tried to stop his body's trembling.

"What is wrong with me? I don't trust anyone—not even my own people, my own kind! The serpents' doing! They've put this fear in me. Every time I look at anyone from now on, I'll wonder: Is he an enemy? Is she one

of them? I won't be able to trust anyone anymore! And soon, everyone in all the worlds will be forced to live like this! Xar, my lord," he cried in agony, "why can't you see?"

"I have to make him understand!" Haplo muttered feverishly. "I have to make my people understand. How? How can I convince them of something I'm not certain I understand? How can I convince myself?"

He walked and walked, not knowing where, not caring. And then he found himself standing outside the city, on a barren plain. A wall, covered with Sartan runes of warding, blocked his way. Strong enough to kill, these sigla prohibited anyone coming near the wall on either side. There was only one passageway through the wall. This was the Final Gate.

The Gate led out of ... or into ... the Labyrinth.

Haplo stood before the Gate, without any very clear idea why he was here, why he'd come. He stared at it, experiencing the mingled sensations of horror and fear and dread that always assailed him whenever he ventured near this place.

The land around him was silent, and he imagined he could hear the voices of those trapped inside, pleading for help, shouting in defiance, screaming curses with their dying breaths on those who had locked them in this place.

Haplo felt wretched, as he always did whenever he came here. He wanted to go in and help, wanted to join the fight, wanted to ease the dying with promises of vengeance. But his memories, his fear were strong hands holding him, keeping him back.

Yet he'd come here for a reason, and certainly not to stand staring at the Gate.

The dog pawed at his leg and whined, seemed to be trying to tell him something.

"Hush, boy," Haplo ordered, shoving the dog away.

The dog became more frantic. Haplo looked around, saw nothing, no one. He ignored the animal, stared at the Gate, feeling increasingly frustrated. He'd come here for a reason, but he hadn't the slightest idea what that reason was.

"I know what it's like," someone commiserated, a voice booming right behind him. "I know just how you feel."

Haplo had been quite alone. At the sudden utterance, spoken directly in his ear, he sprang back, instantly on the defensive, runes tingling, this time with a welcome sensation of protection.

He faced nothing more alarming than a very old man with a long scraggly beard, dressed in mouse-colored robes and wearing an extremely disreputable-looking pointed hat. Haplo couldn't speak for astonishment, but his silence didn't bother the old man, who carried on with his conversation.

"Know exactly how you feel. Felt that way myself. I recall once walking along, thinking of something extremely important. It was, let me see, ah, yes! The theory of relativity. 'E equals mc squared.' By George, I've got it! I said to myself. I saw the Whole Picture, and then, the next moment, bam! it was gone. No reason. Just gone."

The old man looked aggrieved. "Then some wiseacre named Einstein claimed he'd thought of it first! Humpf! I always wrote things down on my shirtsleeves after that. Didn't work either, though. Best ideas... pressed, folded, and starched." He heaved a sigh.

Haplo recovered himself. "Zifnab," he said in disgust, but he didn't relax his defensive posture. The serpents could take any form. Though this was not, on second thought, exactly the form he would have chosen.

"Zifnab, did you say? Where is he?" the old man demanded, extremely irate. Beard bristling, he whirled around. "This time I'll 'nab' you!" he shouted threateningly, shaking his fist at nothing. "Following me again, are you, you—"

"Cut the crazy act, old man," Haplo said. Putting a firm hand on a thin and fragile-feeling shoulder, he twisted the wizard around to face him, stared intently into the old man's eyes.

They were bleary, rheumy, and bloodshot. But they did not glint red. The old man may not be a serpent, Haplo said to himself, but he certainly isn't what he passes himself off as, either.

"Still claim to be human?" Haplo snorted.

"And what makes you think I'm not?" Zifnab demanded, highly insulted.

"Subhuman, perhaps," rumbled a deep voice.

The dog growled. Haplo recalled the old man's dragon. A true dragon. Perhaps not as dangerous as the serpents, but dangerous enough. The Patryn glanced quickly at his hands, saw the sigla on his skin begin to glow a faint blue. He searched for the dragon, but could see nothing clearly. The tops of the wall and the Final Gate itself were shrouded in pink-tinged gray mist.

"Shut up, you obese frog," shouted Zifnab. He was talking, apparently, to the dragon, but he eyed Haplo uneasily. "Not human, eh?" Zifnab suddenly put his wizened fingers to the corners of his eyelids, pulled his eyes into a slant. "Elf?"

The dog cocked its head to one side. It appeared to find this highly diverting.

"No?" Zifnab was deflated. He thought a moment, brightened. "Dwarf with an overactive thyroid!"

"Old man—" Haplo began impatiently.

"Wait! Don't tell me! I'll figure it out. Am I bigger than a bread box? Yes? No? Well, make up your mind." Zifnab appeared a bit confused. Leaning close, he whispered loudly, "I say, you wouldn't happen to know what a bread box is, would you? Or the approximate size?"

"You're Sartan," stated Haplo.

"Oh, yes. I'm certain." Zifnab nodded. "Quite certain. What I'm certain of, I can't remember at the moment, but I'm definitely certain—"

"Not 'certain'! Sartan!"

"Sorry, dear boy. Thought you came from Texas. They talk like that down there, you know. So you think I'm Sartan, eh? Well, I must say, I'm extremely flattered, but I—"

"Might I suggest that you tell him the truth, sir?" boomed the dragon.

Zimab blinked, glanced around. "Did you hear something?"

"It might be to his advantage, sir. He knows now, anyway."

Zifnab stroked his long, white beard, regarded Haplo with eyes that were suddenly sharp and cunning. "So you think I should tell him the truth, eh?"

"What you can remember of it, sir," the dragon remarked gloomily.

"Remember?" Zifnab bristled. "I remember any number of things. And you'll be sorry when I do, lizard lips. Now, let's see. Berlin: 1948. Tanis Half-Elven was taking a shower, when—"

"Excuse me, but we haven't got all day, sir." The dragon sounded stern. "The message we received was quite specific. Grave danger! Come immediately!"

Zifnab was downcast. "Yes, I s'pose you're right. The truth. Very well. You've wrung it out of me. Bamboo sticks beneath the fingernails and all that. I"—he drew a deep breath, paused dramatically, then flung the words forth—"I am Sartan."

His battered pointed hat toppled off, fell to the ground. The dog walked over, sniffed at it, gave a violent sneeze. Zifnab, miffed, snatched the hat away.

"What do you mean?" he demanded of the dog. "Sneezing on my hat! Look at this! Dog snot—"

"And?" prodded Haplo, glaring at the old man.

"—and dog germs and I don't know what else—"

"You're Sartan and what else? Hell, I knew you were Sartan. I guessed that on Pryan. And now you've proved it. You would have to be, in order to travel through Death's Gate. Why are you here?"

"Why am I here?" Zifnab repeated vaguely, glancing up at the sky. "Why am I here?"

No help from the dragon.

The old man folded his arms, placed one hand on his chin. "Why am I here? Why are any of us here? According to the philosopher Voltaire, we are—"

"Damn it!" Haplo exploded. He grabbed hold of the old man's arm. "Come with me. You can tell the Lord of the Nexus all about Voltaire—"

"Nexus!" Zifnab recoiled in alarm. Claspng his heart, he staggered backward. "What do you mean—Nexus? We're on Chelestra!"

"No, you're not," Haplo said grimly. "You're in the Nexus. And my lord—"

"You!" Zifnab shook his fist at the heavens. "You sorry excuse for an omnibus! You've brought us to the wrong place!"

"No, I did not," retorted the dragon, indignant. "You said we were to stop here first, then proceed to Chelestra."

"I said that, did I?" Zifriab looked extremely nervous.

"Yes, sir, you did."

"I didn't happen to say why I wanted to come here, did I? Didn't happen to suggest that it was a great place for barbecued chaodyn carapace? Anything of that sort?"

The dragon signed. "I believe you mentioned, sir, that you wanted to speak to this gentleman."

"Which gentleman?"

"The one to whom you are currently speaking."

"Aha! That gentleman," Zifnab cried triumphantly. He reached out, wrung Haplo's hand. "Well, my boy, nice seeing you again. Sorry to run, but we really must be going. Glad you got your dog back. Give my regards to Broadway. Remember me to Harold Square. Nice chap, Harold Square. Used to work in a deli on Fifth. Now, where's my hat—"

"In your hand, sir," observed the dragon with long-suffering patience. "You have just turned it inside out."

"No, this isn't mine. Positive. Must be yours." Zifnab attempted to hand the hat to Haplo. "Mine was much newer.

Better condition. This one's all covered with hair tonic. Don't try to switch hats on me, sonny!"

"You're going to Chelestra?" Haplo asked, casually accepting the hat. "What for?"

"What for? Sent for!" Zifnab stated importantly. "Urgent call. All Sartan. Grave danger! Come immediately! I wasn't doing anything else at the time, and so— I say," he said, eyeing Haplo anxiously. "Isn't that my hat you're holding?"

Haplo had turned the hat right side out again, was keeping it just out of the old man's reach. "Who sent the message?"

"It wasn't signed." Zifnab kept his gaze on the hat.

"Who sent the message?" Haplo began revolving the hat round and round.

Zifnab stretched out a trembling hand. "Mind you don't crush the brim ..."

Haplo drew the hat back.

Zifnab gulped. "Sam-hill. That was it. As in 'What the Sam-hill are you doing with my hat?'"

"Sam-hill... You mean 'Samah'! Gathering his forces. What's Samah intend to do, old man?"

Haplo lowered the hat until it was about level with the dog's nose. The animal, sniffing at it cautiously this time, began to nibble at the already shapeless point.

Zifnab gave a sharp cry. "Ah! Oh, dear! I—I believe he said something... No, don't drool on it, there's a good doggie! Something about... Abarrach. Necromancy. That's... that's all I know, I'm afraid." The old man clasped his hands, cast Haplo a pleading glance. "May I have my hat now?"

"Abarrach... Necromancy. So Samah's going to Abarrach to learn the forbidden art. That world could get rather crowded. My lord will be quite interested in this news. I think you'd better come—"

"I think not."

The dragon's voice had altered, rolled on the air like thunder. The sigla on Haplo's skin flared bright. The dog leapt to its feet, teeth bared, looking all around for the unseen threat.

"Give the doddering old fool his hat," commanded the dragon. "He's told you all he knows anyway. This lord of yours wouldn't get anything else out of him. You don't want to fight me, Haplo," the dragon added, tone stern and serious. "I would be forced to kill you... and that would be a pity."

"Yes," agreed Zifnab, taking advantage of Haplo's preoccupation with the dragon to make a deft grab. The wizard retrieved his hat, began to sidle backward, heading in the direction of the dragon's voice. "It would be a pity. Who would find Alfred in the Labyrinth? Who would rescue your son?"

Haplo stared. "What did you say? Wait!" He lunged out after the old man.

Zifnab shrieked, clutched his hat protectively to his chest. "No, you can't have it! Get away!"

"Damn your hat! My son ... What do you mean? Are you saying I have a son?"

Zifnab regarded Haplo warily, suspecting designs on the hat.

"Answer him, fool," snapped the dragon. "It's what you came to tell him in the first place!"

"I did?" The old man cast a deprecating glance upward, then, blushing, said, "Oh, yes. Quite."

"A son," Haplo repeated. "You're certain?"

"No, I'm Sartan. Hah! Caught you!" Zifnab cackled. "Well, yes, you have a son, dear boy. Congratulations." He reached out, shook Haplo's hand again. "Unless, of course, it's a daughter," the old man added, after giving the matter some thought.

Haplo waved that aside impatiently. "A child. You're saying a child of mine was born and... that child is trapped in there." He pointed at the Final Gate. "In the Labyrinth."

"I'm afraid so," said Zifnab, voice softening. He was suddenly serious, grave. "The woman, the one you loved... She didn't tell you?"

"No." Haplo had little idea what he was saying, to whom he was saying it. "She didn't. But I guess I always knew.... Speaking of knowing, how the hell do you know, old man?"

"Ah, he's got you there," said the dragon. "Explain that, if you can!"

Zifnab appeared rather flustered. "Well, you see, I once... That is to say, I ran into a chap, who knew a chap, who'd once met..."

"What am I doing?" Haplo demanded of himself. He wondered if he were going mad. "How would you know anything? It's a trick. That's it. A trick to force me into going back into the Labyrinth—"

"Oh, dear, no! No, my boy," said Zifnab earnestly. "I'm trying to keep you out of it."

"By telling me that a child of mine is trapped inside?"

"I'm not saying you shouldn't go back, Haplo. I'm saying that you shouldn't go back now. It isn't time. You have much to do before then. And, above all, you shouldn't go back alone."

The old man's eyes narrowed. "That is, after all, what you were thinking about when we found you here, wasn't it? You were going to enter the Labyrinth, search for Alfred?"

Haplo frowned, made no response. The dog, at the sound of Alfred's name, wagged its tail and looked up hopefully.

"You were going to find Alfred and take him to Abarrach with you," Zifnab continued in a soft voice. "Why? Because there, on Abarrach, in the so-called Chamber of the Damned, there's where you'll find the answers. You can't get into the chamber on your own. The Sartan have it well guarded. And Alfred's the only Sartan who would dare disobey the orders of the Council and unlock the runes of warding. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it, Haplo?"

Haplo shrugged. He was staring moodily at the Final Gate. "What if it was?"

"It isn't time, yet. You must get the machine working. Then the citadels will begin to shine. The durnai will awaken. When all that happens—if all that happens—the Labyrinth will start to change. Better for you. Better for them." Zifiab gave the Gate an ominous nod.

Haplo glared at him. "Do you ever make sense?"

Zifiab looked alarmed, shook his head. "I try not to. Gives me gas. But now you've interrupted. What else was I going to say?"

"He is not to go alone," intoned the dragon.

"Ah, yes. You're not to go alone, my boy," said Ziftiab brightly, as if he'd just thought of it himself. "Not into the Labyrinth, not into the Vortex. Certainly not into Abarrach."

The dog barked, deeply wounded.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," said Zifnab. Reaching out, he gave the animal a timid pat. "Sincere apologies and all that. I know you'll be with him, but that won't be enough, I'm afraid. I was thinking more in terms of a group. Commando squads. The Dirty Dozen. Kelly's Heroes. The Seven Samurai. Debbie Does Dallas. That sort of thing. Well, perhaps not Debbie Wonderful girl, Debbie, but—"

"Sir," said the dragon, exasperated, "need I remind you that we are in the Nexus. Not exactly the place I'd choose to indulge in prepubescent fantasies."

"Ah, yes. Perhaps you're right." Zifnab clutched his hat, glanced about nervously. "Place has changed a lot since I was here last. You Patryns have done wonders. I don't suppose I'd have time to pop over and look at—"

"No, sir," said the dragon firmly

"Or maybe—"

"Nor that either, sir."

"I suppose not." Zifnab sighed, pulled the shapeless and battered hat over his eyes. "Next time. Good-bye, dear boy." Groping about blindly, the old man solemnly shook hands with the dog, apparently mistaking it for Haplo. "Best of luck. I'll leave you with the advice Gandalf gave Frodo Baggins. 'When you go, go as Mr Underhill. Worthless bit of advice, if you ask me. As a wizard, Gandalf was highly overrated. Still, it must have meant something, else why would they have bothered to write it down. I say, you should really consider clipping your nails—"

"Get him out of here," Haplo advised the dragon. "My lord could be along any moment."

"Yes, sir. I believe that would be the best idea."

An enormous green-scaled head swooped out of the clouds.

Haplo's sigla flared, he backed up until he stood against the Final Gate. The dragon ignored the Patryn, however. Huge fangs, protruding from lower and upper jaws, caught hold of the wizard by the back of his mouse-colored robes and, none too gently, heaved the old man off his feet.

"Hey, let go of me, you twisted toad!" Zifnab shouted, flailing about wildly in midair. He began to wheeze and cough. "Ugh! Your breath is enough to flatten Godzilla. Been in the cat's tuna again, haven't you? I say, put me down!"

"Yes, sir," the dragon said through clenched teeth. He was holding the wizard about twenty feet off the ground. "If that's really what you want, sir."

Zifhab lifted the brim of his hat, peered out from underneath. Shuddering, he pulled the hat back over his eyes.

"No, I've changed my mind. Take me ... where is it Samah said we were to meet him?"

"Chelestra, sir."

"Yes, that's the ticket. Hope it isn't one-way. To Chelestra, there's a good fellow."

"Yes, sir. With all dispatch, sir."

The dragon, carrying the wizard, who looked, from this distance, very much like a limp mouse, disappeared into the clouds.

Haplo waited tensely to be certain the dragon was gone. Slowly, the blue light of the sigla faded. The dog relaxed, sat down to scratch.

Haplo turned to face the Final Gate. He could see, through the iron bars, the lands of the Labyrinth. Barren plains, without a tree, shrub, bush, or any type of cover, stretched from the Gate to dark and distant woods.

The last crossing, the most deadly crossing. From those woods, you can see the Gate, see freedom. It seems so close.

You start to run. You dash into the open, naked, exposed. The Labyrinth allows you to get halfway across, halfway to freedom, then sends its foul legions after you. Chaodyn, wolves, dragons. The grasses themselves rise up and trip you, vines entangle you. And that was getting out.

It was far worse, going back in.

Haplo knew, he'd watched his lord battle it every time he entered the Gate. The Labyrinth hated those who had escaped its coils, wanted nothing more than to drag its former prisoner back behind the wall, punish him for his temerity.

"Who am I kidding?" Haplo asked the dog. "The old man's right. Alone, I'd never make it alive to the first line of trees. I wonder what the old man meant about the Vortex? I seem to recall hearing my lord mention something about that once. Supposedly the very center of the Labyrinth. And Alfred's there? It'd be just like Alfred to get himself sent to the very center of the Labyrinth!"

Haplo kicked at a pile of broken stone, rubble. Once, long ago, the Patryns had attempted to tear down the wall. The lord had stopped them, reminded them that though the wall kept them out, it also kept the evil in.

Perhaps it's the evil in us, she'd said, before she left him.

"A son," said Haplo, staring through the Gate. "Alone, maybe. Like I was. Maybe he saw his mother die, like I did. He'd be what—six, seven, now. If he's still alive."

Picking up a large, jagged-edged chunk of rock, Haplo threw it into the Gate. He threw it as hard as he could, wrenching his arm, nearly dislocating his shoulder. Pain flashed through his body, felt good. At least better than the bitter aching in his heart.

He watched to see where the stone landed—a far distance inside. He had only to walk in the Gate, walk as far as the stone. Surely, he had that much courage. Surely, he could do that much for his son....

Haplo turned, abruptly walked away. The dog, caught flat-footed by his master's sudden move, was forced to run to catch up.

Haplo berated himself for a coward, but the accusation was halfhearted. He knew his own worth, knew that his decision wasn't based on fear but on logic. The old man had been right.

"Getting myself killed won't help anyone. Not the child, not his mother—if she's still alive—not my people. Not Alfred.

"I will ask my lord to come with me," Haplo said, walking faster, his excitement, determination mounting. "And my lord will come. He'll be eager to, when I tell him what the old man said. Together, we'll go deep into the Labyrinth, deeper than he's ever gone. We'll find this Vortex, if it exists. We'll find Alfred and... whoever else. Then we'll go to Abarrach. I'll take my lord to the Chamber of the Damned and he will learn for himself—"

"Hullo, Haplo. When did you get back?"

Haplo's heart lurched. He looked down.

"Oh, Bane," he muttered.

"I'm glad to see you, too," said Bane, with a sly smile that Haplo ignored.

He was back in the Nexus, he'd entered the city without even knowing it.

After his greeting, Bane raced off. Haplo watched him go. Running through the streets of the Nexus, Bane dodged the Patryns, who regarded him with patient tolerance. Children were rare and precious beings—the continuation of the race. Haplo was not sorry to see the boy leave. He needed to be alone with his thoughts.

He recalled vaguely that he was supposed to take Bane back to Arianus, start the machine working.

Start the machine working.

Well, that could wait. Wait until he came back out of the Labyrinth...

You must get the machine working. Then the citadels will begin to shine. The durnai will awaken. When all that happens—if all that happens—the Labyrinth will start to change. Better for you. Better for them.

"Oh, what do you know, old man?" Haplo muttered. "Just another crazy Sartan..."

## CHAPTER 7

### THE NEXUS

BANE HAD STUDIED HAPLO CLOSELY FOR SEVERAL MOMENTS AFTER HIS greeting, noted that the man was paying more attention to inward musmgs than outward influences. Excellent, the child thought and dashed on ahead. It doesn't matter if Haplo sees me now. Probably wouldn't have mattered if he'd noticed me watching him earlier. Adults have a tendency to overlook the presence of a child, to treat a child as if it were a dumb animal and could not possibly understand what was going on, what was being said. Bane had discovered this tendency early in his short life, had fi used it often to his own advantage.

But Bane had learned to be careful around Haplo. Although Bane despised the man, as he despised nearly every I adult, the child had been forced to concede Haplo grudging respect. He wasn't as stupid as most adults. Therefore, Bane had taken extra precautions. But now the need for caution was ended, the need for haste urgent.

Bane ran through the forest, nearly knocking over a Patryn, lounging along the path, who gazed after the child with eyes that glinted red in the twilight. Reaching the lord's house, Bane hurled open the door and dashed into the study. The lord was not there.

For an instant, Bane panicked. Xar had left for Abarrach already! Then he paused a moment to catch his breath, consider.

No, that couldn't be possible. The lord had not given Bane final instructions, nor said good-bye. Bane breathed easier and, his head clear, he knew where he would find his adopted "grandfather."

Proceeding through the large house, Bane walked out a door at the back, emerged onto a broad expanse of smooth green lawn. A ship, covered with runes, stood in the lawn's center. Haplo would have recognized the ship—it was similar in almost every detail to the one he'd flown through Death's Gate to Arianus. Limbeck, the Geg on Arianus, would have recognized the ship, for it was similar to the vessel he had discovered wrecked on one of the isles of Drevlin in Arianus.\*

\*Dragon Wing, vol. i of The Death Gate Cycle. Haplo flew the ship to Arianus. Having underestimated the magical power of Death's Gate, Haplo had not prepared his ship properly, with the result that it crash-landed. The Geg, Limbeck, discovered the downed ship, rescued Haplo and the dog.

The ship was perfectly round and had been wrought of metal and of magic. The outside hull was covered with sigla that wrapped the ship's interior in a sphere of protective power. The ship's hatch stood open, bright light streamed out. Bane saw a figure moving within.

"Grandfather!" the child shouted, and ran toward the ship.

The Lord of the Nexus paused in whatever it was he was doing, glanced out the hatch. Bane couldn't see the lord's face, silhouetted against the bright light, but the child knew by the rigidity of the stance and the slight hunching of the shoulders that Xar was irritated at the interruption.

"I will be in presently, child," Xar told him, going back to his duties, disappearing into the depths of the ship. "Return to your lessons—"

"Grandfather! I followed Haplo!" The child gasped for breath. "He was going to enter the Labyrinth, only he met a Sartan who talked him out of it."

Silence within the ship, all movement had ceased. Bane hung onto the doors of the hatch, sucking in great quantities of breath, excitement and lack of oxygen combining to make him light-headed. Xar came back, a figure of darkness against the bright interior light.

"What are you talking about, child?" Xar's voice was gentle, soft. "Calm down. Don't get yourself so worked up."

The lord's hand, callused, hard, stroked Bane's golden curls, damp with sweat.

"I was... afraid you would leave... without hearing ..." Bane gulped air.

"No, no, child. I am making last-minute adjustments, seeing to the placement of the steering stone. Come, what is this about Haplo?" Xar's voice was mild, but the eyes were hard and chill.

Bane wasn't frightened by the cold. The ice was meant to burn another.

"I followed Haplo, just to see where he was going. I told you he didn't love you, Grandfather. He wandered around the forest a long time, looking for someone. He kept talking to that dog of his about serpents. Then he went into the city. He almost got into a fight." Bane's eyes were round, awed.

"Haplo?" The lord sounded disbelieving.

"You can ask anyone. Everyone saw." Bane was not above slight exaggeration. "A woman said he had some sort of sickness. She offered to help him, but he shoved her away and stalked off. I saw his face. It wasn't nice."

"Labyrinth sickness," Xar said, his expression softened. "It happens to us all—"

Bane understood that he'd made a mistake in mentioning the sickness, given his enemy a way out. The child hastened to shut off that escape route.

"Haplo went to the Final Gate. I didn't like that, Grandfather. What reason did he have to go there? You told him he was to take me to Arianus. He should have been back at his ship, getting it ready to go. Shouldn't he?"

Xar's eyes narrowed, but he shrugged. "He has time. The Final Gate draws many back to it. You would not understand, child—"

"He was going to go inside, Grandfather!" Bane insisted. "I know. And that would have been defying you, wouldn't it? You don't want him to go inside, do you? You want him to take me to Arianus."

"How do you know he was going inside, child?" Xar asked, voice soft, tone dangerous.

"Because the Sartan told him he was. And Haplo didn't say he wasn't!" Bane said triumphantly.

"What Sartan? A Sartan in the Nexus?" Xar almost laughed. "You must have been dreaming. Or making this up."

"Are you making this up, Bane?" The lord said the last sternly, stared at Bane intently.

"I'm telling you the truth, Grandfather," Bane averred solemnly. "A Sartan appeared out of nowhere. He was an old man with gray robes and an old, stupid-looking hat—"

"Was his name Alfred?" Xar interrupted, frowning.

"Oh, no! I know Alfred, remember, Grandfather? This wasn't him. Haplo called this man 'Zifnab.' He said that Haplo was going into the Labyrinth to look for Alfred and Haplo agreed. At least he didn't disagree. Then the old man told Haplo that going into the Labyrinth alone was a mistake, that Haplo would never reach Alfred alive. And Haplo said he had to reach Alfred alive, because he was going to take Alfred to the Chamber of the Damned on Abarrach and prove you wrong, Grandfather."

"Prove me wrong," Xar repeated.

"That's what Haplo said." Bane did not allow himself to be inconvenienced by the truth. "He was going to prove you wrong."

Xar shook his head slowly. "You must have been mistaken, child. If Haplo had discovered a Sartan in the Nexus, he would have brought the enemy to me."

"I would have brought the old man to you, Grandfather," said Bane. "Haplo could have, but he didn't." No mention of the dragon. "He warned the Sartan to leave quickly, because you might be coming."

Xar's breath hissed through clenched teeth, the gnarled hand that had been stroking Bane's curls jerked spasmodically, accidentally pulling the child's hair. Bane winced from the pain, inwardly reveled in it. He guessed that Xar was hurting far worse than Bane himself and that Haplo would be the one to suffer for it.

Xar suddenly grasped hold of Bane's hair, jerked his head back, forced the blue eyes to meet Xar's black ones. The lord held the child in his daunting gaze long, searching, penetrating to the bottom of Bane's soul—not a very far drop.

Bane looked back unblinking, unflinching in Xar's rough grip. Xar knew Bane for what he was—a skilled and cunning liar—and Bane knew Xar knew. The child had floated enough truth on the surface to conceal the lies beneath. And, with that uncanny insight into adults gained from long and lonely hours when he had nothing to do except study them, Bane guessed that Xar would be too hurt by Haplo's betrayal to probe deeper.

"I told you, Grandfather," Bane said earnestly, "Haplo doesn't love you. I'm the only one."

The hand holding Bane went suddenly nerveless. Xar released the boy. The lord stared out into the twilight, his pain raw and visible in the ravaged face, in the sudden sagging of the shoulders, the limpness of the hand.

Bane had not expected this, was displeased, jealous of Haplo's ability to cause such pain.

Love breaks the heart.

Bane flung his arms around Xar's legs, hugged him close.

"I hate him, Grandfather! I hate him for hurting you. He should be punished, shouldn't he, Grandfather? You punished me, the time I lied to you. And Haplo's done worse than that. You told me about the time you punished him before he went to Chelestra, how you could have killed him, but you didn't, because you wanted him to learn from his punishment. You must do that again, Grandfather. Punish him like that again."

Annoyed, Xar started to try to free himself from Bane's clinging grasp, then stopped. Sighing, the lord again fondled the boy's hair, stared out into the twilight. "I told you about that time, Bane, because I wanted you to understand the reason for your punishment and for his. I do not inflict pain wantonly. We learn from pain, that's why our bodies feel it. But some, apparently, choose to ignore the lesson."

"And so you'll punish him again?" Bane peered upward.

"The time for punishment is past, child."

Though Bane had been waiting for a year to hear those words, spoken in that tone, he couldn't help but shudder.

"You're going to kill him?" Bane whispered, overawed.

"No, child," said the Lord of the Nexus, twisting the golden curls. "You are."

Haplo arrived back at the lord's house. Entering, he crossed the living area, heading for Xar's library.

"He's gone," said Bane, seated cross-legged on the floor, his elbows on his knees, his chin on his hands. He was studying Sartan runes.

"Gone." Haplo stopped, stared at Bane, frowning, then looked back at the doorway leading to the library. "Are you sure?"

"See for yourself." Bane shrugged.

Haplo did. He walked into the library, glanced around, then returned. "Where did Lord Xar go? To the Labyrinth?"

Bane held out a hand. "Here, dog. Here, boy."

The dog pattered over, sniffed warily at the Sartan book of runes.

"Grandfather went to that world—the one made of stone. The one where the dead bodies walk." Bane looked up, blue eyes large and glittering. "Will you tell me about that world? Grandfather said you might—"

"Abarrach?" Haplo asked in disbelief. "He's gone already. Without—" The Patryn stalked out of the room. "Dog, stay," he ordered as the animal started to follow.

Bane heard the man banging doors in the back part of the dwelling. Haplo was going outside to look for Xar's ship. Bane grinned, wriggled in delight, then quickly sobered, continued to pretend to study his runes. The child cast a surreptitious glance beneath his long lashes at the dog, who had flopped down on its belly and was watching him with friendly interest.

"You'd like to be my dog, wouldn't you?" Bane asked softly. "We'd play together all day and I'll give you a name—"

Haplo returned, walking slowly. "I can't believe he left. Without saying . . . anything to me."

Bane looked at the runes, heard Xar's voice.

It is clear to me that Haplo has betrayed me. He is in league with my enemies. I think it best that I do not meet him again, face to face. I am not certain I could control my anger.

"Grandfather had to leave in a hurry," said Bane. "Something came up. New information."

"What new information?"

Was it wishful thinking on Bane's part, or did Haplo look guilt-ridden, uneasy? Bane buried his chin in his hands again, to keep his grin from showing.

"I don't know," he mumbled, shrugging again. "It's grown-up stuff. I didn't pay any attention."

I must allow Haplo to live awhile longer. An unfortunate necessity, but I need him and so do you, child. Don't argue with me. Haplo is the only one among our people who has been to Arianus. This Geg, Limbeck, who is in control of the great machine, knows Haplo and trusts him. You will need the dwarves' trust, Bane, if you are to gain control of them, the Kicksey-winsey, and, eventually, the world.

"Grandfather said he gave you your orders already. You're supposed to take me to Arianus—"

"I know," Haplo interrupted impatiently. "I know."

Bane risked a glance. The man was not looking at the child, not paying him any attention. Haplo, dark, brooding, was staring at nothing.

Bane felt a twinge of alarm. What if Haplo refused to go? What if he'd made up his mind to enter the Labyrinth, search for Alfred? Xar had said Haplo wouldn't, that Haplo would obey his command. But Xar himself had proclaimed Haplo a traitor.

Bane didn't want to lose him. Haplo was his. The child decided to take action on his own. Jumping to his feet, eager and excited, Bane came over to stand in front of Haplo.

"I'm ready to go. Anytime you say. Won't it be fun? To see Limbeck again. And the Kicksey-winsey. I know how to make it work. I've studied the Sartan runes. It will be glorious!" Bane waved his arms with calculated childish abandon. "Grandfather says that the effects of the machine will be felt on all the worlds, now that

Death's Gate is open. He says that every structure the Sartan built will likely come alive. He says that he'll feel the effects, even as far away as Abarrach."

Bane watched Haplo closely, tried to guess what the man was thinking. It was difficult, practically impossible. The man's face was impassive, expressionless; he might not have been listening. But he had been. Bane knew.

Haplo hears everything, says little. That is what makes him good. That is what makes him dangerous.

And Bane had seen the man's eyelids flicker, ever so slightly, when the child mentioned Abarrach. Was it the idea of the Kicksey-winsey affecting something on Abarrach that had caught the man's interest? Or was it the reminder that, even on Abarrach, Xar would be aware of what his servant was—or was not—doing? Xar would know when the Kicksey-winsey came to life. And if it didn't, he would start to wonder what had gone wrong.

Bane flung his arms around Haplo's waist. "Grandfather said to give you his embrace. He said to tell you he trusted you, relied on you completely. He knows you won't fail him. Or me."

Haplo put his hands on Bane's arms, pulled the boy loose as the man might have pulled loose a leech.

"Ouch, you're hurting me," Bane whimpered.

"Listen, kid," said Haplo grimly, not relaxing his hold. "Let's get one thing straight. I know you. Remember? I know you for the scheming, conniving, manipulative little bastard that you are. I'll obey my lord's command. I'll take you to Arianus. I'll see to it that you have a chance to do whatever it is you need to do to that damn machine. But don't think you're going to blind me with the light from your halo, kid, because I've seen that halo, close-up."

"You don't like me," said Bane, crying a little. "No one likes me, except Grandfather. No one ever did like me."

Haplo grunted, straightened. "Just so we understand each other. And another thing. I'm in charge. What I say goes. Got that?"

"I like you, Haplo," said Bane, with a snivel.

The dog, feeling tenderhearted, came over and licked the child's face. Bane threw his arm around the animal's neck.

I'll keep you, he promised the dog silently. When Haplo's dead, you'll be my dog. It will be fun.

"At least he likes me," Bane said aloud, pouting. "Don't you, boy?"

The dog wagged its tail.

"The damn dog likes everyone," Haplo muttered. "Even Sartan. Now go to your room, pack up your things. I'll wait here until you're ready."

"Can the dog come with me?"

"If it wants. Go on, now. Hurry up. The sooner we get there, the sooner I'll be back."

Bane left the room with a show of quiet obedience. It was fun, playacting; fun to fool Haplo. Fun to pretend to obey a man whose life you hold in your small hands. Bane hugged to himself a conversation—almost the last conversation—he'd had with Xar.

When your task is completed, Bane, when the Kicksey-winsey is in operation and you have taken control of Ananus, Haplo will then become expendable. You will see to it that he is failed I believe you knew an assassin on Arianus

Hugh the Hand, Grandfather. But he's not alive anymore. My father killed him.

There will be other assassins for hire. One thing is most important. One thing you must promise me to do. You must keep Haplo's corpse preserved until my arrival.

You're going to resurrect Haplo, Grandfather? Make him serve you after he's dead, like they do with the dead men on Abarrach?

Yes, child. Only then will I be able to trust him.... Love breaks the heart.

"Come on, boy!" Bane cried, suddenly. "Race you!"  
He and the dog dashed madly for the child's bedroom.

## CHAPTER 8

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

THE TRIP THROUGH DEATH'S GATE WAS UNEVENTFUL. HAPLO CHARMED Bane to sleep almost immediately after they departed the Nexus. It had occurred to Haplo that the passage into Death's Gate had become so simple a skilled mensch wizard might attempt it. Bane was observant, intelligent, and the son of a skilled wizard. Haplo had a sudden vision of Bane flitting from one world to another.... Nope. Nap time.

They had no difficulty reaching Arianus, World of Air. The images of the various worlds flashed past Haplo; he found the floating isles of Arianus with ease. But before he concentrated on it, he spent a few moments watching the other worlds drift before him, shining in rainbow hues like soap bubbles, before bursting and being replaced by the next. All of them were places he recognized except one. And that one—the most beautiful, the most intriguing.

Haplo stared at the vision as long as he could, which was only a matter of fleeting seconds. He had intended to ask Xar about it, but the lord had left before Haplo had a chance to discuss it.

Was there a fifth world?

Haplo rejected that notion. No mention of a fifth world had ever been made in any of the ancient Sartan writings.

The old world.

Haplo thought this much more probable. The flashing image he saw of it accorded with descriptions of the old world. But the old world no longer existed; a world torn apart by magic. Perhaps this was nothing more than a poignant memory, kept around to remind the Sartan of what had once been.

But, if that were so, why should it be presented as an option? Haplo watched the possibilities sparkle before his eyes again and again. Always in the same order: the strange world of blue sky and bright sun, moon, and stars, boundless ocean and broad vistas; then the Labyrinth, dark and tangled; then the twilight Nexus, then the four elemental worlds.

If Haplo had not had Bane with him, he would have been tempted to explore, to select the image in his mind and see what happened. He glanced down at the child, slumbering peacefully, his arm around the dog; both of them sharing a cot Haplo had dragged onto the bridge in order to keep an eye on the kid.

The dog, sensing its master's gaze, opened its eyes, blinked lazily, yawned widely, and, seeing no action was imminent, gave a contented sigh and crowded closer to the child, nearly pushing Bane off the cot. Bane muttered something in his deep, something about Xar, and suddenly clutched the dog's for with pinching hands.

The dog gave a pained yelp, reared its head, and looked at the child with a bemused expression, wondering what it had done to deserve such rough treatment, uncertain how to extricate itself. The dog looked up at Haplo, asking for help.

Haplo, smiling, uncurled the sleeping child's fingers from the dog's fur, petted the dog's head in apology. The dog gave Bane a distrustful glance, jumped off the cot, and curled up safely on the deck at Haplo's feet.

Haplo looked back at the visions, concentrated on Arianus, put the others out of his mind.

The first time Haplo had traveled to Arianus had nearly been his last. Unprepared for both the magical forces of Death's Gate and the violent physical forces existent in the, Realm of Air, he had been forced to crash-land his ship on what he had later learned were a senes of small floating isles known as the Steps of Terrel Fen.

He was prepared, now, for the terrible effects of the ferocious storm that raged perpetually in the Lower Realms. The protective sigla that had only glowed faintly during their passage through Death's Gate flared a vibrant blue when the first blast of wind smote the vessel. Lightning was almost continual, brilliant, blinding. Thunder crashed around them, the wind buffeted them. Hail battered the wooden shell, rain lashed against the window, forming a solid sheet of water, making it impossible to see.

Haplo brought the ship to a standstill, kept it floating in midair. Having spent time on Drevlin—the principal isle of the Lower Realm—he had learned that these storms swept through in cycles. He had only to wait for this one to pass; then would come a period of relative calm before the next one. During that calm, he would find a place to land, make contact with the dwarves.

Haplo considered keeping Bane asleep, decided to allow the boy to wake up. He might as well make himself useful. A quick brush of Haplo's hand wiped away the rune he'd traced on the child's forehead.

Bane sat up, blinked dazedly around for a moment, then glared at the Patryn accusingly.

"You put me to sleep."

Haplo saw no need to verify, comment on, or apologize for his action. Keeping watch as best he could out the rain-smearred window, he flicked a glance at the boy.

"Go through the ship, see if there are any leaks or cracks in the hull."

Bane flushed angrily at the Patryn's offhand, commanding tone. Haplo watched the crimson wave spread from the fair neck to the cheeks. The blue eyes flashed in rebellion. Xar had not spoiled the child, who had been in the lord's care over a year now. The lord had done much to improve Bane's temper, but the boy had been raised a prince in a royal household and was accustomed to giving orders, not taking them.

Especially not from Haplo.

"If you've done your magic right, there shouldn't be any cracks," said Bane petulantly.

We might as well get settled now who's boss, Haplo thought. He shifted his gaze back to the window, watching for the first signs that the storm was about to subside.

"I did my magic right. But you've worked with the runes. You know how delicate the balance is. One tiny sliver could start a crack that would end up breaking apart the entire ship. Best to make sure, to stop it now before it gets wider."

A moment's silence, which Haplo assumed was spent in internal struggle.

"Can I take the dog with me?" Bane asked in sullen tones. Haplo waved a hand. "Sure."

The child seemed to cheer up. "Can I feed him a sausage?"

The dog, at the sound of its favorite word, was on its feet, tongue lolling, tail wagging.

"Only one," said Haplo. "I'm not sure how long this Storm's going to last. We may need to eat the sausages ourselves."

"You can always conjure up more," said Bane happily. "C'mon, dog."

The two clattered away, heading for the ship's stern. Haplo watched the rain slide down the windowpane, H thought back to when he'd first brought the boy to the Nexus...

..."The kid's name is Bane, Lord," said Haplo. "I know," he added, seeing Xar's frown, "it's a strange name for a human child, but, once you know his history, the name makes sense. You'll find an account of him there, Lord, in my journal."

Xar fingered the document but did not open it. Haplo remained standing in respectful silence, waiting for his lord to speak. The lord's next question was not entirely unexpected. "I asked you to bring me a disciple from this world, Haplo. Arianus is, as you describe it, a world in chaos: elves, dwarves, humans all fighting each other, the elves fighting among themselves. A serious shortage of water, due to the failure of the Sartan to align the floating islands and make their fantastic machine operational. When I begin my conquest, I will need a lieutenant, preferably one of the mensch, to to Arianus and gain control over the people in my name. Awhile I am busy elsewhere. And for this purpose you bring me a ten-year-old human child?"

The child under discussion was asleep in a back bedroom in Xar's dwelling. Haplo had left the dog with him, to give its master notice if Bane woke. Haplo did not flinch beneath his Lord's stern gaze. Xar was not doubting his minion; the Lord was puzzled, perplexed—a feeling Haplo could well understand. He'd been prepared for the question, he was prepared with the answer.

"Bane is no ordinary mensch child, Lord. As you will note in the journal\*—"

\*Haplo, Ananus, World of Air, vol. I of Death Gale Journal.

"I will read the journal later, at my leisure. I would be much interested to hear your report on the child now."

Haplo bowed in compliance, sat down in the chair Xar indicated with a wave of his hand.

"The boy is the son of two humans known among their people as mysteriarchs—powerful wizards, by mensch standards, at least. The father called himself Sinistrad, the mother's name is Iridal. These mysteriarchs with their great skill in magic considered the rest of the human race barbaric boors. The mysteriarchs left the fighting and chaos in the Mid Realms, traveled up to the High Realms. Here they discovered a land of beauty that, unfortunately for them, turned out to be a death trap.

"The High Realms had been created by the rune-magic of the Sartan. The mysteriarchs had no more idea how to read Sartan magic than a toddler can read a treatise on metaphysics. Their crops withered in the fields, water was scarce, the rarefied air was difficult to breathe. Their people began to die out. The mysteriarchs knew they had to flee this place, return to the Mid Realms. But, like most humans, they feared

their own kind. They were afraid to admit their weakness. And so they determined that when they went back, it would be as conquerors, not as supplicants.

"The boy's father, Sinistrad, devised a remarkable plan. The human king of the Mid Realms, one Stephen, and his wife, Anne, had given birth to an heir to the throne. At about that same time, Sinistrad's own wife, Iridal, gave birth to their son. Sinistrad switched the babies, taking his own child down to the Mid Realms and bringing Stephen's son back to the Upper Realms. It was Sinistrad's intent to use Bane—as heir to the throne—to gain control of the Mid Realms.

"Of course, everyone in the Mid Realms knew the babies had been switched, but Sinistrad had cleverly cast a charm upon his son that made everyone who looked on the child dote on him. When Bane was a year old, Sinistrad came to Stephen and informed the king of his plan. King Stephen was powerless to fight the mysteriarch. In their hearts, Stephen and Anne loathed and feared the changeling—that was why they named him Bane—but the enchantment around him was so strong that they could do nothing themselves to get rid of him. Finally, in desperation, they hired an assassin to take Bane away and kill him.

"As it turned out, Lord,"—Haplo grinned—"Bane almost assassinated the assassin."

"Indeed?" Xar appeared impressed.

"Yes, you'll find the details there." Haplo indicated the journal. "Bane wore an amulet, given to him by Sinistrad, that transmitted the wizard's commands to the boy, transmitted whatever the boy heard back to Sinistrad. Thus the mysteriarchs spied on the humans, knew every move King Stephen made. Not that Bane needed much guidance in intrigue. From what I've seen of the kid, he could have taught his father a thing or two.

"Bane's quick-witted, intelligent. He's a clairvoyant, and skilled in magic, for a human, though he's untrained. It was Bane who figured out how the Kicksey-winsey works, what it's intended to do. That's his diagram I've included in there, Lord. And he's ambitious. When it became clear to Bane that his father did not intend for them to rule the Mid Realms as a father and son team, Bane determined to get rid of Sinistrad.

"Bane's plot succeeded, though not quite as he'd planned it. The boy's life was saved, ironically enough, by the man who'd been hired to kill him. A waste, that," Haplo added thoughtfully. "Hugh the Hand was an interesting human, a skilled and able fighter. He was exactly what you were seeking in a disciple, Lord. I had planned bringing him to you, but, unfortunately, he died battling the wizard. A waste, as I said."

The Lord of the Nexus was only half listening. Opening the journal, he'd discovered the diagram of the Kicksey-winsey. He studied it carefully.

"The child did this?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord."

"You're certain."

"I was spying on them when Bane showed this to his father. Sinistrad was as impressed as you are."

"Remarkable. And the child is charming, winning, comely. The enchantment his father cast over him would have no effect on us, certainly, but does it still work upon the mensch?"

"Alfred, the Sartan, was of the opinion that the enchantment had been dispelled. But"—Haplo shrugged—"Hugh the Hand was under this boy's spell—whether by magic or merely pity for an unloved child who had been nothing but a pawn all his life. Bane is clever and knows how to use his youth and his beauty to manipulate others."

"What of the child's mother? What did you say her name was, Iridal?"

"She could be trouble. When we left, she was searching for her son in company with the Sartan, Alfred."

"She wants the boy for her own purposes, I presume."

"No, I think she wants him for himself. She never went along with her husband's plan, not really. Sinistrad had some sort of terrible hold over her. She was afraid of him. And, with his demise, the courage of the other mysteriarchs collapsed. There was talk when I left that they were abandoning the High Realms, planning to move down among the other humans."

"The mother could be disposed of?"

"Easily, Lord."

Xar smoothed the pages of the journal with his gnarled fingers, but he wasn't looking at it any longer, nor paying attention to it.

"A little child shall lead them.' An old mensch saying, Hapto. You have acted wisely, my son. I might go so far as to say that your choice was inspired. Those mensch who would feel threatened by an adult coming to lead them will be completely disarmed by this innocent-seeming child. The boy has the typical human faults, of course. He is hotheaded, lacks patience and discipline. But with the proper tutelage, I believe he can be molded into something quite extraordinary for a mensch. I begin, already, to see the vague outline of my plan."

"I am glad to have pleased you, Lord," said Haplo.

"Yes," murmured the Lord of the Nexus, "a little child shall lead them..."

The storm abated. Haplo took advantage of the relative calm to fly over the isle of Drevlin, searching for a place to land. He had come to know this area quite well. He'd spent considerable time here on his last visit, preparing his elven ship for its return through Death's Gate.

The continent of Drevlin was flat and featureless, a hunk of what the mensch called "coralite" floating in the Maelstrom. One could judge landmarks, however, by the Kicksey-winsey, the gigantic machine whose wheels and engines and gears and pulleys and arms and claws spread out over Drevlin's surface, delved deep into the island's interior.

Haplo was searching for the Liftalofts, nine huge mechanical arms made of gold and steel that thrust up into the swirling storm clouds. These Liftalofts were the most important part of the Kicksey-winsey, at least as far as the mensch on Arianus were concerned, for it was the Liftalofts that provided water to the dry realms above. The Liftalofts were located in the city of Wombe, and it was in Wombe that Haplo hoped to find Limbeck.

Haplo had no idea how the political situation might have changed during his absence, but when he'd last left Arianus, Limbeck had made Wombe his power base. It was necessary that Haplo find the leader of the dwarves, and he judged that Wombe would be as good a place to start searching as any.

The nine arms, each with an outstretched golden hand, were easy to spot from the air. The storm had died down, though more clouds were massing on the horizon. Lightning reflected off the metal, the frozen hands were silhouetted against the clouds. Haplo landed on a patch of empty ground, bringing the ship down in the shadow of an apparently abandoned portion of the machine. At least he assumed it was abandoned, no light shone from it, no gears were grinding, no wheels turning, no "lectricity," as the GEGs termed it, was rivaling the lightning with its blue-yellow voltage.

Once safely on the ground, Haplo noticed that there were no lights anywhere. Puzzled, he peered out the rain-streaked window. As he recalled, the Kicksey-winsey turned the storm-ridden darkness of Drevlin into

artificial, perpetual day. Glimmerglamps shone everywhere, 'lectric zingers sent jagged bolts sparking into the air.

Now, the city and its surroundings were lit only by the light of the sun, which, by the time it had been filtered down through the clouds of the Maelstrom, was leaden and sullen and more depressing than darkness.

Haplo stood staring out the window, recalling his last visit here, trying to remember if there had been lights on this part of the Kicksey-winsey, or if he was, in fact, thinking about another portion of the great machine.

"Maybe that was in Het," he muttered, then shook his head. "No, it was here. I definitely remember—"

A thump and a warning bark jolted him out of his reverie.

Haplo walked back to the ship's stern. Bane was standing beside the hatch, holding a sausage just out of the dog's reach.

"You can have this," he was promising the dog, "but only if you quit barking. Let me get this open. All right? Good dog."

Bane shoved the sausage in a pocket, turned to the hatch, and began to fumble with the sliding latch that would, ordinarily, have opened the door.

The latch remained stuck firmly in place. Bane glared at it, beat on it with his small fists. The dog kept its eyes fixed intently on the sausage.

"Going somewhere, Your Highness?" Haplo asked, leaning casually against one of the bulkheads. He had decided, in the interests of portraying Bane as rightful heir to the Volkaran throne, to use the title due to a human prince. He supposed he might as well get used to it now, before they appeared in public. Of course, he'd have to blunt the ironic edge.

Bane glanced reproachfully at the dog, gave the recalcitrant latch one final, futile push with his hands, then looked up coolly at Haplo.

"I want to go outside. It's hot and stuffy in here. And it smells of dog," he added scornfully.

The animal, hearing its name and thinking it was being referred to in a friendly manner—perhaps in regard to the sausage—wagged its tail and licked its chops.

"You used magic on it, didn't you," Bane continued accusingly, giving the latch another push.

"The same magic I've used throughout the ship, Your Highness. I had to. It wouldn't do to let one part remain unprotected, just as it wouldn't do to ride to battle with a gaping hole in your armor. Besides, I don't think you want to go outside just yet. There's another storm coming. You remember the storms on Drevlin, don't you?"

"I remember. I can see when a storm's coming, same as you. And I wouldn't have stayed out that long. I wasn't going that far."

"Where were you going, Your Highness?"

"Nowhere. Just for a walk." Bane shrugged.

"Not thinking of trying to contact the dwarves on your own, eh?"

"Of course not, Haplo," Bane said, eyes round. "Grandfather said I was to stay with you. And I always obey Grandfather."

Haplo noticed the emphasis on the last word, smiled grimly. "Good. Remember, I'm here for your protection, as much as anything. It's not very safe on this world. Not even if you are a prince. There are those who would kill you just for that alone."

"I know," said Bane, looking subdued, somewhat ashamed. "The elves almost killed me last time I was here. I guess I didn't think about that. I'm sorry, Haplo." Clear blue eyes gazed upward. "It was very wise of Grandfather to give you to me for a guard. You always obey Grandfather, too, don't you, Haplo?"

The question caught Haplo by surprise. He glanced swiftly at Bane, wondering what—if anything—the child meant by it. For an instant, Haplo thought he saw a glitter of cunning, sly and malevolent, in the wide blue eyes. But Bane stared at him guilelessly, a child asking a childish question.

Haplo turned away. "I'm going back up front, to keep watch."

The dog whined, looked pathetically at the sausage, still in Bane's pocket.

"You didn't ask me about the leaks," Bane reminded Haplo.

"Well, were there any?"

"No. You work the magic pretty good. Not as good as Grandfather, but pretty good."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Haplo said, bowed, and walked off.

Bane took the sausage out of his pocket, smacked the dog lightly and playfully on the nose with it. "That's for giving me away," he said, in mild reproof.

The dog slavered, regarded the sausage hungrily.

"Still, I guess it was for the best." Bane frowned. "Haplo's right. I'd forgotten about those damn bastard elves. I'd like to meet the one who threw me off the ship that time. I'd tell Haplo to throw that elf into the Maelstrom. And I'd watch him fall, all the way down. I'll bet you could hear him scream a long, long time. Yes, Grandfather was right. I see that now. Haplo will be useful to me, until I can find someone else.

"Here you go." Bane handed over the sausage. The dog snapped it up, swallowed it in a gulp. Bane petted the silky head fondly. "And then you'll be mine. You and me and Grandfather. We'll all live together and we won't let anyone hurt Grandfather anymore ever. Will we, boy?"

Bane laid his cheek on the dog's head, cuddled the warm body.

"Will we?"

## CHAPTER 9

### WOMBE

#### LOW REALM, ARIANUS

#### THE GREAT KICKSEY-WINSEY HAD STOPPED.

Nobody on Drevlin knew what to do. Nothing like this had ever happened before in all the history of the Gogs.

As long as the Gogs could remember—and because they were dwarves, that was a long time indeed—the wondrous machine had been at work. It worked and it worked. Feverishly, serenely, frantically, obtusely—it worked. Even when parts of the Kicksey-winsey broke down, it worked; other parts worked to repair those

that didn't. No one was ever quite certain what work the Kicksey-winsey did, but all knew, or at least suspected, that it worked well—But now it had stopped.

The 'lectriczingers no longer zinged, they hummed—ominously, some thought. The whirly-wheels neither whirled nor wheeled. They held perfectly still, except for a slight quivering. The flashrafts halted, disrupting transportation throughout the Low Realm. The metal hands of the flashraft that grabbed the overhead cable and—with the help of the 'lectriczingers— pulled the flashraft along were stilled. Palms open, the metal hands reached futilely out to heaven.

The whistle-toots were silent, except for a sigh that escaped them now and then. The black arrows inside the glass boxes—arrows that must never be allowed to point to red—had sagged clear down to the bottom half of the boxes and now pointed at nothing.

When it first quit, there had been immediate consternation. Every Geg man, woman, and child—even those off duty, even those involved in the guerrilla action against the Welves—had left his or her post and run to stare at the great—now inactive —machine. There were some who thought that it would start again. The assembled Gogs had waited hopefully... and waited and waited. Scrift-change had come and gone. The marvelous machine had continued to do nothing.

And it was still doing it.

Which meant that the Gogs did nothing. Worse still, it appeared as if they were going to be forced to do nothing without heat and without light. Due to the constant, ferocious storms of the Maelstrom that sweep continually across their isles, the Gogs lived underground. The Kicksey-winsey had always provided heat from the bubble-boils and light from the glimmerglamps. The bubble-boils had stopped bubbling almost at once. The glamps had continued to burn for some time following the shutdown of the machine, but now their flames were fading. Lights all over Drevlin were flickering, going out.

And all around, a terrible silence.

The Gogs lived in a world of noise. The first sound a baby heard was the comforting whump, bang, slam of the Kicksey-winsey at work. Now it was no longer working and it was silent. The Gogs were terrified of the silence.

"It's died!" was the wail that went up simultaneously from a thousand Geg throats, across the isle of Drevlin.

"No, it hasn't died," stated Limbeck Bolttightner, peering grimly at one portion of the Kicksey-winsey through his new spectacles. "It's been murdered."

"Murdered?" Jarre repeated in an awed whisper. "Who would do such a thing?" But she knew, before she asked.

Limbeck Bolttightner took off his spectacles and wiped them carefully on a clean white handkerchief, a habit he'd formed recently. Then he put his spectacles back on, stared at the machine by the light of a torch (made from a rolled-up sheaf of paper containing one of his speeches). He'd lit it by holding it to the sputtering flame of the fast-fading glimmer-glamp.

"The elves."

"Oh, Limbeck, no," cried Jarre. "You can't be right. Why, if the Kicksey-winsey's stopped working, then it's stopped producing water, and the Welves—elves—need that water for their people. They'll die without it. They need the machine just as much as we do. Why would they shut it down?"

"Perhaps they've stockpiled water," said Limbeck coldly. "They're in control up there, you know. They have armies ringed round the Liftalofts. I see their plan. They're going to shut the machine down, starve us, freeze us out."

Limbeck shifted his gaze to Jarre, who immediately looked away.

"Jarre!" he snapped. "You're doing it again."

Jarre flushed, tried very hard to look at Limbeck, but she didn't like looking at him when he wore his spectacles. They were new, of an original design, and—so he claimed—improved his sight immeasurably. But, due to some peculiarity in the glass, the spectacles had the effect of making his eyes appear small and hard.

Just like his heart, Jarre thought to herself sadly, trying her best to look Limbeck in the face and failing miserably. Giving up, she fixed her gaze on the handkerchief that was a glaring patch of white poking out through the dark mass of long, tangled beard.

The torch burned low. Limbeck gestured to one of his bodyguards, who immediately grabbed another speech, rolled it up, and lit it before the last one could go out.

"I always said your speeches were inflammatory." Jarre attempted a small joke.

Limbeck frowned. "This is no time for levity. I don't like your attitude, Jarre. I begin to think that you are weakening, my dear. Losing your nerve—"

"You're right!" Jarre said suddenly, talking to the handkerchief, finding it easier to talk to the handkerchief than to its owner. "I am losing my nerve. I'm afraid—"

"I can't abide cowards," remarked Limbeck. "If you're so scared of the elves that you can no longer function in your position of WUPP Party Secretary—"

"It's not the elves, Limbeck!" Jarre clasped her hands tightly together to keep them from yanking off his spectacles and stomping all over them. "It's us! I'm afraid of us! I'm afraid of you and... and you"—she pointed at one of the Geg bodyguards, who appeared highly flattered and proud of himself—"and you and you! And me. I'm afraid of myself! What have we become, Limbeck? What have we become?"

"I don't know what you mean, my dear." Limbeck's voice was hard and sharp as his new spectacles, which he took off once again and started to clean.

"We used to be peace-loving. Never in the history of the GEGS did we ever kill anyone—"

"Not 'GEGS'!" said Limbeck sternly.

Jarre ignored him. "Now we live for killing! Some of the young people, that's all they think about now. Killing WELVES—"

"Elves, my dear," Limbeck corrected her. "I've told you. The term 'welves' is a slave word, taught to us by our 'masters.' And we're not GEGS, we're dwarves. The word 'GEGS' is derogatory, used to keep us in our place."

He put the spectacles back on, glared at her. The torchlight shining from beneath him (the dwarf holding the torch was unusually short) sent the shadows cast by the spectacles swooping upward, giving Limbeck a remarkably sinister appearance. Jarre couldn't help looking at him now, stared at him with a terrible fascination.

"Do you want to go back to being a slave, Jarre?" Limbeck asked her. "Should we give in and crawl to the elves and grovel at their feet and kiss their little skinny behinds and tell them we're sorry, we'll be good little GEGS from now on? Is that what you want?"

"No, of course not." Jarre sighed, wiped away a tear that was creeping down her cheek. "But we could talk to them. Negotiate. I think the Wel—elves—are as sick of this fighting as we are."

"You're damn right, they're sick of it," said Limbeck, with satisfaction. "They know they can't win."

"And neither can we! We can't overthrow the whole Tribus empire! We can't take to the skies and fly up to Aristagon and do battle."

"And they can't overthrow us either! We can live for generations down here in our tunnels and they'll never find us—"

"Generations!" Jarre shouted. "Is that what you want, Limbeck? War that will last generations! Children who will grow up never knowing anything but hiding and running and fear?"

"At least they'll be free," Limbeck said, hooking his spectacles back over his ears.

"No, they won't. So long as you're afraid, you're never free," Jarre answered softly.

Limbeck didn't respond. He was silent.

The silence was terrible. Jarre hated the silence. It was sad and mournful and heavy and reminded her of something, someplace, someone. Alfred. Alfred and the mausoleum. The secret tunnels beneath the statue of the Manger, the rows of crystal coffins with the bodies of the beautiful young dead people. It had been silent down there, too, and Jarre had been afraid of the silence.

Don't stop! she'd told Alfred.

Stop what? Alfred had been rather obtuse.

Talking! It's the quiet! I can't stand listening to it!

And Alfred had comforted her. These are my friends.... Nobody here can harm you. Not anymore. Not that they would have anyway—at least, not intentionally.

And then Alfred had said something that Jarre had remembered, had been saying to herself a lot lately.

But how much wrong have we done unintentionally, meaning the best.

"Meaning the best," she repeated, talking to fill the dreadful silence.

"You've changed, Jarre," Limbeck told her sternly.

"So have you," she countered.

And after that, there wasn't much to say, and they stood there, in Limbeck's house, listening to the silence. The bodyguard shuffled his feet and tried to look as if he'd gone deaf and hadn't heard a word.

The argument was taking place in Limbeck's living quarters—his current dwelling in Wombe, not his old house in Het. It was a very fine apartment by Geg standards, suited to be the dwelling place of the High Froman,\* which is what Limbeck now was. Admittedly, the apartment was not as fine as the holding tank where the previous High Froman, Darral Longshoreman, used to live. But the holding tank had been too near the surface—and consequently too near the elves, who had taken over the surface of Drevlin.

\*Ruler of the Gogs of Drevlin of the Low Realm of Arianus.

Limbeck, along with the rest of his people, had been forced to delve far beneath the surface, seek shelter down below. This had been no hardship for the dwarves.\* The great Kicksey-winsey was constantly delving and drilling and boring. Hardly a cycle passed without a new tunnel being discovered somewhere in Wombe or Het or Lek or Herat or any of the other Geg towns on Drevlin. Which was fortunate, because the Kicksey-winsey, for no apparent reason that anyone could see, would often bury, crush, fill up, or otherwise destroy previously existing tunnels. The dwarves took this philosophically, burrowing out of collapsed tunnels and trudging off to seek new ones.

\*Haplo, in this and future accounts, uses the term "dwarves" as opposed to "Gegs," as he used in the account of his first trip to Arianus. Haplo doesn't give a reason for this change, but it is probable that he agreed with Limbeck that "Geg" was a demeaning term. Haplo includes a notation in this manuscript defining the word "Geg" as a short version of the elven word "gega'rega," a slang term for an insect.

Of course, now that the Kicksey-winsey had stopped working, there would be no more collapses, no more new tunnels either. No more light, sound, heat. Jarre shivered, wished she hadn't thought about heat. The torch was starting to fizzle and die. Swiftly, Limbeck rolled up another speech.

Limbeck's living quarters were located far below the surface, one of the lowest points on Drevlin, directly beneath the large building known as the Factree. A series of steep, narrow stairs led down from a hallway to another hallway, which led to the hallway in front of Limbeck's apartment.

The steps, the hall, the apartment were not carved out of the coralite, as were most of the other tunnels made by the Kicksey-winsey. The steps were made of smooth stone, the hall had smooth walls, the floor was smooth, as was the ceiling. Limbeck's apartment even had a door, a real door, with writing on it. None of the dwarves could read the writing and accepted Limbeck's pronouncement—that BOILER ROOM meant HIGH FROMAN—without question.

Inside the apartment, things were a bit cramped, due to the presence of a large and extremely imposing-looking part of the Kicksey-winsey. The gigantic contraption, with its innumerable pipes and tanks, no longer worked and had not worked for a long, long time, just as the Factree itself had not worked for as long as the dwarves could remember. The Kicksey-winsey had moved on, leaving this part of itself behind.

Jarre, not wanting to look at Limbeck in the spectacles, fixed her gaze on the contraption, and she sighed.

"The old Limbeck would have taken the thing apart by now," she said to herself, whispering, to fill up the silence. "He would have spent all his time hammering this and unscrewing that and all the time asking why, why, why. Why is it here? Why did it work? Why did it stop?"

"You never ask 'why' anymore, do you, Limbeck?" Jarre said aloud.

"Why what?" Limbeck muttered, preoccupied.

Jarre sighed again. Limbeck either didn't hear her, or ignored her.

"We've got to go to the surface," he said. "We've got to find out how the elves managed to shut down the Kicksey-winsey—"

The sound of footsteps, shuffling and slow—those made by a group trying to descend a steep staircase in pitch darkness, punctuated by an occasional crash and muffled curse—interrupted him.

"What's that?" asked Jarre, alarmed.

"Elves!" said Limbeck, looking fierce.

He scowled at the bodyguard, who was also looking alarmed, but—at the sight of his leader's frown—altered his expression to look fierce, as well.

Shouts of "Froman! High Froman!" filtered through the closed door.

"Our people," said Limbeck, annoyed. "They want me to tell them what to do, I suppose."

"You are the High Froman," Jarre reminded him with some asperity.

"Yes, well, I'll tell them what to do," Limbeck snapped. "Fight. Fight and keep on fighting. The elves have made a mistake, shutting down the Kicksey-winsy. Some of our people weren't too keen on bloodshed before, but now they will be! The elves will rue the day—"

"Froman!" Several voices howled at once. "Where are you?"

"They can't see," said Jarre.

Taking the torch from Limbeck, she flung open the door, trotted out into the hallway.

"Lof?" she called, recognizing one of the dwarves. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Limbeck came to stand next to her. "Greetings, Fellow Warrior in the Battle to End Tyranny."

The dwarves, shaken from their perilous trip down the stairs in the darkness, looked startled. Lof glanced around nervously, searching for such a fearsome-sounding personage.

"He means you," said Jarre curtly.

"He does?" Lof was impressed, so impressed that he forgot momentarily why he'd come.

"You were calling me," said Limbeck. "What do you want? If it's about the Kicksey-winsy stopping work, I'm preparing a statement—"

"No, no! A ship, Yonor," answered several at once. "A ship!"

"A ship has landed Outside." Lof waved a hand vaguely upward. "Yonor," he added belatedly and somewhat sullenly. He had never liked Limbeck.

"An elf ship?" Limbeck asked eagerly. "Crashed? Is it still there? Can you see any elves moving about? Prisoners," he said in an aside to Jarre. "It's what we've been waiting for. We can interrogate them and then use them for hostages—"

"No," said Lof, after some thought.

"No what?" demanded Limbeck, irritated.

"No, Yonor."

"I mean, what do you mean, by saying no."

Lof considered. "No the ship hasn't crashed and no it's not a Welf ship and no I didn't see anyone."

"How do you know it's not a Wel—elf ship? Of course, it has to be an elf ship. What other kind of ship could it be?"

" 'Tisn't," stated Lof. "I should know a Welf ship when I see one. I was on one once." He glanced at Jarre, hoping she'd be impressed. Jarre was the main reason Lof didn't like Limbeck. "Leastwise, I was close to one, the time we attacked the ship at the Lifalof's. This ship doesn't have wings, for one thing. And it didn't

fall out of the skies, like the Welf ships do. This one sort of floated down gently, like it meant it. And," he added, eyes still on Jarre, having saved the best for last, "it's all covered with pictures."

"Pictures..." Jarre glanced at Limbeck uneasily. His eyes, behind his glasses, had a hard, bright gleam. "Are you sure, Lof? It's dark Outside and there must have been a storm—"

"Course I'm sure." Lof wasn't to be denied his moment of glory. "I was standing in the Whuzel-wump, on watch, and the next thing I know this ship that looks like a ... like a... well, like him." Lof pointed at his exalted leader. "Kind of round in the middle and sawed off at both ends."

Fortunately, Limbeck had removed his spectacles and was thoughtfully polishing them again, and so missed the comparison.

"Anyway," Lof continued, swelling with importance, noting that everyone, including the High Froman, was hanging on every word, "the ship sailed right smack out of the clouds and plunked itself down and sat there. And it's all covered with pictures, I could see 'em in the lightning."

"And the ship wasn't damaged?" Limbeck asked, replacing his spectacles.

"Not a bit of it. Not even when the hailstones the size of you, Yonor, came smash down onto it. Not even when the wind was tossing pieces of the Kicksey-winsey up into the air. The ship just sat there, snug as could be."

"Maybe it's dead," said Jarre, trying hard not to sound hopeful.

"I saw a light inside and someone moving around. It's not dead."

"It isn't dead," said Limbeck. "It's Haplo. It has to be. A ship with pictures, just like the ship I found on the Terrel Fen. He's come back!"

Jarre walked over to Lof, grabbed hold of his beard, sniffed at him and wrinkled her nose. "Like I thought. He's had his head in the ale barrel. Don't pay any attention to him, Limbeck."

Giving the astounded Lof a shove that sent him rolling backward into his fellows, Jarre took hold of Limbeck's arm and attempted to turn him around, drag him back inside his quarters.

Once his feet were planted, Limbeck, like all dwarves, was not easily moved. (Jarre had caught Lof off guard.) Limbeck shook Jarre loose, brushing her off his arm as if she were a bit of lint.

"Did any of the elves sight the ship, Lof?" Limbeck asked. "Make any attempt to contact it or see who was inside?"

Limbeck was forced to repeat his questions several times. The puzzled Lof, reestablished on his feet by his comrades, was staring in hurt bewilderment at Jarre.

"What'd I do?" he demanded.

"Limbeck, please—" Jarre begged, tugging again on Limbeck's arm.

"My dear, leave me be," said Limbeck, staring at her through the glittering spectacles. His tone was stern, even harsh.

Jarre slowly dropped her hands. "Haplo did this to you," she said softly. "Haplo did this to all of us."

"Yes, we owe him a great deal." Limbeck turned away from her. "Now, Lof. Were there any elves around? If so, Haplo might be in danger—"

"No Welves, Yonor." Lof shook his head. "I haven't seen a Welf since the machine stopped running. I— Ouch!"

Jarre had kicked him hard in the shins.

"What'd you go and do that for?" Lof roared.

Jarre made no response, marched on past him and the rest of the dwarves without a glance at any of them.

Returning to the BOILER ROOM, she whipped around, pointed a quivering finger at Limbeck. "He'll be the ruin of us! You'll see!"

She slammed the door shut.

The dwarves stood perfectly still, afraid to move. Jarre had taken the torch with her.

Limbeck frowned, shook his head, shrugged, and continued the sentence that had been so violently interrupted. "Haplo might be in danger. We don't want the elves to capture him."

"Anyone got a light?" ventured one of Lof's companions.

Limbeck ignored this question as unimportant. "We'll have to go rescue him."

"Go Outside?" The dwarves were aghast.

"I've been Outside," Limbeck reminded them tersely.

"Good. You go Outside and get him. We'll watch," said Lof.

"Not without light we won't," muttered another.

Limbeck glared angrily at his compatriots, but the glare was rather ineffective since no one could see it.

Lof, who had apparently been giving the matter thought, piped up. "Isn't this the Haplo who's a god—"

"There are no gods," Limbeck snapped.

"Well, then, Yonor"—Lof was not to be deterred—"the Haplo who battled that wizard you're always talking about?"

"Sinistrad. Yes, that's Haplo. Now you see—"

"Then he won't need rescuing!" Lof concluded in triumph. "He can rescue himself!"

"Anyone who can fight a wizard can fight elves," said another, speaking with the firm conviction of one who had never seen an elf up close. "They're not so tough."

Limbeck checked an impulse to strangle his Fellow Warriors in the Battle to End Tyranny. He took off his spectacles, polished them on the large white cloth. He was quite fond of his new spectacles. He could see through them with remarkable clarity. Unfortunately, the lenses were so thick that they slid down his nose, unless held on by strong wire bows wrapped tightly about his ears. The bows pinched him painfully, the strong lenses made his eyeballs ache, the nosepiece dug into his flesh, but he could see quite well.

At times like this, however, he wondered why he bothered. Somehow or other, the revolution, like a runaway flashraft, had veered off the track and been derailed. Limbeck had tried backing it up, had tried turning it around, but nothing had worked. Now, at last, he saw a glimmer of hope. He wasn't derailed, after all. Merely sitting on a siding. And what he'd first considered a terrible disaster—the demise of the Kicksey-winsey—might well work to get the revolution going again. He put his spectacles back on.

"The reason we don't have any light is because—"

"Jarre took the torch?" inserted Lof helpfully.

"No!" Limbeck sucked in a deep breath, clenched his hands to fists to keep his fingers from Lof's throat. "The elves shut down the Kicksey-winsey."

Silence. Then, "Are you sure?" Lof sounded dubious.

"What other explanation could there be? The elves have shut it down. They plan to starve us, freeze us out. Maybe use their magic to come on us in the dark and kill us all. Are we going to just sit here and take it or are we going to fight?"

"Fight!" shouted the dwarves, anger rumbling through the darkness like the storms that swept the land above.

"That's why we need Haplo. Are you with me?"

"Yes, Yonor!" cried the Fellow Warriors.

Their enthusiasm was considerably dampened when two of them started to march off and ended up nose-first against a wall.

"How can we fight what we can't see?" Lof grumbled.

"We can see," said Limbeck, undaunted. "Haplo told me that once long ago dwarves like us lived all their lives underground, in dark places. And so they learned to see in the dark. We've been dependent on light. Now that the light is gone, we'll have to do like our ancestors and learn to see and fight and live in darkness. Glegs couldn't manage. Glegs couldn't do it. But dwarves can. Now"—Limbeck drew a deep breath—"everyone forward. Follow me."

He advanced a step and another and another. He didn't run into anything. And he realized that he could see! Not very clearly; he couldn't have read one of his speeches, for example. But it seemed as if the walls had absorbed some of the light that had been shining on the dwarves for as long as they could remember and that light, out of gratitude, was giving some of itself back. Limbeck could see the walls and the floor and the ceiling shining faintly. He could see the silhouettes of his Fellow Warriors stand out black against the light. Moving on, he could see the break in the walls made by the staircase, could see the stairs running upward, a pattern of darkness and faint, eerie light.

Behind him, he heard the other dwarves gasp in awe, knew that he wasn't alone. They could see, too. His heart swelled with pride for his people.

"Things will change now," he said to himself, marching up the stairs, hearing the bold footsteps marching right behind. The revolution was back on track, and, if not exactly rushing along, at least it was rolling.

He could almost have thanked the elves.

Jarre wiped away a few tears, stood with her back planted against the door, waiting for Limbeck to knock, meekly request the torch. She'd give it to him, she decided, and give him a piece of her mind as well—Listening to the voices, she heard

what sounded like Limbeck, launching into a speech. She sighed gustily, tapped her foot on the floor.

The torch had nearly burned out. Jarre grabbed another sheaf of speeches, set them ablaze. She heard "Fight!" in a loud roar, then a thud against the wall. Jarre laughed, but her laugh was bitter. She put her hand on the doorknob.

Then, inexplicably, she heard the sound of marching feet, felt the heavy vibrations of many pairs of thick dwarven boots clumping down the hall.

"Let them bang their fool heads on the wall a couple of times," she muttered. "They'll be back."

But there was only silence.

Jarre opened the door a crack, peeped out.

The hallway was empty.

"Limbeck?" Jarre cried, flinging the door wide. "Lof? Anyone?"

No response. Far away, she heard the sound of boots thumping determinedly up the stairs. Bits of Limbeck's speech, turned to glowing ash, drifted down from the torch, fell on the floor at her feet.

## CHAPTER 10

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

HAPLO OFTEN USED THE DOG TO LISTEN IN ON THE CONVERSATIONS of others, hearing their voices through the animal's ears. It never occurred to him, however, to listen to conversations anyone might be having with his dog. The animal had been ordered to keep an eye on the boy, alert Haplo to any misdeed— as in the case of the attempt to open the hatch. Beyond that, Haplo didn't care what Bane said or thought.

Though he had to admit that Bane's innocent-seeming question about obedience to the Lord of the Nexus had disturbed him. There had been a time—and Haplo knew it well— when he would have answered such a question immediately, without reservation, with a clear conscience.

Not now. Not anymore.

It was useless to tell himself that he'd never actually gone so far as to disobey his lord. True obedience is in the heart, as well as the mind. And in his heart, Haplo had rebelled. Evasions and half-truths were not as bad as outright refusals and lies, but they were not as good as open honesty, either. For a long time now, ever since Abarrach, Haplo had not been honest with his lord. The knowledge had once made him feel guilty, uncomfortable.

"But now," Haplo said to himself, staring out the window into the rapidly intensifying storm, "I begin to wonder. Has my lord been honest with me?"

The storm broke over the ship. The vessel rocked on its moorings in the violent wind, but otherwise held fast, secure. The constantly flashing lightning lit the landscape brighter during the height of the storm than the sun did during the calm. Haplo put his questions about his lord out of his mind. That was not his problem, at least not now. The Kicksey-winsey was. He walked from window to window, studying what he could see of the great machine.

Bane and the dog wandered onto the bridge. The dog smelled strongly of sausage. Bane was obviously bored and out of sorts.

Haplo ignored them both. He was certain now that his memory was not playing him false. Something was definitely wrong....

"What are you looking at?" Bane demanded, yawning, plunking himself down on a bench. "There's nothing out there except—"

A jagged bolt of lightning struck the ground near the ship, sending rock fragments exploding into the air. Heart-stopping thunder crashed around them. The dog cowered down against the floor. Haplo instinctively fell back from the window, though he was in his place again an instant later, staring out intently.

Bane ducked his head, covered it with his arms. "I hate this place!" he yelled. "I— What was that? Did you see that?"

The child jumped to his feet, pointing. "The rocks! The rocks moved!"

"Yeah, I saw it," Haplo said, glad to have confirmation. He'd been wondering if the lightning had affected his vision.

Another near strike. The dog began to whimper. Haplo and Bane pressed their faces close to the glass, stared out into the storm.

Several coralite boulders were behaving in a most extraordinary manner. They had detached themselves from the ground, seemingly, and were trundling across it at a great rate, heading straight—there could be no mistaking that now—for Haplo's ship.

"They're coming to us!" Bane said in awe.

"Dwarves," Haplo guessed, but why dwarves should risk coming Outside, particularly Outside during a storm, was difficult to fathom.

The boulders were beginning to circle the ship, searching for a way to enter. Haplo ran back to the hatch, Bane and the dog at his heels. He hesitated a moment, reluctant to break the rune-magic's protective seal. But if the mobile rocks were really dwarves, they were in danger of being struck by lightning every second they were out in the storm.

Desperation drove them to this, Haplo decided. Something, he guessed, to do with the change in the Kicksey-winsey. He placed his hand on a sigil drawn in the center of the hatch, began tracing it backward. Immediately, its glowing blue fire started to fade and darken. Other sigla touching it began to darken as well. Haplo waited until those runes on the hatch had dwindled to almost nothing, then he threw the bolt and flung the door wide.

A blast of wind nearly knocked him down. Rain drenched him instantly.

"Get back!" he shouted, flinging an arm up to protect his face from slashing hailstones.

Bane had already scrambled backward, out of the way, nearly falling over the dog in the process. The two huddled a safe distance from the open door.

Haplo braced himself, peered out into the storm. "Hurry!" he cried, though he doubted if anyone could hear him above the boom of the thunder. He waved his arm to attract attention.

The blue glow that illuminated the inside of the vessel was still shining brightly, but Haplo could see it starting to grow dim. The circle of protection was broken. Before long, the sigla guarding the entire ship would weaken.

"Hurry!" he shouted again, this time remembering to speak dwarven.

The lead boulder, coming around the ship a second time, saw the blue light shining from the open hatchway and headed straight for it. The other two boulders, catching sight of their leader, scurried after. The lead boulder slammed against the side of the hull, went through a few moments' wild gyrating, then the rock was suddenly flung upward and over and the bespectacled face of Limbeck, panting and flushed, emerged.

The ship had been built to sail in water, not through the air, and the hatch, therefore, was located some distance off the ground. Haplo had added a rope ladder for his own convenience, and he tossed this out to Limbeck.

The dwarf, nearly flattened against the hull by the wind, began to clamber up, glancing down worriedly at two other boulders, which had crashed into the ship's side. One dwarf managed to extricate himself from his protective shell, but the other was apparently having difficulty. A piteous wail rose above the roar of the wind and the crashing thunder.

Limbeck, looking extremely irritated, checked an impatient exclamation and started back down, moving slowly and ponderously, to rescue his fellow warrior.

Haplo glanced around swiftly; the blue glow was growing dimmer every moment.

"Get up here!" he called to Limbeck. "I'll take care of it!"

Limbeck couldn't hear the words, but he caught the meaning. He began to climb again. Haplo jumped lightly to the ground. The sigla on his body flared blue and red, protecting him from the cutting hailstones and—he hoped fervently—from the lightning.

Half blinded by the rain in his face, he studied the contraption in which the dwarf was trapped. Another dwarf had his hands under the bottom of the thing and was obviously, from the puffing and grunting, attempting to raise it. Haplo added his strength—enhanced by his magic—to the dwarfs. He heaved the boulder up into the air with such force that the dwarf lost his grip and fell flat on his face in a puddle.

Haplo jerked the Geg to his feet, to keep him from drowning, and caught hold of the trapped dwarf, who was staring about dazedly, awestruck by his sudden deliverance. Haplo hustled the two up the ladder, cursing the slowness of the thick-legged dwarves. Fortunately, an extremely close lightning strike impelled all of them to faster action. Thunder rumbling around them, they scaled the ladder in record time, tumbled headfirst inside the ship.

Haplo brought up the rear, shut the hatch, and sealed it, swiftly redrawing the sigla. The blue glow began to brighten. He breathed easier.

Bane, with more thoughtfulness than Haplo would have credited the boy with, arrived with blankets, which he distributed to the dripping dwarves. Out of breath from exertion and fright and amazement at seeing Haplo's skin shining blue, none was able to talk. They wrung water from their beards, sucked in deep breaths, and stared at the Patryn in considerable astonishment. Haplo wiped water from his face, shook his head when Bane offered a blanket to him.

"Limbeck, good to see you again," Haplo said, with a quiet, friendly smile. The warmth of the sigla was rapidly causing the rain water on his body to evaporate.

"Haplo..." said Limbeck, somewhat dubiously. His spectacles were covered with water. Taking them off, he started to dry them on his white handkerchief, only to pull a sodden mass out of his pocket. He stared at the sopping wet handkerchief in dismay.

"Here," said Bane helpfully, offering his shirttail, which he tugged out of leather breeches.

Limbeck accepted the assistance, carefully cleaned his spectacles on Bane's shirt. Putting them on, he took a long look at the child, then at Haplo, then at the child again.

It was odd, but Haplo could have sworn that Limbeck was seeing them both for the first time.

"Haplo," said Limbeck gravely. He glanced again at Bane, hesitated, seemed uncertain how to address the boy who had been presented to the Geg as first a god, then a human prince, then the son of an extremely powerful human wizard.

"You remember Bane," said Haplo easily. "Crown prince and heir to the throne of the Volkaran Isles."

Limbeck nodded, an expression of extreme cunning and shrewdness on his face. The great machine outside may have been at a standstill, but wheels were turning inside the dwarfs head. His thoughts were so obvious on his face that Haplo could have spoken them aloud.

So this is the story, is it? and How will this affect me?

Haplo, accustomed to the vague, impractical, idealistic dwarf he'd left behind, was surprised at this change in Limbeck, wondered what it portended, didn't particularly like it. Any type of change, even change for the good, was disruptive. Haplo saw in these first few moments of their meeting that he was going to have to deal with a completely new and different Limbeck.

"Your Highness," said Limbeck, having apparently, by the crafty smile on his face, come to the conclusion that this situation would suit him fine.

"Limbeck is High Froman, Your Highness," said Haplo, hoping Bane would take the hint and treat Limbeck with the respect he deserved.

"High Froman Limbeck," said Bane, in a tone of cool politeness used by one royal ruler to an equal. "I am pleased to see you once again. And who are these other GEGs you have brought with you?"

"Not GEGs" said Limbeck sharply, his face darkening. "'GEG' is a slave word. An insult! Demeaning!" He slammed his clenched hand into his fist.

Taken aback by the dwarfs vehemence, Bane looked swiftly to Haplo for an explanation. Haplo himself was startled, but, remembering some of his conversations with Limbeck in the past, thought he understood what was going on. Indeed, Haplo might even be held partially accountable.

"You must understand, Your Highness, that Limbeck and his people are dwarves—a proper and ancient term for their race, just as you and your people are known as humans. The term 'GEGs'—"

"—was given to us by the elves," said Limbeck, tugging at his spectacles, which were starting to steam over due to the moisture rising from his beard. "Pardon me, Your Highness, but might I— Ah, thank you."

He wiped his spectacles again on Bane's proffered shirt-tail.

"I'm sorry I snapped at you, Your Highness," Limbeck said coolly, placing the spectacles around his ears and staring at Bane through them. "You, of course, had no way of knowing that this word has now become a deadly insult to us dwarves. Hasn't it?"

He looked to his fellows for support. But Lof was gaping at Haplo, whose blue glow was just beginning to fade. The other dwarf was staring nervously at the dog.

"Lof," Limbeck snapped. "Did you hear what I just said?"

Lof jumped, looked extremely guilty, nudged his companion.

Their leader's voice was stern. "I was saying that the term 'Geg' is an insult to us."

Both dwarves instantly attempted to appear mortally offended and deeply wounded, though it was quite obvious that they didn't have slightest idea what was going on.

Limbeck frowned, seemed to start to say something, then sighed and fell silent.

"May I talk to you? Alone?" he asked Haplo suddenly.

"Sure," said Haplo, shrugging.

Bane flushed, opened his mouth- Haplo forestalled him with a look.

Limbeck eyed the boy. "You're the one who came up with a diagram on the Kicksey-winsey. You figured out how it worked, didn't you, Your Highness?"

"Yes, I did," said Bane, with a becoming modesty.

Limbeck took off his spectacles, reached absently for the handkerchief. Pulling it out, he rediscovered the sodden mass. He shoved the spectacles back on his nose. "You come along, too, then," he said.

Turning to his compatriots, he issued orders. "You stay here, keep watch. Let me know when the storm starts to lift."

The two nodded solemnly, moved to stand by the window.

"It's the elves I'm worried about," Limbeck explained to Haplo. They were walking toward the front of the ship and Haplo's living quarters. "They'll spot your ship and come out to investigate. We'll need to be getting back to the tunnels before the storm ends."

"Elves?" Haplo repeated in astonishment. "Down here? On Drevlin?"

"Yes," said Limbeck. "That's one of the things I need to talk to you about." He settled himself on a stool in Haplo's cabin, a stool that had once belonged to the dwarves on Chelestra.

Haplo almost said something to that effect, checked himself. Limbeck wasn't worried about dwarves on other worlds. He was having trouble enough with this one, apparently.

"When I became High Froman, the first thing I ordered done was to shut the Liftalofts down. The elves came for their water shipment... and didn't get any. They decided to fight, figured they'd scare us with their bright steel and magic.

" 'Run, Glegs,' they yelled at us, 'run away before we step on you like the bugs you are!'

"They played right into my hands," Limbeck said, removing his spectacles and twirling them about by the ear bow. "Quite a few dwarves didn't agree with me that we should fight. Especially the clarks. They didn't want to upset things, wanted our lives to go on as before. But when they heard the elves call us 'bugs' and speak to us as if we truly had no more brains or feelings than insects, even the most peace-loving graybeard was ready to gnaw on elf ears.

"We surrounded the elves and their ship. There were hundreds, maybe a thousand dwarves there that day." Limbeck looked back with a dreamy, wistful expression, and Haplo saw, for the first time since he'd met the dwarf, a hint of the idealistic Limbeck of old acquaintance.

"The elves were mad, frustrated, but there was nothing they could do. We outnumbered them and they were forced to surrender to us. They offered us money.

"We didn't want their money\*—what was that to us? And we didn't want any more of their castoffs and garbage."

\*Due to the severe water shortage in the Mid Realms, water is an extremely valuable commodity. Both human and elven monetary systems are based on water. In human lands, 1 bar is equivalent to 1 barrel of water and may be exchanged for such at the king's treasury or on any of the royal waterfarms scattered throughout the Volkaran and Uylandian isles.

"What did you want?" Haplo asked, curious.

"A city," said Limbeck with pride. His eyes shone. He appeared to have forgotten about the spectacles that dangled loosely from his hand. "A city up there, in the Mid Realms. Above the storm. A city where our children could feel sunshine on their faces and see trees and play Outside. And elven dragonships to take us there."

"Would your people like that? Wouldn't they miss... er... this?" Haplo waved vaguely at the lightning-blasted landscape, the shining skeletal arms of the Kicksey-winsey.

"We don't have much choice," said Limbeck. "There are far too many of us crowded down here. Our population is growing, but the tunnels are not. Once I began studying the matter, I found out that the Kicksey-winsey has been destroying more housing than it's been providing. And there are mountain ranges, up there, in the Mid Realms. Our people could tunnel and build. In time, they'd learn to be happy there."

He sighed and fell silent, staring at the floor that he couldn't see without his spectacles.

"What happened? What did the elves say?"

Limbeck stirred restlessly, glanced up. "They lied to us. I suppose it was my fault. You know how I was then—trusting, naive."

Limbeck put his spectacles back on, glared at Haplo as if daring him to argue. He didn't.

"The elves promised that they would agree to all our terms," Limbeck went on. "They would come back, they said, with ships ready to take our people to the Mid Realms. They came back, all right." His voice was bitter.

"With an army."

"Yes. Fortunately, we were forewarned. Do you remember that elf who brought you from High Realm? Captain Bothar'el?"

Haplo nodded.

"He's joined up with the rebel elves; I forget the name of their leader. Anyway, Bothar'el came down here to warn us that the Tribus elves were setting sail in force to crush our resistance. I don't mind telling you, my friend, that I was devastated.

"What could we do"—Limbeck thumped himself on the chest—"against the might of the elven empire? We knew nothing about fighting. It was our numbers alone forced them to surrender the first time. We were just lucky they didn't attack us then or about half the dwarves would have run off.

"No dwarf living had ever raised a weapon in anger against a fellow being. It seemed we didn't have a chance, we must surrender. But Bothar'el said no, we must not surrender. He showed us the way.

"Of course"—Limbeck's eyes glittered behind the thick glass with sudden, hard cunning—"this Bothar'el and that rebel leader of his have their own reasons for wanting us to fight. I soon figured that out. Instead of concentrating all their forces on the rebel elves, the Tribus elves are forced to split their army, send half of it down here to fight us. The Tribus figured it would be a short war, then they'd be back to fighting their own people and maybe the humans, too. So, you see, my friend, it paid Bothar'el and his rebels to help us keep the Tribus army occupied.

"When the Tribus elves arrived in their huge dragonships, we were nowhere to be seen. They took over the Liftalofts— there was no help for that. Then they tried to come down into the tunnels, but they soon found out that was a mistake.

"Up until then, most of my people didn't care whether or not the elves took over. They had their jobs on the Kicksey-winsey and their families to care for. The clarks, in fact"—

Limbeck sneered—"tried to make peace with the elves! The clarks sent out a delegation to meet them. The elves murdered them, every one. Then we got angry."

Haplo, having seen dwarves fight on other worlds, could well imagine what happened after that. Dwarves are fiercely bound to one another. What happens to one dwarf happens to all is the dwarven philosophy.

"Those elves who were left alive fled," Limbeck continued, with a dour smile. "I thought at first that they might leave Drevlin altogether, but I should have known better. They made a stand around the Liftalofts. Some of my people wanted to continue fighting, but Bothar'el warned that this was just what the elves wanted us to do, to come out in the open, where we'd be at the mercy of their snips' wizards and their magical weapons. So we let them have the Liftalofts and the water. They've taken over the Factree, too. But they don't come down into the tunnels anymore."

"I'll bet not," Haplo agreed.

"And we've made life difficult for them ever since," continued Limbeck. "We sabotaged so many of their dragonships that they don't dare land them on Drevlin. They have to transport their people down here through the Liftalofts. They're forced to keep a large army down here, to protect their water supply, and they have to replace their soldiers pretty often, though I think that has more to do with the Maelstrom than with us.

"The elves hate the storm, so Bothar'el told us. They hate being cooped up inside, and the constant noise of both the storm and the Kicksey-winsey drives some of them crazy. They have to keep sending in new men. They've brought in slaves—captured rebel elves, with their tongues cut out,\* or any of our people they can catch—to operate their part of the Kicksey-winsey.

\*A magical song, sung by the rebel elves, has the effect of causing those elves who hear it to remember long-forgotten values once honored by all elves. Those who hear this song come to see the corruption of the Tribus empire and it causes them to renounce their allegiance, join the rebellion. Thus rebel elves, captured alive, have their tongues cut out or are otherwise silenced.

"We attack them in small groups, harry them, make nuisances of ourselves, force them to keep a lot of elves down here, instead of the small, skeleton force they planned. But now..."

Limbeck frowned, shook his head.

"But now you're at a standstill," Haplo filled in. "You can't retake the Liftalofts, the elves can't ferret you and your people out. Both sides are dependent on the Kicksey-winsey, so both must keep it going."

"True enough," said Limbeck, taking off his spectacles, rubbing the red marks, where the nosepieces pinched. "That's how it's been."

"Been?" said Hapto, noting the emphasis on the word. "What's changed?"

"Everything," said Limbeck grimly. "The elves have shut off the Kicksey-winsey."

## CHAPTER 11

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

"SHUT IT OFF!" BANE BLURTED. "THE WHOLE MACHINE!"

"It's been seven cycles now," said Limbeck. "Look out there. You can see it. Dark, silent. Nothing moves. Nothing works. We have no light, no heat." The dwarf heaved a frustrated sigh. "We never knew, until now, how much the Kicksey-winsey did for us. Our fault, of course, because no dwarf ever wondered why it did anything at all.

"Now that the pumps have quit, many of the tunnels far below the surface are filling up with water. My people had homes down there. They've been forced to leave or drown. What dwellings we had were already overcrowded.

"There were special caves in Herot where we grew our food. Glimmerglamps that shone like the sun gave us light for our crops. But when the Kicksey-winsey shut down, the glim-merglamps went out and now the light's gone. The crops are starting to wilt and will soon die.

"But aside from all of that," said Limbeck, rubbing his temples, "my people are terrified. They weren't afraid when the elves attacked them. But now they're scared silly. It's the quiet, you see." He gazed about, blinking his eyes. "They can't stand the quiet."

Of course, it's more than that, thought Haplo, and Limbeck knows it. For centuries, the lives of the dwarves had revolved around their great and beloved machine. They served it faithfully, devotedly, never bothering to ask how or why. Now the master's heart has stopped beating and the servants have no idea what to do with themselves.

"What do you mean, High Froman, when you say 'the elves shut it down'? How?" Bane wondered.

"I don't know!" Limbeck shrugged helplessly.

"But you're sure it was the elves?" Bane persisted.

"Pardon me, Your Highness, but what difference does it make?" the dwarf asked bitterly.

"It could make a big difference," said Bane. "If the elves shut down the Kicksey-winsey, it could be because they've discovered how to start it up."

Limbeck's expression darkened. He rumbled at his spectacles, ended up with one side dangling from one ear at a crazed angle. "That would mean they would control our lives! This is intolerable! We must fight now!"

Bane was watching Haplo from out of the corners of the blue eyes, a faint smile on the sweetly curved lips. The boy was pleased with himself, knew he was one up on the Patryn in whatever game they were playing.

"Keep calm," Haplo cautioned the dwarf. "Let's think about this a minute."

If what Bane said was right, and Haplo was forced to admit that the kid made sense, then the elves had very probably learned how to operate the Kicksey-winsey, something no one else had been able to do since the Sartan mysteriously abandoned their great machine centuries ago. And if the elves knew how to work it,

then they knew how to control it, control its actions, control the alignment of the floating isles, control the water, control the world.

Whoever rules the machine, rules the water. And whoever rules the water, rules those who must drink it or perish.

Xar's words. Xar expected to come to Arianus a savior, bringing order to a world in chaos. Xar did not expect to arrive and find a world choked into submission by the iron fist of the Tribus elves, who would not easily loosen their grasp.

But I'm as bad as Limbeck, Haplo told himself. Getting worked up over what might be nothing. The first thing I have to do is discover the truth. It's possible the damn machine simply broke; although the Kicksey-winsey was, as he knew from Limbeck's past explanations, quite capable of repairing itself and had done so all these many years.

But there is one other possibility. And if I'm right and that's the real reason, then the elves must be as puzzled and worried over the shutdown of the Kicksey-winsey as the dwarves.

He turned to Limbeck, "I take it you move about Outside only during the times when it's storming, use the storm for cover?"

Limbeck nodded. He'd finally managed to adjust his spectacles. "And it won't last much longer," he said.

"We have to find out the truth about the machine. You don't want to commit your people to a bloody war that may be all for nothing. I need to get inside the Factree. Can you manage it?"

Bane nodded eagerly. "That's where the central control must be located."

Limbeck frowned. "But there's nothing in the Factree, now. There hasn't been for a long time."

"Not in the Factree. Underneath it," Haplo amended. "When the Sartan—the Mangers, as you call them—lived on Drevlin, they built a system of underground rooms and tunnels that were hidden away, protected by their magic, so that no one could ever find them. The controls for the Kicksey-winsey aren't anywhere on Drevlin's surface, are they?" He glanced at Bane.

The child shook his head. "It wouldn't make sense for the Sartan to put them out in the open. They would want to protect them, keep them safe. Of course, the controls could be located anywhere on Drevlin, but it's logical to assume that they'd be in the Factree, which is where the Kicksey-winsey was born—so to speak. What is it?"

Limbeck was looking extremely excited. "You're right! There are secret tunnels down there! Tunnels protected by magic! Jarre saw them. That... that other man who was with you. His Highness's servant. The one who kept falling over his own feet—"

"Alfred," said Haplo with a quiet smile.

"Yes, Alfred! He took Jarre down there! But"—Limbeck looked gloomy again—"she said all she saw were dead people."

So that's where I was! Haplo said to himself.\* And he didn't particularly relish the thought of going back.

\*During a journey through Death's Gate, on their way to Abarrach, Alfred and Haplo fell into each other's consciousness, lived each other's most vivid and painful memory. Fire Sea. vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

"There's more down there than that," he said, hoping he spoke the truth. "You see, I—"

"Froman! High Froman!" Shouts, accompanied by a bark, came from the front of the ship. "The storm's ending!"

"We have to go." Limbeck stood up. "Do you want to come with us? It won't be safe here on this ship, once the elves see it. Though they'll probably destroy it. Either that, or their wizards will try to take it—"

"Don't worry," Haplo said, grinning. "I have magical powers myself, remember? No one will get near this ship if I don't want them to. We'll come with you. I need to talk to Jarre."

Haplo sent Bane off to gather up his bundle of clothes and, most important, the diagram the child had made of the Kicksey-winsey. Haplo buckled on a rune-inscribed sword, thrust a similarly inscribed dagger inside the top of his boot.

He looked down at his hands, the blue tattoos vivid on his skin. Last time he'd come to Arianus, he had concealed the tattoos—and the fact that he was a Patryn—beneath bandages. No need to conceal his true identity now. The time for that was past.

He joined Limbeck and the other dwarves near the ship's hatch.

The storm still raged as fiercely as ever, as far as Haplo could determine, though he thought it barely possible that the hurricane had dwindled to a torrential downpour. Giant hailstones continued pounding the ship's hull and the lightning blasted three holes in the coralite during the brief time Haplo stood and watched. He could use his magic to instantly transport himself and Bane, but in order for the magic to work, he had to be able to visualize exactly where it was he wanted to go, and the only place on Drevlin he could clearly remember was the Factree.

He had a sudden vision of appearing in a circle of blue flame smack in the middle of the elven army.

He studied, as best he could through the rain-smearred window, the contraptions the dwarves used to travel through the storm.

"What are those things?"

"Carts from the Kicksey-winsey," said Limbeck. He took off his spectacles, smiled a vague smile reminiscent of the old Limbeck, "My idea. You probably don't remember, but we carried you in one when you were hurt, the time the dig claws brought us up. Now we've turned the carts upside down and put the wheels on the top instead of the bottom and covered them over with coralite. You'll fit inside one, Haplo," he added reassuringly, "though it will be tight and not too comfortable. I'll go with Lof. You can have mine—"

"I wasn't worried about the fit," interrupted Haplo grimly. "I was thinking about the lightning." His magic would protect him, but not Bane or the dwarves. "One bolt hits that metal and—"

"Oh, no need to worry about that," said Limbeck, his chest swelling with pride. He gestured with the spectacles. "Note the metal rods on top of each cart. If lightning strikes, the rods carry the charge down the side of the cart, through the wheels and into the ground. I call them 'lectricity rods.' "

"They work?"

"Well," Limbeck conceded reluctantly, "they've never really been tested. But the theory is sound. Someday," he added, hopeful, "we'll get struck and then I'll see."

The other dwarves looked extremely alarmed at this prospect. Apparently they didn't share Limbeck's enthusiasm for science. Neither did Haplo. He would take Bane along in his cart, use his magic to cast a shell over the two of them that would keep them both from harm.

Haplo opened the hatch. Rain blew inside. The wind howled, thunder set the ground vibrating beneath their feet. Bane, now able to view the full fury of the storm, was pale and wide-eyed. Limbeck and the dwarves dashed out. Bane hung back in the open hatchway.

"I'm not afraid," he said, though his lips quivered. "My father could make the lightning stop."

"Yeah, well, Daddy's not here. And I'm not sure even Sinistrad would have had much control over this storm."

Haplo caught hold of the boy around the waist, lifted him bodily, and ran to the first cart, the dog bounding along behind.

Limbeck and his fellow warriors had already reached theirs. The dwarves lifted the contraptions, scooted underneath them with remarkable speed. The carts dropped down on top of them, hiding the dwarves from view, protecting them from the fierce storm.

The sigla on Haplo's skin glowed bright blue, formed a protective shield around him that kept the rain and hail from hitting him. Wherever the Patryn's arm or other part of his body contacted Bane, the boy, too, was protected, but Haplo couldn't hold him close and still get him inside the cart.

Haplo fumbled at the contraption in the darkness. The sides of the cart were slippery, he couldn't get his fingers beneath the metal edge. Lightning lit the sky, a hailstone struck Bane on the cheek. The boy clapped his hand over the bleeding cut, but didn't cry out. The dog barked back at the thunder, as if it were a living threat the animal could chase away.

Finally, Haplo managed to raise the cart high enough to thrust Bane inside. The dog slithered in with the boy.

"Stay put!" Haplo ordered, and ran back to his ship.

The dwarves were already trundling over the ground, heading toward safety. Haplo marked the direction they were taking, turned back to his business. Swiftly, he traced a sigil on the ship's outer hull. It flared blue, other sigla caught the magical fire. Blue and red light spread in patterns over the ship's hull. Haplo stood in the driving rain, watched carefully to make certain the magic covered the ship completely. A soft blue light gleamed from it. Nodding in satisfaction, certain now that no one—elf, human, or dwarf—could harm his vessel, Haplo turned and ran back to the cart.

Lifting it up, he crawled inside. Bane was huddled in the center, his arms around the dog.

"Go on, get out," Haplo told the animal, who vanished.

Bane looked around in astonishment, forgot his fear. "What happened to the dog?" he cried shrilly.

"Shut up," Haplo grunted. Hunched almost double, he planted his back against the top of the cart. "Get underneath me," he told Bane.

The child wriggled his way awkwardly under Haplo's outspread arms.

"When I crawl, you crawl."

Moving clumsily, with many halts and starts, falling over each other, they lumbered along. A hole cut into the side of the cart allowed Haplo to see where they were going, and it was a lot farther off than he'd imagined. The coralite, where it was hard, was slick from the water; in other places they sank elbow deep in mud, floundered through puddles.

Rain beat down, hailstones clattered on top of the metal cart, making a deafening racket. Outside, he could hear the dog bark back at the thunder.

"Lectricity rods," muttered Haplo.

## CHAPTER 12

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

"I'M NOT GOING TO TELL YOU ANYTHING ABOUT THE STATUE!" stated Jarre. "It will only cause more trouble, I'm sure of it!"

Limbeck flushed in anger, glowered at her through his spectacles. He opened his mouth to deliver a pronouncement on Jarre, a pronouncement that would have not only ended their relationship but got his spectacles smashed in the bargain. Haplo trod discreetly on the dwarfs foot. Limbeck understood, subsided into a smoldering silence.

They were back in the BOILER ROOM, Limbeck's apartment, now lit by what Jarre called a "glampern." Tired of burning Limbeck's speeches, and equally tired of hearing that she could see in the dark, if only she put her mind to it, she had gone off, after Limbeck's departure, and appropriated the glampern from a fellow warrior, stating it was for the High Froman's use. The fellow warrior, as it turned out, hadn't much use for the High Froman, but Jarre was stoutly built and could add muscle to her political clout.

She walked off with the glampern—a castoff of the elves, left over from the days when they paid for water with their refuse. The glampern, hanging on a hook, served well enough, once one got used to the smoky flame, the smell, and the crack down the side that allowed some sort of obviously highly flammable substance to drip out onto the floor.

Jarre cast them all a defiant glance. Her face, in the glampern light, hardened into stubborn lines. Haplo guessed that Jarre's anger was a mask for affectionate concern, concern for her people and for Limbeck. And maybe not in that order.

Bane, catching Haplo's attention, raised an eyebrow.

I can handle her, the child offered. If you'll give me permission.

Haplo shrugged in answer. It couldn't hurt. Besides being unusually intuitive, Bane was clairvoyant. He could sometimes see the innermost thoughts of others... other mensch, that is. He couldn't worm his way inside Haplo.

Bane glided to Jarre, took hold of her hands. "I can see the crystal crypts, Jarre. I can see them and I don't blame you for being frightened of going back there. It truly is very sad. But dear, dear Jarre, you must tell us how to get into the tunnels. Don't you want to find out if the elves have shut down the Kicksey-winsey?" he persisted in wheedling tones.

"And what will you do if they have?" Jarre demanded, snatching her hands away. "And how do you know what I've seen? You're just making it all up. Or else Limbeck told you."

"No, I'm not," Bane sniveled, his feelings hurt.

"See what you've done now?" Limbeck asked, putting a comforting arm around the boy.

Jarre flushed in shame.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled, twisting the skirt of her dress around her stubby fingers, "I didn't mean to yell at you. But what will you do?" Raising her head, she stared at Haplo, her eyes shimmered with tears. "We can't

fight the elves! So many would die! You know that. You know what would happen. We should just surrender, tell them we were wrong, it was all a mistake! Then maybe they'll go away and leave us alone and everything will be like it was before!"

She buried her face in her hands. The dog crept over, offered silent sympathy.

Limbeck swelled up until Haplo thought the dwarf might explode. Giving him a cautionary sign with an upraised finger, Haplo spoke quietly, firmly.

"It's too late for that, Jarre. Nothing can ever be like it was. The elves won't go away. Now that they have control of the water supply on Arianus, they won't give it up. And sooner or later they'll get tired of being harassed by your guerrilla tactics. They'll send down a large army and either enslave your people or wipe them out. It's too late, Jarre. You've gone too far."

"I know." Jarre sighed, wiped her eyes with the corner of her skirt. "But it's obvious to me that the elves have taken over the machine. I don't know what you think you can do," she added in dull, hopeless tones.

"I can't explain now," said Haplo, "but there's a chance the elves may not have shut down the Kicksey-winsey. They may be more worried about this than you are. And if that's true, and if His Highness can start it up again, then you can tell the elves to go take a flying leap into the Maelstrom."

"You mean, we'll have the Liftalotts back under our control?" Jarre asked dubiously.

"Not only the Liftalotts," said Bane, smiling through his tears, "but everything! All of Arianus! All of it, all the people—elves and humans—under your rule."

Jarre looked more alarmed than pleased at this prospect, and even Limbeck appeared somewhat taken aback.

"We don't really want them under our rule," he began, then paused, considering. "Or do we?"

"Of course we don't," Jarre said briskly. "What would we do with a bunch of humans and elves on our hands? Always fighting among each other, never satisfied."

"But, my dear..." Limbeck seemed inclined to argue.

"Excuse me"—Haplo cut in swiftly—"but we're a long way from that point yet, so let's not worry about it."

Not to mention the fact, the Patryn added silently, that Bane was lying through his small, pearl-white teeth. It would be the Lord of the Nexus who ruled Arianus. Of course, his lord should rule Arianus, that wasn't the point. Haplo disliked deceiving the dwarves, urging them to take risks by giving them false hopes, making false promises.

"There's another point you haven't considered. If the elves didn't shut down the Kicksey-winsey, they probably think that you dwarves did. Which means that they're probably more worried about you than you are about them. After all, with the machine not working, they haven't got water for their people."

"Then they might be preparing to attack us right now!" Limbeck glowered.

Haplo nodded.

"You truly think the elves may not have taken control of it?" Jarre was wavering.

"We'll never know until we see for ourselves."

"The truth, my dear," said Limbeck in a softened tone. "It's what we believe in."

"What we used to believe in," murmured Jarre. "Very well." She sighed. "I'll tell you what I can about the statue of the Manger. But I'm afraid I don't know much. It was all so confused, what with the fighting and the coppers and—"

"Just tell us about the statue," suggested Haplo. "You and the other man who was with us, the clumsy one, Alfred. You went inside the statue and down into the tunnels below."

"Yes," said Jarre, subdued. "And it was sad. So sad. All the beautiful people lying dead. And Alfred so sad. I don't like to think about it."

The dog, hearing Alfred's name, wagged its tail and whined. Haplo petted it, counseling silence. The dog sighed and flopped down, nose on paws.

"Don't think about it," Haplo said. "Tell us about the statue. Start from the beginning."

"Well"—Jarre's brow furrowed in thought, she chewed on her side whiskers—"the fight was going on. I was looking around for Limbeck and I saw him standing next to the statue. The High Froman and the coppers were trying to drag him off. I ran over to help him, but by the time I got there, he was gone.

"I looked around and I saw that the statue had opened up!" Jarre spread her hands wide.

"What part of the statue?" Bane asked. "The body, the whole thing?"

"No, only the bottom part, the base, under the Manger's feet. That's where I saw his feet—"

"Alfred's feet." Haplo smiled. "They'd be hard to miss."

Jarre nodded vigorously. "I saw feet sticking up out of a hole underneath the statue. Stairs ran down into the hole and Alfred was lying on his back on the stairs with his feet in the air. At that moment, I saw more coppers coming and I knew that I better hide or they'd find me. I popped into the hole and then I was afraid they'd see Alfred's feet. So I dragged Alfred down the stairs with me.

"Then a strange thing happened." Jarre shook her head. "When I pulled Alfred down into the hole, the statue started to slide shut. I was so frightened I couldn't do anything. It was all dark, down there, and quiet." Jarre shivered, glanced around. "Horribly quiet. Like it is now. I... I began to scream."

"What happened then?"

"Alfred woke up. He'd fainted, I think—"

"Yes, he has a habit of that," Haplo said grimly.

"Anyway, I was terrified and I asked him if he could open the statue. He said he couldn't. I said he must be able to, he'd opened it once, hadn't he? He said no, he hadn't meant to. He'd fainted and fallen onto the statue and could only suppose that it had opened by accident."

"Liar," muttered Haplo. "He knew how to open it. You didn't see him do it?"

Jarre shook her head.

"You didn't see him anywhere near it? During the fight, for example?"

"I couldn't have. I'd gone over to where our people were hiding in the tunnels and told them to come up and attack. By the time I came back, the fighting had started and I couldn't see anything."

"But I saw him!" said Limbeck suddenly. "I remember now! That other man, the assassin—"

"Hugh the Hand?"

"Yes. I was standing with Alfred. Hugh ran toward us, crying out that the coppers were coming. Alfred looked sick and Hugh shouted at him not to faint but Alfred did anyway. He fell right across the statue's feet!"

"And it opened!" Bane shouted excitedly.

"No." Limbeck scratched his head. "No, I don't think so. I'm afraid things get rather muddled after that. But I remember seeing him lying there and wondering if he was hurt. I think I would have noticed if the statue had been open."

Not likely, Haplo thought, considering the dwarfs poor eyesight.

The Patryn attempted to put himself into Alfred's overlarge shoes, tried to re-create in his mind what might have happened. The Sartan, fearful as always of using his magical power and revealing himself, is caught up in the midst of battle. He faints—his normal reaction to violent situations—falls over the statue's feet. When he wakes, battle swirls around him. He must escape.

He opens the statue, intending to enter and vanish, but something else frightens him and he ends up fainting and falls inside... either that or he was hit on the head. The statue stays open, and Jarre stumbles across it.

Yes, that's probably what occurred, reasoned Haplo, for all the good it does us. Except for the fact that Alfred was groggy and not thinking clearly when he opened the statue. A good sign. The device must not be too difficult to open. If it is guarded by Sartan magic, the rune-structure must not be too complex. The tricky part will be finding it... and evading the elves long enough to open it.

Haplo gradually became aware that everyone had stopped talking, was staring at him expectantly. He wondered what he'd missed.

"What?" he asked.

"What happens once we get down into the tunnels?" asked Jarre practically.

"We look for the controls for the Kicksey-winsey," answered Haplo.

Jarre shook her head. "I don't remember seeing anything that looked like it belonged to the Kicksey-winsey." Her voice softened. "I just remember all the beautiful people... dead."

"Yeah, well, the controls have to be down there somewhere," said Haplo firmly, wondering just who he was trying to convince. "His Highness will find them. And once we're down there, we'll be safe enough. You said yourself the statue closed behind you. What we need is some sort of diversion, to get the elves out of the Factree long enough for us to get in. Can your people supply it?"

"One of the elven dragonships is anchored at the Liflalofts," Limbeck suggested. "Perhaps we could attack it..."

"No attacking!"

Jarre and Limbeck launched into a discussion that almost instantly turned into an argument. Haplo sat back, let them thrash it out, glad to have changed the subject. He didn't care what the dwarves did, as long as they did it. The dog, lying on its side, was either dreaming of chasing or of being chased. Its feet twitched, its flanks heaved.

Bane, watching the sleeping dog, stifled a yawn, tried to look as though he wasn't in the least bit sleepy himself. He dozed off and nearly fell over on his nose, Haplo shook him.

"Go to bed, Your Highness. We won't do anything until morning."

Bane nodded, too tired to argue. Staggering to his feet, bleary-eyed, he stumbled over to Limbeck's bed, fell on it, and was almost instantly asleep.

Haplo, watching him idly, felt a sharp, strange pain in his heart. Asleep, his eyelids closed over the glitter of adult cunning and guile, Bane looked like any other ten-year-old child. His sleep was deep and untroubled. It was for others, older and wiser, to look after his well-being.

"So might a child of mine be sleeping, right this moment," said Haplo to himself, the pain almost more than he could bear. "Sleeping where? In some Squatters' hut, left behind in safety—as safe as one can be in the Labyrinth—by his mother before she moved on. Or is he with his mother, provided she's still alive. Provided the child's still alive.

"He's alive. I know he is. Just as I knew he'd been born. I've always known. I knew when she left me. And I didn't do anything. I didn't do a damn thing, except try to get myself killed so I wouldn't have to think about it anymore.

"But I'll go back. I'll come for you, kid. The old man's right, maybe. It isn't time yet. And I can't do it alone." He reached out, stroked back one of Bane's wet curls. "Just hold on a little longer. Just a little longer..."

Bane huddled up in a ball on the bed. It was cold down in the tunnels, without the heat from the Kicksey-winsey. Haplo rose to his feet. Picking up Limbeck's blanket, the Patryn placed it over the boy's thin shoulders, tucked it around him.

Returning to his chair, listening to Limbeck and Jarre arguing, Haplo drew his sword from its scabbard and began to retrace the sigla inscribed on the hilt. He needed something else to think about.

And something occurred to him as he laid the sword carefully on the table before him.

I'm not in Arianus because my lord sent me. I'm not here because I want to conquer the world.

I'm here to make the world safe for that child. My child, trapped in the Labyrinth.

But that's why Xar's doing this, Haplo realized. He's doing this for his children. All his children, trapped in the Labyrinth.

Comforted, feeling at last reconciled with himself and his lord, Haplo spoke the runes, watched the sigla on his blade catch fire, outshining the dwarfs glampern.

## CHAPTER 13

### WOMBE, DREVLIN

#### LOW REALM

"ACTUALLY, THIS NEED FOR A DIVERSION COULDN'T COME AT A BETTER time," stated Limbeck, peering at Hapfo through the spectacles. "I've developed a new weapon and I've been wanting to test it."

"Humpf!" Jarre sniffed. "Weapons," she muttered.

Limbeck ignored her. The argument over plans for the diversion had been long and bitter and occasionally dangerous to bystanders, Haplo having narrowly missed being struck by a thrown soup pan. The dog had wisely retreated under the bed. Bane slept through the entire discussion.

And Haplo noted that, though Jarre had no compunction about hurling kitchen utensils, she was careful to keep them clear of the High Froman and august leader of WUPP. She seemed nervous and uneasy around Limbeck, watched him out of the corner of her eye with an odd mixture of frustration and anxiety.

In the early days of the revolution, she had been accustomed to smacking Limbeck on both cheeks or tugging playfully, if painfully, at his beard to bring him back to reality. Not any longer. Now she appeared reluctant to come near him. Haplo saw her hands twitch, more than once, during the argument, and guessed that she would have liked nothing better than to give her leader's side whiskers a good tweak. But her hands always ended up twisting her own skirts instead, or mangling the forks.

"I designed this weapon myself," said Limbeck proudly. Rummaging under a pile of speeches, he produced it, held it to the flickering light of the glampern. "I call it a flinger."

Haplo would have called it a toy. The humans in the Mid Realms would have called it a slingshot. The Patryn said nothing disparaging about it, however, but duly admired it and asked how it worked.

Limbeck demonstrated. "When the Kicksey-winsey made new parts for itself, it used to turn out quite a lot of these things." He held up a particularly wicked-looking, sharp chunk of metal. "We used to throw them into the helter-skelter, but it occurred to me that one of these, flung at the wings of the elves' dragonships, would tear a hole in the skin. I learned from my own experience that an object cannot travel through the air with holes in its wings.\* Fill it full of enough holes, and it seems to me logical that the dragonships will not be able to fly."

\*Undoubtedly a reference to a previous adventure, when Limbeck was made to "walk the Steps of Terrel Fen"—a form of execution. Feathered wings are strapped to the arms of the accused and he is pushed off the floating isle of Drevlin into the Maelstrom. *Dragon Wing*, vol. I of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Haplo had to admit that it seemed logical to him, too. He regarded the weapon with more respect. "This would do a fair bit of damage to someone's skin," he said, picking up the razor-sharp metal chunk gingerly. "Elf skin included."

"Yes, I thought of that, too," remarked Limbeck with satisfaction.

An ominous clanging came from behind him. Jarre was banging an iron skillet in a threatening manner against the cold stove. Limbeck turned around, stared at her through his spectacles. Jarre dropped the skillet on the floor with a bang that caused the dog to scoot as far back beneath the bed as possible. Head high, Jarre stalked toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Limbeck demanded.

"For a walk," she said haughtily.

"You'll need the glampern," he advised.

"No, I won't," she mumbled, one hand wiping her eyes and nose.

"We need you to come with us, Jarre," Haplo said. "You're the only one who's been down in the tunnels."

"I can't help you," she said, her voice choked. She kept her back turned. "I didn't do anything. I don't know how we got down there or how we got back out. I just went where that man Alfred told me to go."

"This is important, Jarre," Haplo said quietly. "It could mean peace. An end to the fighting."

She glanced at him over one shoulder, through a mass of hair and side whiskers. Then, tight-lipped, she said, "I'll be back," and walked out, slamming the door shut behind her.

"I'm sorry for that, Haplo," said Limbeck, cheeks flushed in anger. "I don't understand her anymore. In the early days of the revolution, she was the most militant among us." He took off his spectacles, rubbed his eyes. His voice softened. "She was the one who attacked the Kicksey-winsey! Got me arrested and nearly killed." He smiled wistfully, gazing back into the past with his fuzzy vision. "She was the one who wanted change. Now, when change is here, she... she throws soup pans!"

The concerns of the dwarves are not mine, Haplo reminded himself. Stay out of it. I need them to take me to the machine, that's all.

"I don't think she likes the killing," he said, hoping to mollify Limbeck, end the disruption.

"I don't like the killing," Limbeck snapped. He put his spectacles back on. "But it's them or us. We didn't start it. They did."

True enough, Haplo thought, and put the matter aside. After all, what did he care? When Xar came, the chaos, the killing would end. Peace would come to Arianus. Limbeck continued planning the diversion. The dog, after making certain Jarre was gone, came out from under the bed.

Haplo snatched a few hours' sleep himself, woke to find a contingent of dwarves milling about in the hallway outside the BOILER ROOM. Each dwarf was armed with his or her own flinger and metal chunks, carried in strong canvas bags. Haplo washed his hands and face (which reeked of glampern oil), watched, and listened. Most of the dwarves had become quite adept at using the flingers, to judge from what he saw of their crude target practice taking place in the corridor.

Of course, it was one thing to shoot at a drawing of an elf scrawled on the wall, quite another to shoot at a live elf who is shooting back at you.

"We don't want anyone to get hurt," Jarre told the dwarves. She had returned and had, with her characteristic briskness, taken control. "So keep under cover, stay near the doors and entrances to the Liftalofts, and be ready to run if the elves come after you. Our objective is to distract them, keep them busy."

"Shooting holes in their dragonship should do that!" Lof said, grinning.

"Shooting holes in them would do it better," added Limbeck, and there was a general cheer.

"Yes, and then they'll shoot holes in you and where will you be?" Jarre said crossly, casting Limbeck a bitter glance.

The dwarf, not at all perturbed, nodded and smiled, his smile seeming grim and cold, topped by the glittering spectacles.

"Remember this, Fellow Warriors," he said, "if we manage to bring the ship down, we will have scored a major victory. The elves will no longer be able to moor their dragonships on Drevlin, they will be reluctant to even fly near it. Which means that they may think twice about keeping troops stationed down here. This could be our first step toward driving them off."

The dwarves cheered again.

Haplo left to ascertain that his own ship was safe.

He returned, satisfied. The runes he'd activated not only protected his ship, but also created a certain amount of camouflage, causing it to blend in with objects and shadows around it. Haplo could not make his ship invisible—that was not within the spectrum of probable possibilities and, as such, could not be contrived by his magic. But he could make it extremely difficult to see, and it was. An elf would have to literally walk into it to know it was there, and that in itself was not possible, since the sigla created an energy field around the ship that would repel all attempts to get near it.

He returned to find the dwarves marching off to attack the Liftalofts and the elven ship that was moored there, floating in the air, attached to the arms by cables. Haplo, Bane, Limbeck, Jarre, and the dog headed off in the opposite direction, to the tunnels that ran beneath the Factree.

Haplo had traveled this route once before, the last time they'd sneaked into the Factree. He could not have remembered the way, however, and was glad to have a guide. Time and wonders witnessed on other worlds had blurred the wonder of the Kicksey-winsey. His awe returned at the sight of it, however; awe tinged now with a sense of unease and disquiet, as if he were in the presence of a corpse. He remembered the great machine pounding with life: Mectric zingers zapping, whirly-wheels whirling, iron hands smashing and molding, dig claws digging. All still now. All silent.

The tunnels led him past the machine, beneath it, over it, around it, through it. And the thought came to him suddenly that he'd been wrong. The Kicksey-winsey wasn't a corpse. The machine was not dead.

"It's waiting," said Bane.

"Yes," said Haplo. "I think you're right."

The boy edged nearer, looking at him through narrowed eyes. "Tell me what you know about the Kicksey-winsey."

"I don't know anything."

"But you said there was another explanation—"

"I said there could be. That's all." He shrugged. "Call it a guess, a hunch."

"You won't tell me."

"We'll see if my guess is right when we get there, Your Highness."

"Grandfather put me in charge of the machine!" Bane reminded him, scowling. "You're only here to protect me."

"And I intend to do just that, Your Highness," Haplo replied.

Bane darted him a sullen, sidelong glance, but said nothing. He knew it would be useless to argue. Eventually, however, the boy either forgot his grievance or decided it wasn't suited to his dignity to be caught sulking. Leaving Haplo's side, Bane ran up to walk with Limbeck. Haplo sent the dog along, to keep an ear on both of them.

As it was, the dog heard nothing interesting. In fact, it heard very little at all. The sight of the Kicksey-winsey motionless and quiet had a depressing effect on all of them. Limbeck stared at it through his spectacles, his face grim and hard. Jarre regarded the machine she had once attacked with fond sadness. Coming to a part she had worked on, she would sidle close and give it a comforting pat, as though it were a sick child.

They passed numerous dwarves standing about in enforced idleness, looking helpless and frightened and forlorn. Most had been coming to their work every day since the machine quit running, though there was now no work to do.

At first they'd been confident that this was all a mistake, a fluke, a slipped cog of monumental proportions. The dwarves sat or stood about in the darkness, lit by whatever source of light they could manufacture, and watched the Kicksey-winsey expectantly, waiting for it to roar to life again. When their shift ended, the dwarves went home and another shift took their place. But by now, hope was beginning to dim.

"Go home," Limbeck kept telling them as they walked along. "Go to your homes and wait. You're only wasting light."

Some of the dwarves left. Some of the dwarves stayed. Some left, then came back. Others stayed, then left.

"We can't go on like this," said Limbeck.

"Yes, you're right," said Jarre, for once agreeing with him. "Something terrible will happen."

"A judgment!" called out a deep and ragged voice from the too-quiet darkness. "A judgment, that's what it is! You've brought the wrath of the gods upon us, Limbeck Bolttightner! I say we go to the Welves and surrender. Tell the gods we're sorry. Maybe they'll turn the Kicksey-winsey back on."

"Yes," muttered other voices, safely hidden by the shadows. "We want everything back the way it was."

"There, what did I tell you?" Limbeck demanded of Jarre. "This kind of talk is spreading."

"They surely can't believe the elves are gods?" Jarre protested, glancing behind her to the whispering shadows, her face drawn in concern. "We've seen them die!"

"They don't," Limbeck answered gloomily. "But they'll be ready enough to swear they do if it means heat and light and the Kicksey-winsey working once again."

"Death to the High Froman!" came the whispers.

"Give him to the Welves!"

"Here's a bolt for you to tighten, Bolttightner."

Something whizzed out of the darkness—a bolt, big around as Bane's hand. The chunk of metal didn't come any where near its target, clunked harmlessly into the wall behind them. The dwarves were still in awe of their leader, who had, for a brief time, given them dignity and hope. But that wouldn't last long. Hunger and darkness, cold and silence bred fear.

Limbeck didn't say anything. He didn't flinch or duck. His lips pressed together grimly, he kept walking. Jarre, face pale with worry, posted herself at his side and flashed defiant glances at every dwarf they passed. Bane skipped hastily back to walk near Haplo.

The Patryn felt a prickling of his skin, glanced down, saw the sigla tattooed on his arms start to glow a faint blue—a reaction to danger.

Odd, he thought. His body's magic wouldn't react that way in response to some frightened dwarves, a few muttered threats, and a thrown piece of hardware. Something or someone truly menacing was out there, a threat to him, to them all.

The dog growled, its lip curled.

"What's wrong?" asked Bane, alarmed. He had lived among Patrjns long enough to know the warning signs.

"I don't know, Your Highness," said Haplo. "But the sooner we get that machine started again, the better. So just keep walking."

They entered the tunnels, which, as Haplo remembered from his last journey, bisected, dissected, and intersected the ground underneath the Kicksey-winsey. No dwarves lurked down here. These tunnels were customarily empty, since they led nowhere anyone had any reason to go. The Factree had not been used in eons, except as a meeting place, and that had ended when the elves took it over and turned it into a barracks.

Away from the whispers and the sight of the corpselike machine, everyone relaxed visibly. Everyone except Haplo. The runes on his skin glowed only faintly, but they still glowed. Danger was still present, though he couldn't imagine where or how. The dog, too, was uneasy and would occasionally erupt with a loud and startling "whuff" that made everyone jump.

"Can't you get him to stop doing that?" complained Bane. "I almost wet my pants."

Haplo placed a gentle hand on the dog's head. The animal quieted, but it wasn't happy and neither was Haplo.

Elves? Haplo couldn't recall a time his body had ever reacted to a danger from mensch, but then—as he recalled—the Tribus elves were a cruel and vicious lot.

"Why, look!" exclaimed Jarre, pointing. "Look at that! I never saw that before, did you, Limbeck?"

She pointed to a mark on the wall, a mark that was glowing bright red.

"No," he admitted, removing his spectacles to stare at it. His voice was tinged with the same childlike wonder and curiosity that had brought him to first question the whys of Welves and the Kicksey-winsey. "I wonder what it is?"

"I know what it is," cried Bane. "It's a Sartan rune."

"Shush!" Haplo warned, catching hold of the boy's hand and squeezing it tightly.

"A what?" Limbeck peered round at them. Eyes wide, he had forgotten, in his curiosity, the reason for their being down here, or their need for haste.

"The Mangers made marks like that. I'll explain later," said Haplo, herding everyone on.

Jarre kept walking, but she wasn't watching where she was going. She was staring back at the rune. "I saw some of those funny glowing drawings when that man and I were down in the place with the dead people. But those I saw shone blue, not red."

And why were these sigla gleaming red? Haplo wondered. Sartan runes were like Patryn runes in many ways. Red was a warning.

"The light's fading," said Jarre, still looking back. She stumbled over her feet.

"The sigil's broken," Bane told Haplo. "It can't do anything anymore—whatever it was that it was supposed to do."

Yes, Haplo knew it was broken. He could see that for himself. Large portions of the wall had been covered over, either by the Kicksey-winsey or by the dwarves. The Sartan sigla on the walls were obscured, some missing entirely, others—like this one—cracked and now rendered powerless. Whatever it was they had been supposed to do—alert, halt, bar entry—they had lost the power to do.

"Maybe it's you," Bane said, looking up at him with an impish grin. "Maybe the runes don't like you."

Maybe, thought Haplo. But the last time I came down here, no runes glowed red.

They continued walking.

"This is it," stated Jarre, stopping beneath a ladder, shining her glampern upward.

Haplo glanced around. Yes, he knew where he was now. He remembered. He was directly beneath the Factree. A ladder led upward, and, at the top of the ladder, a piece of the tunnel's ceiling slid aside, permitting access to the Factree itself. Haplo studied the ladder, looked back at Limbeck.

"Do you have any idea what's up there now? I don't want to come out in the middle of an elven dining hall during breakfast."

Limbeck shook his head. "None of our people have been in the Factree since the elves took it over."

"I'll go look," Bane offered, eager for adventure.

"No, Your Highness." Haplo was firm. "You stay down here. Dog, keep an eye on him."

"I'll go." Limbeck gazed around vaguely. "Where's the ladder?"

"Put your spectacles on!" Jarre scolded.

Limbeck flushed, reached into a pocket, discovered the spectacles. He pulled them over his ears.

"Everyone stay put. I'll go and take a look," said Haplo, who already had his foot on the first rung. "When's that diversion of yours supposed to start?"

"Should be anytime now," Limbeck answered, peering nearsightedly up into the shadows.

"Do you... do you want the glampern?" Jane asked hesitantly. She was obviously impressed with Haplo's blue-glowing skin, a sight she'd never seen.

"No," Haplo answered shortly. His body was giving off light enough. He didn't need to encumber himself with the glampern. He began to climb.

He had gone about halfway when he heard a scuffle at the bottom and Bane's voice rise in a yelp. Haplo glanced down. Apparently, the boy had been about to follow. The dog had its teeth clamped firmly in the seat of His Highness's pants.

"Shhh!" Haplo hissed, glaring down at them.

He continued his climb, came to the metal plate. As he recalled from the last time he'd done this, the plate slid aside easily and—what was more important—quietly. Now, if some elf just hadn't set a bed on top of it...

Haplo placed his fingers on the plate, gave it a cautious shove.

It moved. A crack of light shone down on him. He halted, waited, ears straining.

Nothing.

He moved the plate again, about as far as the length of his first finger. He halted again, keeping perfectly still, perfectly silent.

Up above, he could hear voices: light, delicate voices of elves. But they sounded as if they were coming from a distance, none near, none directly overhead. Haplo glanced down at the sigla on his skin. The blue glow had not intensified, but neither had it gone away. He decided to risk a look.

Haplo slid the plate aside, peeped warily up over the edge. It took his eyes some time to become accustomed to the bright light. The fact that the elves had light at all was disquieting. Perhaps he'd been wrong, perhaps they had learned how to operate the Kicksey-winsey and had cut off light and heat to the dwarves.

Further investigation revealed the truth. The elves—known for their magical mechanics—had rigged up their own lighting system. The glimmerglamps belonging to the Kicksey-winsey, which had once lit the Factree, were dark and cold.

And no light at all shone on this end of the Factree. This end was empty, deserted. The elves were bivouacked at the far end, near the entrance. Haplo was at eye level with neat rows of cots, stacked around the walls. Elves were moving about, sweeping the floor, checking their weapons. Some were asleep. Several surrounded a cooking pot, from which came a fragrant odor and a cloud of steam. One group squatted on the floor, playing at some type of game to judge by their talk of "bets" and exclamations of either triumph or disgust. No one was at all interested in Haplo's part of the Factree. The lighting system didn't even extend this far.

Directly across from where he stood, he could see the statue of the Manger—the robed and hooded figure of a Sartan holding a single, staring eyeball in one hand. Haplo took a moment to examine the eyeball, was glad to see it was dark and lifeless as the machine.

The eyeball, once activated, revealed the secret of the Kicksey-winsey to any who looked at its moving pictures.\* Either the elves hadn't discovered the eyeball's secret, or, if they had, they'd discounted it, as had the dwarves all these years. Perhaps, like the dwarves, the elves used this empty portion of the huge building only for meetings. Or perhaps they didn't use it at all.

\*Limbeck discovered that the eyeball was, in actuality, a magic lantern. Bane, watching the moving pictures exhibited in the eyeball, figured out what the Kicksey-winsey was supposed to do—bring the various floating continents of Mid and High Realms into alignment, supply them with water. *Dragon Wing*, vol. i of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Haplo slid the plate back all but a crack, descended the ladder.

"It's all right," he told Limbeck. "The elves are all in the front of the Factree. But either your diversion hasn't started or else they don't give a damn—"

He paused. A trumpet call sounded faintly from above. Then came the sound of shouts, weapons rattling, beds scraping, voices raised in either irritation or satisfaction, depending on whether the soldiers found this a welcome break in their dull routine or a nuisance.

Haplo swiftly climbed back up the ladder again, peered out the opening.

The elves were strapping on swords, grabbing bows and quivers of arrows, and running to the call, their officers shouting curses and urging them to hurry.

The diversion had started. He wasn't certain how much time they had, how long the dwarves could harass the elves. Probably not long.

"Come on!" he said, motioning. "Quickly! It's all right, boy. Let him go."

Bane was the first up, climbing like a squirrel. Limbeck followed more slowly. Jarre came after him. She had forgotten, in the heat of soup-pan tossing, to change her skirt for trousers, and was having difficulty managing the ladder. The dog stood at the bottom, regarding them with interest.

"Now!" said Haplo, keeping watch, waiting until the last elf had left the Factree. "Run for it!"

He shoved the plate aside, pulled himself up onto the floor.

Turning, he gave Bane a hand, hauled the boy up beside him. Bane's face was flushed, his eyes shone with excitement.

"I'll go look at the statue—"

"Wait."

Haplo cast a swift glance around, wondering why he hesitated. The elves had gone. He and the others were alone in the Factree. Unless, of course, the elves had been forewarned of their coming and were lying in wait. But that was a risk they had to take, and not much of a risk at that. Haplo's magic could deal efficiently with any ambush. But his skin tingled, shone a faint, disturbing blue.

"Go ahead," he said, angry at himself. "Dog, go with him."

Bane dashed off, accompanied by the dog.

Limbeck poked his head up out of the hole. He stared at the animal, gamboling at Bane's side, and the dwarfs eyes widened. "I could have sworn..."

He stared back down the ladder. "The dog was down there ..."

"Hurry up!" Haplo grunted. The sooner they left this place, the happier he'd be. He dragged Limbeck over the top, reached out a hand to help Jarre.

Hearing a startled shout and an excited bark, Haplo turned swiftly, nearly yanking Jarre's arm out of its socket.

Bane, lying prone across the statue's feet, was pointing down. "I've found it!" The dog, standing spraddle-legged at the top, gazed into the hole with deep suspicion, not liking whatever was down there.

Before Haplo could stop him, Bane slid down into the hole like an eel and disappeared.

The statue of the Manger began to revolve upon its base, sliding shut.

"Go after him!" shouted Haplo.

The dog jumped into the slowly closing gap. The last Haplo saw was the tip of a tail.

"Limbeck, stop it from closing!" Haplo all but dropped Jarre and started for the statue at a run. But Limbeck was ahead of him.

The stout dwarf lumbered across the Factree floor, short, thick legs pumping furiously. Reaching the statue, he hurled himself bodily into the slowly narrowing gap and wedged himself firmly between the base and floor. Giving the statue a push, he shoved it back open, then bent to examine it.

"Ah, so that's how it works," he said, pushing his spectacles back up his nose. He reached out a hand to check his theory by fiddling with a catch he'd discovered.

Haplo planted his foot gently but firmly on the dwarfs fingers.

"Don't do that. It might close again and maybe this time we couldn't stop it."

"Haplo?" Bane's voice floated up out of the hole. "It's awfully dark down here. Could you hand me the glampern?"

"Your Highness might have waited for the rest of us," Haplo remarked grimly.

No answer.

"Keep still. Don't move," Haplo told the boy. "We'll be down in a minute. Where's Jarre?"

"Here," she said in a small voice, coming to stand by the statue. Her face was pale. "Alfred said we couldn't get back out this way."

"Alfred said that?"

"Well, not in so many words. He didn't want me to be afraid. But that had to be the reason why we went into the tunnels. I mean, if we could have escaped by coming up through the statue, we would have, wouldn't we?"

"With Alfred, who knows?" Haplo muttered. "But you're probably right. This must close whenever anyone goes down. Which means we have to find some way to prop this thing open."

"Is that wise?" Limbeck asked anxiously, looking up at them from his position half in and half out of the hole. "What if the elves come back and find it open?"

"If they do, they do," Haplo said, though he didn't consider it likely. The elves seemed to avoid this area. "I don't want to end up trapped down there."

"The blue lights led us out," said Jarre softly, almost to herself. "Blue lights that looked like that." She pointed at Haplo's glowing skin.

Haplo said nothing, stalked off in search of something to use as a wedge. Returning with a length of stout pipe, he motioned Jarre and Limbeck into the hole, followed after them. As soon as he had passed across the base's threshold, the statue began to slide shut, slowly, quietly. Haplo thrust the pipe into the opening. The statue closed on it, held it fast. He shoved on it experimentally, felt the statue give.

"There. The elves shouldn't notice that. And we can open it when we return. All right, let's get a look at where we are."

Jarre held up the glampern and light flooded their surroundings.

A narrow stone staircase spiraled down into darkness below. A darkness that was, as Jarre had said, unbelievably quiet. The silence lay over the place like thick dust, seemed not to have been disturbed in centuries.

Jarre gulped, her hand holding the glampern trembled, caused the light to wobble. Limbeck took out his handkerchief, but used it to mop his forehead, not to clean his spectacles. Bane, huddled at the bottom of the stairs, his back pressed flat against the wall, looked subdued and awed.

Haplo scratched the burning sigla on the back of his hand and firmly suppressed the urge to leave. He had hoped to evade, by coming down here, whatever unseen danger threatened them. But the runes on his body continued to glow blue, neither brighter nor dimmer than when he'd been standing in the Factree. Which made no sense, for how could the threat be both above and below?

"There! Those things make the lights," said Jarre, pointing.

Looking down, Haplo saw a row of Sartan runes running along the base of the wall. He recalled, in Abarrach, seeing the same series of runes, recalled Alfred using them as guides out of the tunnels of the Chamber of the Damned.

Bane crouched down to study them. Smiling to himself, pleased with his cleverness, he put his finger on one and spoke the rune.

At first, nothing happened. Haplo could understand the Sartan language, although it jarred through him like the screeching of rats. "You've mispronounced it."

Bane glowered up at him, not liking to be corrected. But the boy repeated the rune again, taking time to form the unfamiliar and difficult sounds with care.

The sigil flared into light, shared that light with its neighbor. One at a time, the sigla each caught fire. The base of the wall, down the stairs, began to glow blue.

"Follow it," said Haplo unnecessarily, for Bane and Limbeck and the dog were already clambering down the steps.

Only Jarre lingered behind, face pale and solemn, her hands kneading and twisting a tiny fold of her skirt.

"It's so sad," she said.

"I know," Haplo replied quietly.

## CHAPTER 14

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

LIMBECK CAME TO A HALT AT THE FOOT OF THE STAIRS. "NOW what?"

A veritable honeycomb of tunnels branched off from the one in which they were standing, lit by the blue runes on the floor. The sigla advanced no farther, almost as if waiting for instructions.

"Which way do we go?"

The dwarf spoke in a whisper, they all spoke in whispers, though there was no reason why they shouldn't have talked out loud. The silence loomed over them, strict and stern, prohibiting speech. Even whispering made them feel uneasy, guilty.

"The time we were here, the blue lights led us to the mausoleum," said Jarre. "I don't want to go back there again."

Neither did Haplo. "Do you remember where that was?"

Jarre, holding fast to Haplo's hand, as she had once held fast to Alfred's, shut her eyes and thought. "I think it was the third one to the right." She pointed.

At that instant, the sigla flared and branched off in that direction. Jarre gasped and crowded closer to Haplo, hanging on to him with both hands.

"Wow!" Bane whistled softly.

"Thoughts," said Haplo, recalling something Alfred had told him when they were running for their lives through the tunnels in Abarrach. "Thoughts can affect the runes. Think of where we want to go and the magic will lead us there."

"But how can we think of it when we don't know what it is?" Bane argued.

Haplo rubbed his itching, burning hand against his trouser leg, forced himself to remain patient, calm. "You and my lord must have talked about how the machine's central control would work, Your Highness. What do you think it's like?"

Bane paused to consider the matter. "I showed Grandfather the pictures I'd made of the Kicksey-winsey. He noticed how all the machine's parts look like parts of our own bodies or the bodies of animals. The gold hands and arms of the Liftalofts, the whistles made in the shape of mouths, the claws like bird feet that dig up the coralite. And so the controls must be—"

"A brain!" guessed Limbeck eagerly.

"No." Bane was smug- "That's what Grandfather said, but I said that if the machine had a brain it would know what to do, which it obviously doesn't, since it's not doing it. Aligning the islands, I mean. If it had a brain, it would do that on its own. It's working, but without purpose. What I think we're looking for is the heart."

"And what did Grandfather say to that?" Haplo was skeptical.

"He agreed with me," Bane replied, loftily superior.

"We're supposed to think about hearts?" Limbeck asked.

"It's worth a shot." Haplo frowned, scratched his hand. "At least it's better than standing around here. We can't afford to waste any more time."

He set his mind to thinking about a heart, a gigantic heart, a heart pumping life to a body that has no mind to direct it. The more he considered it, the more the notion made sense, though he would never admit as much to Bane. And it fit in with the Patryn's own theory, too.

"The lights are going out!" Jarre clutched Haplo's hand, fingers digging into his skin.

"Concentrate!" he snapped.

The sigla that had lit the hallway to the right flickered, dimmed, and died. They all waited, breathlessly, thinking about hearts, all now acutely conscious of the beating of their own hearts, which sounded loud in their ears.

Light glimmered to their left. Haplo held his breath, willing the runes to come to life. The sigla burned stronger, brighter, lighting their way in a direction opposite that of the mausoleum.

Bane shouted in triumph. His shout bounded back to him, but the voice didn't sound human anymore. It sounded hollow, empty, reminded Haplo unpleasantly of the echoing voice of the dead, the lazar on Abarrach. The glowing sigla on Haplo's skin flashed suddenly, their light becoming more intense.

"I wouldn't do that again, if I were you, Your Majesty." The Patryn spoke through gritted teeth. "I don't know what's out there, but I have the feeling someone heard you."

Bane, eyes wide, had shrunk back against the wall.

"I think you're right," he whispered through quivering lips. "I-I'm sorry. What do we do?"

Haplo heaved an exasperated sigh, endeavored to loosen Jarre's pinching fingers, which were cutting off his circulation. "Let's go. But let's be quick about it!"

No one needed any urging to hurry. By now, all of them, including Bane, were anxious to complete their task, then get out of this place.

The glowing sigla led them through the myriad hallways.

"What are you doing?" Bane demanded, pausing to watch Haplo, who had stopped for about the fourth time since they'd started down the tunnel. "I thought you said to hurry."

"This will ensure us finding our way out, Your Highness," Haplo replied coolly. "If you'll notice, the sigla fade after we pass them. They might not light up again or they might take us another way, a way that could bring us out into the arms of the elves."

He stood facing the arched entryway of the tunnel branch they had just entered and, with the point of his dagger, was scratching a sigil of his own on the wall. The rune was not only useful, but he felt a certain amount of satisfaction in leaving a Patryn mark on hallowed Sartan walls.

"The Sartan runes will show us the way out," argued Bane petulantly.

"They haven't shown us much of anything yet," remarked Haplo.

But eventually, after a few more twists and turns, the runes led them to a closed door at the end of a hall.

The glowing sigla that ran across the floor and skipped over other doorways, leaving them in darkness, now arched up and over, outlining this door in light. Recalling the warding runes on Abarach, Haplo was glad to see the sigla glow blue and not red. The door was formed in the shape of a hexagon. In its center was inscribed a circlet of runes surrounding a blank spot. Unlike most Sartan runes, these were not complete, but appeared to have been only half finished.

Haplo registered the odd shape of the door and the sigla formation as something he had seen or encountered before, but his memory offered no help, and he thought little more of it.\* It looked to be a simple opening device, the key being sigla drawn in the center.

\*Undoubtedly the gates to the Sartan city of Pryan, which Haplo describes in his journal Pryan, World of Fire.

"I know this one," said Bane, studying it for a moment. "Grandfather taught me. It was in those old books of his." He looked back at Haplo. "But I need to be taller. And I need your dagger."

"Be careful," said Haplo, handing the weapon over. "It's sharp."

Bane took a moment to study the dagger with wistful longing. Haplo lifted the boy, held him up level with the rune-structure on the door.

Brow furrowed, tongue thrust out in concentration, Bane stuck the dagger's tip into the wooden door and began slowly and laboriously to draw a sigil.\* When the last stroke was completed, the sigil caught fire. Its flame spread to the runes around it. The entire rune-structure flared briefly, then went out. The door opened a tiny crack. Light—bright, white—flared out, the brilliance making them blink after the darkness of the tunnel.

\*Haplo should have recognized this from Pryan as well. The dwarf Drugar wore the very same sigil on an amulet around his neck. A common Sartan key and locking device, the sigla were more ornamental than

they were functional, for—as Bane demonstrates—even a mensch could learn to operate the elemental magic. Places the Sartan wanted to truly guard and prohibit entry to were surrounded by runes of warding.

From inside the room came a metallic clanking sound.

Haplo dropped His Highness unceremoniously on the ground, shoved the boy behind him, and made a grab for the excited Limbeck, who was preparing to march right inside. The dog growled, low in its throat.

"There's something in there!" Haplo hissed beneath his breath. "Move back! All of you!"

More alarmed by the tension in Haplo than by the half-heard sound in the room, Bane and Limbeck obeyed, edged back against the wall. Jarre joined them, looking scared and unhappy.

"What—" Bane began.

Haplo cast him a furious glance, and the boy quickly shut his mouth. The Patryn paused, continuing to listen at the crack of the partially opened door, puzzled by the sounds he heard within. The clanking metallic jingle was sometimes a rhythmic pattern, sometimes a chaotic clashing, and other times completely stilled. Then it would start up again. And it was moving, first near to him, then advancing away.

He could have sworn that what he was hearing were the sounds of a person, clad in full plate armor, walking about a large room. But no Sartan—or Patryn, either—had ever in the history of their powerful races worn such a mensch device as armor. Which meant that whatever was inside that room had to be a mensch, probably an elf.

Limbeck was right. The elves had shut down the Kicksey-winsey.

Haplo listened again, listened to the clanking sounds move this way and that, moving slowly, purposefully, and he shook his head. No, he decided, if the elves had discovered this place, they would be swarming around it. They would be as busy as ants inside this tunnel. And there was, as far as Haplo could determine, only one person making those strange sounds inside that room.

He looked at his skin. The sigla still glowed warning blue, but were still faint.

"Stay here!" Haplo mouthed, glaring at Bane and Limbeck.

The boy and the dwarf both nodded.

Haplo drew his sword, gave the door a violent kick, and rushed inside the room, the dog at his heels. He halted, came near dropping his weapon. He was dumbstruck with amazement.

A man turned to meet him, a man made all of metal.

"What are my instructions?" asked the man in a monotone, speaking human.

"An automaton!" cried Bane, disobeying Haplo and running inside the room.

The automaton stood about Haplo's height, or somewhat taller. His body—the replica of a human's—was made of brass. Hands, arms, fingers, legs, toes were jointed and moved in a lifelike, if somewhat stiff, manner. The metal face had been fancifully molded to resemble a human face, with nose and mouth, though the mouth did not move. The brows and lips were outlined in gold, bright jewels gleamed in the eye sockets. Runes, Sartan runes, covered its entire body, much as the Patryn's runes covered his body, and probably for the same purpose—all of which Haplo found rather amusing, if somewhat insulting.

The automaton was alone in a large and empty circular room. Surrounding it, mounted in the room's walls, were eyeballs, hundreds of eyeballs, exactly like the one eyeball held in the hands of the Manger statue far above them. Each unwinking eye portrayed in its vision a different part of the Kicksey-winsey.

Haplo had the eerie impression that these eyes belonged to him. He was looking out through every one of these orbs. Then he understood. The eyes belonged to the automaton. The metallic clanking Haplo had heard must have been the automaton moving from eyeball to eyeball, making his rounds, keeping watch.

"There's someone alive in there!" Jarre gasped. She stood in the doorway, not daring to venture inside. Her own eyes were opened so wide it seemed likely they might roll out of her head. "We have to get him out!"

"No!" Bane scoffed at the notion. "It's a machine, just like the Kicksey-winsey."

"I am the machine," stated the automaton in its lifeless voice.

"That's it!" cried Bane, excited, turning to Haplo. "Don't you see? He's the machine! See the runes that cover him? All the parts of the Kicksey-winsey are connected magically to him. He's been running it, all these centuries!"

"Without a brain," murmured Haplo. "Obeying his last instructions, whatever those were."

"This is wonderful!" Limbeck breathed a sigh. His eyes filled with tears, the glass in his spectacles steamed over. He snatched them off his nose.

The dwarf stood staring myopically and with reverent awe at the man-machine, making no move to come near it, content to worship at a distance. "I never imagined anything so marvelous."

"I think it's creepy," said Jarre, shivering. "Now that we've seen it, let's go. I don't like this place. And I don't like that thing."

Haplo could have echoed her sentiments. He didn't like this place, either. The automaton reminded him of the living corpses on Abarrach, dead bodies brought to life by the power of necromancy. He had the feeling that the same sort of dark magic was working here, only in this instance it had given life to what was never meant to be alive. A degree better, he supposed, than bringing to life rotting flesh. Or perhaps not. The dead at least possessed souls. This metal contraption was not only mindless but soulless as well.

The dog sniffed at the automaton's feet, looked up at Haplo, baffled, apparently wondering why this thing that moved like a man and talked like a man didn't smell like a man.

"Go watch the door," Haplo ordered the dog.

Bored with the automaton, the animal was happy to obey.

Limbeck pondered, fell back on his favorite question. "Why? If this metal man's been running the machine all these years, why did the Kicksey-winsey stop?"

Bane pondered, shook his head. "I don't know," he was forced to admit, shrugging.

Haplo scratched his glowing hand, mindful that their danger had not lessened. "Perhaps, Your Highness, it has something to do with the opening of Death's Gate."

Bane scoffed. "A lot you know—" he began.

The automaton turned in Haplo's direction.

"The Gate has opened. What are my instructions?"

"That's it," said Haplo in satisfaction. "I thought as much. That's why the Kicksey-winsey stopped."

"What gate?" Limbeck asked, frowning. He'd wiped his spectacles, replaced them on his nose. "What are you talking about?"

"I suppose you could be right," Bane mumbled, glancing at Haplo balefully. "But what if you are? What then?"

"I demand to know what's going on!" Limbeck glared at them.

"I'll explain in a minute," said Haplo. "Look at it this way, Your Highness. The Sartan intended that the four worlds all work together. Let's say that the Kicksey-winsey was not meant to simply draw the floating islands into alignment on Ananus. Suppose the machine has other tasks, as well, tasks that have something to do with all the other worlds."

"My true work begins with the opening of the Gate," said the automaton. "What are my instructions?"

"What is your true work?" Bane parried.

"My true work begins with the opening of the Gate. I have received the signal. The Gate is open. What are my instructions?"

Where are the citadels?

Haplo was reminded, suddenly, of the tytans on Pryan. Other soulless creatures, whose frustration over not having their question answered led them to murder whatever hapless being crossed their path. Where are the citadels? What are my instructions?

"Well, give it the instructions. Tell it to turn the machine on and let's go!" Jarre said, shuffling nervously from one foot to the other. "The diversion can't last much longer."

"I'm not leaving until I know exactly what's going on," Limbeck stated testily.

"Jarre's right. Tell it what to do, Your Highness, then we can get out of here."

"I can't," said Bane, glancing at Haplo slyly out of the corner of his eye.

"And why not, Your Highness?"

"I mean I can, but it will take a long time. A long, long time. First I'll have to figure out what each different part of the machine is meant to do. Then I'll have to give each part of the machine its own instructions—"

"Are you certain?" Haplo eyed the boy suspiciously.

"It's the only safe way," Bane replied, all glittering innocence. "You want this to be done safely, don't you? If I made a mistake—or you made a mistake—and the machine started running amok... maybe sending islands scooting here and there, perhaps dropping them into the Maelstrom." Bane shrugged. "Thousands of people could die."

Jarre was twisting her skirt into knots. "Let's leave this place, right now. We're well enough off, as it is. We'll learn to live without the Kicksey-winsey. When the elves find out it isn't going to work again, they'll go away—"

"No, they won't," said Limbeck. "They can't or they'll die of thirst. They'll search and poke and prod until they discover this metal man and then they'll take it over—"

"He's right," agreed Bane. "We must—"

The dog began to growl, then gave its warning bark. Haplo glanced down at his hand and arm, saw the sigla glowing brighter.

"Someone's coming. Probably discovered the hole in the statue."

"But how? There weren't any elves up there!"

"I don't know," Haplo said grimly. "Either your diversion didn't work or they were tipped off. It doesn't matter now. We've got to clear out of here, fast!"

Bane glared at him, defiant. "That's stupid. You're being stupid. How can the elves find us? The runes went dark. We'll just hide in this room—"

The kid's right, Haplo thought. I am being stupid. What am I afraid of? We could shut the door, hide in here. The elves could search these tunnels for years, never find us.

He opened his mouth to give the order, but the words wouldn't come. He'd lived this long relying on his instincts. His instincts told him to get away.

"Do as you're told, Your Highness." Haplo took hold of Bane, started dragging the squirming boy toward the door.

"Look at that." The Patryn thrust his brightly glowing hand underneath the child's nose. "I don't know how they know we're down here but, believe me, they know. They're looking for us. And if we stay in this room, this is where they'll find us. Here... with the automaton. You want that? Would Grandfather want that?"

Bane glared at Haplo; the hatred in the child's eyes gleamed bare and cold, like a drawn blade. The intensity of his hate and the malevolence accompanying it appalled Haplo, momentarily disrupted his thinking. His hand loosened its grasp.

Bane jerked himself free of Haplo's grip. "You're so stupid," he said softly, lethally. "I'll show you just how stupid you are!" Turning, he shoved Jarre aside, ran out the door and into the hallway.

"After him!" Haplo ordered the dog, who dashed off obediently.

Limbeck took off his spectacles, was gazing wistfully at the automaton. Unmoved, it remained standing in the center of the room.

"I still don't understand ..." Limbeck began.

"I'll explain later!" Haplo said in exasperation.

Jarre took over. Grabbing hold of the august leader of WUPP, much as she used to do, she hustled Limbeck out of the room and into the hall.

"What are my instructions?" the automaton asked.

"Shut the door," Haplo growled, relieved to be away from the metal corpse.

Out in the hallway, he paused to get his bearings. He could hear Bane's pounding footsteps running up the tunnel, back the way they'd come. The Patryn sigil Haplo had scratched above the arch shone with a flickering bluish green light. At least Bane had had sense enough to run off in the right direction, although that was likely going to take him right into the arms of their pursuers.

He wondered what the fool kid had in mind. Anything to make trouble, Haplo supposed. Not that it mattered. He's a mensch, so are the elves. I can handle them easily. They'll never know what hit them.

Then why are you afraid, so afraid you can barely think for the fear?

"Beats the hell out of me," Haplo answered himself. He turned to Limbeck and Jarre. "I've got to stop His Highness. You two keep up with me as best you can, get as far away from this room as possible. That"—he pointed at the burning Patryn symbol—"won't last long. If the elves catch Bane, keep out of sight. Let me do the fighting. Don't try to be heroes."

With that, he ran down the hallway.

"We'll be right behind you!" Jarre promised, and turned to find Limbeck.

He had removed his spectacles, was staring myopically at the door that had shut behind him.

"Limbeck, come on!" she ordered.

"What if we never find it again?" he said plaintively.

"I hope we don't!" was on the tip of Jarre's tongue, but she swallowed her words. Taking hold of his hand—something she realized she had not done in a long while—she tugged at him urgently. "We have to leave, my dear. Haplo's right. We can't let them find it."

Limbeck heaved a great sigh. Putting on his spectacles, he planted himself in front of the door, folded his arms across his broad chest.

"No," he said resolutely. "I'm not leaving."

## CHAPTER 15

### WOMBE, DREVLIN

#### LOW REALM

"AS I SUSPECTED, THE GEGS STAGED THE DIVERSION TO COVER THEIR tracks," stated the elven captain. He stood near the statue of the Manger, peering down at the crack at the base. "One of you men, remove that pipe."

None of the members of the small squad of elves rushed forward to do the captain's bidding. Shifting their feet, they glanced at each other or looked sidelong at the statue.

The captain turned to see why his order hadn't been obeyed. "Well? What's the matter with you?"

One of the elves saluted, spoke up. "The statue's cursed, Captain Sang-drax. Everyone knows it, who's served here any length of time." A none-too-subtle reminder to the captain that he hadn't been here all that long.

"If the GEGs went down there, that's an end of them, sir," said another.

"Cursed!" Sang-drax sniffed. "You'll be cursed, if you don't obey orders. My curse! And you'll find my curse more damning than anything this ugly hunk of rock could do to you!" He glared at them. "Lieutenant Ban'glor, remove that pipe."

Reluctantly, afraid of the curse, but more afraid of his captain, the chosen elf came forward. Reaching down gingerly, he took hold of the pipe. His face was pale, sweat trickled down his skin. The other elves involuntarily backed up a pace, caught the baleful glare of their captain, and froze. Ban'glor yanked on the pipe, nearly tumbled over backward when it slid out easily. The statue's base revolved, opened, revealing the staircase leading down into darkness.

"I heard noise down there." The captain walked over, stared down into the hole. The other elves gazed at it in unhappy silence. They all knew what their next order would be.

"Where did High Command find this enthusiastic bastard?" whispered one soldier to another.

"Came in on the last troop ship," said the other gloomily.

"Just our luck we'd get stuck with him. First Captain Ander'el has to go and get himself killed—"

"Did you ever wonder about that?" asked his companion abruptly.

Captain Sang-drax was staring intently into the hole at the statue's base, apparently listening for a repetition of the sound that had drawn his attention.

"Silence in the ranks." He glanced around irritably.

The two soldiers hushed, stood unmoving, faces expressionless. The officer resumed his reconnaissance, descending about halfway down into the hole in a futile attempt to see into the darkness.

"Wonder about what?" the soldier whispered after the captain had disappeared.

"The way Ander'el died."

The other shrugged. "He got drunk and wandered out in the storm—"

"Yes, and when did you ever see Captain Ander'el when he couldn't hold his liquor?"

The soldier flashed his companion a startled glance. "What are you saying?"

"What a lot of people are saying. That the captain's death was no accident—"

Sang-drax returned. "We're going in." He gestured to the two who had been talking. "You two men, take the lead."

The two exchanged glances. He couldn't have overheard, they said to each other silently. Not from that distance. Glumly and without haste, they moved to obey. The remainder of the squadron marched down after them, most eyeing the statue nervously, giving it a wide berth. Last to descend, Captain Sang-drax followed his men, a slight smile on his thin, delicate lips.

Haplo ran after Bane and the dog. As he ran, he glanced down at his skin—which was now burning a bright blue tinged with fiery red—and he cursed beneath his breath. He shouldn't have come here, shouldn't have allowed Bane to come, or the dwarves. He should have heeded the warning his body was trying to give him, even though it made no sense. In the Labyrinth, he would have never made this mistake.

"I've grown too damn cocky," he muttered, "too sure of myself, counting myself safe in a world of mensch."

But he was safe, that was the inexplicable, maddening part of all this. Yet his runes of defense and protection glowed blue and now red in the darkness.

He listened for the pounding, heavy footfalls of the two dwarves, but couldn't hear them. Perhaps they'd gone in another direction. Bane's steps sounded nearer, yet still some distance away. The kid was running with all the speed and heedless abandon of a frightened child. He was doing the right thing—keeping the elves from finding the automaton's room. But getting himself captured in the process wasn't likely to help.

Haplo rounded a corner, paused a moment, listening. He had heard voices, he was certain—elven voices. How close was beyond his ability to guess. The twisting halls distorted sound and he had no way of knowing how near he was to the statue.

Haplo sent an urgent message to the dog, Stop Bane! Hold on to him!, started running again. If he could just reach the kid ahead of the elves—

A cry, sounds of a scuffle, and the dog's urgent, angry snarling and growling brought Haplo up short. Trouble ahead. He cast a swift glance behind him. The dwarves were nowhere in sight.

Well, they were on their own. Haplo couldn't be responsible for them and Bane, too. Besides, Limbeck and Jarre would be most at home within these tunnels, quite capable of finding a hiding place. Putting them from his mind, he crept forward.

Shut up, dog! he ordered the animal. And listen!

The dog's barking ceased.

"And what have we here, Lieutenant?"

"A kid! Some human's brat, Captain." The elf sounded considerably astonished. "Ouch! Cut it out, you little bastard!"

"Let go of me! You're hurting me!" Bane shouted.

"Who you? What you do down here, brat?" demanded the officer, speaking the crude form of elven that most elves are convinced is the only form humans can understand.

"Mind your manners, brat." The sound of a slap—hard and cold and impersonal, "The captain ask you question. Answer nice captain."

The dog growled. No, boy! Haplo commanded silently. Let it go.

Bane gasped from the pain, but he didn't blubber or whimper. "You'll be sorry you did that," he said softly.

The elf laughed, slapped the child again. "Speak up."

Bane gulped, drew in a hissing breath. When he spoke, he spoke elven fluently. "I was looking for you elves when I saw the statue open and I was curious and came down. And I'm not a brat. I'm a prince, Prince Bane, son of King Stephen and Queen Anne of Volkaran and Ulyndia. You better treat me with respect."

Good for you, kid. Haplo awarded the boy grudging praise. That will make them stop and think.

The Patryn slipped silently closer to the hallway in which the elves held the child captive. He could see them, now—six elven soldiers and one officer, standing near the staircase that led back up to the statue.

The soldiers had fanned out down the hallway, stood with weapons drawn, looking nervously this way and that. Obviously, they didn't like it down here. Only the officer appeared cool and unconcerned, although Haplo could see that Bane's answer had taken the elf by surprise. He rubbed a pointed chin, eyed the boy speculatively.

"King Stephen's whelp is dead," said the soldier holding the boy. "We should know. He accused us of the murder."

"Then you should know that you didn't do it," returned Bane cunningly. "I am the prince. The very fact that I'm here on Drevlin should prove that to you." The boy spoke scornfully. His hand started to rub his aching jaw, but he changed his mind, stood proudly, too proud to admit he was hurt, glaring at his captors.

"Oh, yes?" said the captain. "How?"

The captain was obviously impressed. Hell, Haplo was impressed. He'd forgotten how smart and manipulative Bane could be. The Patryn relaxed, took time to study the soldiers, tried to decide what magic he could use that would render the elves helpless and leave Bane unharmed.

"I'm a prisoner, King Stephen's prisoner. I've been looking for a way to escape and, when the stupid Glegs left to attack your ship, I had my chance. I ran away and came searching for you, only I got lost, coming down here. Take me back to Tribus. It will be well worth your while." Bane smiled ingenuously.

"Take you back to Tribus?" The elven captain was highly amused. "You'll be lucky if I waste energy enough taking you back up the stairs! The only reason I haven't killed you yet, you little worm, is that you are right about one thing: I am curious to know what a human brat is doing down here. And I suggest that this time you tell me the truth."

"I don't see the need to tell you anything. I'm not alone!" Bane crowed shrilly. Turning, he pointed down the hallway, back the way he'd come. "There's a man guarding me, one of the mysteriarchs. And some Glegs are with him. Help me escape before he can stop me!"

Bane ducked beneath the elf captain's arm, headed for the shelter of the stairs. The dog, after a swift glance back at Haplo, bolted after the boy.

"You two, catch the brat!" shouted the captain swiftly. "The rest of you, come with me!"

He drew a dagger from a sheath worn on his belt, headed down the hallway in the direction Bane had pointed.

Damn the little bastard! Haplo swore. He called upon the magic, speaking and drawing the sigla that would fill the hallway with a noxious gas. Within seconds, everyone—including Bane—would be comatose. Haplo raised his hand. As the first fiery sigil burned in the air beneath his fingers, he wondered who Bane was truly trying to escape.

A short, stout figure darted suddenly from around back of Haplo. "I'm here! Don't hurt me! I'm the only one!" shouted Jarre. Trundling clumsily down the hall, she was headed straight for the elves.

Haplo had not heard the dwarf approach and he dared not stop his magic long enough to grab her, keep her out of the line of his spell-casting. She'd end up right in the midst of the sleeping gas. He had no choice but to continue. He'd pick her up when he picked up Bane. He stepped out from his hiding place.

The elves came to a confused halt. They saw runes flashing in the air, a man with shimmering red and blue skin in front of them. This was no mysteriarch. No human could cast magic like this. They looked to their captain for orders.

Haplo drew the last sigil. The magic was nearly complete. The elven captain was prepared to hurl his dagger, but the Patryn paid it scant attention. No mensch weapon could harm him. He completed the sigil, stepped back, and waited for the spell to work.

Nothing happened.

The first sigil had, inexplicably, flickered and gone out. Haplo stared at it. The second sigil, dependent on the first, began to fade. He couldn't believe it. Had he made a mistake? No, impossible. The spell was a simple one...

Pain flared in Haplo's shoulder. Looking down, he saw the hilt of a dagger protruding out of his shirt. A dark splotch of blood flowered beneath it. Anger and confusion and pain robbed him of coherent thought. None of this should be happening! The dagger should not have touched him! The runes on his body should have protected him! The damn spell should be working! Why wasn't it?

He looked into the eyes—the red eyes—of the elven captain and saw the answer.

Haplo clutched at the dagger, but he lacked the strength to pull it out. A sickening, horrible warmth had begun flowing through his body. The warmth made him queasy, twisted him up inside. The terrible sensation weakened his muscles. His hand dropped, limp, lifeless. His knees buckled. He staggered, almost fell, and stumbled over to lean against the wall in an effort to try to keep on his feet.

But now the warmth was spreading up into his brain. He slumped to the floor...

And then he wasn't anywhere.

## CHAPTER 16

WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM JARRE SAT CROSS-LEGGED ON THE FLOOR OF THE FACTREE, NEAR THE statue of the Manger, trying not to look at the opening at the statue's base, the opening that led back down the stairs into the strange tunnels. Yet as often as she determined not to look at it, that was how often she discovered herself looking at it.

She fixed her gaze on some other object: one of the elven guards, Bane, the unhappy dog. The next thing Jarre knew, she was looking back at the opening.

Waiting, watching for Limbeck.

She had planned exactly what she'd do when she saw Limbeck come peering and stumbling his way up out of the hole. She'd create a diversion, just like the diversion she'd created back down there in the tunnels. She'd make it look like she was trying to escape. She'd run toward the front of the Factree, away from the statue. That would give Limbeck time to sneak across the floor and slip back down into the dwarven tunnels, the way they'd come up.

"I just hope he won't do anything stupid and chivalrous," Jarre said to herself, her gaze sliding back to the statue. "Like try to rescue me. That's what the old Limbeck would have done. Fortunately, he has more sense now."

Yes, he has more sense. He's extremely sensible. It was sensible of him to let me sacrifice myself, allow the elves to capture me, let me lead them away from the room with the automaton. It was my plan, after all. Limbeck agreed to it immediately. Very sensible of him. He didn't argue, didn't try to convince me to stay, didn't offer to go with me.

"Take care of yourself, my dear," he said, peering at me through those infernal spectacles, and don't tell them about this room."

All very sensible. I admire sensible people.

Which made Jarre wonder why she had a sudden desire to slug Limbeck in his sensible mouth.

Sighing, she stared at the statue and remembered her plan and what it had gained them.

Running down the tunnel, she'd been more frightened at the sight of Haplo, his skin glowing with bright magic, than she had been of the elves. She almost hadn't been able to go through with her plan, then Bane had shouted out something in elven about Gega and had pointed down the tunnel, in the direction of the room.

After that, it had been all confusion. Terrified that they'd find Limbeck, Jarre ran out in the open, shouting that she was alone. Something whizzed past her ear. She heard Haplo cry out in pain. Looking around, she saw him writhing on the floor, the magical glow of his skin fading rapidly. She'd turned to go back to help him, but two elves caught hold of her, held her fast.

One of the elves bent down near Haplo, examined him closely. The others kept back. A shout from upstairs, followed by a whining cry from Bane, indicated that the elves had managed to catch the boy.

The elf kneeling beside Haplo glanced up at his men, said something Jarre couldn't understand, and made an imperative gesture. The two elves hauled her up the stairs, back up here into the Factree.

She found Bane sitting on the floor, looking smug. The dog had flopped down beside the boy, who had his hand on the animal's ruff. Every time the dog tried to get up, probably to go check on its master, Bane coaxed it to stay put.

"Don't move!" the elves ordered Jarre, speaking crude dwarven.

She obeyed meekly enough, plopping herself down beside Bane.

"Where's Limbeck?" the boy asked her, speaking dwarven in a loud whisper.

When had he learned to speak her language? The last time he'd been here, he couldn't speak dwarven. She'd only just now thought of it, noticed how irritating it was.

Jarre fixed him with a blank stare, as if he'd been speaking elven and she didn't understand. Glancing surreptitiously at their guards, she saw them engaged in low-voiced conversation, saw them glance more than once at the opening in the statue's base.

Turning back to Bane, Jarre placed two fingers on the boy's arm, pinched him hard.

"I'm alone," she said to him. "And don't you forget it."

Bane opened his mouth to cry out. Taking one look at Jarre's face, however, the boy decided it was best to keep silent. Nursing his bruised arm, he scooted away from her and was now sitting quietly, either sulking or plotting some new mischief.

Jarre couldn't help but think that, somehow, this was all his fault. She decided she didn't like Bane.

Nothing much was happening now. The other elves paced restlessly about the statue, guarding their prisoners and casting nervous glances down the stairs. The elf captain and Haplo did not return. And there was no sign of Limbeck.

Time crawled when you were caught in situations like this. Jarre knew that and made allowances. And even with allowances, it occurred to her that she'd been sitting here a long, long time. She wondered how long those magic symbols Haplo had put above the arches to show the way out would last, didn't think it could be as long as this.

Limbeck wasn't coming. He wasn't coming to rescue her. Or join her. He was going to be ...sensible.

Booted footsteps rang on the Factree floor. A voice called out, the guards snapped to attention. Jarre, hope in her heart, prepared to run. But no respectable, bespectacled leader of WUPP appeared.

It was only an elf. And he was coming from a different direction, from the front of the Factree. Jarre sighed.

Pointing to Bane and Jarre, the elf said something in elven that Jarre didn't understand. The guards were quick to respond. They appeared relieved, in fact.

Bane, looking more cheerful, jumped to his feet. The dog bounded up with an eager whimper. Jarre stayed where she was.

"Come on, Jarre," the boy said, with a smile that magnanimously forgave all. "They're taking us out of here."

"Where?" she asked suspiciously, standing up slowly.

"To see the lord commander. Don't worry. Everything's going to be all right. I'll take care of you."

Jarre wasn't buying it. "Where's Haplo?"

She glowered at the approaching elves, folded her arms across her chest, braced to stay put, if necessary.

"How should I know?" Bane asked, shrugging. "The last I saw of him, he was down there, about to let loose some of that magic of his. I guess it must not have worked," he added.

Smugly, Jarre thought. "It didn't. He was hurt. The elf threw a knife at him."

"That's too bad," said Bane, blue eyes wide. "Was... um... was Limbeck with him?"

Jarre stared at the boy blankly. "Limbeck who?"

Bane flushed in anger, but before he could badger her, a guard broke up the conversation.

"Move along, Geg," he ordered in dwarven.

Jarre didn't want to move along. She didn't want to see this lord commander. She didn't want to leave without knowing what had happened to Limbeck and to Haplo. She looked defiant, was about to make a stand that would have probably earned her a blow from the guard, when it suddenly occurred to her that Limbeck might be hiding down there, waiting for exactly this opportunity. Waiting for the guards to leave so that he could make good his escape.

Meekly, she fell into step beside Bane.

Behind them, one of the elves shouted a question. The newly arrived elf answered with what sounded like an order.

Uneasy, Jarre glanced back.

Several elves were gathering around the statue.

"What are they doing?" she asked Bane fearfully.

"Guarding the opening," said Bane, with a sly smile.

"Watch where you're going! And keep moving, maggot," ordered the elf. He gave Jarre a rough shove.

Jarre had no choice but to obey. She walked toward the Factree entrance. Behind her, the elves took up positions near the statue, but not too near the forbidding opening.

"Oh, Limbeck." Jarre sighed. "Be sensible."

## CHAPTER 17

WOMBE, DREVLIN

LOW REALM

HAPLO WOKE IN PAIN, ALTERNATELY SHIVERING AND BURNING. LOOKING up, he saw the eyes of the elven captain gleam red through a shadowed dimness.

Red eyes.

The captain squatted on his haunches, long, thin-fingered elven hands hanging between bent knees. He smiled when he saw Haplo conscious, watching him.

"Greetings, master," he said pleasantly, his tone light and bantering. "Feeling sickish, are you? Yes, I suppose so. I've never experienced the nerve poison, but I understand it produces some remarkably uncomfortable sensations. Don't worry. The poison is not deadly, its effects wear off soon."

Haplo gritted his teeth against the chill that made them rattle in his head, closed his eyes. The elf was speaking Patryn, the rune language of Haplo's people, the language that no elf living or dead had ever spoken, could ever speak.

A hand was touching him, sliding beneath his wounded shoulder.

Haplo's eyes flared open, he instinctively lashed out at the elf... or that was what he intended. In reality, he flopped his arm around a little. The elf smiled with a mocking compassion, clucked over Haplo like a distracted hen. Strong hands supported the injured Patryn, eased him to an upright, sitting position.

"Come, come, master. It's not that bad," said the captain cheerily, switching to elven. "Yes, if looks could kill, you'd have my head hanging from your trophy belt." Red eyes glinted in amusement. "Or should I say, perhaps, a snake's head, don't you agree?"

"What... what are you?" At least, that's what Haplo tried to say. His brain shaped the words clearly, but they came out mush.

"Talking's difficult just now, I fancy, isn't it?" remarked the elf, speaking Patryn again. "No need. I can understand your thoughts. You know what I am. You saw me on Chelestra, though you probably don't remember. I was only one of many. And in a different body. Dragon-snakes, the mensch dubbed us. Here, what would you say? Serpent-elf? Yes, I rather like that."

Shape-changers... Haplo thought in a vague kind of horror. He shivered, mumbled.

"Shape-changers," agreed the serpent-elf. "But come. I'm taking you to the Royal One. He's asked to speak with you."

Haplo willed his muscles to respond to his command, willed his hands to strangle, hit, jab, anything. But his body failed him. His muscles twitched and danced in erratic spasms. It was all he could do to remain standing, and then he was forced to lean on the elf.

Or, he supposed he should start thinking, the serpent.

"Suppose you try standing, Patryn. Oh, I say, that's quite good. Now walking. We're late as it is. One foot in front of the other."

The serpent-elf guided the stumbling Patryn's footsteps as if he were a feeble old man. Haplo shuffled forward, feet falling over each other, hands jerking aimlessly. A cold sweat soaked his shirt. His nerves flamed and tingled. The sigla tattooed on his body had gone dark, his magic disrupted. He shook and shivered and burned, leaned on the elf, and kept going.

Limbeck stood in the darkness that was so extraordinarily dark—far darker than any darkness he could ever remember— and began to think that he'd made a mistake. The sigil Haplo had left above the arched passageway still glowed, but it cast no light, and, if anything, its solitary brilliance so far above the dwarf only served to make his own darkness darker.

And then the light of the sigil began to dim.

"I'm going to be trapped down here in the dark," said Limbeck. Removing his spectacles, he started to chew on the earpiece, a habit of his when nervous. "Alone. They're not coming back."

This possibility had not occurred to him. He'd seen Haplo perform marvelous feats of magic. Surely, a handful of elves wouldn't be a problem for a man who had driven away a marauding dragon. Haplo would scare away the elves, then come back, and Limbeck could continue investigating that wondrous metal personage inside the room.

Except Haplo didn't come back. Time passed. The sigil grew dimmer. Something had gone wrong.

Limbeck wavered. The thought of leaving this room, perhaps forever, was agony. He had been so close. Give the metal man its instructions and the metal man would start the heart of the great machine beating again. Limbeck was not quite clear on what the instructions were or how they were to be given or what would happen once the great machine started up, but he had faith that all would be made clear to him in time—just like putting on his spectacles.

But, for now, the door was closed. Limbeck couldn't get back inside. He knew he couldn't get back inside, because he'd given the door a push or two, after Jarre had left him. He supposed he should be encouraged because the metal man had at least followed Haplo's orders, but right at the moment Limbeck could have opted for a more slovenly, undisciplined attitude on the metal man's part.

The dwarf considered beating on the door, shouting, demanding to be let in.

"No," Limbeck muttered, grimacing at an awful taste in his mouth, a taste left behind by the earpiece, "yelling and shouting might alert the elves. They'd come searching and find the Heart Room [as he was now terming it]. If I had a light, I could see that symbol Bane drew on the door, then maybe I could open it. But I don't have a light and no way to get a light without going away and bringing one back. And if I go away to bring one back, how will I get back when I don't know the way?"

Sighing, Limbeck put his spectacles back on. His gaze went to the archway, to the sigil that had once shone brightly but now was hardly more than a pale ghost of itself.

"I could leave a trail, like Haplo did," murmured Limbeck, frowning in deep thought. "But with what? I don't have anything to write with. I don't"—he felt hastily in his pockets—"even have a single wing nut on me." He had been thinking of a story he'd heard as a child, in which two young GEGs, before entering the tunnels of the great machine, had marked their route by leaving behind a trail of nuts and bolts.

A thought came to him, then—a thought whose brilliance nearly took his breath away.

"My socks!"

Limbeck plunked himself down on the floor. One eye on the sigil, whose glow was growing dimmer by the minute, and one on what he was doing, he hauled off his boots, stood them neatly by the door. Pulling off one of his long, thick woolen socks, which he had knit himself,\* he fumbled about at the top of the sock,

searching for the knot that marked the end of the thread. He found it without much trouble, not having bothered to try to incorporate it into the fabric. Giving the knot a good swift wrench with his teeth, he tugged it loose.

\*Since the lives of the dwarves on Drevlin revolve solely around the Kicksey-winsey, male and female dwarves divide household chores such as child rearing, cooking, sewing, and cleaning. Thus all dwarves are adept at knitting, crocheting, darning, and, in fact, consider such skills a form of recreation. All dwarves must have something to do with their hands; to sit idle, dreaming (such as Limbeck did as a youth), is considered a terrible sin.

Limbeck knew how to knit, but he evidently wasn't much good at it, as is evidenced by the fact that his socks unravel with such ease.

His next problem was: how to anchor the end of the thread? The walls were smooth, as was the door. Limbeck groped about in the dark, hoping to find some protrusion, but discovered nothing. At length, he wrapped the thread around the buckle on his boot, then stuffed the top of the heavy boot beneath the door until only the sole could be seen, sticking out.

"Just leave that alone, will you?" he called to the metal man within the room, thinking that perhaps the automaton might take it into its steel head to either shove the boot back out or (if it took a fancy to the boot) pull it the rest of the way inside.

The boot remained in place. Nothing disturbed it.

Hastily, Limbeck took hold of his sock, began to unravel it. He started down the hall, leaving a trail of woolen thread behind.

He had gone under about three sigil-marked archways and unraveled about half his sock when the flaw in his plan occurred to him.

"Bother," said Limbeck, irritated.

For, of course, if he could find his way back, following the trail of the sock, then so could the elves. But there was no help for that now. He could only hope he came across Haplo and Bane quickly, then he could take them back to the Heart Room before the elves discovered it.

The sigla over the archways continued to give off their faint glow. Limbeck followed their lead, used up one sock. Taking off the other, he tied the end of its thread to the end of the thread of the first and continued on. He was trying to figure out what he would do when he ran out of socks. He was considering starting on his sweater and even thinking that he must be somewhere near the stairs that led to the statue, when he rounded a corner and almost ran smack into Haplo.

The Patryn was no help to Limbeck, however, for two reasons: Haplo wasn't alone and he didn't look at all well. An elf was half-carrying the Patryn.

Startled, Limbeck ducked back into a recessed doorway. Pattering about on his bare feet, the dwarf made hardly a sound. The elf, who had slung Haplo's limp arm across his shoulders, was talking to Haplo and did not hear Limbeck's approach or his retreat. The elf and Haplo continued without pause on down a hallway that branched off from Limbeck's.

Limbeck's heart sank. The elf was moving confidently through the tunnels, which meant that the elves must know all about them. Did they know about the Heart Room and the metal man? Were the elves the ones responsible for shutting down the Kicksey-winsey?

The dwarf had to find out for certain and the one way to find out was to spy on the elves. He would see where they took Haplo and, if possible, what they did to him. And what he did to them.

Wadding what was left of his sock into a ball, Limbeck wedged the sock into a corner and, moving more quietly (without his boots) than any dwarf had ever moved in the history of the race, he crept down the hall after Haplo and the elf.

Haplo had no idea where he was, except that he had been brought to one of the underground tunnels dug by the Kicksey-winsey. Not a Sartan tunnel... No. A quick glance at the wall confirmed his thinking. No Sartan runes, anywhere. He banished the thought as swiftly as it came. Of course, the serpents now knew about the secret Sartan tunnels, if they didn't know about them before. But best not to let them know anything else, if he could help it.

Except that Bane...

"The boy?" The serpent-elf glanced at Haplo. "Don't concern yourself. I sent him back with my men. They're real elves, of course. I'm their captain—Sang-drax is my name in elven. Rather clever, don't you agree?" Yes, I've sent Bane along to the real elves. He'll be of far more value to us in their hands. Quite a remarkable mensch, that Bane. We have great hopes for him.

"Drax" means "dragon" in elven. "Sang" means snake.

"No, no, I assure you, master." The red eyes flickered. "The child's not under our control. No need. Ah, but here we are. Feeling better? Good. We want you to be able to concentrate fully on what the Royal One has to say."

"Before you kill me," Haplo mumbled.

Sang-drax smiled, shook his head, but he made no response. He cast a casual glance up and down the corridor. Then, keeping a firm grip on the Patryn, the serpent-elf reached out, knocked on a door.

A dwarf opened it.

"Give me a hand," said Sang-drax, indicating Haplo. "He's heavy."

The dwarf nodded. Between them, they manhandled the still-groggy Patryn into the room. The dwarf kicked at the door to shut it, but didn't bother to see if he'd succeeded. Apparently, they felt secure in their hideout.

"I have brought him, Royal One," called Sang-drax.

"Enter and welcome to our guest," was the response, given in human.

Limbeck, stealing along behind the two, soon became completely lost. He suspected the elf had doubled back on his own trail, and he watched anxiously, half afraid that the elf would come across the woolen thread. But Limbeck concluded he must have been mistaken, for they never did.

They traveled a great distance through the tunnels. Limbeck grew tired of walking. His bare feet were icy cold and bruised from stubbing his toes on walls in the dark. He hoped that Haplo would start to feel better; then, with Limbeck's help, they could both jump the elf and escape.

Haplo groaned, didn't look particularly energetic, however. The elf didn't appear concerned over his prisoner. He would pause occasionally, but that was only to shift his burden more comfortably on his shoulders. He'd then continue on, an eerie red glow—coming from some unknown source—lighting his way.

"My goodness, elves are strong," Limbeck remarked to himself. "Far stronger than I'd imagined." He noted down this fact to be taken into account should full-scale war ever be mounted against the enemy.

They took many twists and turns down winding corridors. Then the elf came to a halt. Easing the injured Haplo back against the wall, the elf glanced casually up and down the corridor.

Limbeck shrank back into a convenient passageway located directly across from where the elf was standing and flattened himself against the wall. Now Limbeck knew the source of the eerie red glow—it emanated from the elf's eyes.

The strange eyes with their fiery gaze flared in Limbeck's direction. The horrible, unnatural light almost blinded him. He knew he'd been discovered and he crouched, cowering, waiting to be apprehended. But the eyes' flaming gaze passed right over him, flitted on down the corridor, and back again.

Limbeck went limp in relief. He was reminded of the time one of the 'lectric zingers on the Kicksey-winsey had gone amok, spit out great bolts of lightning, before the dwarves managed to get it under control. One of those bolts had whizzed right past Limbeck's ear. Had he been standing six inches to his left, he would have been sizzled. Had the dwarf been standing six inches in front of himself, the elf would have spotted him.

As it was, the elf was satisfied that he was unobserved. But then he hadn't seemed all that worried about it to begin with. Nodding to himself in satisfaction, the elf turned and knocked on a door.

It opened. Light streamed out. Limbeck blinked, his eyes adjusting to the sudden brilliance.

"Give me a hand here," said the elf.\*

\*Limbeck learned to speak the elven language from Captain Bothar'el.

Expecting another elf to come to the aid of the first, Limbeck was astonished beyond measure to see a dwarf emerge from the doorway.

A dwarf!

Fortunately for Limbeck, his shock at seeing a dwarf assisting an elf to carry the reviving Haplo into this secret, subterranean room was so great that it paralyzed his tongue and all his other faculties into the bargain. Otherwise, he might have cried out "Hey!" "Hullo!" or "What in the name of Great-aunt Sally's side whiskers do you think you're doing?" and given himself away.

As it was, by the time Limbeck's brain had reestablished communication with the rest of Limbeck, the elf and the dwarf had dragged a groggy Haplo into the room. They closed the door behind them, and Limbeck's heart traveled down to where his boots had once been. Then he noticed a crack of light, and his heart jumped, though it didn't quite manage to make it back up to its proper place, for it still seemed to be beating somewhere around the level of his knees. The door had been left slightly ajar.

It wasn't courage that urged Limbeck forward. It was: What? Why? How?

Curiosity, the driving force in his life, drew him toward that room as the 'lectrical iron-tuggers on the Kicksey-winsey tugged iron. Limbeck was standing at the door, one bespectacled eye to the crack, before he realized what he was doing or gave a thought to his peril.

Dwarves in collusion with the enemy! How could such a thing be? He'd find out who the traitors were and he'd... well, he'd ... or maybe he'd...

Limbeck stared, blinked. He drew back, then brought two eyes to the crack, thinking that one had been playing tricks on him. It hadn't. He took off his spectacles, rubbed his eyes, looked again.

Humans were in the room! Humans and elves and dwarves. All standing around as peaceful as can be. All getting along together. All, apparently, united in brotherhood.

With the exception that their eyes glowed red and that they filled Limbeck with a cold, nameless terror, he couldn't remember having seen a more wonderful sight.

Humans, elves, dwarves—one.

Haplo stood in the room, staring around him. The horrible sensation of alternately freezing and burning had ceased, but now he was weak, wrung out. He longed to sleep, recognized this as his body's desire to heal itself, reestablish the circle of his being, his magic.

And I'll be dead long before that can happen.

The room was large and dimly lit by a few flickering lanterns hanging from pegs on the walls. Haplo was at first confused by what he saw. But men, on second thought, it made sense. It was logical, brilliant. He sank into a chair that Sang-drax shoved beneath his limp legs.

Yes, it made perfect sense.

The room was filled with mensch: elves like Sang-drax, humans like Bane, dwarves like Limbeck and Jarre. An elven soldier was tapping the toe of his boot with the point of his sword. An elven nobleman smoothed the feathers of a hawk he held on his wrist. A human female, clad in a tattered skirt and a deliberately provocative blouse, lounged in a bored manner against a wall. Beside her, a human wizard was amusing himself by tossing a coin in the air, making it disappear. A male dwarf, in the dress of the Glegs, grinned through a thick tangle of beard. All mensch, all completely different in looks and appearance except for one thing. Each gazed at Haplo with gleaming red eyes.

Sang-drax, posting himself beside Haplo, indicated a human male, clad as a common laborer, who came forward to stand in the center of the group. "The Royal One," the serpent-elf said, speaking Patryn.

"I thought you were dead," said Haplo, his words slurred and faltering, but coherent.

The serpent king looked confused for a moment, then laughed. "Ah, yes. Chelestra. No, I am not dead. We can never die."

"You looked pretty dead to me, after Alfred was finished with you."

"The Serpent Mage? I admit that he killed a part of me, but for every part of me that dies, two more parts are born. We live, you see, as long as you live. You keep us alive. We are indebted to you." The serpent-human bowed.

Haplo stared, confused. "Then what is your true form? Are you snakes or dragons or mensch or what?"

"We are whatever you want us to be," said the serpent king. "You give us shape, as you give us life."

"Meaning you adapt to the world you're in, whatever suits your purpose," Haplo spoke slowly, his thoughts struggling through a drugged haze. "In the Nexus, you were a Patryn. On Chelestra, it suited your purpose to appear in the guise of terrifying snakes..."

"Here, we can be more subtle," said the serpent king, with a casual wave of his hand. "We have no need to appear as ferocious monsters to throw this world into the turmoil and chaos on which we thrive. We have only to be its citizens."

The others in the room laughed appreciatively.

Shape-changers, Haplo realized. The evil can assume any form, any guise. On Chelestra—dragon-snakes; in this world—mensch; in the Nexus—his own people. No one will recognize them, no one will know they are here. They can go anywhere, do anything, foment wars, keep dwarf fighting elf, elf fighting human... Sartan fighting Patryn. Too eager to hate, never realizing our hatred makes us weak, we are open and vulnerable to the evil that will eventually devour us all!

"Why have you brought me here?" Haplo asked, almost too sick and despairing to care.

"To tell you our plans."

Haplo sneered. "A waste of time, since you intend to kill me."

"No, no, that would be the waste!"

Walking past rows of elves and dwarves and humans, the serpent king came to stand directly in front of Haplo. "You still haven't grasped it, yet, have you, Patryn?"

The king reached out his hand, stabbed a finger at Haplo's chest, tapped it. "We live only so long as you live. Fear, hatred, vengeance, terror, pain, suffering—that is the foul and turgid quagmire in which we breed. You live in peace and each of us dies a little bit. You live in fear and your life gives us life."

"I'll fight you!" Haplo mumbled.

"Of course you will!" laughed the serpent-human.

Haplo rubbed his aching head, his bleary eyes. "I get it. That's what you want"

"Now you are beginning to understand. The harder you struggle, the stronger we grow."

What about Xar? Haplo wondered. You pledged to serve him. Is that, too, a trick... ?

"We will serve your lord." The serpent king was sincere, earnest.

Haplo scowled. He had forgotten they could read his thoughts.

"We serve Xar with enthusiasm," the serpent king continued. "We are with him on Abarrach, in the guise of Patrins, of course. We are assisting him to learn the secret of necromancy. We will join his army when he launches his attack, aid him in his war, fight his battles, do willingly whatever he asks of us. And after that..."

"You'll destroy him."

"We will be forced to, I'm afraid. Xar wants unity, peace. Achieved through tyranny and fear, of course. We'd gain some sustenance from that but, all in all, a starvation diet"

"And the Sartan?"

"Oh, we don't play favorites. We're working with them, as well. Samah was inordinately pleased with himself when several 'Sartan' answered his call, came to 'their dear brothers' from out of Death's Gate. He has gone to Abarrach, but, in his absence, the newby arrived 'Sartan' are urging their fellow Sartan to declare war upon the mensch.

"And, soon, even the peaceful mensch of Chelestra will fall to quarreling among themselves. Or should I say... ourselves."

Haplo's head sagged, heavy as rock. His arms were stones, his feet boulders. He found himself lying on the table.

Sang-drax grabbed Haplo by the hair, jerked his head up, forced him to look at the serpent, whose form now became hideous. The creature loomed large, its body swelling and expanding. And then the body started to break apart. Arms, legs, hands detached themselves from the torso, floated away. The head dwindled in size until all Haplo could see were two slit, red eyes.

"You will sleep," said a voice in Haplo's mind. "And when you wake, wake to health, fully restored. And you will remember. Remember clearly all I have said, all I have yet to say. We find ourselves in danger, here, on Arianus. There exists an unfortunate trend toward peace. The Tribus empire, weak and corrupt within, is fighting a two-front war, one which we do not think they can win. If Tribus is overthrown, the elves and their human allies will negotiate a treaty with the dwarves. This cannot be allowed.

"Nor would your lord want this to happen, Haplo." The red eyes flamed with laughter. "That will be your dilemma. An agonizing one. Help these mensch and you thwart the will of your lord. Help your lord and you help us. Help us and you destroy your lord. Destroy your lord and you destroy your people."

Darkness, soothing and welcome, blotted out the sight of the red eyes. But he still heard the laughing voice.

"Think about it, Patryn. Meanwhile, we'll grow fat on your fear."

Peering inside the room full of mensch, Limbeck could see Haplo clearly—they'd dropped him on the floor, just inside the door. The Patryn, looking around, appeared to be as astounded as the dwarf, to see this unique gathering.

Haplo didn't seem to be at all pleased, however. In fact, as near as Limbeck could tell, Haplo looked as terrified as Limbeck felt.

A human, dressed as a common laborer, came forward. He and Haplo began to converse in a language that Limbeck didn't understand, but which sounded harsh and angry and chilled him with dark and frightening sensations. At one point, however, everyone in the room laughed and commented and seemed extremely happy, agreeing to something that had been said.

At that point. Limbeck understood some of the conversation, for the dwarves spoke in dwarven and the elves in elven and the humans, presumably, since Limbeck didn't speak their language, spoke human. None of this cheered Haplo, however, who appeared more tense and desperate than before, if that were possible. He looked, to Limbeck, like a man about to meet a terrible end.

An elf took hold of Haplo by the hair, jerked the Patryn's head up, forcing him to look at the human. Limbeck watched wide-eyed, having no idea what was going on, but certain—somehow—that Haplo was going to die.

The Patryn's eyes fluttered, closed. His head sagged, he sank back into the arms of the elf. Limbeck's heart, which had struggled up from his feet, now lodged firmly in his throat. He was certain that Haplo was dead.

The elf stretched the Patryn out on the floor. The human looked down at him, shook his head, and laughed. Haplo's head turned, he sighed. He was, Limbeck saw, asleep.

Limbeck was so relieved that his spectacles steamed up. He took them off and wiped them with a shaking hand.

"Some of you Tribus elves, help me carry him," ordered the elf who had brought Haplo down here. Once again, he was speaking the elven language, not the strange language that Limbeck couldn't understand. "I've got to get him back up to that Factree place, before the others grow suspicious."

Several elves—at least Limbeck supposed they were elves; it was difficult to tell, because they were wearing some type of clothing that made them look more like the walls of the tunnels than elves—gathered around the slumbering Haplo. They lifted him by his legs and shoulders, carried him easily, as though he weighed no more than a child, and started for the door.

Limbeck ducked hastily back down the tunnel, watched as the elves bore Haplo off in the opposite direction.

It occurred to Limbeck that, once again, he was going to be left alone down here, with no idea how to get out. He must either follow them or...

"Perhaps I could ask one of the dwarves."

He turned to look into the room and almost dropped his spectacles. Hurriedly, he wrapped the earpieces around his ears, stared hard through the lenses of thick glass, not believing what he was seeing.

The room, which had been filled with light and laughter and humans and elves and dwarves, was empty.

Limbeck sucked in a deep breath, let it out with a shivering sigh. His curiosity overwhelmed him. He was about to slip into the room and investigate when it struck him that the elves—his way out—were rapidly leaving him behind. Shaking his side whiskers over the strange and inexplicable things he'd seen, Limbeck trotted down the hallway, following the strangely dressed elves.

The eerie red glow of their eyes lit the passages brightly, showed their way. How they could tell one tunnel from another, one arched entry from an exit, was beyond Limbeck. They moved at a rapid pace, never pausing, never taking a wrong turn, never forced to back up or start over.

"What are your plans, Sang-drax?" asked one. "Clever name, by the way."

"You like it? I thought it appropriate," said the elf who had brought Haplo down here. "I must see to it that the human child, Bane, and the Patryn, here, are taken to the emperor. The child has a plan in mind that should foment chaos in the human kingdom far more effectively than anything we could do ourselves. You will, I trust, pass the word along to those near the emperor and urge his cooperation?"

"He'll cooperate, if the Unseen\* advise it."

\*An elite unit of soldiers created by the emperor, ostensibly to search out and destroy rebel elves. The Unseen—so called because of their mysterious ability to make themselves very nearly invisible—have gained enormous power—even before the infiltration by the evil serpents.

"I am amazed that you managed to join such an elite and powerful unit so quickly. My congratulations."

One of the oddly dressed elves shrugged. "It was quite simple, really. Nowhere else on Arianus does there exist a group whose means and methods coincide so well with our own. With the exception of an unfortunate tendency to revere elven law and order and to perpetrate their deeds in the name of such, the Unseen Guard are perfect for us."

"A pity we cannot penetrate the ranks of the Kenkari\* as easily."

\*One of the seven original clans of elves brought by the Sartan to Arianus after the Sundering. All elven clans had wizards among them, but the Kenkari were more powerful in magic than most and, through strict policies of intermarriage, they were able, over many generations, to enhance their magical powers. Consequently, the Kenkari are much in demand by other elven clans. Though they have no lands of their own, they are greatly revered in the elven nation, live as "guests" among the various royal families. Their main duties, however, lie with the Keeping of the Souls.

"I begin to think that will be impossible, Sang-drax. As I explained to the Royal One this evening, prior to your arrival, the Kenkari are spiritual in nature, and therefore extraordinarily sensitive to us. We have concluded that they do not pose a threat, however. Their only interest is in the spirits of the dead, whose power feeds the empire. Their main object in life consists of guarding these captive souls."

More conversation followed, after that, but Limbeck, slogging along behind and beginning to feel very tired from all this unaccustomed exertion, soon lost interest in trying to follow it. Most of what they discussed he

hadn't understood anyhow, and the small part he understood confused him. He did think it odd that elves, who, moments ago, had been quite chummy with humans, should now be talking about 'fomenting chaos.'

"But then nothing either humans or elves do would surprise me," he decided, wishing that he could sit down and rest. Then certain half-heard words of the elves' conversation jolted Limbeck into forgetting about sore feet and aching ankles.

"What will you do with the dwarf female your men captured?" one of the elves was asking.

"Did they?" Sang-drax replied carelessly. "I wasn't aware."

"Yes, they took her while you were occupied with the Patryn. She's in custody now, with the boy."

Jarre! Limbeck realized. They were talking about Jarre!

Sang-drax considered. "Why, I suppose I'll take her along. She might come in handy in future negotiations, don't you think? If those fool elves don't kill her first. The hatred they have for these dwarves is perfectly marvelous."

Kill Jarre! Limbeck's blood ran cold with shock, then burned hot with rage, then drained from his head into his stomach with the sickly feeling of remorse.

"If Jarre dies, it will be because of me," he mumbled to himself, barely watching where he was going. "She sacrificed herself for my sake..."

"Did you hear something?" asked one of the elves who was holding on to Haplo's legs.

"Vermin," said Sang-drax. "The place is crawling with them. You'd think the Sartan would have taken more care. Hurry up. My men will assume I'm lost down here and I don't want any of them deciding to play hero and come searching for me."

"I doubt that," said the oddly dressed elf with a laugh. "From what I've overheard, your men have little love for you."

"True," said Sang-drax implacably. "Two of them suspect me of having murdered their former captain. They're right, of course. Quite clever of them to have figured it out, actually. A pity such cleverness will prove fatal. Ah, here we are, the entrance to the Factree. Quietly, quietly."

The elves fell silent, all intent on listening. Limbeck—outraged, upset, and confused—came to a halt some distance behind. He knew where he was now, having recognized the entrance to the stairway that led back up to the statue of the Manger. He could still see the faint glow of the rune-mark Haplo had left behind.

"Someone's moving about up there," said Sang-drax. "They must have set a guard. Put him down. I'll take it from here. You two return to your duties."

"Yes, sir, Captain, sir." The other elves grinned, saluted mockingly, and then—to the distraught Limbeck's intense astonishment—both vanished.

Limbeck removed his spectacles, cleaned them. He had the vague idea that spots on the lenses might account for the elves' disappearance. Clean lenses weren't any help, however. Two of the elves were still gone. The elf captain was dragging Haplo to his feet.

"Wake up now." Sang-drax slapped the Patryn's face. "That's it. Feeling a bit groggy? It will take you some time to fully recover from the poison's effects. We'll be well on our way to the Imperanon by then. Don't worry. I'll take over the care of the mensch, especially the child."

Haplo could barely stand, and then he was forced to lean heavily on the elf captain. The Patryn looked extremely ill, but even then, sick as he was, he seemed loath to have anything to do with the elf. But he had no choice, apparently. He was too weak to climb the stairs on his own. If he wanted out of the tunnel, he had to accept the assistance of Sang-drax's strong arm.

And Limbeck had no choice. The infuriated dwarf longed to rush out and confront the elf, demand Jarre's immediate and safe return. The old Limbeck would have done so, without any regard for the consequences.

This Limbeck peered through his spectacles and saw an unusually strong elf. He recalled that the captain had mentioned other elves standing guard above, noted that Haplo was in no shape to help. Sensibly, Limbeck remained where he was, hiding in the darkness. Only when he judged by the sound of their footsteps that the two were halfway up the stairs did the dwarf pad barefooted over to crouch at the bottom.

"Captain Sang-drax, sir," came a voice from above. "We were wondering what happened to you."

"The prisoner ran," said Sang-drax. "I had to go after him."

"He ran with a knife in his shoulder?" The elf sounded impressed.

"These damned humans are tough, like wounded animals," said Sang-drax. "He led me a merry chase until the poison brought him down."

"What is he, sir? Some type of wizard? I never saw a human whose skin glowed blue like that."

"Yes. He's one of those so-called mysteriarchs. Probably down here to guard the boy."

"You believe the little bastard's story, sir?" The elf sounded incredulous.

"I think we should let the emperor determine what we believe, don't you, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. I suppose so, sir."

"Where have they taken the boy?"

Blast the boy, Limbeck thought irritably. Where have they taken Jarre?

The elf and Haplo had reached the top of the stairs. The dwarf held his breath, hoping to hear more.

"To the guardhouse, Captain. Awaiting your orders, sir."

"I'll need a ship, ready to fly back to Paxaria—"

"I'll have to clear that with the lord commander, sir."

"Then do so, at once. I'll be taking the boy and this wizard and that other creature we captured—"

"The dwarf, sir?" The elf was astounded. "We had thought to execute her, as an example ..."

Limbeck didn't hear any more. A roaring sound in his ears made him dizzy and light-headed. He swayed on his feet, was forced to lean against the wall. Jarre—executed! Jarre, who'd saved him from being executed! Jarre, who loved him far more than he deserved. No, it wouldn't happen! Not if he could help it and... and...

The roaring subsided, replaced by a cold emptiness that made him feel hollow and dark inside, as cold and dark and empty as these tunnels. He knew what to do. He had a Plan.

And now he could hear once again.

"What should we do about this opening, sir?"

"Close it," said Sang-drax.

"Are you sure, sir? I don't like the feel of that place. It seems... evil. Perhaps we should leave it open, send down teams to explore—"

"Very well, Lieutenant," said Sang-drax casually. "I saw nothing of interest down there, but if you would like to investigate, feel free. You'll be exploring on your own, of course. I can't spare any men to assist you. However—"

"I'll see to it that the opening is closed, sir," the elf said hastily.

"Whatever you decide. The choice is yours. I'll need a litter and some bearers. I can't carry this heavy bastard much farther."

"Let me help you, sir."

"Throw him down on the floor. Then you can close the opening. I'll—"

The elves' voices were receding. Limbeck dared wait no longer. He crept up the stairs, keeping his head low, until he could peep out the top of the hole. The two elves, involved with maneuvering the semiconscious Haplo off the statue's base, had their backs to the opening. Two other elves, standing guard, were eyeing the wounded human—one of the notorious mysteriarchs—with interest. They, too, had their backs turned.

It was now or never.

Planting his spectacles securely on his nose, Limbeck crawled out of the opening and made a mad, desperate dash for the hole in the floor that led back down to the GEGS' underground system of tunnels.

This part of the Factree was only dimly lit. The elven guards, wary of the strange and forbidding statue, were not standing particularly close to it. Limbeck made it to safety without being seen.

In his panicked flight, he nearly plummeted down into the hole headfirst. Managing to catch himself at the last moment, he threw himself on the floor, grasped hold of the rungs of the ladder, and, executing a clumsy somersault, tumbled down inside. He hung suspended a moment, his hands clinging awkwardly to the top rung of the ladder, his bare feet scrabbling wildly for purchase. It was a long drop down.

Limbeck caught hold of the ladder with his toes, planted his feet more or less securely. Prying his sweating hands loose from their hold, he turned himself around and clung to the ladder thankfully, catching his breath, listening for sounds of pursuit.

"Did you hear something?" one elf was asking.

Limbeck froze against the ladder.

"Nonsense!" The lieutenant's voice was crisp. "It's that damn opening. It's making us all hear things. Captain Sang-drax is right. The sooner we shut it up, the better."

He heard a grinding sound, made by the statue sliding shut on its base. Limbeck climbed down the ladder and headed, grim-faced and coldly angry, back to his headquarters, there to institute the Plan.

His thread trail back to the automaton, the automaton itself, the unlikely peaceful union of humans, elves, dwarves— none of that mattered now.

And it might not ever matter again.

He would have Jarre back... or else.

## CHAPTER 18

### THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO ARISTAGON, MID REALM

THE WEESHAM\* EXPERIENCED AN OVERWHELMING SENSE OF THANKFULNESS as she approached the Cathedral of the Albedo.\* It was not the beauty of the structure that touched her, though the cathedral was rightfully considered to be the most beautiful of any structure built by the elves on Arianus. Nor was she overly influenced by the awe and reverence most elves felt on approaching the repository for the souls of the elven royal families. The weesham was too frightened to notice the beauty, too bitter and unhappy to be reverent. She was thankful because she had, at last, reached a safe haven.

\*An elven wizard whose function is to capture the soul of a dying member of elven royalty and deliver it to the Cathedral of the Albedo. A weesham is assigned to a royal child at its birth and follows the child continually throughout life, waiting for death and the release of the soul, which is captured in a magical box.

\*An ancient word taken from old Earth. Originally "albedo" referred to that proportion of solar light shining on a planet that is reflected from that planet. The elves use the word in a highly romanticized form, to denote the light of elven souls reflecting back to their people.

Clutching the small lapis and chalcedony box in her hand, she hastened up the coralite steps. Gold-gilt edges gleamed in the sunshine, seemed to shine on her path. She made her way around the octagon-shaped building until she came to the central door. As she walked, the weesham glanced more than once over her shoulder—a reflexive action, born of three days of terror.

She should have realized that it was not possible for even the Unseen to trail her here, into this sacred precinct. But her fear made her incapable of rational thought. Fear had consumed her, like the delirium of a fever, made her see things that were not there, hear words that weren't spoken. She blanched and trembled at the sight of her own shadow and, reaching the door, began beating on it with a clenched fist, rather than tapping softly and reverently as she was supposed to do.

The Keeper of the Door, whose exceptionally tall stature and thin, almost emaciated-looking form marked him as one of the Kenkari elves, jumped at the sound. Hastening to the door, he stared through the crystal panes and frowned. The Kenkari was accustomed to weesham—or geir, as they were less formally but more appropriately known\*—arriving in various stages of grief. The stages ranged from the resigned, quiet grief of the elderly, who had lived with their charges since they were young, to the stiff-lipped grief of the soldier-weesham, who had seen their charges brought down by the war currently raging on Arianus, to the anguished grief of a weesham who has lost a child. The emotion of grief on the part of the weesham was acceptable, even laudable. But lately the Keeper of the Door had been seeing another emotion connected with grief, an emotion that was unacceptable—fear.

\*Geir is a slang term meaning "vulture."

He saw the signs of fear in this geir, as he had seen the same signs in too many other weesham of late. The hasty pounding on the door, the distraught glances over the shoulder, the pale skin marred by gray smudges of sleepless nights. The Keeper solemnly and slowly opened the door, met the geir with grave mien, forced her to go through the ritual proceedings before she was permitted entry. The Kenkari, experienced in these matters, knew that the familiar words of the ritual, though it seemed tedious at the time, brought comfort to the grieving and the fearful.

"Please, let me in!" gasped the woman when the crystal door swung open on silent hinges.

The Keeper barred the way with his own slender body. He lifted his arms high. Folds of cloth, embroidered in silken threads of iridescent reds and yellows and oranges, surrounded by velvet black, simulated the wings of a butterfly. The elf seemed, in fact, to become a butterfly—his body the body of the insect that was sacred to the elves, the wings spreading on either side.

The sight was dazzling to eye and mind and reassuring as well. The geir was immediately recalled to her duties; her training and teaching returned to her. Color came to her pallid checks, she remembered the proper way to introduce herself and, after a few moments, quit trembling.

She gave her name, her clan name,\* and that of her charge. This last name she spoke with a choke in her voice and was forced to repeat it before the Keeper understood. He searched swiftly through the repositories of his memory, found the name filed there, among hundreds of others, and ascertained that the soul of this young princess rightly belonged in the cathedral. (Difficult to believe, but, in this degenerate age, there were those elves of common blood who attempted to insinuate their own plebeian ancestors into the cathedral. The Keeper of the Door—through his extensive knowledge of the royal family tree and its numerous offshoots, both legitimate and otherwise—discovered the imposters, made them prisoners, and turned them over to the Unseen Guard.)

\*Elves of other clans may become weesham, though only the Kenkari may serve in the cathedral. The weesham, who must be highly skilled in spirit magic, study with the Kenkari from the time they enter adolescence until they become adults (equivalent in human terms to the age of twenty). At this time, the geir are assigned to their charges, usually members of their own clans.

Now the Keeper was in no doubt and made his decision immediately. The young princess, a second cousin of the emperor on his father's mother's side, had been renowned for her beauty and intellect and spirit. She should have lived years longer, become a wife, mother, borne more such as herself to grace this world.

The Keeper said as much, when—the ritual ended—he admitted the geir into the cathedral, shut the crystal door behind her. He noticed, as he did so, that the woman almost wept with relief, but still glanced about her in terror.

"Yes," replied the geir in a low voice, as if, even in this sanctuary, she was afraid to talk aloud, "my beautiful girl should have lived long. I should have sewed the sheets of her wedding bed, not the hem of her shroud!"

Holding the box in her open palm, the geir—a woman of around forty years—smoothed its intricately carved lid with her hand and murmured some broken words of affection for the poor soul held within.

"What was it struck her down?" asked the Keeper solicitously. "The plague?"

"Would it were!" the geir cried bitterly. "That I could have borne." She covered the box with her hand, as if she could still protect the one inside. "It was murder."

"Humans?" The Keeper was grim. "Or rebels?"

"And what would my lamb, a princess of the blood, be doing with either humans or the rebel scum!\*" the geir flashed, forgetting in her grief and anger that she was speaking to a superior.

\*Reference to the rebel elves, who were currently attempting to overthrow the Tribus empire.

The Keeper reminded her of her place with a look.

The geir lowered her eyes, caressed the box. "No, it was her own that killed her. Her own flesh and blood!"

"Come, woman, you're hysterical," stated the Keeper sternly. "What possible reason—"

"Because she was young and strong, her spirit is young and strong. Such qualities," said the geir, tears trailing unheeded down her cheeks, "are more valuable to some in death than they are in life."

"I cannot believe—"

"Then believe this." The geir did the unthinkable. Reaching out her hand, she grasped hold of the Keeper's wrist, drew him near to hear her low, horror-filled words. "My lamb and I always had a glass of hot negus before retiring.\* We shared the drink that night. I thought it tasted odd, but I assumed that the wine was bad. Neither of us finished ours, but went to bed early. My lamb had been plagued with evil dreams..." The geir had to pause, to regain her composure.

\*The geir never leave their charges, but remain at their sides, day and night, in case death should take them.

"My lamb fell asleep almost immediately. I was puttering about the room, sorting her dear ribbons and laying out her dress for the morrow, when a strange feeling came over me. My hands and arms felt heavy, my tongue dry and swollen. It was all I could do to stagger to my bed. I fell instantly into a strange state. I was asleep, yet I wasn't. I could see things, hear things, yet I could not respond. And thus, I saw them."

The geir pressed the Keeper's hand more tightly. He leaned close to hear her, yet was barely able to understand her words spoken fast and tight.

"I saw the night crawl through her window!"

The Keeper frowned, drew back.

"I know what you think," the geir said. "That I was drunk or dreaming. But I swear it is the truth. I saw movement, dark shapes blotted out the window frame, crept over to the wall. Three of them. And for an instant they were holes of blackness against the wall. They stood still. And then they were the wall!"

"But I could still see them move, though it was as if the wall itself were writhing. They slid to my lamb's bed. I tried to scream, to cry out, but my voice made no sound. I was helpless. Helpless."

The geir shuddered. "Then a pillow—one of my lamb's silk embroidered pillows that she'd sewn with her own dear hands—rose up in the air, borne by unseen hands. They laid it over her face and... and pressed it down. My lamb struggled. Even in her sleep, she fought to live. The unseen hands held the pillow over her face until... until her struggles ceased. She lay back limp.

"Then I sensed one of them come over to me. There was nothing else visible, not even a face. Yet I knew one was near. A hand touched my shoulder and shook me.

" 'Your charge is dead, geir,' a voice said. 'Quickly, catch her soul.'"

"The terrible drugged feeling left me. I screamed and sat up and reached for the evil creature, to hold him until I could summon the guards. But my hands passed through air. They had gone. They were no longer the walls, but the night. They fled.

"I ran to my lamb, but she was dead. Her heartbeat stilled, her life smothered out of her. They had not even given her a chance to free her own soul. I had to cut her.\* Her smooth, pale skin. I had—"

\*The first words an elven child of royal blood teams are those that will release his soul from the body after death. He repeats these at the time of death and the geir then captures the soul to take it to the cathedral. However, if the elf dies before the words can be spoken, the geir may free the soul by cutting open a vein in the left arm and drawing off heart's blood. This must be done within moments after death. The geir began to sob uncontrollably. She did not see the look on the Keeper's face, did not see his forehead crease, his large eyes darken.

"You must have dreamed it, my dear," was all he said to the woman.

"No," she replied in hollow tones, her tears wept out. "I did not dream it, though that is what they would have me believe. And I've sensed them, following me. Everywhere I go. But that is nothing. I have no reason to live. I wanted only to tell someone. And they could not very well kill me before I fulfilled my duty, could they?"

She gave the box a last fond, grieving look, then placed it gently and reverently in the Keeper's hand.

"Not when this is what they wanted."

Turning, head bowed, she walked back through the crystal door.

The Keeper held it open for her. He spoke a few comforting words, but they were empty of conviction and both the speaker and the hearer—if she heard them at all—knew it. Holding the lapis and chalcedony box in his hand, he watched the geir wend her way down the gilt-edged stairs and out onto the large and empty courtyard surrounding the cathedral. The sun shone brightly. The geir's body cast a long shadow behind her.

The Keeper felt chilled. He watched closely until the woman had vanished beyond his sight. The box in his hand was still warm from the geir's fast hold on it. Sighing, he turned away, rang a small silver gong that stood on a wall sconce near the door.

Another Kenkari, clad in the multicolored butterfly robes, drifted down the hall on silent, slippered feet.

"Take over my duties for me," the Keeper commanded. "I must deliver this to the Aviary. Summon me if there is need."

The Kenkari, the Keeper's chief assistant, nodded and took up his place at the door, ready to receive the soul of any new arrival. Box in hand, the Keeper, his brow furrowed, left the great door and headed for the Aviary.

The Cathedral of the Albedo is built in the shape of an octagon. Coralite, magically urged and pruned, swoops majestically up from the ground to form a high, steeply pitched dome. Crystal walls fill the space left between the coralite ribs, the crystal planes shine with blinding brilliance in the light of the sun, Solaris.

The crystal walls create an optical illusion, making it appear to the casual observer (who is never allowed very close) that he can see completely through the building from one side to the other. In reality, mirrored walls on the inside of the octagon reflect the interior walls of the outside. One outside cannot see inside, therefore, but those inside can see everything. The courtyard surrounding the cathedral is vast, empty of all objects. A caterpillar cannot cross it without being observed. Thus do the Kenkari keep their ancient mysteries safely guarded.

Within the octagon's center is the Aviary. Located in a circle around the Aviary are rooms for study, rooms for meditation. Beneath the cathedral are the permanent living quarters of the Kenkari, the temporary living quarters for their apprentices, the weesham.

The Keeper turned his steps toward the Aviary.

The largest chamber in the cathedral, the Aviary is a beautiful place, filled with living trees and plants brought from all over the elven kingdom to be grown here. Precious water—in such short supply elsewhere in the land, due to the war with the Glegs—was freely dispensed in the Aviary, lavishly poured to maintain life in what was, ironically, a chamber for the dead.

No singing birds flew in this Aviary. The only wings spread within its crystal walls were unseen, ephemeral—the wings of the souls of royal elves, caught, kept captive, forced to sing eternally their silent music for the good of the empire.

The Keeper paused outside the Aviary, looked within. It was truly beautiful. The trees and flowering plants grew lush here as nowhere else in the Mid Realms. The emperor's garden was not as green as this, for even His Imperial Majesty's water had been rationed.

The Aviary's water flowed through pipes buried deep beneath the soil that had been brought, so legend had it, from the garden island of Hesthea, in the High Realms, now long since abandoned.\* Other than being watered, the plants were given no further care, unless the dead tended them, which the Keeper sometimes liked to imagine that they did. The living were only rarely permitted to enter the Aviary. And that had not happened in the Keeper's inordinately long lifetime, nor in any lifetime that any Kenkari could remember.

\*For a history of the High Realms, see *Dragon Wing*, vol. i of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

No wind blew in the enclosed chamber. No draft, not even a whisper of air could steal inside. Yet the Keeper saw the leaves of the trees flutter and stir, saw the rose petals tremble, saw flower stalks bend. The souls of the dead flitted among the green and living things. The Keeper watched a moment, then turned away. Once a place of peace and tranquillity and hope, the Aviary had come to take on a sinister sadness for him. He looked down at the box he held in his hand, and the dark lines in his thin face deepened.

Hastening to the chapel that stood adjacent to the Aviary, he spoke the ritual prayer, then gently pushed open the ornately carved wooden door. Within the small room, the Keeper of the Book sat at a desk, writing in a large, leather-bound volume. It was her duty to record the name, lineage, and pertinent life-facts of all those who arrived in the small boxes.

The body to the fire, the life to the book, the soul to the sky. That was how the ritual went. The Keeper of the Book, hearing someone enter, halted her writing. She looked up.

"One to be admitted," said the Door, heavily.

The Book (titles were shortened, for convenience' sake) nodded and rang a small silver gong that sat on her desk.

Another Kenkari, the Keeper of the Soul, entered from a side room. The Book rose respectfully to her feet. The Door bowed. Keeper of the Soul was the highest rank attainable among the Kenkari, A wizard of the Seventh House, the Kenkari who held this title was not only the most powerful of his clan, but also one of the most powerful elves in the empire. The Soul's word, in times past, had been enough to bring kings to their knees. But now? The Door wondered.

The Soul held out his hand, reverently accepted the box. Turning, he laid the box upon the altar and knelt to begin his prayers. The Door told the maiden's name and recited all he knew of the young woman's lineage and history to the Book, who jotted down notes. She would record the details more fully, when she had time.

"So young," said the Book, sighing. "What was the cause of death?"

The Door licked dry lips. "Murder."

The Book raised her eyes, stared at him, glanced over at the Soul. The Soul ceased his prayers, turned around.

"You sound certain this time."

"There was a witness. The drug did not take complete hold. Our weesham has a taste for fine wine, it seems," the Door added, with a twisted smile. "She knew bad from good and wouldn't drink it."

"Do they know?"

"The Unseen know everything," said the Book in a low voice.

"She is being followed. They have been following her," said the Door.

"Here?" The Soul's eyes flared. "Not onto the sacred grounds."

"No. As yet the emperor does not dare send them here."

The words as yet hung ominously in the air.

"He grows careless," said the Soul.

"Or more bold," suggested the Door.

"Or more desperate," said the Book softly.

The Kenkari stared at one another. The Soul shook his head, passed a trembling hand through his white, wispy hair. "And now we know the truth."

"We have long known it," said the Door, but he said it quietly, and the Soul did not hear.

"The emperor is slaying his own kin for their souls, to aid him in his cause. The man fights two wars, three enemies: the rebels, the humans, the Gogs below. Ancient hatred and mistrust keeps these three groups divided, but what if something should happen and they should unite? That is what the emperor fears, that is what drives him to this madness.

"And it is madness," said the Door. "He is decimating the royal line, lopping off its head, cutting out its heart. Who does he have slaughtered but the young, the strong, those whose souls cling most stubbornly to life. He hopes that these souls will add their strong voices to the holy voice of Krenka-Anris, give our wizards more magical power, strengthen the arms and wills of our soldiers."

"Yet for whom does Krenka-Anris speak now?" asked the Soul.

The Door and Book kept silent, neither daring to respond.

"We will ask," said the Keeper of the Soul. He turned back to the altar.

The Keeper of the Door and the Keeper of the Book knelt alongside, one to the Soul's left, the other to his right. Above the altar, a pane of clear crystal permitted them to see within the Aviary. The Keeper of the Soul lifted a small bell from the altar, a bell made of gold, and rang it. The bell had no clapper, made no sound that living ears could hear. Only the dead could hear it, or so the Kenkari believed.

"Krenka-Anris, we call to you," said the Keeper of the Soul, raising his arms in appeal. "Holy Priestess, who first knew the wonder of this magic, hear our prayer and come to give us counsel. Thus we pray:

Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess.

Three sons, most beloved, you sent to battle;  
around their necks, lockets, boxes of magic,  
wrought by your hand.

The dragon Krishach, breathing fire and poison,  
slew your three sons, most beloved.  
Their souls departed. The lockets opened.  
Each soul was captured. Each silent voice called to you.

Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess.  
You came to the field of battle.  
You found your three sons, most beloved,  
and wept over them, one day for each.

The dragon Krishach, breathing fire and poison,  
heard the grieving mother,  
and flew to slay you.  
Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess.

You cried out to your three sons, most beloved.  
Each son's soul sprang from the locket,  
was like a shining sword in the belly of the dragon.  
Krishach died, fell from the skies.  
The Kenkari were saved.  
Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess.

You blessed your three sons, most beloved.  
You kept their spirits with you, always.  
Always, their spirits fought for us, the people.  
You taught us the holy secret, the capturing of souls.

Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess,  
Give us counsel in this, our trying hour,  
For lives have been taken, their deaths untimely,  
To serve blind ambition.  
The magic that you brought us, that was once blessed,  
Is now a thing perverted, dark and unholy.

Tell us what to do,  
Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess,  
We beseech you.

The three knelt before the altar in profound silence, each waiting for the response. No word was spoken aloud. No flame flared suddenly on the altar. No shimmering vision appeared before them. But each heard the answer clearly in his or her own soul, as each heard the clang of the tongueless bell. Each rose up and stared at the others, faces pale, eyes wide, in confusion and disbelief.

"We have our answer," said the Keeper of the Soul in awed and solemn tones.

"Do we?" whispered Door. "Who can understand it?"

"Other worlds. A gate of death that leads to life. A man who is dead but who is not dead. What are we to make of this?" asked Book.

"When the time is propitious, Krenka-Anris will make all known," said the Soul, firmly, regaining his composure. "Until then, our way is clear. Keeper," he said, speaking to the Door, "you know what to do."

The Keeper bowed in acquiescence to the Soul, knelt a final time before the altar, then left upon his duty. The Keeper of the Soul and the Keeper of the Book waited in the small room, listening with inheld breath and fast-beating hearts for the sound that neither had ever thought to hear.

It came—a hollow boom. Grillwork made of gold, fashioned in the form of butterflies, had been lowered into place. Delicate, lovely, fragile-seeming, the grille was imbued with magic that made it stronger than any iron portcullis that served the same function.

The great central door that led inside the Cathedral of the Albedo had been closed.

## CHAPTER 19

### DEEPSKY MIDREALM

HAPLO RAGED INSIDE A PRISON CELL THAT WAS OPEN AND AIRY AND wide as the world. He tried helplessly to batter his way through bars that were flimsy as strands of silken spiderweb. He paced a floor compassed round by no walls, he pounded on an open door, guarded by no guards. Yet a man who'd been born in a prison knew no worse prison than that in which he now found himself. By setting him free, by letting him go, by granting him the privilege of doing whatever he desired, the serpents had thrown him into a cage, bolted the door, tossed away the key.

For there was nothing he could do, nowhere he could go, no way to escape.

Feverish thoughts and plans raced through his mind. He had first wakened from his sleep to find himself on one of the elven dragonships, bound—according to Sang-drax—for the elven city of Paxaris, located on the continent of Aristagon. Haplo considered killing Sang-drax, considered taking over the elven ship, considered leaping off the ship himself, to fall to his death through the empty skies. When he reviewed his plans coldly and rationally, the last seemed the only one likely of accomplishing anything constructive.

He could kill Sang-drax, but—as the serpents had told him—their evil would only return, and be twice as strong. Haplo could take over the elven ship; the Patryn's magic was powerful, far too powerful for the puny ship's wizard to counter. But Haplo's magic couldn't fly the dragonship, and where would he go anyway? Back to Drevlin? The serpents were there. Back to the Nexus? The serpents were there, too. Back to Abarrach? Most assuredly, the serpents would be there.

He could warn someone, but who?... Warn them of what? Xar? Why should Xar believe him? Haplo wasn't sure he believed himself.

The fevered dreaming and plotting, the eventual ice-cold deliberation and rejection were not the worst of what Haplo suffered in his prison. He knew that Sang-drax knew every scheme, every desperate grasp. And Haplo knew that the serpent-elf approved of all of them, was actually mentally encouraging Haplo to act.

And thus, as his only form of rebellion against the serpent-elf and his prison, the Patryn did nothing. But he found little satisfaction in that, for Sang-drax thoroughly approved of this, too.

Haplo did nothing during the voyage, and did it with a grim ferocity that worried the dog, frightened Jarre, and apparently daunted Bane, for the child took care to keep clear of the Patryn's path. Bane was up to other devices. Haplo's one source of amusement was to watch the child working hard to ingratiate himself with Sang-drax.

"Not exactly the person I'd choose to put my trust in," Haplo warned Bane.

"Who should I choose? You?" Bane sneered. "A lot of good you were to me! You let the elves capture us. If it hadn't been for me and my quick thinking we'd all be dead by now."

"What do you see when you look at him?"

"An elf." Bane was sarcastic. "Why, what do you see?"

"You know what I mean. With that clairvoyant talent of yours. What images come to your mind?"

Bane looked suddenly uncomfortable. "Never mind what I see. It's my business. And I know what I'm doing. Just leave me alone."

Yeah, you know what you're doing, kid, Haplo thought tiredly. And maybe you do, after all. I sure as hell don't.

Haplo had one hope. It was a fleeting one, and he wasn't certain it was hope or what to do about it. He had come to the conclusion that the serpents didn't know about the automaton and its connection to the Kicksey-winsey.

He'd discovered this by eavesdropping on a conversation taking place between Sang-drax and Jarre. Haplo found it darkly fascinating to watch the serpent in action, watch him spread the contagion of hatred and divisiveness, watch it infect those who might have once been immune.

Shortly after arriving in the Mid Realm, the dragonship flew to Tolthom, an elven farming community, to drop off a shipment of water.\* They did not stay long, but unloaded their cargo as swiftly as possible, this isle being a favored target of human water pirates. Every elf on board stood armed and ready to fend off possible attack. The human galley slaves, who operated the dragonship's gigantic wings, were brought up on deck, in plain view. Guards stood nearby, arrows nocked, prepared to shoot the prisoners through the heart should any humans attack. Tolthom's own dragonships circled overhead as the precious water was pumped from the ship into giant holding tanks on the continent.

\*Any dragonship, even one carrying political prisoners, would be required to take water up into the Mid Realm. The elves stockpiled water on Drev-lin prior to the shutting down of the Kicksey-winsey. They had also developed various means of collecting the rainwater from the almost continual storms that sweep Drevlin. This was certainly not enough for the requirements of the Mid Realm, however.

Haplo stood on deck, watching the water flow, watching the sun glisten on its sparkling surface, and imagined his life flowing like the water, pouring out of him, and knew he was as powerless to stop it as he was to stop the water. He didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Standing near him, the dog whined in anxious concern, rubbed its head against his knee, trying to get his attention.

Haplo would have reached down to pet the animal, but reaching took too much effort.

"Go away," he told the dog.

Hurt, the animal wandered over to Jarre, curled up unhappily at her feet.

Haplo leaned over the rail, watched the water.

"I'm sorry, Limbeck. I understand, now."

The words came to Haplo through the dog's ears.

Jarre stood some distance away from him, staring in awe at the coralite isle floating in the pearl-blue sky. The busy port town's streets were filled with people. Small, neat houses lined the coralite cliffs. Wagons trundled down the streets, formed a row, each farmer waiting patiently for his or her share of water. The elves laughed and visited together, their children played and ran in the sunshine and open air.

Jarre's eyes filled with tears.

"We could live here. Our people would be happy here. It might take some time—"

"Not as long as you think," said Sang-drax. The elf walked in casual, leisurely fashion along the deck. The dog sat up, growled.

"Listen," Haplo silently instructed it, though he wondered why he bothered.

"Once colonies of dwarves used to live on these isles. That was long ago," the serpent-elf added, with a shrug of his slender shoulders, "but they prospered, at least so legend has it."

"Unfortunately, the GEGS' lack of magical talent proved your undoing. The elves forced the dwarves to leave the Mid Realm, shipped your people down to Drevlin, to work with the others already serving the Kicksey-winsey. Once you were gone, the elves took over your homes and lands."

Sang-drax extended an elegant, shapely hand, pointed. "See that cluster of houses, the ones that burrow into the hillside? Dwarven-built. Who knows how old? And still standing. Those are the fronts of warrens that run far back into the hills. They are snug, dry. Your people found a way of sealing up the coralite,\* to keep the rainwater from dripping through. The elves use the houses now for storage."

\*Coralite is extremely porous; water runs through it like a sieve. All races have tried to develop various means of catching and containing the water by sealing up the coralite, but, because the coralite is essentially a living entity, undergoing constant alteration, these have met with only mediocre success. Detailed explanations of coralite and the construction of the floating continents of the Mid Realm can be found in Dragon Wing, vol. 1 of The Death Gate Cycle.

Jarre examined the dwellings, barely visible on the distant hillside. "We could return, move in. This wealth, this paradise that should have been ours, could be ours again!"

"Why, so it could," Sang-drax agreed, lounging against the rail. "If and when you GEGS develop an army large enough to push us elves off this isle. That's what it would take, you know. Do you honestly think we'd let your kind live among us again?"

Jarre's small hands clenched the slats of the rail. She was too short to see over the top, was forced to peer out between the bars. "Why torment me like this?" she demanded, her voice cold and tight. "I hate you enough already."

Haplo stood on the deck, watched the water flow, heard the words flow around him, and thought that it all amounted to pretty much the same: nothing. He noticed, as a matter of idle curiosity, that his magical defenses no longer reacted when Sang-drax was around. Haplo wasn't reacting to anything. But deep inside, some part of him fought against his prison, struggled to break loose. And he knew that if he could only find the energy, he'd be able to free that part of him and then he could... he could... ..watch the water flow.

Except that now the water had stopped flowing. The holding tanks were only about half full.

"You talk of hate," Sang-drax was saying to Jarre. "Look down there. Do you know what is going on?"

"No," Jarre said. "And I don't care."

The line of wagons, loaded with barrels, had begun moving past the storage tanks. But after the first few had gone by, the farmers pulled to a halt, began to shout angrily. Word spread rapidly, and soon a mob was milling about the holding tanks, fists raised.

"Our people have just been told that their water is being rationed. From now on, very little water will be coming from Drevlin. They've been told that you GEGS have shut off the supply."

"But that's not true!" Jarre cried, speaking before she thought.

"It isn't?" Sang-drax said, interested.

Undoubtedly interested.

Haplo was roused from his lethargy. Listening through the dog, the Patryn glanced at the serpent-elf sharply.

Jarre stared at the water in the tanks. Her face hardened. She scowled, said nothing more.

"I think you're lying," said Sang-drax, after a moment's pause. "I think you'd better hope you're lying, my dear."

Turning, he strolled off. The elves on board ship, their mission completed, were herding the human slaves back to the gailey. Elven guards arrived to march Patryn, dwarf, and dog back to their quarters. Jarre clung to the bars, taking one last, long look, her eyes fixed on the tumbledown buildings on the hillside. The elves were forced to wrench her hands loose, practically had to drag her below.

Haplo grinned sourly, shook his head. Built by dwarves! Centuries old. What a crock. She believes it, though. And she hates. Yes, Jarre is beginning to hate in earnest. Can't get enough hate, can you, Sang-drax?

Haplo drifted along, going docilely where he was led. What did it matter where? His cell was always around him. The dog left Jarre, returned to its master's side, growled at any elf who came too close.

But Haplo had learned something. The serpents didn't know the truth about the Kicksey-winsey. They assumed the dwarves had shut it down. And that was good, he supposed, although what difference it might make was beyond him to figure out.

Yes, good for him. Good for Bane, who would be able to get the machine up and running. Good for the dwarves and for Limbeck.

But not, probably, good for Jarre.

That was the only incident worthy of note during the entire voyage, except for one last conversation with Sang-drax, shortly before the dragonship arrived in the imperial capital.

Once they left Tolthom (after beating off the angry mob, who discovered that there was more water on board, bound for the main continent), the trip to Aristagon was completed rapidly. The human galley slaves were worked to the point of exhaustion, at which point they were flogged and ordered to work some more. The dragonship was alone in Deepsky, an easy target.

Only a year before, lumbering, water-laden dragonships such as these would have been escorted by a fleet of small warships. Built along the same lines as the larger dragonships, the warships were able to maneuver quickly in the air and carried various pyrotechnic magicks designed to battle human raiders. But not anymore. Now the dragonships were on their own.

The emperor's official public position was that the humans had become such a weak threat that escorts were no longer necessary.

"The truth of the matter," Sang-drax informed Haplo on the final night of their voyage, "is that the armies of the Tribus elves are spread too thin. The warships are being used to keep Prince Rees'ahn and his rebels bottled up in the Kirikai Out-lands. So far, it's working. Rees'ahn hasn't a dragonship to his name. But if he allies with King Stephen, Rees'ahn will have dragons, enough to launch an all-out invasion. So the warships are not only keeping Rees'ahn in, they're busy keeping Stephen out."

"What's stopped them from allying before this?" Haplo asked churlishly. He detested talking to the serpent-elf, but he was forced to do so in order to find out what was going on.

Sang-drax grinned. He knew Haplo's dilemma, and reveled in it. "Old fears, old mistrust, old hatred, old prejudices. Flames that are easy to kindle, hard to douse."

"And you serpents are busy fanning them."

"Naturally. We have people working for both sides. Or should I say against both sides. But I don't mind telling you that it's been difficult and that we are not easy in our minds. One reason we appreciate Bane. A remarkably clever child. A credit to his father. And I don't mean Stephen."

"Why? What has Bane got to do with it? You must know that rigmarole he told you in the tunnel was a pack of lies." Haplo was uneasy. Had Bane said anything to Sang-drax about the Kicksey-winsey?

"Oh, yes, we know he's lying. But others don't. Nor will they."

"My lord has taken a fancy to the child," Haplo warned quietly. "He won't like it if anything happens to Bane."

"Implying that we might do something to harm him. I assure you, Patryn, that we will guard this human child with as much care as if he were one of our own hatchlings. It's all been his idea, you see. And we find that you mortal beings work much more efficiently when your own greed and ambition fuel the engine."

"What's the plan?"

"Come, come. Life must hold a few surprises, master. I wouldn't want you to grow bored."

The following morning, the dragonship landed in Paxaria, whose name means Land of Peaceful Souls.

Anciently, the Paxaria (Souls at Peace) were the dominating clan in the elven realms.

The founder of the clan, according to elven legend, was Paxar Kethin, who purportedly "fell from the firmament" when he was a baby and landed in a beautiful valley, from which he took his name. Minutes were to him as years. He grew to manhood on the spot and determined that he would found a great city here, having seen the three riverbeds and the Everwell in a vision while still in his mother's womb.

Each clan on Aristagon has a similar story, differing in almost all points with one exception. All elves believe that they "came from above," which is, essentially, the truth. The Sartan, on first arriving in the World of Sky, settled the mensch in the High Realms while they worked to build the Kicksey-winsey and waited for the signal from the other worlds. This signal was, of course, a long time coming. The Sartan were forced to resettle the mensch—whose populations were growing rapidly—to the Mid and Low realms. In order to bring water to the mensch (until the Kicksey-winsey could be made to work), they built the Everwell.

The Sartan constructed three huge towers at Fendi, Gonster, and Templar. These rune-covered towers, working through Sartan magic, collect rainwater, store it, and parcel it out on a controlled basis. Once every month, the three towers open their floodgates and send three rivers of water cascading down channels cut into the coralite, channels that have been magically sealed to keep the water from seeping away into the porous material.

The rivers converge at a central point, forming the shape of a Y, and plummet in a magnificent fall down into the Everwell—an underground cavern lined with rock brought from the Ancient Earth. A fountain called "Wal'eed" gushes from the center, providing water to all who need it.

This system was designed to be temporary, was intended to provide water to a small populace. But the mensch populations grew, and the Sartan population dwindled. The water supply—once so plentiful no one thought of conserving it—was now counted almost drop by drop.

Following the War of the Firmament,\* the Paxar elves, reinforced by the Kenkari, emerged as strongest of the clans. They claimed the Everwell, set guards over the Wal'eed fountain, and built their king's palace around the site.

\*A battle fought when the Paxar attempted to settle what later became known as the Valley of the Dragons. It was during this battle that Krenka-Anris discovered how to capture souls and use them to enhance elven magic. The Paxar allied with the Kenkari to defeat the dragons. Those dragons that survived flew to human lands, where they found a welcome. Human magic, which deals with living things and natural properties, can enchant dragons. Elven magic, which deals with mechanics, cannot.

The Paxar continued to share water with the other elven clans and even the humans, who had once lived on Aristagon, but who had moved to Volkaran and Ulyndia. The Paxar never cut the water off, never charged for it. Paxar rule was benevolent and well-intentioned, if patronizing. But the threat to disrupt vital water supplies was omnipresent.

The hot-blooded Tribus clan considered it demeaning and humiliating to be forced to beg—as they considered it—for water. They were not pleased at having to share water with humans, either. This dispute eventually resulted in the Brother-blood, a war between the Tribus and the Paxar elves that lasted three years and resulted in the Tribus clan taking over Paxaria.

The final blow came to the Paxar when the Kenkari, self-proclaimed neutrals in the conflict, secretly threw the support of the elven souls, held in the Cathedral of the Albedo, to the Tribus. (The Kenkari have always denied that they did this. They insist that they remained neutral, but no one, particularly the Paxar, believes them.)

The Tribus razed the Paxar king's palace and built a larger one on the site of the Everwell. Known as the Imperanon, it is almost a small city within itself. It includes the Palace, the Sanctuary Parks, used exclusively by the royal family, the Cathedral of the Albedo, and, below ground, the Halls of the Unseen.

Once a month, the towers built by the Sartan sent forth life-giving water. But now the Tribus controlled it. Other elven clans were forced to pay a tax, supposedly for upkeep and maintenance costs. The humans were denied water altogether. Tribus coffers were getting rich. Other elven clans, angered at the tax, sought their own supplies of water and found them, down below, in Drevlin.

The other clans, particularly the Tretar, who invented the famous dragonships, began to prosper. Tribus might have withered on its own vine, but, fortunately for them, desperate humans began to attack the dragonships, steal the water. Faced with this threat, the various elven clans forgot old differences, banded together, and formed the Tribus empire, whose heart is the Imperanon.

The war against the humans was going well for the elves. They were near victory. Then their charismatic and most skilled military general, Prince Rees'ahn, fell under the influence (some say the magic) of a song sung by a black-skinned human known as Ravenlark. This song made the elves remember the ideals of Paxar Kethin and Krenka-Anris. Elves who hear this song see truth, see the corrupt, dark heart of the dictatorial Tribus empire, and know that it means the destruction of their world.

Now, the towers of the Sartan continue to send forth water, but armed elves stand guard along its route. Rumor has it that large parties of human slaves and captured elven rebels are building secret aqueducts that lead from the rivers directly into the Imperanon. Every month, the water flowing from the towers is less than the amount that flowed last month. The elven wizards, who have studied the towers at length, report that for some unknown reason, their magic is starting to fail.

And none knows how to save it.

CHAPTER 20

## THE IMPERANON

### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

"THEY CANNOT DO THIS," AGAH'RAN STATED WITH A SHRUG. HE WAS feeding a slice of orange to a pet hargast\* bird and did not look up as he spoke. "They simply cannot do this."

\*A rare species claimed, by legend, to nest in the brittle branches of the hargast tree. Since no one has ever found a hargast-bird nest, this cannot be verified. The birds are difficult to net and are therefore extremely expensive. Their song is quite exquisite.

"Ah, but they can, O Exalted One," replied Count Tretar, head of the Tretar clan,\* and currently His Imperial Majesty's most trusted and valued adviser. "What is more to the point, they have."

\*The seven elven clans are: Paxar, Quintar, Tretar, Savag, Melista, Tribus, and Kenkari. The emperor is a member of the Tribus clan, as is his son, the rebel prince, Rees'ahn. Intermarriage has blurred most clan lines, with the exception of the Kenkari, who are forbidden to marry or bear children outside the clan. None has ever been known to disobey.

"Closed the Cathedral of the Albedo? Accepting no more souls? I refuse to permit it. Send them word, Tretar, that they have incurred our extreme displeasure and that the cathedral is to be reopened at once."

"That is precisely what Your Imperial Majesty must not do."

"Not do? Explain yourself, Tretar." Agah'ran lifted painted eyelids slowly, languidly, as if the effort were almost beyond his strength. At the same time, he wagged his hands in helpless fashion. His fingers had juice on them, and the stickiness displeased him.

Tretar motioned for the valet de chambre, who summoned a slave, who ran with alacrity to bring the emperor a warm, moist towel. Agah'ran laid his fingers limply on the cloth. The slave reverently cleansed them.

"The Kenkari have never proclaimed allegiance to the empire. Historically, My Liege, they have always been independent, serving all clans, owing loyalty to none."

"They approved of the forming of the empire." It was nearing his nap time and Agah'ran was inclined to be petulant.

"Because they were pleased to see the union of the six clans. And therefore they have served Your Imperial Majesty and have supported Your Majesty's war against your rebel son, Rees'ahn. They even cast him out, as Your Imperial Majesty commanded, ordered his weesham to leave him, essentially damning his soul to live outside the Blessed Realm."

"Yes, yes, we know all this, Tretar. Come to the point. I grow fatigued. And Solaris is very hot. If I am not careful, I shall begin to sweat."

"If Your Radiance will bear with me a moment longer."

Agah'ran's hand twitched, an action that, in another man, might have been the clenching of a fist. "We need those souls, Tretar. You were present. You heard the report. Our ungrateful son Rees'ahn—may the ancestors devour him—has been conducting secret negotiations with that barbaric fiend, Stephen of Volkaran. If they ally... Ah, see what this upset has done to us. We are trembling. We feel weak. We must retire."

Tretar snapped his fingers. The valet clapped his hands. Slaves brought forth a sedan chair that had been standing nearby. Other slaves lifted His Imperial Majesty gently in their arms, carried him bodily from the

cushions on which he'd been seated to the sedan chair, where His Majesty was settled, with much fuss and bother, among the cushions. The slaves hoisted the chair onto their shoulders.

"Gently, gently," ordered the valet. "Don't lift too fast. The motion makes His Majesty giddy."

Slowly, solemnly, the sedan chair started off. The Royal Weesham rose and followed after. Count Tretar came after the weesham. The valet de chambre, watching anxiously, hovered about the sedan chair in case His Majesty felt faint. The procession, led by the sedan chair, moved from the garden to the emperor's sitting room—a fatiguing journey of about ten paces.

Agah'ran—an extraordinarily handsome elf (beneath the paint) in his early two hundreds—was not, as some first supposed on meeting him, crippled. Nothing in the slightest was wrong with His Imperial Majesty's limbs. Agah'ran (in mid-life, by elven standards) was quite capable of walking and did so, when required. The unusual effort fatigued him for cycles afterward, however.

Once inside the sumptuously furnished sitting room, Agah'ran made a languid motion with his fingers. "His Majesty wishes to stop," Tretar instructed. The valet echoed the count's orders. The slaves complied. The chair was lowered, slowly, so as not to make His Imperial Majesty nauseous, to the floor. The emperor was lifted out of it and placed in a chair, facing out on the garden.

"Turn us a bit to the left. We find the view far less fatiguing from this angle. Pour us some chocolate. Will you partake, Tretar?"

"I am honored that Your Imperial Majesty thinks of me." Count Tretar bowed. He detested chocolate, but would never dream of offending the emperor by refusing.

One of the slaves reached for the samovar. The weesham, looking uneasy (as well he might, considering the discussion was dealing with his true masters, the Kenkari), saw a way to escape and intervened. "I fear the chocolate has grown tepid, O Exalted One. It would give me great pleasure to bring Your imperial Majesty more. I know precisely the temperature Your Imperial Majesty likes it."

Agah'ran glanced at Tretar. The count nodded. "Very well, Weesham," the emperor said languidly. "You are dismissed from our royal presence. Six degrees above room temperature and not a degree higher."

"Yes, My Liege." The geir, hands plucking nervously at his black robes, bowed himself out. Tretar waved his hand. The valet de chambre hustled the slaves out of the room. The valet himself faded into the background.

"A spy, do you think?" Agah'ran asked, referring to the departed weesham. "The Kenkari found out through him?"

"No, My Liege. The Kenkari would never dream of anything so crude. They may be very powerful in magic, but they are a simple people, politically naive. The geir is sworn to one duty and that is the safekeeping of Your Imperial Majesty's soul. That is a holy duty, and one with which the Kenkari would not interfere."

Tretar leaned forward, lowered his voice to a whisper. "From what I have been able to learn, My Liege, it was the ineptness of the Unseen that precipitated this crisis.\*"

A corner of the painted eyelid twitched. "The Unseen do not make mistakes, Tretar," said Agah'ran.

"They are men, O Radiant One. They are fallible, as all men are fallible, with the exception of Your Imperial Majesty. And I have heard it said"—Tretar moved still closer—"that the Unseen have taken steps to discipline the elves involved. They are no more. And neither is the geir who carried news of the princess's murder to the Kenkari."

Agah'ran appeared considerably relieved. "The matter is settled, then, and nothing like this will occur again. You will see to that, Tretar. Express our wishes to the Unseen forcibly."

"Of course, My Liege," said Tretar, who had absolutely no intention of doing any such thing. Let those cold-blooded demons mind their own affairs! He wanted no part of them.

"That does not help us with our current problem, however, Tretar," pursued Agah'ran mildly. "The eggs have been broken, so to speak. We see no way of putting the yolks back into their shells."

"No, O Radiant One," Tretar agreed, glad to return to a subject less dangerous and of far more importance. "And, therefore, I propose to His Imperial Majesty that he make an omelet."

"Quite clever, Tretar." The emperor's painted lips creased slightly. "Do we partake of this omelet ourselves or feed it to the Kenkari?"

"Neither, Majesty. We feed it to our enemy."

"A poisoned omelet, then."

Tretar bowed in homage. "Your Majesty is, I see, far ahead of me."

"You are referring to that human child... What's his name? The one who was brought to the Imperanon yesterday."

"Bane, Your Majesty."

"Yes. Charming child, or so we hear. Passable looks, for a human, we are told. What are we to make of him, Tretar? Is this wild tale of his to be believed?"

"I have done some investigating, Your Imperial Majesty. If you would be interested to hear what I have discovered?"

"Amused, at least," said the emperor, with a languid lift of a plucked eyebrow.

"Your Majesty has, among his slaves, a human who once served in the royal household of King Stephen. A minor footman, he was pressed into service in the Volkaran army. I took the liberty of bringing this man and the child, Bane, together. The footman recognized the child immediately. In fact, the wretched man nearly passed out, thinking he'd seen a ghost."

"Appallingly superstitious—humans," Agah'ran commented.

"Yes, My Liege. Not only did this man recognize the boy, the boy knew the footman. He spoke to him by name—"

"By name? A footman? Bah! This Bane cannot have been a prince!"

"Humans tend to be democratic-minded, Sire. I am told that King Stephen admits any human, even those of the lowest, most common rank, into his presence, if they have a suit or a grievance."

"Gad! How dreadful! I feel quite faint," said Agah'ran. "Hand me those smelling salts, Tretar."

The count lifted a small bottle, decorated with silver, and motioned to the valet de chambre, who motioned to a slave, who took the bottle and held it at the proper distance beneath the imperial nose. Several sniffs of the aromatic salts restored Agah'ran to clear-minded attentiveness, alleviated the shock of hearing about the barbaric practices of humans.

"If you are feeling quite well, My Liege, I will continue."

"Where is all this leading, Tretar? What has the child to do with the Kenkari? You cannot fool us, Count. We are sharp. We see a connection developing here."

The count bowed in homage. "Your Imperial Majesty's brain is a veritable dragon-trap. If I might presume upon Your Radiance's patience, I beg Your Majesty to permit me to introduce the child into the Royal Presence. I believe Your Imperial Majesty will find the story the boy has to tell quite interesting."

"A human? Into our presence? Suppose... suppose" —Agah'ran appeared distraught, fluttered his hand— "suppose we catch something?"

"The boy has been quite thoroughly scrubbed, Your Majesty," said the count with becoming gravity.

Agah'ran motioned to the valet, who motioned to the slave, who handed the emperor a scented pomander. Holding it up in front of his nose, Agah'ran indicated with a slight nod that Tretar was to proceed. The count snapped his fingers. Two of the royal guard marched in, conveying the child between them.

"Stop! Stop there!" Agah'ran commanded, though the boy had not taken four steps into the large room.

"Guards, leave us," Tretar ordered. "Your Imperial Majesty, I present His Highness, Bane, Prince of Volkaran."

"And Ulyndia and the High Realms," added the child. "Now that my real father's dead."

He stepped forward with an imperious air, bowed gracefully from the waist. The prince indicated respect for the emperor, but made it clear he was offering it to an equal, as an equal.

Agah'ran, accustomed to seeing his own people prostrate themselves flat on the floor before their emperor, was considerably taken aback by such arrogance and bravado. It would have cost an elf his soul. Tretar held his breath, thinking perhaps he'd made a serious mistake.

Bane raised his head, straightened his small body, and smiled. He had been bathed and dressed in whatever finery Tretar could find to fit him (human children being considerably rounder than elven children). The golden curls had been combed into ringlets that glistened in the light. Bane's skin was like fine porcelain, his eyes were bluer than the lapis on the box held by the emperor's geir. Agah'ran was impressed with the child's beauty, or so Tretar judged, noting the emperor lift his eyebrow and slightly lower the scented pomander.

"Come nearer, boy—"

Tretar coughed delicately.

Agah'ran took the hint. "Come nearer, Your Highness, that we may look at you."

The count breathed again. The emperor was charmed. Not literally, of course. Agah'ran wore strong talismans that protected him against magic. Tretar, in his first interview with Bane, had been amused to see the human boy attempt to work some type of crude magic upon himself, some sort of enchantment spell. The magic had no effect, but its use was one of the first indications Tretar had that the boy might be telling at least part—if not all—the truth.

"Not too close," said Agah'ran. Not all the perfume in Aristagon could mask the human smell. "There, that's near enough. So you claim to be the son of King Stephen of Volkaran."

"No, I do not, O Exalted Being," said Bane, frowning slightly.

Agah'ran cast a stem glance at Tretar, who inclined his head. "Patience, My Liege," he said softly. "Tell His Imperial Majesty your father's name, Your Highness."

"Sinistrad, Your Imperial Majesty," said Bane proudly. "A mysteriarch of the High Realm."

"A term the humans use for a wizard of the Seventh House, My Liege," explained Tretar.

"Seventh House. And your mother's name?"

"Anne of Ulyndia, Queen of Volkaran and Ulyndia."

"Dear, dear," murmured Agah'ran, shocked, though he had himself fathered more illegitimate children than he could count. "I fear you've made a mistake, Count. If this bastard is not the king's son, then he is not the prince."

"Yes, I am, My Liege!" Bane cried in childish impetuosity that was quite becoming and, moreover, quite convincing. "Stephen claimed me as his legitimate son. He made me his heir. My mother forced him to sign papers. I've seen them. Stephen has to do what my mother says. She's head of her own army. He needs her support if he wants to remain king."

Agah'ran glanced at Tretar.

The count rolled his eyes as much as to say, "What do you expect of humans?"

The emperor almost smiled, refrained. A smile might muss his paint. "Such an arrangement sounds quite satisfactory to all concerned, Your Highness. We sense something happened to upset it, since you were found on that Geg place. What's its name..."

"Drevlin, My Liege," Tretar murmured. "Yes, Drevlin. What were you doing down there, child?" "I was a prisoner, Your Radiance." Bane's eyes glittered with sudden tears. "Stephen hired an assassin, a man called Hugh the Hand—"

"Surely not!" Agah'ran's painted eyelids fluttered.

"My Liege, please, do not interrupt," Tretar admonished gently.

"Hugh the Hand traveled to the High Realms. He murdered my father, Your Imperial Majesty, and was going to murder me, but, before he died, my father managed to fatally wound the assassin first. But then I was captured by an elven captain named Bothar'el. He's in league with the rebels, I think."

Agah'ran glanced again at Tretar, who confirmed this with a nod.

"Bothar'el took me back to Volkaran. He figured that Stephen would pay to have me back safely." Bane's lip curled. "Stephen paid to have me out of the way. Bothar'el sent me to the GEGs, paid them to keep me prisoner."

"Your Radiance will recall," Tretar struck in, "that around this time, Stephen let it be known among the humans that the prince had been taken prisoner and murdered by elves. The story stirred up the humans against us."

"But tell me, Count, why didn't Stephen simply do away with the child?" Agah'ran asked, regarding Bane as if he were some sort of exotic animal, let loose from its cage.

"Because the mysteriarchs had, by this time, been forced to flee the High Realm, which, our spies tell us, has become untenable for their kind. They moved onto Volkaran and told Stephen it would be as much as his life was worth to harm the son of Sinistrad, who had been a powerful leader among them."

"Yet the queen permits her child to remain a prisoner. Why would your mother allow such a thing?" Agah'ran asked Bane.

"Because if the people found out she'd been whoring with one of the mysteriarchs, they would have burned her for a witch," said Bane, with an air of innocence that made his use of the crude, if descriptive, verb quite charming.

The count gave a deprecating cough. "I believe there is more to it than that, Your Imperial Majesty. Our spies report that Queen Anne wants to gain the throne herself. She intended to do so, in league with this mysteriarch, Sinistrad—the boy's father. But he died, and now neither she nor the surviving wizards are powerful enough to overthrow Stephen and take control of Volkaran themselves."

"But I am, My Liege," Bane said, ingenuously.

Agah'ran appeared highly diverted. He actually removed the pomander in order to get a better look. "You are, boy?" "Yes, O Radiant One," said Bane. "I've been thinking this all out. What if I turned up suddenly, safe and sound, on Volkaran? I'd say publicly that you elves kidnapped me, but I had managed to escape. The people love me. I'd be a hero. Stephen and Anne would have no choice but to claim me, take me back."

"But Stephen would only get rid of you again," said Agah'ran, yawning and passing a fatigued hand over his brow. It was past nap time. "And, though it might gain you something, we fail to see what this would gain us,"

"A lot, My Liege," said Bane coolly. "If the king and queen were to both suddenly die, I'd be heir to the throne." "My, my," murmured Agah'ran, eyes opening so wide that the paint on the lids cracked.

"Valet, summon the guards," ordered Tretar, reading the signs. "Remove the boy."

Bane flared. "You, sir, are speaking to a prince of Volkaran!"

Tretar glanced at the emperor, saw the painted eyelids flicker in amusement. The count bowed to the prince.

"I beg your pardon, Your Highness. His Imperial Majesty has greatly enjoyed this interview, but he now grows weary." "We suffer from the headache," said Agah'ran, pressing polished fingernails to his temple.

"I am sorry His Majesty is indisposed," said Bane, with dignity. "I will withdraw."

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Tretar, making a gallant effort to keep from laughing. "Guards, please escort His Royal Highness back to his quarters."

The guards marched in, marched Bane out. Bane cast a secret, inquiring glance at Tretar. The count smiled, indicated that all was well. Bane appeared pleased, walked away between his guards with a grace and elegance not seen in many elven children.

"Remarkable," Agah'ran said, having recourse, once again, to the smelling salts.

"I trust I have no need to remind Your Majesty that we are dealing with humans and must not allow ourselves to be shocked by their barbaric ways."

"All very well for you to say so, Count, but we are convinced that this nauseating tale of assassins and whores has quite destroyed our inclination for lunch. We have an extremely delicate digestive system, Tretar."

"I am sadly aware of the fact, Your Majesty, and for that I do deeply apologize."

"Still," the emperor mused, "if the boy were to succeed to the throne of Volkaran, he would have reason to be extremely grateful to us."

"Indeed, O Exalted One," said Tretar. "At the very least he would refuse to ally with Prince Rees'ahn, leave the rebels to shift for themselves, might even be persuaded to declare war on them. I further suggest that Your Imperial Majesty offer to serve in the capacity of protectorate to the young king Bane. We could send in an occupation force to keep peace among the warring factions of humans. For their own good, of course."

Agah'ran's lid-painted eyes glittered. "You mean, Tretar, that this boy would simply hand us Volkaran."

"I do, indeed, My Liege. In return for rich reward, naturally."

"And what of these wizards, these 'mysteriarchs'?" The emperor grimaced at being forced to speak the human word.

The count shrugged. "They are dying out, Your Imperial Majesty. They're arrogant, willful, disliked and distrusted even by those of their own race. I doubt if they will trouble us. If they do, the boy will keep them in line."

"And the Kenkari? What of our wizards?"

"Let them do what they will, My Liege. Once the humans are conquered and subdued, you will be able to concentrate your forces on destroying the rebels. That accomplished, you wipe out the GEGs in Drevlin and take over the Kicksey-win-sey. You will then have no more need for the souls of the dead, O Exalted One. Not when you have at your command the souls of all the living in Arianus."

"Most ingenious, Count Tretar. We commend you."

"Thank you, My Liege." The count bowed deeply.

"But this will take time."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty."

"And what are we to do about these wretched GEGs? Shutting the machine down, cutting off our water!"

"Captain Sang-drax—an excellent officer, by the way, I draw Your Imperial Majesty's attention to him—has brought us a GEG prisoner."

"So we heard." The emperor held the pomander to his nose, as though the stench had somehow managed to seep into his half of the palace. "We fail to see why. We have a pair for the royal zoo, don't we?"

"Your Imperial Majesty is in good humor this day," Tretar said, adding the laugh he knew was expected.

"We aren't," Agah'ran stated petulantly. "Nothing is going right. But we assume that this GEG is of some importance to you?"

"As a hostage, My Liege. I suggest that we offer the GEGs an ultimatum; they either start the Kicksey-winsey or what is left of this GEG female will be returned to them in several small boxes."

"And what is one GEG more or less, Tretar? They breed like rats. I fail to see—"

"Begging Your Radiance's pardon, but the GEGs are quite a close-knit race. They have a rather quaint belief that what happens to one GEG happens to all. I think this threat should be sufficient inducement for them to do our bidding."

"If you think so, Count, then such will be our command."

"Thank you, My Liege. And now, as Your Radiance appears fatigued—"

"We are, Tretar. We admit it. The pressures of state, dear count, the pressures of state... However, one thought occurs to us."

"Yes, O Exalted One?"

"How do we return the boy to Volkaran without rousing the humans' suspicions? And what's to keep King Stephen from simply doing away with him quietly if we do send him back?" Agah'ran shook his head, wearied himself greatly with the effort. "We see too many difficulties—"

"Rest assured, O Exalted One, I have taken all this into consideration."

"Truly?"

"Yes, My Liege."

"And what is your intent, Count?"

The count glanced at the slaves and the valet. He leaned down, whispered into His Radiant Majesty's perfumed ear.

Agah'ran stared, confounded, at his minister, for a moment. Then a slow smile spread over the lips that were touched with ground coral. The emperor was aware of his minister's intelligence, just as his minister was aware that his emperor— despite appearances—was no fool.

"We approve, Count. You will make the arrangements?"

"Consider them made, Your Imperial Majesty."

"What will you tell the boy? He will be eager to leave."

The count smiled. "I must admit, My Liege, it was the boy who suggested the plan."

"The cunning little devil. Are all human children like this, Tretar?"

"I should not think so, O Exalted One, or the humans would have long ago defeated us."

"Yes, well, this one bears watching. Keep your eye on him, Tretar. We should love to hear further details, but some other time." Agah'ran passed his hand weakly over his brow. "The headache grows severe."

"Your Radiance suffers much for his people," said Tretar, with a low bow.

"We know, Tretar. We know." Agah'ran heaved a pain-filled sigh. "And they do not appreciate it."

"On the contrary, they adore you, My Liege. Attend to His Majesty," Tretar ordered, snapping his fingers.

The valet de chambre leapt to action. Slaves came running from all directions, bearing cold compresses, hot towels, warm wine, chilled water.

"Carry us to our bedchamber," said Agah'ran faintly.

The valet took over, marshaling the complicated procedure.

Count Tretar waited until he had seen the emperor lifted from the couch, placed among silken pillows on a gilded litter, and carried in a procession, moving at a coral grub's pace (so as not to disturb the royal equilibrium) toward the bedchamber. Near the door, Agah'ran made a feeble gesture.

Tretar, who had been watching closely, was instantly attentive.

"Yes, My Liege?"

"The boy has someone with him. A human freak, whose skin has turned blue."

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty," answered Tretar, not thinking it necessary to explain. "So we have been informed."

"What of him?"

"You have nothing to worry about, My Liege. I did hear it rumored that this man was one of the mysteriarchs. I questioned Captain Sang-drax about him, and according to the captain, this blue-skinned fellow is only the boy's manservant." Agah'ran nodded, lay back among the pillows, and closed the painted eyelids. The slaves bore him off. Tretar waited until certain he was no longer needed, then—smiling to himself in satisfaction—he went off to put the first steps of his plan into action.

## CHAPTER 21

### ROYAL PALACE

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

KING STEPHEN'S CASTLE ON THE ISLE OF PROVIDENCE WAS FAR DIFFERENT in appearance from his elven counterpart's on Aristagon. The Imperanon was a vast collection of gracefully designed and elegant buildings, with spiraling towers and minarets decorated with tile mosaics, painted furbelows, and carved curlicues. King Stephen's fortress was solid, massive, constructed on square lines; its grim, tooth-edged towers rose dark and unlovely into the smoke-colored sky. The difference in the stone could be seen in the flesh, so the saying went.

Night on the Imperanon was ablaze with flambeaux and candelabra. On Volkaran, lambent light from the Firmament glittered on the scaled skin of guard-dragons, perched atop the towers. Watch fires shone red in the twilight, lighting the way for returning dragon marauders and providing warmth for the human watchers, whose eyes ceaselessly scanned the skies for elven dragonships.

The fact that no elven dragonship had dared fly Volkaran's skies for a long while did not make the watchers less vigilant. There were some, living in the town of Firstfall, which crowded close to the castle walls, who whispered that Stephen did not watch for elven dragonships. No, he watched for enemies closer to home, flying the kiratrack,\* not the kanatrack. Alfred, who lived among the humans for a time, wrote the following discourse on the race. The title is *A Baffling History*.\*

\*Directional reference system. Defined in detail in *Dragon Wing*, vol. r, *The Death Gate Cycle*. For general purposes, kiratrack corresponds to west, kanatrack is east, backward is north, and backtrack is south. This statement implies that Stephen is more worried about dragons flying from Ulyndia than from the elven kingdoms.

\*Found in the library of Castle Volkaran. Alfred wrote the history in the human language, undoubtedly with the intent of using it to instruct the humans in their own folly. True to his vacillating nature, the Sartan could never bring himself to show the book to the king, but placed it in the library, apparently in the forlorn hope that Stephen or Anne might stumble across it.

The elves in Arianus would not have grown strong and powerful if the humans had been able to unite. United as a race, the humans could have formed a wall through which the elves could not have penetrated. The humans could have easily taken advantage of the various elven clan wars to have established strong footholds on Aristagon (or, at the very least, keep from being pushed off!).

But the humans, who consider elves foppish and weak, made the mistake of discounting them. The various human factions, with their long history of blood feuds, were far more interested in battling each other than in fending off elven attacks. The humans, in essence, defeated themselves, leaving themselves so weak that all the powerful Paxar had to do was stamp their feet and shout, "Boo!" and the humans fled in terror.

The humans were driven off Aristagon. They flew to the Volkaran Isles and the larger continent of Ulyndia, and here they might have regrouped, united. During the Brotherblood War that raged among the elves, the humans could have easily recaptured all the territory they had lost. It is altogether possible that they might have taken the Imperanon, for the humans had among them then the mysteriarchs, whose skills in magic are far greater than those attained by the elves, with the exception of the Kenkari. And the Kenkari were, in this war, supposedly neutral.

But their own race's internecine wars offended and sickened the powerful mysteriarchs. Finding that their efforts to bring peace to the warring factions were in vain, the mysteriarchs left the Mid Realm, traveled up to the High Realm, to the cities built by the Sartan, where the mysteriarchs hoped to live in peace. Their departure left the humans vulnerable to attack by the Tribus elves, who, having defeated and forcibly united the elven clans, turned their attention to the human raiders, who had been attacking and pirating elven water shipments from Drevlin.

The Tribus elves conquered many human realms on Volkaran, using bribes and betrayal as well as the sword to divide and conquer. The humans saw their sons and daughters taken into slavery; they saw most of their food going into elven mouths; they saw elf lords slaughter dragons for sport. Eventually, the humans came to the conclusion that they hated elves more than they hated each other.

The two most powerful human clans, working in secret, formed an alliance, sealed by the marriage of Stephen of Volkaran with Anne of Ulyndia. The humans began to push the occupying forces off Volkaran, culminating in the famous Battle of Seven Fields, a battle remarkable for the fact that the loser ended up the victor.\* The subsequent rebellion among the elves, led by the Prince Rees'ahn, forced the withdrawal of elven occupying forces.

\*Defeated in battle, King Stephen was forced to surrender his army to Prince Rees'ahn. The elves took the humans prisoner and were marching them to slavery when a human minstrel named Ravenlark began to sing a song of defiance. The song turned out to have a powerful, almost magical effect on the elves. It transports all elves who hear it back to a time when they lived in peace, when their society gloried in all things beautiful. The elves threw down their weapons; many began to weep for what was lost. The king and his army retreated into a nearby castle. The elves left field of battle, returned to their ships. Thus began the elven revolution. Dragon Wing, vol. I, The Death Gate Cycle.

Alfred's history concludes on a sad note:

Ulyndia and Volkaran are once again under human control. But now, once the elven threat is removed, the humans have decided it is safe to start hating each other again. Factions howl war and snap at each other's throats. Powerful barons on both sides mutter darkly that the alliance of Stephen and Anne has outlived its usefulness. The king and queen are forced to play a dangerous game.

These two, in truth, love each other dearly. A marriage of convenience, planted in the muck of years of hatred, has blossomed into mutual respect and affection. But each knows that the flower will wither and die untimely, unless they can keep control of their followers.

Thus each pretends to hate what each most dearly values—the other. They quarrel loudly in public, cling to each other most fondly in private. Thinking the marriage and therefore the alliance is crumbling, the members of each opposing faction whisper their intrigues to king and queen openly, not realizing that these two are—in reality—one. Thus Stephen and Anne have been able to control and put out blazes that might have consumed their kingdom.

But now there is a new problem—Bane. And what we are to do about him is beyond me to figure out. I am afraid for the mensch, though. Afraid for them all.

The problem had been solved.\* Bane had disappeared, purportedly carried off to a faraway realm by a man with blue skin—at least such had been the vague report given King Stephen by Bane's real mother, Iridal of the High Realms.

\*Bane's story is told in full in *Dragon Wing*. vol. i, *The Death Gate Cycle*.

The farther away they took Bane, the better, was Stephen's view of the matter. Bane had vanished over a year ago, and a curse seemed to have been lifted from the entire kingdom with the boy's removal.

Queen Anne became pregnant again, and was safely delivered of a baby girl. The child was princess of Ulyndia and, though the crown of Volkaran could not now, by law, be given into female hands, laws had a way of changing over the years, especially if Stephen did not father any sons. King and queen both adored their daughter. Magi of the Third House were hired to stand guard day and night to make certain that this time no strange, fey changeling appeared in the cradle.

Also, during this momentous year, the rebellion of the Gegs of the Lower Realms further weakened the elves, depleted their forces. Stephen's armies had managed to push the elves from their last toehold on the outlying islands of Volkaran.

An elven dragonship loaded with water had just fallen into human hands. The water harvest had been good this year. Stephen had been able to call off water rationing, which pleased the people. The quarreling factions—for the most part—thought well of each other, and the fights that broke out among them now were of the good-natured variety, resulting in bloody noses, not bloody knives.

"I am even beginning to think seriously, my dear, of telling the world that I love you," said Stephen, leaning over his wife's shoulder to make faces at the baby.

"Don't go too far," said Anne. "I've rather come to enjoy our public bickering. I think it's good for us. Whenever I do get truly mad at you, I put all my anger into the next mock battle, and I feel much better. Oh, Stephen, what a dreadful face! You'll frighten her."

The baby, however, laughed in delight and reached out a hand to try to grab the king's graying beard.

"So, all these years, you've actually meant those terrible things you said to me!" Stephen teased.

"I hope your face freezes like that. It would serve you right! Isn't he an ugly papa?" Anne said to the baby. "Why don't you fly up and attack such an ugly papa. There, my little dragon. Fly to Papa."

Lifting the baby, Anne "flew" the child at Stephen, who caught hold of his daughter and tossed her lightly in the air. The baby laughed and crowed and tried again to grasp hold of the man's beard.

The three were in the nursery, enjoying a brief and precious time together. Such moments were all too rare for the royal family, and the man who stood in the doorway stopped to watch, a sad and regretful smile on his lips. The moment would end. He, himself, would end it. But he paused to enjoy the extra few seconds of unclouded happiness that he must snatch away.

Perhaps Stephen felt the shadow of the cloud pass over him. The visitor had made no sound, but the king was aware of his presence. Trian—king's magus—and Trian alone had permission to open doors without knocking, without being announced. Stephen looked up, saw the wizard standing in the doorway.

The king smiled at the sight and started to make some jest, but the expression on Trian's face was more frightening than those Stephen had been making to entertain his tiny daughter. The king's smile faded and grew cold. Anne, who had been fondly watching her husband and child play together, saw his brow darken, glanced over her shoulder in alarm. At the sight of Trian, the queen rose to her feet.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Trian cast a swift glance from beneath lowered lashes back into the hallway, made a slight gesture with his hand to indicate that people were in earshot.

"A messenger has arrived from Baron Fitzwarren, Your Majesty," the magus said loudly. "A minor skirmish with the elves at Kurinandistai, I believe, I am truly sorry to draw Your Majesties away from more pleasant pursuits, but you both know the baron."

They both did indeed know the baron, having received a report from him only that morning stating that he hadn't seen an elf for weeks, complaining bitterly about the inaction—which was bad for discipline—and asking for permission to go chasing elven dragonships.

"Fitzwarren is a hothead," said Stephen, taking his cue. He handed his daughter to the nursemaid, who had entered at a summons from Trian. "One of your cousins, my Queen. A Ulyndian." This said with a sneer.

"He's a man who won't run away from a fight, which is more than I can say for the men of Volkaran," answered Anne with spirit, though her face was pale.

Trian gave the gentle and long-suffering sigh of one who would like to administer a good caning to spoiled children, but who is not permitted to do so. "If Your Majesties would both be so good as to hear the messenger's report. He is in my study. Fitzwarren has asked for a charm to protect against frostbite. I will prepare it, while Your Majesties interview the messenger. That will save time."

A meeting in Trian's study. The king and queen exchanged unhappy glances. Anne pressed her lips together tightly, placed chill fingers in her husband's hand. Stephen frowned, escorted his wife down the hallway.

Trian's study was the only room in the castle where the three could meet in private, be certain that their conversation would not be overheard. The castle was a breeding ground for intrigue and gossip. Half the servants were in the pay of one baron or another. The other half passed on their information for free.

Located in a light and airy turret room, the wizard's study was far removed from the noise and rowdiness of the boisterous castle life. Trian was fond of revels himself. His youthful good looks and charming manner ensured that, though unmarried, he rarely spent a night in bed alone, unless he wanted. No one in the kingdom could dance with such grace, and many a noble would have given untold sums to know the magus's secret for imbibing large quantities of wine and never showing the slightest ill effect.

But though Trian might revel through the night, he was serious and intent on the business of assisting to run the kingdom during the day. He was completely, totally, devotedly loyal to his king and queen, loved them both as friends, respected them as his rulers. He knew their every secret and could have made his fortune ten times over by selling out one or the other. He would have as soon jumped into the Maelstrom. And though he was twenty years younger than Stephen, Trian was councillor, adviser, minister, and mentor to the older man.

Entering the wizard's study, king and queen discovered two people waiting for them there. One—a man—they did not know, though he seemed vaguely familiar. The other—a woman—they knew by sight, and, at the sight of her, the cloud that had covered them grew thicker and darker.

The woman rose and made respectful reverence to Their Majesties. Stephen and Anne returned the bow with respect on their side, for though the woman and her followers had acknowledged the two as king and queen, the bond forged was an uneasy one. It is difficult ruling those who are far more powerful than oneself and who could, with a whispered word, bring one's castle tumbling down about one's ears.

"You know the Lady Iridal, I believe, Your Majesty," said Trian unnecessarily, gently endeavoring to set everyone at ease before he let loose the blast that would shatter their lives.

Polite pleasantries were exchanged, everyone mouthing words learned by rote, none of them thinking about what they said. Thus "How nice to see you again" and "It's been far too long" and "Thank you for the sweet baby gift" died away swiftly. Especially when the baby was mentioned. Anne turned deathly white and sank down in a chair. Iridal clasped her hands together tightly, looked down, unseeing, at her fingers. Stephen coughed, cleared his throat, and frowned at the stranger in the room, trying to recall where he'd seen the man.

"Well, what is it, Trian?" the king demanded. "Why have you summoned us here? I assume it has nothing to do with Fitzwarren," he added with heavy irony, his gaze shifting to the Lady Iridal, for though she lived near the palace, she rarely ventured to visit, well aware that she brought back unwelcome and painful memories to this couple, as they revived such memories in her.

"Will it please Your Majesty to take a seat?" asked Trian. No one in the room could sit down unless the king sat first.

Stephen frowned, then threw himself into a chair. "Get on with it."

"Half a moment, if you please, Your Majesty," said Trian. He raised his hands, fluttered his fingers in the air, and imitated the sound of a piping of birds. "There. Now we may speak safely."

Anyone listening outside the door, outside the circle of the spell, would overhear only what sounded like twittering bird calls. Those within the compass of the spell itself could hear and understand each other perfectly.

Trian cast a deprecating glance at the Lady Iridal. A mysteriarch, she ranked Seventh House, while Trian could attain no higher than Three. Iridal could have changed them all to singing birds, if she'd desired.

Iridal smiled reassuringly. "Very well done, Magicka," she said.

Trian flushed in pleasure, not immune to praise for his art. He had serious business at hand, though, and moved to it swiftly.

He laid a hand on the arm of the stranger, who had risen when his king entered, then resumed his seat near the wizard's desk. Stephen had been staring at the stranger as if he knew him, but could not place from where.

"I see Your Majesty recognizes this man. He has changed much in appearance. Slavery does that. He is Peter Hamish of Pitrin's Exile, once royal footman."

"By the ancestors! You're right!" stated Stephen, banging his hand on the arm of the chair. "You went for a squire to my lord Gwenned, didn't you, Peter?"

"That I did, sire," said the man, smiling broadly, his face red with pleasure at the king's remembrance. "I was with him at the Battle of Tom's Peak. The elves had us surrounded. My lord was struck down, and I was made prisoner. It wasn't my lord's fault, sire. The elves come upon us unexpected—"

"Yes, Peter, His Majesty is fully aware of the truth of the matter," interposed Trian smoothly. "If you could proceed on to the rest of your story. Don't be nervous. Tell it to Their Majesties and the Lady Iridal as you told it to me."

Trian saw the man cast a longing glance at the empty glass near his hand. The wizard immediately filled it with wine. Peter made a thankful grab for it, then, realizing he was drinking in the presence of his king, paused with the glass halfway to his mouth.

"Please, go ahead," said Stephen kindly. "You've obviously been through a terrible ordeal."

"Wine is good for strengthening the blood," added Anne, outwardly composed, inwardly quaking.

Peter swallowed a grateful gulp, sending the sweet wine to join another glassful, given him by the wizard, already strengthening the blood.

"I was took prisoner, sire. The elves made most of the others oarsmen in those devil dragonships of theirs. But somehow or other they found out I'd once served in the royal household. They hauls me off and asks me all sorts of questions about you, sire. They beat me till the whites of my ribs showed, Your Majesty, but I never told them fiends nothin'."

"I commend your bravery," said Stephen gravely, knowing full well that Peter had probably poured out his soul at the first touch of the lash, just as he'd told the elves he was a member of the royal household to save himself from the galleys.

"When it was clear to them fiends that they couldn't get nothin' from me, Your Majesty, they set me up in their own royal castle, what they calls the 'Imp-er-non.'" Peter was obviously proud of his ability to speak elven. "I figured they wanted me to show 'em how things should be done in a royal household, but they only set me to scrubbin' floors and talkin' to other prisoners."

"What other—" Stephen began, but Trian shook his head, and the king fell silent.

"Please tell His Majesty about the latest prisoner you saw in the elven palace."

"He warn't no prisoner," Peter objected, on his fourth glass of wine. "More like an honored guest, he was. The elves are treating him real good, sire. You needn't be worried."

"Tell us who it was you saw," urged Trian gently.

"Your son, sire," said Peter, growing a bit maudlin. "Prince Bane. I'm happy to bring you news that he is alive. He spoke to me. I woulda brought him along, when me and the others was plannin' to escape, but he said he was too well guarded. He'd only hinder us. A true little hero, your son, sire."

"He gave that there to me." The footman pointed to an object lying on Trian's desk. "Said I was to bring it to his mother. She'd know, then, that it was him as sent it. He made it for her."

Peter raised the glass in an unsteady hand. Tears came to his eyes. "A toast to His Highness and to Your Majesties."

Peter's bleary attention was focused on the wine in his hand, as much as his attention could focus on anything by now. Thus he missed the fact that the joy fill news of Bane's return caused Stephen to go rigid, as if struck by a poleax. Anne stared at the man in horror, sagged in her chair, her face ashen. Lady Iridal's eyes flamed with sudden hope.

"Thank you, Peter, that will be all for now," said Trian. He took hold of Peter's arm, hoisted the man from his chair, led him—bowing and staggering—past king and queen and mysteriarch.

"I'll see to it that he has no memory of this, Your Majesty," Trian promised in a low voice. "Oh, may I suggest that Your Majesties do not drink the wine." He left the room with Peter, shutting the door behind them.

The wizard was gone a long time. His Majesty's guards did not accompany the king to the wizard's study, but took up positions at a discreet distance, about thirty paces away, at the far end of the hall. Trian accompanied Peter down the hall, relinquished the inebriated footman to the guards, with orders that the man be taken somewhere to sleep off his intoxication. Such was the effect of the wizard's sweet wine mat when the befuddled Peter awoke, he would have no memory of having ever been in the Imp-er-non.

By the time Trian returned to his study, he found that the shock of the news had worn off somewhat, though the alarm was, if anything, more intense.

"Can this be true?" Stephen demanded. The king had risen to his feet and was pacing the study. "How can we trust this great idiot?"

"Simply because he is a great idiot, sire," said Trian, standing, his hands folded before him, his manner deliberately calm and tranquil. "This is one reason I wanted you to hear his story from the man himself. He is certainly not clever enough to have made up such a tale. I have questioned him most extensively and am satisfied that he is not lying. And then there is this."

Trian lifted the object from his desk, the object that Peter had brought—a present from Bane to his mother. Trian held it out, not to Anne, but to Iridal.

She stared at it, blood mounting her cheeks, then draining, to leave her more pale than before. The object was a hawk feather, decorated with beads, suspended from a leather thong. Innocent in appearance, the gift was such as a child might make under the instructions of his nursemaid, to please any mother's fond heart. But this feather necklace had been made by a child of magic, son of mysteriarchs. The feather was an amulet and through it, the child could communicate with the mother. His true mother. Iridal reached out a trembling hand, took the feather, and held it tight.

"It is from my son," she said, though she spoke without a voice.

Trian nodded. "Let me assure you all, Your Majesties, Lady Iridal, that I would not have put you through this ordeal if I weren't absolutely certain that what Peter says is the truth. The child he saw was Bane."

Stephen flushed at the implied rebuke, muttered something beneath his breath that might have been an apology. With a heavy sigh, he slumped into his seat. The king and queen moved nearer each other, leaving Lady Iridal sitting alone, slightly apart.

Trian came to stand before the three. The wizard stated firmly and calmly what they all knew, but perhaps had not, even now, accepted.

"Bane is alive, and he is in elven hands."

"How is this possible?" Anne demanded in a choked voice, her hand at her throat, as though she were suffocating. She turned to Lady Iridal. "You said they took him away! To another land! You said Alfred took him away!"

"Not Alfred," Iridal corrected. The initial shock was receding; the mysteriarch was beginning to realize that her dearest wish was coming true. "The other man. Haplo."

"The man you described to me, the one with the blue skin," said Trian.

"Yes." Iridal's eyes shone with the brilliance of her hope. "Yes, he was the one. He took my son away..."

"Then he has apparently brought him back," said Trian dryly. "For he is also in the elven castle. The footman saw a man with blue skin in company with the prince. It was this detail, perhaps more than any other, that convinced me the man's story was true. Aside from the Lady Iridal, myself, and Your Majesties, none here knows about the man with blue skin or his connection with Bane. Add to this the fact that Peter not only saw Bane, but spoke to him. Bane recognized the footman and called him by name. No, sire. I repeat. There can be no doubt."

"So the child is held hostage," said Stephen grimly. "The elves plan, no doubt, to use this threat to force us to stop our attacks on their shipping, perhaps even try to disrupt the negotiations with Rees'ahn. Well, it won't work. They can do what they like with him. I wouldn't trade one drop of water—"

"My dear, please!" said Anne quietly, laying her hand on her husband's arm. She glanced beneath her eyelids at the Lady Iridal, who was sitting, pale and cold, hands clenched in her lap, staring at nothing, pretending not to hear. "She is his mother!"

"I am well aware that this lady is the child's mother. May I remind you, my dear, that Bane had a father—a father whose evil very nearly destroyed us all. Forgive me for speaking plainly, Lady Iridal," said Stephen, undeterred by his wife's pleading gaze, "but we must face the truth. You have said yourself that your husband wielded a powerful, dark influence over the child."

A faint flush came to Iridal's ivory cheeks, a shudder shook her slender frame. She did not reply, however, and Stephen looked over at Trian.

"I wonder, even, how much of this is Bane's doing," stated the king. "But, be that as it may, I am adamant. The elves will find they have made a bad bargain—"

Iridal's faint flush of shame had deepened to anger. She seemed about to speak. Trian raised his hand to forestall her.

"Lady Iridal, if I may," he said quietly. "Matters are not this simple, sire. The elves are clever. The wretched Peter did not escape. He was permitted to escape, intentionally. The elves knew he would bring you this information, probably subtly encouraged him to do so. The elves made his 'escape' look very real and convincing. Just as they did all the others."

"Others?" Stephen looked up vaguely, frowning.

Trian sighed. He had been putting off bad news. "I am afraid, sire, that Peter was not the only one to return bearing news that His Highness, Prince Bane, is alive. More than twenty other slaves 'escaped' that night. All have returned to their various homelands, all carrying the same tale. I've erased Peter's memory, but I might just as well have left him alone. Within a very few cycles, the news that Bane is alive and in elven hands will be the talk of every tavern from Pitrin's Exile to Wtshser."

"Blessed ancestors protect us," murmured Anne.

"I am certain you are aware of the vicious rumors that have been spread concerning Bane's illegitimacy, sire," continued Trian gently. "If you cast the boy to the wolves, so to speak, people will believe these rumors to be the truth. They will say that you rid yourself of a bastard. Our queen's reputation will be irreparably damaged. The barons of Volkaran will demand that you divorce her, marry one of their own. The barons of Ulyndia will take Queen Anne's part and rise against you. The alliance we've worked hard and long to build will crumble into dust. It could lead to civil war."

Stephen huddled in his chair, his face gray and haggard. Ordinarily he did not look his fifty years. His body was firm and muscular. He could hold his own with any of the younger knights in tourney competition,

frequently beat the best. Yet now his shoulders sagged, his frame had collapsed. His head bowed, he was suddenly an old man.

"We could tell the people the truth," said Lady Iridal.

Trian turned to her, smiled. "A magnanimous offer, my lady. I know how painful that would be for you. But it would only make matters worse. Your people have wisely kept out of public view, since their return from the High Realms. The mysteriarchs have lived quietly, aiding us in secret. Would you want Sinistrad's evil designs upon us made known? People would suspect and turn against you all. Who knows what terrible persecution might follow?"

"We are doomed," said Stephen heavily. "We must give in."

"No," responded Iridal, voice and demeanor cool. "There is another alternative. Bane is my responsibility. He is my son. I want him back. I will rescue my child from the elves."

"Go into the elven kingdom alone and snatch away your son?" Stephen lifted his hand from his brow, looked up at his wizard.

The king needed the mysteriarchs' powerful magic. No use offending the magus. He made a slight motion with his head, asking Trian to urge Iridal to depart. They had serious business to discuss, alone. "The woman's gone mad," he mouthed, though, of course, he did not say this aloud.

Trian shook his own head slightly. "Listen to what she has to offer," he advised the king silently. Aloud, he said, "Yes, my lady? Please continue."

"Once I've recovered him, I will take my son to the High Realms. Our dwelling is livable, for a short time, at least.\*

\*The Sartan constructed a magical shell around the High Realm to make its rarefied atmosphere suitable for mensch habitation. This shell is beginning to break down and no one now knows the secret of its reconstruction.

Alone with me, without anyone else to influence him, Bane will draw back from the dark path he walks, the path his father taught him to walk." She turned to Stephen. "You must let me try, Your Majesty. You must!"

"Faith, Lady, you don't need my sanction," said Stephen bluntly. "You may fly off the top parapet of this castle, if you're so minded. What could I do to stop you? But you're talking about traveling into elven lands, a human woman, alone! Walking into an elven dungeon and back out again. Perhaps you mysteriarchs have discovered some means of turning yourselves invisible—"

Both Anne and Trian endeavored to stem the king's tirade, but it was Iridal who brought Stephen up short.

"You are right, Your Majesty," she said, with a faint, apologetic smile, "I will go, whether you grant me permission or not. I ask only out of courtesy, for the sake of maintaining good relations between all parties. I am well aware of the danger and the difficulty. I have never been in elven lands. I have no means of journeying there—yet. But I will. I do not intend to go alone, Your Majesty."

Anne reached out her hand impulsively, took hold of Iridal's and clasped it fast. "I would go any distance, face any danger to find my child, if she were lost to me! I know how you feel. I understand. But, dear lady, you must listen to reason—"

"Indeed, Lady Iridal," said Stephen gruffly. "Forgive me if I spoke harshly at first. It is the weight of this burden, bearing down on me—when it seemed that at last all burdens had been lifted from my shoulders—that caused me to lose my temper. You say that you will not go alone." The king shrugged. "Lady, a legion would not benefit you—"

"I do not want a legion. I want one man, one man who is worth a legion. He is the best. You said so yourself. If I am not mistaken, you scoured the kingdom in search of him. You saved him from the executioner's block. You know his mettle better than anyone else, for you hired him to do a job dangerous and delicate."

Stephen was staring at the woman in horror, Trian in troubled perplexity. Anne let loose Iridal's hand. Stricken with guilt, the queen shrank back in her chair.

Iridal rose to her feet, tall and majestic, proud and imperious.

"You hired this man to kill my son."

"Gracious ancestors forbend!" cried Stephen hoarsely. "Have you mysteriarchs discovered the power to raise the dead?"

"Not us," said Iridal softly. "Not us. For which I am grateful. It is a terrible gift."

For long moments, she was silent, then, sighing, she lifted her head, brisk and business-minded. "Do I have Your Majesty's permission to try? You have nothing to lose. If I fail, none will be the wiser. I will tell my people I am traveling back to the High Realms. You may tell them that I died there. No blame will come to you. Grant me a fortnight, Your Majesty."

Stephen stood up, clasped his hands behind his back, began to pace the room. He paused, glanced at Trian. "Well, what say you, Magicka? Is there no other way?"

"None that has half the chance of succeeding, slim though this chance might be. The Lady Iridal speaks truly, sire. We have nothing to lose and much to gain. If she is willing to take the risk?..."

"I am, Your Majesty," said Iridal.

"Then I say, yes, sire," said Trian.

"My queen?" Stephen looked to his wife. "What do you say?"

"We have no choice," said Anne, her head bowed. "We have no choice. And after what we did..." She covered her eyes with her hand.

"If you refer to hiring an assassin to kill the boy, we did that because we had no choice," said Stephen, grim and stern. "Very well, Lady Iridal. I grant you a fortnight. At the end of that time, we meet with Prince Rees'ahn at Seven Fields, there to make final plans for the alliance of our three armies and the eventual overthrow of the Tribus empire. If Bane is still in elven hands by that time..."

He sighed, shook his head.

"Do not worry, Your Majesty!" said Iridal. "I will not fail you. This time, I will not fail my son." She made a low reverence, to both king and queen.

"I will escort you out, my lady," offered Trian. "It would be best if you left the way you entered. The fewer who know you were here, the better. If Your Majesties—"

"Yes, yes. Dismissed." Stephen waved his hand abruptly.

He cast a meaningful glance at the magus as Trian left. Trian lowered his eyes, indicating he understood.

Magus and mysteriarch left the room. Stephen sat down to await his wizard's return.

The Lords of Night spread their cloaks over the sky. The glitter of the Firmament faded. The room in which king and queen waited together, silent and unmoving, grew dark. Neither moved to strike a light. Their dark thoughts were suited to night's shadows.

A door opened softly—not the door by which the magus and Lady Iridal had left but another door, a secret door, located in the back of the study and concealed by a wall painting. Trian emerged, carrying an iron glowlamp to light his way.

Stephen blinked in the light, lifted his hand to shield his eyes. "Douse that thing," he ordered.

Trian did as he was told.

"She told us herself Hugh the Hand was dead. She described his death to us."

"Obviously, she lied, sire. Either that, or she is insane. And I do not believe she is insane. I think rather she foresaw the day when this knowledge would be of use to her."

Stephen grunted, was silent again. Then he said, slowly, heavily, "You know what must be done. I presume that was why you brought her here."

"Yes, sire. Although I must confess I had not dreamed she would offer to go fetch the child herself. I had hoped only that she might establish contact with him. This makes matters much simpler, of course."

Queen Anne rose to her feet. "Is that necessary, Stephen? Couldn't we let her try?...\*\*"

"So long as that boy lives—whether in High Realm, Low Realm, this realm, any realm—he is a danger to us... and to our daughter."

Anne lowered her head, said nothing more. Stephen looked at Trian, nodded. The magus bowed, glided out of the room, leaving by the secret door.

King and queen watted a moment longer in the darkness to compose themselves, to put on the false smiles, to summon carefree laughter, to play at plotting and at intrigue, while, beneath the supper table, where no one could see, their cold hands would join, clasp together tightly.

## CHAPTER 22

### KIR MONASTERY

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

THE SHARP LINES OF GRANITE WALLS THAT FORMED THE KIR MONASTERY stood out, stark and black, against the shimmering, lambent light given off by the coralite of the hills surrounding it. The monastery itself was dark and silent; no light shone within, no sound came from within. A single, solitary glow-lamp burning feebly over the entrance—a signal to those in need—was the only evidence that anyone lived here.

Iridal dismounted from her dragon, stroked its neck, spent a few moments calming it. The creature was nervous, restive, and would not respond immediately to the sleep spell she tried to cast upon it. Riders always caused their dragons to sleep after flight. Not only did the spell provide the dragon needed rest, but also the enforced slumber rendered the creature harmless, so that it would not take it into its head to raid the countryside during the mysteriarch's absence.

But this dragon refused to be enchanted. It jerked its head away, tugged at its harness, lashed its tail this way and that. Had Iridal been an experienced dragon-rider, she would have recognized these signs as indicative of another dragon somewhere near.

Dragons are very companionable creatures, fond of their own kind, and this dragon of Iridal's was much more inclined for a friendly chat than sleep.\* The dragon was too well trained to call out (they are taught to keep silent, lest a cry give away their position to an enemy). But the creature had no need to vocalize; it could sense a companion in many other ways: smell and hearing, among other, more subtle means.

\*A note on dragons. The creatures who live permanently on Arianus are true dragons, an advanced species of reptile, who possess varying degrees of magical power, depending on each creature's own intelligence and a variety of other factors. The dragons on Arianus are not to be confused with those who occasionally appear in the guise of dragons—such as the serpent-elf Sang-drax or the dragon-serpents of Chelestra.

If the other dragon in the area had responded, Iridal would have been forced to resort to firm measures in order to subdue her mount. As it was, the other dragon refused to acknowledge in any way its fellow's presence. Iridal's borrowed dragon—a mild creature, not exceptionally quick-witted—was hurt, but was too stupid to be deeply offended. Tired from the long journey, the dragon finally relaxed and listened to Iridal's soothing words.

Seeing its eyelids droop and noting the tail begin to curl about the feet, the claws to dig more firmly in the ground to gain steady purchase, Iridal quickly intoned the spell. Her dragon soon slept deeply. Never thinking to wonder why it had been restive, her mind preoccupied with thoughts of this coming meeting that she knew would not be at all a pleasant one, Iridal forgot about the odd behavior of the dragon and set out to walk the short distance between herself and the monastery.

No outer walls surrounded the monastery. No gate barred entrance. The death monks needed no such protection. When the elves occupied human lands and entire villages were razed and destroyed, the Kir monasteries remained untouched. The most drunken, blood-mad elf sobered instantly on finding himself anywhere near the black, chill walls.\*

\*It is rumored that the Kenkari elves feel a kinship to the Kir monks, whose death-worship religion derived from a failed attempt to emulate the Kenkari in the capture of souls. Many believe that the powerful Kenkari stretched a protective hand over the human monks, forbidding elven soldiers to persecute the Kir.

Repressing a shiver, Iridal focused her mind on what was important—the recovery of her lost child—and, drawing her cloak more closely about her, proceeded with firm step to the baked clay door illuminated by the glowlamp. An iron bell hung over the door. Iridal took hold of the bellpull and jerked it. The iron tones of the bell were muffled and almost immediately swallowed up, absorbed by the building's thick walls. Accepted as a necessity for contact with the outside world, the bell was permitted to speak, but not to sing.

There came a grating sound. An opening appeared in the door. An eye appeared in the opening.

"Where is the corpse?" the voice asked in a disinterested monotone.

Iridal, her thoughts on her son, was chilled by the question, alarmed and startled. It seemed a terrible portent, and she very nearly turned around and ran off. But logic prevailed. She reminded herself of what she knew of the Kir monks, told herself that this question—so frightful to her—was perfectly natural for them.

The Kir monks worship death. They view life as a kind of prison-house existence, to be endured until the soul can escape and find true peace and happiness elsewhere. The Kir monks will not, therefore, come to the aid of the living. They will not nurse the sick, they will not feed the hungry or bind the wounds of the injured. They will, however, tend to the dead, celebrating the fact that the soul has moved on. The Kir are not disturbed by death in even its more horrible forms. They claim the victim when the murderer has done. They walk the fields of battle when the battle is ended. They enter the plague town when all others have fled.

The one service the Kir offer the living is to take in unwanted male children: orphans, bastards, inconvenient sons. These children are raised in the Order, raised to worship death, and so the Order continues.

The question the monk asked Iridal was a common question, one he asked of all who come to the monastery at this hour of night. For there would be no other reason to approach these forbidding walls.

"I do not come about the dead," said Iridal, recovering her composure. "I come about the living."

"About a child?" demanded the monk.

"Yes, Brother," answered Iridal. "Though not in the way you mean," she added silently.

The eye disappeared. The small panel in the clay door slammed shut. The door opened. The monk stood to one side, his face hidden by the black cowl he wore low over his head. He did not bow, did not offer her welcome, showed her no respect, regarded her with very little interest. She was alive, and the living did not count for much with the Kir.

The monk proceeded down a corridor without glancing back at Iridal, assuming she would follow or not as she chose. He led her to a large room not far from the entrance, certainly not far enough for her to catch more than a glimpse inside the monastery walls. It was darker within than without, for outside the walls, the coralite gave off its faint silvery glow. Inside, no lamps lit the hallways. Here and there, she caught a glimpse of a candle, its pinprick of wavering light providing safe walking for the one who held it. The monk showed Iridal into the room, told her to wait, the Abbot would be with her shortly. The monk left and shut the door behind him, locked her inside, in the dark.

Iridal smiled even as she shivered and huddled deeper within her cloak. The door was baked clay, as were all the doors in the monastery. She could, with her magic, shiver it like ice. But she sat and waited in patience, knowing that now was not the time to resort to threats. That would come later.

The door opened; a man entered, carrying a candle. He was old and large-framed, lean and spare, his flesh seeming insufficient to cover his bones. He did not wear his cowl over his head, but let it fall on his thin shoulders. His head was bald, perhaps shaved. He barely spared Iridal a glance as he crossed in front of her without courtesy, came to sit behind a desk. Lifting a pen, he reached out, drew forth a sheet of parchment, and—still not looking at Iridal—prepared to write.

"We do not offer money, you know," said the man, who must have been the Abbot, though he did not bother to introduce himself. "We will take the child off your hands. That is all. Are you the boy's mother?"

Again, the question struck painfully near the mark of her thoughts. Iridal knew well the Abbot assumed she had come to rid herself of an unwanted burden; she had decided to use this ruse to obtain entry. But she found herself answering nonetheless.

Yes, I am Bane's mother. I gave him up. I let my husband take my child and give him to another. What could I do to stop him? I was frightened. Sinistrad held my father's life in bondage. And when my child returned to me, I tried to win him back. I did try! But, again, what could I do? Sinistrad threatened to kill them, those who came with Bane. The Geg, the man with the blue skin, and... and...

"Really, madam," said the Abbot coldly, raising his head, regarding her for the first time since he'd come into the room. "You should have made up your mind to this before you disturbed us. Do you want us to take this boy or don't you?"

"I didn't come about a child," said Iridal, banishing the past. "I came to talk to someone who resides in this house."

"Impossible!" stated the Abbot. His face was pinched and gaunt, the eyes sunken. They glared at her from dark shadows, reflected the candlelight that was two flickering points of flame in the glistening orbs- "Once man or boy enters that door, he leaves the world behind. He has no father or mother, sister or brother, lover or friend. Respect his vows. Be gone, and do not disturb him."

The Abbot rose. So did Iridal. He expected her to leave, was somewhat surprised and considerably displeased—to judge by his baleful expression—to see her take a step forward, confront him.

"I do respect your ways, Lord Abbot. My business is not with any of the brothers, but one who has never taken vows. He is the one who is permitted to reside here, against—I may add—all rules, in defiance of tradition. He is called Hugh the Hand."

The Abbot did not flicker an eyelid. "You are mistaken," he said, speaking with such conviction that Iridal must have believed him had she not known positively the monk was lying. "One who called himself by that name used to live with us, but that was as a child. He left, long ago. We have no knowledge of him."

"The first is true," Iridal answered. "The second is a lie. He came back to you, about a year ago. He told a strange tale and begged admittance. You either believed his story or thought him mad and took pity on him. No," she interrupted herself. "You pity no one. You believed his story, then. I wonder why?"

An eyebrow moved, lifted. "If you saw him, you would have no need to ask why." The Abbot folded his hands across his lank body. "I will not bandy words with you, Lady. It is obviously a waste of time. Yes, one who calls himself Hugh the Hand does reside here. No, he has not taken vows that shut him off from the world. Yet, he is shut off. He has done so himself. He will not see a living soul from the outside. Only us. And then only when we bring him food and drink."

Iridal shuddered, but she stood firm. "Nonetheless, I will see him." Drawing aside her cloak, she revealed a silvery gray dress, trimmed in cabalistic symbols on the hem, the neck, the cuffs of the sleeves and the belt she wore around her waist. "I am one you term a mysteriarch. I am of the High Realm. My magic could crack that clay door, crack these walls, crack your head if I choose. You will take me to see Hugh the Hand."

The Abbot shrugged. It was nothing to him. He would have allowed her to tear the Abbey down stone by stone before he permitted her to see one who had taken the vows. But the man Hugh was different. He was here by sufferance. Let him look out for himself.

"This way," said the Abbot, ungraciously, walking past her to the door. "You will speak to no one, nor lift your eyes to look at anyone. On pain of expulsion." He was not, it seemed, particularly impressed by her threats. After all, a mysteriarch was just another corpse, as far as the Kir were concerned.

"I said I respected your vows and I will do what is required of me," responded Iridal crisply. "I care nothing for what goes on in here. My business"—she emphasized the word—"is with Hugh the Hand."

The Abbot stalked out carrying the candle, the only light, and he blocked out most of it with his robed body. Iridal, coming behind, found it difficult to see her footing. She was forced, therefore, to keep her eyes fixed on the ground, for the floors of the ancient building were cracked and uneven. The halls were deserted, quiet. She had a vague impression of shut doors on either side of her. Once she thought she heard a baby cry, and her heart ached for the poor child, alone and abandoned in such a dismal place.

They reached a stairway, and here the Abbot actually stopped and obtained a candle for her before proceeding downward. Iridal concluded that he was not so much concerned for her safety as trying to avoid the nuisance of dealing with her should she fall and break anything. At the bottom of the stairs, they came to water cellars. Doors stood barred and locked to protect the precious liquid that was not only used for drinking and cooking but was also part of the Abbey's wealth.

Apparently, however, not all doors guarded water. The Abbot stalked over to one, reached down and rattled the handle.

"You have a visitor, Hugh."

No answer. Just a scraping sound, as of a chair, lurching across the floor.

The Abbot rattled the handle more loudly.

"He is locked in? You've made him a prisoner?" asked Iridal in a low voice.

"He makes himself a prisoner, Lady," retorted the Abbot. "He has the key inside with him. We may not enter—you may not enter—unless he hands the key to us."

Iridal's resolve wavered. She very nearly left again. She doubted now if Hugh could help her, and she was afraid to face what he had become. Yet, if he didn't help her, who would? Not Stephen, that much had been made clear. Not the other mysteriarchs. Powerful wizards, most of them, but with no love for her dead husband, no reason to want progeny of Sinistrad's returned to them.

As for other mundane humans, Iridal knew very few, was not impressed by those she'd met. Hugh alone filled all her needs. He knew how to pilot an elven dragonship, he had traveled in elven lands, he spoke the elven language fluently, was familiar with elven customs. He was bold and daring; he'd earned his livelihood as a professional assassin, and he'd been the best in the business. As Iridal had reminded Stephen, he—a king who could afford the best—had once hired Hugh the Hand.

The Abbot repeated, "Hugh, you have a visitor,"

"Go to hell," said a voice from within.

Iridal sighed. The voice was slurred and harsh from smoking stregno—Iridal could smell the reek of his pipe out in the hall—from strong drink and disuse. But she recognized it.

The key. That was her hope. He kept the key himself, obviously afraid that if he gave it to others, he might be tempted to tell them to let him out. There must be part of him, then, that wanted out.

"Hugh the Hand, it is Iridal of the High Realm. I am in desperate need. I must speak with you. I ... I want to hire you."

She had little doubt that he'd refuse and she knew, from the slight, disdainful smile on the Abbot's thin lips, that he thought the same.

"Iridal," repeated Hugh, in puzzled tones, as if the name was wandering around the liquor-soaked dregs of his mind. "Iridal!"

The last was a harsh whisper, an expelled breath, as of something long wished for and finally achieved. But there was neither love nor longing in that voice. Rather, a rage that might have melted granite.

A heavy body thudded against the clay door, followed by a fumbling and scraping. A panel slid aside. A red eye, partially hidden beneath a mat of filthy hair, stared out, found her, fixed on her, unblinking.

"Iridal..."

The panel slid shut abruptly.

The Abbot glanced at her, curious to see her response, probably expecting her to turn and flee. Iridal stood firm, the fingers of one hand, hidden beneath her cloak, digging into her flesh. The other hand, which held the candle, was steady.

Frantic activity sounded inside: furniture being overturned, casks upset, as if Hugh was searching for something. A snarl of triumph. A metal object struck the lower half of the door. Another snarl, this one of frustration, then a key shot out from beneath the crack.

The Abbot leaned down, picked the key up, held it in his hand a moment, eyeing it speculatively. He looked at Iridal, silently asking her if she wanted him to proceed.

Lips pressed together, she indicated with a cold nod that he was to open the door. Shrugging, the Abbot did so. The moment the lock clicked, the clay door was flung open from the inside. An apparition appeared in the doorway, silhouetted against dimly lit, smoke-filled shadows behind, illuminated by the candlelight before him. The apparition sprang at Iridal. Strong hands grabbed hold of her arms, dragged her inside the cell, and flung her back against a wall. She dropped the candle; it fell to the floor, the light drowning in a pool of spilled wax.

Hugh the Hand, blocking the door with his body, faced the Abbot.

"The key," the Hand commanded.

The Abbot gave it over.

"Leave us!"

Catching hold of the door, Hugh slammed it shut. Turning, he faced Iridal. She heard the Abbot's soft footfalls pad disinterestedly away.

The cell was small. The furniture consisted of a crude bed, a table, a chair—overturned—and a bucket in a corner, used— by the stench—to hold the body's wastes. A thick wax candle stood on the table. Hugh's pipe lay beside it. A mug stood near that, along with a plate of half-eaten food and a bottle of some liquor that smiled almost as bad as the stregno.

Iridal took in all these objects with a swift glance that was also searching for weapons. Her fear was not for herself; she was armored with her powerful magic that could subdue the man more swiftly and easily than she subdued her dragon. She feared for Hugh, that he might do some harm to himself before she could stop him, for she assumed that he was drunk beyond the point of sanity.

He stood before her, staring at her, his face—with its hawk nose, strong forehead, deep-set, narrow eyes—was hideous, half-hidden by wandering shadows and a haze of yellow-tinged smoke. He breathed heavily, from the frenzied exertion, the liquor, and an avid excitement that made his body tremble. He lurched unsteadily toward her, hands outstretched. The light fell full upon his face and then Iridal was afraid for herself, for the liquor had inflamed his skin but did not touch his eyes.

Some part of him, deep within, was sober; some part that could not be touched by the wine, no matter how much he drank; some part that could not be drowned. His face was almost unrecognizable, ravaged by bitter grief and inner torment. His black hair was streaked with gray; his beard, once rakishly braided, was uncombed, and had grown long and scraggly. He wore a torn shirt and a leather vest and breeches stained and stiff with dirt. His hard-muscled body had gone soft, yet he had a strength born of the wine, for Iridal could still feel the bite of his fingers on her bruised arms.

He staggered closer. She marked the key in his shaking hand. The words of a spell were on her lips, but she didn't say them. She could see his face clearly now, and she could have wept for him. Pity, compassion, the memory that he had given his life, died horribly to save her child, moved her to reach out her hands to him.

He caught hold of her wrists, his grasp crushing and painful, and fell to his knees before her.

"End this curse!" he pleaded, his voice choked. "I beg you, Lady! End this curse you have put upon me! Free me! Let me go!"

He bowed his head. Harsh, dry sobs tore his body. He shook and shivered, his nerveless hands let slip their hold. Iridal bent over him, her tears falling on the graying hair that she smoothed with chill fingers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered brokenly. "So sorry."

He raised his head. "I don't want your damn pity! Free me!" he repeated again, harsh, urgent. His hands clutched at hers. "You don't know what you've done! End it... now!"

She regarded him for long moments, unable to speak.

"I can't, Hugh. It was not me."

"Yes!" he cried fiercely. "I saw you! When I woke—"

She shook her head. "Such a spell is far beyond my power, thank the ancestors. You know," she said to him, looking into the pleading, hopeless eyes. "You must know. It was Alfred."

"Alfred!" He gasped the word. "Where is he? Did he come... ?"

He saw the answer in her eyes and threw his head back as if the agony was more than he could endure. Two great tears welled from beneath squinched-shut eyelids, rolled down his cheeks into the thick and matted beard. He drew a deep and shivering breath and suddenly went berserk, began to scream in terrible anger, claw at his face and hair with his hands. And, as suddenly, he pitched forward on his face and lay still and unmoving as the dead.

Which he had once been.

## CHAPTER 23

### KIR MONASTERY

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

HUGH WOKE WITH A BUZZING IN HIS HEAD—A DULL, THROBBING ACHE that went up his neck and stabbed through to the back of his eyeballs—and a tongue thick and swollen. He knew what was wrong with him and he knew how to fix it. He sat up on the bed, his hand groping for the wine bottle that was never far from reach. It was then he saw her and memory hit him a blow that was cruel and hurt worse than the pain in his head. He stared at her wordlessly.

She sat in a chair—the only chair—and had, by her attitude, been sitting there for some time. She was pale and cold, colorless—with her white hair and silver robes—as the ice of the Firmament. Except for her eyes, which were the myriad colors of sunlight on a crystal prism.

"The bottle's here, if you want it," she said.

Hugh managed to get his feet beneath him, heaved himself up and out of bed, paused a moment to wait until the light bursting in his vision had faded enough for him to see beyond it, and made his way to the table. He noted the arrival of another chair, noted at the same time that his cell had been cleaned.

And so had he.

His hair and beard were filled with a fine powder, his skin was raw and it itched. The pungent smell of grise\* clung to him. The smell brought back vivid memories of his childhood, of the Kir monks scrubbing the squirming bodies of young boys—abandoned bastards, like himself.

\*Those who can't afford water for bathing use grise to cleanse the body or any other surface. A pumicelike substance made from ground coralite, grise is often mixed with headroot, an herb with a strong, but not offensive odor, used to kill lice, fleas, ticks, and other vermin.

Hugh grimaced, scratched his bearded chin, and poured himself a mug of the cheap, raw wine. He was starting to drink it when he remembered that he had a guest. There was only one mug. He held it out to her, grimly pleased to note that his hand did not tremble.

Iridal shook her head. "No, thank you," she said, not aloud, her lips forming the words.

Hugh grunted, tossed down the wine in one swift gulp that kept him from tasting it. The buzzing in his head receded, the pain dulled. He lifted the bottle without thinking, hesitated. He could let the questions go unanswered. What did it matter anyway? Or he could find out what was going on, why she'd come.

"You gave me a bath?" he said, eyeing her.

A faint flush stained the pale cheeks. She did not look at him. "The monks did," she said. "I made them. And they scrubbed the floor, brought fresh linen, a clean shirt."

"I'm impressed," said Hugh. "Amazing enough they let you in. Then do your bidding. What'd you threaten 'em with? Howling winds, quakes; maybe dry up their water...?"

She did not respond. Hugh was talking for the sake of filling up the silence, and both knew it.

"How long was I out?"

"Many hours. I don't know."

"And you stayed and did all this." He glanced around his cell. "Must be important, what you came for."

"It is," she said, and turned her eyes upon him.

He had forgotten their beauty, her beauty. He had forgotten that he loved her, pitied her, forgotten that he'd died for her, for her son. All lost in the dreams that tormented him at night, the dreams that not even the wine could drown. And he came to realize, as he sat and looked into her eyes, that last night, for the first time in a long time, he had not dreamed at all.

"I want to hire you," she said, her voice cool and business-like. "I want you to do a job for me—"

"No!" he cried, springing to his feet, oblivious to the flash of pain in his head. "I will not go back out there!"

Fist clenched, he smashed it on the table, toppled the wine bottle, sent it crashing to the floor. The thick glass did not break, but the liquid spilled out, seeping into the cracks in the stone.

She stared at him, shocked. "Sit down, please. You are not well."

He winced at the pain, clutched his head, swayed on his feet. Leaning heavily on the table, he stumbled back to his chair, sank down.

"Not well." He tried to laugh. "This is a hangover, Lady, in case you've never seen one." He stared into the shadows. "I tried it, you know," he said abruptly. "Tried going back to my old calling. When they brought me

down from that place. Death is my trade. The only thing I know. But no one would hire me. No one can stand to be around me, except them." He jerked his head in the direction of the door, indicating the monks.

"What do you mean, no one would hire you?"

"They sit down to talk to me. They start to tell me their grievances, start to name the mark they want assassinated, start to tell me where to find him... and, little by little, they dry up. Not just once. It happened five times, ten. I don't know. I lost count."

"What happens?" Iridal urged gently.

"They go on and on about the mark and how much they hate him and how they want him to die and how he should suffer like he made their daughter suffer or their father or whoever. But the more they tell me this, the more nervous they get. They look at me and then look away, then sneak a look back, and look away again. And their voices drop, they get mixed up in what they've said. They stammer and cough and then usually, without a word, they get up and run. You'd think," he added grimly, "they'd stabbed their mark themselves and were caught with the bloody knife in their hands."

"But they did, in their hearts," said Iridal.

"So? Guilt never plagued any of my patrons before. Why now? What's changed?"

"You've changed, Hugh. Before, you were like the coralite, soaking up their evil, absorbing it, taking it into yourself, freeing them of the responsibility. But now, you've become like the crystals of the Firmament. They look at you, and they see their own evil reflected back to them. You have become our conscience."

"Hell of a note for an assassin," he said, sneering. "Makes it damn hard to find work!" He stared unseeing at the wine bottle, nudged it with his foot, sent it rolling around in circles on the floor. His blurred gaze shifted to her. "I don't do that to you."

"Yes, you do. That's how I know." Iridal sighed. "I look at you, and I see my folly, my blindness, my stupidity, my weakness. I married a man I knew to be heartless and evil out of some romantic notion that I could change him. By the time I understood the truth, I was hopelessly entangled in Sinistrad's snares. Worse, I'd given birth to an innocent child, allowed him to become tangled in the same web."

"I could have stopped my husband, but I was frightened. And it was easy to tell myself that he would change, that it would all get better. And then you came, and brought my son to me, and, at last, I saw the bitter fruit of my folly. I saw what I had done to Bane, what I'd made him through my weakness. I saw it then. I see it now, looking at you."

"I thought it was them," said Hugh, as if he hadn't heard her. "I thought the world had gone mad. Then I began to realize it was me. The dreams..." He shuddered, shook his head. "No, I won't talk about the dreams."

"Why did you come here?"

He shrugged, voice bitter. "I was desperate, out of money. Where else could I go? The monks said I would return, you know. They always said I'd be back." He glanced around with a haunted look, then shook himself, shook off the memories.

"Anyway, the Abbot told me what was wrong. He took one look at me and told me what had happened. I had died. I'd left this life... and been dragged back. Resurrected." Hugh gave the bottle a sudden, vicious kick, sent it spinning across the floor.

"You... don't remember?" Iridal faltered.

He regarded her in silence, dark, glowering. "The dreams remember. The dreams remember a place beautiful beyond words, beyond... dreams. Understanding, compassion..." He fell silent, swallowed, coughed, and cleared his throat. "But the journey to reach that place is terrible. The pain. The guilt. The knowledge of my crimes. My soul wrenched from my body. And now I can't go back. I tried."

Iridal stared at him, horrified. "Suicide... ?"

He smiled, a terrible smile. "I failed. Both times. Too damn scared."

"It takes courage to live, not to die," said Iridal.

"How the hell would you know, Lady?" Hugh sneered.

Iridal looked away, stared at her hands twisting in her lap.

"Tell me what happened," said Hugh.

"You... you and Sinistrad fought. You stabbed him, but the wound was not mortal. He had the power to turn himself into a snake, attacked you. His magic... poison in your blood. He died, but not before he had..."

"Killed me," said Hugh dryly.

Iridal licked her lips, did not look at him. "The dragon attacked us. Sinistrad's dragon, the Quicksilver. With my husband dead, the dragon was free from his control and went berserk. Then, it all becomes confused in my mind. Haplo—the man with the blue skin—took Bane away. I knew I was going to die... and I didn't care. You're right." She looked up, smiled at him wanly. "Death did seem easier than living. But Alfred enchanted the dragon, put it in thrall. And then..."

The memory came back....

Iridal gazed in awe at the dragon, whose giant head was swaying back and forth, as if it heard a soothing, lulling voice.

"You've imprisoned it in its mind," she said.

"Yes," Alfred agreed. "The strongest cage ever built."

"And I am free," she said in wonder. "And it isn't too late. There is hope! Bane, my son! Bane!"

Iridal ran toward the door where she'd last seen him. The door was gone. The walls of her prison had collapsed, but the rubble blocked her path.

"Bane!" she cried, trying vainly to drag aside one of the heavy stones that the dragon had knocked down in its fury. Her magic would help her, but she couldn't think of the words. She was too tired, too empty. But she had to reach him. If only she could move this rock!

"Don't, my dear," said a kind voice. Gentle hands took hold of her. "It won't do any good. He has gone far away by now, back to the elven ship. Haplo has taken him."

"Haplo taken... my son?" Iridal couldn't make any sense of it. "Why? What does he want with him?"

"I don't know," Alfred replied. "I'm not sure. But don't worry. We'll get him back. I know where they're going."

"Then we should go after them," said Iridal.

But she gazed helplessly about. Doors had disappeared, blocked by debris. Holes gaped in the walls revealing more destruction beyond. The room was changed so completely that it was suddenly unfamiliar to her, as if she had walked into the bouse of a stranger. She had no idea where to go, how to leave, how to find her way out.

And then she saw Hugh.

She'd known he'd died. She'd tried to make him hear before he died, that he'd helped her, that now she understood. But he'd left her too soon, too quickly. She sank down beside the body, took the chill hand in her own, pressed it to her cheek. His face, in death, was calm and reflected a peace the man had never known in life, a peace Iridal envied.

"You gave your life for me, for my son," she told him. "I wish you could have lived, to see that I will make use of this gift. You taught me so much. You could teach me still. You could help me. And I could have helped you. I could have filled the emptiness inside you. Why didn't I, when I had the chance?"

"What would have happened to him, do you suppose, if he had not died?" Alfred asked.

"I think he would have tried to make up for the evil he did in his life. He was a prisoner, like me," Iridal answered "But he managed to escape. Now he is free."

"You, too, are free," said Alfred.

"Yes, but I am alone," said Iridal.

She sat by Hugh, holding his lifeless hand, her mind empty as her heart. She liked the emptiness. She didn't feel anything and she was afraid of feeling. The pain would come, more awful than dragon claws tearing at her flesh. The pain of regret, tearing her soul.

She was vaguely aware of Alfred chanting, of him dancing his slow and graceful dance that looked so incongruous—the elderly man, with his bald head and flapping coattails, his too-big feet and clumsy hands—whirling and dipping and bobbing about the rubble-filled room. She had no idea what he was doing. She didn't care.

She sat, holding Hugh's hand... and felt his fingers twitch.

Iridal didn't believe it. "My mind is playing tricks. When we want something very badly, we convince ourselves—"

The fingers moved in hers, spasmodic motion, death throes.

Except Hugh had been dead a long time, long enough for the flesh to chill, the blood to drain from lips and face, the eyes to have fixed in the head.

"I'm going mad," said Iridal, and dropped the hand back on the unmoving breast. She leaned forward to close the staring eyes. They shifted, looked at her. His lids blinked. His hand stirred. His breast rose and fell.

He gave an anguished, agonized scream....

When Iridal regained her senses, she was lying in another room, another house—a friend's house, belonging to one of the other mysteriarchs of the High Realm.

Alfred stood beside her, gazing down on her with an anxious expression.

"Hugh!" cried Iridal, sitting up. "Where is Hugh?"

"He's being cared for, my dear," said Alfred solicitously and—so it seemed to Iridal—somewhat confusedly. "He's going to be all right. Don't worry yourself over him. Some of your friends took him away."

"I want to see him!"

"I don't think that would be wise," said Alfred. "Please, lay back down."

He fussed with the blanket, covered her, wrapped it tenderly around her feet, smoothed out imaginary wrinkles.

"You should rest, Lady Iridal. You've been through a terrible ordeal. The shock, the strain. Hugh was grievously wounded, but he is being treated—"

"He was dead," said Iridal.

Alfred wouldn't look at her. He kept fiddling with the blankets.

Iridal tried to catch hold of his hand, but Alfred was too quick for her. He backed away several steps. When he spoke, he spoke to his shoes.

"Hugh wasn't dead. He was terribly wounded. I can see how you would have been mistaken. The poison has that effect, sometimes. Of... of making the living appear to be dead."

Iridal threw back the blanket, rose to her feet, advanced on Alfred, who attempted to sidle away, perhaps even flee the room. But he fell over his feet and stumbled, caught himself on a chair.

"He was dead. You brought him back to life!"

"No, no. Don't be ridiculous." Alfred gave a feeble laugh. "You... you've suffered a great shock. You're imagining things. I couldn't possibly. Why, no one could!"

"A Sartan could," said Iridal. "I know about the Sartan. Sinistrad studied them. He was obsessed with them, with their magic. Their library is here, in the High Realms. He could never find the key that unlocked their mysteries. But he knew about them, from the writings they left in human and elven. And they had the power to resurrect the dead. Necromancy—"

"No!" Alfred protested, shuddering. "I mean yes, they... we have the power. But it must never be used. Never used. For every life that is brought back untimely, another dies . untimely. We may help the grievously injured, do all we can to draw them back from the threshold, but once they cross beyond... never!"

"Never...."

"Alfred was insistent, calm, and firm in his denial," said Iridal, returning from the past with a gentle sigh. "He answered all my questions freely, if not fully. I began to think that I had been mistaken. That you were only wounded.

"I know," she said, seeing Hugh's bitter smile. "I know the truth now. I knew it then, I think, but I didn't want to believe it, for Alfred's sake. He was so kind to me, helping me search for my child, when he could have easily abandoned me, for he has troubles of his own."

Hugh grunted. He had little use for another man's troubles. "He lied. He was the one who brought me back! The bastard lied."

"I'm not so sure," said Iridal, sighing. "It's odd, but I believe that he believes he is telling the truth. He has no memory of what truly happened."

"When I get hold of him, he'll remember. Sartan or not."

Iridal glanced at him, somewhat astonished. "You believe me?"

"About Alfred?" Hugh eyed her grimly, reached for his pipe. "Yes, I believe you. I think I knew all along, though I didn't want to admit it. That wasn't the first time he performed this resurrection trick of his."

"Then why did you think I did it?" she asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," Hugh muttered, fumbling with the pipe. "Maybe I wanted to believe it was you who brought me back."

Iridal flushed, averted her head. "In a way, it was. He saved you out of pity for my grief, and out of compassion for your sacrifice."

The two sat long moments in silence, Iridal staring at her hands, Hugh sucking on the cold and empty pipe. To light it would mean standing up and walking over to the fire grate and he wasn't certain he could navigate even that short distance without falling. He eyed the empty wine bottle with regret. He could have called for another, but decided against it. He had a clear purpose now, and he had the means to obtain it.

"How did you find me?" he asked. "And why did you wait so long?"

Her flush deepened. She raised her head, answered the last question first. "How could I come? To see you again... the pain would have been more than I could bear. I went to the other mysteriarchs, the ones who took you from the castle and brought you down here. They told me..." Iridal hesitated, not certain where her words might lead her.

"That I'd gone back to my old profession, as if nothing had happened. Well, I tried to pretend it hadn't," Hugh said grimly. "I didn't think you'd appreciate having me show up on your doorstep."

"It wasn't like that. Believe me, Hugh, if I had known—" She couldn't quite see where that was going either and fell silent.

"Known that I'd turned into a drunken sot, you would have been glad to give me a few bars and a bowl of soup, and a place to sleep in your stable? Well, thanks, Lady, but I don't need your pity!"

He stood up, ignored the pain that shot through his head, and glared down at her.

"What do you want of me?" he snarled, teeth clenched over the pipe stem. "What can I do for Your Ladyship?"

She was angry in her turn. No one—especially drunken, washed-up assassins—spoke to a mysteriarch like that. The rainbow eyes glittered like the sun through a prism. She rose to her feet, drew herself up in offended dignity.

"Well?" he demanded.

Looking at him, seeing his anguish, she faltered, "I suppose I deserved that. Forgive me—"

"Damn it!" Hugh cried, nearly biting the pipe stem in two. His jaws ached with the strain. He slammed his fist on the table. "What the devil do you want with me?"

She was pale. "To... to hire you."

He regarded her silently, grimly. Turning away from her, he walked over to the door, stared at the closed panel.

"Who's the mark? And keep your voice down."

"There is no mark!" Iridal replied. "I have not come to hire you to kill. My son has been found. He is being held hostage by the elves. I intend to try to free him. And I need your help."

Hugh grunted. "So that's it. Where've the elves got the kid?"

"In the Imperanon."

Incredulous, Hugh turned, stared at Iridal. "The Imperanon? Lady, you need help, all right." Taking his pipe from his mouth, he pointed it at her. "Maybe someone should lock you up in a cell..."

"I can pay you. Pay you well. The royal treasury—"

"—doesn't hold enough," said Hugh. "There's not enough barls in the world that could pay me to march into the heart of the enemy empire and fetch back that little—"

The flare of her rainbow eyes warned him not to proceed.

"Obviously I have made a mistake," she said coldly. "I will trouble you no further."

She walked toward the door. Hugh remained standing in front of it, blocking it, did not move.

"Step aside," she ordered.

Hugh put the pipe back in his mouth, sucked on it a moment, regarded her with grim amusement. "You need me, Lady. I'm the only chance you've got. You'll pay me what I ask."

"What do you ask?" she demanded.

"Help me find Alfred."

She stared at him, shocked into silence. Then she shook her head. "No... that's not possible! He's gone. I have no way of finding him."

"Maybe he's with Bane."

"The other is with my son. Haplo, the man with the blue skin. And if Haplo is with Bane, Alfred is not. They're bitter enemies. I can't explain, Hugh. You wouldn't understand."

Hugh flung his pipe to the floor. Reaching out, he caught hold of her, gripped her arms hard.

"You're hurting me," she protested.

"I know. I don't give a damn. You try to understand, Lady," said Hugh. "Imagine you've been blind from birth. You're content in a world of darkness, because you know nothing different. Then, suddenly, you're given the gift of sight. You see all the wonders you've never even been able to imagine—the sky and trees, clouds and the Firmament. And then, suddenly, the gift is ripped away. You're blind again. You're plunged back into darkness. But this time, you know what you've lost."

"I'm sorry," whispered Iridal. She started to lift her hand, to touch his face.

Hugh flung her back. Angry, ashamed, he turned away.

"I agree to the bargain," she said softly. "If you do this for me, I'll do what I can to help you find Alfred."

Neither spoke for a moment, neither was able.

"How much time do we have?" he asked gruffly.

"A fortnight. Stephen meets then with Prince Rees'ahn. Though I don't think the Tribus elves know about..."

"The hell they don't, Lady. The Tribus don't dare let that meeting come off. I wonder what they had in mind before that kid of yours fell into their hands? Rees'ahn's smart. He's survived three assassination attempts by their special guard, the ones they call the Unseen. Some say the prince is being warned by the Kenkari..."

Hugh paused, pondered. "Now that gives me an idea."

He fell silent, felt about his clothing for his pipe, forgetting he'd thrown it from him.

Iridal reached down, picked it up, handed it to him. He took it from her almost absentmindedly, fished some stregno out of a greasy leather pouch, and stuffed it into the bowl. Walking to the fire grate, he lifted a glowing coal with a pair of tongs, touched the coal to the bowl. A thin trail of smoke rose, bringing with it the acrid odor of the stregno.

"What—" Iridal began.

"Shut up," Hugh snapped. "Look, from now on, Lady, you do what I say, when I say it. No questions. I'll explain, if I have time, but if I don't, then you have to trust me. I'll rescue that kid of yours. And you help me find Alfred. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes," Iridal answered steadily.

"Good." He lowered his voice, his glance going again to the door. "I need two monks in here, no one watching. Can you manage that?"

Iridal walked over to the door, slid aside the panel. A monk stood in the hallway, probably ordered to wait for her.

She nodded. "Are you capable of walking?" she asked loudly, in disgust.

Hugh took the hint. He placed his pipe carefully near the grate, then, catching up the wine bottle, he smashed it on the floor. He kicked over the table, tumbled down into the puddle of spilled wine and broken glass, and rolled about in the mess.

"Oh, yeah," he mumbled, trying to stand and falling back down. "I can walk. Sure. Let's go."

Iridal stepped to the door, rapped on it briskly. "Go fetch the Abbot," she ordered.

The monk left. The Abbot returned. Iridal unlocked the door, opened it.

"Hugh the Hand has agreed to accompany me," she said, "but you see the state he's in. He can't walk without assistance. If two of your monks could carry him, I would be extremely grateful."

The Abbot frowned, looked dubious. Iridal removed a purse from beneath her cloak. "My gratitude is of a material nature," she said, smiling. "A donation to the Abbey is always welcome, I believe."

The Abbot accepted the purse. "Two of the brethren will be sent. But you may neither see nor speak to them."

"I understand, Lord. I am ready to leave now." She did not look back at Hugh, but she could hear the crunch of broken glass, heavy breathing, and muttered curses.

The Abbot appeared highly pleased and gratified at her departure. The mysteriarch had disturbed his Abbey with her imperious demands, caused a stir among the brethren, brought too much of the world of the living into one devoted to the dead. He himself escorted Iridal up the stairs, through the Abbey, and out the front entrance. He promised that Hugh would be sent out to meet her, if he could walk, carried if he could not. Perhaps the Abbot was not sorry to rid himself of this troublesome guest as well.

Iridal bowed, expressed her thanks. She hesitated, wanting to remain nearby, in case Hugh needed her help.

But the Abbot, clutching the purse, did not go back inside the Abbey. He waited beneath the glowlamp, intending to make certain that the woman was truly leaving.

Iridal had no recourse, therefore, but to turn and depart the Abbey grounds, make her way back to her slumbering dragon. Only then, when the Abbot saw her with the dragon, did he turn and stalk into the Abbey, slam shut the door.

Looking back, Iridal wondered what to do, wished she knew what Hugh had planned. She decided that the best thing she could do was awaken the dragon, have it ready to carry them speedily away from this place.

Waking a slumbering dragon is always a tricky maneuver, for dragons are independent by nature, and if the beast woke up free of the spell that enthralled it, it might decide to fly away, attack her, attack the Abbey, or a combination of all three.

Fortunately, the dragon remained under enchantment. It emerged from sleep only slightly irritated at being awakened. Iridal soothed and praised it, promised it a treat when they returned home.

The dragon stretched its wings, lashed its tail, and proceeded to inspect its scaly hide for signs of the tiny and insidious dragon-wyrm, a parasite fond of burrowing beneath the scales and sucking the dragon's blood.

Iridal left it to its task, turned to watch the Abbey entrance, which she could see from her vantage point. She was just beginning to be anxious, more than half-afraid that Hugh might have changed his mind. She was wondering how to cope if he had, for the Abbot would most certainly not let her return, no matter what dire magics she threatened.

Then Hugh burst out the front door, almost as if he had been shoved from behind. He carried a bundle in one arm—a cloak and clothes for the journey, no doubt—and a bottle of wine in the other. He fell, caught himself, glanced backward, said something it was probably just as well Iridal couldn't hear. Then he straightened, stared around, obviously wondering where she was.

Iridal lifted her arm, waved to draw his attention, called out to him.

Perhaps it was the sound of her voice—startlingly loud in the clear, frosty night—or her sudden movement. She never knew. Something jolted the dragon out of its enchantment.

A shrill shriek rose behind her, wings flapped, and, before she could stop it, the dragon had taken to the air. The dragon's disenchantment was nothing more than a minor annoyance for a mysteriarch. Iridal had only to recast a very simple spell, but, to do so, she was forced to turn her attention away from Hugh for a few moments.

Unfamiliar with the intrigues and machinations of the royal court, it never occurred to Iridal that the distraction was deliberate.

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HUGH SAW THE DRAGON TAKE TO THE AIR, KNEW IMMEDIATELY THAT IT had slipped the reins of its enchantment. He was no magus. There was nothing he could do to help Iridal recapture it or cast a spell on it. Shrugging, he pulled the cork of the wine bottle out with his teeth and was about to take a drink when he heard a man's voice, speaking to him from the shadows.

"Make no sudden movement. Give no indication you hear me. Walk over this direction."

Hugh knew the man, searched to give the voice a name and a face, but failed. The wine-soaked months of self-imposed captivity had drowned the memory. He could see nothing in the darkness. For all he knew, an arrow was nocked and aimed at his heart. And though he sought death, he sought it on his own terms, not on someone else's. He wondered briefly if Iridal had led him into this ambush, decided not. Her anxiety over that kid of hers had been too real.

The man seemed to know Hugh was only pretending to be drunk, but the Hand figured it couldn't hurt to keep up the pretense. He acted as if he hadn't heard, lurched in the general direction of the voice by accident. His hands fumbled with his bundle and wine bottle—which had now become shield and weapon. Using his cloak to conceal his motions, he shifted the heavy bundle in his left hand, ready to lift it to protect himself, readjusted his right hand's grip on the neck of the wine bottle. With one quick motion, he could smash the glass against a head, across a face.

Muttering beneath his breath about the inability of women to control dragons, Hugh staggered out of the small pool of light that illuminated the Abbey grounds, found himself among a few scraggly bushes and a grove of twisted trees.

"Stop here. That's near enough. You only need to hear me. Do you know me, Hugh the Hand?"

And then he did know. He gripped the bottle tighter. "Trian, isn't it? House magus to King Stephen."

"We haven't much time. The Lady Iridal mustn't know we've had this conversation. His Majesty wishes to remind you that you have not fulfilled the agreement."

"What?" Hugh shifted his eyes, stared into the shadows, without seeming to stare.

"You did not do what you were paid to do. The child is still alive."

"So?" said Hugh harshly. "I'll give you your money back. You only paid me half of it anyway."

"We don't want the money back. We want the child dead."

"I can't do it," said Hugh to the night.

"Why?" the voice asked, sounding displeased. "Surely you of all men haven't found a conscience. Are you suddenly squeamish? Don't you like killing anymore?"

Hugh dropped the wine bottle, made a sudden lunge. His hand caught hold of the wizard's robes. He dragged the man forth.

"No," said Hugh, holding the wizard's handsome, fine-boned face close to his own grizzled jowl. "I might like it too much!"

He shoved Trian backward, had the satisfaction of watching him crash into the bushes. "I might not be able to stop myself. Tell that to your king."

He couldn't see Trian's face; the wizard was a robed hump of blackness, silhouetted against the luminescent coralite. Hugh didn't want to see him. He kicked aside the shards of the wine bottle, cursed the waste, and started to walk away. Iridal had managed to coax the dragon out of the sky. She was petting it, whispering the words of the spell.

"We offered you a job," said Trian, picking himself up, calm, nonplussed. "You accepted it. You were paid for it. And you failed to complete it." Hugh kept walking.

"You had only one thing that raised you above the level of common cutthroat, Hugh the Hand," Trian told him, the words a whisper, carried by the wind. "Honor."

Hugh made no response, did not look back. He strode rapidly up the hill toward Iridal, found her disheveled, irritated.

"I'm sorry for the delay. I can't understand how the enchantment could have slipped like that..."

I can, Hugh told her silently. Trian did it. He followed you. He foiled your spell, freed the dragon, in order to distract you while he talked to me. King Stephen's not sending you to rescue your son, Lady. He's using you to lead me to the child. Don't trust him, Iridal. Don't trust Trian, don't trust Stephen. Don't trust me.

Hugh could have said that to her, the words were on his lips... and they stayed there, unspoken.

"Never mind that now," he told her, voice harsh and sharp. "Will the spell hold?" "Yes, but—"

"Then fly the beast out of here. Before the Abbot finds two of his brethren stripped to their skins, bound hand and foot in my cell."

He glowered at her, expecting questions, prepared to remind her that she had agreed to ask none.

She cast him one wondering glance, then nodded and swiftly mounted the dragon. Hugh tied the bundle securely on the back of the ornate, two-person saddle that bore the *Winged Eye*—King Stephen's device.

"No wonder the damn wizard was able to disrupt the spell," Hugh muttered beneath his breath. "Riding a friggin' royal dragon!"

He pulled himself up on the creature's back, settled himself behind Iridal. She gave the command and the dragon sprang into the air, wings lifted and flapped, bearing them upward. Hugh did not waste time searching to see if he could find the magus. That was futile. Trian was too good. The question was: would he follow them? or simply wait for his dragon to return and report?

Hugh smiled grimly, leaned forward. "Where are we bound?"

"To my dwelling. To pick up provisions."

"No, we're not." Hugh spoke loudly, to be heard over the rush of the wind, the beating of the dragon's wings. "You have money? Barls? With the king's stamp?"

"Yes," Iridal replied. The dragon's flight was erratic, wild. The wind tore at Iridal's cloak, her white hair blew free, was like a cloud around her face.

"We'll buy what we need," Hugh told her. "From this moment, Lady Iridal, you and I disappear. A pity the night is so clear," he added, glancing about. "A rainstorm would be a useful thing about now."

"A storm can be conjured," said Iridal, "as you well know. I may not have much skill over dragons, but wind and rain are a different matter. How shall we find our way, then?"

"By the feel of the wind on my cheek," said Hugh, grinning at her. He slid forward, put out his arms—one on either side of Iridal—and reached for the reins. "Summon your storm, Lady."

"Is this necessary?" she asked, stirring uneasily at the Hand's overwhelming nearness, his body pressed against hers, his strong arms encircling her. "I can manage the dragon. You give me the directions."

"Wouldn't work," said Hugh. "I fly by feel; don't even think about it, most of the time. Lean back against me. You'll stay dryer. Relax, Lady. We've a long journey ahead of us this night. Sleep, if you can. Where we're going, there won't be many nights ahead of us when you'll be able to afford the luxury."

Iridal sat stiff and rigid a moment longer, then, with a sigh, she sank back against Hugh's breast. He shifted himself to better accommodate her, tightened his arms around her more securely.

He grasped the reins with a firm, experienced grip. The dragon, sensing skilled hands, calmed down and flew evenly.

Iridal spoke the words of magic beneath her breath, words that snatched high drifting clouds from the sky far above them, brought fog down to wrap around them, a damp and misty blanket. Rain began to fall.

"I can't keep this up long," she said, feeling herself growing drowsy. The rain pelted softly on her face. She burrowed deeper into Hugh's arms.

"Doesn't need to be long."

Trián likes his comforts, Hugh thought. He won't chase us through a rainstorm, especially when he figures out where we're headed.

"You're afraid of being followed, aren't you?" Iridal said.

"Let's just say I don't like to take chances," Hugh responded.

They flew through the storm and the night in silence so warm and comfortable that both were loath to disturb it. Iridal could have asked more questions—she knew well enough that the monks would not be likely to follow them. Who else did he fear? But she didn't say anything.

She had promised not to and she meant to keep that promise. She was glad he'd put such restrictions on her, in fact. She didn't want to ask, didn't want to know.

She rested her hand over her bosom, over the feather amulet that she wore hidden beneath her gown, the amulet that put her in mental contact with her child. She had not told him about that, nor would she. He would disapprove, would probably be angry. But she would not break this link with her child—lost to her once, now blessedly found.

Hugh has his secrets, she said to herself. I will keep mine.

Resting in his arms, glad of his strength and sheltering presence, Iridal let go of the past with its bitter sorrows and even more bitter self-recriminations, let go of the future with its certain peril. She let go of both as easily as she had let go the reins, allowing someone else to steer, to guide. There would come a time when she would need to grasp hold of them again, perhaps even fight for control. But until then, she could do what Hugh suggested—relax, sleep.

Hugh sensed more than saw that Iridal slept. The rain-soaked darkness was thick, blotted out the faint glow of the coralite below, making it seem as if ground and sky were one and the same. He shifted the reins to one hand, drew his cloak over the woman with the other, forming a tent to keep her warm and dry.

In his mind, he heard the same words, over and over and over.

You had only one thing that raised you above the level of common cutthroat, Hugh the Hand.

Honor... Honor... Honor...

"You spoke to him, Trian? You recognized him?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Stephen scratched his bearded chin. "Hugh the Hand lives and has been alive, all this time. She lied to us."

"One can hardly blame her, sire," said Trian.

"We were fools to believe her! A man with blue skin! The bumbling Alfred gone looking for her son. Alfred couldn't find himself in the dark. She lied about it all!"

"I'm not so certain, Your Majesty," said Trian thoughtfully. "There was always more—much more—to Alfred than he let on. And the man with the blue skin. I have myself come across certain interesting references in those books the mysteriarchs brought with them—"

"Does any of this have anything to do with Hugh the Hand or Bane?" Stephen demanded, irritated.

"No, sire," said Trian. "But it might be of importance later on."

"Then we will discuss it later on. Will the Hand do as you told him?"

"I cannot say, sire. I wish I could," Trian added, seeing Stephen look highly displeased. "We had little time for speech. And his face, Your Majesty! I caught a glimpse of it, by the ground light. I could not look at it long. I saw there evil, cunning, desperation—"

"What of it? The man is, after all, an assassin."

"The evil was my own, sire," said Trian.

He lowered his gaze, stared down at several of the books, tying on the desk in his study.

"And mine, too, by implication."

"I didn't say that, sire—"

"You don't need to, damn it!" Stephen snapped, then he sighed heavily. "The ancestors be my witness, Magicka, I don't like this any more than you do. No one was happier than I was to think that Bane had survived, that I wasn't responsible for the murder of a ten-year-old child. I believed Lady Iridal because I wanted to believe her. And look where we are now. In far worse danger than before.

"But what choice do I have, Trian?" Stephen slammed his fist on the desk. "What choice?"

"None, sire," said Trian.

Stephen nodded. "So," he said abruptly, back to business. "Will he do it?"

"I don't know, sire. And we have reason to be afraid if he does. 'I might like the killing too much,' was what he said. 'I might not be able to stop myself' "

Stephen looked gray, haggard. He lifted his hands, stared at them, rubbed them. "That need not be a worry. Once this deed is done, we will eliminate the man. At least in his case, we can feel justified. He has long cheated the executioner's ax. I assumed you followed the two when they left the monastery? Where did they go?"

"Hugh the Hand is skilled in shaking pursuit, sire. A rainstorm blew up, out of a cloudless sky. My dragon lost their scent, and I was soaked to the skin. I deemed it best to return to the Abbey and question the Kir monks who sheltered the Hand."

"With what result? Perhaps they knew what he intended."

"If so, sire, they did not tell me." Trian smiled ruefully. "The Abbot was in an uproar over something. He informed me that he'd had his fill of magi, then he slammed the door in my face."

"You did nothing?"

"I am merely Third House, sire," said Trian humbly. "The Kir's own magi are of a level equal to mine. A contest was neither appropriate nor called for. It would not do to offend the Kir, sire."

Stephen glowered. "I suppose you're right. But now we've lost track of the Hand and the Lady Iridal."

"I warned you to expect as much, Your Majesty. And we must have done so in any case. I surmised, you see, where they were headed—a place I, for one, dare not follow. Nor would you find many here willing or able to do so." "What place is that? The Seven Mysteries\*?"

\*Seven islands in the Giphith Cluster, rumored, among humans, to be haunted by the ghosts of ancestors who had done some misdeed during their lives and who died unrepentant, cast off by their families. The elves have a similar belief; a common threat in elven is "You'll be sent to the Seven Mysteries for that" Several expeditions, both human and elven, have been sent to explore the islands. None ever returned. Alfred wrote that he intended to explore the islands himself, but he never did so. He appeared to have a vague theory that Sartan magic was involved, but how it worked or for what purpose, he was unable to say

"No, sire. A place better known and, if anything, more dreaded, for the dangers in this place are real. Hugh the Hand is on the heading for Skurvash, Your Majesty."

## CHAPTER 25

### SKURVASH

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

HUGH ROUSED IRIDAL FROM HER SLUMBER WHILE THEY WERE STILL IN the skies, the weary dragon searching eagerly for a place to land. The Lords of Night had removed their dark cloaks, the Firmament was beginning to sparkle with the first rays of Solaris. Iridal started to wakefulness, wondering that she had slept so deeply and heavily.

"Where are we?" she asked, watching with half-drowsy pleasure the island emerge from the shadows of night, the dawn touching villages that were like toy blocks from this height. Smoke began to drift up from chimneys. On a cliff—the highest point on the island—a fortress made of the rare granite much prized on Arianus cast the shadow of its massive towers over the land, now that the Lords of Night had departed.

"Skurvash," said Hugh the Hand. He steered the dragon away from what was obviously a busy port, headed for the forested side of town, where landings could be kept private, if not necessarily secret.

Iridal was wide awake now, as if cold water had been thrown into her face. She was silent, thoughtful, then said in a low voice, "I suppose this is necessary."

"You've heard of the place."

"Nothing good."

"And that probably overrates it. You want to go to Aristagon, Lady Iridal. How did you plan to get there? Ask the elves to pretty please let you drop by for tea?"

"Of course not," she said coolly, offended. "But—"

"No 'buts.' No questions. You do what I say, remember?"

Every muscle in Hugh's body ached from the unaccustomed rigors of the flight. He wanted his pipe, and a glass—several glasses—of wine.

"Our lives will be in danger every minute we're on this island, Lady. Keep quiet. Let me do the talking. Follow my lead and, for both our sakes, don't do any magic. Not so much as a disappearing bar trick. They find out you're a mysteriarch and we're finished."

The dragon had spotted a likely landing site, a cleared patch near the shoreline. Hugh gave the beast its head and allowed it to spiral downward.

"You could call me Iridal," she said softly.

"Are you always on a first-name basis with your hired help?"

She sighed. "May I ask one question, Hugh?"

"I don't promise to answer."

"You spoke of 'they.' 'They' mustn't know I'm a mysteriarch. Who are 'they'?"

"The rulers of Skurvash."

"King Stephen is the ruler."

Hugh gave a sharp, barking laugh. "Not of Skurvash. Oh, the king's promised to come in, clean it up, but he knows he can't. He couldn't raise a force large enough. There's not a baron in Volkaran or Ulyndia who hasn't a tie to this place, though you won't find one who'd dare admit it. Even the elves, when they ruled most of the rest of the Mid Realms, never conquered Skurvash."

Iridal stared down at the island. Outside of its formidable-looking fortress, it had little else to recommend it being mostly covered with the scraggy brush known as dwarf-shrub, so named because it looked somewhat like a dwarf's thick, russet beard and because once it dug its way into the coralite, it was almost impossible to uproot. A small and scraggly-looking town perched on the edge of the shoreline, holding on as tenaciously as the shrubs. A single road led from the town through groves of hargast trees, climbed the side of the mountain to the fortress.

"Did the elves lay siege to it? I can believe such a fortress could hold out long—"

"Bah!" Hugh grimaced, flexed his arms, tried to ease the muscles in his stiff neck and shoulders. "The elves didn't attack. War's a wonderful thing, Your Ladyship, until it begins to cut into your profits."

"You mean these humans trade with the elves?" Iridal was shocked.

Hugh shrugged. "The rulers of Skurvash don't care about the slant of a man's eyes, only the glint of his money."

"And who is this ruler?" She was interested and curious now.

"Not one person," Hugh responded. "A group. They're known as the Brotherhood."

The dragon settled down for a landing in a broad, cleared space that had obviously been used for this purpose many times before, to judge by the broken tree limbs (snapped off by the wings), the tracks of claws left in the coralite, and the droppings scattered around the field. Hugh dismounted, stretched his aching back, flexed his cramped legs.

"Or perhaps I should say 'we,' " he amended, coming to assist Iridal down from the dragon's back. "We are known as the Brotherhood."

She had been about to place her hand in his. Now she hesitated, stared at him, her face pale, her eyes wide. Their rainbow hue was muddied, darkened by the shadows of the hargast trees surrounding them.

"I don't understand."

"Go back, Iridal," he said to her, grimly earnest. "Leave, right now. The dragon's tired, but the beast'll make it, take you at least as far as Providence."

The dragon, hearing itself mentioned, shifted irritably from foot to foot and rustled its wings. It wanted to be rid of its riders, wanted to skulk off into the trees, go to sleep.

"First you were eager to join me. Now you're trying to drive me away." Iridal regarded him coldly. "What happened? Why the change?"

"I said no questions," Hugh growled, staring moodily out over the rim of the island, into the fathomless blue depths of deepsky. He flicked a glance at her. "Unless you'd care to answer a few I could ask."

Iridal flushed, drew back her hand. She dismounted from the dragon without assistance, used the opportunity to keep her head lowered, her face concealed in the recesses of the hood of her cloak. When she was standing on the ground, and certain of maintaining her composure, she turned to Hugh.

"You need me. You need me to help find Alfred. I know something of him, quite a lot, in fact. I know who he is and what he is and, believe me, you won't discover him without my assistance. Will you give that up? Will you send me away?"

Hugh refused to look at her. "Yes," he said in a low voice. "Yes, damn it. Go!" His hands clenched on the dragon's saddle, he laid his aching head on them.

"Damn Trian!" he swore softly to himself. "Damn Stephen! Damn this woman and damn her child. I should have set my head on the block when I had the chance. I knew it then. Something warned me. I would have wrapped death around me like a blanket and slipped into slumber..."

"What are you saying?"

He felt Iridal's hand, her touch, soft and warm, on his shoulder. He shuddered, cringed away.

"What terrible grief you bear!" she said gently. "Let me share it."

Hugh rounded on her, savage, sudden. "Leave me. Buy someone else to help you. I can give you names—ten men— better than me. As for you, I don't need you. I can find Alfred. I can find any man—"

"—so long as he's hiding in the bottom of a wine bottle," Iridal retorted.

Hugh caught hold of her, his grip tight and painful. He shook her, forced her head back, forced her to look at him.

"Know me for what I am—a hired killer. My hands are stained with blood, blood bought and paid for. I took money to kill a child!"

"And gave your life for the child..."

"A fluke!" Hugh shoved her away, flung her back from him. "That damned charm he cast over me. Or maybe a spell you put on me."

Turning his back on her, he began to untie the bundle, using swift, violent tugs.

"Go," he said again, not looking at her. "Go now."

"I will not. We made a bargain," said Iridal. "The one good thing I've heard said about you is that you never broke a contract."

He stopped what he was doing, turned to stare at her, his deep-set eyes dark beneath frowning, overhanging brows. He was suddenly cold, calm.

"You're right, my lady. I never broke a contract. Remember that, when the time comes." Freeing the bundle, he tucked it under his arm, nodded his head at the dragon. "Take off the enchantment."

"But... that will mean it will fly loose. We might never catch it."

"Precisely. And neither will anyone else. Nor is it likely to return to the king's stables any time in the near future. That will be long enough for us to disappear."

"But it could attack us!"

"It wants sleep more than food." Hugh glared at her, his eyes red from sleeplessness and hangover. "Free it or fly it, Lady Iridal. I'm not going to argue."

Iridal looked at the dragon, her last link with her home, her people. The journey had all been a dream, up until now. A dream such as she had dreamed asleep in Hugh's arms. A glorious rescue, of magic and flashing steel, of snatching her child up in her arms and defying his enemies to seize him, of watching the elves fall back, daunted by a mother's love and Hugh's prowess. Skurvash had not been a part of that dream. Nor had Hugh's blunt and shadowed words.

I'm not very practical, Iridal told herself bleakly. Or very realistic. None of us are, who lived in the High Realms. We didn't need to be. Only Sinistrad. And that was why we let him proceed with his evil plans, that was why we made no move to stop him. We are weak, helpless. I swore I would change. I swore I would be strong, for my child's sake.

She pressed her hand over the feather amulet, tucked beneath the bodice of her gown. When she felt stronger, she lifted the spell from the dragon, broke the last link in the chain.

The creature, once freed, shook its spiky mane, glared at them ferociously, seemed to consider whether or not it should make a meal of them, decided against it. The dragon snarled at them, took to the air. It would seek a safe place to rest, somewhere high and hidden. Eventually it would tire of being alone and go back to its stables, for dragons are social creatures, and it would soon feel the longing for its mate and companions left behind.

Hugh watched it well away, then turned and began to walk up a small path that led to the main road they had seen from the air. Iridal hastened to keep up with him.

As he walked, he was rummaging through the bundle, extracted an object from it—a pouch. Its contents gave off a harsh, metallic jingle. He looped its ties over the belt he wore at his waist.

"Give me your money," he ordered. "All of it."

Silently, Iridal handed over her purse.

Hugh opened it, gave it a swift eye-count, then thrust the purse inside his shirt, to rest snugly and firmly against his skin. "The lightfingers\* of Skurvash live up to their reputation," he said dryly. "We'll need to keep what money we have safe, to buy our passage."

\*Pickpockets.

"Buy our passage! To Aristagon?" repeated Iridal, dazed. "But we're at war! Is flying to elven lands... is it that simple?"

"No," said Hugh, "but anything can be had for a price."

Iridal waited for him to continue, but he was obviously not going to tell her more. Solaris was bright and the coralite glistened. The air was warming rapidly after night's chill. In the distance, perched high on the side of a mountain, the fortress loomed strong and imposing, as large as Stephen's palace. Iridal could not see any houses or buildings, but she guessed they were heading for the small village she'd seen from the air. Spirals of smoke from morning cooking fires and forges rose above the brush.

"You have friends here," she said, recalling his words, the "they" that had been altered to "we."

"In a manner of speaking. Keep your face covered."

"Why? No one here will know me. And they can't tell I'm a mysteriarch just by looking at me."

He stopped walking, eyed her grimly.

"I'm sorry," Iridal said, sighing. "I know I promised not to question anything you did and that's all I've done. I don't mean to, but I don't understand and I'm frightened."

"I guess you've a right to be," he said, after a moment spent tugging thoughtfully on the long thin strands of braided beard. "And I suppose the more you know, the better off we'll both be. Look at you. With those eyes, those clothes, that voice—a child can see you're noble born. That makes you fair game, a prize. I want them to know you're my prize."

"I will not be anyone's prize!" Iridal bristled. "Why don't you tell them the truth—that I'm your employer."

He stared at her, then he grinned, then threw back his head and laughed. His laughter was deep, hearty; it released something inside him. He actually smiled at her, and the smile was reflected in his eyes.

"A good answer, Lady Iridal. Perhaps I will. But, in the meanwhile, keep close to me, don't wander off. You're a stranger here. And they have rather a special welcome for strangers in Skurvash."

The port town of Klervashna was located close to the shoreline. It was built out in the open, no walls surrounded it, no gates barred entry, no guards asked them their business. One road led from the shore into town, one road—the same road—led out of town and up into the mountains.

"They're certainly not worried about being attacked," said Iridal, accustomed to the walled cities of Volkaran and Ulyndia, whose citizens, continually on the alert for elven raiders, lived in an almost constant state of fear.

"If anything did threaten them, the residents would pack up and head for the fortress. But no, they're not worried."

A group of boys, playing at pirate in an alley, were the first ones to take note of them. The children dropped their hargast-limb swords and ran up to stare at them with ingenuous frankness and open curiosity.

The boys were about Bane's age, and Iridal smiled at them. A little girl, clad in rags, ran up, held out her hand.

"Will you give me money, beautiful lady?" begged the child, with a winsome, pretty smile. "My mother is sick. My father is dead. And there is me and my baby sister and brother to feed. Only one coin, beautiful lady—"

Iridal started to reach for her purse, remembered she didn't have it with her.

"Off with you," Hugh said harshly. He held up his right hand, palm out.

The little girl looked at him shrewdly, shrugged, and skipped off, returning to the game. The boys trailed after her, whooping and shouting, except for one, who dashed up the road into town.

"You didn't need to be so rough with the child," Iridal said reprovingly. "She was so sweet. We could have spared a coin—"

"—and lost your purse. That 'sweet' child's job is to find out where you keep your money. Then she passes the word to her light-fingered father, who is undoubtedly very much alive, and who would have relieved you of your wealth once you were in town."

"I don't believe it! A child like that..."

Hugh shrugged, kept walking.

Iridal drew her cloak more closely about her. "Must we stay long in this dreadful place?" she asked in a low voice, moving nearer Hugh.

"We don't even stop here. We go on. To the fortress."

"Isn't there another route?"

Hugh shook his head. "The only way is through Klervashna. It allows them to get a look at us. Those boys play here for a reason, to watch for strangers. But I've given them the sign. One's gone now, to report our arrival to the Brotherhood. Don't worry. No one'll bother us, from now on. But you best keep quiet."

Iridal was almost grateful for the order. Child thieves. Child spies. She might have been shocked to think parents could abuse and destroy the innocence of childhood. But she recalled a father who had used his son to spy on a king.

"Klervashna," said Hugh, gesturing with his hand.

Iridal looked about in surprise. From his introduction, she had been expecting a raucous, brawling city of sin—thieves harking in the shadows, murder done openly in the streets. She was considerably startled therefore to see nothing more frightening than young girls driving geese to market, women carrying baskets laden with eggs, men hard at apparently legitimate work.

The town was bustling, thriving. Its streets were crowded, and the only difference she could see between it and any respectable city of Ulyndia was that the population appeared to be of a widely varied nature, encompassing every type of human, from the dark-skinned inhabitants of Humbisash to the fair-haired wanderers of Malakal. But even this did not prepare her for the astonishing sight of two elves, who emerged from a cheese shop, almost ran into them, elbowed past with a muttered oath.

Iridal was startled, glanced at Hugh in alarm, thinking perhaps that the town had been conquered, after all. He did not appear concerned, barely glanced at the elves. The human inhabitants paid the enemy scant attention, except for a young woman who followed after them, trying to sell them a bag of pua fruit.\*

\*Believed to cure impotence.

The rulers of Skurvash don't care about the slant of a man's eyes, only the glint of his money.

Equally astounding was the sight of well-bred servants, belonging to wealthy estates of other islands, strolling through the streets, packages in their arms. Some wore their liveries outright, not caring who knew the names of their masters. Iridal recognized the coat of arms of more than one baron of Volkaran, more than one duke of Ulyndia.

"Smuggled goods," Hugh explained. "Elven fabric, elven weapons, elven wine, elven jewels. The elves are here for the same reason, to buy human goods they can't get in Aristagon. Herbs and potions, dragon's teeth and claws, dragon skin and scales to use on their ships."

The war for these people is profit, Iridal realized. Peace would mean economic disaster. Or perhaps not. The winds of changing fortune must have blown through Klervashna often. It would survive, just as legend held it the rat had survived the Sundering.

They walked through the town at a leisurely pace. Hugh stopped once, to buy stregno for his pipe, a bottle of wine, and a cup of water, which he gave to Iridal. Then they moved on, Hugh shoving his way through the crowds, keeping firm hold of "his prize," his hand over Iridal's upper arm. A few passersby gave them sharp, inquisitive glances that flicked over Hugh's stern, impassive face, noted Iridal's rich clothing. An eyebrow or two raised, a knowing smile quirked a lip. No one said a word, no one stopped them. What one did in Klervashna was one's own business.

And that of the Brotherhood.

"Are we going to the fortress now?" asked Iridal.

The rows of neat, gable-roofed houses had come to an end. They were heading back into the wilderness. A few children had seen them on their way, but even they had disappeared.

Hugh pulled the cork out of the wine bottle with his teeth, spit it on the ground. "Yeah. Tired?"

Iridal raised her head, looked up at the fortress that seemed a great distance away. "I'm not used to walking, I'm afraid. Could we stop and rest?"

Hugh gave this thoughtful consideration, then nodded abruptly. "Not long," he said, assisting her to sit on a large outgrowth of coralite. "They know we've left town. They'll be expecting us."

Hugh finished off the wine, tossed the bottle into the bushes at the side of the road. He took another moment to fill his pipe—shaking the dried fungus out of the bag—then lit it, using tinder and flint. Puffing on the pipe, drawing the smoke into his lungs, he repacked the bundle, tucked it beneath his arm, and stood up.

"We best be going. You'll be able to rest when we get there. I've got some business to transact."

"Who are 'they'?" Iridal asked, rising wearily to her feet. "What is this Brotherhood?"

"I belong to it," he said, teeth clenched on the pipe stem. "Can't you guess?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't."

"The Brotherhood of the Hand," he said. "The Assassins' Guild."

## CHAPTER 26

### SKURVASH

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

THE FORTRESS OF THE BROTHERHOOD REIGNED, SOLID AND IMPREGNABLE, over the island of Skurvash. A series of structures, built over time, as the Brotherhood grew and its needs changed, the fortress commanded a view of deepsky and its flight tracks, as well as the land all around it and the one meandering road that led up to it.

An approaching single-rider dragon could be spotted at a thousand menkas, a large troop-laden dragonship at two thousand. The road—the only road through the rough land, covered with the brittle-limbed and occasionally deadly hargast trees\* —wandered through deep ravines and over numerous swinging bridges. Hugh showed Iridal, as they crossed, how a single stroke of a sword could send the bridge and everyone on it plunging into the sharp rocks far below. And if by chance an army made it to the top of the mountain, it would have to take the fortress itself—a sprawling complex, guarded by desperate men and women who had nothing to lose.

\*Bane was nearly killed when the limb from a hargast broke during a windstorm and fell down on him. See *Dragon Wing*, vol. i of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Small wonder both King Stephen and Emperor Agah'ran had given up all thoughts—except wishful ones—of attacking it.

The Brotherhood knew itself to be safe, secure. Its vast network of spies warned it instantly of any threat, long before that threat was seen. Vigilance was, therefore, easy and relaxed. The gates stood open wide. The guards played at rune-bone and didn't even bother to glance up from their game as Hugh and Iridal walked through the gates to a cobblestone courtyard beyond. Most of the outbuildings were empty, though they would have been filled rapidly enough with the citizens of Klervashna had attack threatened. Hugh and Iridal saw no one in their walk along the winding avenues, leading up a gentle slope to the main building.

Older than the rest, this structure was central headquarters for the Brotherhood, which had the temerity to fly its own flag—a blood-red banner bearing a single upheld hand, palm flat, fingers together. The entrance door—a rarity on Arianus, for it was made of wood, decorated with intricate carvings—was closed fast and barred.

"Wait here," Hugh ordered, pointing. "Don't move from this spot."

Iridal, numb and dazed with exhaustion, looked down. She stood on a flat piece of flagstone that was, she noticed (now that she examined it more closely) a different shape and color from the flagstone walkway leading to the door. The stone was cut to resemble vaguely the shape of a hand.

"Don't move off that rock," Hugh warned again. He indicated a narrow slit in the stonework, positioned above the door. "There's an arrow pointed at your heart. Step to either the right or the left and you're dead."

Iridal froze, stared at the dark slit, through which she could see nothing—no sign of life, no movement. Yet she had no doubt, from Hugh's tone, that what he said was true. She remained standing on the hand-shaped rock. Hugh left her, walked up to the door.

He paused, studied the carvings on the door, carvings that were done in the shape of hands—open, palm flat, resembling the symbol on the flag. There were twelve in all, ranged round in the shape of a circle, fingers out. Choosing one, Hugh pressed his own hand into the carving.\* The door swung open.

\*Haplo made a study of the Brotherhood and was able to penetrate many of their secrets. He surmises, in his writings, that the carvings on the door correspond to some sort of ritual cycle in the Brotherhood's calendar. A member chooses the correct hand based on this cycle and presses his hand against it. A small hole carved in the door admits sunlight into the watch room. The sunlight is cut off by the hand covering the hole, and thus the watcher knows the member is one who has a right to enter. At night, or on cloudy days, a candle flame or some other source of light is held up to the correct hand, is seen through the hole. Those who fail to perform this ritual are killed instantly by the archer stationed at all times in the window above.

"Come," he said to Iridal, motioning for her to join him. "It's safe now."

Glancing askance at the window above, Iridal hastened to Hugh's side. The fortress was oppressive, filled her with a sense of terrible loneliness, gloom, and dark foreboding. She caught hold of Hugh's outstretched hand, held on to it fast.

Hugh looked concerned at her chill touch, her unnatural pallor. He squeezed her hand reassuringly, a grim look warned her to remain calm, in control. Iridal lowered her head, pulled her hood down to hide her face, and accompanied him inside a small room.

The door shut immediately behind them, bars thundered into place with a boom that stopped the heart. After the bright light outside, Iridal was half blind. Hugh stood blinking, motionless, until he could see.

"This way," said a dry voice that sounded like the crackle of very old parchment. Movement sounded to their right.

Hugh followed, knowing well where he was and where he was going. He kept fast hold of Iridal, who was grateful for his guidance. The darkness was daunting, unnerving. It was intended to be. She reminded herself that she had asked for this. She had better get used to being in dark and unnerving places.

"Hugh the Hand," said the dry voice. "How very good to see you, sir. It's been a long time."

They entered a windowless chamber, lit by the soft light of a glowstone in a lantern. A stooped and wizened old man stood regarding Hugh with a gentle, benign expression, made remarkable by a pair of wonderfully clear and penetrating eyes.

"It has that, Ancient," said Hugh, his stern expression relaxing into a smile. "I'm surprised to find you still at work. I've thought you'd be taking your ease by a good fire."

"Ah, this is all the duties I undertake now, sir," said the old man. "I've put the other away long since, except for a bit of instruction, now and then, to those like yourself, who ask for it. A skilled pupil you were, too, sir. You had the proper touch—delicate, sensitive. Not like some of these ham-fisted louts you see today."

The Ancient shook his head, the bright eyes shifted unhurriedly from Hugh to Iridal, taking in every detail to the extent that she had the feeling he could see through her clothes, perhaps even through flesh.

He shifted the penetrating gaze back to Hugh. "You'll forgive me, sir, but I must ask. Wouldn't do to break the rules, not even for you." "Of course," said Hugh, and held up his right hand, palm out, fingers together.

The Ancient took Hugh's hand in his own, peered at it intently by the light of the glowstone.

"Thank you, sir," said the Ancient gravely. "What is your business?"

"Is Ciang seeing anyone today?"

"Yes, sir. One's come to be admitted. They'll be perform-the ceremony at the stroke of the hour. I'm sure your presence would be welcome. And what is your wish concerning your guest?"

"She's to be escorted to a room with a fire. My business with Ciang may take a while. See to it that the lady's made pcomfortable, given food and drink, a bed if she desires." "A room?" asked the old man mildly. "Or a cell?" "A room," said Hugh. "Make her comfortable. I may be a long time."

The Ancient eyed Iridal speculatively. "She's a magus, I'll \*er. It's your call, Hand, but are you sure you want her left unguarded?"

"She won't use her magic. Another's life, more precious for her than her own, hangs in the balance. Besides," he added "she's my employer."

"Ah, I see." The Ancient nodded and bowed to Iridal with a rusty grace that would have become one of Stephen's royal courtiers.

"I will escort the lady to her chamber myself," said the old man in courteous tones. "It is not often I have such pleasant duty allotted me. You, Hugh the Hand, may go on up. Ciang has been informed of your coming."

Hugh grunted, not surprised. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, refilled it. Placing his pipe in his mouth, he cast Iridal one look that was empty and dark, without comfort, hint, or meaning. Then he turned and walked into the shadows beyond.

"We go through this door, my lady," said the Ancient, gesturing in a direction opposite from that which Hugh had taken.

Lifting the lantern in his wrinkled hand, the old man apologized for preceding her, saying that the way was dark and the stairs in ill repair and occasionally treacherous. Iridal begged him, in a low voice, not to think of it.

"You've known Hugh the Hand long?" she asked, feeling herself blush to ask the question, trying hard to make it sound like casual conversation.

"Over twenty years," said the Ancient. "Since he first came to us, little more than a gangling youth."

Iridal wondered at that, wondered about this Brotherhood, who ruled an island. And Hugh was one of them and seemingly respected at that. Amazing, for a man who went out of his way to isolate himself.

"You mentioned teaching him a skill," she said. "What was it?" It might have been music lessons, to judge by the Ancient's benign and gentle appearance.

"The knife, my lady. Ah, there has never been one as skilled with a blade as Hugh the Hand. I was good, but he bettered me. He once stabbed a man he was sitting next to him an inn. Made such a neat job of it that

the man never moved, never let out a cry. No one knew he was dead until the next morning, when they found him sitting in the same place, stiff as the wall. The trick is knowing the right spot, slipping the blade between the ribs in order to pierce the heart before the mark knows what hit him.

"Here we are, my lady. A room nice and cozy, with a fire well laid and a bed, if you'd care to take a nap. And will you have white wine or red with your meal?"

Hugh walked slowly through the halls of the fortress, in time to feel pleasure in this return to familiar surround—Nothing had changed, nothing except him. That's why had not come back, when he knew he would have been welcome. They wouldn't understand and he couldn't explain - The Kir didn't understand either. But they didn't ask questions.

More than a few of the Brotherhood had come here to die. Some of the elders, like the Ancient, returned to spend fading among those who had been their only family—a family loyal and closely bound than most. Others, younger, in to either recover from wounds—a hazard of the business or to die from them. More often than not, the patient recovered. The Brotherhood, from long association with death, had considerable knowledge on the treatment of knife, sword, and arrow wounds, dragon bites and claw attacks, had used antidotes for certain poisons.

The Brotherhood's own magi were skilled in reversing the spells cast by other Magicka, at lifting the enchantments from rings, that sort of work. Hugh the Hand had shared of his own knowledge, gleaned from the Kir monks, whose works took them always among the dead and whose had developed magics that protected against contagion, contamination.\*

\*Although the Kir monks worship death, consider death the final triumph over life, they were forced to face the realization that, unless they took sensible precautions, they might not have any worshippers left.

"I could have come here," Hugh reflected, puffing on his pipe and eyeing the dark and shadowed hallways with nostalgic sigh. "But what would I have told them? I'm not sickening from a mortal wound, but one that's immortal." He shook his head, quickened his steps. Ciang would still questions, but now Hugh had a few answers, and since he here on business, she wouldn't press him. Not as she would have if he'd come here first.

He climbed a spiraling staircase, arrived in a shadowed and ity hall. A series of doors stood shut on either side. One, at end, was open. Light streamed out into the hallway. Hugh inched toward the light, paused on the door's threshold to give his eyes time to adjust from the fortress's dark interior to the brightness of the room.

Three people were inside. Two were strangers—a man and a youngster of perhaps about nineteen. The other Hugh knew well. She turned to greet him, not rising from the desk behind which she sat, but tilting her head to gaze at him with the slanted, shrewd eyes that took in all, gave back nothing.

"Enter," she said. "And welcome."

Hugh knocked the pipe's ashes out in the hallway, tucked his pipe into a pocket of his leather vest.

"Ciang,"\* he said, walking into the room. Coming to stand before her, he bowed low.

\*Not her real name. Elven meaning of the word "ciang" is "merciless" or "without pity." She is one of the great mysteries of Arianus. No one knows her past; the oldest elf living is young to Ciang.

"Hugh the Hand." She extended her hand to him.

He brought it to his lips—an action that appeared to amuse her.

"You kiss that old wrinkled claw?"

"With honor, Ciang," Hugh said warmly, and meant it.

The woman smiled at him. She was old, one of the oldest living beings on Arianus, for she was an elf and long-lived, even for her kind.

Her face was a mass of lines, the skin drawn taut over high cheekbones, the fine-boned, beaked nose white as ivory. She followed the elven custom of painting her lips, and the red flowed among the wrinkles like tiny rivulets of blood. Her head was bald, her hair having fallen out long ago. She scorned to wear a wig and one was truly not necessary, for her skull was smooth and well shaped. And she was aware of the startling effect she had on people, the power of the look of the bright dark eyes set in the bone-white skull.

"Once princes fought to the death for the privilege of kissing that hand, when it was smooth and delicate," she said.

"They would still, Ciang," said Hugh. "They'd be only too happy, some of them."

"Yes, old friend, but not for the sake of beauty. Still, what I have now is better. I would not go back. Sit beside me, Hugh, at my right. You will be witness to this young man's admittance."

Ciang motioned for him to draw up a chair. Hugh was about to do so when the youngster leapt to do it for him.

"Allow m-me, sir," said the boy, stuttering, his face flushed red.

He lifted a heavy chair made of the precious wood that is in short supply in Arianus and set it down where Ciang indicated, at her right hand.

"And... and you're truly Hugh the Hand?" the boy blurted, when he had set the chair down and stepped back to stare.

"He is," answered Ciang. "Few are granted the honor of the Hand. Someday it may be you, boy, but, for now, meet the master."

"I ... I can't believe it," stammered the boy, overcome. "To think Hugh the Hand should be here, at my investiture! I ... I ..." Words failed him.

His older companion, whom Hugh did not recognize, reached out, plucked the boy's sleeve, tugged him back to his place at the end of Ciang's desk. The young man retreated, moving with the awkwardness of youth, at one point stumbling over his feet.

Hugh said nothing, glanced at Ciang. A corner of the woman's mouth twitched, but she spared the boy's feelings, refrained from laughing.

"Right and proper respect," she said gravely. "From younger to elder. His name is John Darby. His sponsor is Ernst Twist. I do not think you two know each other?"

Hugh shook his head. Ernst did likewise, darting a glance sideways, bobbing and reaching up to tug at his hair, a foolish, country-bumpkin gesture of respect. The man looked like a bumpkin, dressed in baggy patched clothes, a greasy hat, broken shoes. This was no bumpkin, however; those who took him for such probably never lived long enough to regret their mistake. The hands were slender and long-fingered and had certainly never done manual labor. And the cold eyes, that never met Hugh straight on, had a peculiar cast to them, a red glint that Hugh found disconcerting.

"Twist's scars are still fresh," said Ciang. "But he has already advanced from sheath to tip. He'll make blade, before the year is out." High praise, from Ciang.\* Hugh regarded the man with loathing. Here was an

assassin who would "kill for a plate of stew" as the saying went. Hugh guessed, from a certain stiffness and coolness in her tone, that Ciang shared his feelings of disgust. But the Brotherhood needed all kinds, and this one's money was as good as the next. So long as Ernst Twist followed the laws of the Brotherhood, how he thwarted the laws of man and nature was his business, vile though it might be.

\*See Appendix I, The Brotherhood of the Hand.

"Twist needs a partner," continued Ciang. "He has brought forth the young man, John Darby, and, after review, I have agreed to admit him to the Brotherhood under the standard terms."

Ciang rose to her feet, as did Hugh. The elven woman was tall and stood straight, a slight stoop in the shoulders her only concession to old age. Her long robes were of the very finest silk, woven in the shimmering color and fantastic designs favored by elves. She was a regal presence, daunting, awful in her majesty.

The youth, undoubtedly a cold-blooded killer, for he could not have obtained entry without some proof of his skill, was abashed, blushing and flustered, looked as if he was about to be sick.

His companion poked the young man roughly in the back. "Stand up tall. Be a man," Ernst muttered.

The boy gulped, straightened, drew a deep breath, then said, through white lips, "I'm ready."

Ciang cast a sidelong glance at Hugh, rolled her eyes, as much as to say, "Well, we were all young once." She pointed a long finger at a wooden box, encrusted with sparkling gems, that stood in the center of the desk.

Hugh leaned over, respectfully took hold of the box and moved it within the woman's reach. He lifted the lid. A sharp-bladed dagger, whose golden hilt was fashioned in the shape of a hand—palm flat, fingers pressed together. The extended thumb formed the crosspiece. Ciang drew forth the dagger, handling it carefully. The firelight gleamed in the razor-sharp blade, made it burn.

"Are you right-handed or left?" Ciang asked.

"Right," said John Darby. Droplets of sweat ran down his temples, trickled down his cheeks.

"Give me your right hand," Ciang ordered.

The young man presented his hand, palm open, out.

"Sponsor, you may offer support—"

"No!" the boy gasped. Licking dry lips, he thrust Twist's proffered arm away. "I can stand it on my own."

Ciang expressed approval with a raised eyebrow. "Hold your right hand in the proper position," she said. "Hugh, show him."

Hugh lifted a candle from the mantelpiece, brought it over to the desk, set it down. The candle's flame shone in the wooden finish—a finish spotted and stained with dark splotches. The young man looked at the splotches. The color fled his face.

Ciang waited.

John Darby pressed his lips tightly together, held his hand closer. "I'm ready," he repeated.

Ciang nodded. She raised the dagger by the hilt, its blade pointing downward.

"Grasp the blade," said Ciang, "as you would the hilt."

John Darby did so, wrapping his hand gingerly around the blade. The hilt, in the shape of the hand, rested on his hand, the thumb-shaped crosspiece running parallel to his own thumb. The young man began to breathe heavily.

"Squeeze," said Ciang, cool, impassive.

John Darby's breath halted an instant. He almost shut his eyes, caught himself in time. With a glance of shame at Hugh, the youngster forced himself to keep his eyes open. He swallowed, squeezed his hand over the dagger's blade.

He caught his breath with a gasp, but made no other sound. Drops of blood fell down on the desk, a thin stream trickled down the young man's arm.

"Hugh, the thong," said Ciang.

Hugh reached into the box, drew out a soft strip of leather, about as wide as a man's two fingers. The symbol of the Brotherhood made a pattern up and down the long strip of leather. It, too, was stained dark in places.

"Give it to the sponsor," said Ciang.

Hugh gave the thong to Ernst Twist, who took it in those long-fingered hands of his, hands that were undoubtedly splotched with the same dark stains that marred the thong.

"Bind him," said Ciang.

All this time, John Darby had been standing, his hand squeezing the dagger's blade, the blood dripping from it. Ernst wrapped the thong around the young man's hand, bound it tight, leaving the ends of the thong free. Ernst grasped one free end, held onto it. Hugh took hold of the other. He looked to Ciang, who nodded.

The two of them yanked the bond tight, forcing the dagger's blade deeper into the flesh, into bone. The blood flowed faster. John Darby could not hold back his anguish. He cried out in pain, a shuddering "ah!" wrenched from him in agony. He closed his eyes, staggered, leaned against the table. Then, gulping, drawing short, quick breaths, he stood straight, looked at Ciang. The blood dripped onto the desk.

Ciang smiled as though she had sipped that blood, found it to her liking. "You will now repeat the oath of the Brotherhood."

John Darby did so, bringing back through a haze of pain the words he'd laboriously memorized. From now on, they would be etched on his mind, as surely as the scars of his investiture would be etched on his hand.

The oath completed, John stood upright, refusing, with a shake of his head, any help from his sponsor. Ciang smiled at the young man, a smile that for a single instant brought to the aged face a hint of what must have been remarkable beauty. She laid her hand upon the youth's tortured one.

"He is acceptable. Remove the binding."

Hugh did so, unwrapping the leather thong from John Darby's bloody hand. The young man opened his palm, slowly, with an effort, for the fingers were gummed and sticky. Ciang plucked the dagger from the trembling grip.

It was now, when all was ended, the unnatural excitement drained, that the weakness came. John Darby stared at his hand, at the cut flesh, the pulsing of the red blood welling out of the wounds, and was suddenly

aware of the pain as if he'd never felt it. He turned a sickly gray color, swayed unsteadily on his feet. Now he was grateful for Ernst Twist's arm, which kept the young man upright.

"He may be seated," said Ciang.

Turning, she handed the gory dagger to Hugh, who took the blade and washed it in a bowl of water, brought specifically for the purpose. This done, the Hand wiped the dagger carefully on a clean, white cloth until it was completely dry, then brought it back to Ciang. She shut it and the leather thong back in the box, replaced the box in its proper place on her desk. The blood spattered on the desk would be allowed to soak into the wood, mingling young Darby's blood with that of countless others who had undergone the same rite.

One more small ceremony remained to be completed.

"Sponsor," said Ciang, her gaze going to Ernst Twist.

The man had just settled the pale and shivering young Darby into a chair. Smiling that deceptively foolish smile, Twist shuffled forward and held out his right hand, palm up, to Ciang. The woman dipped the tips of her fingers in Darby's blood, traced two long red lines along scars on Twist's palm, scars that corresponded to the fresh wounds on Darby's.

"Your life is pledged to his life," Ciang recited, "as his is pledged to yours. The punishment for oath-breaking is visited upon both."

Hugh, watching absently, his thoughts going to what would be a difficult conversation with Ciang, thought he saw, again, the man's eyes glisten with that strange red light, like the eyes of a cat by torchlight. When the Hand looked more closely, curious about this phenomenon, Twist had lowered his eyelids in homage to Ciang and was shuffling backward to resume his place near his new partner.

Ciang shifted her gaze to young Darby. "The Ancient will give you herbs to prevent infection. The hand may be bandaged until the wounds are healed. But you must be prepared to remove the bandage should any require it. You may remain here until you feel you are well enough to travel. The ceremony takes its toll, young man. Rest this day, renew your blood with meat and drink. From this day on, you have only to open your palm in this fashion"—Ciang lifted her hand to demonstrate—"and those in the Brotherhood will know you for one of our own."

Hugh looked at his own hand, at the scars that were now barely visible on a calloused palm. The scar taken in the meaty part of the thumb was clearest, largest, for that had been the last to heal. It ran in a thin white strip, cutting across what the palm readers know as the life line. The other scar ran almost parallel to the head and heart lines. Innocent-looking scars; no one ever noticed them, not unless they were meant to.

Darby and Twist were leaving. Hugh rose, said what was appropriate. His words brought a faint flush of pleasure and pride to the young man's gray cheeks. Darby was already walking more steadily. A few draughts of ale, some boasting of his prowess, and he'd be thinking quite well of himself. Tonight, when the throbbing pain awakened him from feverish dreams, he would have second thoughts.

The Ancient stood in the hallway as if on command, though Ciang had made no summons. The old man had been through many of these rites, knew to the second how long they lasted.

"Show our brothers to their rooms," Ciang ordered.

The Ancient bowed, looked at her inquiringly. "May I bring madam and her guest anything?"

"No, thank you, my friend," said Ciang graciously. "I will take care of our needs."

The Ancient bowed again and escorted the two off down the hallway.

Hugh tensed, shifted in his chair, preparing himself to meet those wise and penetrating eyes.

He was not prepared for her remark.

"And so, Hugh the Hand," said Ciang pleasantly, "you have come back to us from the dead."

## CHAPTER 27

### SKURVASH

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### MID REALM

STUNNED BY THE COMMENT, HUGH STARED AT CIANG IN WORDLESS amazement. His look was so wild and dark that it was now Ciang's turn to regard him with astonishment.

"Why, what is the matter, Hugh? One would think I spoke the truth. But I am not talking to a ghost, am I? You are flesh and blood." She reached out her hand, closed it over his.

Hugh released his breath, realized the woman had made the remark in jest, referring to his long absence from Skurvash. He held his hand steady beneath her touch, managed a laugh, and made some muttered explanation that his last job had taken him too close to death to make it a laughing matter.

"Yes, that is what I heard," said Ciang, studying him intently, new thoughts awakened.

Hugh saw, from the expression on her face, that he'd given himself away. The woman was too shrewd, too sensitive to have missed his unusual reaction. He waited nervously for the question, was relieved, yet somewhat disappointed, when it did not come.

"That is what comes of traveling to the High Realm," said Ciang. "Of dealing with mysteriarchs... and other powerful people." She rose to her feet. "I will pour the wine. And then we will talk."

And other powerful people. What did she mean? Hugh wondered, watching her move slowly toward the sideboard on which stood a lovely crystal bottle and two goblets. Could she know about the Sardan? Or the man with the blue, tattooed skin? And if she did know about them, what was it she knew?

Probably more than I do, Hugh thought.

Ciang walked slowly, a concession to her age, but her dignity and carriage made it appear that it was she who chose to walk with measured tread, the years had not chosen for her. Hugh knew better than to assist her. She would have taken his offer for an insult. Ciang always served her guests with her own hands, a custom that dated back to early elven nobility when kings had served wine to their nobles. It was a custom long since abandoned by modern elven royalty, yet said to have been revived in this age by the rebel, Prince Rees'ahn.

Ciang poured the wine into the goblets, placed them upon a silver salver, and carried it across the room to Hugh.

Not a drop spilled.

She lowered the tray to Hugh, who took a goblet, thanked her, and held it until the woman had returned to her chair. When she had lifted the goblet in her hand, Hugh rose to his feet, pledged Ciang's health, and drank deeply.

Ciang bowed graciously, pledged his health, and brought the cup to her lips. When the ceremony was complete, both resumed their seats. Hugh would now be free to pour himself more wine, or to assist her, if she required.

"You were grievously wounded," said Ciang.

"Yes," Hugh replied, not meeting her eyes, staring into the wine that was the same color as the blood of young Darby, drying on the table.

"You did not come here." Ciang set her cup down. "It was your right."

"I know. I couldn't face anyone." He lifted his gaze, dark and grim. "I failed. I hadn't carried out the contract."

"We might have understood. It has happened to others before—"

"Not to me!" said Hugh with a sudden, fierce gesture that almost knocked over the wine goblet. He steadied it, glanced at Ciang, muttered an apology.

The woman gazed at him intently. "And now," she said, after a moment's pause, "you have been called to account."

"I've been called on to fulfill the contract."

"And this conflicts with your desire. The woman you brought with you, the mysteriarch."

Hugh flushed, took another drink of wine, not because he wanted it, but because it gave him an excuse to avoid Ciang's eyes. He heard—or thought he did—a note of rebuke.

"I never sought to hide her identity from you, Ciang," Hugh responded. "Just those fools in town. I didn't want trouble. The woman is my employer."

He heard the rustle of fine silk, guessed that Ciang was smiling, lifting her shoulders in a shrug. He could hear her unspoken words. Lie to yourself, if you must. You do not lie to me.

"Quite wise," was all she said aloud. "What is the difficulty?"

"The former contract conflicts with another job."

"And what will you do to reconcile the situation, Hugh the Hand?"

"I don't know," said Hugh, rotating the empty goblet by the stem, watching the light reflect off the jewels at its base.

Ciang sighed softly, her fingernail tapped lightly on the table. "Since you do not ask for advice, I offer none. I remind you, however, to think over the words you heard that young man speak. A contract is sacred. If you break it, we will have no choice but to consider that you have broken faith with us, as well. The penalty will be exacted,\* even upon you, Hugh the Hand."

\*See Appendix I, The Brotherhood of the Hand.

"I know," he said, and now he could look at her.

"Very well." She was brisk, clasped her hands, unpleasantness out of the way. "You have come here on business. What may we do to assist you?"

Hugh stood up, walked over to the sideboard, poured another glass of wine, tossed it down in a gulp that took no notice of the fine flavor. If he failed to kill Bane, not only his honor was forfeit, but his life as well. Yet to kill the child was to kill the mother, at least as far as Hugh was concerned.

He thought back to those moments Iridal had slept in his arms, confiding, trusting. She had accompanied him here, to this terrible place, believing in him, believing in something within him. Believing in his honor, in his love for her. He had given both to her, as his gift, when he'd given up his life. And, in death, he'd found both returned to him a hundred times over.

And then, he'd been snatched back, and honor and love had died, though he lived. A strange and terrible paradox. In death, perhaps he could find them again, but not if he did this terrible deed. And he knew that if he didn't, if he broke his oath to the Brotherhood, they would come after him and he would fight them instinctively. And he would never find what he'd lost. He'd commit one foul crime after another, until darkness overwhelmed him, utterly, eternally.

It would be better for us all if I told Ciang to take that dagger from its box and stab me to the heart.

"I need passage," he said abruptly, turning to face her. "Passage to the elven lands. And information, whatever you can tell me."

"The passage is not a problem, as you well know," answered Ciang. If she had been disturbed by his long silence, she did not show it. "What about disguise? You have your own means of concealment in enemy lands, for you have traveled Aristagon before and never been found out. But will the same disguise work for your companion?"

"Yes," Hugh replied briefly.

Ciang asked no questions. A brother's methods were a brother's business. Most likely she knew anyway.

"Where is it you need to go?" Ciang lifted a quill pen, drew forth a sheet of paper.

"Paxaria."

Ciang dipped the pen in ink, waited for Hugh to be more specific.

"The Imperanon," Hugh said.

Ciang pursed her lips, replaced the pen in the inkwell. She gazed at him steadily.

"Your business takes you there? Into the castle of the emperor?"

"It does, Ciang." Hugh drew out his pipe, thrust it in his mouth, sucked on it moodily.

"You may smoke," said Ciang, with a gracious nod at the fire. "If you open the window."

Hugh lifted the small, lead-paned window a crack. He filled the pipe with stregno, lit it from a glowing coal at the fire, drew the biting smoke gratefully into his lungs.

"That will not be easy," Ciang continued. "I can provide you with a detailed map of the palace and its environs. And we have someone within who will help you for a price. But to get inside the elven stronghold..." Ciang shrugged, shook her head.

"I can get in," Hugh said grimly. "It's getting out again... alive."

He turned, strode back to seat himself at the chair by her desk. Now that they were discussing business, now that the pipe was in his hands, the stregno mixing pleasantly with the wine in his blood, he could for a time banish the horrors that hounded him.

"You have a plan, of course," Ciang said. "Else you would not have come this far."

"Only a partial one," he told her. "That's why I need information. Anything at all, no matter how small or seemingly irrelevant might help. What is the emperor's political situation?"

"Desperate," said Ciang, leaning back in her chair. "Oh, life is not changed within the Imperanon itself. Parties, gaiety, merriment every night. But they laugh from wine, not from the heart, as the saying goes. Agah'ran dares not let this alliance between Rees'ahn and Stephen come about. If it does, the Tribus empire is finished, and Agah'ran knows it."

Hugh grunted, puffed on his pipe.

Ciang regarded him through languid eyes, lids half closed. "This has to do with Stephen's son, who is not, they say, Stephen's son. Yes, I heard the boy was in the emperor's clutches. Be easy, my friend. I ask nothing. I begin to see the tangle you are in all too clearly."

"Whose side is the Brotherhood on in this?"

"Our own, of course." Ciang shrugged. "War has been profitable for us, for Skurvash. Peace would mean an end to smuggling. But I've no doubt new business opportunities would arise. Yes, so long as greed, hatred, lust, ambition remain in this world—in other words, so long as mankind remains in this world—we will thrive."

"I'm surprised no one's hired us to murder Rees'ahn."

"Ah, but they have. He's remarkable, that one." Ciang sighed, gazed far away. "I don't mind admitting to you, Hugh the Hand, that the prince is one man I would have liked to have known when I was young and attractive. Even now... But that is not to be."

The elven woman sighed again, came back to business, to the present. "We lost two good men and my best woman on that one job. Reports say he was warned by the magus who is always with him, the human female known as Ravenslark. You wouldn't be interested in taking on this assignment yourself, my friend? His head would fetch a fine price."

"Ancestors forbid," Hugh said shortly. "There isn't enough money in the world could pay me for that."

"Yes, you are wise. We would have said, when we were younger, that Krenka-Anris guards him."

Ciang sat silent, her eyes again half closed, one finger making an absentminded circle in the blood on the polished wood. Hugh, thinking she was tired, was ready to take his leave when she opened her eyes, stared full at him.

"There is one piece of information I have that may help you. It is strange, only rumor. But if so, it has great portent."

"And that is?"

"The Kenkari, they say, have stopped accepting souls."

Hugh took the pipe from his mouth, his own eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Ciang smiled, made a slight gesture. "They discovered that the souls being brought to the Temple of the Albedo were not yet ready to come. Sent there by royal decree."

It took Hugh a moment to assimilate her meaning. "Murder?" He stared at her, shaking his head. "Is Agah'ran insane?"

"Not insane. Desperate. And, if this is true, he is also a fool. Murdered souls will not aid his cause. All their energy is expended, crying out for justice. The magic of the Albedo is withering. Another reason Rees'ahn's power grows."

"But the Kenkari are on the emperor's side."

"For now. They have been known to switch allegiances before this, however. They could do it again."

Hugh sat silent, thoughtful.

Ciang said nothing further, left Hugh to his thoughts. She took up the pen again, wrote several lines upon the paper in a firm, bold hand that looked more human than elven. She waited for the ink to dry, then rolled the paper up in a complex twist that was as much her signature as that writing upon it.

"Is this information helpful to you?" she asked.

"Maybe," Hugh muttered, not being evasive, just attempting to see his way. "At least it gives me the beginnings of an idea. Whether or not it comes to anything ..."

He rose to his feet, preparatory to taking his leave. Ciang stood to escort him out. Courteously, he offered her his arm. Gravely, she accepted it, but took care not to lean on him. He matched his pace to her slow one. At the door, she handed him the twist of paper.

"Go to the main docks. Give this to the captain of a ship called the Seven-eyed Dragon. You and your passenger will be admitted on board without question."

"Elven?"

"Yes." Ciang smiled. "The captain won't like it, but he'll do what I ask. He owes us. But it would be politic to wear your disguise."

"What's his destination?"

"Paxaua. I trust that will suit?"

Hugh nodded. "The central city. Ideal."

They reached the door. The Ancient had returned from his previous task and now waited patiently for Hugh.

"I thank you, Ciang," said Hugh, taking the woman's hand and lifting it to his lips. "Your help has been inestimable."

"As is your danger, Hugh the Hand," said Ciang, looking up at him, eyes dark and cold. "Remember the policy. The Brotherhood can help you get into the Imperanon.... perhaps. We cannot help you get out. No matter what."

"I know." He smiled, then looked at her quizzically. "Tell me, Ciang. Did you ever have a weesham, waiting around to catch your soul in one of those Kenkari boxes?"

The woman was startled. "Yes, I had one, once. As do all of royal birth. Why do you ask?"

"What happened, if the question's not too personal?"

"It is personal, but I don't mind answering. One day I decided that my soul was my own. As I have never been a slave in life, so I would not be one in death."

"And the weesham? What happened to her?"

"She would not leave, when I told her to. I had no choice." Ciang shrugged. "I killed her. A very gentle poison, swift acting. She had been at my side since birth and was fond of me. For that crime alone my life is forfeit in elven lands."

Hugh stood silent, withdrawn into himself, perhaps not even listening to the answer, though he was the one who had asked the question.

Ciang, who was usually able to read men's faces as easily as she read the scars upon their palms, could make nothing of Hugh. She could almost have believed, at that moment, that the absurd tales she had heard about him were true.

Or that he has lost his nerve, she said to herself, eyeing him.

Ciang withdrew her hand from his arm, a subtle indication that it was time he left. Hugh stirred, came back to himself and to business.

"You said there was someone in the Imperanon who might aid me?"

"A captain in the elven army. I know nothing of him, except by report. That very man who was previously here— Twist—recommended him. The captain's name is Sang-drax."

"Sang-drax," repeated Hugh, committing it to memory. He raised his right hand, palm outward. "Farewell, Ciang. Thank you for the wine... and the help."

Ciang bowed her head slightly, lowered her eyelids. "Farewell, Hugh the Hand. You may go on ahead alone. I have need to speak with the Ancient. You know the way. The Ancient will meet you in the central hall."

Hugh nodded, turned, and walked off.

Ciang watched him through narrowed eyes until he was out of hearing. Even then, she kept her voice low.

"If he comes here again, he is to be killed."

The Ancient looked stricken, but gave silent agreement. He, too, had seen the signs.

"Do I send round the knife?"\* he asked unhappily.

\*See Appendix I, The Brotherhood of the Hand.

"No," answered Ciang. "That will not be necessary. He carries his own doom within him."

## CHAPTER 28

### THE IMPERANON

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

MOST ELVES DID NOT BELIEVE IN THE EXISTENCE OF THE DREAD DUNGEONS of the Unseen, the emperor's own personal guard. Most elves considered the dungeons little more than dark rumor, a threat held over small children when they misbehaved.

"If you don't stop hitting your little sister, Rohana'ie," scolds the long-suffering parent, "the Unseen will come in the night and carry you off to their prison! And then where will you be?"

Few elves ever saw the Unseen; thus their name. The elite guard did not walk the streets, or roam the alleyways. They did not come knocking on the door in the hours when the Lords of Night had spread their cloak. And though the elves might not believe in the dungeons, almost all elves believed that the Unseen themselves existed.

For law-abiding citizens, the belief was a comforting one. Miscreants—thieves, murderers, and other social misfits—had a convenient way of simply disappearing. No fuss. No bother. None of that spectacle elves associated with the strange human habit of granting criminals a public trial that might result in their being set free (why arrest them in the first place?) or execution in the middle of the village square (barbaric!).

Rebel elves claimed that the dungeons existed. They claimed that the Unseen were not bodyguards but the emperor's own personal assassination squad, that the dungeons held more political prisoners than robbers and murderers.

There were those among the royal families who were beginning to think, in their hearts, that Prince Rees'ahn and his rebels were right. The husband who woke after a strangely heavy sleep to find his wife gone from their bed. The parents whose eldest son vanished without a trace on his way home from university. Those who dared make open inquiries were advised, by the head of their clan, to keep their mouths shut.

Most elves, however, dismissed the rebel claims or would reply with a shrug and the popular proverb that if the Unseen smelled a dragon they had probably found a dragon.

But in one matter, the rebels were right. The dungeons of the Unseen did truly exist. Haplo knew. He was in them.

Located far below the Imperanon, the dungeons were not particularly terrible, being little more than holding cells. Long-term imprisonment was unknown among the Unseen. Those elves permitted to live long enough to see the dungeons were here for a reason—the main one being that they had some sort of information the Unseen needed. When that information was extracted, as it invariably was, the prisoner disappeared. The cell was cleaned and readied for the next.

Haplo was a special case, however, and most members of the Unseen weren't sure quite why. A captain—an elf with the peculiar name of Sang-drax—took a proprietary interest in the human with the blue skin, and word went around that he was to be left in the captain's hands.

Cycle after cycle, Haplo sat in an elven prison, whose iron bars he could have melted with a sigil. He sat in his prison cell and wondered if he were going mad.

Sang-drax had cast no spell over him. The shackles that bound Haplo were those of his own choosing. Imprisonment was another ploy of the serpent-elf to torment him, to tempt him, to force him into taking some type of rash action. And because he believed that Sang-drax wanted Haplo to do something, the Patryn decided to thwart Sang-drax by doing nothing.

At least, that's what he told himself he was doing. It was then he would ask himself bitterly if he might not be going insane.

"We're doing the right thing," he assured the dog.

The animal lay on the floor, nose on paws, gazed up at its master dubiously, seemed to think that it wasn't so certain.

"Bane's up to something. And I doubt if the little bastard has his 'grandfather's' interests in mind. But I'll have to catch him in the act in order to prove it."

To prove what? the dog's sad eyes asked. Prove to Xar that his trust in the boy was misplaced, that he should have trusted you alone? Are you that jealous of Bane?

Haplo glared at the animal. "I'm not—"

"Visitor!" rang out a cheery voice.

Haplo tensed. Sang-drax appeared out of nowhere, as usual stood just outside the cell door. The door was made of iron, with a square grate in the upper portion, a grate covered by bars. Sang-drax peered through the grate. He never asked, on his daily visits, that the cell door be opened, never entered the cell.

Come and get me, Patryn! His presence—just out of reach —taunted Haplo silently.

"Why should I?" Haplo wanted to shout, frustrated, unable to cope with the feeling of panicked fear that was building inside him, rendering him increasingly helpless. "What is it you want me to do?"

But he controlled himself, to outward appearances, at least, and remained seated on his cot. Ignoring the serpent-elf, he stared at the dog.

The animal growled and bared its teeth, its hackles raised, lip curling back over sharp fangs, as it did whenever the serpent-elf was either within sight or smell.

Haplo was tempted to give the dog the order to attack. A series of sigla could change the animal into a gigantic monster. Its bulk would burst open the cells, its teeth could rip off a man's—or a snake's—head. The powerful and fearful aberration Haplo could create would not have an easy battle. The serpent-elf possessed his own magic, stronger than Haplo's. But the dog might distract Sang-drax long enough to give Haplo a chance to arm himself.

The Patryn had left his cell one night, the first night of arrival, to acquire weapons. He picked up two—a dagger and a short-bladed sword—from a cache the Unseen kept in their guardroom. Returning to his cell, he spent the remainder of the night etching runes of death upon each blade, runes that would work quite well against mensch, less well against the serpents.

Both weapons were hidden in a hole beneath a stone he'd magically removed, magically replaced. Both weapons would come quickly to hand.

Haplo moistened his mouth. The sigla on his skin burned. The dog's growl grew louder; it understood matters were becoming serious.

"Haplo, for shame," said Sang-drax softly. "You might well destroy me, but what would you gain? Nothing. And what would you lose? Everything. You need me, Haplo. I am as much a part of you"—his gaze shifted—"as that animal is a part of you."

The dog sensed Haplo's resolve waver. It whined, begging to be allowed to sink its teeth into the serpent-elf's shins, if nothing better offered itself.

"Leave your weapons where they are," said Sang-drax, with a glance at the very rock under which they were hidden. "You'll have use for them later on, as you will see. I've come this very moment to bring you information."

Haplo, with a muttered curse, ordered the dog into a corner.

The animal obeyed reluctantly, first venting its feelings by rearing up on its hind legs, lunging, barking and snarling, at the door. Its head came to the level of the barred grate. Teeth flashed. Then it dropped down, slunk off.

"Keeping that animal is a weakness," the serpent-elf remarked. "I'm surprised your lord permits it. A weakness in him, no doubt."

Haplo turned his back on the serpent-elf, went over and threw himself down on his cot. He stared grimly at the ceiling. He saw no reason to discuss either the dog or his lord with Sang-drax, or to discuss anything at all for that matter.

The serpent-elf lounged against the door, began to make what he termed his "daily report."

"I've spent the morning with Prince Bane. The child is well and in high spirits. He appears to have taken a fancy to me. He is permitted to come and go about the palace as he chooses, with the exception of the imperial suites, of course, so long as I escort him. In case you were wondering, I've requested and been granted reassignment to this duty. An elven count named Tretar—who has the ear of the emperor, as the saying goes—has also taken a fancy to me.

"As for the dwarfs health, I'm afraid I cannot say the same. She is extremely wretched."

"They haven't hurt her, have they?" Haplo demanded, forgetting he wasn't going to talk to the serpent-elf.

"Oh, dear, no," Sang-drax assured him. "She is far too valuable for the elves to mistreat her. She has a room next to Bane's, though she is not permitted to leave it. In fact, the dwarfs value grows, as you will hear shortly. But she is desperately homesick. She can't sleep. Her appetite dwindles. I'm afraid she may die of sorrow."

Haplo grunted, put his hands under his head, settled himself more firmly on the cot. He didn't believe half of what the serpent-elf told him. Jarre was sensible, levelheaded. She was probably fretting over Limbeck more than anything else. Still, it would be beneficial to get her out of here, leave with her, return to Drevlin...

"Why don't you escape?" asked Sang-drax, with his infuriating habit of intruding on Haplo's thoughts. "I'd be delighted to assist you. I can't think why you don't."

"Maybe because you serpents seem so damn eager to get rid of me."

"That's not the reason. It's the boy. Bane won't leave. You don't dare leave him. You don't dare leave without him."

"Your doing, no doubt."

Sang-drax laughed. "I'm flattered, but I'm afraid I can't take the credit. This scheme is all his own. Quite a remarkable child, that Bane."

Haplo yawned, closed his eyes, grit his teeth. Even through the closed lids, he could see Sang-drax grinning.

"The Gogs have threatened to destroy the Kicksey-win-sey," the serpent-elf said.

Haplo flinched involuntarily, cursed himself for doing so, and forced himself to lie still, every muscle in his body rigid.

Sang-drax continued talking in a low voice, meant for Haplo's ear alone. "The elves, laboring under the delusion that the dwarves have shut down the machine, have delivered an ultimatum to that dwarf leader—what's his name?"

Haplo remained silent.

"Limbeck." Sang-drax answered his own question. "Odd name for a dwarf. It never sticks in my mind. The elves told this Limbeck that he either starts operating the Kicksey-winsey again or they will send his female dwarf friend back to him in various assorted pieces.

"The dwarves, laboring under a similar delusion that it is the elves who have caused the machine to cease operations, were understandably confused by this ultimatum, but eventually came to decide, by reason of a few hints, passed on by us, that the ultimatum was a trick, some sort of subtle elven plot against them.

"Limbeck's reply—which, by the way, I've just heard from Count Tretar—is this: If the elves harm one whisker on Jarre's chin, the GEGS will destroy the Kicksey-winsey. Destroy the Kicksey-winsey," Sang-drax repeated. "I fancy they could do it, too. Don't you?"

Yes, Haplo was damn well sure they could do it. They had worked on the machine for generations, kept it running even after the Sartan had abandoned it. The dwarves kept the body alive. They could make it die.

"Yes, so they could," agreed Sang-drax conversationally. "I can picture it now. The GEGS let the steam build up in the boilers, they send the electricity running amok. Parts of the machine would explode, unleashing such a terrible destructive force that the dwarves might unwittingly destroy the entire continent of Drevlin, to say nothing of the machine itself. And there go Lord Xar's plans for conquering the four worlds."

He began to laugh. "I find it all so amusing. The true irony in all this is that neither dwarves nor elves could start the fool machine if they wanted to! Yes, I did some investigating, based on what Jarre told me on board the ship. Up until then, I believed—as do the elves—that the dwarves had shut off the Kicksey-winsey. But they didn't. You discovered the reason. The opening of Death's Gate. That's the key, isn't it? We don't know how, yet, or why. But, to be honest, we serpents really don't care.

"You see, Patryn, it occurred to us that the destruction of the Kicksey-winsey would plunge not only this world into chaos but the others, as well.

" 'Why don't you destroy it yourselves, then?' you ask.

"We could. Perhaps we will. But we much prefer to leave the destruction to the dwarves, to feed off their rage, their fury, their terror. As it is, Patryn, their frustration and anger, their feelings of helplessness and fear have been strong enough to sustain us for a cycle, at least."

Haplo lay unmoving. His jaw muscles were beginning to ache from the strain of keeping them clenched shut.

"The emperor hasn't made up his mind what to do yet," Sang-drax informed him. "Limbeck gave the elves two cycles to decide. I'll let you know what the decision is. Well, sorry to leave, but duty calls. I've promised to teach Bane to play rune-bone."

Haplo heard the serpent-elf's light footfalls walking away. They stopped, came back.

"I grow fat off your fear, Patryn."

CHAPTER 29

PAXAUA

ARISTAGON, MID REALM

THE ELVEN SHIP, THE SEVEN-EYED DRAGON, NAMED AFTER A LEGENDARY monster of elven folklore,' made a safe, if somewhat ponderous landing, in Paxaua. The ship was heavily loaded. Flying weather had not been good, with rain, wind, and fog the entire distance. They were a cycle late getting into port. The crew was edgy and ill-tempered, the passengers—muffled to the eyes against the cold—looked slightly green. The human galley slaves, whose muscles provided the energy that propelled the gigantic wings, slumped in their bonds, too exhausted to make the march to the prison house, where they were kept until the next voyage.

\*A monster sent by Krenka-Anris to test the courage and skill of the mythical elven warrior Mnarash'ai. In each of the dragon's eyes, Mnarash'ai beheld seven deaths. She had to overcome her fear of each before she could, at last, slay the dragon.

A customs official, looking bored, left his warm office on shore, strolled up the gangplank. Tripping on his heels in haste to get aboard ship was an overwrought Paxar merchant. He had invested a considerable fortune in a load of pua fruit, to be delivered fresh, and was positive that delay and damp had caused it to rot.

The ship's captain strolled over to meet the customs official.

"Any contraband, Captain?" inquired the official languidly.

"Certainly not, Excellency," answered the captain, with a smile and a bow. "Will you examine the ship's log?" He gestured to his cabin.

"Thank you, yes," said the customs official stiffly.

The two left the deck, entered the cabin. The door shut behind them.

"My fruit! I want my fruit!" gabbled the merchant, dashing excitedly about the deck, tangling himself in the ropes, and nearly tumbling headfirst down an open hatch.

A crew member took the merchant in tow, steered him to the lieutenant, who was accustomed to dealing with such matters.

"I want my fruit!" the merchant gasped.

"Sorry, sir," answered the lieutenant, with a polite salute, "but we cannot off-load any cargo until we receive approval from customs."

"How long will that take?" demanded the merchant, in agony.

The lieutenant glanced at the captain's cabin. About three glasses of wine, he could have said. "I can assure you, sir—" he began.

The merchant sniffed. "I can smell it! The pua fruit. It's gone bad!"

"That would be the galley slaves, sir," said the lieutenant, keeping a straight face.

"Let me see it, at least," begged the merchant, taking out a handkerchief and mopping his face.

The lieutenant, after some thought, agreed that this would be possible and led the way across the deck toward the stairs leading down to the hold. They walked past the passengers, who stood lining the rail, waving to friends and relatives who'd come to meet them. The passengers, too, would not be allowed to leave the ship until they had been questioned, their luggage inspected.

"The market price on pua fruit is the highest I've seen it," said the merchant, floundering along in the lieutenant's wake, tripping and stumbling over coils of rope, careening off casks of wine. "It's due to the raiding, of course. This will be the first shipment of pua to reach Paxar safely in twelve cycles. I'll make a killing. If it's just not rotted—Holy Mother!"

The alarmed merchant made a grab for the lieutenant, nearly sent the officer overboard.

"H-humans!" the merchant quavered. The lieutenant, seeing the merchant's white face and popping eyes, reached for his sword and searched the skies for dragons, assuming that there must be an army of them, at the very least. Finding nothing more ominous than the dismal overcast, he regarded the merchant with a grim stare. The merchant continued to tremble and point.

He had discovered humans—two of them. Two passengers, standing apart from all the others. The humans were clad in long black robes. They kept their hoods up over their heads; one in particular, the shorter of the two, had his pulled low over his face. Though the merchant could not see their features, he knew them for humans. No elf had such broad and well-muscled shoulders as the taller of the two robed men, and no one except a human would wear clothing made of such coarse cloth, in such an ill-omened and unlucky color as black. Everyone on board ship, including the human slaves, gave these two a wide berth.

The lieutenant, looking extremely annoyed, sheathed his sword.

"This way, sir," he said to the merchant, urging the gaping elf along.

"But they... they're wandering around loose!" "Yes, sir," said the lieutenant.

The elf, staring at the humans in horrible fascination, stumbled over the open hatch.

"Here we are, sir. Mind your step. We wouldn't want you to fall and break your neck," the lieutenant said, gazing heavenward, perhaps asking to be kept from temptation.

"Shouldn't they be in irons? Chains or something?" the merchant demanded, as he began to gingerly descend the ladder.

"Probably, sir," said the lieutenant, preparing to follow after. "But we're not permitted."

"Not permitted!" The merchant halted, looked indignant. "I never heard of such a thing. Who doesn't permit it?"

"The Kenkari, sir," said the lieutenant imperturbably, and had the satisfaction of seeing the merchant turn pale.

"Holy Mother," the elf said again, but this time with more reverence. "What's the reason?" he asked in a whisper. "If it's not secret, of course."

"No, no. These two are what the humans call 'death monks.' They come to the cathedral on holy pilgrimage and have safe passage granted here and back, so long as they don't speak to anyone."

"Death monks. Well, I never," said the merchant, descending into the hold, where he found his fruit perfectly sound and only slightly bruised after its rough passage.

The customs official emerged from the captain's cabin, wiping his lips, his cheeks a brighter shade of pink than when he'd entered. There was a noticeable bulge in the vicinity of his breast pocket that had not been there earlier, a look of satisfaction had replaced the look of boredom with which he had boarded. The customs official turned his attention to the passengers, who were eagerly awaiting permission to go ashore. His expression darkened. "Kir monks, eh?"

"Yes, Excellency," replied the captain. "Came aboard at Sunthas."

"Caused any trouble?"

"No, Excellency. They had a cabin to themselves. This is the first time they've left it. The Kenkari have decreed that we should give the monks safe passage," the captain reminded the official, who was still frowning. "Their personages are sacred."

"Yes, and so is your profit," added the official dryly. "You undoubtedly charged them six times the price of the run."

The captain shrugged. "A man has to earn a living, Excellency," he said vaguely.

The official shrugged. After all, he had his share.

"I suppose I'll have to ask them a few questions." The official grimaced in disgust at the thought, removed a handkerchief from his pocket. "I am permitted to question them?" he added dubiously. "The Kenkari won't take offense?"

"Quite all right, Excellency. And it would look well to the other passengers."

The official, relieved to know that he wasn't about to commit some terrible breach of etiquette, decided to get the unpleasant task behind him as quickly as possible. He walked over to the two monks, who remained standing apart. They bowed in silence to him as he approached. He halted at arm's length from them, the handkerchief held over his nose and mouth.

"Where you from?" the official demanded, speaking pidgin elven.

The monk bowed again, but did not reply. The official frowned at this, but the captain, hastening forward, whispered, "They're forbidden to speak."

"Ah, yes." The official thought a moment. "You talk me," he said, slapping himself on the chest. "Me chief."

"We are from Pitrin's Exile, Excellency," the taller of the two monks answered, with another bow.

"Where you go?" the official asked, pretending not to notice that the human had spoken excellent elven.

"We are making a holy pilgrimage to the Cathedral of the Albedo, Excellency," answered the same monk.

"What in sack?" The official cast a scathing glance at the crude srips each monk carried.

"Items our brethren requested we bring them, herbs and potions and suchlike. Would you like to inspect them?" the monk asked humbly and opened his sack.

A foul odor of decay wafted from it. The official could only imagine what was in there. He gagged, clamped the handkerchief more firmly over his mouth, and shook his head.

"Shut the damn thing! You'll poison us all. Your friend, there, why doesn't he say something?"

"He has no lips, Excellency, and has lost a portion of his tongue. A terrible accident. Would you like to see—"

The official recoiled in horror. He noticed now that the other monk's hands were covered by black gloves and that the fingers appeared to be crooked and deformed. "Certainly not. You humans are ugly enough," he muttered, but he said the last beneath his breath. It would not do to offend the Kenkari, who—for some strange reason—had formed a bond with these ghouls.

"Be off with you then. You have five cycles to make your pilgrimage. Pick up your papers at the port authority, in that house, to your left."

"Yes, Excellency. Thank you, Excellency," said the monk, with still another bow.

The Kir lifted both scripts, slung them over his shoulder, then assisted the other monk to walk. His steps were slow and shuffling, his back bent. Together, the two made their way down the gangplank, passengers, crew, and human slaves all taking care to keep as far from the Kir as possible.

The official shivered. "They make my skin crawl," he said to the captain. "I'll bet you're glad to be rid of them."

"I am, indeed, Excellency," said the captain.

Hugh and Iridal had no difficulty obtaining the papers that would permit them to stay in the realm of Paxaria\* for a period of five cycles, at which time they must leave or face arrest. Even the Kenkari could not protect their brother monks if they overstayed their allotted time.

\*A realm on the continent of Aristagon, Paxaria is the land of the Paxar clan of elves. Paxaria's largest city is Paxaua, a port town. Currently united with the Tribus elves, the Paxar are ostensibly permitted to rule their own realm. The Paxar king is nothing but a figurehead, however, and is married to one of Agah'ran's marry daughters.

The bond between the two religious sects, whose races have been enemies almost since the beginning of Aristagon, can be traced back to Krenka-Annis, the Kenkari elf who discovered the secret magic of trapping the souls of the dead. At that time, shortly after the mensch were removed from the High Realm, humans still lived on Aristagon, and though the relationship between the races was rapidly worsening, a few maintained friendships and contact.

Among these was a human magus who had been known to Krenka-Annis for many years. The humans had heard about the new elven magic that was capable of saving the souls of their dead, but were unable to discover the secret. The Kenkari kept it as a sacred trust. One day this magus, who was a kind and scholarly man, came to Krenka-Annis, begging her help. His wife was dying, he said. He could not bear to lose her. Would the Kenkari please save her soul, if they could not save the body.

Krenka-Annis took pity on her friend. She returned with him and attempted to catch the soul of the dying woman. But Kenkari magic would not work with humans. The woman died, her soul escaped. Her husband, despondent with grief, became obsessed with attempting to catch human souls. He traveled the isles of Aristagon and eventually all the inhabited portion of the Mid Realm, visiting every deathbed, going among the plague-ridden, standing on the sidelines of every battle, trying various magics to catch the souls of the dying, all without success.

He acquired followers during his travels, and these humans carried on his work after the magus himself died and his own soul had slipped away, despite his followers' best efforts to keep hold of it. The followers, who called themselves "Kir,"\* wanted to continue their search for the magic, but, due to their habit of arriving at households side by side with death, they were becoming increasingly unpopular among the populace. It was whispered that they brought death with them and they were often physically attacked, driven away from their homes and villages.

\*Probably a corruption of the word "Kenkari."

The Kir banded together for their own protection, dwelt in isolated parts of the Mid Realm. Their search for the means to capture souls took a darker path. Having had no luck with the living, the Kir began to study the dead, hoping to find out what happened to the soul after it left the body. Now they searched for corpses, particularly corpses abandoned by the living.

The Kir continued to keep to themselves, avoiding contact with outsiders as much as possible, taking far more interest in the dead than in the living. Though still viewed with loathing, they were no longer viewed with fear. They became accepted and even welcome members of society. They eventually gave up the search for the soul-trapping magic, began instead—perhaps naturally enough—to worship death.

And though, over the centuries, their views on death and life had grown divergent and were now far apart, the Kir monks and the Kenkari elves never forgot that the two trees had sprung from the same seed. The Kenkari were among the few outsiders ever permitted to enter a Kir monastery and the Kir were the only humans able to obtain safe passage in elven lands.

Hugh, having been raised by the Kir monks, knew about this bond, knew that this disguise would provide the only safe means of entering elven lands. He'd used it before, with success, and he'd taken the precaution of procuring two black robes before he'd left the monastery, one robe for himself and one for Iridal.

No women being allowed in the order, it was necessary for Iridal to keep her hands and face covered and to refrain from speaking. This was not a great difficulty, since elven law prohibited the Kir from talking to any elf. Nor was any elf likely to break the prohibition. The elves viewed the Kir with loathing and superstitious dread that would make it quite easy for Hugh and Iridal to travel without interference.

The official at the port authority rushed them through with insulting haste, threw their papers at them from a safe distance.

"How do we find the Cathedral of the Albedo?" Hugh asked in fluent elven.

"No understand." The elf shook his head.

Hugh persisted. "What's the best route into the mountains, then?"

"No speak human," the elf said, turned his back, and walked off.

Hugh glowered, but said nothing, made no further argument. He took their papers, thrust them into the rope belt girdling his waist, and walked back out into the streets of the bustling port town of Paxaua.

From the depths of her cowl, Iridal gazed in awe and despair at the row after row of buildings, the winding streets, the crowds of people. The largest city in Volkaran could have fit easily into Paxaua's market district.

"I never imagined anyplace so vast or one filled with so many people!" she whispered to Hugh, taking hold of his arm and crowding close. "Have you ever been here before?"

"My business has never brought me this deep into elven territory," Hugh answered, with a grim smile.

Iridal looked at the numerous, converging, winding, twisting city streets in dismay. "How will we ever find our way? Don't you have a map?"

"Only of the Imperanon itself. All I know is that the cathedral's located somewhere in those mountains," said Hugh, indicating a range of mountains on the distant horizon. "The streets of this rat's warren have never been mapped, to my knowledge. Most of them don't have names, or if they do, only the inhabitants know them. We'll ask directions. Keep moving."

They followed the flow of the crowd, began walking up what appeared to be a main street.

"Asking directions is going to be rather difficult," Iridal remarked in a low voice, after a few moments' walking. "No one comes near us! They just... stare..."

"There are ways. Don't be afraid. They don't dare harm us."

They continued along the street, their black robes standing out like two dark holes torn from the gaily colored, living tapestry formed by the throngs of elves going about their daily lives. Everywhere the dark figures walked, daily life came to a halt.

The elves stopped talking, stopped bartering, stopped laughing or arguing. They stopped running, stopped walking, seemed to stop living, except for their eyes, which followed the black-robed pair until they had moved on to the next street, where it happened all over again. Iridal began to think that she carried silence in her hand, was draping its heavy folds over every person, every object they passed.

Iridal looked into the eyes, saw hatred—not for what she was, which surprised her, but for what she brought—death. A reminder of mortality. Long-lived though the elves are, they can't live forever.

She and Hugh kept walking, aimlessly, it seemed to Iridal, though they traveled in the same direction, presumably moving toward the mountains, though she could no longer see them, hidden by the tall buildings.

At length, she came to realize that Hugh was searching for something. She saw his hooded head turn from one side of the narrow street to the other, looking at the shops and the signs over the shops. He would leave a street, for no apparent reason, draw her into a street running along parallel. He would pause, study diverging streets, choose one, and head that direction.

Iridal knew better than to ask him, certain she would receive no reply. But she began to use her eyes, studied the shops and the signs as he was studying them. Paxaua's marketplace was divided into districts. Cloth sellers had their street next to the weavers. Swordsmiths were up a block or two from the tinker, the fruit vendors seemed to stretch for a mile. Hugh led her into a street lined with perfumers; the fumes from their aromatic shops left Iridal breathless. A left-angle turn brought them to the herbalists.

Hugh appeared to be nearing his goal, for he moved faster, casting only the briefest glances at the signs hanging above the shops. They soon left the larger herb shops behind, continued on down the street, heading into the central part of Paxaua. Here the shops were smaller and dirtier. The crowds were smaller, as well, for which Iridal was thankful, and appeared to be of a poorer class.

Hugh glanced to his right, leaned near Iridal.

"You're feeling faint," he whispered.

Iridal stumbled, clutched at him obligingly, swayed on her feet. Hugh grasped hold of her, looked around.

"Water!" he called sternly. "I ask for water for my companion. He is not well."

The few elves who had been in the street vanished. Iridal let her body go heavy, sagged in Hugh's arms. He half carried, half dragged her over to a stoop, under a shabby, swinging sign that marked yet another herb shop.

"Rest here," he told her in a loud voice. "I will go inside and ask for water. Keep a watch out," he muttered beneath his breath before he left her.

Iridal nodded silently, drew her hood well over her face, though she still made certain she could see. She sat limply where Hugh left her, darting alarmed glances up and down the street. It had not occurred to her until now that they were being followed. Such a thing seemed ludicrous, when every elf in Paxaua must know by now of their presence and probably where they were bound, for they had certainly made no secret of it.

Hugh entered the shop door, left it open behind him. Out of the corner of her eye, Iridal watched him walk over to a counter. Behind it, long rows of shelving were lined with bottles of every shape, color, and size, containing an astonishing variety of plants, powders, and potions.

Elven magic tends to be mechanical in nature (dealing with machines) or spiritual (the Kenkari). Elves don't believe in mixing a pinch of this herb with a scoop of that powder, except for use in healing. And healing potions weren't considered magical, merely practical. The elf behind the counter was an herbalist. He could dispense ointments to treat boils and blisters and diaper rash, provide liquids to cure coughs and insomnia and fainting spells. And perhaps a love charm or two, delivered under the counter.

Iridal couldn't imagine what Hugh was after. She was reasonably certain it wasn't water.

The elf behind the counter didn't seem at all pleased to see him.

"No like your kind. You go way," said the elf, waving his hand.

Hugh raised his right hand, palm out, as if in greeting. "My companion is feeling faint. I want a cup of water. And we are lost, we need directions. In the name of the Kenkari, you cannot refuse."

The elf regarded him in silence, cast a sharp and furtive glance at the door. "You, monk. You no sit there. Bad for business," he called to Iridal, loudly and irritably. "Come in. Come in."

Hugh returned to assist Iridal to her feet, led her into the shop.

The elf slammed shut the door. Turning to the Hand, he said in a low voice, "What do you need, Brother? Be, quick. We don't have much time."

"Directions on the fastest route to the Cathedral of the Albedo."

"Where?" the elf asked, astonished.

Hugh repeated himself.

"Very well." The elf was perplexed, but cooperative. "Go back to Swordsmith Street, turn onto Silversmith Row and follow it to the end. It will merge with a large highway known as King's Way. It winds about some, but it will take you into the mountains. The mountain pass is heavily guarded, but you shouldn't have any trouble. Those disguises—a clever idea. They won't get you inside the Imperanon, though. I presume that's your real destination."

"We're going to the cathedral. Where is it?"

The elf shook his head. "Take my advice, Brother. You don't want to go there. The Kenkari will know you're imposters. You don't want to cross the Kenkari."

Hugh made no reply, waited patiently.

The elf shrugged. "It's your soul, Brother. The Imperanon is built on the mountain side. The cathedral is in front, on a large, level plateau. The structure is a huge crystal dome standing in the center of a large round courtyard. You can see it for menka. Believe me, you won't have any trouble finding it, though why you'd want to go there is beyond me. Still, that's your business. Anything else I can do for you?"

"We heard a rumor that the Kenkari have stopped accepting souls. Is it true?"

The elf raised his eyebrows. This question was certainly not one he'd expected. He glanced out the window, to the empty street, then at the door, to make sure it was shut, and still took the precaution of lowering his voice.

"It is true, Brother. The word is all over town. When you reach the cathedral, you'll find the doors closed."

"Thank you for the help, Brother," said Hugh. "We'll take our leave. We don't want to cause you any trouble. The walls moved."\*

\*Translation: The Unseen are following us.

Iridal looked at Hugh, wondering what he meant. The elf seemed to know, however.

He nodded. "Of course. Don't fret. The Unseen are not watching you so much as they are watching us, their own people. Who you talk to, where you stop."

"I trust we haven't brought trouble on you."

"Who am I?" The elf shrugged. "Nobody. I take care to be nobody. If I were somebody—rich, powerful—yes, then you could bring trouble to me."

Hugh and Iridal prepared to go.

"Here, drink this." The elf handed Iridal a cup of water. She accepted it thankfully. "You took as if you could use it. You're certain I can't do anything else for you, Brother? Poisons? I have some excellent snake venom in stock. Perfect for adding a little bite to your dagger's tooth—"

"Thank you, no," said Hugh.

"So be it," the elf said cheerfully. He threw open the door. His expression altered to a scowl. "And stay out, you dog of a human! And you tell the Kenkari, they owe me a blessing!"

He shoved Hugh and Iridal roughly over the stoop, slammed the door shut after them. The two stood in the street, looking—Iridal trusted—as forlorn and weary and dispirited as she felt.

"We've come the wrong way apparently," said Hugh, speaking human, for the benefit, Iridal presumed, of the Unseen.

So it was the elite elven guard who were following them. She stared around, saw nothing, nobody. She didn't even see the walls move, wondered how Hugh knew.

"We must retrace our steps," he told her.

Iridal accepted the arm Hugh offered for her support, leaned on him, thinking wearily of the long distance they had still to travel. "I had no idea your work was so strenuous," she whispered.

He looked down at her with a smile, a rare thing for him. "It's quite a distance into the mountains, I'm afraid. And we don't dare stop again."

"Yes, I understand."

"You must be missing your magic, about now," he said to her, patting her hand, still smiling at her.

"And you must be missing your pipe." Her hand tightened over his. They walked for long moments in companionable silence.

"You were looking for that shop, weren't you?"

"Not that one in particular," Hugh responded. "One with a certain sign in the window."

Iridal couldn't at first recall a sign; the shop had been so poor and shabby. Nothing hung over the door. Then she remembered that there had been a sign propped up inside the window. Crudely painted, now that she thought of it—the image was of a hand.

The Brotherhood advertised openly in the streets, it seemed. Elf and human—strangers, mortal enemies—yet they risked their lives to help each other, bound by a bond of blood, of death. Evil, to be sure, but might this not offer a hope of good to come? Wasn't this an indication that the two races were not natural enemies, as some on both sides claimed?

The chance for peace rests with us, Iridal thought. We must succeed. Yet, now that she was in this alien land, this alien culture, her hopes for finding her son and freeing him were growing dim.

"Hugh," she said, "I know I'm not supposed to ask questions, but what the elf said is true. The Kenkari will know we are imposters. Still you talk as if you truly plan to go to them. I don't understand. What will you say to them? How can you hope—"

"You're right, Lady," said Hugh, cutting her short. His smile had vanished. His tone was grim. "You're not supposed to ask questions. Here, this is the right road."

They entered onto a broad avenue, marked with the royal crest of the King of Paxaria. The two were once again surrounded by crowds, once again surrounded by silence.

In silence, they continued on.

## CHAPTER 30

### THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR OF THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO HAD a new responsibility. Once he had waited for the weesham, bearing the souls of their charges for release in the Aviary. Now, he was forced to turn them away.

Word spread rapidly among a shocked populace that the cathedral was closed, though just why the Kenkari had closed it was not revealed. The Kenkari were powerful, but even they did not dare openly accuse their emperor of murdering his own subjects. The Kenkari had been more than half expecting to be attacked or at least persecuted by the emperor's troops, were considerably surprised (and relieved) when they were not.

But, to the Keeper's dismay, the weesham continued to cross the courtyard. Some had not heard the news. Others, though informed that the cathedral was closed, still tried to get in.

"But surely the law doesn't apply to me," the weesham would argue. "To all the others, perhaps, but the soul I bear is the soul of a prince..." Or a duchess or a marquis or an earl.

It didn't matter. All were turned away.

The weesham left, bewildered, completely at a loss, clutching the small boxes in trembling hands.

"I feel so terribly sorry for them," said the Door to the Book. They stood conferring together in the chapel. "The weesham look lost. 'Where do I go?' they ask me. 'What am I to do?' It's been their whole life. What can I say except 'Return to your home. Wait.' Wait for what?"

"The sign," said the Book confidently. "It will come. You will see. You must have faith."

"Easy for you to talk," said the Door in bitter tones. "You don't have to turn them away. You don't see their faces."

"I know. I'm sorry," said the Book, laying her hand on the thin hand of her fellow Kenkari. "But things will be easier now the word is out. The weesham have stopped coming. There hasn't been one in the last two cycles. You will no longer be troubled."

"Not by them." His tone was ominous.

"You still fear we might be attacked?"

"I almost begin to wish we would be. Then, at least we would know the emperor's mind. He hasn't publicly denounced us. He hasn't tried to order us to alter our stand. He hasn't sent troops."

"Troops wouldn't come. Not against us," said the Book.

"They wouldn't have come in the old days. But so much is changing now. I wonder ..."

The sound of the gong rang throughout the cathedral's precincts. Both glanced upward, the notes seeming to shiver on the still air. The Door's chief assistant, left to guard in the Door's absence, was summoning his master.

The Door sighed. "Ah, I spoke too soon. Another."

The Book gazed at him in mute sympathy. The Keeper of the Door rose to his feet, left the Aviary, and hastened back to his post. As he walked—not moving very fast—he glanced unhappily out the crystal walls, expecting to see yet another weesham, expecting yet another argument. What he saw, however, made the Door come to a halt. He stared in astonishment, and, when he started moving again, his haste caused his slippered feet to slip precariously on the polished floors.

His chief assistant was extremely grateful to see him.

"I'm thankful you could come, Keeper. I feared you might be at prayer."

"No, no." The Keeper of the Door stared through the crystal wall, through the golden grille that barred entrance.

He had been hoping that his vision had been blurred, that a trick of light had deceived him, that he wasn't seeing two black-robed humans crossing the vast and empty courtyard. But they were so near now that there could not be much doubt.

His brow furrowed. "Kir monks of all things. At a time like this."

"I know," murmured his assistant. "What do we do?"

"We must admit them," said the Door, sighing. "Tradition demands it. They've come all this way. At grave peril, perhaps, for they cannot know how bad things are. The sacred law that protects them holds, but who knows for how long? Raise the grille. I will speak with them."

The assistant hurried to obey. The Keeper of the Door waited until the Kir, who were moving slowly, had reached the stairs. They both kept their hoods pulled low over their heads.

The grille rose silently, effortlessly. The Keeper of the Door pushed on the crystal door, which moved noiselessly to open. The Kir had halted when the grille went up. They remained standing unmoving, their heads lowered, as the Door walked forth.

He raised his arms; the shimmering robes with their butterfly wings and myriad colors were dazzling in the sunlight.

"I welcome you, brethren, in the name of Krenka-Anris," said the Door, speaking human.

"All praise to Krenka-Anris," said the taller of the two Kir monks in elven. "And to her sons."

The Door nodded. The response was the correct one.

"Enter and be at peace after your long journey," said the Door, lowering his arms, standing to one side.

"Thank you, Brother," said the monk harshly, assisting his companion, who appeared footsore and exhausted.

The two crossed the threshold. The Keeper shut the door. His assistant lowered the grille. The Door turned to his visitors and, though they had said nothing, done nothing to arouse suspicion, the Door knew he'd made a mistake.

The taller of the monks saw, by the Door's altered expression, that their disguises had been penetrated. He drew off his hood. Keen eyes glittered from beneath overhanging brows. His beard was braided into two twists on a strong and jutting jaw. His nose was like the beak of a hawk. The Keeper thought he had never seen a more daunting human.

"You are right, Keeper," said this man. "We are not Kir monks. We made use of these disguises because it is the only way we could travel here in safety."

"Sacrilege!" cried the Door, his voice shaking, not with fear, but with fury. "You have dared enter sacred precincts under false pretenses! I don't know what you hoped to accomplish, but you have made a terrible mistake. You will not leave here alive. Krenka-Anris, I call upon you! Cast down your holy fire. Burn their flesh! Cleanse your temple of their profane presence!"

Nothing happened. The Keeper of the Door was staggered. Then, he began to think he understood how his magic had been thwarted. The other Kir monk had removed her hood, and he saw the rainbow-colored eyes, the wisdom in them.

"A mysteriarch!" said the Door, recovering from the shock. "You may have disrupted my first spell, but you are one and we are many..."

"I did not disrupt your spell," said the woman quietly. "Nor will I use my magic against you, not even in my own defense. We mean no harm, intend no sacrilege. Our cause is one of peace between our peoples."

"We are your prisoners," said the man. "Bind us, blindfold us. We won't fight you. We ask only that you take us to see the Keeper of the Souls. We must speak to him. When he has heard us, he may pass judgment on us. If he deems we must die, then so be it."

The Door eyed the two narrowly. His assistant had sounded the alarm, ringing the gong wildly. Other Kenkari came at a run, formed a ring around the false monks. The Keeper, with their assistance, could cast his spell again.

But why hadn't it worked in the first place?

"You know a great deal about us," said the Door, trying to decide what to do. "You knew the correct response—something only a true Kir monk would know; you know about the Keeper of the Souls."

"I was raised by Kir monks," said the man. "And I've lived among them since."

"Bring them to me." A voice sparkled on the air, like frost or the notes of the tongueless bell.

The Keeper of the Door, recognizing the command of his superior, bowed in silent acquiescence. But first, he laid his hand upon each human's eyes, casting a spell that would blind them. Neither attempted to stop him, though the man flinched and stiffened, as if it took enormous will to submit himself to this handicap.

"Profane eyes may not see the sacred miracle," said the Keeper of the Door.

"We understand," replied the mysteriarch calmly.

"We will guide you safely. Have no fear of falling," said the Door, extending his own hand to the woman.

Her hand met his, her touch was light, cool.

"Thank you, Magicka," she said and even managed a smile, though by the weariness on her face, she must be exhausted almost to the point of dropping. Limping on bruised and swollen feet, she grimaced when she walked.

The Door glanced back. His chief assistant had taken hold of the arm of the man, was leading him along. The Door found it difficult to take his eyes from the man's face. It was ugly, its features hard and brutal-looking. But then most human faces appear brutish to the delicate-boned elves. There was something different about this man's face. The Door wondered that he wasn't repulsed, that he kept staring at the man with a sense of awe, a prickling of the skin.

The woman stumbled over the Kenkari's long butterfly robes. The Door had drifted over into her path.

"I beg your pardon, Magicka," he said. He would have liked to ask her name, but it was for his superior to handle the formalities. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

"I'm sorry we've upset you," the woman said, with another wan smile.

The Door was coming to feel pity for her. Her features were not nearly as coarse as those of most humans, she was almost pleasant to look upon. And she seemed so tired and so... sad. "It isn't much farther. You've traveled a long distance, I suppose."

"From Paxaua, on foot. I dared not use my magic," said the woman.

"No, I suppose not. No one gave you any trouble, hindered you?"

"The only place we were stopped was in the mountains. The guards at the pass questioned us, but did not detain us long, once we reminded them that we are under your protection."

The Door was pleased to hear this. The troops, at least, have respect for us, haven't turned against us. The emperor is a different matter. Agah'ran is up to something. He would never have allowed our prohibition to stand if he were not. After all, we let him know that we know he's a murderer. He must realize we won't tolerate his rule for long.

And for what do we wait? For a sign. Other worlds. A gate of death that leads to life. A man who is dead and who is not dead. Blessed Krenka-Anris! When would it all be explained?

The Keeper of the Book and the Keeper of the Soul were waiting for them in the chapel. The humans were led inside. The Door's chief assistant, who had brought the human male, bowed and left them. He shut the door. At the sound, the human male turned, frowned.

"Iridal?"

"I'm here, Hugh," she said softly.

"Have no fear," said the Keeper of the Soul. "You are in the chapel of the Aviary. I am here, the one with whom you asked to speak. With me also are the Keepers of the Book and of the Door. I regret that I must leave the blindness upon you, but it is forbidden by law that the eyes of our enemies should look upon the miracle."

"We understand," said Iridal. "Perhaps the day will come when there will be no need for such laws."

"We pray for that day, Magicka," said the Keeper. "What is it you are called?"

"I am Iridal, formerly of the High Realms, now of Volkaran."

"And your companion?" the Keeper prompted, after waiting a moment for the man to answer.

"He is Hugh the Hand," said Iridal, when it became clear Hugh wasn't going to speak. She appeared worried, turned her sightless eyes in what she sensed was his direction, reached out a groping hand.

"A man raised by Kir monks. A man with a most remarkable face," said the Keeper, studying Hugh intently. "I've seen many humans, and there is something different about you, Hugh the Hand. Something awful, something fey. I do not understand. You came to speak to me. Why? What is you want of the Kenkari?"

Hugh opened his lips, seemed about to respond, then said nothing.

Iridal, her hand finding his arm, was alarmed to feel the muscles rigid, shivering.

"Hugh, is everything all right? What's wrong?"

He drew away from her touch. His mouth opened, closed again. The cords in his neck stood out, his throat constricted. At last, apparently angered with himself, he brought the words out with an effort, as if he'd dragged them up from dark depths.

"I came to sell you my soul."

## CHAPTER 31

### THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

"HE'S INSANE," SAID THE BOOK, THE FIRST TO RECOVER HER POWER of speech.

"I don't believe so," said the Keeper of the Soul, regarding Hugh with intense, if perplexed, interest. "You are not insane, are you, Hugh." The human word came awkwardly to elven lips.

"No," Hugh answered shortly. Now that the worst was over—and he had not imagined it would be so difficult—he was relaxed, could even view the elves' astonishment with sardonic amusement. The only person he could not face yet was Iridal and, because of this, he was grateful for his blindness.

She said nothing, confused, not understanding, thinking, perhaps, that this was another of his tricks.

No trick. He was in earnest—deadly earnest. "You were raised by Kir monks. You know something, then, of our ways."

"I know a lot, Keeper. I make it my business to know things," Hugh said.

"Yes," the Soul murmured. "I do not doubt it. You know, then, that we do not accept human souls, that we never buy souls at all. The souls we take in are given to us freely..."

The Keeper's voice faltered somewhat on the last statement.

Hugh smiled grimly, shook his head.

The Keeper was silent long moments, then said, "You are well informed, sir." Silent again, then, "You have made a long journey, fraught with danger, to offer that which you knew we must reject—"

"You won't reject it," said Hugh. "I'm different."

"I can sense that," said the Keeper softly. "But I don't understand. Why are you different, Hugh? What is there about your soul that would make it valuable to us? That would even permit us to take it?"

"Because my soul, such as it is"—Hugh's mouth twisted—"has passed beyond... and has returned."

"Hugh," Iridal gasped, suddenly realizing that this was no trick, "you can't be serious. Hugh, don't do this!"

Hugh paid no attention to her.

"Do you mean," said the Keeper in a stifled tone that sounded as if he were suffocating, "that you have died and been... and been..."

"Resurrected," Hugh said.

He had expected astonishment, disbelief. But it seemed he had cast a lightning bolt into the elves. He could feel the electricity arc in the air, almost hear it crackle around him.

"That is what I see in your face," said Soul.

"The man who is dead and is not dead," said Door.

"The sign," said Book.

A moment ago, Hugh had been in control of the situation. Now, somehow, he'd lost it, felt helpless, as when his dragon-ship had been sucked into the Maelstrom.

"What is it? Tell me!" he demanded harshly, reaching out. He stumbled over a chair.

"Hugh, don't! What do you mean?" Iridal cried, blindly clutching at him. She turned frantically to the elves. "Explain to me. I don't understand."

"I think we may restore their sight," said the Keeper of the Soul.

"Such a thing is unprecedented!" Book protested.

"All is unprecedented," replied Soul gravely.

He took hold of Hugh's hands, held them fast, with a strength startling in one so thin, and laid his other hand on the man's eyes.

Hugh blinked, looked swiftly around him. The Keeper of the Door lifted Iridal's blindness in the same fashion. Neither had ever seen Kenkari elves before, and were amazed by their appearance.

The Kenkari, all three, stood head and shoulders taller than Hugh the Hand, who was considered a tall man among humans. But the elves were so excessively thin that the three of them might have stood side by side and barely equaled Hugh's breadth. The Kenkari's hair was long, for it is never cut, and is white from birth.

Male and female Kenkari are similar in appearance, particularly when wearing the shapeless butterfly robes that easily hide the female's curves. The most noticeable difference between the sexes is in the way the hair is worn. Males plait it in one long braid, down the back. Females wrap the braid around the head in a crown. Their eyes are large, overlarge in their small, delicate faces; the pupils are extraordinarily dark. Some elves remark disparagingly (but never publicly) that the Kenkari have come to resemble the winged insect they worship and emulate.

Iridal sank weakly into a chair one of the Kenkari provided for her. Once her initial shock at the sight of the strange-looking elves had worn off, she turned her gaze to Hugh.

"What are you doing? Tell me. I don't understand."

"Trust me, Iridai," Hugh said quietly. "You promised you would trust me."

Iridal shook her head, and, as she did so, her eyes were drawn to the Aviary. They softened at the sight of the lush, green beauty, but then she seemed to realize what it was she looked upon. Her gaze shifted back to Hugh with a kind of horror.

"Now, please explain yourself, sir," said the Keeper of the Soul.

"First you explain yourself," Hugh demanded, glaring from one to the other. "You don't seem all that surprised to see me. I get the feeling you were expecting me."

The dark-eyed gazes of the three Keepers slid from one to the other, exchanging thoughts from beneath lowered lids.

"Please, sit down, Hugh. I think we should all sit down. Thank you. You see, sir, we weren't expecting you precisely. We didn't know quite what to expect. You've obviously heard that we have closed the Cathedral of the Albedo. Due to... shall we say... very unhappy circumstances."

"The emperor murdering his own kin for their souls," Hugh stated. Reaching into a pocket of his robes, he drew forth his pipe, stuck it—cold—between his teeth.

Angered by Hugh's bluntness and apparent disdain, the Soul's expression turned hard and brittle. "What right have you humans to judge us? Your hands, too, are wet with blood!"

"It is a terrible war," said Iridal softly. "A war neither side can win."

The Soul grew calmer. Sighing, he nodded in sad agreement. "Yes, Magicka. That is what we have come to understand. We prayed to Krenka-Anris for the answer. And we received it, though we do not understand it. 'Other worlds. A gate of death that leads to life. A man who is dead and who is not dead.' The message was more complicated, of course, but those are the signs we are to look for, to know that the end of this terrible destruction is near."

" 'A gate of death...' " Iridal repeated, staring at them in wonder. "You mean: Death's Gate."

"Do you know of such a thing?" the Keeper asked, taken aback.

"Yes. And ... it leads to other worlds! The Sartan created them, created Death's Gate. A Sartan I knew passed through it, not long ago. The same Sartan..." Iridal's voice faded to a whisper. "The same Sartan who restored this man's life to him."

No one spoke. Each one, elf and human, sat in the awed and fearful silence that comes when mortals feel the touch of an Immortal hand, when they hear the whisper of an Immortal voice.

"Why have you come to us, Hugh the Hand?" the Soul demanded. "What bargain did you hope to strike? For," he added, with a wry—if tremulous—smile, "one does not sell one's soul for so paltry a thing as money."

"You're right." Hugh shifted uncomfortably, his glowering gaze upon his pipe, avoiding all eyes, especially Iridal's. "You know, of course, of the human child being held in the castle—"

"King Stephen's son, yes."

"He's not King Stephen's son. He's her son." Hugh pointed the pipe at Iridal. "Her son and her late husband's, also a mysteriarch. How the kid came to be thought of as Stephen's is a long story and one that has nothing to do with why we are here. Suffice it to say, the elves plan to hold the boy hostage, in return for Stephen's surrender."

"Within only a few days' time, King Stephen plans to meet with Prince Rees'ahn, form an alliance between our peoples, launch a war that will surely bring an end to the cruel Tribus rule. The emperor plots to use my son to force Stephen into refusing such an alliance," Iridal explained. "All hope for peace, for unity among the races, would be shattered. But if I can free my son, the emperor will have no hold over Stephen. The alliance can proceed."

"But we can't get into the Imperanon to free the kid," said Hugh. "Not without help."

"You seek our help in obtaining entry into the palace."

"In exchange for my soul," said Hugh, placing the pipe back in his mouth.

"In exchange for nothing!" Iridal struck in angrily. "Nothing except the knowledge that you elves have done what is right!"

"You ask us, Magicka, to betray our people," said the Soul.

"I ask you to save your people!" Iridal cried passionately. "Look at the depths to which your emperor has sunk. He murders his own! What will happen if this tyrant rules the world unchallenged?"

The Keepers again exchanged glances.

"We will pray for guidance," said Soul, rising to his feet. "Come, brethren. If you will excuse us?"

The other Keepers stood and left the room, passing through a small door into an adjoining room, presumably another chapel. They shut the door carefully behind them.

The two left alone sat in cold, unhappy silence. There was much Iridal wanted to say, but the grim and dour expression on Hugh's face let her know that her words and arguments would not be welcome, might do more harm than good. Iridal could not think, however, that the elves would accept Hugh's offer. Surely the Kenkari would aid them without exacting such a terrible price.

She convinced herself of this, relaxed, and, in her weariness, must have drifted into sleep, for she was not aware of the Kenkari's return until Hugh's touch upon her hand brought her to startled wakefulness.

"You are tired," said Soul, looking at her with a gentle beneficence that strengthened her hope. "And we have kept you overlong. You shall have food and rest, but first, our answer." He turned to Hugh, clasped his thin hands before him. "We accept your offer."

Hugh made no reply, merely nodded once, abruptly.

"You will accept the ritual death at our hands?"

"I welcome it," Hugh said, his teeth clenched over the pipe stem.

"You can't mean this!" Iridal cried, rising to her feet. "You can't demand such a sacrifice—"

"You are very young, Magicka," said Soul, dark eyes turning upon Iridal. "You will come to learn, as we have in our long lives, that what is given freely is often despised. It is only when we pay for something that we treasure it. We will aid your safe entry into the palace. When the boy is removed, you, Hugh the Hand, will return to us. Your soul will be of inestimable value.

"Our charges"—Soul glanced toward the Aviary, to the leaves fluttering and stirring with the breath of the dead—are beginning to grow restless. Some want to leave us. You will placate them, tell them that they are better off where they are."

"They're not, but fair enough," said Hugh. Removing his pipe, he rose to his feet, stretched tired and aching muscles.

"No!" Iridal protested brokenly. "No, Hugh, don't do this! You can't do this!"

Hugh tried to harden himself against her. Then, suddenly, he sighed, drew her close, held her fast. She began to weep. Hugh swallowed. A single tear crept from beneath his eyes, slid down his cheek, and fell into her hair.

"It's the only way," he said to her softly, speaking human. "Our only chance. And we're getting the best of the deal. An old used-up, misspent life like mine in exchange for a young life, like your son's.

"I want death to come this way, Iridal," he added, his voice deepening. "I can't do it myself. I'm afraid. I've been there, you see, and the journey is... is..." He shuddered. "But they'll do it for me. And it will be easy this time. If they send me."

She could not speak. Hugh lifted her in his arms. She clung to him, weeping.

"She's tired, Keeper," he said. "We both are. Where may we rest?"

The Keeper of the Soul smiled sadly. "I understand. The Keeper of the Door will guide you. We have rooms prepared for you and food, though I fear it is not what you are accustomed to eating. I cannot permit you to smoke, however."

Hugh grunted, grimaced, said nothing.

"When you are rested, we will discuss arrangements with you. You must not wait long. You are probably not aware of this, but you were most assuredly followed here."

"The Unseen? I'm aware of it. I saw them. Or as much of them as anyone ever sees."

The Keeper's eyes widened. "Truly," he said, "you are a dangerous man."

"I'm aware of that, too," Hugh responded grimly. "This world will be a better place without me in it."

He left, carrying Iridal in his arms, following the Keeper of the Door, on whose face was an expression of hope, mingled with dazed perplexity.

"Will he truly come back to die?" asked Book, when the three were gone.

"Yes," said the Keeper of the Soul. "He will come back."

## CHAPTER 32

### THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

GUIDED BY THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR, HUGH CARRIED IRIDAL THROUGH the halls of the cathedral, down to the lower levels, where the rooms allocated to the weesham were located. The Door opened two of the rooms, located side by side. Food, consisting of bread and fruit, and a small pitcher of water had been placed on a table in each.

"The doors seal themselves once they are closed," the elf said apologetically. "Please do not be offended. We do this with our own people, not out of lack of trust, but in order that the quiet and peace of the cathedral may be maintained. No one is permitted to walk the halls except myself or my assistants, the Keeper of the Book, and the Keeper of the Soul."

"We understand. Thanks," said Hugh.

He carried Iridal inside, placed her upon the bed. She caught hold of his hand as he was about to withdraw.

"Please don't go yet, Hugh. Please stay and talk to me. Just a moment."

Hugh's expression was dark. He glanced at the Kenkari, who lowered his eyes, nodded gently.

"I will leave you to enjoy your repast in private. When you are ready to go to your own room, you have but to ring the small silver bell there, by the bed, and I will return to escort you."

The Keeper, bowing, withdrew.

"Sit down," Iridal urged, holding fast to Hugh's hand.

"I'm very tired, Lady," he said, avoiding looking at her. "We'll talk in the morning—"

"We must talk now." Iridal rose to her feet, stood in front of him. Reaching up, she touched his face with her fingers. "Don't do this, Hugh. Don't make this terrible bargain."

"I have to," he said gruffly, jaw clenched against her soft touch, eyes anywhere but on her. "There's no other way."

"Yes, there is. There has to be. The Kenkari want peace as much as we do. Maybe more. You saw them, heard them. They're afraid, Hugh, afraid of the emperor. We'll talk to them, make some other arrangement. Then we'll rescue Bane and I'll help you find Alfred, as I promised—"

"No," said Hugh. Catching hold of her wrist, he forced her hand away from him. And now he looked at her. "No, it's better this way."

"Hugh!" Iridal faltered, cheeks stained crimson, wet with her tears. "Hugh, I love you!"

"Do you?" Hugh regarded her with a grim, sardonic smile. He held up his right hand, held it palm out. "Look, look at the scar. No, don't turn your head. Look at it, Iridal. Imagine my hand caressing your soft flesh. What would you feel? My loving touch? Or this scar?"

Iridal lowered her eyes, lowered her head.

"You don't love me, Iridal," Hugh said, sighing. "You love a part of me."

She raised her head, answered him fiercely. "I love the best part!"

"Then let that part go."

Iridal shook her head, but she said nothing more, made no further argument.

"Your son. He's the one that matters to you, Lady. You have a chance to save him. Not me. My soul was lost a long time ago."

Turning away from him, Iridal sank down on the bed, stared at her hands, clasped in her lap.

She knows I'm right, but she doesn't want to accept it, Hugh decided. She's still fighting against it, but her resistance is weakening. She's a rational woman, not a lovesick girl. By morning, when she's thought about it, she'll go along with it.

"Good night, Lady."

Hugh reached down, rang the small silver bell.

Hugh had judged Iridal correctly, or at least so he supposed. By morning, her tears were dry. She was calm, met Hugh with a quiet smile of reassurance and the whispered words, "You may count on me. I won't fail you."

"You won't fail your son," he corrected her.

She smiled for him again, let him think that was what was important to her. And it was, certainly. Bane would be her redemption, hers and Sinistrad's. All the evil both parents had done—his by commission, hers by omission—would be expurgated by their child. But this was only one factor in her decision to appear to go along with Hugh.

Last night, before she slept, Iridal remembered again the silent counsel of that Immortal voice. What or whose, she couldn't understand, for she had never believed in any Almighty power.

The man who was dead and who is not dead.

Hugh was meant to be here, she realized. I will take this as a hopeful sign and trust that all will be for the best.

And so Iridal no longer argued against the sacrifice. She had convinced herself that the sacrifice would never take place.

She and Hugh met later in the day with the three Keepers, Book, Door, and Soul, in the small chapel room of the Aviary.

"We do not know if you have yet devised a plan for entering the Imperanon," the Keeper of the Soul began, with a deprecating glance at Hugh. "If not, we have some ideas."

The Hand shook his head, indicated that he would be interested to hear what the Keeper had in mind.

"Will you go, Magicka?" the Soul asked Iridal. "The risk is very great. Should the emperor capture a human of your talent—"

"I will go," Iridal interrupted. "The boy is my son."

"We assumed that such would be the case. If all goes according to plan, the danger should be minimal. You will enter the palace very late, when most will be sleeping heavily.

"His Imperial Majesty is giving a party this night, as he does every night, but this one is to celebrate the anniversary of elven unification. Everyone living in the Imperanon will be expected to attend and many are coming from far parts of the kingdom. The celebration will last a considerable length of time and there will be much coming and going and confusion in the castle.

"You will make your way to your son's room, remove the child, bring him back here. He will be quite safe in the cathedral, I assure you, madam," the Soul added. "Even if the emperor should discover the boy were here, Agah'ran would not dare order an attack on the sacred precinct. His own soldiers would rebel against such a command."

"I understand," Iridal replied.

Hugh, sucking on the cold pipe, nodded his approval.

The Keeper appeared pleased. "We will provide you, Magicka, and your son, with safe transportation to your own lands. You, sir"—he bowed slightly in Hugh's direction—"will remain here with us."

Iridal pressed her lips firmly shut at this, made no comment.

"It all sounds easy enough," said Hugh, removing the pipe, "but how do we get into the palace and back out again? The guards won't be sleeping off gaiety and merriment.' "

The Keeper of the Soul shifted his gaze to the Keeper of the Door, turning over the remainder of the discussion to his subordinate.

The Door looked to Iridal. "We have heard it said, Magicka, that those humans of your arcane skill, Seventh House, have the gift of creating... shall we say... false impressions in the minds of others."

"You mean illusion," Iridal answered. "Yes, but there are certain restrictions. The one observing the illusion must want to believe it is true or expect it to be true. For example, I could create an illusion, right now, that would allow me to look just like this woman." Iridal pointed to the Keeper of the Book. "But such an illusion would fail, simply because you would not believe it. Your mind would tell you that, logically, there could not be two of this woman in this room at the same time."

"But if," pursued Door, "you cast the illusion and I met you walking down the hall by yourself. I would be deluded into thinking you were my fellow Kenkari, would I not?"

"Yes. Then you would have little reason to doubt."

"And I could stop and speak to you, touch you? You would seem real to me?"

"That would be dangerous. Even though I speak elven, the timbre and tone of my voice is necessarily human and might give me away. My gestures would be my own, not those of your friend. The longer you were around me, the greater the chances that I could no longer deceive you. However, I begin to see what you have in mind. And you are right. It might work. But only for me. I could appear to be an elf, and thus walk safely into the castle. But I cannot cast such a spell on Hugh."

"No, we had not supposed you could. We have made other arrangements for him. You, sir, are familiar, you said, with those known as the Unseen."

"Only by reputation."

"Yes, quite." Door smiled faintly. "Do you know of the magical clothing they wear?"

"No." Hugh lowered the pipe, looked interested. "No, tell me about it."

"The fabric is woven of a wondrous thread that changes color and texture to match whatever it is around. One of their uniforms lies on the floor there, next to the desk. Do you see it?"

Hugh stared, frowned, raised his eyebrows. "I'll be damned."

"Now you see it, of course, since your attention has been drawn to it. Much like Lady Irida's spell. You see the folds, the shape, the bulkiness. Yet, you were in this room for a considerable length of time, and the clothing passed unobserved, even by you—a man usually quite observant.

"Dressed in this guise, the Unseen can go anywhere, at any time, day or night, and—to the ordinary eye—would be practically invisible. Anyone watching for them would be able to detect them by their movement and... substance... for lack of a better word. In addition, it takes a certain amount of time for the fabric to alter color and appearance. Thus the Unseen learn to move slowly, silently, with fluid grace, in order to blend in with their surroundings.

"All this you must learn to do, Hugh the Hand. Before you enter the palace this night."

Hugh walked over, fingered the cloth. Lifting it, he held it against the background of the wooden desk, watched, marveling, to see the fabric shift from the soft green of the carpet on the floor to the dark brown of the wood. As the Kenkari said, the very appearance of the cloth altered as well, taking on the grain and texture of the wood until it seemed to almost disappear in his hand.

" 'The walls move.' What I wouldn't have given for this in the old days," he murmured.

The Brotherhood had long wondered how the Unseen managed to operate so effectively and efficiently, wondered how it was that no one ever saw them or knew what they looked like. But the secrets of the Unseen were kept as closely and carefully as the secrets of the Brotherhood.

It was agreed upon that elven magic must have something to do with this remarkable ability, though what or how was open to debate. The elves did not possess the ability to conjure up illusions, as did the higher ranking human wizards. But they could spin magical thread, it seemed.

This guise that he held in his hand could make his fortune. Add to its obvious advantages his own skill and knowledge and experience...

Hugh laughed bitterly at himself, tossed the uniform back to the floor, where it immediately began to change its color to the green of the carpet.

"Will it fit me? I'm bigger than any elf."

"The garments are designed to fit loosely, to flow with the wearer's movements. Then, too, they must adapt to all sizes and shapes of our people. As you might imagine, such uniforms are tremendously rare and prized. It takes a hundred cycles to produce thread enough for the tunic alone, and another hundred cycles after that to do the weaving. The weaving and sewing may only be done by skilled magi, who have spent years learning the secret art. The trousers have a drawstring, to fit around the waist. There are slippers for your feet, a mask for your head, gloves for your hands."

"Let's see what I look like," Hugh said, gathering up the clothing in a bundle. "Or what I don't look like."

The uniform fit, though it was tight through the shoulders, and he was forced to let the drawstring on the waist out as far as it would go. Fortunately, he'd lost weight during his self-imposed incarceration. The slippers were meant to slip over boots and did so with ease. Only the gloves didn't fit.

The Kenkari were extremely upset over this. Hugh shrugged. He could always keep his hands out of sight, hide them behind his back or in the folds of the belted tunic.

Hugh looked in the crystal mirror at himself. His body was rapidly blending into the wall. His hands were the only part of him clearly visible, the only part that was flesh and blood, real.

"How appropriate," he remarked.

Hugh spread out his map of the Imperanon. The Keepers examined it, pronounced it accurate.

"In fact," said Soul in wry tones, "I am amazed at its accuracy. No one but another elf—and then one who has spent considerable time in the palace—would have been able to draw this map."

Hugh shrugged his shoulders, made no comment.

"You and the Lady Iridal enter here, through the main gate that leads into the palace proper," said the Keeper, turning back to the map, tracing the route with his thin finger. "The Lady Iridal will tell the guards that she has been summoned to the palace at such a late hour to attend a sick relative.\* Such excuses are common. Many members of the royal families maintain their own private homes in the hills surrounding the palace and many return under the cover of darkness to keep private appointments. The gatekeepers are accustomed to such trysts and will most assuredly let the lady in without difficulty."

"Wouldn't her weesham be with her?" asked the Book worriedly.

"By rights," the Soul admitted, "but members of the royal family have been known to sneak away from their weesham, especially when looking forward to a night of stolen pleasure."

"While the guards are talking to Lady Iridal, you, sir, will remain hidden in the shadows. You may slip past the guards when the gate is opened. Getting inside will be the easy part, I am afraid. As you can see, the palace is enormous. It contains hundreds of rooms, on numerous levels. The child could be held anywhere. But one of the weesham, who was in the palace a short time ago, told me that a human child had been given a room just off the Imperial Garden. That could be in any one of these suites located here—"

"I know where he is," said Iridal, in a low voice.

The Keepers were silent. Hugh straightened from bending over the map, regarded her with a dark frown.

"How?" he asked in a tone that implied he already knew—and wasn't going to like—her answer.

"My son told me," she said, lifting her head, meeting his eyes. She reached into the bodice of her elven dress, withdrew a hawk feather attached to a leather thong and held it in her hand. "He sent me this. I've been in contact with him."

"Damn!" Hugh growled. "I suppose he knows we're coming?"

"Of course. How else could he be ready?" Iridal was defensive. "I know what you're thinking, that we don't dare trust him—"

"I can't imagine what would give you that idea!" Hugh sneered.

Iridal flushed in anger. "But you're wrong. He's frightened. He wants to get away. That man Haplo was the one who turned him over to the elves. This has all been Haplo's idea. He and this lord of his—a terrible old man called Xar—want the war to continue. They don't want peace."

"Xar, Haplo. Strange names. Who are these people?"

"They are Patryns, Keeper," said Iridal, turning to the Kenkari.

"Patryns!" The Kenkari stared at her, stared at each other. "The ancient enemy of the Sartan?"

"Yes," said Iridal, growing calmer.

"How is that possible? According to their records left behind, the Sartan removed their enemy before bringing us to Arianus."

"I don't know how it's possible. I only know that the Patryns weren't destroyed. Alfred told me about it, but I'm afraid I didn't understand very much of what he said. The Patryns have been in prison, or something like that. Now they're back and they want to conquer the world, take it for themselves."

She turned to Hugh. "We must rescue Bane, but without Haplo's knowledge. That shouldn't be difficult. My son tells me that Haplo is being held by the Unseen, in some sort of dungeon. I looked, but I can't find them located on the map—"

"No," said the Keeper, "they wouldn't be. Not even the very clever person who drew this map could know where the dungeons of the Unseen are located. But does this present a problem, sir?"

"I hope not. For all our sakes," Hugh said coldly. He bent over the map. "Now, let's say we've got the kid, no trouble. What's the best way out?"

"Patryns," murmured the Soul in awe. "What are we coming to? The end of the world..."

"Keeper," Hugh urged patiently.

"Forgive me. What was your question? The way out? That would be here. A private exit, used by those who leave with the dawn and want to depart quietly, without bother. If the child was cloaked and wore a woman's bonnet, he might pass for Lady Iridal's handmaid, should anyone see."

"Not good, but the best we can do under the circumstances," Hugh muttered, in an ill humor. "Have you ever heard of an elf named Sang-drax?"

The Kenkari looked at each other, shook their heads.

"But that is not unusual," said the Soul. "Many people come and go. Why do you ask?"

"I was told that if we got into trouble, this elf could be trusted."

"Pray such trust will not be needed," said the Soul solemnly.

"Amen," said Hugh.

He and the Kenkari continued to plan, to discuss, to bring up difficulties, dangers, try to address them, solve them, work around them. Iridal ceased paying attention. She knew what she was to do, what part she was to play. She wasn't frightened. She was elated, wished only that time would move more swiftly. Before now, she had not let herself dwell too much on recovering Bane, afraid that something would go wrong. Afraid she would be disappointed again, as she had been in the past.

But now she was so close. She couldn't imagine anything going wrong. She let herself believe the dream was at last coming true. She yearned for her son, for the little boy she had not seen in a year, the little boy lost to her, now found.

Clasping the feather in her hand, she closed her eyes, pictured him in her mind. "My son, I am coming for you. Tonight we will be together, you and I. And no one will ever take you from me again. We will never be separated again."

## CHAPTER 33

### THE IMPERANON

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

"My MOTHER'S COMING FOR ME TONIGHT," SAID BANE, TWIDDLING the feather he held in his hand. "It's all arranged. I just spoke to her."

"That is excellent news, Your Highness," said Sang-drax. "Do you know the details?"

"She's coming in the front gate, disguised as an elf woman. An illusion spell. Not all that difficult. I could do it, if I wanted."

"I'm certain you could, Your Highness." Sang-drax bowed. "Is the assassin accompanying her?"

"Yes. Hugh the Hand. I thought he was dead," Bane added. He frowned, shivered. "He certainly looked dead. But Mother said no, he was only hurt real bad."

"Appearances can be deceiving, Your Highness, especially when Sartan are involved."

Bane didn't understand this, didn't care. His head was filled with his own concerns, plots, and schemes. "You'll tell Count Tretar? Tell him to be ready?"

"I leave this moment on just such an errand, Your Highness."

"You'll tell everyone who needs to know?" Bane persisted.

"Everyone, Highness," Sang-drax said, with a bow and a smile.

"Good," said Bane, making the feather spin and twist in his hands.

"Still here?" Sang-drax said, peering in the cell's grate.

"Easy, boy," Haplo said to the dog, who was barking with such ferocity it had nearly barked itself hoarse. "Don't waste your breath." The Patryn lay on the bed, his hands beneath his head.

"I am truly amazed. Perhaps we misjudged you. We thought you reckless, full of fire and spirit, eager to advance the cause of your people. Have we"—Sang-drax lounged against the cell door—"frightened you into a stupor?"

Patience, Haplo counseled, clenching the hands concealed beneath his head. He's goading you.

"I should have thought," Sang-drax continued, "that by now you would have engineered the female dwarfs escape."

"And Jarre's unfortunately killed while attempting to break out of prison. And the emperor's extremely sorry, but it can't be helped. And the dwarves are extremely sorry, but they'll have to destroy the machine anyway." Haplo settled himself more comfortably.

"Go play rune-bone with Bane, Sang-drax. You could probably beat a child at your games."

"The game is going to get interesting tonight, Haplo," said Sang-drax softly. "And you, I think, will be one of the major players."

Haplo didn't move, stared at the ceiling. The dog, standing near its master, had lost its bark but kept up a constant rumbling growl in its chest.

"Bane's going to have a visitor. His mother."

Haplo lay still, kept his eyes focused above him. He was getting to know that ceiling very well by now.

"Iridal is a strong-willed woman. She's not coming to bring her baby cookies and weep over him. No, she's coming with the intent of taking him with her when she leaves. Of spiring him away, hiding him from you, you bad man. And she'll succeed, I have no doubt. And where will you go to look for dear little Bane? Mid Realm? High Realm? Low? How long will your search take, master? And what will Bane be doing all this time? He has his own plans, as you well know, and they don't include either you or 'Grandfather.' "

Haplo reached out his hand, petted the dog.

"Well, well." Sang-drax shrugged. "Just thought you might be interested in the information. No, don't thank me. I hate to see you bored, that's all. Shall we expect you tonight?"

Haplo made an appropriate remark.

Sang-drax laughed. "Ah, my dear friend. We are the ones who invented that\*." He produced a sheet of parchment, slid it under the cell door. "Just in case you don't know where the boy's room is, I've drawn you a map. The dwarfs room is right down the hall. Oh, by the way, the emperor is refusing to give in to Limbeck's demands. He's going to execute Jarre and send down an army to finish off her people. Such an entertaining man, that emperor. We've really grown quite fond of him."

The serpent-elf made a graceful bow. "Until tonight, master. We do so look forward to the pleasure of your company. The party just wouldn't be the same without you."

Still laughing, Sang-drax sauntered off.

Haplo, fists clenched, lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

The Lords of Night drew their cloaks over the world of Arianus. In the Imperanon, artificial suns banished the darkness, flambeaux lit the hallways, chandeliers were lowered from the ceiling of the ballrooms, candelabra flamed in the drawing rooms. The elves ate, drank, danced, and were as merry as possible with the dark shadows of their watching weesham, carrying their little boxes, in attendance. What the geir were doing with the souls they collected now was a subject of whispered speculation, though not at the dinner table. The gaiety was brighter than usual this night. Since the Kenkari had proclaimed their edict refusing to accept any more souls, the mortality rate among young elven royalty had markedly declined.

The parties lasted far into the night, but eventually even the young must sleep... or least retire to more private pleasures. The flambeaux were put out, the chandeliers doused and raised back up into the ceilings, the candelabra were dispersed among the guests to aid them in finding their way either home or back to their chambers.

An hour had passed since the last few elves had left the palace, staggering homeward, arm in arm, trilling an obscene song, ignoring the patient and sober weesham who trotted sleepily behind. The main gate was never closed; it was extraordinarily heavy, mechanically operated, and made a terrible screeching sound that could be heard as far away as Paxaua. The emperor, out of bored curiosity, had ordered it shut once. The experience was a dreadful one, it had taken him a cycle to fully recover his loss of hearing.

The gate was not shut, but the guards who patrolled the main entrance were alert and careful, far more interested in the skies than the ground. All knew that the human invasion force, when it came, would come from the air. Lookouts stood on the towers, keeping watch for raiders whose dragons might succeed in breaking through the elven fleet.

Wearing rich and colorful elven clothing—a high-waisted dress, decorated in jewels and ribbons, with puffed sleeves that came to her wrists, and long, flowing skirts of several layers of filmy silk, covered by a cloak of royal blue satin—Iridal slipped out of the shadows of the Imperanon's walls and walked rapidly to the guardhouse that stood just inside the main gate.

Guards making their rounds on the walls above gave her a swift, cursory glance and dismissed her from their thoughts. Those standing inside the main gate eyed her, but made no move to accost her, leaving that to the porter.

He opened the door, in response to the knock.

"How may I assist you, my lady?"

Iridal could barely hear him above the blood surging in her ears. Her heart beat rapidly. She was almost faint from it, yet it didn't seem to be working properly—didn't seem to be pumping blood to her limbs. Her hands were ice cold and her feet almost too numb to walk.

The guard's casual response and uninterested gaze gave her confidence, however. The illusion was working. He did not see a human woman clad in elven clothes that were too small, fit too tight. He saw an elf maiden with delicate features, almond eyes, porcelain skin.

"I wish to enter the palace," said Iridal faintly, in elven, hoping her fear would be mistaken for maidenly confusion.

"Your business?" the porter asked crisply.

"I ... that is... my aunt is very sick. I've been summoned to her bedside."

Several of the guards, standing nearby, looked at each other with sly grins; one made a whispered comment having to do with surprises that lurked between the sheets belonging to "sick aunts." Iridal, hearing the whispers if not the words, thought it in character to draw herself up, favor the offender with an imperious stare from the confines of her satin-lined hood. And, in doing so, she flashed a quick, searching glance around the gate area.

She saw nothing, and the heart that had beat too rapidly before now seemed to stop altogether. She wished desperately she knew where Hugh was, what he was doing. Perhaps he was—even now—stealing inside the gate, underneath the long noses of the elven guards. It took all Iridal's willpower to keep from looking for him, hoping to catch even the slightest glimpse of movement in the torchlight, hear the tiniest sound. But Hugh was a master of stealthy movement, had adapted himself swiftly and completely to the chameleonlike costume of the Unseen. The Kenkari had been impressed.

The whispering behind Iridal hushed. She was forced to turn her attention back to the porter.

"Have you a pass, my lady?"

She had, written out by the Kenkari. She presented it. All was in order. He handed it back.

"Your aunt's name?"

Iridal supplied it. The Kenkari had supplied her.

The porter disappeared into his guardhouse, wrote the name down in a book kept for the purpose. Iridal might have been worried by this, fearing he would check on her, but the Kenkari had assured her that this was a formality. The porter would have been hard pressed checking up on the whereabouts of the hundreds who came and went during a single nighttime.

"You may enter, my lady. I trust your aunt's health improves," said the porter politely.

"Thank you," Iridal replied and swept past him, beneath the massive gate and the towering walls.

The footsteps of the guards echoed on ramparts above her. She was daunted by the immensity of the Imperanon, which was enormous beyond anything she could-have imagined. The main building towered above her, blotting the mountaintops from sight. Innumerable wings branched off from it, wrapped around the base of the mountain.

Iridal thought of the vast numbers of guards patrolling the palace, imagined them all to be standing outside her son's room, and suddenly her task appeared hopeless. How could she have ever dreamed they would succeed?

We will, she told herself. We have to.

Firmly suppressing her doubts, she kept walking. Hugh had warned her not to hesitate. She had to appear as if she knew where she was going. Her steps did not falter, not even when a passing elven soldier, catching a glimpse of her face by torchlight, informed her that he was off duty in an hour, if she cared to wait.

Keeping the map well in mind, Iridal veered to her right, bypassing the main building. Her path took her into the part of the royal dwellings set farther back into the mountains. She walked underneath archways, past barracks and various other outbuildings. Turning a corner, she ascended a tree-lined avenue, continued past what had once been splashing fountains of water (a blatant display of the emperor's wealth) but which were now shut off "for repairs." She was growing worried. She couldn't remember any of this from the map. She didn't think she should have come this far, was tempted to turn around and retrace her steps, when she finally saw something she recognized from the map.

She was on the outskirts of the Imperial garden. The garden, whose terraces ran up the mountainside, was beautiful, though not as lush as in past days, before the water had been rationed. It looked exquisite to Iridal, however, and she paused a moment to relax in relief. Apartments for the imperial guests surrounded the garden, a series of eight buildings. Each building had a central door, that provided admittance. Iridal counted six buildings over; Bane was in the seventh. She could almost look to his window. Pressing the feather amulet tightly in her hand, Iridal hastened forward.

A footman opened a door to her knock, asked to see her pass.

Iridal, standing in the open doorway, fumbled for the pass in the folds of her skirt, dropped it.

The footman bent to pick it up.

Iridal felt, or thought she did, the hem of her gown stir, as though someone had crept by her, slipping through the narrow confines of the open door. She took back the pass—which the footman did not bother to examine—hoped he had not noticed how her hand shook. Thanking him, she entered the building. He offered the use of a candle boy, to escort her through the halls. Iridal declined, stating that she knew the way, but she did accept a lighted flambeau.

She continued down the long hall, certain that the footman was staring at her the entire distance, though in reality he had gone back to exchanging the latest court gossip with the candle boy. Leaving the main corridor, Iridal ascended a flight of carpeted stairs, entered another corridor that was empty, illuminated here and there by light shining from flambeaux mounted in wall sconces. Bane's room was at the very end.

"Hugh?" she whispered, pausing, staring into the shadows.

"I'm here. Hush. Keep going."

Iridal sighed in relief. But the sigh changed to an inaudible gasp when a figure detached itself from the wall and advanced on her.

It was an elf, a male elf, clad in the uniform of a soldier. She reminded herself that she had every right to be here, guessed that this man must be on an errand similar to the one she'd made up. With a coolness that she would have never believed herself capable of, she drew her hood over her face and was about to sweep past the elf, when he reached out a hand, detained her.

Iridal drew back with a show of indignation. "Really, sir, I—"

"Lady Iridal?" he said to her softly.

Astonished, frightened, Iridal retained her composure. Hugh was nearby, though she trembled to think what he might do. And then she knew. His hands materialized in the air behind the elf. A dagger flashed.

Iridal couldn't speak. Her magical powers failed her.

"It is you," said the elf, smiling. "I see through the illusion now. Don't be afraid. Your son sent me." He held up a feather, twin to the one Iridal wore. "I am Captain Sang-drax..."

The dagger blade held still, but did not reverse. Hugh's hand raised, made a sign to Iridal that she should find out what the elf wanted.

Sang-drax. She vaguely remembered the name, mentioned as someone they could trust if they were in trouble. Were they in trouble?

"I've frightened you. I'm sorry, but I didn't know of any other way to stop you. I came to warn you that you are in danger. The man with the blue skin—"

"Haplo!" Iridal gasped, forgetting caution.

"Yes, Haplo. He was the one who brought your son to the elves. Did you know that? For his own evil purposes, you may be certain. He has discovered your plan to rescue Bane and he means to stop you. He may be here at any moment. We haven't a second to lose!"

Sang-drax took hold of Iridal's hand, urged her down the hall. "Quickly, my lady, we must reach your son before Haplo does."

"Wait!" Iridal cried, pulled back.

The dagger's blade still gleamed in the torchlight, behind the elf. Hugh's hand was raised, admonishing caution.

"How could he find out?" Iridal swallowed. "No one knew, except my son—"

Sang-drax's expression was grave. "Haplo suspected something was up. Your son is brave, madam, but brave men have been known to break down under torture—"

"Torture! A child!" Iridal was aghast.

"This Haplo is a monster. He will stop at nothing. Fortunately, I managed to intervene. The boy was more frightened than hurt. But he will be very glad to see you. Come. I will carry the light." Sang-drax took the flambeau from her, drew her forward, and this time Iridal went with him.

The hand and the dagger had both vanished.

"It is a pity," Sang-drax added, "that we have no one to stand guard while we make your son ready for his journey. Haplo might arrive at any moment. But I dared not trust any of my men—"

"You need not concern yourself," Iridal said coolly. "I have a companion."

Sang-drax appeared astonished, impressed. "One as gifted in magic as yourself, apparently. No, don't tell me. The less I know the better. There is the room. I will take you to your son, but then I must leave you two for a moment. The boy has a friend, a dwarf-maid named Jarre. She's due to be executed and, brave child that he is, he will not escape without taking her with him. You remain with your son, I will bring the dwarf."

Iridal agreed. They reached the room at the end of the hall. Sang-drax tapped on the door in a peculiar manner.

"A friend," he said in a low voice. "Sang-drax."

The door opened. The room was dark, an odd circumstance if Iridal had thought about it. But at that moment, she heard a choked cry.

"Mother! Mother, I knew you'd come for me!"

Iridal sank to her knees, held out her arms. Bane flung himself into her embrace.

Golden curls and a tear-wet cheek pressed against hers.

"I'll be back," Sang-drax promised.

Iridal heard him only vaguely, paid little attention as the door shut gently behind herself and her son.

It was night in the dungeons of the Unseen. No lights burned here, except for a single glowlamp provided for the benefit of the soldier on duty. And the light was far from Haplo, at the opposite end of the long row of prison cells. Peering through the grate, he could barely see it—a flicker of brightness that seemed, from this distance, no larger than a candle flame.

No sound broke the stillness, except the occasional hacking cough of some wretch in another part of the prison and a moan from another whose political views had come into question. Haplo was so accustomed to these sounds he no longer heard them.

He stared at the cell door.

The dog stood near, ears up, eyes bright, tail wagging slowly. It sensed something was happening and whined softly, urging its master to action.

Haplo reached out his hand, touched the door that he could barely see in the darkness, felt the iron cold and rough from rust beneath his fingers. He traced a sigil on the door, spoke a word, watched it flare blue, then red. The iron melted in the heat of his magic. Haplo stared at the hole he'd created, visible until the magic's glow faded. Two, three more sigla. The hole expanded, and he could walk out, free.

"Free..." Haplo muttered.

The serpents had forced him into taking this action, maneuvered him into it, impelled him, driven him.

"I've lost control," he said. "I've got to get it back. That means beating them at their own game. Which is going to be interesting, considering I don't know the damn rules!"

He glared at the hole he'd made.

Now was the time to make his move.

"A move they're expecting me to make," he said bitterly.

He was alone down here at the end of the cell block. No guards, not even the Unseen in their magical fool-the-eye getup. Haplo had spotted them the first day, been mildly impressed by mensch ingenuity. But they weren't around. They had no need to follow him. Everyone knew where he must go. Hell, they'd given him a map!

"I'm surprised the bastards didn't leave the key in the lock," he muttered.

The dog whined, pawed at the door.

Haplo drew two more sigla, spoke the words. The iron melted away. He stepped through the hole. The dog trotted excitedly after.

Haplo glanced at the runes tattooed on his skin. They were dark, dark as the night that cloaked him. Sang-drax wasn't around, and, for Haplo, no other danger existed in this palace. He walked from the cell, the dog at his heels, walked past the soldier on duty, who didn't notice him.\*

\*Haplo's magic wouldn't render him invisible, but it does affect the possibility that people not looking for him wouldn't see him.

Haplo walked out of the dungeons of the Unseen.

Hugh the Hand took up his position across the hallway opposite Bane's room. The hall was a T-shape, with the boy's room at the cross-point, the stairs they had come up forming the base at the far end, and another hallway running perpendicular. By posting himself at the cross-point, Hugh could see the stairs and all three sections of hall.

Sang-drax had let Iridal into her son's room, had crept back out, shutting the door. Hugh was careful to remain quiet and unmoving, blending into the shadows and the wall behind him. It was impossible that the captain should see him, but Hugh was disconcerted to note the eyes of the elf shift almost right to him. He was also puzzled to note the eyes had a red cast to them, and he was reminded of Ernst Twist, reminded that Ciang had said something about Twist—a human—recommending this Sang-drax.

And Ernst Twist had just happened to be with Ciang. And Sang-drax had just happened to befriend Bane. Coincidence? Hugh didn't believe in coincidence, any more than he believed in luck. Something was wrong here....

"I'm going to get the dwarf," said Sang-drax, and if it hadn't been impossible, Hugh might have supposed the elf was talking to him. Sang-drax pointed down the hallway to Hugh's left. "Wait here. Keep an eye out for Haplo. He's coming." The elf turned and ran lightly and swiftly down the hall.

Hugh flicked a glance back down the corridor. He'd just looked that direction, seen no one. The hall was empty.

Except it wasn't empty now.

Hugh blinked, stared. A man was walking down the hall that had been empty seconds before, almost as if the elf's words had magicked him into being.

And the man was Haplo.

Hugh had no difficulty recognizing the Patryn—the deceptive, unassuming, self-effacing air; the calm, confident walk; the quiet watchfulness. When Hugh had last seen Haplo, however, the man's hands had been bandaged.

Now Hugh knew why. Iridal had said something about blue skin, but she had said nothing about the blue skin glowing faintly in the dark. Some type of magic, Hugh supposed, but he couldn't worry about magic now. His main concern was the dog. He'd forgotten about the dog.

The animal was looking straight at him. It wasn't threatening. It appeared to have found a friend. Its ears went up, its tail wagged, it opened its mouth in a wide grin.

"What's the matter with you?" Haplo demanded. "Get back here."

The dog fell back obediently, though it continued to eye Hugh, its head cocked to one side, as if it couldn't quite figure out what this new game was but would go along since they were all old comrades.

Haplo continued to walk up the hall. Though he flicked a glance sideways in Hugh's direction, the Patryn appeared to be looking for something ... or someone... else.

Hugh drew the dagger, lunged forward, moving swiftly, silently, with lethal skill.

Haplo made a slight motion with his hand. "Take him, dog."

The dog leapt, mouth open, teeth flashing. Strong jaws closed over Hugh's right arm, the weight of the animal's body crashing into his knocked him to the floor.

Haplo kicked the dagger out of Hugh's hand, stood over him.

The dog began licking Hugh's hand, wagging its tail.

Hugh made a move to stand.

"I wouldn't, elf," said Haplo calmly. "He'll rip your throat out."

But the beast that was supposed to rip out Hugh's throat was sniffing and pawing at him in friendly fashion.

"Get back," Haplo ordered, dragging the dog away. "I said get back." He stared at Hugh, whose face was hidden by the hood of the Unseen. "You know, elf, if it wasn't impossible, I'd say he knows you. Just who the hell are you, anyway?"

Leaning down, the Patryn took hold of Hugh's mask, ripped it from the man's head.

Haplo staggered backward, the shock a paralyzing one.

"Hugh the Hand!" he breathed, awed. "But you're... dead!"

"No, you are!" Hugh grunted.

Taking advantage of his enemy's startlement, Hugh lashed out with his foot, aimed a blow at Haplo's groin.

Blue fire crackled around Hugh. He might have driven his foot into one of the 'lectric zingers on the ICicksey-winsey. The jolt knocked him backward, almost head over heels. Hugh lay stunned, nerves twitching, head buzzing.

Haplo bent over him. "Where's Iridal? Bane knew she was coming. Did the kid know about you? Damn it, of course he did." He answered himself. "That's the plan. I—"

A muffled explosion came from the end of the hall, from behind the closed door of Bane's room.

"Hugh! Help—" Iridal screamed. Her voice was cut off in a strangled choke.

Hugh twisted to his feet.

"It's a trap," warned Haplo quietly.

"Of your making!" Hugh snarled, tensing to fight, though every nerve in his body jumped and burned.

"Not mine." Haplo rose slowly, faced the man calmly. "Bane's."

Hugh stared intently at the Patryn.

Haplo met his gaze. "You know I'm right. You've suspected all along."

Hugh lowered his eyes, turned, moved at a groggy, staggering run for the door.

## CHAPTER 34

### THE IMPERANON

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

HAPLO WATCHED HUGH GO, INTENDED TO FOLLOW HIM, BUT FIRST looked around warily. Sang-drax was here somewhere; the runes on the Patryn's skin were reacting to the presence of the serpent. Undoubtedly Sang-drax was waiting in that very room. Which meant that—

"Haplo!" A voice shrieked. "Haplo, come with us!"

Haplo turned. "Jarre?"

Sang-drax had the dwarf maid by the hand, was urging her along down the corridor toward the stairs.

Behind Haplo, wood splintered. Hugh had broken down the door. The Patryn heard the assassin crash into the room with a roar. He was met with shouts, orders in elven, a clash of steel against steel.

"Come with me, Haplo!" Jarre reached out to him. "We're escaping!"

"We dare not stop, my dear," warned Sang-drax, dragging the dwarf along. "We must flee before the confusion ends. I've promised Limbeck I'd see you reached home safely."

Sang-drax wasn't looking at Jarre. He was looking at Haplo. The serpent's eyes gleamed red.

Jarre would never reach Drevlin alive.

Sang-drax and the dwarf ran down the stairs; the dwarf stumbling in her haste, her heavy boots clumping and clattering.

"Haplo!" he heard her howl.

He stood in the hall, swearing in bitter frustration. If he could have, he would have split himself in two, but that was impossible, even for a demigod. He did the next best thing.

"Dog, go to Bane! Stay with Bane!" he commanded.

Waiting only to see the dog take off, dashing for Bane's room—over which an ominous silence had now settled— Haplo started down the corridor in pursuit of Sang-drax.

A trap!

Haplo's warning echoed inside Hugh.

You've suspected all along.

Too damn right. Hugh reached Bane's room, found the door locked. He kicked it. The flimsy tik wood splintered, tore at Hugh's flesh as he dashed through it. He had no plan of attack, there wasn't time to form one. But experience had taught him that reckless, unexpected action could often overwhelm an enemy—especially one complacent with success. Hugh abandoned stealth and disguise, made as much noise, wrought as much havoc as possible.

The elven guards who had been hiding inside the room knew Iridal had an accomplice; her call for help had proclaimed as much. Once they had subdued the mysteriarch, they lay in wait for the man, jumped him when he came smashing through the door. But after a few seconds, the elves began wondering if they were grappling with one man or a legion of demons.

The room had been dark, but, now that the door was shattered, light from the flambeaux in the hallway partially illuminated the scene. The flickering light only added to the confusion, however. Hugh's mask was torn off. His head and hands were visible, his body was still camouflaged by the elven magic. It seemed to the startled elves that a disembodied human head loomed over them. Hands carrying death flashed out of nowhere.

Hugh's slashing dagger caught one elf across the face, stabbed another in the throat. He groin-kicked an elf guard, who crumpled with a groan. A battering fist felled another.

The elves, caught flat-footed by the ferocity of the attack, and not exactly certain if they fought a living man or a specter, the elves fell back in confusion.

Hugh ignored them. Bane—his face pale, eyes wide, curls disheveled—crouched beside his mother, who lay unconscious on the floor. The Hand swept aside furniture and bodies. He had very nearly scooped up both mother and child, seemed likely to walk out with them, when a cold voice spoke.

"This is ridiculous. He's one man. Stop him."

Shamed, shaken from their terror, the elven soldiers returned to the attack. Three jumped Hugh from behind, grasped his flailing arms and pinned them to his side. Another struck him a blow across the face with the flat of his sword, two more carried his feet out from underneath him. The fight was over.

The elves bound Hugh's arms and wrists and ankles with bowstrings. He lay on his side, his knees hunched to his chest. He was groggy and helpless. Blood ran down the side of his head, dripped from a cut mouth. Two elves stood watchful guard over him, while the others went to fetch light and assist fallen comrades.

Candles and flaring flambeaux illuminated a scene of destruction. Hugh had no idea what sort of spell Iridal had cast before she'd been struck down, but black scorch marks were burned into the walls, several ornate tapestries were still smoldering, and two elves with severe burns were being carried from the room.

Iridal lay on the floor, eyes closed, her body limp. But she was breathing. She was alive. Hugh could see no sign of a wound, wondered what had felled her. His gaze shifted to Bane, who knelt beside his mother's unmoving form. Hugh recalled Haplo's words, and, though he didn't trust the Patryn, he didn't trust Bane either. Had the child betrayed them?

Hugh stared at Bane hard. Bane stared back, his face impassive, revealing nothing, neither innocence nor guilt. But the longer the child looked at Hugh, the more nervous Bane grew. His gaze shifted from Hugh's face to a point just above Hugh's shoulder. Suddenly Bane's eyes grew wide, he gave a strangled cry.

"Alfred!"

Hugh almost glanced around behind him, then realized that the boy must be trying to trick him, draw his attention away from Iridal.

But if Bane was putting on an act, he was giving a marvelous performance. He shrank back, held up a warding small hand.

"Alfred! What are you doing here? Alfred, go away. I don't want you here. I don't need you..." The child was babbling, almost incoherent.

"Calm down, Your Highness," said the cold voice. "There is no one there."

Bane swelled in anger. "Alfred's there! Standing right at Hugh's shoulder! I can see him, I tell you—"

Suddenly, the boy blinked, stared, narrow-eyed, at Hugh. Bane gulped, managed a sickly, cunning smile.

"I was laying a trap, trying to find out if this man has an accomplice. You spoiled it. You've gone and ruined it all, Count." Bane tried to look indignant, but he kept his gaze fixed on Hugh, and there was a certain uneasiness in the child's eyes,

Hugh had no idea what Bane was up to, cared less. Some sort of trick. The Hand remembered a time when Bane had claimed to see a Kir monk, standing at Hugh's shoulder.\* The assassin licked blood from his cut lip, glanced around the room, trying to get a look at the man in charge.

\*Drigon Wing, vol. i of The Death Gate Cycle. Bane, as a clairvoyant, possessed the ability to see images of anything or anyone currently exerting a strong influence on a person. In general, with most people, the images would be symbolic and Bane would likely take them for granted, or use them to increase his hold on people, and thus he would not mention them. This one apparently startled the boy into speaking.

"Me no speak elf," Hugh grunted.

A tall, well-formed elf came into view. Dressed in resplendent clothing, the elf had, by some miracle, emerged unscathed, undamaged from the whirlwind of destruction that had leveled much of the room. The count walked forward, studied Hugh with detached interest, as he might have studied some new form of bug life.

"I am Count Tretar, lord of the Tretar elves. You, I believe, are known as Hugh the Hand."

"No?" Tretar smiled. "But you wear our clothes quite well. Come, come, my dear sir." The count continued to speak elven. "The game is ended. Accept your loss with grace. I know a great deal about you—that you speak elven fluently; that you are responsible for the deaths of several of our people; that you stole one of our dragonships. I have a warrant for your apprehension—dead or alive."

Hugh glanced again at Bane, who was now regarding the Hand with the unblinking, guileless innocence children practice as their best defense against adults.

Hugh grimaced, shifted his body, ostensibly to ease his discomfort, but in reality to test the strength of his bonds. The bowstrings were tied tight. If he attempted to work them loose, he would only succeed in causing them to dig deeper into his flesh.

This Tretar was no fool. Disassembling would no longer serve the assassin. Perhaps he could strike a bargain,

"What's happened to the boy's mother?" Hugh demanded. "What did you do to her?"

The count glanced at Iridal, quirked an eyebrow.

"Poisoned. Oh, nothing fatal, I assure you. A mild form, delivered by a dart, that will render her unconscious and incapacitated for as long a period as we deem necessary. It is the only way to deal with those humans known as 'mysteriarchs.' Other than killing them outright, of—"

The count stopped talking. His gaze had shifted to a dog that had come wandering into the room.

Haplo's dog. Hugh wondered where the Patryn was, what his role was in all this. But the Hand couldn't guess and he certainly wasn't going to ask, in case the elves had, by some chance, left the Patryn out of their calculations.

Tretar frowned, glanced round at his soldiers. "That's the dog that belongs to His Highness's manservant. What's it doing here? Take the beast out."

"No!" Bane cried. "He's mine!" The child leapt up and threw his arms around the dog's neck.

The dog responded by licking Bane's cheek, giving every evidence that it had just discovered a long-lost friend.

"He likes me better than Haplo," Bane announced. "I'm going to keep him."

The count regarded the pair thoughtfully. "Very well, the animal can stay. Go find out how it got loose," he said, in an undertone to a subordinate. "And what's happened to its owner."

Bane pulled the dog down beside him on the floor. The animal lay there panting, looking around with bright eyes.

The count returned to his perusal of Hugh.

"You've captured me," said the Hand. "I'm your prisoner. Lock me up, kill me. What happens to me doesn't matter. Let the lady and the boy go."

Tretar appeared highly amused. "Really, my dear sir, do you think we are that stupid? A renowned assassin and a powerful wizardess fall into our hands and you expect us to literally throw both of you away. What waste! What folly."

"What do you want, then?" Hugh growled.

"To hire you," said Tretar coolly.

"I'm not for sale."

"Every man has his price."

Hugh grunted, shifted his position again. "There's not enough barls in this slimy kingdom of yours to buy me."

"Not money," said Tretar, carefully dusting the soot off the seat of a chair with a silken handkerchief. He sat down, crossed shapely legs, covered by silken hose, leaned back. "A life. Her life."

"So that's it."

Rolling over to lie on his back, Hugh bunched his muscles, tried to burst his bindings. Blood—warm and sticky—ran down his hands.

"My dear sir, relax. You're only damaging yourself." Tretar heaved an affected sigh. "I admit that my men are not particularly impressive fighters, but they do know how to tie knots. Escape is impossible, and we would not be foolish enough to kill you in the attempt, as perhaps you hope. After all, we are not asking you to do anything you haven't done countless times before. We want to hire you to kill. As simple as that."

"Who's the mark?" Hugh asked, thinking he knew.

"King Stephen and Queen Anne."

Hugh glanced up at Tretar, surprised.

The count nodded in understanding. "You expected me to say Prince Rees'ahn, didn't you? We considered it, when we knew you were coming. But the prince has survived several such attempts. It is said that he has supernatural powers guarding him. While I don't necessarily believe in that rubbish, I do think you—a human—would have an easier time killing the human rulers. And their deaths will serve much the same purpose. With Stephen and Anne dead and their eldest child on the throne, the alliance with Rees'ahn will crumble."

Hugh looked grimly at Bane. "So this was your idea."

"I want to be king," Bane said, petting the dog.

"And you trust this little bastard?" Hugh said to the count. "Hell, he'd betray his own mother."

"That's meant to be some sort of jest, isn't it? Sorry, but I never could understand human attempts at humor. His Highness, Prince Bane, knows where his best interests lie."

Hugh's gaze went to Iridal. He was thankful she was unconscious. He might almost, for her sake, have wished her dead.

"If I agree to kill the king and queen, you let her go. That's the deal?"

"Yes."

"How do I know you'll keep your end?"

"You don't. But then you haven't much choice except to trust us, do you? However, I will make this concession. The boy will accompany you. He will be in contact with his mother. Through him, you will know she is alive."

"And through him you'll know if I've done what you want."

Tretar shrugged. "Naturally. And we will keep the mother informed as to the condition of her son. She would, I imagine, be devastated if anything happened to the child. She would suffer most cruelly..."

"You're not to hurt her," Bane ordered. "She's going to convince all the mysteriarchs to be on my side. She loves me," the child added with an impish smile. "She'll do whatever I want her to do."

Yes, and she wouldn't believe me if I told her the truth. Not that I'll be around long enough, Hugh thought. Bane will see to that. He can't let me live. Once I've served my purpose, I'll be "captured" and executed. But how does Haplo figure in all this? Where is he?

"Well, sir, may we have your answer?" Tretar nudged Hugh with the toe of his polished shoe.

"You don't need an answer," Hugh said. "You've got me and you know it."

"Excellent," Tretar stated briskly. Rising to his feet, he beckoned to several of his men. "Remove the lady to the dungeons. Keep her drugged. Otherwise, she is to be well treated."

The elves lifted Iridal to her feet. She opened her eyes, stared around drunkenly, saw her son and smiled. Then her eyelids fluttered, her head lolled, she slumped in the arms of her captors. Tretar drew her hood up over her head, hiding her features.

"There, if anyone sees you, they will think that the lady is merely suffering from a surfeit of wine. Go on."

The elves half carried, half dragged the stumbling Iridal out the door and down the corridor. Bane, his arm around the dog, watched without interest. Then, face brightening, he turned to Hugh.

"When do we leave?"

"It must be soon," Tretar advised. "Rees'ahn is already at Seven Fields. Stephen and Anne are on their way. We will provide you with whatever you need ..."

"I can't very well travel like this," Hugh remarked from his place on the floor.

Tretar regarded him attentively, then gave a single, brief nod. "Release him. He knows that even if he did manage to escape us and find his way to the dungeons, the lady would be dead by the time he reached her."

The elves cut Hugh's bindings, assisted him to his feet.

"I'll want a short sword," he said, rubbing his arms, trying to restore the circulation. "And my daggers back. And poison for the blades. There's a certain type. Have you an alchemist? Good. I'll speak to him myself. And money. A lot. In case we have to bribe our way through the lines. And a dragon."

Tretar pursed his lips. "The last will be difficult, but not impossible."

"I'll need traveling clothes," Hugh continued. "And so will the boy. Human. Something peddlers might wear. And some elven jewels. Nothing good. Cheap and gaudy."

"That will not be a problem. But where are your own clothes?" Tretar asked, with a sharp look.

"I burned 'em," Hugh responded calmly.

Tretar said nothing more. The count was longing to find out how, from where, and from whom Hugh had obtained the magical uniform of the Unseen. But he must have guessed that on this point Hugh would keep silent. And perhaps the count had a fair idea anyway. Surely, by now, Tretar's spies would have connected Hugh and Iridal with the two Kir monks who entered Paxaua. Where would Kir monks go but to their spiritual brothers, the Kenkari?

"I'm taking the dog," Bane announced, jumping excitedly to his feet.

"Only if you can teach it to fly dragonback," Hugh told him.

Bane appeared crestfallen for an instant, then ran off to his bed, commanding the animal to follow.

"Now, this is a dragon," Bane said, pointing at the bed. He patted the mattress. "You get up here... That's it. And now sit. No, sit. Hind end down."

The dog, tongue out, ears up, tail wagging, entered into the spirit of the game, but appeared uncertain what was required of it and offered a front paw to shake.

"No, no, no!" Bane pressed on the dog's rear portion. "Sit!"

"Charming child," observed Tretar. "One would think he was going on holiday..."

Hugh said nothing, eyed the dog. The beast was magical, as he recalled. At least he supposed it must be. He'd seen it do some strange things. It wasn't often separated from Haplo and, if it was, there must be a reason. But Hugh was damned if he could figure out what. Not that it much mattered anyway. There was only one way out of this, as far as Hugh could see.

An elf entered the room, glided over to Tretar, spoke in an undertone. Hugh had sharp hearing.

"Sang-drax ... all going according to plan. He has the dwarf... she will arrive in Drevlin safely, story of escape. Emperor's pride saved... Kicksey-winsey saved. Boy can keep the dog..."

At first, Haplo had no difficulty following Sang-drax and the dwarf. With her heavy boots, her short legs, which couldn't quite keep up with her supposed rescuer, and her huffing and puffing from the unaccustomed exertion, Jarre was moving slowly and making enough noise for the Kicksey-winsey itself.

Which made it all the more inexplicable when Haplo lost them.

He had followed them down the hall outside Bane's room, down the stairs. But when he reached the bottom of the staircase that opened into another hallway (the same hall through which he'd entered) the two were nowhere in sight.

Haplo, cursing in frustration, ran down the hallway, gaze sweeping the floor, the walls, the closed doors on either side.

He was near the end of the hall, almost to the front door, when it occurred to him that something about this was wrong.

Lights were burning, where before it had been dark. No footmen yawned and gossiped in the entryway. He saw, in sudden perplexity, that there wasn't an entryway. Reaching the end of the corridor and what should have been a door, Haplo discovered a blank wall and two more corridors, each of which branched off in opposite directions. These halls were far longer than normal, far longer than would have been possible, considering the size of the building. And he had no doubt now that if he ran down either one, he would find both led to other corridors.

He was in a maze, a maze of the serpent-elf's magical creation, a frustrating, nightmarelake concoction that would have Haplo running endlessly, going nowhere except insane.

The Patryn came to a halt. He reached out groping hands, hoping to touch something solid and real, hoping to dispel the magic. He was in danger, for though it appeared to him as if he were standing in an empty corridor, in reality he might be standing in the center of an open courtyard, surrounded by a hundred armed elves.

This was worse, far worse, than being struck suddenly blind. Deprived of his sight, he could have relied on, trusted his other senses. But now his brain was forced to argue with his senses; the dreamlike quality of the

illusion was unnerving. He took a step, and the corridor swayed and slanted. The floor he could feel beneath his feet wasn't the floor he saw with his eyes. Walls slid through his fingers. Yet his fingers touched something solid. He was growing dizzy, disoriented.

He shut his eyes, tried to concentrate on sounds, but that proved unreliable. The only sounds he heard were coming through the dog's ears. He might have been standing in the room with Hugh and Bane.

Haplo's skin prickled, the runes activating. Something, someone was coming up on him. And here he stood, with his eyes shut, flailing about helplessly. Now he heard footsteps, but were they near him or near the dog? Haplo fought down a panicked urge to lash out wildly.

A breath of wind touched his cheek. Haplo turned.

The corridor was still empty, but, damn it, Haplo knew someone was there, someone right behind him. He worked his magic, caused the sigla to shine blue, envelop him in a protective shield.

It would work against mensch. But not against...

Pain burst in his head. He was falling, falling into the dream. He hit the ground, the shock jolted him back to conscious awareness. Blood rolled into his eyes, gummed the lids. He struggled to open them, but gave up. It hurt to look into the dazzling light His magic was unraveling.

Another blow...

Gigantic birds—horrible creatures with leather wings, razor-sharp beaks and tearing teeth—attacked Haplo. He tried to escape, but they dove at him, repeatedly. Their wings beat around him. He fought, but he couldn't see them. They had pecked out his eyes.

He tried to run from them, stumbled blindly over the rough and uneven terrain of the Labyrinth. They swooped down on him, talons raked across his naked back. He fell, and when he did, they were on him. He turned bleeding eye sockets toward the sound they made, the raucous cries of glee and chortles of sated hunger.

He struck at them with his fists, kicked at them with his feet. They flew just near enough to tease him, let him wear himself out. And when he collapsed, weak, they perched on his body, dug talons into his skin, tore out great gobs of flesh, and feasted on it and on his pain and his terror.

They meant to kill him. But they would devour him slowly. Pick his bones, eat the still-living flesh. Gorged, they would flap away, leave him to agony and darkness. And when he had regained his strength, healed himself, tried to run, he would hear once more the horrible flapping of their learner wings. And each time they attacked, he lost a little more of his power to fight them.

Lost it, never to regain it.

## CHAPTER 35 THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO

### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

"KEEPER," SAID THE KENKARI, THE DOOR'S ASSISTANT. "ONE OF THE weesham to see you. Count Tretar's weesham, to be precise."

"Tell him that we are not accepting—"

"Begging your pardon, Keeper, but I have told him just that. He is being very stubborn. He insists on speaking to you personally."

Door sighed, took a sip of wine, dabbed his lips with a cloth and left his repast to go to deal with this most irritating weesham.

He was a long time in speech with him, and, when the conversation ended, Door pondered a moment, summoned his assistant, informed him that he would be in the chapel.

The Keepers of the Soul and of the Book were on their knees before the altar in the small chapel. The Door, seeing them in prayer, entered the room silently, shut the door behind him, and himself went down on his knees, clasped his hands, bowed his head.

The Keeper turned. "You have news?"

"Yes, but I feared—"

"No, you do quite right to interrupt us. Look."

Door lifted his head, stared aghast at the Aviary. It was as if a storm were sweeping through the lush greenery; trees shook and shivered and moaned in a wind that was the clamorous breath of thousands of trapped souls. Leaves trembled in violent agitation, branches cracked and broke.

"What is happening?" Door whispered, forgetting in his fright that he was not supposed to speak unless the Keeper of the Soul had spoken first. Recalling this, he cringed, was about to ask forgiveness.

"Perhaps you can tell us."

Door shook his head, perplexed. "A weesham was just here, the one who told us about the human child, Bane. He received our warning and sends us this news. His charge, Count Tretar, has captured the Lady Iridal and Hugh the Hand. The mysteriarch has been imprisoned in the dungeons of the Unseen. The weesham is not certain what has become of Hugh, but thinks that he and the child, Bane, are being taken away somewhere."

The Keeper of the Soul rose to his feet.

"We must act and act swiftly."

"But why do the dead clamor so?" Door faltered. "What has disturbed them?"

"I do not understand." The Keeper of the Soul looked sorrowful, perplexed. "I have the feeling that we may never, in this life, understand. But they do." He stared into the Aviary, his expression changing to one of awe and wistful longing. "They understand. And we must act. We must go forth."

"Go forth!" The Door blanched. He had never, in the countless years he had opened his door to others, passed through it himself. "Go where?"

"Perhaps," said the Keeper with a pale smile, listening to the silent cries of the dead inside the Aviary, "to join them."

In the chill, dark hour before dawn, the Keeper of the Soul shut the door that led to the Aviary, placed a spell of sealing upon it—a thing that had never happened in all the history of the cathedral. Never once, in that time, had the Keeper of the Soul left his sacred post.

The Keeper of the Door and the Keeper of the Book exchanged solemn glances as the door swung shut, the words of the spell were pronounced. Awed and overwhelmed, they were more frightened by this sudden change in their lives than by the vague danger they felt threatening them. For they read in this small change

a portent of far greater change that would affect, for good or evil, the lives of all the peoples of all the races of Arianus.

The Keeper of the Soul left the Aviary, proceeded down the corridor. He was followed two paces behind—as was proper—by the Keeper of the Door on his left, the Keeper of the Book on his right. None of the three spoke, though Door nearly exclaimed aloud as they passed by the hallway that led to the outer doors, continued moving farther into the heart of the cathedral. He had assumed they must leave the cathedral to reach the Imperanon. But then, he had assumed that was their destination. Apparently, he'd assumed wrong.

He dared not question, since the Keeper of the Soul did not speak. Door could only exchange glances of mute astonishment with Book as they accompanied their master down the stairs to the chambers of the weesham, past study rooms and storage rooms, and entered the great library of the Kenkari.

The Keeper spoke a word. Glowlamps burst into light, illuminated the room with a soft radiance. Door guessed now that perhaps they had come in search of some volume of reference, some text that would provide explanation or instruction.

Inside the library of the Kenkari was the entire history of the elves of Arianus and, to a lesser extent, the history of the other two races, as well. The material on the humans was largest; that on the dwarves extremely slim, for the elves considered the dwarves a mere footnote. Here, to this library, Book brought her work when it was complete, carried down each huge volume as it filled with names, and placed it in its correct order on the ever-expanding shelves that housed the Record of Souls. Here, too, were volumes left behind by the Sartan, though not quite as large a collection as could be found in the High Realm.

The elves could not read most of the works of the Sartan. Few could even be opened, for the mysteries of the rune-magic used by the Sartan, whom the elves had considered to be gods, could not be penetrated. The books were kept as sacred relics, however, and no Kenkari ever entered the library without performing a bow of reverence and remembrance in honor of those who had vanished long ago.

Door was not surprised, therefore, to see the Keeper of the Soul pause before the crystal case that held the various Sartan scrolls and leather-bound volumes. Neither was Book. She and Door emulated their master, made their obeisance to the Sartan, but then stared in astonishment to see the Keeper reach out his hand, rest his thin fingers on the crystal, and speak several words of magic. The crystal melted at his touch. He passed his hand through the crystal, took hold of a slim, rather nondescript-looking volume. It was covered with dust, having been relegated to the bottom of the case.

The Keeper withdrew the book. The crystal re-formed, sealed shut. The Soul regarded the book with an air of wistful sadness and fear.

"I begin to think we have made a terrible mistake. But"—he lifted his head to heaven—"we were afraid." He lowered his head, sighed. "The humans and dwarves are different from us. So very different. Who knows? Perhaps this will help us all understand."

Thrusting the book into the voluminous sleeves of his many-colored robes, the Keeper of the Soul led his mystified followers deeper into the library until they came to stand before a blank wall.

The Soul halted. The expression on his face altered, became grim and angry. He turned and, for the first time since they had started on their expedition, looked directly at the other two.

"Do you know why I have brought you here?"

"No, Keeper," each murmured, quite truthfully, for neither of them had a clue as to why they should be standing staring at a blank wall when great and portentous events moved around them.

"This is the reason," the Soul said, his usually gentle voice stern. He put forth his hand, placed it against a portion of the wall, and shoved.

A section of the wall swung out, pivoting silently and smoothly on a central axis, opened on a crudely fashioned staircase, leading down into darkness.

Both Book and Door spoke at once.

"How long has this been here...?"

"Who could have done..."

"The Unseen," answered the Soul grimly. "These stairs go to a tunnel that leads directly to their dungeons. I know, because I followed it."

The other two Kenkari stared at the Keeper in unhappy astonishment, unnerved by the discovery and fearful of its portent.

"As to how long this has been here, I have no idea. I found it myself only a few cycles ago. I could not sleep one night, and sought to compose my mind with study. I came here at a late hour when no one would normally be about. At that, I did not catch them quite by surprise. I saw a flutter of movement out of the corner of my eye. I might have passed it off as nothing more than my eyes adjusting from dimness to bright light, except that it was accompanied by an odd sound that drew my attention to this wall. I saw the outline of the door just disappearing.

"For three nights I hid in the darkness, waited for them to return. They did not. Then, on the fourth, they came back. I saw them enter, watched them leave. I could feel the anger of Krenka-Anris at this sacrilege. Cloaked in her anger, I slipped after them, tracked them to their lair. The dungeons of the Unseen."

"But why?" Book demanded. "Have they dared to spy on us?"

"Yes, I believe so," the Keeper of the Soul responded, his expression grave. "Spying and worse, perhaps. The two who entered the night I watched were searching among the books, appeared particularly interested in those of the Sartan. They sought to break into the crystal case, but our magic thwarted them. And there was something very strange about them."

The Keeper lowered his voice, glanced at the open wall. "They spoke a language I had never heard before in this world. I could not understand what they were saying."

"Perhaps the Unseen have developed a secret language of their own," offered Door. "Similar to thieves' cant among the humans..."

"Perhaps." The Soul appeared unconvinced. "It was terrible, whatever it was. I was almost paralyzed with fear, just listening to them talk. The souls of the dead trembled and cried out in horror."

"And yet you followed them," said Door, regarding the Keeper with admiration.

"It was my duty," the Keeper replied simply. "Krenka-Anris commanded it. And now we are commanded to enter once again. And we are to walk their path and use their own dark secrets against them."

The Keeper stood in the doorway, raised his arms. The chill, dank wind that flowed from the cavernous tunnel fluttered the silken folds of multicolored fabric, spread them, lifted them, lifted the slender body of the elf. He dwindled in size until he was no larger than the insect he emulated.

With a graceful sweep of his wings, the Kenkari flew through the door and into the dark tunnel. His two companions took to the air, worked their magic, soared after him. Their robes glowed with a luminous

brilliance that lit their way, a brilliance that died, changed to the softest black velvet when they reached their destination.

Unheard, the three entered the dungeons of the Unseen.

Once the Kenkari were inside, the elves resumed their normal shape and appearance, with the exception that their robes remained a velvet black, softer than the darkness that surrounded them.

The Keeper of the Soul paused, looked back at his companions, wondering if they felt what he felt.

By their expressions, they did.

"There is great evil at work here," said the Keeper in a low voice. "I've never experienced the like on Arianus before."

"And yet," said the Book, timidly, "it seems ancient, as if it had always been here."

"Older than we are," agreed the Door. "Older than our people."

"How can we fight it?" the Book asked helplessly.

"How can we not?" responded the Soul.

He advanced down the dark cell block, moving toward a pool of light. One of the Unseen, on night duty, had just departed. The day command was taking over the watch\*. The guard lifted a ring of keys, prepared to make his rounds to check on the prisoners, see who had died in the night.

A figure stepped out of the shadowy darkness, blocked his path.

The Unseen came up short, put his hand to his sword.

"What the—" He stared, fell back a pace before the advancing black-robed elf. "Kenkari?"

The Unseen removed his hand from the sword hilt. He had recovered from his shock and surprise by now, remembered his duty.

"You Kenkari have no jurisdiction here," he said gruffly, albeit with the respect he considered it expedient to show such powerful magi. "You agreed not to interfere. You should honor that agreement. In the name of the emperor, I ask you to leave."

"The agreement we made with His Imperial Majesty has been broken, and not by us. We will leave when we have what we came for," said the Keeper calmly. "Let us pass."

The Unseen drew his sword, opened his mouth to shout for reinforcements. The Keeper of the Soul raised his hand in the air, and, with his motion, the Unseen's motion was arrested. He stood immobile, silenced.

"Your body is a shell," said the Kenkari, "which you will leave someday. I speak to your soul that lives eternally and that must answer to the ancestors for what it did in life. If you are not completely lost to hatred and dark ambition, aid us in our task."

The Unseen began to shake violently, in the throes of some inner struggle. He dropped his sword, reached for the ring of keys. Wordlessly, he handed the keys to the Keeper.

"Which is the cell of the human wizardess?"

The Unseen's living eyes shifted to a corridor that was dark and appeared unused and abandoned. "You mustn't go down there," he said in a hollow voice that was like an echo in a cavern. "They are coming down there. They are bringing in a prisoner."

"Who are they?"

"I don't know, Keeper. They came to us not long ago— they pretend to be elves, like us. But they are not. We all know, but we dare say nothing. Whatever they are, they are terrible."

"Which cell?"

The Unseen trembled, whimpered. "I ... I can't..."

"A powerful fear, to work on the soul," murmured the Keeper. "No matter. We will find her. Whatever happens, your body will neither see nor hear anything until we are gone."

The Keeper of the Soul lowered his hand. The Unseen blinked a little as if he'd just woken from a nap, sat down at the desk, picked up the night log, and began to study it with intense interest.

Taking the keys, the Keeper—his expression grave and stern—advanced down the dark corridor. His companions came after. Footsteps faltered, hearts beat rapidly, chill fear shook the body, its cold penetrating to the bone.

The cell block had been ominously silent, but now, suddenly, the elves heard footsteps and a shuffling sound, as of a heavy weight being dragged across the floor.

Four figures stepped out of a wall at the opposite end of the corridor, appeared to take shape and form from the darkness. They dragged a fifth person, limp and lifeless, between them.

The four looked to all others to be elven soldiers. The Kenkari looked beyond what they could see with the mortal eye. Ignoring the outward facade of flesh, the Keepers searched for souls. They did not find any. And though they could not see the serpents in their true form, what the Kenkari did see they knew as Evil—hideous, nameless, old as time's beginning, terrible as time's end.

The serpent-elves sensed the Kenkari's presence—a radiant presence—and turned their attention from their prisoner. The serpent-elves appeared amused.

"What do you want, old twig?" said one. "Come to watch us kill this man?"

"Perhaps you've come for his soul," said another.

"Don't bother," said a third, with a laugh. "He's like us. He doesn't have one."

The Kenkari could not reply, terror had stolen their voices. They had lived long in the world, longer than almost any other elves, and they had never encountered such evil.

Or had they?

The Keeper of the Soul looked around him, looked at the dungeons. Sighing, he looked into his own heart. And he was no longer afraid. Only ashamed.

"Release the Patryn," he said. "Then leave."

"You know what he is." The serpent-elves seemed surprised. "But perhaps you don't realize how powerful he is? We alone can deal with his magic. It is you who should leave— while you are still able to do so."

The Keeper of the Soul clasped his thin hands together, took a step forward.

"Release him," the Keeper repeated calmly. "And leave."

The four serpent-elves dropped Haplo to the ground, but they did not depart. Abandoning their elven forms, they melted into shapeless shadows. Only their eyes were visible, glowing red. They advanced on the Kenkari.

"Long have you worked for us." The darkness hissed like a thousand snakes. "You have served us well. This is a matter that does not concern you. The woman is human, your bitter enemy. The Patryn plans to subjugate you and all your people. Turn away- Go back and live in peace."

"I hear you now and see you for the first time," said the Keeper of the Soul, his voice trembling, "and my shame is very great. Yes, I served you—out of fear, misunderstanding, hate. Having seen you for what you are, having seen myself, I denounce you. I serve you no longer."

The black velvet of his robes began to shimmer, the multicolors flashed to radiant light. The Keeper lifted his arms and the silken material floated around his thin body. He advanced, summoning his magic, summoning the magic of the dead, calling on the name of Krenka-Anris to come to his aid.

The darkness loomed over him, hideous, threatening.

The Kenkari stood his ground, faced it, unafraid.

The darkness hissed, writhed about him, and slid away.

Book and Door stared, gasped.

"You drove it off!"

"Because I was no longer afraid," said the Soul.

He looked down at the unconscious, seemingly lifeless Patryn. "But I believe we are too late."

## CHAPTER 36

### THE IMPERANON

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

HUGH THE HAND WAS AWAKENED IN THE DAWN BY THE IMPRESSION that someone stood over him. He roused himself, found Count Tretar.

"Remarkable," said the count. "What they tell of you is not exaggerated. A true professional, a cold and callous killer, if ever there was one. I fancy there are not many men who could sleep soundly the night before they intend to murder a king."

Hugh sat up, stretched. "More than you might imagine. How well did you sleep?"

Tretar smiled. "Rather poorly. But I trust that tomorrow I will rest easier. The dragon has been obtained. Sang-drax has a human friend who is quite helpful in such matters—"

"Name wouldn't happen to be Ernst Twist, would it?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact it is," said the count.

Hugh nodded. He still had no idea what was going on, but the knowledge that Twist was involved didn't surprise him.

"The dragon is tethered on the grounds outside the Imperanon's walls. Couldn't permit the beast inside. The emperor would be in a state of nervous prostration for a week. I'll take you and the boy there myself. His Highness is anxious to get started."

Tretar glanced over at Bane, who was dressed and fidgeting with impatience. The dog lay at the boy's side.

Hugh studied the animal, wondered what was wrong with it. Ears drooping, it looked desperately unhappy. As he watched, he saw it raise its head, stare hopefully at the door, as if expecting a summons.

Then, not hearing anything, it sighed and sank back down. Obviously, the dog was waiting for its master.

It might, thought Hugh, have a long wait.

"Here are the clothes you wanted," Tretar was saying. "We took them off one of the slaves."

"What about my weapons?" asked Hugh. He examined the leather breeches, soft-soled boots, patched shirt, and worn cloak. Nodding in satisfaction, he began to dress.

Tretar regarded him with a disdainful air, his nose wrinkled at the smell.

"Your weapons wait for you in company with the dragon."

Hugh was careful to seem casual, at ease, hide his disappointment. It had been a fleeting hope, a half-formed plan, made before he gave in to exhaustion. He hadn't really expected the elves to give him the weapons. If they had...

But, they hadn't.

He shrugged the hope off. One way out, he told himself. Be thankful you have that.

He lifted his pipe from the table by the couch on which he'd slept. He'd persuaded the elves to bring him some stregno, enjoyed a pipe before bed. He tucked the pipe into his belt, indicated he was ready.

"Something to eat?" Tretar offered, gesturing to honey cakes and fruit.

Hugh glanced at it, shook his head. "What you elves eat isn't eating." Truth told, his stomach was clenched so tight he didn't think he could keep anything down.

"Are we finally going now?" Bane demanded grumpily. He tugged at the dog. The animal clambered reluctantly to its feet, stood looking woeful. "Cheer up," the boy ordered, giving the animal a playful smack on the nose.

"How's your mother this morning?" Hugh asked.

"Fine," Bane answered, looking at him with a sweet smile. He toyed with the feather he wore around his neck, held it up for Hugh to see. "She's sleeping."

"You'd tell me that, with that same look on your face, if she was dead," Hugh said. "But I'll know if anything happens to her. I'll know, you little bastard."

Bane's smile froze, twitched at the comers. Then he tossed his curls. "You shouldn't call me that," he said slyly. "You insult my mother."

"No, I don't," Hugh replied. "You're no child of hers. You are your father's creation." He walked past Bane, out the door.

At the count's command, three elven guards, heavily armed, surrounded Hugh the Hand, escorted him down the hall. Bane and Tretar followed, walking side by side.

"You must see to it, Your Highness, that he's publicly charged with the murders, executed before he can talk," Tretar said in an undertone. "The humans must not suspect that we elves have had anything to do with this."

"They won't, my lord," said Bane, two bright red spots burning in his pale cheeks. "Once I have no more use for the assassin, I'll have him executed. And this time, I'll see to it that he stays dead. He couldn't come back to life once his body's been cut apart, do you think?"

Tretar had no idea what Bane was talking about, but he didn't suppose it mattered. Looking down at the prince, who was gazing up at the count with limpid eyes and a curve of the rose-tinted lips, Tretar almost found it in his heart to pity the wretches who would so shortly be Bane's subjects.

Count Tretar's own personal dragonship was to carry Hugh and Bane up into the mountains, where the dragon was being held in thrall.

In the Imperial Harbor, another dragonship—one of the large ones that made the journey through the Maelstrom into Drevlin—was being hurriedly made ready to sail.

Human slaves, stumbling over their chains, were herded aboard. Elven mariners swarmed over the ship, testing lines, raising and lowering the sails. The captain ran on board, clutching together the flapping folds of his hastily put-on uniform. A ship's wizard, rubbing sleep from his eyes, dashed on board after.

Tretar's own small dragonship spread its wings, prepared to take to the air. Hugh watched the bustle on board the larger ship until he grew bored, was turning away when his attention was caught by a familiar figure.

Two familiar figures, Hugh amended, startled. The first he recognized as Sang-drax. The second, walking along beside the elf, was—of all things—a female dwarf.

"Jarre," said Hugh, coming up with the name, after some thought. "That girlfriend of Limbeck's. I wonder what the devil she's doing, mixed up in all this?"

His wonder was brief and it passed swiftly, for Hugh wasn't much interested in the dwarf. He stared hard at Sang-drax, however, wished that he might be granted the time to settle his score with the treacherous elf. But that wasn't going to be possible.

The count's ship sailed into the air, headed for the mountain peaks. Tretar was taking no chances with Hugh. An elven soldier stood with his sword at the Hand's throat during the entire short journey, just in case the human might have some desperate plan to seize control of the ship.

The elves needn't have troubled. Any attempt to escape would be futile, endanger Iridal's life, and all for nothing. Hugh realized that now, should have realized it during the night when he was concocting foolhardy, desperate schemes.

There was only one way, one way to alert Stephen to his danger, deliver Bane alive into the king's hands, keep him alive so that the elves wouldn't harm Iridal. The last was chancy, but Hugh had to take the risk. Iridal would want him to take the risk.

Most important, this would open her eyes to the truth.

Hugh had formed his plan. It was firm in his mind. He was confident it would work. He relaxed, at peace with himself for the first time in a long time.

He was looking forward to the night.

To what would be, for him, endless night.

## CHAPTER 37

### THE DUNGEONS OF THE UNSEEN

#### MID REALM

HAPLO CLOSED THE CIRCLE OF HIS BEING, GATHERED HIS REMAINING strength, healed himself. This time would be the last, though. He couldn't fight any longer, didn't want to fight any longer. He hurt, he was tired. The battle was futile. No matter what he did, they would defeat him at last. He lay in the darkness, waiting for them to come.

They didn't.

And then the darkness changed to light.

Haplo opened his eyes, remembered he didn't have any eyes. He put his hands to the bleeding sockets, saw his hands, and realized he had eyes to see. He sat up, stared at his body. He was whole, unharmed, except for a throbbing pain at the base of his skull and a dizzy sensation brought on by his too-swift movement.

"Are you all right?" came a voice.

Haplo tensed, blinked rapidly to clear his vision.

"Don't be afraid. We are not those who harmed you. They have gone."

Haplo had only to look down at his arm to know the voice spoke the truth. The sigla were dark. He was in no immediate danger. He lay back, closed his eyes.

Iridal walked in a terrible world, a world distorted, where every object was just a little beyond her reach, a world where people talked a language whose words she understood, yet they made no sense. She watched the world happen around her without being able to affect it, control it. The feeling was horrifying, that of existing in a waking dream.

And then all was darkness—that and the knowledge that she was imprisoned and they'd taken her child away from her. She tried to use her magic to free herself, but the words to the spell were hidden by the darkness. She couldn't see them, and she couldn't remember them.

And then the darkness grew light. Strong hands took hold of hers and guided her to stability, to reality. She heard voices and understood the words. She reached out, hesitantly, to touch the person who leaned over her and her hand closed over thin, fragile-feeling bone. Iridal gasped in relief, could have wept.

"Be at peace, Lady," said the Kenkari, "all is well. Rest. Relax. Let the antidote take effect."

Iridal did as she was told, too weak and still too disoriented to do anything else, for the moment, though her first and foremost thought was rescuing Bane. That much had been real, she knew. They had stolen him away from her. But with the Kenkari's help, she would get him back.

Struggling to clear the burning mists from her mind, she heard voices close by—one voice that sounded familiar. Chillingly familiar. Iridal leaned forward to hear better, putting aside irritably the restraining hand of the Kenkari.

"Who are you?" the voice was asking.

"I am the Keeper of the Soul, a Kenkari. This is my assistant, the Keeper of the Door. Though I fear these titles mean nothing to you."

"What happened to the ser—I mean the ... uh ... elves who took me prisoner?"

"They are gone. What did they do to you? We thought you were dead. Should you be moving around like this?"

Iridal sucked in a breath. Haplo! The Patryn! The man who had taken her son from her the first time.

"Help me get away!" Iridal said to the Kenkari. "I must ... He mustn't find me..." She tried to stand, but her legs were weak and she fell back.

The Kenkari was perplexed, anxious. "No, Lady, you are not fully recovered ..."

"Never mind what they did to me," Haplo was saying harshly. "What did you do to them? How did you fight them?"

"We confronted them," replied the Soul gravely. "We faced them without fear. Our weapons are courage, honor, the determination to defend what is right. Discovered late, perhaps," he added with a sigh, "but true to us when we needed them."

Iridal flung the Kenkari aside. She could stand now, weak, but she wouldn't fall. Whatever drug the elves had given her was wearing off rapidly, burned out of her blood by her fear of Haplo's finding her... and finding Bane. She reached the cell door and looked out. Almost immediately, she moved back, keeping herself hidden in the shadows.

Haplo was on his feet, leaning against a wall, not four paces from where she stood. He looked haggard, pale, as if he had endured some terrible torment. But Iridal remembered his magical power, knew it was far stronger than her own. She dared not let him find her.

"Thanks for ... whatever," he was saying to the elves grudgingly. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"It is morning," answered Door.

The Patryn cursed. "You didn't by any chance see an elf and a dwarf, did you? An elf soldier, a captain. And he'd have with him a dwarf, a female."

"We know of whom you speak, but we did not see them. Count Tretar's weesham has informed us. They have taken a dragonship to Drevlin. They left at dawn."

Haplo cursed again. Muttering some excuse, he started to walk around the mensch. He was leaving, chasing after some dwarf and an elf captain. He hadn't said a word about Bane. Iridal held her breath, almost limp with relief.

Go! she urged him silently. Let him go, she urged the elves silently. But, to her dismay, one of the elves put a slender hand on Haplo's shoulder. The other Kenkari blocked Haplo's path.

"How will you go after them?" the Soul said.

"That's my concern," the Patryn returned impatiently. "Look, you elves may not care, but they're going to murder that dwarf, unless I—"

"You reproach us," said the Soul, closing his eyes, bowing his head. "We accept your rebuke. We know the wrong we have done and we seek only to make amends, if that is possible. But relax. You have time, time to heal your injury, for I believe such things are possible for you. Rest now. We must free the mysteriarch."

"Mysteriarch?" Haplo had been going to shove his way past. He stopped. "What mysteriarch?"

Iridal began to call upon the magic, to crumble the stone down around them. She did not want to hurt the Kenkari, after all they had done for her, but they were going to reveal her presence to Haplo and that was something she could not allow...

A hand closed over hers. "No, Lady," said the Book, her voice gentle and sad. "We cannot permit it. Wait."

"The Lady Iridal," said Soul, and looked directly at her.

"Bane... Bane's mother. She's here?" Haplo followed the Kenkari's gaze.

"Book," called Soul. "Is the Lady Iridal well enough to travel?"

Iridal cast a furious glance at the Kenkari, jerked her hand from the woman's grasp. "What is this—a trap? You Kenkari said you would help me rescue my son! And I find you with this man—a Patryn—one who carried Bane off! I will not—"

"Yes, you will." Haplo came up to her, stood in front of her. "You're right, this is a trap, but you're the one who fell into it. And that son of yours set it."

"I don't believe you!" Iridal clasped her hand over the feather amulet.

The Kenkari stood by, exchanging eloquent glances among themselves, but doing nothing, saying nothing.

"Of course, the amulet," said Haplo grimly. "Just like the one he used to wear when he communicated with Sinistrad. That's how Bane found out you were coming. You told him. You told him you were bringing Hugh the Hand. Bane arranged the capture, set the trap. Right now, he and the assassin are on their way to murder King Stephen and his queen. Hugh's been coerced into going along with the plot because he thinks they'll kill you if he doesn't."

Iridal held onto the feather amulet tightly.

"Bane, my child," she called. She would prove Haplo lied. "Can you hear me? Are you safe? Have they hurt you?"

"Mother? No, I'm fine, Mother. Truly."

"Are they holding you prisoner? I'll free you. How can I find you?"

"I'm not a prisoner. Don't worry about me, Mother. I'm with Hugh the Hand. We're riding on a dragon. The dog, too! Though I had quite a bit of trouble getting the dog to jump on. I don't think he likes dragons. But I love them. I'm going to have one of my very own someday." A moment's pause, then the childish voice, slightly altered. "What did you mean about finding me, Mother? Where are you?"

Haplo was watching her. He couldn't possibly hear what Bane was saying; her child's words came to her mind magically through the amulet. But the Patryn knew.

"Don't tell him you're coming!" Haplo said to her softly.

If Haplo is right, then this is all my fault, Iridal realized. Again, my fault. She shut her eyes, blotting out Haplo, blotting out the sympathetic faces of the Kenkari. But she took Haplo's advice, though she loathed herself for doing so.

"I'm... I'm in a prison cell, Bane. The elves have locked me in here and... they're... giving me a drug..."

"Don't worry, Mother." Bane sounded cheerful again. "They won't hurt you. No one will. We'll be together soon. It's all right if I keep the dog, isn't it, Mother?"

Iridal removed her hand from the feather amulet, smoothed it out with her fingers. Then she glanced around, took in her surroundings, saw herself, standing in a prison cell.

Her hand began to tremble; tears shimmered, dimmed the defiance in her eyes. Slowly, her fingers released the feather.

"What is it you want me to do?" she said in a low voice, not looking at Haplo, staring at her cell door.

"Go after them. Stop Hugh. If he knows you're free, knows you're safe, he won't murder the king."

"I'll find Hugh and my son," she said, her voice shaking, "but only to prove you wrong! Bane has been deceived. Evil men, men like you—"

"I don't care why you go, Lady," Haplo interrupted, exasperated. "Just go. Maybe these elves"—he glanced at the Kenkari—"can help you."

Iridal glared at him, hating him. She turned to the Kenkari, regarded them with equal bitterness. "You'll help me. Of course you'll help me. You want Hugh's soul. If I save him, he'll come back to you!"

"That will be his decision," said the Keeper. "Yes, we can help you. We can help both of you."

Haplo shook his head. "I don't need help from—" He paused.

"Mensch?" finished the Soul, smiling. "You will need a means of reaching the dragonship that is carrying the dwarf to her death. Can your magic provide it?"

Haplo looked grim. "Can yours?" he countered.

"I believe so. But first, we must return to the cathedral. Door, you will lead."

Haplo hesitated. "What about the guards?"

"They will not trouble us. We hold their souls in thrall, you see. Come with us. Listen to our plan. You must at least take time to heal yourself completely. Then, if you choose to go on your own, you will be strong enough to face your enemies."

"All right, all right!" snapped Haplo. "I'll go. Stop wasting time."

They entered a dark tunnel, lit only by the iridescent glow of the strange robes worn by the Kenkari. Iridal paid little attention to her surroundings, allowed herself to be led along, neither seeing nor caring. She didn't want to believe Haplo, couldn't believe him. There must be some other explanation.

There had to be.

Haplo kept close watch on Iridal. She did not speak a word to him when they arrived at the cathedral. She did not look at him or acknowledge his presence. She was cold, withdrawn into herself. She answered the Kenkari when they spoke to her, but only in polite monosyllables, saying as little as possible.

Has she learned the truth? Was Bane smug enough to tell her or is the child continuing the deception? Is Iridal continuing to deceive herself? Haplo eyed her, couldn't guess the answers.

She hated him, that much was obvious. Hated him for taking her child from her, hated him for making her doubt her son.

And she'll hate me far more if I'm right, Haplo thought. Not that I blame her. Who knows how Bane would have turned out, if I'd left him with her? Who knows what he would have been like without the influence of his "Grandfather"? But then, we would have never found out about the Kicksey-win-sey, discovered the automaton. Funny how things work out.

And it might not have mattered anyway. Bane will always be Sinistrad's son. And Irida's son, too. Yes, you had a hand in his upbringing, Lady, if only by withholding your hand. You could have stopped your husband. You could have taken the baby back. But you know that now, don't you. And, maybe, after all, there wasn't anything you could have done. Maybe you were too scared.

Scared like I'm scared, scared of going back into the Labyrinth, too frightened to help my own child...

"I guess we're not much different, you and I, Lady Iridal," he told her silently. "Go ahead and hate me, if it makes you feel better. Hating me is a hell of a lot easier than hating yourself."

"What is this place?" he asked aloud. "Where are we?"

"We are in the Cathedral of the Albedo," answered the Keeper.

They had emerged from the tunnel, entered what looked to be a library. Haplo cast a curious glance at several volumes bearing what he recognized as Sartan runes. That made him think of Alfred and he recalled another question he wanted to ask Lady Iridal. But it would have to wait until later, if and when they were ever alone. If and when she would speak to him.

"The Cathedral of the Albedo," Haplo repeated, musing, trying to recall where he'd heard that before. Then he remembered. The taking of the elven ship on Drevlin; the dying captain; a wizard holding a box to the captain's lips. The trapping of a soul. Now more of what the Kenkari had said was making sense. Or maybe it was the fact that the pain in his head was subsiding.

"This is where you elves keep the souls of your dead," Haplo said. "You believe it strengthens your magic."

"Yes, that is what we believe."

They had passed through the lower parts of the cathedral, come to the crystal walls that faced out over the sunlit courtyard. All was peaceful, serene, quiet. Other Kenkari padded by on slippered feet, making graceful reverences to the three Keepers as they passed.

"Speaking of souls," said the Keeper. "Where is yours?"

"Where's my what?" Haplo couldn't believe he'd heard right.

"Your soul. We know you have one," the Keeper added, mistaking Haplo's incredulous look for one of indignation. "But it is not with you."

"Yeah? Well, you know more than I do," Haplo muttered.

He massaged his aching head. Nothing at all was making sense. The strange mensch—and these were undoubtedly the strangest mensch he'd ever come across—were right. He was definitely going to have to take time to heal himself.

Then, somehow or other, he'd steal a ship...

"Here, you may rest."

The Kenkari led the way into a quiet room that appeared to be a small chapel. A window opened onto a beautiful, lush garden. Haplo glanced at it without interest, impatient to complete his healing and be gone.

The Kenkari indicated chairs with a polite and graceful gesture. "Is there anything we can bring you? Food? Drink?"

"Yeah. A dragonship," muttered Haplo.

Iridal slumped into a chair, closed her eyes, shook her head.

"We must leave you now. We have preparations to make," said the Kenkari. "We will return. If you need anything, ring the tongueless bell."

How can I save Jarre? There has to be a way. Stealing a ship will take too long. She'll be dead by the time I reach her. Haplo began to pace the small room. Absorbed in his thoughts, he forgot Iridal's presence, was startled when she spoke. He was even more startled when he realized she was answering his thoughts.

"You have remarkable magical powers, as I recall," she said. "You carried my son by magic from the ruined castle. You could do the same here, I suppose. Why don't you just leave on your own, let your magic take you where you want?"

"I could," said Haplo, turning to face her. "If I had a fixed location in my mind—somewhere I knew, somewhere I'd been before. It's hard to explain, but I could conjure up the possibility that I'm there—not here. I could travel to Drevlin, because I've been to Drevlin. I could take us both back to the Imperanon. But I can't take myself to a strange dragonship flying somewhere between here and Drevlin. And I can't take you to your son, if that's what you're hoping for, Lady."

Iridal regarded him coldly. "Then it appears we must rely on these elves. Your head wound has reopened. It has started to bleed again. If you can truly heal yourself, Patryn, I suggest it might be wise to do so."

Haplo had to admit she was right. He was wearing himself out, accomplishing nothing. Sitting down in a chair, he laid his hand upon the injured part of his skull, established the circle of his being, let the warmth of his magic close the crack in the bone, banish the memory of the ripping talons, the tearing beaks...

He had drifted into a healing sleep when he was jolted awake by a voice.

Iridal had risen to her feet, was staring at him in awe and fear. Haplo, confused, couldn't think what he'd done to upset her. Then he looked at his skin, saw the blue glow of the runes just starting to fade. He'd forgotten. The mensch on this world weren't used to such sights.

"You are a god!" Iridal whispered, awed.

"I used to think so," Haplo said dryly, experimentally rubbing his skull, feeling it whole and undamaged beneath his fingers. "But not anymore. Forces stronger than mine and those of my people exist in this universe."

"I don't understand..." Iridal murmured.

Haplo shrugged. "That's the point."

She regarded him thoughtfully. "You've changed from what you were. When you first came, you were confident, in control."

"I thought I was in control. I've learned a lot, since then."

"Now, you are more like us—'mensch,' I believe Alfred said is the term you use. You seem ..." She hesitated.

"Frightened?" Haplo offered grimly.

"Yes," she said. "Frightened."

A small door opened. One of the Kenkari entered, bowed. "All is ready. You may enter the Aviary."

His hand indicated the garden. Haplo was about to protest irritably that this was no time for tea and cookies on the lawn when he caught a glimpse of Iridal. She was staring at the lush green foliage with a kind of horror, shrinking away from it.

"We must go in there?" she asked.

"All is well," said the Kenkari. "They understand. They want to help. You are welcome."

"Who?" Haplo asked the Kenkari. "Who understands? Who's going to help?"

"The dead," answered the Keeper.

Haplo was reminded of the second world he'd visited—Pryan. Its lush jungles might have been uprooted and dropped into this crystal dome. Then he saw that this foliage was arranged to look wild. In reality, it was carefully tended, lovingly nurtured.

He was amazed at the vastness of the dome. The Aviary had not looked this big seen through the chapel window. A dragonship—two dragonships—could have flown side by side in the widest part. But what amazed him more, when he stopped to think about it, was the greenery. Trees and ferns and plants such as these did not grow in the arid Mid Realm.

"Why," said Iridal, staring around her, "these trees are like those in the High Realms. Or rather, those that used to be in the High Realms." She reached out to touch a soft and feathery fern. "Nothing like this grows there now. All died, long ago."

"Not all. These are from the High Realms," said the Keeper of the Soul. "Our people brought them to this Realm when they left, long ago. Some of these trees are so old, I feel young around them. And the ferns—"

"Forget the damn ferns! Let's get on with this, whatever it is," said Haplo impatiently. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable. When they had first entered, the Aviary had seemed a haven of peace and tranquillity. Now he sensed anger and turmoil and fear. Hot winds touched his cheek, stirred his clothing. His skin crawled and itched, as if soft wings were brushing against him.

Souls of the dead, kept in here like caged birds.

Well, I've seen stranger things, Haplo reminded himself. I've seen the dead walk. He'd give these mensch one chance to prove their usefulness, then he'd take matters into his own hands.

The Kenkari lifted their eyes to the heavens, began to pray.

"Krenka-Anris, we call to you," said the Keeper of the Soul. "Holy Priestess, who first knew the wonder of this magic, hear our prayer and give us counsel. Thus we pray:

Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess.  
Three sons, most beloved, you sent to battle;  
around their necks, lockets, boxes of magic,  
wrought by your hand.

The dragon Krishach, breathing fire and poison,  
slew your three sons, most beloved.  
Their souls departed. The lockets opened.  
Each soul was captured. Each silent voice called to you.

Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess,  
Give us counsel in this, our trying hour,  
A force for evil, dark and unholy,  
Has entered our world.  
It came at our behest. We brought it, we created it,  
in the name of fear and hatred.  
Now we do penance.  
Now we must try to drive evil away.  
And we are not strong.

Grant us your help,  
Krenka-Anris,  
Holy Priestess,  
We beseech you.

The hot winds began to blow harder, fiercer, strengthening to an angry gale. The trees swayed and moaned, as if lamenting, branches snapped, leaves rustled in agitation. Haplo imagined he could hear voices, thousands of silent voices, adding their prayers to those spoken aloud by the Kenkari. The voices rose to the top of the Aviary, rose above the trees and greenery.

Iridal gasped and clutched at his arm. Her head was raised, her gaze fixed on the top of the Aviary dome.

"Look!" she breathed.

Strange clouds began to form, to coalesce, clouds woven from the whispering cacophony.

They began to take the form and shape of a dragon.

A nice bit of magic. Haplo was moderately impressed, though he wondered irritably just how the mensch thought a cloud shaped like a dragon was going to help anybody. He was again about to ask, about to interrupt, when the sigla on his skin burned in warning.

"The dragon Krishach," said Soul.

"Come to save us," said Book.

"Blessed Krenka-Anris," said Door.

"But it's not real!" Haplo protested, admonishing his own instincts as much as anything else. The sigla on his skin glowed blue, prepared to defend him.

And then he saw that it was real.

The dragon was a creature of cloud and of shadow; insubstantial, yet granted a terrible substance. Its flesh was a pale, translucent white, the white of a long-dead corpse. The dragon's skeleton was visible through the flaccid skin, which hung loosely over the bones. The eye sockets were empty, dark, except for a smoldering flame that gleamed bright one instant, then faded, then shone again, like dying embers being blown to life.

The phantom dragon soared in circles, floating on the breath of the dead souls. Then, suddenly, it swooped down.

Haplo crouched, instinctively, put his hands together to activate the rune-magic.

The Keeper of the Soul turned, regarded him with the large, dark eyes. "Krishach will not harm you. Only your enemies need fear him."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Krenka-Anris has heard your plea, offers her help in your need."

The phantom dragon landed on the ground near them. It was not still, but remained in constant, restless motion—wings lifting, tail thrashing. The skeletal head wrapped in its cold, dead flesh turned constantly, keeping all in view of its empty, hollow eyes.

"I'm supposed to ride... that," said Haplo.

"This could be a trick, to lure me to my death." Irida's lips were ashen, trembling. "You elves are my enemies!"

The Kenkari nodded. "Yes, you are right, Magicka. But somewhere, sometime, someone must trust enough to reach out his hand to an enemy, though he knows it means that hand could be cut off at the wrist."

The Keeper reached into the voluminous sleeves of his robes, withdrew from them a small, thin, nondescript-looking book. "When you reach Drevlin," he said, offering the book to Haplo, "give this to our brothers, the dwarves. Ask them to forgive us, if they can. We know it will not be easy. We will not be able to easily forgive ourselves."

Haplo took the book, opened it, flipped through it impatiently. It appeared to be of Sartan make, but it was written in the mensch languages. He pretended to study it. In reality, he was plotting his next move. He—

He stared at the book, looked up at the Kenkari.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Yes," the Keeper admitted. "I believe it is what the Evil Ones were searching for when they entered our library. They were looking in the wrong place, however. They assumed it must be among the works of the Sartan, guarded and protected by Sartan runes. But the Sartan wrote it for us, you see. They left it for us."

"How long have you known about it?"

"A long time," said the Keeper sadly. "To our shame, a long time."

"It could give the dwarves, the humans—anyone—tremendous power over you and your people."

"We know that, too," said the Keeper.

Haplo thrust the book into his belt. "It's not a trap, Lady Iridal. I'll explain on the way, if you'll explain a few things to me, such as how Hugh the Hand managed to get himself resurrected."

Iridal looked from the elves to the terrifying phantom to the Patryn who had taken away her son. Haplo's magical defenses had begun to fade as he fought down his own fear and repugnance. The blue glow that illuminated the sigla dimmed and died.

Smiling his quiet smile, he held out his hand to Iridal.

Slowly, hesitantly, she took it.

## CHAPTER 38

### DEEPSKY

SEVEN FIELDS, LOCATED ON THE FLOATING CONTINENT OF ULYNDIA, was the subject of legend and song—particularly song, for it was a song that had, in reality, won the famous Battle of Seven Fields for the humans. Eleven years ago, by human time, the elven prince Rees'ahn and his followers heard the song that changed their lives, brought memories of an era when the Paxar elves had built a great kingdom, founded on peace.

Agah'ran—king at the time of the Battle of Seven Fields, now self-proclaimed emperor—had termed Rees'ahn a traitor, driven his son into exile, tried several times to have him killed. The attempts failed. Rees'ahn grew stronger, as the years passed. More and more elves—either swayed by the song or swayed by their own sense of outrage at the atrocities performed in the name of the Tribus empire—gathered around the prince's standard.

The rebellion of the dwarves on Drevlin had proved "a gift of the ancestors" for the rebels, as the elves term it. Songs of thanksgiving had been offered in Prince Rees'ahn's newly built fortress on Kirikari. The emperor had been forced to split his army, fight a war on two fronts. The rebels had immediately redoubled their attacks, and now their holdings extended far beyond the borders of the Kirikari Outlands.

King Stephen and Queen Anne were glad to see the Tribus elves pushed back, but were somewhat nervous to note the rebel elves moving closer to human lands. An elf was an elf, as the saying goes, and who knew but that these sweet-tongued rebels might start singing a different tune?

King Stephen had opened negotiations with Prince Rees'ahn and had, so far, been extremely pleased with what he heard. Rees'ahn not only promised to respect human sovereignty over the lands they already possessed, but offered to open up other continents in the Mid Realm to human occupation. Rees'ahn promised to stop the practice of using human slaves to power his elven dragonships. Humans would be hired to serve on these ships that made the vital water run to Drevlin. As part of the crew, the humans would receive their fair share of the water and be permitted to sell it in the markets of Volkaran and Ulyndia.

Stephen, in turn, agreed to end his own piratical attacks on elven shipping, promised to send armies, wizards, and dragons to fight with the rebels. Together, they would bring about the downfall of the Tribus empire.

Matters had reached this stage in the negotiations when it was decided that the principals should meet face to face, hammer out the final terms and details. If a concerted push was going to be made against the imperial army, it had better come now. Cracks had been discovered in the seemingly impregnable fortress that was the Tribus empire. These cracks, so rumor had it, were spreading, widening. The defection of the Kenkari was the battering ram that would allow Rees'ahn to break down the gates and storm the Imperanon.

Human assistance was vital to the prince's plans. Only by joining together could the two races hope to defeat the strength of the imperial armies. Rees'ahn knew this; so did King Stephen and Queen Anne. They were prepared to agree to terms. Unfortunately, there were powerful factions among the humans who were

deeply mistrustful of the elves. These barons were arguing publicly against Stephen's proposed alliance, bringing up old injuries, reminding the humans of how they had suffered under elven rule.

Elves are sneaky and cunning, said the barons. This is all a trick. King Stephen's not selling us to the elves. He's giving us away!

Bane was explaining the political situation—as the child had heard it from Count Tretar—to a grimly silent and disinterested Hugh.

"The meeting between Rees'ahn and my father, the king, is an extremely critical one. Quite delicate," said Bane. "If anything—the least, little thing—should go wrong, the entire alliance would collapse."

"The king's not your father," Hugh said, the first words he'd spoken, almost since their journey had begun.

"I know that," said Bane, with his sweet smile. "But I should get used to calling him that. So I won't slip up, make a mistake. Count Tretar advised it. And I'm to cry at the funeral—not too much, or people won't think I'm brave. But a few tears will be expected of me, don't you think?"

Hugh did not answer. The boy sat in front of him, perched securely on the pommel of the dragon saddle, enjoying the excitement of the ride from the elven lands of Aristagon into the human-occupied territory of Ulyndia. Hugh could not help recalling that the last time he'd made this journey, Iridal—Bane's mother—sat in the very same place, cradled securely in his arms. It was the thought of her that kept him from snatching up Bane and tossing the boy into the open skies.

Bane must have known this, for every once in a while, the boy would twist around, twiddle the feather amulet he wore in Hugh's face.

"Mother sends her love," he would say slyly.

The one drawback to Hugh's plan was that the elves might take out their anger at him on their prisoner, on Iridal. Though now the Kenkari knew she was alive—at least Hugh hoped they knew—perhaps they could save her.

He had the dog to thank for that.

The moment they'd come within sight and smell of the dragon, the dog, yelping wildly, took one look at the beast, tucked its tail between its legs, and fled.

Count Tretar suggested letting the dog go, but Bane had thrown a red-in-the-face, feet-kicking tantrum, screamed he wouldn't go anywhere without the dog. Tretar sent his men in pursuit.

The Hand had taken advantage of the diversion to whisper a few words to Tretar's ever-present weesham. If the weesham was more loyal to the Kenkari than to the count, the Kenkari now knew that Iridal had been taken prisoner.

The weesham had said nothing, but the man had given Hugh a significant look that seemed to promise he would carry the message to his masters.

It had taken some time for the elves to capture the dog. Muzzling it, they had been forced to wrap its head up in a cloak before they could wrestle it onto the dragon, lash it securely onto the back of the saddle among the packs and bundles.

The dog spent the first half of the flight howling dismally, then—exhausted—it had fallen asleep, for which Hugh was devoutly grateful.

"What's that down there?" Bane asked excitedly, pointing to a land mass floating in the clouds below.

"Ulyndia," said Hugh.

"We're almost there?"

"Yes, Your Highness"—spoken with a sneer—"we're almost there."

"Hugh," said Bane, after a moment of intense thought, to judge by his expression, "when you've done this job for me, when I'm king, I want to hire you to do another."

"I'm flattered, Your Highness," said Hugh. "Who else do you want me to assassinate? How about the elven emperor? Then you'd rule the world."

Bane blithely ignored the sarcasm. "I want to hire you to kill Haplo."

Hugh grunted. "He's probably already dead. The elves must've killed him by now."

"No, I doubt it. The elves couldn't kill him. Haplo's too clever for them. But I think you could. Especially if I told you all his secret powers. Will you, Hugh? I'll pay you well." Bane turned, looked at him directly. "Will you kill Haplo?"

A chill hand twisted Hugh's gut. He'd been hired by all manner of men, to kill all manner of men, for all manner of reasons. But he'd never seen such malevolence, such bitter, jealous hatred in any man's eyes as he now saw in the child's beautiful blue ones.

Hugh couldn't, for a moment, respond.

"There's just one thing you must do," Bane continued, his gaze straying to the slumbering dog. "You must tell Haplo, when he's dying, that Xar is the one who wants him dead. Will you remember that name? Xar is the one who says that Haplo must die."

"Sure," said Hugh, shrugging. "Anything for the customer."

"You'll take the contract, then?" Bane brightened.

"Yeah, I'll take it," Hugh agreed. He'd agree to anything to shut the kid up.

Hugh sent the dragon into a descending spiral, flying slowly, taking his time, allowing himself to be seen by the pickets he knew would be posted.

"There're more dragons coming," Bane announced, peering ahead through the clouds.

Hugh said nothing.

Bane watched for a while, then he turned, frowning, to look suspiciously at the assassin. "They're flying this way. Who are they?"

"Outriders. His Majesty's guard. They'll stop us, question us. You remember what you're supposed to do, don't you? Keep that hood over your head. Some of these soldiers might recognize you."

"Oh, yes," said Bane. "I know."

At least, thought Hugh, I don't have to worry about the kid giving us away. Deceit's his birthright.

Far below, Hugh could see the shoreline of Ulyndia, the plains known as Seven Fields. Usually empty and desolate, the vast expanse of coralite was alive with the movement of men and beasts. Neat rows of small tents formed lines across the fields—the elven army on one side, the human army on the other.

Two large, brightly colored tents stood in the center. One flew the elven flag of Prince Rees'ahn—bearing the emblem of a raven, a lily, and a lark rising, in honor of the human woman, Ravenslark, who had wrought the miracle of song among the elves. The other tent flew King Stephen's flag—the Winged Eye. Hugh marked this tent, noted the deployment of troops around it, calculated his best way in.

He wouldn't have to worry about a way out.

Elven dragonships floated at anchor off the coastline. The humans' dragons were penned further inland, upwind of the elven ships, which used the skins and scales of dead dragons in their making. A live dragon, catching a whiff, would become so enraged that it might overthrow its enchantment, create a damnable row.

The King's Own, Stephen's personal guard, was flying picket detail. Two of the giant battle dragons, each with its own contingent of troops riding on its back, were keeping watch over the ground. The smaller, swift-flying, two-man dragons scanned the skies. It was two of these that had spotted Hugh, were bearing down on him.

Hugh checked his dragon's descent, commanded it to hover in the air, wings barely moving, drifting up and down on the thermals rising from the land beneath it. The dog, waking up, lifted its head and started howling.

Though Hugh's action in drawing up his mount was a sign of peaceful intent, the King's Own was taking no chances. The two soldiers on the lead dragon had bows out, arrows nocked and aimed—one at Hugh, one at the dragon. The soldier riding the second dragon approached only when he was certain that the other guards had Hugh well covered. But Hugh noted a smile cross the man's stern face when he saw—and heard—the dog.

Hugh hunkered down, touched his hand to his forehead in a show of humble respect.

"What is your business?" the soldier demanded. "What do you want?"

"I am a simple peddler, Your Generalship." Hugh shouted to be heard over the dog's howling and the flap of dragon wings. He gestured to the bundles behind him. "My son and I have come to bring wondrous things of much value to Your Generalship's most illustrious and courageous soldiers."

"You've come to fleece them out of their pay with your shoddy merchandise, is what you mean to say."

Hugh was indignant. "No, General, sir, I assure you. My merchandise is of the finest—pots and pans to be used for cooking, trinkets to brighten the pretty eyes of those who wept when you left."

"Take your pots and pans, your son, your dog, and your glib tongue elsewhere, peddler. This is not a market. And I am not a general," the soldier added.

"I know this is not a market," said Hugh meekly. "And if you are not a general it is only because those of authority do not esteem you properly, as they should. But I see the tents of many of my comrades already set up down below. Surely King Stephen would not begrudge an honest man such as myself, with a small son to support and twelve more like him at home, to say nothing of two daughters, the chance to earn an honest living."

The King's Own might have doubted the existence of the twelve sons and two daughters, but he knew he'd lost this round. He'd known it before he started. The news of the peaceful meeting of two armies on the plains of Seven Fields was like the sweet smell of rotting pua fruit—it had drawn every conceivable sort of fly. Whores, gamblers, peddlers, weapons makers, water vendors—all flew to suck up their share. The king

could either attempt to drive them away, which would mean bloodshed and bitter feelings among the populace, or he could put up with them, keep an eye on them.

"Very well," said the soldier, waving his hand. "You can land. Report to the overseer's tent with a sample of your wares and twenty barls for your seller's license."

"Twenty barls! An outrage," growled Hugh.

"What did you say, peddler?"

"I said I am most appreciative of your great kindness, General. My son adds his respects. Add your respects to the great general, my son."

Bane, blushing prettily, bowed his head, brought his small hands to his face, as was proper for a peasant child in the presence of illustrious nobility. The soldier was charmed. Waving off the bowmen, he steered his dragon away, went off in pursuit of still another rider, who looked to be a tinker, just approaching.

Hugh released the dragon from its hovering position. They began to descend.

"We did it!" cried Bane gleefully, yanking off his hood.

"There was never much doubt," Hugh muttered. "And put that back on. From now on, you wear it until I tell you to take it off. All we need is for someone to recognize you before we're ready to move."

Bane glowered at him, rebellious blue eyes cold. But the boy was intelligent, he knew what Hugh said made sense. Sullenly, he drew the hood of his shabby cloak up over his head and face. Turning his back, he sat stiff and rigid, chin on his hands, watching the panorama spread out below.

"Probably sitting there imagining all the ways he'll have me tortured," Hugh said to himself. "Well, Your Highness, my last pleasure in this life will be in disappointing you."

He was granted another pleasure, too. The dog had howled itself hoarse and could now only utter a pathetic croak.

Far below the Mid Realm, flying on a different track, the phantom dragon sped swiftly toward its destination—almost too swiftly for the comfort of its passengers. Since neither was concerned with comfort, only with speed, Haplo and Iridal bowed their heads before the wind that whistled shrilly past them, held on tightly to the dragon and to each other, and fought to see for the wind-induced tears that blinded their eyes.

Krishach needed no guidance, or perhaps it obtained its guidance from the minds of its passengers. There was no saddle, no reins. Once the two had reluctantly and cringingly mounted, the phantom dragon leapt into the air and soared through the crystal walls of the Aviary. The walls had not parted, but had melted into a glistening curtain of water, allowing them to pass through with ease. Haplo, looking back, saw the crystal harden again behind them, as if touched by an icy breath.

Krishach flew over the Imperanon. Elven soldiers stared up at them in astonishment and terror, but before any could raise his bow, the phantom dragon had swept past, soared into the open skies.

Haplo and Iridal, leaning close together to be heard, discussed their destination. Iridal wanted to fly immediately to Seven Fields.

Haplo intended to fly to the dragonship.

"The dwarfs' life is in the most immediate danger. Hugh plans to kill the king tonight. You'll have time to set me down on Sang-drax's ship, then you can fly to Seven Fields. Besides, I don't want to be left by myself with this demon beast."

"I don't think either of us will be left with it," Iridal said, with a shudder. It took all her nerve and resolve to hold onto the folds of chill, dead flesh, to withstand the dread cold, so horribly different from the warmth of living dragons. "When we no longer need him, Krishach will be more than eager to return to his rest."

Iridal was silent a moment, then looked back at Haplo. Her eyes were softer, sadder. "If I find Bane and take him with me to the High Realms, will you come after him?"

"No," said Haplo quietly. "I don't need him any longer."

"Why not?"

"The book the Kenkari gave me."

"What's in it?" she asked.

Haplo told her.

Iridal listened, first amazed, then perplexed, then disbelieving. "They've known, all this time... and done nothing. Why? How could they?"

"Like they said—hate, fear."

Iridal was thoughtful, eyes on the empty sky around them. "And that lord of yours. What will he do, when he comes to Arianus? He will come, won't he? Will he want Bane back?"

"I don't know," said Haplo shortly, not liking to think about it. "I don't know what my lord intends. He doesn't tell me his plans. He expects me to obey his orders."

Iridal looked back at him. "But you're not, are you?"

No, I'm not, Haplo admitted, but he admitted it only to himself, saw no reason to discuss it with a mensch. Xar will understand. He'll have to understand.

"My turn to ask questions," Haplo said, changing the subject. "Hugh the Hand looked extremely dead when I saw him last. How'd he manage to come back to life? You mysteriarchs find a way?"

"You know better than that. We are only 'mensch.'" Iridal smiled faintly. "It was Alfred."

I thought as much, Haplo said to himself. Alfred brought the assassin back from the dead. This from the Sartan who swore he would never be caught dead practicing the black art of necromancy. "Did he tell you why he resurrected Hugh?" he asked aloud.

"No, but I'm certain it was because of me." Iridal sighed, shook her head. "Alfred refused to speak of it. He denied he'd done it, in fact."

"Yeah, I can imagine. He's good at denial. 'For every person brought back to life, another dies untimely.' That's what the Sartan believe. And Hugh's restored life means King Stephen's untimely death, unless you can reach him and stop him, stop your son."

"I will," said Iridal. "I have hope now."

They fell silent, the strain of shouting over the noise of the wind was too exhausting. The dragon had flown out of sight of land. Haplo soon lost any point of reference. All he could see was empty blue sky—above them, below, around them. A cloudy haze obscured the sparkle of the Firmament, and they were yet too far away to sight the swirling gray-black clouds of the Maelstrom.

Iridal was absorbed in her own thoughts, her plans and hopes for her son. Haplo remained alert, scanning the skies, keeping constant watch. He was the first to see the black speck beneath them. He focused on it, noted that Krishach turned its empty eye sockets that direction.

"I think we've found them," he said, at last able to make out the curved head, broad wingspan of a dragonship.

Iridal looked down. The phantom dragon's speed had slowed; Krishach began descending in large and lazy spirals.

"Yes, that's a dragonship," Iridal agreed, studying it. "But how will you know if it's the right one or not?"

"I'll know," said Haplo grimly, with a glance at the sigla tattooed on his skin. "Can they see us, do you think?"

"I doubt it. Even if they did, we would appear, from this distance, to be riding an ordinary dragon. And a ship that size wouldn't be alarmed by a single dragon."

The dragonship didn't appear to be alarmed, nor did it look to be in any hurry. It was traveling at a leisurely pace, the broad wings catching and riding the strengthening air currents. Far below, the darkening of the sky presaged the Maelstrom.

He could make out details of the dragonship—see the carving on the head, the painted wings. Tiny figures moved on the deck. And there was an insignia on the ship's hull.

"The imperial crest," Iridal said. "I think this is the ship you seek."

Haplo's skin had begun to itch and burn. The sigla were starting to glow a faint, soft blue.

"It is," he said.

Iridal, hearing the conviction in his voice, glanced at him, wondering how he could be so certain. Her eyes widened at the sight of his glowing skin, but she said nothing, turned back to watch the dragonship.

Surely they must see us now, Haplo thought. And if I know Sang-drax is down there, then he knows I'm up here.

It might have been Haplo's imagination, but he could almost swear he saw the brightly dressed form of the serpent-elf, standing below, staring up at him. Haplo thought he could hear faint screams, too; cries of someone in terrible pain.

"How close can we get?" Haplo asked.

"Flying an ordinary dragon—not very," Iridal answered. "The wind currents would be too dangerous, to say nothing of the fact that they will soon start firing arrows and perhaps magic at us. But with Krishach...?" She shrugged helplessly. "I doubt if either wind currents, arrows, or magic will have much effect on Krishach."

"Take me as close as possible then," said Haplo. "I'll jump for it."

Iridal nodded, though it was the phantom dragon who responded. Haplo was near enough now that he could see elves pointing upward, some racing to grab weapons or alter course. One elf stood alone, unmoving in the middle of the turmoil. Haplo's skin shone a bright blue, streaked with red.

"It was this evil I sense that made the Kenkari give up the book, wasn't it?" said Iridal suddenly, shuddering. "This is what they encountered in the dungeons."

Krishach was clearly visible to the elves by now. They must have seen that they were not facing an ordinary, living dragon. Many began to cry out in terror. Those who held bows dropped them. Several broke ranks and ran for the hatches.

"But what is this evil?" Iridal cried above the rushing wind, the flap of the dragonship's sails, the horrified shouts of the crew. "What do I see?"

"What we all must see, eventually, if we have the courage to look into the darkness," answered Haplo, tense, ready to jump. "Ourselves."

## CHAPTER 39

### DEEPSKY ARIANUS

THE PHANTOM DRAGON SWOOPED CLOSE TO THE ELVEN VESSEL, FAR too close. Krishach's wing clipped one of the guide ropes attached to the sails. The rope snapped, the starboard wing sagged like the broken wing of an injured bird. The elves, stricken with terror at the sight of the monstrous apparition, ran before it. Krishach appeared to be about to smash headlong into the frail ship. Haplo, balancing precariously on the dragon's back, made a convulsive leap for the deck.

His magic cushioned his fall. He hit, rolled, and was on his feet, dreading to hear the crack of the main mast, see the phantom dragon destroy the ship. He ducked involuntarily as the huge, corpse-white belly passed overhead. A chill blast of air, stirred by the pale wings, billowed the remaining sail, sent the ship into a perilous descent. Staring upward, Haplo saw the awful flames burning in the dead skull and, above that, Iridal's terrified face. Krishach, with a hollow roar, swooped overhead.

"Fly on!" Haplo shouted to Iridal. "Go! Quickly."

He didn't see Sang-drax; the serpent-elf had probably gone below decks, to Jarre.

Iridal seemed reluctant to leave him; Krishach hovered in the air near the crippled vessel. But Haplo was in no immediate danger—the elves on deck had either fled below decks or, driven mad with fear, leapt overboard.

Haplo shouted to Iridal, waved his arm. "There's nothing more you can do here! Go find Bane!"

Iridal raised her hand in farewell, turned her face upward. Krishach flapped his wings, and the phantom dragon soared swiftly away to his next destination.

Haplo glanced about. The few elves remaining on the top deck were paralyzed with fear, their minds and bodies numb with shock. The Patryn's flesh glowed, he had arrived on the wings of the dead. Haplo surged across the deck, grabbed one by the throat.

"Where's the dwarf? Where's Sang-drax?"

The elf's eyes rolled, he went limp in Haplo's grip. But the Patryn could hear, below decks, the dwarfs high-pitched, pain-filled screams. Flinging aside the useless mensch, Haplo dashed over to one of the hatch covers, tried to pull it open.

The cover was shut tight, probably being held from below by the panicked crew. Someone down there was shouting orders. Haplo listened, wondering if it was Sang-drax. But he didn't recognize the voice, decided it must be the captain or one of his officers, attempting to restore order.

Haplo kicked at the hatch. He could use his magic to blow it open, but then he'd be faced with fighting his way through a mass of desperate mensch who, by this time, were probably nerving themselves up to do

battle. And he didn't have time to fight. He could no longer hear Jarre's cries. And where was Sang-drax? Lying in wait, in ambush...

Swearing beneath his breath, Haplo looked around for another way below decks. He was familiar with dragonships, having flown one to the other worlds he'd visited. The ship was beginning to list, the weight of its broken wing dragging it down. Only the magic of the ship's wizard was keeping it afloat.

A gust of wind hit the vessel, sent it lurching. A shudder ran through the ship. It had fallen too close to the Maelstrom, was caught in the stormy coils. The captain must have realized what was happening; his shouts turned to bellows.

"Get those slaves back to work on the port side. Use the lash, if you have to! What do you mean, they've bolted the door to the cable room? Somebody find the ship's wizard. Break down the damn door. The rest of you, get back to your stations or by the ancestors you'll be posted to duty on Drev-li! Where the devil is that blasted wizard?"

The port-side wing had ceased to move, the cable controlling it had gone slack. Maybe the galley slaves were too fear-crazed to perform their tasks. They could, after all, have seen the phantom from out the hawse-hole, located in the hull through which the cable passed.

The hawse-hole...

Haplo ran to the port side, peered over the edge. The Maelstrom was still far below, though much closer than when he'd first boarded the ship. He climbed over the railing, scrambled, slipped, and slid the rest of the way down the side of the hull, catching himself on the cable that guided the port wing.

Clinging to the thick rope, he wrapped his legs around it and crawled forward toward the hawse-hole that gaped in the ship's side. Startled faces—human faces—stared out at him. Haplo kept his gaze fixed on them, not on the drop beneath him. He doubted if even his magic would save him from a fall into the Maelstrom.

Walk the dragon's wing, Hugh the Hand had termed this maneuver, a term that had become synonymous in Arianus with any daring, dangerous feat.

"What is he?" demanded a voice.

"Dunno. Human, from the looks of 'im."

"With blue skin?"

"All I know is he don't have slanty eyes and pointy ears and that makes 'im good enough for me," said a human, in the firm tones of an acknowledged leader. "Some of you men, give him a hand."

Haplo reached the hawse-hole, grasped hold of the strong arms that caught him, pulled him inside. Now he could see why the port-side wing had ceased to function. The human galley slaves had taken advantage of the confusion to slip their bonds, overwhelm their guards. They were armed with swords and knives. One was holding a dagger to the throat of a young elf, dressed in wizard's garb.

"Who are you? Where'd you come from? You was riding the back of that fiend..." The humans gathered around him, suspicious, frightened, half-threatening.

"I'm a mysteriarch," said Haplo.

Fear changed to awe, then hope. "You've come to save us?" said one, lowering his sword.

"Yeah, sure," said Haplo. "And I'm here to save a friend of mine—a dwarf. Will you help me?"

"Dwarf?" The suspicion returned. The man who was their leader shoved his way forward through the pack. He was older than the rest, tall and muscular, with the huge shoulders and biceps of those who spend their lives in harness, working the giant wings of the dragon-ships.

"What's a damn dwarf to us?" he demanded, facing Haplo. "And what the hell is a mysteriarch doing here?"

Great. All Haplo needed now was mensch logic. Blows were thundering against the door. Wood splintered. The head of an ax sliced through, was jerked free, cracked through again.

"What's your plan?" Haplo retorted. "What do you intend to do now that you've seized control?" The answer was one he might have expected. "Kill elves."

"Yeah. And while you're doing that, the ship's being sucked into the Maelstrom."

The vessel shuddered, the deck listed precariously. The humans slid and fell, tumbling into the walls and each other. "Can you fly it?" Haplo shouted, grabbing hold of an overhead beam for support.

The humans looked doubtfully at each other. Their leader's expression grew dark, grim.

"So we die. We'll send their souls to their precious emperor first."

Sang-drax. This was Sang-drax's doing. Haplo had a good idea now how the humans had managed to come by their weapons. Chaos, discord, violent death—meat and drink to the serpent-elf.

Unfortunately, now was not the time for Haplo to try to explain to the humans that they'd been duped by a player in a cosmic game, nor could he very well launch into an exhortation to love those who had inflicted the raw and bleeding lash marks he could see on their backs.

It's too late! Sang-drax's mocking voice whispered in Haplo's brain. It's too late, Patryn. The dwarf is dead; I killed her. Now the humans will kill the elves, the elves will slay the humans. And the doomed ship hurtles downward, carrying them all to destruction. So it will be with their world, Patryn. So it will be with yours.

"Face me, Sang-drax!" Haplo cried in anger, clenching his fists. "Fight me, damn it!"

You are no different from these mensch, are you, Patryn? I grow fat on your fear. We will meet—you and I—but in my time.

The voice was gone. Sang-drax was gone. Haplo felt the itch and burn of the runes on his skin start to ease. And there was nothing he could do. He was helpless, as the serpent-elf had said.

The door gave way, burst open. Elves charged inside. The humans jumped to meet them. The man holding the ship's wizard hostage started to draw his knife across the young elf's throat.

"I lied!" Haplo snarled, grabbing hold of the first mensch that came within his grasp. "I'm not a mysteriarch!"

Blue and red sigla from the Patryn's arm flared, enveloped the human's body in dancing runes. The sigla flashed around the terrified man like a whirlwind and, with the speed of lightning, arced from him to the elf he was battling. The jolt sizzled from that elf to a human fighting behind him. Faster than any of them could let go an indrawn breath, the runes jolted through the bodies of every elf and human inside the cable room, sped from there throughout the ship.

There was sudden, frozen silence.

"I'm a god," Haplo announced grimly.

The spell held the mensch immobile, muscles locked in place, movement suspended, killing strokes arrested, blows halted. The knife drew blood from the wizard's cut skin, but the hand that held the blade could not stab it home. Only the eyes of each man remained free to move.

At the sound of Haplo's pronouncement, the eyes of the mensch shifted in their frozen heads, stared at him in mute and helpless fear.

"Don't go anywhere until I get back," he told them, and walked around the unmoving bodies, which glowed with a faint, blue light.

He stalked through the shattered door. Everywhere he went, throughout the ship, the awed eyes of the spelt-enthralled mensch followed him.

A god? Well, why not. Limbeck had mistaken Haplo for a god when they'd first met.

The god who wasn't, Limbeck had called him. How appropriate.

Haplo hurried through the eerily quiet ship, which was canting and rocking and shivering as if in terror itself of the black clouds swirling beneath it. He shoved open doors, kicked in doors, peered into rooms, until he found what he was searching for. Jarre, lying in a crumpled, bloody heap on the blood-soaked deck.

"Jarre. Jarre," he whispered, coming to stand by the dwarf. "Don't do this to me." Gently, carefully, he turned her face up. Her face was battered, bruised, her eyes swollen shut. But he noticed, when he examined her, that her lashes fluttered slightly. Her skin was warm.

Haplo couldn't find a pulse, but, laying his head on her chest, he heard the faint beating of her heart. Sangdrax had lied. She wasn't dead.

"Good girl," he said to her softly, gathering her up in his arms. "Just hang on a little longer."

He couldn't help her now. He couldn't expend the energy needed to heal her and maintain his hold over the mensch on this ship at the same time. He would have to transport her somewhere quiet, somewhere safe.

Haplo emerged from the room, carrying the unconscious, tormented body of the dwarf in his arms. He made his way slowly through the ship. The eyes stared at him, shifted to the pitiful sight of the tortured dwarf maid.

"You heard her screams?" Haplo asked the mensch. "What'd you do, laugh? Can you still hear them? Good. I hope you hear them a long, long time. Not that you've got much time. Your ship is falling into the Maelstrom.

"And what will you do about it, Captain?" he asked the elf who was frozen in midstride, caught dashing off the bridge. "Kill the humans who are the only ones who can work the wings? Yeah, that sounds like a sensible idea to me.

"And you fools," he said to the humans, immobile in the port cable room. "Go ahead, murder the elf wizard, whose magic is the only thing keeping you afloat."

Holding Jarre in his arms, the Patryn began to chant the runes. The spell reversed, the blue glow surrounding the mensch slid off them like water. Flowing through the ship, the magic began to gather around Haplo. The fiery runes formed a circle of flame that encompassed him and the dying dwarf. The flames were blinding, forced the mensch standing near to back away, squint their eyes against the radiant light. "I'm leaving," he told them. "Feel free to take up where you left off."

## CHAPTER 40

### SEVEN FIELDS

## MID REALM

THE LORDS OF NIGHT SPREAD THEIR CLOAKS, THE SPARKLE OF THE firmament dimmed and died. The soft, shimmering glow of the coralite was lost in the brighter light of hundreds of campfires. Smoke rose, filling the air with a haze that had in it the scents of stews and roasting meat, carried the sounds of laughter and shouting and snatches of song. It was an historic occasion, a night of celebration.

Prince Rees'ahn and King Stephen had just this day announced agreement on the terms of the alliance. Each had expressed heartfelt satisfaction in forging a bond between two races who had, for centuries, been grappling for each other's throats.

There remained now only the formalities—the drawing up of the documents (clerks were working feverishly by the light of glowlamps) and the signing of the documents to make all legal and official. The signing ceremony was to take place one cycle after next, when both sides had taken time to read the documents and King Stephen and Queen Anne had presented them to the barons for consideration.

Their Majesties had no doubt that the barons would vote in favor of signing, though a few malcontents might agree grudgingly, with grumbling and black looks of distrust at the elven side of the camp. Each baron felt the iron grip of either King Stephen or Queen Anne at his throat. Each baron had only to look outside his tent to see the King's Own—strong and powerful and unfailingly loyal—to imagine that very army flying over his barony.

The barons would make no protest aloud but, that night, while the majority celebrated, a few skulked in their tents and muttered to themselves of what would happen should that iron grip ever go slack.

Stephen and Anne knew the names of the dissidents; they had been brought here on purpose. King and queen meant to force the recalcitrant barons to state their "ayes" in public, in full view of their own personal guard and in full view of each other. Their Majesties were aware—or soon would be—of the whisperings going on in camp that night, for the wizard Trian was not present among those celebrating in the royal tent. Had the rebellious barons peered closely into the shadows of their own tents, they would have received a nasty shock.

The King's Own did not relax their vigilance either, though Stephen and Anne had bid their soldiers drink their health and provided wine for the occasion. Those on duty—standing guard around the royal tent—could only look forward to the pleasure.

But those off duty were glad to obey Their Majesties' command. The camp was, therefore, a merry one, with much joyful confusion. Soldiers gathered around the fires, boasting of exploits, exchanging tales of heroism. The vendors were doing a brisk business.

"Jewels, elven jewels, from Aristagon itself," called Hugh the Hand, moving from campfire to campfire.

"You there! Over here!" cried a boisterous voice.

Hugh obeyed, stepped into the firelight.

The soldiers, wine cups in hand, left off their bragging and gathered around the peddler.

"Let's see what you've got."

"Certainly, most honored sirs," said Hugh with a flourishing bow, "Boy, show them."

The peddler's son stepped into the firelight, exhibiting a large tray he held in his hands. The child's face was grimy with dirt and partially obscured by an overlarge hood that hung down over his forehead. The soldiers

didn't so much as glance at the boy; what interest did they have in a peddler's son? Their gaze was fixed on the brilliant, glittering baubles.

The dog sat down, scratched and yawned and looked hungrily at a string of sizzling sausages, roasting over a fire.

Hugh played his role well; he'd acted this part before, and he haggled over prices with an ardor and skill that would have made him a fortune had he been a true dealer. As he argued, his gaze darted about the camp, judging his distance from the royal tent, deciding where he would move next.

Hugh closed the deal, dispensed the jewels, pocketed the barls, was loud in his laments that he'd been outbargained.

"Come along, my son," he said grumpily, laying a hand on Bane's shoulder.

The child snapped the box shut and obediently traipsed after. The dog, after one final, wistful glance at the sausages, followed.

The royal tent stood in the center of the camp, in the middle of a large open area. A wide swath of coralite separated it from the tents of the King's Own. The royal tent was large, square-shaped, with a canopy extending out in front. Four guards were posted round the tent itself—one at each corner. Two guards, under the command of a sergeant, stood at the front entrance. And, as luck would have it, the captain of the guard was there also, discussing the day's events with the sergeant in a low voice.

"Come here, boy. Let me see what we've left," Hugh said gruffly for the benefit of any who might have been listening. He chose a shadowed spot, outside of the direct light of any of the camp fires, directly opposite the royal tent's entrance.

Bane opened the box. Hugh bent over it, muttering to himself. He looked intently at Bane, at the child's face that was a white glimmer in the light of the campfires. Hugh searched for any sign of weakness, fear, nervousness.

The assassin might, he realized, with a sudden shock, have been looking in a mirror.

The boy's blue eyes were cold, hard, bright with purpose, empty of expression and feeling, though he was about to witness the brutal murder of two people who had been mother and father to him for ten years. Raising his gaze to Hugh's, the child's sweet lips curved, smiled.

"What do we do now?" he asked, in a breathless whisper of excitement.

It took Hugh a moment to find the words to answer. The feather amulet hanging around the boy's neck was all that prevented the assassin from carrying out the contract he'd made so long ago. For Iridal's sake, her son would live.

"Is the king in the tent?"

"Anne and Stephen are both in there. I know. The royal bodyguard wouldn't be posted outside if the king and queen weren't inside. The bodyguard always goes where the king goes."

"Look at the guards standing in front of the royal tent," said Hugh harshly. "Do you know any of them?"

Bane's gaze shifted, eyes narrowed. "Yes," he said after a moment. "I know that one man—the captain. I think I know the sergeant, too."

"Would either of them know you?"

"Oh, yes. Both were in and out of the palace a lot. The captain made me a toy spear once."

Hugh felt the lightness of things, experienced the exhilarating warmth and strange calmness that sometimes came over him when he knew with absolute certainty that fate was working with him, that nothing could go wrong, not now.

Not ever.

"Good," he said. "Perfect. Hold still."

Taking the child's head in his hand, Hugh tilted the face to the light and began to scrub off the dirt and grime he'd smeared over it as a disguise. Hugh wasn't gentle; there wasn't time. Bane winced, but kept quiet.

Work complete, Hugh studied the face—the cheeks pink with the rubbing and excitement, the golden curls falling in a rumpled mass over the forehead.

"Now they should know you." Hugh grunted. "You remember what you're supposed to say, what you're supposed to do."

"Of course! We've been over it twenty times already. Just you do your part," Bane added, with a cold and hostile stare, "and I'll do mine."

"Oh, I'll do my part, Your Highness," Hugh the Hand said softly. "Let's get going, before that captain of yours decides to leave."

He started forward and almost fell over the dog, who had taken advantage of the lull in the action to flop down and rest. The animal leapt back with a muffled yelp. Hugh had stepped on its paw.

"Drat the beast! Shut up!" Hugh told it, glowering. "Tell the damn dog to stay here."

"I won't," cried Bane petulantly, catching hold of the ruff around the dog's neck and hugging it. The dog was exhibiting its hurt paw with a woeful air. "He's mine now. He'll protect me, if I need him. You never know. Something might happen to you, and then I'd be all alone."

Hugh eyed the boy. Bane stared back.

It wasn't worth the argument.

"Come on then," the Hand said, and they started for the royal tent.

Hurt forgotten, the dog trotted along behind.

Inside the tent, Stephen and Anne were taking advantage of the few moments of privacy permitted them on this journey, as they both prepared for a well-earned night's rest. They had just returned from dining with Prince Rees'ahn in the elven camp.

"A remarkable man, Rees'ahn," said Stephen, starting to remove the armor he'd worn for both security and ceremony.

He raised his arms, permitting his wife to unfasten the leather straps that held on the breastplate. Ordinarily, in a military encampment, the king's manservant would have performed the task, but all attendants had been dismissed this night, as they were every night when Stephen and Anne traveled together.

Rumor had it that the servants were dismissed so that the king and queen could battle in private. On more than one occasion, Anne had stormed out of the tent, and many nights, Stephen had done the same. All for

show, a show that was about to end. Any disgruntled barons hoping for discord on this night would be sadly disappointed.

Anne unfastened the buckles and untied the ties with expert swiftness, helped Stephen ease the heavy breastplate from his chest and back. The queen came from a clan that had won its fortunes by beating its rivals into submission. She had ridden on her share of campaigns, spent many nights in tents not nearly as fine or comfortable as this one. That had been in her youth, however, before her marriage. She was enjoying this outing immensely, the only drawback being the fact that she'd had to leave her precious baby behind, under the care of the nurse.

"You're right about Rees'ahn, my dear. Not many men—human or elven—would have fought on—against the odds he faced," said Anne. She stood with his night robes in her arms, waiting for him to complete his undressing. "Hunted like an animal, half starving, friends turning traitor, his own father sending assassins to murder him. Look, my dear, here's a link broken. You must have it mended."

Stephen lifted the chain mail from his shoulders, tossed it carelessly into a corner of the tent. Turning, he accepted her assistance in dressing for the night (it was not true, again as rumor had it, that the king slept in his armor!). Then he took his wife in his arms.

"But you didn't even look at it," Anne protested, glancing at the chain mail that lay draped on the floor.

"I will in the morning," he said, regarding her with a playful smile. "Or perhaps not. Who knows? I may not put it on. I may not put it on tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that. Perhaps I shall take the armor and toss it off the edge of Ulyndia. We stand on the brink of peace, my dearest wife. My queen."

Reaching out his hand, he loosened her long coil of hair, fluffed it to fall around her shoulders. "What would you say to a world where no man or woman would ever again wear the accoutrements of war?"

"I would not believe it," she said, shaking her head with a sigh. "Ah, my husband, we are a long way from such a world, even now. Agah'ran may be weakened, desperate, as Rees'ahn assures us. But the elven emperor is cunning and surrounded by loyal fanatics. The battle against the Tribus empire will be long and bloody. And the factions among our own people—"

"Nay, not tonight!" Stephen stopped her words with his lips. "Not tonight. Tonight we will speak only of peace, of a world we may not live to see, but one which we will bequeath our daughter."

"Yes, I'd like that," said Anne, resting her head on her husband's broad chest. "She will not be forced to wear chain mail under her wedding dress."

Stephen threw back his head and laughed. "What a shock! I will never get over it. I embraced my bride and thought I was hugging one of my own sergeants! How long was it before you left off sleeping with a dagger beneath your pillow?"

"About as long as you had a taster sample any food I cooked before you ate it," Anne said briskly.

"Our lovemaking had a strange excitement. I was never quite certain I'd live through it."

"Do you know when I first knew I loved you?" Anne said, suddenly serious. "It was the morning our baby, our little boy, disappeared. We woke to find the changeling in his place."

"Hush, don't speak of such things," said Stephen, holding his wife fast. "No words of ill omen. All that is past, gone."

"No, it isn't. We've heard no word..."

"How can we expect to? From elven lands? To ease your mind, I will have Trian make discreet inquiries."

"Yes, please." Anne looked relieved. "And now, Your Majesty, if you will let loose of me, I will brew mulled wine, to keep off the chill."

"Forget the wine," Stephen murmured, nuzzling her neck. "We will relive our wedding night."

"With the soldiers standing right outside?" Anne was scandalized.

"That didn't bother us then, my dear."

"Nor did the fact that you brought the tent down on top of us and my uncle thought you'd murdered me and nearly ran you through with his sword before I stopped him. We're a staid old married couple now. Have your wine and go to bed."

Stephen, laughing, let her go, watched her fondly as she stirred the spices into the warm wine. He came over, sat beside her, lifted a lock of her long hair and kissed it.

"I wager I could still bring the tent down," he said, teasing.

"I know you could," she replied, handing him his wine, looking at him with a smile.

## CHAPTER 41

### SEVEN FIELDS

#### MID REALM

"HALT!" CRIED THE KING'S OWN, BRINGING THEIR SPEARS UP, HOLDING them in front of two muffled and heavily cloaked strangers—one tall and one short—who had approached too near the ring of steel that surrounded Their Majesties. "Turn aside. You have no business here."

"Yes, I do," a shrill voice cried. Bane dragged off the hood that covered his head, stepped into the light of the sentry fires. "Captain Miklovich! It's me! The prince. I've come back! Don't you recognize me?"

The child poked his head beneath the crossed spears. The captain, at the sound of the voice, turned in frowning astonishment. Both he and the sergeant peered into the night. The firelight reflected off steel swords, spear points, and polished armor, cast strange shadows that made it difficult to see. Two guards started to lay their hands on the squirming child, but—at Bane's words—they hesitated, looked at each other, then glanced back over their shoulders at their captain.

Miklovich came forward, his expression hard and disbelieving. "I don't know what your game is, urchin, but you..." The rest of the words vanished in a whistling breath of astonishment.

"I'll be damned," the captain said, studying the child intently. "Could it—? Come closer, boy. Let me get a look at you in the light. Guards, let him pass."

Bane caught hold of Hugh's hand, started to drag the man along with him. The guards brought their spears up, blocking the way. No one was watching the dog, who slipped between the soldiers' legs, stood watching everyone with tongue-lolling interest.

"This man saved my life!" Bane cried. "He found me. I was lost, near starving to death. He took care of me, even though he didn't believe I was really the prince."

"Is it true, Your Worship?" asked Hugh, with the groveling manner and the thick accent of some uneducated peasant. "Forgive me if I did not believe him. I thought he was mad. The village wisewoman said the only way to cure the madness was to bring him here and make him see—"

"But I'm not mad! I am the prince!" Bane glittered with excitement, with beauty and charm. The golden curls glistened, the blue eyes sparkled. The lost child had returned home. "Tell him, Captain Miklovich. Tell him who I am. I promised I'd reward him. He's been very kind to me."

"By the ancestors!" the captain breathed, staring at Bane. "It is His Highness!"

"It is?" Hugh gaped in befuddled wonder. Snatching off his cap, he began to twist it in his hands, all the while edging his way inside the steel ring. "I didn't know, Your Worship. Forgive me. I truly thought the boy was mad."

"Forgive you!" the captain repeated, grinning. "You've just made your fortune. You'll be the richest peasant in Volkaran."

"What is going on out there?" King Stephen's voice sounded from inside the tent. "An alarm?"

"A joyous one, Your Majesty!" the captain called. "Come and see!"

The King's Own turned to watch the reunion. They were relaxed, grinning, hands slack on their weapons. Bane had followed Hugh's instructions perfectly, pulled the assassin in with him. Now the child let go of Hugh's sword arm, skipped nimbly to one side, out of the assassin's way. No one was watching the "peasant." All eyes were on the golden-haired prince and on the tent flap. They could hear Stephen and Anne inside, moving hastily toward the entrance. Parents and child would soon be reunited.

The captain walked a little ahead of Hugh—to the assassin's right—a step or two behind Bane, who was dancing toward the tent. The dog trotted along after, unnoticed in the excitement.

The sergeant opened the tent flap wide, began tying it back. He was on Hugh's left.

Excellent, Hugh thought. His hand, beneath the cover of his cloak and loose-fitting peddler's rags, was stealing to his belt, fingers closing around the hilt of a short sword—a poor choice of weapon for an assassin. The wide flat blade would catch the light.

Stephen appeared in the entrance, his eyes blinking, trying to adjust to the glow of the sentry fires. Behind him, clutching her robes around her, Anne stared out over his shoulder.

"What is it—?"

Bane dashed forward, flung out his arms. "Mother! Father!" he cried with a joyous yell.

Stephen paled, a look of horror crossed his face. He staggered backward.

Bane behaved flawlessly. At this point, he was to turn, reach out for Hugh, draw the assassin forward. Then the child was to fling himself out of the way of the Hand's killing stroke. This was how they had rehearsed it.

But Hugh muffed his part.

He was going to die. His life was measured in two, maybe three breaths. At least death would come swiftly this time. A sword through his throat or chest. The guards would not take chances with a man about to murder their king.

"This is the man who saved my life, Father," Bane shrieked. He turned, reached out for the assassin.

Hugh drew his blade, slowly, clumsily. He lifted it high, let the firelight catch it, gave out an attention-getting roar. Then he launched himself at Stephen.

The King's Own reacted swiftly, instinctively. Seeing the flashing blade, hearing the assassin's shout, they dropped their spears and leapt to throttle him from behind. The captain knocked Hugh's sword from his hand, drew his own sword, and was about to grant Hugh the swift death he sought when a huge, furry shape struck him.

Ears up, eyes bright, the dog had been watching the proceedings with interest, enjoying the excitement. Sudden movement, shouting, and confusion startled the animal. Men smelled of fear and tension and danger. The dog was jostled, stepped on. And then it saw the captain lunge at Hugh, about to harm a man the dog knew as a friend.

Jaws closed on the captain's sword arm. The animal dragged the man to the ground. The two tumbled over each other; the dog growling and snarling, the captain trying to fend off the animal's vicious attack.

The King's Own had firm grasp of Hugh. The sergeant, sword in hand, dashed over to deal with the assassin.

"Hold!" Stephen bellowed. He'd recovered from his first shock, recognized Hugh.

The sergeant halted, looked back at his king. The captain rolled on the ground, the dog worrying him like a rat. Stephen, perplexed, arrested by the expression on the assassin's face, came forward.

"What—?"

No one, except Hugh, was paying any attention to Bane.

The child had picked up Hugh's sword from the ground, was advancing on the king, coming up on him from behind.

"Your Majesty—" Hugh cried, struggled to free himself.

The sergeant struck him a blow to the head, with the flat of his sword. Dazed, Hugh slumped in his captor's arms. But he'd drawn Anne's attention. She saw the danger, but was too far away to act.

"Stephen!" she screamed.

Bane gripped the hilt of the sword in both small hands.

"I will be king!" he shouted in fury, and plunged the sword with all his strength into Stephen's back.

The king cried out in pain, staggered forward. He reached his hand around in disbelief, felt his own blood run over his fingers. Bane wrenched the blade free. Stumbling, Stephen fell to the ground. Anne ran from the tent.

The sergeant, stupefied, unable to believe what he'd seen, stared at the child, whose small hands were wet with blood. Bane aimed another stroke, a killing stroke. Anne flung her own body over that of her wounded husband.

Sword raised, Bane rushed at her.

The child's body jerked, his eyes widened. He dropped the sword, clutched at his throat with his hands. He seemed unable to breathe, was gasping for air. Slowly, fearfully, he turned around.

"Mother?" He was strangling, lacked the voice to speak, his lips formed the word.

Iridal stepped out of the darkness. Her face was pale, fixed, and resolute. She moved with a terrible calm, a terrible purpose. A strange whispering sound, as if the night was sucking in its breath, hissed through the night.

"Mother!" Bane choked, sank to his knees, extended a pleading hand. "Mother, don't..."

"I'm sorry, my son," she said. "Forgive me. I cannot save you. You have doomed yourself. I do what I have to do."

She raised her hand.

Bane glared at her in impotent fury, then his eyes rolled, he slumped to the ground. The small body shuddered and then lay still.

No one spoke, no one moved. Minds tried to assimilate what had happened, what even now seemed impossible to believe. The dog, sensing the danger had ended, left off its attack. Padding over to Iridal, the dog nudged her cold hand.

"I shut my eyes to what his father was," said Iridal in a quiet voice, terrible to hear. "I shut my eyes to what Bane had become. I'm sorry. I never meant for this to happen. Is he... is he... dead?"

A soldier, standing near, knelt down beside the child, laid a hand upon Bane's chest. Looking up at Iridal, the soldier nodded wordlessly.

"It is fitting. That was how your own child died, Your Majesty," said Iridal, sighing, her gaze on Bane, her words for Anne. "The baby could not breathe the rarefied air of the High Realm. I did what I could, but the poor thing choked to death."

Anne gave a gasping sob, averted her head, covered her face with her hands. Stephen, struggling to his knees, put his arms around her. He stared in horror and shock at the small body lying on the ground.

"Release this man," said Iridal, her empty-eyed gaze going to Hugh. "He had no intention of killing the king."

The King's Own appeared dubious, glowered at Hugh darkly. The assassin's head was lowered. He did not look up. He had no care for his fate, one way or the other.

"Hugh made a deliberately clumsy attempt at murder," Iridal told them. "An attempt that was meant to reveal my son's treachery to you... and to me. He succeeded," she added softly.

The captain, on his feet, dirty and disheveled but otherwise unharmed, cast a questioning glance at the king.

"Do as she says, Captain," Stephen ordered, rising painfully, gasping in agony. His breath came short. His wife had her arms around him, assisting him. "Release this man. The moment he raised his sword, I knew..." The king tried to walk, almost fell.

"Help me!" Queen Anne cried, supporting him. "Send for Trian! Where is Trian? The king is grievously hurt!"

"Nothing so terrible as all that, my dear," said Stephen, making an attempt to smile. "I've... taken worse than this..." His head lolled, he sagged in his wife's arms.

The captain ran to support his fainting king, but halted and turned in alarm when he heard the sentry's voice ring out. A shadow moved against the firelight. Steel clashed. The nervous King's Own snapped to action. Captain and sergeant raised their swords, stepped in front of Their Majesties. Stephen had fallen to the ground, Anne crouched protectively over him.

"Be at peace, it is I, Trian," said the young wizard, materializing out of the darkness.

A glance at Hugh, at the dead child, and at the dead child's mother was sufficient to apprise the wizard of the situation. He did not waste time in questions, but nodded once, took charge.

"Make haste. Carry His Majesty into his tent, shut the flap. Quickly, before anyone else sees!"

The captain, looking vastly relieved, barked orders. Guards carried the king inside. The sergeant lowered the tent flap, stood guard himself outside it. The young wizard took a few moments to speak a few brief words of reassurance to Anne, then sent her into the tent to prepare hot water and bandages.

"You men," Trian said, turning to the King's Own. "Not a word of this to anyone, on your lives."

The soldiers nodded, saluted.

"Should we double the guard, Magicka?" asked the ashen-faced sergeant.

"Absolutely not," Trian snapped. "All must seem as normal, do you understand? The wolf attacks when it smells blood." He glanced at Iridal, standing motionless over the body of her son. "You men, douse that fire. Cover the corpse. No one is to leave this area until I return. Gently, men," he advised, glancing again at Iridal.

Anne appeared at the tent flap, searching anxiously for him. "Trian..." she began.

"I'm coming, Your Majesty. Hush, go back inside. All will be well." The wizard hastened into the royal tent.

"One of you, come with me." The sergeant and a guard moved to obey Trian's commands, cover the small corpse. "Bring a cloak."

Hugh raised his head.

"I'll take care of it," he said.

The sergeant looked at the man's haggard face, gray, caked and streaked with blood, oozing from a deep slash that had nearly laid bare his cheekbone. His eyes were almost invisible beneath the jutting, furrowed brow; two tiny points of flame, reflecting from the watch fires, flickered deep within the darkness. He moved to block the sergeant's way.

"Stand aside," the sergeant ordered angrily.

"I said I'll go."

The sergeant looked at the wizardess—pale and unmoving. He looked at the small body lying at her feet, then at the assassin, dark and grim.

"Go ahead then," said the sergeant, perhaps relieved. The less he had to do with any of these fey people, the better. "Is there... anything you need?"

Hugh shook his head. Turning, he walked over to Iridal. The dog sat quietly by her side. Its tail wagged gently at Hugh's approach.

Behind him, the soldiers tossed water onto the campfire. There came a hissing sound, a shower of sparks flew into the air. Darkness shrouded them. The sergeant and his men moved nearer the royal tent.

The faint pearl glow of the coralite illuminated Bane's face. His eyes closed—the light of unnatural ambition and hatred doused—he looked like any small boy, fast asleep, dreaming of a day of ordinary mischief. Only the bloodstained hands belied the illusion.

Hugh drew off his own tattered cloak, spread it over Bane. He did not speak. Iridal did not move. The soldiers took up their positions, closed the ring of steel as if nothing had happened. Beyond, they could hear snatches of song; the celebrating continued.

Trian emerged from the tent. Hands folded together, he walked swiftly to where Hugh and Iridal stood, alone, with the dead.

"His Majesty will live," said the wizard.

Hugh grunted, pressed the back of his hand to his bleeding cheek. Iridal shivered all over, lifted her eyes to the wizard.

"The wound is not serious," Trian continued. "The blade missed the vital organs, glanced along the ribs. The king has lost considerable blood, but he is conscious and resting comfortably. He will attend the signing ceremony tomorrow. A night of revelry and elven wine will excuse his pallor and slowness of movement. I need not tell you that this must be kept secret."

The wizard looked from one to the other, moistened his lips. He glanced once, then avoided looking at, the cloak-covered form on the ground.

"Their Majesties ask me to express their gratitude... and their sympathy. Words cannot express—"

"Then shut up," Hugh said.

Trian flushed, but he kept quiet.

"May I take my son away with me?" Iridal asked, pale and cold.

"Yes, Lady Iridal," Trian replied gently. "That would be best. If I might ask where—"

"To the High Realms. I will build his funeral pyre there. No one will know."

"And you, Hugh the Hand?" Trian turned his eyes upon the assassin, studied him intently. "Will you go with her?"

Hugh seemed undecided whether to answer or not. He put his hand again to his cheek, brought it back wet with blood. He stared at the blood a moment, unseeing, then slowly wiped the hand across his shirt.

"No," he said at last. "I have another contract to fulfill."

Iridal stirred, looked at him. He did not look at her. She sighed softly.

Trian smiled, thin-lipped. "Of course, another contract. Which reminds me, you were not paid for this one. I think His Majesty will agree that you earned it. Where shall I send the money?"

Hugh bent down, lifted Bane's body, covered with the cloak, in his arms. One small hand, stained with blood, fell limply from beneath the crude shroud. Iridal caught hold of the hand, kissed it, laid it gently back to rest on the child's breast.

"Tell Stephen," Hugh said, "to give the money to his daughter. My gift, for her dowry."

## CHAPTER 42

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

LIMBECK TOOK OFF HIS SPECTACLES FOR THE TWENTIETH TIME IN ALMOST as many minutes and rubbed his eyes. He tossed the spectacles on the table in front of him, plopped down in a chair, and glared at them. He had made them himself. He was proud of them. For the first time in his life, with these spectacles on, he could see clearly—everything sharp and in focus, no fuzzy blobs, no vague and blurry outlines. Limbeck stared at the spectacles, admiring them (what he could now see of them) and loathing them.

He hated them, detested them. And he dared not move without them. They had begun to give him frightful headaches that started in back of his eyeballs, shot what felt like little 'lectric zingers into his head. The 'lectric zingers fired up a giant whumping whammer that marked time by banging against his skull.

But now he could see his people clearly, could see their faces pinched with hunger, drawn with the fear that grew worse every day that passed, every day the Kicksey-winsey refused to move, remained shut down, shut off, silent. And when Limbeck looked at this people through the spectacles, when he saw their despair, he hated.

He hated the elves, who had done this to them. He hated the elves who had dragged off Jarre and were now threatening to kill her. He hated the elves or whatever it was that had killed the Kicksey-winsey. And when he hated, his stomach muscles twisted and lurched up and wrapped around his lungs, and he couldn't breathe for the tightness.

Then he planned grand and glorious wars, and he made very fine and impassioned speeches to his people. And for a while, they hated, too, and they forgot about being cold and hungry and afraid of the terrifying silence. But eventually Limbeck would have to fall silent, and then the dwarves would return to their homes and be forced to listen to their children cry.

Then the pain would be so bad it sometimes made him throw up. When he was finished throwing up, he'd feel his insides slide back into their proper places. He'd remember how life used to be, before the revolution, before he'd asked why, before he'd found the god who wasn't a god, who turned out to be Haplo. Limbeck would remember Jarre and how much he missed her, missed her calling him a "druz" and yanking on his beard.

He knew that the why had been a good question. But maybe his answer to the why hadn't been such a great answer.

"There are too many why's," he muttered, talking to himself (the only person he had to talk to now, most of the other dwarves not liking to be around him much, for which he didn't blame them, since he didn't like to be around himself much either). "And there are no answers. It was stupid of me to ask. I know better now. I know things like: That's mine!, Hands off!, Give me that or I'll split your skull open, and Oh, yeah? Well, you're another!"

He'd come a long way from being a druz.

Limbeck laid his head down on the table, stared morosely through the wrong end of the spectacles, which had the interesting and rather comforting effect of making everything seem far away and small. He'd been a lot happier, being a druz.

He sighed. It was all Jarre's fault. Why did she have to run off and get herself captured by elves? If she hadn't, he wouldn't be in this predicament. He'd be threatening to destroy the Kicksey-winsey...

"Which I couldn't do, anyway," he muttered. "These GEGS would never hurt their precious machine. The elves know that. They're not taking my threat seriously. I—" Limbeck stopped in horror.

GEGS. He'd called his people GEGS. His own people. And it was as if he were seeing them through the wrong end of the spectacles—distant, far away, small.

"Oh, Jarre!" Limbeck moaned, "I wish I was a druz!"

Reaching up, he gave his own beard a hard and painful yank, but it just didn't have the same effect. Jarre put love into her beard-yanking. She'd loved him when he was a druz.

Limbeck snatched up the spectacles, hurled them on the table, hoping they'd break. They didn't. Peering around nearsightedly, he went on a grim and frantic search for a hammer. He had just picked up what he'd thought was a hammer but which turned out to be a feather duster when a furious pounding and loud, panicked shouting exploded outside his door.

"Limbeck, Limbeck," howled a voice he recognized as belonging to Lof.

Bumbling into the table, Limbeck groped about for the spectacles, stuck them, slightly askew, on his face, and— feather duster in hand—flung the door open.

"Well? What is it? Can't you see I'm busy?" he said in an Important Voice, which is how he generally got rid of people these days.

Lof didn't notice. He was in a pitiable state, his beard sticking out wildly in all directions, his hair standing on end, his clothes every which way. He was wringing his hands, and when a dwarf wrings his hands, matters are desperate. For long moments, he couldn't talk, but could only shake his head, wring his hands, and whimper.

Limbeck's spectacles were hanging from one ear. He took them off, stuffed them in a vest pocket, and patted Lof kindly on the shoulder. "Steady, old man. What's happened?"

Encouraged, Lof gulped and drew a shuddering breath. "Jarre," he managed. "It's Jarre. She's dead. The elves killed her. I... I s-s-saw her, Limbeck!" Dropping his head to his hands, Lof gave a harsh sob and began to weep.

It was quiet. The quiet came from Limbeck, bounced off the walls, returned to him. He couldn't even hear Lof crying anymore. He couldn't hear anything. The Kicksey-winsey had long been silent. Now Jarre was silent, forever. It was all so very, very quiet.

"Where is she?" he asked, and he knew he asked the question, though he couldn't hear the sound of his own voice.

"In... in the Factree," Lof bumbled. "Haplo's with her, he says she's not dead... but I know I saw..."

Limbeck saw Lof's mouth moving, forming words. Limbeck understood one—"Factree."

Taking out his spectacles, placing them firmly on his nose and over his ears, Limbeck grabbed hold of Lof. Dragging him along, Limbeck headed for the secret tunnels that led to the Factree.

As he went, he rallied every dwarf he found. "Come with me," he told them. "We're going to kill elves."

Haplo's magic transported him to the Factree, the only place on Drevlin — other than his ship — that he could picture clearly in his mind. He had considered his ship. Once there, he could save Jarre's life, return her to her people, then he could return to his people. He would sail to Abarrach and try, once again, to persuade his lord that the serpents were using him, using them all.

The idea of his ship was in his mind only briefly, before he abandoned it. Sang-drax and the serpents were plotting something—something major, something dire. Their plans for Arianus were going awry. They hadn't expected Haplo or Iridal to escape, they hadn't taken the Kenkari into consideration. They would have to make a move to counter whatever good effect Iridal might be able to achieve in the Mid Realm. Haplo had a good idea what the serpents next move was going to be.

He materialized inside the Factree, near the statue of the Manger. Haplo laid Jarre down gently on the base of the statue and took a swift look around. His skin glowed a faint blue, a residue of the magic expended to bring himself and the dwarf here, but also a warning. The serpents were near. Down below, he guessed, down in their secret caverns.

As for more immediate danger, he was prepared to face the elven soldiers, who were bivouacked in the Factree, prepared to deal instantly with any who might be standing guard duty around the statue. They would be astounded to see him materializing out of nowhere. In that moment of shock, he would subdue them.

But there was no one there. The statue's base had been shut again, covering the tunnel beneath. Elves still moved about the Factree, but they were all gathered at the front of the huge building, as far from the statue as they could get.

The glimmerglamps were dark, this part of the Factree was left to darkness.

Haplo looked up at the benign face of the statue, reflected in the blue light radiating from the Patryn's skin. He saw, in the face, Alfred. "This fear of your people would grieve you, wouldn't it, my bumbling friend?" the Patryn asked. Then the shadows moved, and Haplo saw Samah's stern face beneath the statue's hood. "But you'd think their fear a fitting tribute."

Jarre moaned and stirred. Haplo knelt by her side. The statue shielded them from the sight of the elves. Should any happen to look this direction—a possibility he didn't consider likely—they would see only a blue glow, soft and faint, so soft and faint that they would probably think their eyes were deceiving them and discount it.

But other eyes were watching, eyes Haplo hadn't counted on.

"J-Jarre!" gasped a horrified voice.

"Damn!" Haplo swore, and turned.

Two figures crept out of the darkness, emerging from the hole in the floor that led to the dwarves' secret tunnels.

Of course, Haplo realized, Limbeck would have posted spies to keep an eye on the elves. The dwarves could sneak up the ladder, sit in the darkness, watch the elves' movements without running serious risk. The only drawback would be the feeling of fear that flowed from beneath the statue, from the serpents below.

Haplo noted that the dwarves appeared hesitant to approach the statue, were drawn to it by their shock and their worry over Jarre.

"She's all right," Haplo told them, trying to sound reassuring, hoping to prevent panic. One bellow and it was all over. He'd have the entire elven army to cope with. "She looks bad now, but I'm going to—"

"She's dead!" gasped the dwarf, staring. "The elves killed her."

"Limbeck!" said his companion. "Must tell... Limbeck."

Before Haplo could say another word, the two had turned and dashed off, trundling across the Factree floor toward the tunnel entrance. He heard their heavy boots clumping down the ladder; they'd forgotten to shut the metal cover.

Fine. Just fine. If he knew Limbeck, Haplo would soon have half the dwarves in Drevlin up here. Well, he'd deal with that when it happened.

Leaning over Jarre, he took both her hands in his, extended the circle of his being, made her a part of it. The sigla's glow brightened, traveled from Haplo's right hand to Jarre's left. His health and strength flowed into her, her pain and torment flowed into him.

He'd known the pain was coming, was braced to receive it. He'd experienced the same thing, healing the elf lad, Devon, in Chelestra. But this was more terrible, the pain was far worse, and—as if the serpents knew it would reach him eventually—the torment took him back to the Labyrinth.

Again the cruel birds with their razor talons and tearing beaks gorged on his flesh, tore at his vitals, beat at him with their leathery wings. Haplo grit his teeth, closed his eyes, told himself over and over it was not real, and held fast to Jarre.

And some of her strength—the strength and courage that had kept her alive—flowed to him.

Haplo gasped and shuddered, wanted desperately to die, the pain and fear were so bad. But firm, strong hands held his and a voice was saying, "It's all right. They're gone. I'm here."

The voice was a woman's, a Patryn's. He knew it. It was her voice! She'd come back to him. Here, in the Labyrinth, she'd found him at last. She'd driven away the serpents. He was safe, with her, for the time being.

But the serpents would come back, and there was the child to protect... their child.

"Our child?" he asked her. "Where is our child?"

"Haplo?" said the voice, now sounding puzzled. "Haplo, don't you see me? It's me, Jarre..."

Haplo sat up, caught his breath. Level with his face was the frightened and anxious face—and quivering side whiskers—of a female dwarf. His disappointment was almost as terrible to bear as the pain. He closed his eyes, shoulders slumped. It was all hopeless. How could he go on? Why should he? He'd failed, failed her, their child, failed his people, failed Jarre's people...

"Haplo!" Jarre's voice was stern. "Don't be a druz. Snap out of it."

He opened his eyes, looked up at her, standing near him. Her hands twitched; he had the impression that if he'd had a beard, she'd be yanking it—her usual remedy for restoring Limbeck to sense.

Haplo smiled his quiet smile, rose to his feet. "Sorry," he said.

"Where was I? What did you do to me?" Jarre demanded, eyeing him suspiciously. Her face paled, she looked frightened. "The .. the elf... he hurt me." Her expression grew puzzled. "Only he wasn't an elf. He was a horrible monster, with red eyes ..."

"I know," said Haplo.

"Is he gone? He is gone, isn't he?" she said, brightening with hope. "You drove him away."

Haplo regarded her in silence.

She shook her head, hope dimming. "He's not?"

"No, he's here. Down below. And there's more of them. Many more. The elf, Sang-drax, was only one of them. They're able to enter your world the same way I enter it."

"But how—" she wailed.

"Hush!" Haplo raised his hand.

The sound of feet, many feet, heavily booted feet, pounded down below—in the dwarves' secret entrance. Deep voices, shouting and clamoring in anger, echoed through the tunnels. The heavily booted feet began climbing up the ladder that led into the Factree.

The noise was like the rumble of the storms that swept Drevlin, swelling from beneath the Factree floor. Haplo cast a swift glance toward the elves, even as he raced over to the dwarves. The elven soldiers were on their feet, grabbing for weapons, their officers shouting orders. The expected dwarven attack was underway. The elves were prepared.

Haplo reached the tunnel entrance and was nearly bowled over by a surge of dwarves, leaping out at him. The elves were hastily overturning cots, throwing up barricades. The Factree doors flew open, a gust of rain-laden wind blew inside. Lightning flashed and the crack of thunder nearly drowned out the shouting dwarves. Someone cried in elven that the entire dwarven community was in arms. An officer yelled back that this was what he'd been waiting for, now they could exterminate the little "Gegs."

Limbeck charged past Haplo. At least Haplo assumed it was Limbeck. The dwarf's face was contorted with hatred and fury and the lust to kill. Haplo would not have recognized the dwarf had it not been for the spectacles, planted firmly on his nose and tied around his head with a long piece of string. He was carrying a wicked-looking battle-ax in one hand and, unaccountably, a feather duster in the other.

Limbeck dashed past Haplo, leading his fellow dwarves in a mad, frenzied dash that would take them headlong into the advancing ranks of the disciplined elves.

"Avenge Jarre!" shouted Limbeck.

"Avenge Jarre!" answered the dwarves in a single, rumbling, dire voice.

"I don't need avenging!" Jarre yelled shrilly, from where she stood at the base of the statue of the Manger. "It wasn't the elves! Limbeck!" she howled, wringing her hands. "Don't be a druz!"

Well, it worked once before, Haplo thought, and was extending his arm to unleash the spell that would freeze everyone in his or her place. But the chant died on his lips. He looked at his arm, saw the runes flare a brilliant, vibrant blue, saw it intertwined with red, felt his skin flame with warning.

The statue of the Manger came to life, began to move.

Jarre screamed, lost her balance on the swiveling base, and tumbled down the dais on which the statue stood. Limbeck had not heard her shout, but he heard her scream. He stopped in midrush, turned toward the sound, saw Jarre, scrambling to her feet, and the statue of the Manger, opening slowly.

The fear and terror and horror that flowed out of the tunnel ahead of the serpents acted more effectively than any of Haplo's spells to stop the dwarven advance. The dwarves stumbled to a halt, stared fearfully at the hole. Defiance and fury seeped out of them, leaving them cold and shivering husks. The elves, farther away from the tunnel entrance, couldn't see precisely what was going on, but they could see the giant statue moving on its base, could hear the rumble it made. And they, too, could feel the fear. They crouched behind their barricades, gripped their weapons, looked questioningly and nervously at their officers, who were grim and uneasy themselves.

"It won't work, Sang-drax," Haplo shouted. Through the dog's ears, Haplo could hear Hugh's voice, talking to Trian. He could hear the words of Irida's bitter sorrow. "You're defeated! Bane's dead. The alliance will hold. Peace will come. There's nothing you can do now!"

Oh, yes there is, said Sang-drax, whispering inside Haplo's head. Watch!

Jarre half stumbled, half ran to Limbeck.

"We've got to escape!" she shrieked, plummeting into him, nearly knocking him flat. "Tell everyone. We have to leave. A... a horrible monster is coming. It lives down there! Haplo said—"

Limbeck knew a horrible monster was coming, something dark and evil and hideous. He knew he should run, knew he should order everyone to run for their lives, but he couldn't manage to get the words out. He was too frightened. And he couldn't see clearly. His spectacles had misted over from the sweat dripping down his brow. And he couldn't take them off. The string was knotted around his head and he didn't dare let loose of the battle-ax he was holding to unknot the string.

Dark shapes, dreadful beings, poured up out of the hole.

It was... They were...

Limbeck blinked, rubbed at his spectacles with his shirtsleeves.

"What... what is it, Jarre?" he demanded.

"Oh, Limbeck!" She drew in a shivering breath. "Limbeck... it's us!"

## CHAPTER 43

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

AN ARMY OF DWARVES MARCHED UP OUT OF THE TUNNEL BENEATH THE statue.

"Not bad, Sang-drax," Haplo muttered in grudging admiration. "Not bad at all. Confuse the hell out of everyone."

The serpents resembled the dwarves of Drevlin in every aspect—in clothes, in appearance, in the weapons they carried. They were shouting their hatred of the elves, urging their fellows to launch the attack. The true dwarves were beginning to waver. They were afraid of the newcomers, but their fear was starting to merge with their fear of the elves and soon they wouldn't be able to tell one fear from the other.

And they wouldn't be able to tell one dwarf from another.

Haplo could. He could see the red-eyed glint that gave away the serpents, but how could he explain all this to the true dwarves, how could he warn them, convince them? The two dwarven armies were about to join together. They would attack the elves, defeat them, drive them from Drevlin. And then the serpents, disguised as dwarves, would attack the machine, the Kicksey-winsey, on which the lives of all of the races on Arianus depended.

A brilliant stroke. So what if the humans and elves allied? So what if Rees'ahn and Stephen overthrew the Tribus empire? Word would come to them that the dwarves were wrecking the Kicksey-winsey, about to deprive the Mid Realm of water. The humans and elves would have no choice but to fight the dwarves to save it. ...

Chaos. Endless conflict. The serpents would grow powerful, invincible.

"Don't believe them! They're not us!" Jarre cried shrilly. "They're not dwarves. And they're not elves, either. They're the ones who hurt me! Look at them. Limbeck. Look at them!"

Limbeck tried to wipe the mist from his spectacles.

Frustrated, Jarre grabbed hold of the spectacles, gave them a tug that broke the string. Snatching them off Limbeck's nose, she threw them on the floor.

"What have you done?" Limbeck roared in anger.

"Now you can see, you druz! Look at them! Look!"

Limbeck peered myopically ahead. The army of dwarves was now only a dark blur, congealed together into a long, flowing mass. The mass heaved and writhed and glared at him from countless pairs of gleaming red eyes.

"A giant snake!" Limbeck shouted, raising his battle-ax. "We're being attacked by a giant snake!"

"We are?" Lof asked confusedly, looking up and down and in front and behind him. "Where?"

"Here," said Haplo.

Drawing the elven sword, stolen from the Imperanon, the Patryn lunged at the red-eyed dwarf standing nearest him. The runes etched on the sword flared, the metal glowed. A cascade of blue and red flame flowed from the blade toward the dwarf's head.

Except that it was no longer a dwarf.

A massive, flat, and snakelike body—ancient and awful—reared upward, expanding out of the dwarf's body like a monstrous plant bursting out of a seed pod. The serpent took shape and form faster than the eye could follow. Its tail lashed out, struck the sword, sent it flying. The weapon's rune-magic began to fall apart, the sigla shattered, crumbled in midair—links of a chain broken and scattered.

Haplo sprang back, out of the way of the lashing tail, watched for an opportunity to recover his weapon. He'd expected this—his attack had been too swift, too random. He hadn't had time to concentrate on his magic. But he had achieved his goal. Killing, even wounding the serpent, was not his objective. He'd meant to force it to show its true form, disrupt its magic. At least now the dwarves would see the serpent for what it was.

"Very clever of you, Patryn," said Sang-drax. The graceful form of the serpent-elf walked slowly out of the ranks of red-eyed dwarves. "But what have you accomplished—except their deaths?"

The dwarves gasped in shock, fell over themselves and each other in an effort to escape the hideous creature that now loomed over them.

Haplo darted beneath the serpent's whipping tail, snatched up his sword. Falling back, he faced Sang-drax. A few dwarves, shamed by the cowardice of their fellows, came to the Patryn's side. The other dwarves rallied around him, gripping pipes, battle-axes, whatever weapons they had been able to find.

But their courage was short-lived. The rest of the serpents began abandoning their mensch bodies. The darkness was filled with their hissing and the foul odor of decay and corruption that clung to them. The fire of the red eyes flared. A head dove down, a tail struck out. Massive jaws picked up a dwarf, lifted him to the Factree roof far above, dropped him to a screaming death. Another serpent crushed a dwarf with its tail. The serpents' best weapon—fear—swept through the ranks of dwarves like an ague.

Dwarves bellowed in panic, dropped their weapons. Those nearest the serpents scrambled to retreat down the hole, but ran up against a wall of their brethren, who could not get out of the way fast enough. The serpents leisurely picked off a dwarf here and there, making certain that they died loudly, horribly.

The dwarves fell back toward the front of the Factree, only to encounter the elven barricades. Elven reinforcements had begun arriving, but they were meeting—by the sounds of it—dwarven resistance

outside the Factree. Elves and dwarves were fighting each other among the wheels and gears of the Kicksey-winsey, while inside the Factree itself, chaos reigned.

The elves cried that the serpents had been built by the dwarves. The dwarves shrieked that the snakes were a magical trick of the elves. The two turned on each other, and the serpents drove them on, inciting them to the slaughter.

Sang-drax alone had not altered his form. He stood in front of Haplo, a smile on the delicate elven features.

"You don't want them to die," said Haplo, keeping his sword raised, watching his opponent closely, trying to guess his next move. "Because if they die, you die."

"True," said Sang-drax, drawing a sword, advancing on Haplo. "We have no intention of killing them, not all of them, at any rate. But you, Patryn. You no longer provide sustenance. You have become a drain, a liability, a threat."

Haplo risked a swift glance around. He couldn't see either Limbeck or Jarre, presumed that they had been caught up in the panicked tide, swept away.

He stood alone now, near the statue of the Manger, who stared out unseeing on the bloodshed, an expression of stern and absurdly foolish compassion frozen on the metal face.

"It is all hopeless, my friend," said Sang-drax. "Look at them. This is a preview of the chaos that will rule the universe. On and on. Everlasting. Think of it, as you die..."

Sang-drax lashed out with his sword. The metal gleamed with the sullen, reddish light of the serpent's magic. He could not immediately penetrate the magical shield of the Patryn's sigla, but he would try to weaken it, batter it down.

Haplo parried the blow, steel clanging against steel. An electrical jolt ran from the serpent's blade to Haplo's, surged through the hilt, passed into his palms—the part unprotected by the runes—and from there up his arms. His magic was shaken. He fought to hold on to the blade, but another jolt burned the flesh on his hand, set the muscles and nerves in his arm twitching and dancing spasmodically. His hand no longer functioned. He dropped the sword, fell back against the statue, grasping his useless arm.

Sang-drax closed in. Haplo's body-magic reacted instinctively to protect him, but the serpent's blade easily penetrated the weakening shield, slashed across Haplo's chest

The sword cut the heart-rune, the central sigil, from which Haplo drew his strength, out of which sprang the circle of his being.

The wound was deep. The blade sliced through flesh, laid bare the breastbone. To an ordinary man, to a mensch, it would not have been mortal. But Haplo knew it for a death blow. Sang-drax's magical blade had cut open more than flesh. It had severed Haplo's own magic, left him vulnerable, defenseless. Unless he could take time to rest, to heal himself, to restructure the runes, the serpent's next attack would finish him.

"And I'll die at the feet of a Sartan," Haplo muttered dazedly to himself, glancing up at the statue.

Blood flowed freely, soaked his shirt front, ran down his hands, his arms. The blue light of his sigla was fading, dwindling. He sank to his knees, too tired to fight, too ... despairing. Sang-drax was right. It was hopeless.

"Get on with it. Finish me," Haplo snarled. "What are you waiting for?"

"You know full well, Patryn," said Sang-drax in his gentle voice. "I want your fear!"

The elven form began to alter, the limbs merged horribly, coalesced into a slack-skinned, slime-coated body. A red light glared down on Haplo, growing brighter. He had no need to look up to know that the giant snake head loomed above him, prepared to tear at his flesh, crush his bones, destroy him.

He was reminded of the Labyrinth, of the time he'd been mortally wounded there. Of how he'd laid down to die, too tired, too hurt...

"No," said Haplo.

Reaching out his hand, he grasped the hilt of the sword. Lifting it awkwardly in his left hand, he staggered slowly to his feet. No runes shone on the blade. He'd lost the power of the magic. The sword was plain, unadorned mensch steel, notched and battered. He was angry, not afraid. And if he ran to meet death, he could, perhaps, outrun his fear.

Haplo ran at Sang-drax, lifting the blade in a blow he knew he would never live to strike.

At the start of the battle, Limbeck Bolttightner was on his hands and knees on the floor, trying to find his spectacles.

Dropping his battle-ax, he paid no attention to the shouts and frightful yells of his people. He paid no attention to the hissing and slithering of the serpents (they were only shadowy blobs to him anyway). He paid no attention to the fighting raging around him, no attention to Lof, who was rooted to the spot with terror. Limbeck paid absolutely no attention to Jarre, who was standing over him, beating him on the head with the feather duster.

"Limbeck! Please! Do something! Our people are dying! The elves are dying! The world is dying! Do something!"

"I will, damn it!" Limbeck yelled at her viciously, hands pawing desperately over the floor. "But first I have to be able to see!"

"You could never see before!" Jarre shrieked at him. "That's what I loved about you!"

Two panes of glass shone red in the reflected light of the serpent's eyes. Limbeck made a grab for them, only to have them shoot out from under his very fingers.

Lof, jolted free from his paralyzing fear by Jarre's shout, turned to run away and accidentally kicked the spectacles, sent them skittering across the floor.

Limbeck dove after them, sliding on his rotund belly. He scabbled under one dwarf's legs, reached around another's ankles. The spectacles seemed to have become a live thing, perversely keeping just beyond his grasp. Booted feet crunched on his groping fingers. Heels jabbed into his side. Lof toppled to the floor with a panic-stricken yell, his rump missing smashing the spectacles by inches. Limbeck clambered over the prostrate Lof, stuck a knee in the unfortunate dwarf's face, made a wild, stabbing grab.

Intent on the spectacles, Limbeck didn't see what had terrified Lof. Admittedly, Limbeck wouldn't have seen much anyway, nothing but a large gray, scaly mass descending on him. His fingertips were actually touching the wire frame of his spectacles when he was suddenly grabbed roughly from behind. Strong hands took hold of his collar, sent him flying through the air.

Jarre had run after Limbeck, trying to reach him through the milling crowd of frightened dwarves. She lost sight of him for an instant, found him again—lying on top of Lof, both of them about to be crushed by the body of one of the horrible serpents.

Dashing forward, Jarre caught hold of Limbeck's collar, yanked him up, and flung him out of danger. He was saved, but not the spectacles. The snake's body crashed down. The floor shook, glass crunched. Within instants, the serpent reared up again, red eyes searching for its victims.

Limbeck lay on his stomach, gulping for breath and not having much luck finding it. Jarre had only one thought—to keep the red eyes of the serpent off them. Again, she took hold of Limbeck by the collar and began to drag him (she couldn't lift him) over to the statue of the Manger.

Once, long ago, during another fight in the Factree, Jarre had taken refuge inside this statue. She'd do it again. But she hadn't counted on Limbeck.

"My spectacles!" he screamed with the first breath he was able to suck into his lungs.

He lunged forward, pulled himself free of Jarre's grasp... and was almost beheaded by the backswing of Sang-drax's sword.

Limbeck saw only a blur of red fire, but he heard the blade whistle past him, felt the rush of air on his cheek. He stumbled backward, into Jarre, who caught hold of him, pulled him down beside her at the statue's base.

"Haplo!" she started to cry, then hastily swallowed her shout. The Patryn's attention was fixed on his enemy; her yell might only distract him.

Intent on each other, neither Haplo nor his foe noticed the two dwarves, crouching at the statue's base, afraid to move.

Limbeck had only the vaguest idea of what was going on. To him, it was all a blur of light and motion and confusing impression. Haplo was fighting an elf, and then it seemed that the elf swallowed a snake, or perhaps it was the other way around.

"Sang-drax!" Jarre breathed, and Limbeck heard the horror and fear in her voice.

She shrank back against him. "Oh, Limbeck," she whispered unhappily. "Haplo's finished. He's dying, Limbeck."

"Where?" shouted Limbeck in frustration. "I can't see!"

And the next thing he knew, Jarre was leaving his side.

"Haplo saved me. I'm going to save him."

The serpent's tail lashed out, smashed into Haplo, knocked the sword from his hand, battered him to the floor. He lay dazed and hurting, weak from loss of blood, no breath left in his body. He waited for the end, for the next blow. But it didn't come.

A dwarf-maid stood over him protectively. Defiant, fearless, side whiskers quivering, a battle-ax in both hands, Jarre glared at the serpent.

"Go away," she said. "Go away and leave us alone."

The serpent ignored the dwarf. Sang-drax's gaze and attention were concentrated on the Patryn.

Jarre jumped forward, swung the ax at the snake's putrid flesh. The blade bit deep. A foul ooze flowed from the wound.

Haplo struggled to regain his feet. The serpent, wounded and in pain, struck at Jarre, intending to rid itself of a pest, then deal with the Patryn.

The snake's head dove at the dwarf. Jarre stood her ground, waited until the head was level with her blade. The serpent's toothless jaws opened wide. Jarre sprang clumsily to one side, swinging her ax. The sharp blade struck the snake's lower jaw, the force of the blow buried the head of the ax deep in the serpent's flesh.

Sang-drax howled in pain and fury, tried to shake the ax loose, but Jarre clung to the handle tenaciously. Sang-drax reared his head, intending to slam the dwarf's body into the floor.

Haplo grasped his sword, raised it.

"Jarre!" he cried. "Stop it! Let go!"

The dwarf released her hold on the ax handle, tumbled to the ground.

Sang-drax shook the ax loose. Infuriated at this insignificant creature who had inflicted such terrible pain on him, the serpent lashed out, jaws open to snap Jarre in two.

Haplo thrust the blade into the serpent's gleaming red eye.

Blood spurted. Half blind, mad with pain and outrage, no longer able to draw on the fear of its foe for strength, the serpent thrashed about in murderous fury.

Haplo staggered, nearly fell. "Jarre! Down the stairs!" he gasped.

"No!" she shrieked. "I've got to save Limbeck!" and she was gone.

Haplo started to go after her. His foot slipped on the serpent's blood. He fell, slid painfully down the stairs, too weak to catch himself.

It seemed he fell for a long, long time.

Oblivious to the fighting, searching for Jarre, Limbeck groped his way around the statue of the Manger and nearly tumbled into the hole that gaped suddenly at his feet. He stood gazing down into it. He could see blood and darkness and the tunnel that led to his unraveled sock, to the automaton, to the turning on of the wondrous machine. And down there, too, was that room, the mysterious room where he'd seen elves and dwarves and humans coming together in harmony. He peered around him and saw on the floor elves and dwarves lying together, dead.

A frustrated "why" was on his lips, but it was never spoken. For the first time in his life, Limbeck saw clearly. He saw what he had to do.

Fumbling in his pocket, Limbeck dragged out the white cloth he used to clean his spectacles and began to wave it in the air. "Stop," he shouted, his voice loud and strong in the silence. "Stop the fighting. We surrender."

## CHAPTER 44

### THE FACTREE

#### LOWER REALM

ELVES AND DWARVES STOPPED LONG ENOUGH TO STARE AT LIMBECK some were puzzled, some frowning, most suspicious, all astounded. Taking advantage of the general stupefaction, Limbeck climbed atop the statue's base.

"Are you all blind?" he shouted. "Can't you see where this will end? Death for us all. Death for the world, unless we stop it." He held out his hands toward the elves. "I'm High Froman. My word is law. We'll talk, negotiate. You elves can have the Kicksey-winsey. And I'll prove I mean what I say. There's a room down there." He pointed to the tunnel. "A room where you elves can turn the machine on. I'll show—"

Jarre screamed. Limbeck had a sudden impression of a huge mass rearing above him, a noxious hissing breath blowing over him, like the wind of the Maelstrom.

"It is too late!" roared Sang-drax. "There will be no peace for this world. Only chaos and terror, as you fight for survival. On Arianus, you will be forced to drink blood instead of water! Destroy the machine!"

The serpent's head swept over the startled dwarf and smashed into the statue of the Manger.

A resounding clang, deep and shuddering, rang through the Factree. The statue of the Manger, the stern and silent form of the Sartan that had stood for centuries, worshiped and adored by countless dwarves, shuddered, rocked on its base. The snake, lashing about in fury, struck at it again. The Manger let out another resounding clang, shook, shivered, and toppled to the floor.

The booming echo of its fall tolled like a knell of doom through the Factree.

All over Drevlin, the serpents began smashing the 'lectric zingers and ripping off the whistle-toots and battering into bits of metal the wondrous machine. The dwarves halted their retreat, picked up their weapons, turned to face the serpents.

The elves saw what was happening, had a sudden vision of their water-ships, sailing up to the realms above—empty. They began to fire their magical arrows at the serpents' red eyes. Inside the Factree and out, drawn together by the terrible sight of the serpents attacking the machine, dwarves and elves fought side by side to protect the Kicksey-winsey.

They were aided by the timely arrival of a crippled dragon-ship that had managed, by the combined efforts of its human and elven crew, to make its way safely through the Maelstrom. A group of burly humans, acting under the command of an elven captain, carrying weapons enchanted by the spells of an elven wizard, joined the dwarves.

It was the first time, in all the history of Arianus, that humans and elves and dwarves fought together, not against each other.

The sight would have made the leader of WUPP proud, but unfortunately he couldn't see it. Limbeck had disappeared, lay buried beneath the broken statue of the Manger.

Jarre, half blinded by tears, lifted her battle-ax and prepared to fight the serpent whose bloodied head was weaving over the statue, perhaps seeking Haplo, perhaps Limbeck. Jarre ran forward, shrieking defiance, swinging the ax... and couldn't find the enemy.

The serpent had vanished.

Jarre stumbled, unable to stop the momentum of her violent swing. The ax flew from her blood-slick hands. She fell to her hands and knees.

"Limbeck?" she cried desperately, feverishly, and crawled toward the broken statue.

A hand appeared, waved feebly. "Here I am. I... I think..."

"Limbeck!" Jarre dove for the hand, caught hold of it, kissed it, and then began to tug on it.

"Ouch! Wait! I'm stuck! Ooof! My arm! Don't—"

Ignoring Limbeck's protests, not having time to pamper him, Jarre clasped his pudgy hand, planted her foot against the statue, and pulled. After a brief but invigorating struggle, she managed to free him.

The august leader of WUPP emerged from underneath the statue of the Manger, rumpled and disheveled, shaken and confused, all his buttons missing, and with the overall impression of having been stomped on and squashed, but otherwise unharmed.

"What... what happened?" he asked, squinting, trying to see.

"We're fighting to save the Kicksey-winsey," said Jarre, giving him a swift hug. Then she grabbed up the bloody battle-axe and prepared to launch herself into the fray.

"Wait, I'll come with you!" Limbeck cried, clenching his fists and looking fierce.

"Don't be a druz," Jarre said fondly. Reaching out, she yanked on his beard. "You can't see a thing. You'd only hurt yourself. You stay here."

"But... what can I do?" Limbeck cried, disappointed. "I must do something."

Jarre could have told him (and would, later on, when they were alone together) that he'd done everything. That he was the hero of the War, responsible for saving the Kicksey-winsey and the lives of not only his people but of everyone on Arianus. She didn't have time for all that now, however.

"Why don't you make a speech?" she suggested hastily. "Yes, I think one of your speeches would be just the thing."

Limbeck considered. It had been a long time since he'd made a speech. Not counting the surrender speech, which had been rather rudely interrupted. He couldn't quite recall where that one had been headed, however.

"But... I don't have one ready..."

"Yes, you do, my dear. Here."

Jarre reached into one of Limbeck's baggy pockets, pulled out a sheaf of ink-stained paper, and, removing the sandwich, handed the speech to Limbeck.

Resting his hand on the fallen statue of the Manger, Limbeck held the papers up to his nose and began to thunder,

"Workers of Drevlin! Untie and throw off your freckles... No, that can't be right. Workers of Drevlin! Unite and throw off your mackerels!"

And so the dwarves marched into what would later go down in history as the Battle of the Kicksey-winsey, with the occasionally confused but always inspiring words of the leader of WUPP, soon to be world hero, Limbeck Bolttightner, ringing in their ears.

## CHAPTER 45

### WOMBE, DREVLIN LOW REALM

HE SAT ON THE STAIRS LEADING DOWN FROM THE BASE OF THE fallen statue into the secret tunnels of the Sartan. Above him, Limbeck harangued, the mensch battled the serpents to save their world, and the Kicksey-winsey stood silent, unmoving. Haplo leaned against the wall, weak and light-headed from shock and loss of blood.

The dog was with him, gazing at him anxiously. Haplo didn't know when it had come back, was too tired to think about it or what its return portended. And he could do nothing to help the mensch; he could barely help himself.

"It doesn't sound as if they need any help, though," he said to the dog.

He had closed the terrible wound in his chest, but he needed time, a long time, to completely heal himself. The heart rune, the very center of his being, was torn.

He leaned against the wall, shut his eyes, grateful for the darkness. His mind drifted. He was holding the small book, the one given him by the Kenkari. He would have to remember to turn the book over to Limbeck. He was looking at it again ... he had to be careful... didn't want to smear blood ... on the pages.... The drawings... diagrams... instructions.

"The Sartan didn't abandon the worlds," he was telling Limbeck ... or the dog... who kept changing into Limbeck. "Those on this one foresaw their own demise. Alfred's people. They knew they would not be able to complete their grand scheme for uniting the worlds, for providing air to the world of stone, water to the world of air, fire to the world of water. They wrote it all down, wrote it down for those they knew they would have to leave behind.

"It's all here, in this small book. The words that will start the automaton upon its tasks, start the Kicksey-winsey operating, align the continents, bring them all life-giving water. The words that will send a signal through Death's Gate to all the other worlds.

"It is all in this book, written down in four languages: Sartan, elven, dwarven, human.

"Alfred would be pleased," Haplo told Limbeck... who kept changing into the dog. "He can quit apologizing."

But the plan had gone awry.

The Sartan who were supposed to awaken and use the book had not. Alfred, the one Sartan who did wake up, either didn't know about the book or had searched for it and couldn't find it. It was the Kenkari elves who had found the book. Found it, suppressed it, hidden it away.

"And if it hadn't been the elves," Haplo said, "it would have been the humans, or the dwarves. All of them, too filled with hate and distrust to come together ..."

"Workers of the world!" Limbeck was winding up. "Unite!"

And this time, he got it right.

"Maybe this time, they will get it right," Haplo said tiredly, smiling. He sighed. The dog whimpered, crowded close to its master and sniffed worriedly—flesh twitching—at the blood on his hands and arms.

"I could take the book," came a voice. "Take it from your dead body, Patryn."

The dog whimpered, pressed its nose into his hand.

Haplo's eyes flared open. Fear snapped him to full, alert wakefulness.

Sang-drax stood at the bottom of the stairs. The serpent had resumed his elf form, looked much the same as before, except that he was wan and pale and only one red eye gleamed. The other eye socket was a dark and empty hole, as if the serpent had plucked out the injured orb and tossed it away.

Haplo, hearing the dwarves shout triumphantly from above, understood.

"They're winning. Courage, unity—the pain's more bitter than a sword's thrust inside you, isn't it, Sang-drax? Go on, get out. You're as weak as I am. You can't hurt me now."

"Oh, I could. But I won't. We have new orders.' " Sang-drax smiled, his voice lingered over die last word as if he found it amusing. "You're to live, after all, it seems. Or perhaps I should rephrase that. I'm not the one destined to kill you."

Haplo bowed his head, closed his eyes, leaned back against the wall. He was tired, so very tired...

"As for your mensch friends," continued Sang-drax, "they haven't managed to turn the machine on yet. It may prove to be a 'jolting' experience. For them... and for all the other worlds. Read the book, Patryn. Read it carefully."

The serpent's elven form began to waver, started to lose consistency and shape. He was visible, for an instant, in his hideous snakelike body, but that transformation, too, was difficult for him to maintain. He was, as Haplo had said, growing weak. Soon, only his words were left, and the faint flicker of the gleaming red eye in the darkness of the Sartan tunnels.

"You are doomed, Patryn. Your battle can never be won. Unless you defeat yourself."

## CHAPTER 46

### THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO

#### ARISTAGON, MID REALM

THE DOORS TO THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ALBEDO REMAINED CLOSED. THE Kenkari continued to turn away the weesham, who occasionally came to stand forlornly, staring at the ornate grillwork until the Keeper of the Door emerged.

"You must go," he would tell them. "The time is not right."

"But what do we do?" they cried, clutching the lapis boxes. "When do we return?"

"Wait," was all he said.

The weesham found no comfort in that, but they could do nothing except return to the Imperanon or to their dukedoms or principalities and wait. Everyone on Paxaria was waiting.

Waiting for their doom.

News of the alliance forged between the rebel elves and the humans had spread rapidly. The Unseen brought back reports that human and elven forces were massing for the final assault. Imperial elven troops began to withdraw from towns on the perimeter of Volkaran, falling back to encircle and defend Aristagon. Towns and cities on the perimeter immediately made plans to surrender to Prince Rees'ahn, on condition that human armies would not be permitted to occupy them. (The elves recalled their own tyrannical occupation of human lands and feared retribution. Their fears were undoubtedly justified. Some wondered if centuries-old, festering wounds would ever heal.)

At one point, a strange report, whose source was later traced to Count Tretar, went round the Imperanon. Agah'ran had announced publicly, during luncheon, that King Stephen had been assassinated. The human barons were reportedly in revolt against Queen Anne. Prince Rees'ahn had fled for his life. The alliance was about to crumble.

Parties were held in celebration. When the emperor sobered up, however, he discovered that the report was not true. The Unseen assured Agah'ran that King Stephen was alive and well, though it was observed that the king walked somewhat stiffly and haltingly—the result of a fall suffered during a drinking bout.

Count Tretar was no longer seen at court.

But Agah'ran was confident. He gave more parties, one or two each night, each more glittering, more frantic than the last. The elves who attended (and there were fewer of them each night) laughed at certain other members of the royal family who had purportedly abandoned their homes, gathered up what wealth they could carry, and headed for the frontiers.

"Let the rebels and the human scum come. We will see how they fight against a real army," said Agah'ran.

In the meantime, he and the other princes and princesses and counts and earls and dukes danced and drank and ate sumptuously.

Their weesham sat silently in the corners and waited.

The silver gong rang. The Keeper of the Door sighed, rose to his feet. Peering through the grilhvork, expecting another geir, he gave a small gasp. He opened the door with trembling hands.

"Come in, sir. Come in," he said in low and solemn tones.

Hugh the Hand entered the cathedral.

The Hand wore, once again, the robes of a Kir monk, though in this instance he didn't wear them to disguise himself for travel through enemy lands. A Kenkari elf accompanied Hugh. The Kenkari had been assigned to escort him from the camp of Prince Rees'ahn in Ulyndia, back to the cathedral in Aristagon. Needless to say, no elf had dared stop them.

Hugh stepped across the threshold. He did not look back, did not take a final glance at a world he would soon be leaving forever. He'd seen enough of that world. It held no joy for him. He was leaving it without regret.

"I will take over from here," said the Door in a low voice to Hugh's escort. "My assistant will show you to your quarters."

Hugh stood apart, silent, aloof, staring straight ahead. The Kenkari who had accompanied him whispered a few words of blessing, pressed long, delicate-boned fingers into Hugh's arm. The Hand acknowledged the blessing with a flicker of the deeply sunken eyes, a slight inclination of the head.

"We will go to the Aviary now," said Door, when they were alone. "If that is what you wish."

"The sooner I get this over with, the better," Hugh said.

They walked down the crystal corridor that led to the Aviary and the small chapel room just outside.

"How do you do it?" Hugh asked.

The Door flinched, startled. He'd been absorbed in his own thoughts. "Do what, sir?"

"Execute people," said the Hand. "You'll excuse the question, but I have a rather personal interest in this."

The Door went exceedingly pale. "Forgive me. I... I cannot answer. The Keeper of the Soul..." He stammered and fell silent.

Hugh shrugged. After all, what did it matter? The worst part was the journey, the wrenching agony of the soul, unwilling to leave the body. When all ties were severed, he'd be welcomed back home.

They entered the chapel without ceremony, without knocking. Obviously, they were expected. The Keeper of the Book stood behind her desk, the Book open. The Keeper of the Soul stood before the altar.

The Kenkari shut the door, placed his back to it.

"Hugh the Hand, approach the altar," said the Keeper of the Soul.

Hugh stepped forward. Behind the altar, through the window, he could see the Aviary. The green leaves were very still, this day; no motion, no disturbance. The dead souls, too, were waiting.

In moments, Hugh would join them.

"Make this quick," said Hugh. "No praying, no singing. Just get on with it."

"It shall be as you desire, sir," said the Keeper of the Soul, gently. He raised his arms, the butterfly wings shimmered, falling in folds about him. "Hugh the Hand, you agreed to give your soul to us in return for our assistance to you and the Lady Iridal. Such assistance was granted. Your quest to save the child was successful."

"Yes," said Hugh, voice gruff, soft. "He is safe, now." As I'll be safe, he thought. Safe in death.

The Keeper of the Soul flicked a glance at Book and Door, then turned his complete attention back.

"And you, Hugh the Hand, now come forward to fulfill your contract with us. You give us your soul."

"I do," said Hugh, kneeling down. "Take it." He braced himself, clasped his hands before him, drew a deep breath, as if he guessed it must be his last.

"I would," said the Keeper, frowning. "But your soul is not yours to give."

"What?" Hugh let out his breath, glowered at the Keeper. "What do you mean? I've come here to you. I kept my part—"

"Yes, but you do not come to us free of mortal bonds. You have taken on another contract. You agreed to kill a man."

Hugh was growing angry. "What tricks are you elves up to? What man did I agree to kill?"

"The man called Haplo."

"Haplo?" Hugh gaped, uncomprehending. He honestly had no idea what the elf was talking about.

And then...

There's just one thing you must do. You must tell Haplo, when he's dying, that Xar is the one who wants him dead. Will you remember that name? Xar is the one who says that Haplo must die.

The Keeper of the Soul watched Hugh's face, nodded when the man looked up at him in stunned and baffled realization. "You promised the child Bane. You took his contract."

"But ... I never meant..."

"You never meant to live long enough to fulfill it. Yet you are alive. And you took the contract."

"And Bane is dead!" Hugh said harshly.

"Would that make a difference to the Brotherhood? The contract is sacred ..."

His expression dark and grim, Hugh rose, stood facing the Keeper. "Sacred!" He gave a bitter laugh. "Yeah, it's sacred. Apparently it's the only thing sacred in this accursed life. I thought you Kenkari were different. I thought at last I'd found something I could believe in, something..."

"But what do you care? Pah!" Hugh spit on the floor at the Keeper's feet. "You're no better than all the rest."

Book gasped. Door averted his face. Inside the Aviary, the leaves of the trees whispered, sighed. The Keeper regarded Hugh in silence.

At length, the Keeper said, quietly, calmly, "You owe us a life. Instead of yours, we choose his."

Book caught her breath, stared, horrified, at the Keeper of the Soul. Door opened his mouth, about to do the unthinkable — about to speak, about to protest. The Keeper cast the other Kenkari a swift, stern gaze and both bowed their heads, fell silent.

"Why? What'd he do to you?" Hugh demanded.

"We have our reasons. Do you find this arrangement acceptable?"

Hugh folded his arms across his chest, tugged thoughtfully at his twisted beard. "This pays for all?"

The Keeper smiled gently. "Perhaps not all. But it will come close."

Hugh considered, eyed the Kenkari suspiciously. Then he shrugged. "Very well. Where do I find Haplo?"

"On the isle of Drevlin. He has been grievously wounded and is weak." The Keeper lowered his eyes, his face was flushed. "You should have no difficulty—"

Book made a choking sound, covered her mouth with her hands.

Hugh glanced at her, sneered. "Squeamish? Don't worry, I'll spare you the gory details. Unless you want to hear how he died, of course. I'll throw that part in free. Describe his death throes..."

Book turned away, leaned weakly on her desk. Door was livid, his frail body shook and trembled. The Keeper of the Soul stood silent, unmoving.

Hugh turned on his heel, walked toward the door. The Keeper glanced questioningly at the Soul.

"Accompany him," the Kenkari commanded his fellow. "Make whatever arrangements he deems necessary for his transportation to Drevlin. And provide whatever... weapons..."

Door blanched. "Yes, Keeper," he murmured, barely able to walk. He glanced back, pleadingly, as if he would beg the Keeper to reconsider. Soul remained firm, implacable. Sighing, Door prepared to escort the assassin out.

"Hugh the Hand," the Soul called.

Pausing on the threshold, Hugh turned. "Now what?"

"Remember to fulfill the condition you promised. Tell Haplo that Xar is the one who wants him dead. You will be certain to do that? It is most important."

"Yeah, I'll tell him. Anything for the customer." Hugh gave a mocking bow. Then he turned to Door. "The only thing I'll need is a knife, with a good, sharp blade."

The Keeper shrank into himself. Pallid and wan, he cast a final glance back at Soul. Receiving no reprieve, he accompanied Hugh out and shut the door behind them.

"Keeper, what have you done?" cried Book, unable to contain herself. "Never, in all the centuries of our existence, have we taken a life! Any life! Now our hands will be stained with blood. Why? For what reason?"

The Keeper stood staring after the assassin. "I do not know," he said in a hollow voice. "I was not told. I did only as I was commanded." He looked behind the altar, through the crystal window, into the Aviary.

The leaves of the trees rustled quietly, in satisfaction.

## APPENDIX I

### THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE HAND

#### ORIGINS AND HISTORY

No one is certain when the Assassins' Guild was first established or who established it. It was in existence before the Sartan left Arianus, to judge by writings left behind that lament the guild's activities and ponder ways to put a stop to it. Sartan scholars speculate that the Brotherhood's origins date from the rise of guilds in general, during the prosperous rule of the Paxar elves. The Paxar encouraged free trade, thus allowing the development of a strong merchant class.

Thus, while the more peace-minded citizens of the Mid Realm were forming Silversmiths' guilds and Brewers' guilds, it was perhaps natural that the darker elements of society should mink of forming their own guild. The Brotherhood may have, at first, been formed in mockery of the legitimate guilds, but members soon saw the advantages of banding together: self-protection, self-regulation, and the ability to set and control prices.

Probably founded by elves, with only elven members, the Brotherhood soon extended its membership to include humans. The guild would have added dwarves to its ranks, as well, for the Brotherhood's credo is that the color of every man's money is the same, just as is the color of his blood. But most of the dwarves had, by this time, been shipped off to Drevlin and, therefore, were out of the realm of the Brotherhood's interest and jurisdiction.

Shifting winds of change and war wreaked havoc on nations and people of the Mid Realm, but these gales only served to strengthen the power of the Brotherhood. A series of strong, intelligent, ruthless, and cold-blooded leaders, culminating in Ciang, herself, not only held the ranks of the Brotherhood together, but increased its stature and wealth.

Shortly after the fall of the Paxar and the rise of the Tribus elves, the Brotherhood took control of the island of Skurvash, built its fortress there, and has continued to exert a powerful influence on all underworld operations in the Mid Realm since.

#### CURRENT STATUS

The power of the Brotherhood during this particular period of Arianus's history is enormous. War and rebellion serve as an ideal cover for its operations. Although not directly involved in the smuggling operations of Skurvash (just as they are not "directly involved" in other illegal activities), the Brotherhood levies a "tax" on smuggled or stolen merchandise, in return for providing protection to those who sell it. This "tax" and the income derived from membership dues make the Brotherhood the wealthiest guild in

existence. Such wealth and influence is undoubtedly due to the genius of Ciang, the Brotherhood's current leader.

## CIANG THE ARM

Ciang's word is law. She is highly respected (almost worshiped) by all the members. The crudest, most heartless murderer has been known to cower like a small, naughty child under Ciang's rebuke. Nothing is known about her youth, except that she was reputed to be one of the most beautiful elven women ever born and that, from hints she herself has dropped, she is a member of elven royalty. She is quite charming, amoral, and totally ruthless. She is the only one of the Brotherhood who can make the final decision to "send round the knife" and has done so on numerous occasions. Although a fellow member may call for such an action, Ciang herself must initiate the order.

## SENDING ROUND THE KNIFE

"Sending round the knife" is the term used for the most-feared ritual in the Brotherhood of the Hand. Violation of certain laws in the Brotherhood is punishable by death, and, as might be expected, the members themselves police their own organization. If a member is deemed to have broken one of the laws and the death sentence is passed, Ciang orders that wooden knives carved with the offender's name be circulated among the members. The knives are passed one to the other, as members encounter each other, until the word goes around (which it does with alarming speed). Any member who meets the offender is required to carry out the death sentence or face a similar punishment. It does not matter that the member under sentence may be friend, lover, spouse, sibling, or parent. Loyalty to the Brotherhood takes precedence over all other loyalties and vows.

## MEMBERSHIP DUES

Originally membership dues were low, intended to cover the guild's expenses and not much more. It was Ciang who determined that the dues be raised to their extraordinarily high level, forcing out many of the "stew-plate" variety of assassin (one who would kill a man for a plate of stew). The move was quite controversial at the time, many members arguing (but not in Ciang's presence) that it would prove the death of the guild. Ciang's wisdom soon became apparent, however.

Assassins were at first required to pay a percentage of their contracts, but this proved too difficult to monitor. Ciang ordered that this practice cease. All members are now required to pay yearly dues that vary in amount, based on rank; the assumption being that a skilled assassin is a rich assassin.

Any assassin who has fallen on hard times and can't afford the dues has only himself or herself to blame. The Brotherhood wants only skilled, disciplined members and can afford to rid itself of drunks, gamblers, or any other person whose personal failings make him or her a failure at the craft.

Payment of annual dues is excused only for those injured in the line of duty. Wounded members may come to the fortress on Skurvash and avail themselves of the fine-quality (perhaps the finest available in the Mid Realm) medical treatment. During their recovery period, dues are waived.

## THE BROTHERHOOD'S INFIRMARY

Strict rules pertain to the admittance of injured members into the Infirmary. The injury must have been obtained while on a job. The wounds must be honorable in nature and must be honorably obtained. (Being struck over the head from behind by a chair during a barroom brawl, for example, would not qualify. Nor would being knifed by a jealous lover.) If a contract is unfulfilled due to an injury obtained while attempting to fulfill it, the assassin must return the money he or she was paid for the job and complete the contract on personal time, for personal honor.

## DEFINITION OF VARIOUS TERMS

"Scars Are Still Fresh."

This pertains to the rite of investiture and refers to the fact that the person has not been a member of the Brotherhood long. Ciang uses this term in reference to Ernst Twist.

Note: Hugh the Hand described his meeting with Twist to Haplo, to whom we are indebted for the story. Haplo recognized Twist as a serpent from Hugh's description of the peculiar red cast to the man's eyes, as well as the connection between Twist and Sang-drax.

Given the fact that the serpents could not have been long in coming to Arianus, Haplo found it remarkable that Twist had risen this far in the membership in so short a time. He reasons that the serpents, having seen the vast potential of the guild in terms of furthering their own ambitions for plunging the world into chaos, must have gone out of their way to join.

Haplo adds a certain rumor (probably obtained from Hugh the Hand), that an attempt to assassinate Ciang was deliberately staged by the serpents, in order for one of their own to "save" her life and emerge a hero. If this did indeed occur, no record of it exists. Ciang herself would have been far too proud to have publicized it. The fact remains, however, that Ernst Twist rose rapidly in the ranks and is, according to all reports, still rising.

"Sheath to Tip

Make Blade

These terms refer to the various stages of rank of those who join the Brotherhood. A new member — one "whose wound bleeds" — is said to be a "sheath," for, just as a sword remains sheathed, the new assassin's potential is still untried. From "sheath" one moves to "tip" — newly blooded — and then up to "blade," "crossguard," "hilt." Such advancements may take years. How they are determined is kept highly secret, but Ciang presumably has final word. Hugh's rank, "the hand," is highest, next to Ciang's own. She is known as "the arm."

## SPONSORS

Except under certain circumstances, all current applicants to the Brotherhood must have a sponsor. The sponsor is a person who is willing to literally bet his or her life on the new member, for if any of the Brotherhood's rules are broken by the novice, retribution is swift and fatal and falls not only on the newcomer, but also on the one who sponsored him or her.

One might imagine that such a rule would discourage old members from sponsoring new ones, but a very handsome bonus is paid to those who bring in "fresh blood."

In the event that the knife is "sent round" on one member of such a team, the other may claim first right to enact the penalty of death. Such an act may not serve to save the surviving member's life, but he or she will at least be considered by the Brotherhood to have died with honor redeemed.

Teams often work together but are not required to do so. Some may take separate paths and rarely see each other again.

Occasionally, individuals of rare skill and talent are invited by the Brotherhood to join. Hugh the Hand was one of these. A loner by nature, Hugh would never have sought admittance to the Brotherhood on his own. Some say that Ciang herself acted as his sponsor. Others say it was the man known only as the Ancient. Hugh never speaks of it.

A peaceful Arianus will no doubt bring changes to the Assassins' Guild. But the guild's demise is not foreseen. The evil serpents' plot against Arianus has been thwarted for the time being, but not the serpents themselves.

As Sang-drax reminds us, their influence has been felt since the beginning of time and will continue to be felt until time's end. And, until that time, the Brotherhood of the Hand will flourish.

## APPENDIX II

### DEATH GATE

#### SINGULARITIES

A report compiled by Haplo for his lord. Never delivered.

The Jrandin Rheus, as the Sartan called it, took unified creation and sundered it into independent yet interdependent realms. Most Patryns familiar with the Sartan diagrams of the Sundering and the Sundered Realms, however, seem to be led to a false image of the final nature of that structure—that is, as some series of globes neatly connected by arrows and lines floating in nebulous space. It is not surprising. The Sartan loved symmetry and linearity above all and took comfort in picturing their Jrandin Rheus as some beautifully ordered and balanced thing. The details are a great deal more complex and messy, as we well know.

In fact, all of the Sundered Realms exist in the same place. Viewed in terms of the Probability Wave of Patryn Magic, the unified creation that existed before the Jrandin Rheus was harmonically shifted into several different realities. These harmonic realities manifest themselves into the various partitioned realities that we perceive as fire, water, earth, and sky, as well as such special subrealities we know as the Nexus and the Labyrinth.

However, the harmonics of these realities are not entirely separate. The original harmonics that set up the Sundering continue to reverberate between the worlds. Through these harmonics, each of the realms touches the others in special ways that are manifest in our understanding as harmonic paths. These paths take two forms: conduits and Death Gates.

Conduits and Death Gates are quite similar in basic structure but radically different in their form. The basic structure of each is formed by a rotating singularity—a spinning mass of such high gravity that all laws of time, space, and existence have no meaning. It is a place where nothing exists and everything exists. It is a place where perfect chaos and order exist simultaneously in the same space. The contradictions themselves that allow these singularities to essentially be in both disparate existences of different realms at the same time.

The spin of such singularities determines their form (Death Gate or conduit) and their state (barred, open, or stopped).

#### FORM

The form of the harmonic path is determined by the direction and complexity of the spin of the singularity relative to the probability boundary between the two realms. This spin compresses the event horizon surrounding the singularity and gives direction to the Death Gate or conduit.

Death Gates were given a single, simple rotation direction (Figure 1). This configuration from the original magic produced a flattened disk that, as rotation increased, developed a depression on both sides (Figure 3). It was the development of this symmetrical event horizon that gave the Death Gates a stable axis of direction and, eventually, would allow passage from one realm to the next. Due to this symmetry, the Death Gates are stable in both directions of passage. This made the Death Gates ideal for Sartan and mensch to travel between the realms once the Death Gates were open at the Jran-kri.\*

\*A Sartan phrase meaning the third phase of the Sartan plan.

Conduits, however, are created when a singularity is given, or develops on its own, a complex motion relative to the probability boundary between realms. When more than one axis of rotation is involved (Figure 2), the complex event horizon in fast-rotating singularities creates a field allowing one-way passage between realms but offers no way of returning through the same singularity. Conduits were to be utilized to transport raw materials, power, light, and water between the realms at the Jran-kri. It found other uses as well, apparently, for I suspect that one such conduit was used to send our people to the Labyrinth—as well as those Sartan who disagreed with the council under Samah.

## STATE

In addition to their form, each harmonic path also has a state. This state is determined by the speed of its rotation. The higher the speed of the rotation, the more flattened the event horizon of the singularity. The thinner the event horizon at the point of passage, the more defined the direction of travel and the easier the trip.

There are three states mentioned in the Jrandin Rheus, though only the first two are explained.

### Barred

The first state is called barred. This state is created when a singularity rotates "slowly." This rotation rate is quite high compared to the turning of a mill wheel, for example, but is slow compared to the open state. As a Barred Gate, the rotation of the singularity forms a disk with a depression on each side (Figure 3). Through this depression—the thinnest part of the disk—a traveler can pass from one realm to the next. Such passage, however, comes at tremendous personal cost. I, of course, have transited the Death Gate while it was barred. It was not an experience I would care to repeat, for it brings one uncomfortably close to knowledge that one would just as soon forget.

Conduits rotating in the barred state can allow the passage of some people and materials in one direction, as I have stated, but are subject to the same difficulties as the Death Gates. Until these conduits were brought to a full and open state, it would be impossible for the realms to function together.

### Open

At the Jran-kri, the gates and conduits were "open." This means that the relative rotation of the gates and conduits was vastly increased. This resulted in the event horizon of the harmonic paths forming a torus shape with the event horizon surrounding a clear hole of reality bridging the realms (Figure 4). In the region of this bridging reality, all the realms could be linked and traveled. The thoughts of the individual at the time of transition are critical to the transition to the desired destination being properly made. Concentration is vital for a successful passage.

With the conduits open, the interaction of the worlds is set in motion. The conduits widen and allow vastly greater amounts of all kinds of power and materials to move into the next realm. The circuitous design of the realms, as originally planned by the Sartan, allows for the smooth flow of goods and materials. Within a few months, the realms should be productive and functioning well. It is ironic that the Sartan abandoned their experiment before they could taste its fruits.

### Stopped

There is a third state mentioned in the text, a state where the singularities stop rotating altogether (Figure 5). Such a state would, of course, prevent any passage from realm to realm of either personnel or goods.

## Deathgate Singularity Rotation

(Single Directional Rotation)

Figure 1

Conduit Singularity Rotation

(Multidirectional Rotation)

Figure 2

Deathgate Singularity States

Barred Gate

(Slow Rotation)

Figures

Open Gate

(Fast Rotation)

Figure 4

Stopped Gate (No Rotation)

Figures

APPENDIX III

THE KICKSEY-WINSEY

DEMYSTIFIED

This was taken from a monograph based on a speech given by Limbeck Bolttightner, a dwarf of my acquaintance in the Realm of Air. Both intelligent and curious, Limbeck became more and more interested as time went on in the true workings and nature of the Kicksey-winsey. This compilation is almost certainly a mixture of the Kenkari book's observations coupled with the intimate knowledge of the great machine that the dwarves possess.

—HAPLO

In the beginning of all time and creation, there was the Kicksey-winsey. There were also a lot of things before that, but they didn't really matter. It wasn't until the Kicksey-winsey came into being that there was any point or purpose to life. The Mangers, great and terrible beings of the sky, created this most wonderful place and brought we dwarves down to it. Then they left us alone. When they left us alone, they really messed up.

From that time until now, we have continued to struggle, work, and serve the Kicksey-winsey with our lives and our blood. We didn't know why. No one told us what the lever twisting did when we twisted or why bolt tightening was of any consequence. My old friend Balin Purgeflusher—a fine and dedicated dwarf until his untimely accident—had no concept of what he was flushing when he purged.

You, my fellow dwarves, have been born in an age of enlightenment—when we are no longer slaves to the elves nor to the humans nor even to the Mangers who dumped us here like so much garbage. We no longer grovel. We no longer live off the scraps tossed to us by others. Today, we have lifted up our heads and stand tall—as tall as we can in such circumstances—with our elven and human neighbors.

One of the great benefits of this age of enlightenment is that we now have a better understanding of the Kicksey-winsey and its overall purpose. Dwarves from every scrift often ask me, "What is the Kicksey-winsey?" and "Where did it come from?" and "What do all the parts do?" and "When do we eat?" They should be asking, "Why do we have a Kicksey-winsey?" but since I just asked that question, I'll answer all of them—even the one you didn't think to ask.

## WHAT IS THE KICKSEY-WINSEY?

The Kicksey-winsey is a masheen. A masheen is a collection of wheels and turn-knobbies and lever-bangers and tube-zoomers that, when all put together, DO SOMETHING! That is a masheen. When you turn your turny-wheelie, you are helping the masheen to do something.

Just what you are doing is highly dependent upon what part of the Kicksey-winsey you are serving. The diagrammatic map of the Kicksey-winsey—drawn by myself and reproduced here for the first time—should serve to demystificate the mystifying masheen. If you will pay attention and follow along on my map, you will recognize parts of the Kicksey-winsey that you and your family have served for generations.

At its very simplest, a masheen takes stuff called matrels and turns it into poduct-goodys. Matrels are, by themselves, pretty useless stuff. An example of matrels would be the ore brought up by the dig claws from below. To date, the dig claws have been the primary source of matrels for the Kicksey-winsey. However, in a startling revelation, we now know that this ore was only intended to be used for the building of the Kicksey-winsey itself—not for the actual creation of poduct-goodys! The primary source of matrels was to be a location that we know as Wombe. Wombe has traditionally been the home of the Scrift Heads and the High Froman. Perhaps many of you, too, have told jokes about the Froman and how they never really worked and served the Kicksey-winsey. This is because his tasks—the collection of matrels from the Lexax\* through mystical processes understood only vaguely by the Froman through tradition—was not possible to perform until the Alignment of the World. With the lands of all creation\* now brought into harmony, the intended work of the Froman has begun, and at last, all the people of our government are honestly employed.

\*The dwarves' spiritual concepts are limited to the realm of Arianus. They have little conception of an "outside" reality or of other spheres of existence beyond a vague and often self-contradictory mythology of a place called Lexax—a possible derivation from the word Nexus. In trying to convey the notion of importing raw materials from the other realms of existence, this was the only framework in which the dwarves could understand the concept

\*Again, the dwarves' understanding of their universe is limited to their own realm.

From Wombe, these matrels are then distributed via a number of different means to various cities of our acquaintance through a system called Conveyer. Everything from whoosh-wagons, sucker tubes, rip-roads, flushers, and zoomers is utilized to distribute these matrels to their destination. Throughout our history, this movement of raw matrels about the Kicksey-winsey has, of course, been noted but never clearly understood. Various theories regarding its meaning have been forwarded. Groth Staredial's theory, popularly called Blood-winsey,\* though crude, was not far from the truth. The late Throtin Pushpuller's competing theory that the Conveyer was intended to be an alternate transportation system was tragically disproved by his own tests near the Erm Melty-vat only last year. Though too late for Throtin, we now understand this Conveyer as a distribution system for matrels, never intended to transport live dwarves.

\*Staredial's theory involved the notion that the movement of raw materials through the Kicksey-winsey was like the movement of dwarf blood through their veins. Limbeck, an early supporter of Staredial's theory, has a hard time giving it up.

At the same time that the Fromen at Wombe are sending out matrels for each of the scrifts, a second system with the magical and mystical name of trami-sond is at work. This was not always so. In the beginning, the Kicksey-winsey created its own powher with a device called a spinnerator that put water into large holdings. The amount of powher that the spinnerator made, however, was not enough to fulfill the destiny of the Kicksey-winsey. Now, with the Alignment of the Worlds, powher comes from a different

source. Through processes unknown to us, an enput device gathers a mystic force called Powher from the realm of Lexax. This wonderful force is then channeled into a secret place, known only to the Mangers, called the Room of Trol.

(I must interject, for our young audience, that the Room of Trol has no connection to actual trolls. No trolls exist in the Kicksey-winsey, although I have been told that there may be some in remote locations in the Mid Realms. There is no need to panic!)

The Room of Trol then takes the powher and sends it as a tramis down the tramis-sond system. The form of this powher varies from the gas that lights your lamps to the driving force that wheels your wheels in the Kicksey-winsey. Whatever form it takes, powher is the stuff that makes everything in our world work.

When enough matrel and enough powher are brought together in the different scrifts, then the Kicksey-winsey creates—through our help and efforts—a variety of poduct-goodys. Poduct-goodys are riches beyond need. They are everything from tunics and trousers to lamps and forks. They are everything from pillows to hammers. They are chairs, tools, weapons, food, and water. Everything that one could think of that one would want—and a great number you haven't thought of—are poduct-goodys of the Kicksey-winsey.

However, do not be led to the false conclusion that this wealth comes without a price! "Everything has a price, some just hide it better than others."\* There are others who live in the Lexax who exact payment for the matrels and powher that they send to us through enput. They call this tribute that they demand esport. Once the poduct-goodys are finished, we select that which we need and then send the rest—an enormous surplus—through the esport just outside of Het back as tribute to those who are now sending us matrels and powher in such abundance.

\*A dwarf aphorism that is used far too much and heeded far too little.

Why should we send esport, you ask? Well, you probably didn't ask why, but I will. Why should we send esport,\* ask? Because, I answer, if we don't send esport, they'll stop sending emport and powher, and we no longer would get to have new poduct-goodys instead of the garbage the elves used to give us.

The Kicksey-winsey does many other things such as sending water from the holdings to the other realms above us through the Liftalofts and keeping the various continents in line with a series of masheens called linnners.\* I will not be describing them here. They are complex subjects and are probably better dealt with another time.\*

\*While some of the terminology used by the dwarf is modeled after more common words, some of his names have no discernible source other than his own imagination.

\*The truth is that I could never make Limbeck understand runic alignment theory nor even the notion that water—so common a commodity on his own continent—could be of such importance to the upper realms. This is just his way of dodging the issue.

#### WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

Just before the beginning, the Kicksey-winsey was started by the Mangers. The first dwarves, led by the legendary Dunk Pullstarter, were brought to Drevlin by the Mangers and established here. The Kicksey-winsey was started.

The common misconception is that the Kicksey-winsey was always as large as it is now. This is simply not true. In the beginning, the Kicksey-winsey was quite small—some say no larger than a single scrift section—and did nothing but work to increase itself. This was natural. The first part of the purpose for the Kicksey-winsey was to establish and protect itself so that it could eventually fulfill its second, and more important purpose, of serving the dwarves, elves, and humans as well as those who exist in the Lexax.

#### WHAT DO ALL THE PARTS DO?

I have no idea. Neither do you.

The reason we have no idea is that the Kicksey-winsey is so unfathomably huge, so titanically complex, and has been so out of control for so long that it has grown beyond our ability to understand it. Without Mangers and Trollers to direct it, the Kicksey-winsey itself has been taking whatever steps were required for its own brainless survival.

WHY DO WE HAVE THE KICKSEY-WINSEY?

We serve the Kicksey-winsey so that it may serve us. This is the second purpose of the great masheen that we have directed for so many years without any knowledge of why. If we take care of the Kicksey-winsey it will take care of us and that should be enough purpose for any dwarf. It certainly is enough for me.

WHEN DO WE EAT?

Now that the Kicksey-winsey is operating as it was always meant to—whenever we want. That concludes my talk and begins our lunch.

Kicksey - winsey Demystified.

CHAPTER 1

ABARRACH

ABARRACH: WORLD OF STONE, WORLD OF DARKNESS LIT BY THE fires of molten sea, world of stalagmites and stalactites, world of fire dragons, world of poisonous air and sulfurous fumes, world of magic.

Abarrach: world of the dead.

Xar, Lord of the Nexus, and now Lord of Abarrach, sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes. The rune-constructs he was studying were starting to blur together. He'd almost made a mistake—and that was inexcusable. But he had caught himself in time, corrected it. Closing his aching eyes, he went over the construct again in his mind.

Begin with the heart-rune. Connect this sigil's stem to an adjoining rune's base. Inscribe the sigla on the breast, working upward to the head. Yes, that was where he'd gone wrong the first few times. The head was important— vital. Then draw the sigla on the trunk, finally the arms, the legs.

It was perfect. He could find no flaw. In his mind's eye, he imagined the dead body on which he'd been working rising up and living again. A corrupt form of life, admittedly, but a beneficial one. The corpse was far more useful now than it would have been moldering in the ground.

Xar smiled in triumph, but it was a triumph whose life span was shorter than that of his imaginary defunct. His thoughts went something like this:

I can raise the dead.

At least I am fairly certain I can raise the dead.

I can't be sure.

That was the pall over his elation. There were no dead for him to raise. Or rather, there were too many dead. Just not dead enough.

In bitter frustration, Xar slammed his hands down on the elaborately conceived rune-construct. The rune-bones\* went flying, skittering and sliding off the table onto the floor.

\*A game played on Abarrach, similar to an ancient game known on Earth as mah-jongg. The playing pieces are inscribed with the sigla used by both Patryns and Sartan to work their magic. Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

Xar paid no attention to them. He could always put the construct together again. Again and again. He knew it as well as he knew the rune-magic to conjure up water. For all the good it would do him.

Xar needed a corpse. One not more than three days dead. One that hadn't been seized by these wretched lazars.\* Irritably he swept the last few remaining rune-bones to the floor.

\*The Sartan inhabiting Abarrach learned to practice the forbidden art of necromancy, began giving a dreadful type of life to the corpses of their dead. The dead became slaves, working for the living. If the dead

are brought back too soon after death, the soul does not leave the body, but remains tied to it. These Sartan become lazar—fearful beings who inhabit simultaneously both the plane of the living and the realm of the dead. A lazar can find no peace, no rest. Its "life" is constant torment. Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle.

He left the room he used as his study, headed for his private chambers. On his way, he passed by the library. And there was Kleitus, the Dynast, former ruler (until his death) of Necropolis, the largest city on Abarrach. At his death, Kleitus had become a lazar—one of the living dead. Now the Dynast's gruesome form, which was neither dead nor alive, wandered the halls and corridors of the palace that had once been his. The lazar thought it was still his. Xar knew better, but he saw no reason to disabuse Kleitus of the notion.

The Lord of the Nexus steeled himself to speak to the Lord of the Living Dead. Xar had fought many terrible foes during his struggles to free his people from the Labyrinth. Dragons, wolves, snogs, chaodyn—every monster the Labyrinth could create. Xar feared nothing. Nothing living. The lord couldn't help feeling a qualm deep in his bowels when he looked into the hideous, ever-shifting death-mask face of the lazar. Xar saw the hatred in the eyes—the hatred that the dead bore the living of Abarrach.

An encounter with Kleitus was never pleasant. Xar generally avoided the lazar. The lord found it uncomfortable talking to a being who had one thought on his mind: death. Your death.

The sigla on Xar's body glowed blue, defending him from attack. The blue light was reflected in the Dynast's dead eyes, which glittered with disappointment. The lazar had tried once, on Xar's arrival, to kill the Patryn. The battle between the two had been brief, spectacular. Kleitus had never tried it again. But the lazar dreamed of it during the endless hours of his tormented existence. He never failed to mention it when they came together.

"Someday, Xar," said Kleitus, the corpse talking, "I will catch you unawares. And then you will join us."

"...join us," came the unhappy echo of the lazar's soul. The two parts of the dead always spoke together, the soul being just a bit slower than the body.

"It must be nice for you to have a goal still," Xar said somewhat testily. He couldn't help it. The lazar made him nervous. But the lord needed help, information, and Kleitus was the only one—so far as Xar could determine—who might have it. "I have a goal myself. One I would like to discuss with you. If you have the time?" Nervousness made Xar sarcastic.

Try as he might, Xar could not look for long at the lazar's face. It was the face of a corpse—a murdered corpse, for Kleitus had himself been slain by another lazar, had then been brought back to hideous life. The face would sometimes be the face of one long dead, and then suddenly it would be the face of Kleitus as he had been when he was alive. The transformation occurred when the soul moved into the body, struggled to renew life, regain what it had once possessed. Thwarted, the soul flew out of the body, tried vainly to free itself from its prison. The soul's continual rage and frustration gave an unnatural warmth to the chill, dead flesh.

Xar looked at Kleitus, looked away hastily.

"Will you accompany me to the library?" Xar asked with a polite gesture, his gaze anywhere but on the corpse.

The lazar followed willingly. Kleitus had no particular desire to be of assistance to the Lord of the Nexus, as Xar well knew. The lazar came because there was always the possibility that Xar might weaken, inadvertently lower his defenses. Kleitus came because he hoped to murder Xar.

Alone in the room with the lazar, Xar considered briefly summoning another Patryn to stand guard. He immediately abandoned the idea, was aghast at himself for even thinking such a thing. Not only would such

a summons make him appear weak in the eyes of his people—who worshipped him—but he wanted no one else to know the subject of his discussions.

Consequently, though he did so with misgivings, Xar shut the door made of braided kairn grass, marked it with Patryn runes of warding so that it could not be opened. He drew these runes over faded Sartan runes, Sartan magic that had long ago ceased to function.

Kleitus's lifeless eyes sprang suddenly to life, focused on Xar's throat. The dead fingers twitched in anticipation.

"No, no, my friend," Xar said pleasantly. "Another day, perhaps. Or would you like to come again within the circle of my power? Would you like to feel again my magic starting to unravel your existence?"

Kleitus stared at him with unblinking hatred. "What do you want, Lord of the Nexus?"

"...Nexus," came the sad echo.

"I want to sit down," Xar said. "I've had a wearing time of it. Two days and nights on the rune-construct. But I have solved it. I now know the secret to the art of necromancy. I can now raise the dead."

"Congratulations," said Kleitus, and the dead lips curled in a sneer. "You can now destroy your people as we destroyed ours."

Xar let that pass. The lazar tended to have a dark outlook on things. He supposed he couldn't blame them.

The lord took his seat at a large stone table whose top was covered with dusty volumes: a treasure-trove of Sartan lore. Xar had spent as much time studying these works as possible, considering the myriad duties of a lord about to lead his people to war. But this time spent among the Sartan books was minute compared to the years Kleitus had spent. And Xar was at a disadvantage: he was forced to read the material in a foreign language—the Sartan language. Although he had mastered that language while in the Nexus, the task of breaking down the Sartan rune-structure, then rebuilding it into Patryn thought, was exhausting and time-consuming.

Xar could never, under any circumstances, think like a Sartan.

Kleitus had the information Xar needed. Kleitus had delved deep into these books. Kleitus was—or had been—a Sartan himself. He knew. He understood. But how to worm it out of the corpse? That was the tricky part.

Xar wasn't fooled by the lazar's shambling walk and bloodthirsty demeanor. Kleitus was playing a far more subtle game. An army of living, warm-blooded beings had recently arrived on Abarrach—Patrins, brought here by Xar, brought here to train for war. The lazar hungered after these living beings, longed to destroy the life that the dead coveted and at the same time found so abhorrent. The lazar could not fight the Patrins. The Patrins were too powerful.

But it required an immense outlay of the Patrins' magic to sustain life in the darksome caverns of Abarrach. The Patrins were beginning to weaken—ever so slightly. So had the Sartan weakened before them; so had many of the Sartan died.

Time. The dead had time. Not soon, but inevitably, the Patryn magic would start to crumble. And then the lazar would strike. Xar didn't plan to be here that long. He had found what he'd come to Abarrach to find. Now he just needed to determine whether or not he'd really found it.

Kleitus did not sit down. The lazar can never rest in one place long, but are constantly moving, wandering, searching for something they have lost all hope of discovering.

Xar did not look at the animated corpse, shuffling back and forth in front of him. He looked instead at the dusty volumes lying on the table.

"I want to be able to test my knowledge of necromancy," Xar said. "I want to know if I can actually raise the dead."

"What is stopping you?" Kleitus demanded.

"... stopping you?"

Xar frowned. The annoying echo was like a buzzing in his ears, and it always came just when he was about to speak, interrupting him, breaking the chain of his thought.

"I need a corpse. And don't tell me to use my own people. That is out of the question. I personally saved the life of every Patryn I brought with me from the Nexus."

"You gave life," said Kleitus. "You have the right to take it."

"...take it."

"Perhaps," Xar said loudly over the echo. "Perhaps that is true. And if there were more of my people—far more—I might consider it. But our numbers are few and I dare not waste even one."

"What do you want of me, Lord of the Nexus?"

"...Nexus?"

"I was talking to one of the other lazar, a woman named Jera. She mentioned that there were Sartan—living Sartan—still on Abarrach. A man named ... um ..." Xar hesitated, appeared at a loss.

"Balthazar!" Kleitus hissed.

"Balthazar..." mourned the echo.

"Yes, that was the name," Xar said hastily. "Balthazar. He leads them. An early report I received from a man called Haplo—a Patryn who once visited Abarrach—led me to believe that this Sartan Balthazar and his people all perished at your hands. But Jera tells me that this is not true."

"Haplo, yes, I recall him." Kleitus did not seem to find the memory a pleasant one. He brooded for a long moment, the soul flying in, struggling, flying out of the body. He came to a halt in front of Xar, stared at the lord with shifting eyes. "Did Jera tell you what happened?"

Xar found the corpse's gaze disconcerting. "No," he lied, forcing himself to remain seated when it was his instinct to get up and flee to a far corner. "No, Jera did not. I thought perhaps you—"

"The living ran before us." Kleitus resumed his restless walk. "We followed. They could not hope to escape us. We never tire. We need no rest. We need no food. We need no water. At last we had them trapped. They made a pitiable stand before us, planning to fight to save their miserable lives. We had among us their own prince. He was dead. I had brought him back to life myself. He knew what the living had done to the dead. He understood. Only when the living are all dead can the dead be free. He swore he would lead us against his own people.

"We readied for the kill. But then one of our number stepped forward—the husband of this very Jera. He is a lazar. His wife murdered him, raised him up, gave him the power we command. But he betrayed us. Somehow, somewhere, he had found a power of his own. He has the gift of death, as did one other Sartan who came to this world, came through Death's Gate—"

"Who was that?" Xar asked. His interest, which had been lagging through the lazar's long-winded discourse, was suddenly caught.

"I don't know. He was a Sartan, but he had a mensch name," said Kleitus, irritated at the interruption.

"Alfred?"

"Perhaps. What difference does it make?" Kleitus seemed obsessed with telling his tale. "Jera's husband broke the spell that held the prince's corpse captive. The prince's body died. The prison walls of his flesh crumbled. The soul floated free." Kleitus sounded angry, bitter.

"...floated free." The echo was wistful, longing.

Xar was impatient. Gift of death. Sartan nonsense.

"What happened to Balthazar and his people?" he demanded.

"They escaped us," Kleitus hissed. His waxen hands clenched in fury. "We tried to go after them, but Jera's husband was too powerful. He stopped us."

"So there are Sartan still living on Abarrach," Xar said, fingers drumming the table. "Sartan who can provide the corpses I need for my experiments. Corpses who will be troops in my army. Do you have any idea where they are?"

"If we did, they would not still be living," Kleitus said, regarding Xar with hatred. "Would they, Lord of the Nexus?"

"I suppose not," Xar muttered. "This husband of Jera's. Where is he? Undoubtedly he knows how to find the Sartan?"

"I do not know where he has gone. He was in Necropolis until you and your people arrived. He kept us out of our city. Kept me out of my palace. But you appeared, and he left."

"Afraid of me, no doubt," Xar said offhandedly. "He fears nothing, Lord of the Nexus!" Kleitus laughed unpleasantly. "He is the one of whom the prophecy speaks."

"I heard about a prophecy." Xar waved a negligent hand. "Haplo said something about it. He viewed prophecies much as I view them, however. Wishes, nothing more. I give them little credence."

"You should give this one credence, Patryn. So the prophecy is spoken: 'He wilt bring life to the dead, hope to the living, and for him the Gate wilt open.' That is the prophecy. And it has come to pass."

"...come to pass."

"Yes, it has come to pass," Xar echoed the echo. "I am the one who has brought the prophecy to fulfillment. It speaks of me, not some perambulating corpse."

"I think not..."

"...think not."

"Of course it has!" Xar said irritably. "'The Gate will open...' The Gate has opened."

"Death's Gate has opened."

"What other gate is there?" Xar demanded, annoyed and only half-listening, hoping to steer the conversation back to where it had started.

"The Seventh Gate," Kleitus replied.

And this time the echo was silent. Xar glanced up, wondering what was the matter with it.

"Your talk of armies, of conquest, of traveling from world to world... What a waste of time and effort." Kleitus gave a rictus smile, "When all you need to do is step inside the Seventh Gate."

"Indeed?" Xar frowned. "I have been through many gates in my lifetime. What is so special about this one?"

"It was inside this chamber—the Seventh Gate—that the Council of Seven sundered the world."

"...sundered the world."

Xar sat silent. He was stunned. The implications, the possibilities... if Kleitus was right. If he was telling the truth. If this place still existed...

"It exists," said Kleitus,

"Where is this... chamber?" Xar asked, testing, still not entirely believing the lazar.

Kleitus appeared to ignore the question. The lazar turned to face the bookcases that lined the library. His dead eyes—occasionally alight with the flitting soul— searched for something. At last his withered hand, still stained with the blood of those it had murdered, reached out and lifted a small, thin volume. He tossed the book on the desk in front of Xar.

"Read," Kleitus said.

"...read," came the sad refrain.

"It looks like a children's primer," Xar said, examining it with some disdain. He had himself used books like these, found in the Nexus, to teach the Sartan runes to the mensch child Bane.

"It is," said Kleitus. "It comes from the days when our own children were alive and laughing. Read."

Xar studied the book suspiciously. It appeared to be genuine. It was old, extremely old—to judge by the musty smell and brittle, yellowed parchment. Carefully, fearful that the pages might crumble to dust at a touch, he opened the leather cover, read silently to himself.

The Earth was destroyed.

Four worlds were created out of the ruin. Worlds for ourselves and the mensch: Air, Fire, Stone, Water.

Four Gates connect each world to the other: Arianus to Pryan to Abarrach to Chelestra.

A house of correction was built for our enemies: the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth is connected to the other worlds through the Fifth Gate: the Nexus.

The Sixth Gate is the center, permitting entry: the Vortex.

And all was accomplished through the Seventh Gate.

The end was the beginning.

That was the printed text. Beneath, in a crude scrawl, were the words - The beginning was our end.

"You wrote this," Xar guessed.

"In my own blood," Kleitus said.

"...blood."

Xar's hands shook with excitement. He forgot about the Sartan, about the prophecy, about the necromancy. This—this was worth it all!

"You know where the gate is? You will take me there?" Xar rose eagerly to his feet.

"I know. The dead know. And I would be only too happy to take you, Lord of the Nexus..." Kleitus's face writhed, the soul flitting restlessly in and out of the corpse, the hands flexed. "If you met that requirement. Your death could be arranged..."

Xar was in no mood for humor. "Don't be ridiculous. Take me there now. Or, if that is not possible"—the thought came to the lord that perhaps this Seventh Gate was on another world—"tell me where to find it."

Kleitus appeared to consider the matter, then shook his head. "I don't believe I will." "...I will."

"Why not?" Xar was angry. "Call it... loyalty."

"This—from a man who slaughtered his own people!" Xar sneered. "Then why tell me about the Seventh Gate, if you refuse to take me to it?" He had a sudden thought. "You want something in exchange. What?"

"To kill. And keep on killing. To be rid of the smell of warm blood that torments me every moment that I live... and I will live forever! Death is what I want. As to the Seventh Gate, you don't need me to show you. Your minion has been there already. I should think he would have told you."

"...death... you..."

"What minion? Who?" Xar was confounded a moment, then asked, "Haplo?"

"That could be the name." Kleitus was losing interest.

"...name."

"Haplo knows the location of the Seventh Gate!" Xar scoffed. "Impossible. He never mentioned it..."

"He doesn't know," Kleitus responded. "No one living knows. But his corpse would know. It would want to return to that place. Raise up this Haplo's corpse, Lord of the Nexus, and he will lead you to the Seventh Gate."

"I wish I knew your game," Xar said to himself, pretending once more to peruse the child's book, covertly observing the lazar. "I wish I knew what you were after! What is the Seventh Gate to you! And why do you want Haplo? Yes, I see where you're leading me. But so long as it's the same direction I'm traveling..."

Xar shrugged and lifted the book, read aloud.

" 'And all was accomplished through the Seventh Gate.' How? What does that mean, Dynast? Or does it mean anything? It is hard to tell; you Sartan derive so much pleasure out of playing with words."

"I would guess it means a great deal, Lord of the Nexus." A flicker of dark amusement brought real life to the dead eyes. "What that meaning is, I neither know nor care."

Reaching out his hand, its flesh bluish white and dappled with blood, its nails black, Kleitus spoke a Sartan rune, struck the door.

The Patryn sigla protecting the door shattered. Kleitus walked through it and left.

Xar could have held the runes against the Dynast's magic, but the lord didn't want to waste his energy. Why bother? Let the lazar leave. He would obviously be of no further use.

The Seventh Gate. The chamber where the Sartan sundered the world. Who knows what powerful magic exists inside there still? thought Xar.

If, as he claims, Kleitus knows the location of the Seventh Gate, then he doesn't need Haplo to show him. He obviously wants Haplo for his own purposes. Why? True, Haplo eluded the Dynast's clutches, escaped the lazar's murderous rampage, but it seems unlikely that Kleitus would hold a grudge. The lazar loathes all living beings. He wouldn't single out just one unless he had a special reason.

Haplo has something or knows something Kleitus wants. I wonder what? I must keep Haplo to myself, at least until I find out...

Xar picked up the book again, stared at the Sartan runes until he had them memorized. A commotion in the hallway, voices calling his name, disturbed him.

Leaving the desk, Xar crossed the room, opened the door. Several Patryns were roaming up and down the corridor.

"What do you want?"

"My Lord! We've been searching all over!" The woman who had answered paused to catch her breath.

"Yes?" Xar caught her excitement. Patryns were disciplined; they did not ordinarily let their feelings show. "What is it, Daughter?"

"We have captured two prisoners, My Lord. We caught them coming through Death's Gate."

"Indeed! This is welcome news. What—"

"My Lord, hear me!" Under normal circumstances, no Patryn would have dared interrupt Xar. But the young woman was too excited to contain herself. "They are both Sartan. And one of them is—"

"Alfred!" Xar guessed.

"The man is Samah, My Lord."

Samah! Head of the Sartan Council of Seven.

Samah. Who had been held in suspended animation long centuries on Chelestra.

Samah. The very Samah who had brought about the destruction of the worlds.

Samah. Who had cast the Patryns into the Labyrinth.

At that moment, Xar could almost have believed in this higher power Haplo kept yammering about. And Xar could almost have thanked it for giving Samah into his hands.

SAMAH. OF ALL THE WONDERFUL PRIZES. SAMAH. THE SARTAN who had thought up the plot to sunder the world. The Sartan who had sold the idea to his people. The Sartan who had taken their blood and the blood of countless thousands of innocents in payment. The Sartan who had locked the Patryns in the prison hell of the Labyrinth.

"And," Xar said to himself suddenly, his gaze going back to the book, "the Sartan who undoubtedly knows the location of the Seventh Gate! Not only that, but he will probably refuse to tell me where it is or anything about it." Xar rubbed his hands. "I will have the inordinate pleasure of forcing Samah to talk!"

There are dungeons in the palace of stone on Abarrach. Haplo had reported their existence to Xar. Haplo had very nearly died in the dungeons of Abarrach.

Xar hastened through the rat's warren of corridors that led downward to the dungeons—the "catacombs," as they had been euphemistically known during the reign of the Sartan.

What had those early Sartan used the catacombs for? Prisons for the malcontents among the mensch? Or perhaps the Sartan had even tried housing the mensch down here, away from the corrupt atmosphere of the caverns above, the atmosphere that was slowly poisoning every living thing the Sartan had brought with them. According to Haplo's report, there were rooms down here, other rooms besides prison cells. Large rooms, big enough to hold a fair number of people. Sartan runes, traced along the floor, led the way, for those who knew the secrets of their magic.

Torches burned in sconces on the wall. By their light, Xar caught an occasional glimpse of these Sartan runes. Xar spoke a word—a Sartan word—and watched the sigla flicker feebly to life, glow a moment, then die, their magic broken and spent.

Xar chuckled. This was a game he played around the palace, a game of which he never tired. The sigla were symbolic. Like their magic, the power of the Sartan had shone briefly, then died. Broken, spent.

As Samah would die. Xar rubbed his hands together again in anticipation.

The catacombs were empty now. In the days before the accidental creation of the dread lazar, the catacombs had been used to house the dead, both types of dead: those who had been reanimated and those awaiting reanimation. Here they stored the corpses for the three days requisite to being brought back to life. Here, too, were the occasional dead who had already been brought back to life but who had proved a nuisance to the living. Kleitus's own mother had been one of these.

But now the cells were empty. The dead had all been freed. Some had been turned into lazar. Others, dead too long to be of use to the lazar—like the queen mother— were left to wander vaguely around the halls. When the Patryns arrived, such dead had been rounded up, formed into armies. Now they awaited the call to battle.

The catacombs were a depressing place in a world of depressing places. Xar had never liked coming down here, and had not done so after his first brief tour of inspection. The atmosphere was heavy, dank and chill. The smell of decay was rank, lingering on the air. It was even palpable to the taste. The torches sputtered and smoked dismally.

But Xar didn't notice the taste of death today. Or if he did, it left a sweet flavor in his mouth. Emerging from the tunnels into the cellblock, he saw two figures in the shadows, both keeping watch for him. One was the young woman who had summoned him. Marit was her name. He'd sent her on ahead to prepare for his arrival. Although he could not see her clearly in the murky dimness, he recognized her by the sigla glowing faintly blue in the darkness; her magic acting to keep her alive in this world of the living dead. The other figure Xar recognized by the fact that the sigla on this man's skin did not glow. That and the fact that one of his red eyes did.

"My Lord." Marit bowed with deep reverence. "My Lord." The dragon-snake in man's form bowed, too, but never once did the one red eye (the other eye was missing) lose sight of Xar.

Xar didn't like that. He didn't like the way the red eye was always staring at him, as if waiting for the moment the lord would lower his guard, when the red eye could slide swordlike inside. And Xar did not like the lurking laughter he was positive he could see in that one red eye. Oh, its gaze was always deferential, subservient. The laughter was never there when Xar looked into the eye directly. But he always had the feeling that the eye gleamed mockingly the moment he glanced away.

Xar would never let the red eye know it bothered him, made him uneasy. The lord had even gone so far as to make Sang-drax (the dragon-snake's mensch name) his personal assistant. Thus Xar kept his eye on Sang-drax.

"All is in readiness for your visit, Lord Xar." Sang-drax spoke with the utmost respect. "The prisoners are in separate cells, as you commanded."

Xar peered down the row of cells. It was difficult to see by the feeble light from the torches—they too seemed to be coughing in the ruinous air. Patryn magic could have lit this foul place as bright as day on the sunny world of Pryan, but the Patryns had learned from bitter experience that one didn't waste one's magic on such luxuries. Besides, having come from the dangerous realm of the Labyrinth, most Patryns felt more at ease under the protection of darkness.

Xar was displeased. "Where are the guards I ordered?" He looked at Marit. "These Sartan are tricky. They might well be able to break free of our spells."

She glanced at Sang-drax. Her glance wasn't friendly; she obviously disliked and distrusted the dragon-snake. "I was going to post them, My Lord. But this one prevented me."

Xar turned a baleful gaze on Sang-drax. The dragon-snake in Patryn form gave a deprecating smile, spread his hands. Patryn runes adorned the backs of those hands, similar in appearance to the runes tattooed on Xar's hands and on Marit's. But the sigla on Sang-drax's hands didn't glow. If another Patryn attempted to read them, the runes wouldn't make any sense. They were strictly for show; they had no meaning. Sang-drax was not a Patryn.

Just what he was Xar wasn't certain. Sang-drax called himself a "dragon," claimed he came from the world of Chelestra, claimed he and others of his kind were loyal to Xar, living only to serve Xar and further his cause. Haplo referred to these creatures as dragon-snakes, insisting that they were treacherous, not to be trusted.

Xar saw no reason to doubt the dragon or dragon-snake or whatever it was. In serving Xar, Sang-drax was only showing good sense. Still, the lord didn't like that unblinking red eye, or the laughter that wasn't in it now but almost certainly would be when Xar's back was turned.

"Why did you countermand my orders?" Xar demanded.

"How many Patryns would you require to guard the great Samah, Lord Xar?" Sang-drax asked. "Four? Eight? Would even that number be sufficient? This is the Sartan who sundered a world!" -

"And so we have no guards to guard him. That makes sense!" Xar snorted.

Sang-drax smiled in appreciation of the humor, was immediately serious again. "He is under constraint now. A mensch child could guard him, in his state."

Xar was worried. "He is injured?"

"No, My Lord. He is wet."

"Wet!"

"The sea water of Chelestra, My Lord. It nullifies the magic of your kind." The voice lingered over the last two words.

"How did Samah come to soak himself in sea water before entering Death's Gate?"

"I cannot imagine, Lord of the Nexus. But it proved most fortuitous."

"Humpf! Well, he will dry out. And then he will need guards—"

"A waste of manpower, My Lord Xar. Your people are few in number and have so many matters of urgent importance to deal with. Preparing for your journey to Pryan—"

"Ah, so I am going to Pryan, am I?"

Sang-drax appeared somewhat confused. "I thought that was my lord's intent. When we discussed the matter, you said—"

"I said I would consider going to Pryan." Xar eyed the dragon-snake narrowly. "You seem to be unusually interested in getting me to that particular world. Is there any special reason, I wonder?"

"My lord has said himself that the tytans of Pryan would make formidable additions to his army. And, in addition, I think it quite likely that you might find the Seventh Gate on—"

"The Seventh Gate? How did you come to find out about the Seventh Gate?"

Sang-drax was now definitely confused.

"Why... Kleitus told me you were searching for it, Lord."

"He did, did he?"

"Yes, Lord. Just now."

"And what do you know of the Seventh Gate?"

"Nothing, Lord, I assure you—"

"Then why are you discussing it?"

"The lazar brought it up. I was only—"

"Enough!" Xar had rarely been so angry. Was he the only person around here who didn't know about the Seventh Gate? Well, that would soon end.

"Enough," Xar repeated, casting a sidelong glance at Marit. "We will speak of this matter later, Sang-drax. After we have dealt with Samah. I trust I will receive many of the answers to my questions from him. Now, as to guards—"

"Allow me to serve you, Lord. I will use my own magic to guard the prisoners. That will be all you need."

"Are you saying that your magic is more powerful than ours? Than Patryn magic?" Xar asked the question in a mild tone. A dangerous tone, to those who knew him.

Marit knew him. She drew a step or two away from Sang-drax.

"It is not a question of whose magic is more powerful, My Lord," Sang-drax replied humbly. "But let us face facts. The Sartan have learned to defend against Patryn magic, just as you, My Lord, can defend against theirs. The Sartan have not learned to fight our magic. We defeated them on Chelestra, as you will remember, Lord—"

"Just barely."

"But that was before Death's Gate had been opened, My Lord. Our magic is much more powerful now." Again the threatening softness. "I was the one who captured these two."

Xar looked at Marit, who confirmed this fact with a nod. "Yes," she conceded. "He brought them to us, where we stood guard, at the gates of Necropolis."

The Lord of the Nexus pondered. Despite Sang-drax's protestations, Xar didn't like the implied conceit of the dragon-snake's statement. The lord also didn't like admitting that the creature had a point. Samah. The great Samah. Who among the Patryns could guard him effectively? Only Xar himself.

Sang-drax appeared ready to argue further, but Xar cut the dragon-snake's words short with an impatient wave of his hand. "There is only one sure way to prevent Samah's escape, and that is to kill him."

Sang-drax demurred. "But surely you require information from him, My Lord..."

"Indeed," Xar said with smooth satisfaction. "And I will have it—from his corpse!"

"Ah!" Sang-drax bowed. "You have acquired the art of necromancy. My admiration is boundless, Lord of the Nexus."

The dragon-snake sidled closer; the red eye gleamed in the torchlight. "Samah will die, as you command, My Lord. But—there is no need for haste. Surely he should suffer as your people have suffered. Surely he should be made to endure at least a portion of the torment your people have been made to endure."

"Yes!" Xar drew in a shivering breath. "Yes, he will suffer. I will personally—"

"Permit me, My Lord," Sang-drax begged. "I have a rather special talent for such things. You will watch. You will be pleased. If not, you have only to take my place."

"Very well." Xar was amused. The dragon-snake was almost panting with eagerness. "I want to speak to him first, though. Alone," he added, when Sang-drax started to accompany him. "You will wait for me here. Marit will take me to him."

"As you wish, My Lord." Sang-drax bowed again. Straightening, he added in solicitous tones, "Be careful, My Lord, not to get any of the sea water on yourself."

Xar glowered. He looked away, looked back quickly, and it seemed to him that the red eye glinted with laughter.

The Lord of the Nexus made no reply. Turning on his heel, he stalked down the row of empty cells. Marit walked beside him. The sigla on the arms and hands of both Patryns glowed with a blue-red light that was not entirely acting in response to the poisonous atmosphere of Abar-rach.

"You don't trust him, do you, Daughter?"\* Xar asked his companion.

\*Marit is not his daughter in the literal sense of the word. Xar considers all Patryns his children, since he was the one who brought them forth out of the darkness of the Labyrinth. It is not known whether Xar fathered

any natural children of his own. If so, the youngest would be old by Patryn standards, at least past their Seventieth Gate. Since few Patryns trapped in the Labyrinth live even half that long, we must assume that Xar's true children, if he had any, are long since dead.

"It is not for me to trust or distrust anyone whom my lord chooses to favor," Marit answered gravely. "If my lord trusts this creature, I trust my lord's judgment."

Xar nodded in approval of the answer. "You were a Runner,\* I believe?"

\*Those who live in the Labyrinth are divided into two categories: Runners and Squatters. Runners live and travel alone, their only object to escape the Labyrinth. Squatters live in large groups. Their object is also escape, but they place greater value on the survival and perpetuation of their race.

"Yes, My Lord."

Slowing his steps, Xar laid his gnarled hand on the young woman's smooth, tattooed skin. "So was I. We didn't either of us survive the Labyrinth by trusting in anything or anyone other than ourselves, did we, Daughter?"

"No, My Lord." She seemed relieved.

"You will keep your eye on this one-eyed snake, then."

"Certainly, My Lord."

Noticing Xar glancing around impatiently, Marit added, "Samah's cell is down here, My Lord. The other prisoner is being held at the opposite end of the cellblock. I deemed it wise not to put them too close together, although the other prisoner appears harmless."

"Yes, I forgot there were two. What about this other prisoner? Is he a bodyguard? Samah's son?"

"Hardly that, My Lord." Marit smiled, shook her head. "I'm not even certain he's a Sartan. If he is, he's deranged. Odd," she added, thoughtfully, "but if he were a Patryn, I would say he suffers from Labyrinth sickness."

"Probably an act. If the man was mad, which I doubt, the Sartan would never permit him to be seen in public. It might harm their status as demigods. What does he call himself?"

"A bizarre name. Zifnab."

"Zifnab!" Xar pondered. "I've heard that before... Bane spoke... Yes, in regard to—" Casting a sharp look at Marit, Xar shut his mouth. "My Lord?"

"Nothing important, Daughter. I was thinking out loud. Ah, I see we are nearing our destination."

"Here is the cell of Samah, My Lord." Marit gave the man inside a cool, dispassionate glance. "I will return to guard our other prisoner."

"I think the other will get along well enough on his own," Xar suggested mildly. "Why not keep our snaky friend company?" He motioned with his head back toward the opening of the cellblock tunnels, where Sangdrax stood watching them. "I do not want to be disturbed in my conversation with the Sartan."

"I understand, My Lord." Marit bowed and left, walking back down the long, dark corridor flanked by rows of empty cells.

Xar waited until she had reached the end and was speaking to the dragon-snake. When the red eye turned upon Marit and away from Xar, the Lord of the Nexus approached the prison cell and looked inside.

Samah, head of the Sartan governing body known as the Council of Seven, was—in terms of years—far older than Xar. Yet because of his magical sleep—one which had been supposed to last only a decade but had inadvertently lasted centuries—Samah was a man in the prime of middle age.

Strong, tall, he had once had hard, chiseled features and a commanding air. Now the sallow skin sagged from his bones; the muscles hung loose and flaccid. The face, which should have been lined with wisdom and experience, was creviced, haggard, and drawn. Samah sat listlessly on the cold stone bed, his head and shoulders bowed in dejection, despair. His robes, his skin were sopping wet.

Xar clasped his hands around the bars, drew close for a better look. The Lord of the Nexus smiled.

"Yes," he said softly, "you know what fate awaits you, don't you, Samah? There is nothing quite as bad as the fear, the anticipation. Even when the pain comes—and your death will be very painful, Sartan, I assure you—it won't be as bad as the fear."

Xar gripped the bars harder. The blue sigla tattooed on the backs of his gnarled hands were stretched taut; the enlarged knuckles were as white as exposed bone. He could scarcely draw breath; for long moments he couldn't speak. He had not thought to feel such passion in the presence of his enemy, but suddenly all the years—years of battle and suffering, years of fear—returned to him.

"I wish"—Xar almost choked on his words—"I wish I could let you live a long, long time, Samah! I wish I could let you live with that fear, as my people have lived with it. I wish I could let you live centuries!"

The iron bars dissolved beneath Xar's squeezing hands. He never noticed. Samah had not raised his head, did not look up at his tormentor. He sat in the same attitude, but now his hands clenched.

Xar entered the cell, stood over him.

"You can't escape the fear, never for a moment. Not even in sleep. It's there in your dreams. You run and run and run until you think your heart must burst and then you wake and you hear the terrifying sound that woke you and you get up and you run and run and run... all the time knowing it is hopeless. The claw, the tooth, the arrow, the fire, the bog, the pit will claim you in the end.

"Our babies suck fear in their mother's milk. Our babies don't cry. From the moment of birth, they're taught to keep quiet—out of fear. Our children do not laugh either. Who knows who might be listening?"

"You have a son, I am told. A son who laughs and cries. A son who calls you 'Father,' a son who smiles like his mother."

A shiver crawled over Samah's body. The lord didn't know what nerve he had hit, but he reveled in the discovery and kept probing.

"Our children rarely know their own parents. A kindness—one of the few we can do for them. That way they don't become attached to their parents. It doesn't hurt so much when they find them dead. Or watch them die."

Xar's hatred and fury were slowly suffocating him. There wasn't enough air in Abarrach to sustain him. Blood beat in his head, and the lord feared for an instant that his heart might rupture. He raised his head and howled, a savage scream of anguish and rage that was like the heart's blood bursting from his mouth.

The howl was horrifying to hear. It reverberated through the catacombs, growing louder by some trick of the acoustics, and stronger, as if the dead in Abarrach had picked it up and were adding their own fearful cries to those of the Lord of the Nexus.

Marit blanched and gasped and shrank in terror against the chill wall of the prison. Sang-drax himself appeared taken aback. The red eye shifted uneasily, darting swift glances into the shadows, as if seeking some foe.

Samah shuddered. The scream might have been a spear driven through his body. He closed his eyes.

"I wish I didn't need you!" Xar gasped. Foam frothed his mouth; spittle hung from his lips. "I wish I didn't need the information you have locked in that black heart. I would take you to the Labyrinth. I would let you hold the dying children, as I have held them. I would let you whisper to them, as I have whispered: 'All will be well. Soon the fear will end.' And I would let you feel the envy, Samah! The envy when you gaze down upon that cold, peaceful face and know that, for this little child, the fear is over. While for you, it has just begun..."

Xar was calm now. His fury was spent. He felt a great weariness, as if he had spent hours fighting a powerful foe. The lord actually staggered as he took a step, was forced to lean against the stone wall of the prison cell.

"But unfortunately, I do need you, Samah. I need you to answer a... question." Xar wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his robe, wiped the chill sweat from his face. He smiled, a mirthless, bloodless smile, "I hope, I sincerely hope, Samah, Head of the Council of Seven, that you choose not to answer!"

Samah lifted his head. The eyes were sunken, the skin livid. He looked truly as if he were impaled on his enemy's spear. "I do not blame you for your hatred. We never meant..." He was forced to pause, lick dry lips. "We never meant any of the suffering. We never meant for the prison to turn deadly. It was to be a test... Don't you understand?"

Samah gazed at Xar in earnest appeal. "A test. That was all. A difficult test. One meant to teach you humility, patience. One meant to diminish your aggression..."

"Weaken us," Xar said softly.

"Yes," said Samah, slowly lowering his head. "Weaken you."

"You feared us."

"We feared you."

"You hoped we would die..."

"No." Samah shook his head.

"The Labyrinth became the embodiment of that hope. A secret hope. A hope you dared not admit, even to yourselves. But it was whispered into the words of magic that created the Labyrinth. And it was that secret, terrible hope that gave the Labyrinth its evil power."

Samah did not answer. He sat again with his head bowed.

Xar shoved himself away from the wall. Coming to stand in front of Samah, the lord put his hand beneath the Sartan's jaw, wrenched his head up and back, forced Samah to look up.

Samah flinched. He wrapped his hands around the old man's wrists, tried to free himself from the lord's grasp. But Xar was powerful. His magic was intact. The blue runes flared. Samah gasped in agony, snatched his hands away as if he had touched burning cinders.

Xar's thin fingers bit deeply and painfully into the Sartan's jaw.

"Where is the Seventh Gate?"

Samah stared, shocked, and Xar was pleased to see—at last—fear in the Sartan's eyes.

"Where is the Seventh Gate?" He squeezed Samah's face.

"I don't know... what you're talking about," Samah was forced to mumble.

"I'm so glad," Xar said pleasantly. "For now I will have the pleasure of teaching you. And you will tell me."

Samah managed to shake his head. "I'll die first!" he gasped.

"Yes, you probably will," Xar agreed. "And then you'll tell me. Your corpse will tell me. I've learned the art, you see. The art you came here to learn. I'll teach you that, too. Though it will be rather late to do you much good."

Xar released his hold, wiped his hands on his robes. He didn't like the feel of the sea water, could already notice it starting to weaken the rune-magic. Turning tiredly, he walked out of the cell. The iron bars sprang back into place as he passed by.

"My only regret is that I lack the strength to instruct you myself. But one waits who, like me, also wants revenge. You know him, I believe. He was instrumental in your capture."

Samah was on his feet. His hands clasped the bars of the cell. "I was wrong! My people were wrong! I admit it. I can offer no excuse, except that maybe we do know what it is like to live in fear. I see it now. Alfred, Orla... Orla." Samah closed his eyes in pain, drew a deep breath. "Orla was right."

Opening his eyes, gazng intently at Xar, Samah shook the bars of his cell. "But we have a common enemy. An enemy who will destroy us all. Destroy both our peoples, destroy the mensch!"

"And that enemy would be?" Xar was toying with his victim.

"The dragon-snakes! Or whatever form they take. And they can take any form they choose, Xar. That is what makes them so dangerous, so powerful. That Sang-drax. The one who captured me. He is one of them."

"Yes, I know," said Xar. "He has been very useful."

"You are the one being used!" Samah cried in frustration. He paused, trying desperately to think of some way to prove his point. "Surely one of your own would have warned you. That Patryn, the young man. The one who came to Chelestra. He discovered the truth about the dragon-snakes. He tried to warn me. I didn't listen. I didn't believe. I opened Death's Gate. He and Alfred... Haplo! That's the name he called himself. Haplo."

"What do you know of Haplo?" Xar asked in a low voice.

"He learned the truth," Samah said grimly. "He tried to make me see it. Surely, he must have told it to you, his lord."

"So this is the thanks I get, is it, Haplo?" Xar asked the dark shadows. This is gratitude for saving your life, my son. Betrayal.

"Your plot failed, Samah," Xar said coolly. "Your attempt to subvert my faithful servant failed. Haplo told me everything. He admitted everything. If you're going to speak, Sartan, speak to some purpose. Where is the Seventh Gate?"

"Haplo obviously didn't tell you everything," Samah said, lip curling. "Otherwise you would know the answer to your question. He was there. He and Alfred, at least so I gathered from something Alfred said. Apparently your Haplo trusts you no more than my Alfred trusts me. I wonder where we went wrong..."

Xar was stung, though he took care not to show it. Haplo again! Haplo knows. And I don't! It was maddening.

"The Seventh Gate," Xar repeated as if he hadn't heard.

"You're a fool," Samah said tiredly. Letting loose of the bars, he lapsed back on the stone bench. "You're a fool. As I was a fool. You doom your people." He sighed. His head sank into his hands. "As I have doomed mine."

Xar made a sharp, beckoning gesture. Sang-drax hastened down the dank and gloomy corridor.

The lord was having a difficult time. He wanted Samah to suffer, of course, but he also wanted Samah dead. Xar's fingers twitched. He was already drawing, in his own mind, the runes of necromancy that would begin the terrible resurrection.

Sang-drax entered the Sartan's cell. Samah did not look up, though Xar saw the Sartan's body stiffen involuntarily, bracing to endure what was coming.

What was coming? Xar wondered. What would the dragon-snake do? Curiosity made the lord forget momentarily his eagerness to see it all end.

"Commence," he said to Sang-drax.

The dragon-snake made no move. He did not raise his hand against Samah, did not summon fire or conjure steel. Yet suddenly Samah's head jerked up. He stared at something only he could see, his eyes widening in horror. He raised his hands, tried to use the Sartan runes to defend himself, but since he was wet with the magic-nullifying sea water of Chelestra, the magic would not work.

And perhaps it would not have worked anyway, for Samah was fighting a foe of his own mind, an enemy from somewhere in the depths of his own consciousness, brought to life by the insidious talents of the dragon-snake.

Samah screamed and leapt to his feet and flung himself against the stone wall in an effort to escape.

There was no escape. He staggered as beneath a tremendous blow, screamed again—this time in pain. Perhaps sharp talons were rending his skin. Perhaps fangs had torn his flesh or an arrow had thudded into his breast. He sank to the floor, writhing in agony. And then he shuddered and lay still.

Xar watched a moment, frowned. "Is he dead?" The lord was disappointed. Though he could commence his rune-magic now, death had come too quickly, been too easy.

"Wait!" the dragon-snake cautioned. He spoke a word in Sartan.

Samah sat up, clutching a wound that was not there. He stared around in terror, remembering. He gave a low, hollow cry, ran to the other side of his cell. Whatever was attacking him struck again. And again.

Xar listened to the Sartan's fearful screams, nodded in satisfaction.

"How long will this go on?" he asked Sang-drax, who was lounging back against a wall, watching, smiling.

"Until he dies—truly dies. Fear, exhaustion, terror will eventually kill him. But he'll die without a mark on his body. How long? That depends on your pleasure, Lord Xar."

Xar ruminated. "Let it continue," he decided finally. "I will go and question the other Sartan. He may be far more willing to talk with the yells of his compatriot ringing in his ears. When I return, I will ask Samah one more time about the Seventh Gate. Then you may finish it."

The dragon-snake nodded. After taking another moment to watch Samah's body twitch and jerk in agony, Xar left the Sartan's cell, proceeding down the corridor to where Marit waited in front of the cell of the other Sartan.

The one called Zifnab.

## CHAPTER 3

### ABARRACH

THE OLD MAN HUDDLED IN HIS CELL. HE LOOKED PATHETIC AND rather pale. Once, when a bubbling cry of excruciating torment was wrenched from Samah, the old man shuddered and put the tip of his yellowed white beard to his eyes. Xar watched from the shadows, deciding that this wretched relic would probably collapse into a trembling heap if the lord stamped his foot at him.

Xar approached the cell, signed Marit to use her rune-magic to remove the bars.

The old man's wet robes clung to his pitifully thin body. His hair trailed in a sodden mass down his back. Water dripped from the straggly beard. On the stone bed beside him was a battered pointed hat. The old man had from all appearances been attempting to wring the water from the hat, which had a twisted and maltreated look about it. Xar stared hard and suspiciously at the hat, thinking it might be a hidden source of power. He received the odd impression that it was sulking.

"That is your friend you hear screaming," said Xar conversationally, sitting down beside the old man, taking care to keep himself from getting wet.

"Poor Samah," the old man said, trembling. "There are those who would say he deserves this, but"—his voice softened—"he was only doing what he believed to be right. Much as you have done, Lord of the Nexus."

The old man lifted his head, looked intently at Xar with a disconcertingly shrewd expression. "Much as you have done," he repeated. "If only you'd left it there. If only he'd left it there." He inclined his head in the direction of the screams and gave a gentle sigh.

Xar frowned. This wasn't precisely what he'd had in mind. "The same thing will be happening to you shortly, Zifnab—"

"Where?" The old man peered around curiously.

"Where what?" Xar was growing irritated.

"Zifnab! I thought"—the old man looked deeply offended—"I thought this was a private cell."

"Don't try any of your tricks on me, old fool. I won't fall for them... as did Haplo," Xar said.

Samah's cries ceased for a moment, then began again.

The old man was regarding Xar with a blank expression, waiting for the lord to proceed. "Who?" he asked politely.

Xar was strongly tempted to commence torturing him right then and there. He contained himself by a great effort of will. "Haplo. You met him in the Nexus, beside the Final Gate, the gate that leads to the Labyrinth. You were seen and overheard, so don't play stupid."

"I never play stupid!" The old man drew himself up haughtily. "Who saw me?"

"A child. His name is Bane. What do you know about Haplo?" Xar asked patiently.

"Haplo. Yes, I do seem to remember." The old man was growing anxious. He stretched out a wet and shaking hand. "Youngish chap. Blue tattoos. Keeps a dog?"

"Yes," Xar growled, "that is Haplo."

The old man grabbed Xar's hand, shook it heartily. "You will give him my regards—"

Xar yanked his hand away. The lord stared at his skin, displeased to note the weakening of the sigla wherever the water touched them.

"So I arrive to give Haplo—a Patryn—the regards of a Sartan." Xar wiped his hand on his robes. "Then he is a traitor, as I have long suspected."

"No, Lord of the Nexus, you are mistaken," said the old man earnestly and rather sadly. "Of all the Patrins, Haplo is the most loyal. He will save you. He will save your people, if you will let him."

"Save me?" Xar was lost in astonishment. Then the lord smiled grimly. "He had better look to saving himself. As you should do, Sartan. What do you know about the Seventh Gate?"

"The citadel," the old man said.

"What?" Xar asked with feigned carelessness. "What did you say about the citadel?"

The old man opened his mouth, was about to reply, when he suddenly let out a shriek, as though he'd been kicked. "What did you do that for?" he demanded, whirling around and confronting empty air. "I didn't say anything. Well, of course, but I thought that you... Oh, very well."

Looking sullen, he turned back around, jumped when he saw Xar. "Oh, hullo. Have we met?"

"What about the citadel?" Xar recalled hearing something about a citadel, but he couldn't remember what.

"Citadel?" The old man looked vague. "What citadel?"

Xar heaved a sigh. "I asked about the Seventh Gate and you mentioned the citadel."

"It's not there. Definitely not there," the old man said, nodding emphatically. Twiddling his thumbs, he looked nervously around his cell, then said loudly, "Pity about Bane."

"What about Bane?" Xar questioned, eyes narrowing.

"Dead, you know. Poor child."

Xar couldn't speak, he was so amazed. The old man kept rambling on.

"Some would say it wasn't his fault. Considering the way he was raised and all that. Loveless childhood. Father an evil wizard. Boy didn't stand a chance. I don't buy that!" The old man looked extremely fierce. "That's the problem with the world. No one wants to take responsibility for his actions anymore. Adam

blames the apple-eating incident on Eve. Eve says the serpent made her do it. The serpent claims that it's God's fault for putting the tree there in the first place. See there? No one wants to take responsibility."

Somehow Xar had lost control of the situation. He was no longer even enjoying Samah's tormented screams. "What about Bane?" he demanded.

"And you!" the old man shouted. "You've smoked forty packs of cigarettes a day since you were twelve and now you're blaming a billboard for giving you lung cancer!"

"You are a raving lunatic!" Xar started to turn away. "Kill him," he ordered Marit. "We'll learn nothing from this fool while he's alive..."

"What were we talking about? Ah, Bane." The old man sighed, shook his head. He looked at Marit. "Would you care to hear about him, my dear?"

Marit silently asked Xar, who nodded.

"Yes," she said, seating herself gingerly beside the old man.

"Poor Bane." He sighed. "But it was all for the best. Now there will be peace on Arianus. And soon the dwarves will be starting up the Kicksey-winsey..."

Xar had heard enough. He stormed out of the cell. He was very nearly irrational with fury—a drunken sensation he didn't like. He forced himself to think logically. The flame of his anger was quenched, as if someone had shut off one of the gas jets that gave light to this palace of tomb-like darkness. He beckoned to Marit.

She left the old man, who in her absence continued talking to his hat.

"I don't like what I am hearing about Arianus," Xar said in a low voice. "I don't believe the doddering old fool, but I have long sensed that something was wrong. I should have heard from Bane before now. Travel to Arianus, Daughter. Find out what is going on. But be careful to take no action! Do not reveal yourself—to anyone!"

Marit gave a brief nod.

"Prepare for the journey," Xar continued, "then come to my chambers for your final instructions. You will use my ship. You know how to navigate Death's Gate?"

"Yes, Lord," Marit answered. "Shall I send someone down here to take my place?"

Xar considered. "Send one of the lazar. Not Kleitus," he added hastily. "One of the others. I may have some questions for them when it comes time to raise Samah's body."

"Yes, Lord." Marit bowed respectfully and left.

Xar remained, glaring into Zifnab's cell. The old man had apparently forgotten the Patryn's existence. Rocking from side to side, Zifnab was snapping his fingers and singing to himself. "Tin a soul man. Ba-dop, da-ba-dop, da-ba-dop, da-ba-dop. Yes, I'm a soul man..."

Xar hurled the cell bars back into place with grim delight.

"I'll find out from your corpse who you really are, old fool. And you'll tell me the truth about Haplo."

Xar strode back down the corridor toward Samah's cell. The screams had ceased for the moment. The dragon-snake was peering in through the bars. Xar came up behind him.

Samah lay on the floor. He appeared near death; his skin was clay-colored and glistened with sweat. He was breathing spasmodically. His body twitched and jerked.

"You're killing him," Xar observed.

"He proved weaker than I thought, Lord," Sang-drax said apologetically. "However, I could dry him off, permit him to heal himself. He would still be weak, probably too weak to attempt to escape. However, there would be a danger—"

"No." Xar was growing bored. "I need information. Rouse him enough that I may speak to him."

The bars of the cell dissolved. Sang-drax walked inside, prodded Samah with the toe of his boot. The Sartan groaned and flinched. Xar stepped in. Kneeling beside Samah's body, the Lord of the Nexus put his hands on either side of the Sartan's head and raised it from the ground. The lord's touch was not gentle; long nails dug into Samah's gray flesh, leaving glistening trails of blood.

Samah's eyes wrenched open. He stared at the lord and shivered in terror, but there was no recognition in the Sartan's eyes. Xar shook the man's head, dug his fingers to the bone.

"Know me! Know who I am!"

Samah's only reaction was to gasp for breath. There was a rattling in his throat. Xar knew the signs.

"The Seventh Gate! Where is the Seventh Gate?"

Samah's eyes widened. "Never meant... Death... Chaos! What... went wrong..."

"The Seventh Gate!" Xar persisted.

"Gone." Samah shut his eyes, spoke feverishly. "Gone. Sent it... away. No one knows... Rebels... Might try... undo... Sent it..."

A bubble of blood broke on Samah's lips. His eyes fixed in his head, staring in horror at something only he could see.

Xar dropped the head. It fell limp and unresisting, struck the stone floor with a crack. The lord laid his hand on Samah's inert chest, put his fingers on the Sartan's wrist. Nothing.

"He is dead," Xar said, cool with controlled excitement. "And his last thoughts are of the Seventh Gate. Sent the Gate away, he claims! What nonsense. He proved stronger than you thought, Sang-drax. He had the strength to continue this deceit to the end. Now, quickly!"

Xar ripped apart Samah's wet robes, laying bare the still chest. Producing a dagger—its blade was marked with runes—the lord set the sharp tip over Samah's heart and pierced the skin. Blood, warm and crimson, flowed from beneath the knife's sharp edge. Working swiftly and surely, repeating the sigla beneath his breath as he drew them on the skin, Xar used the knife to carve the runes of necromancy into Samah's dead flesh.

The skin grew cool beneath the lord's hand; the blood flowed more sluggishly. The dragon-snake stood nearby, watching, a smile lighting the one good eye. Xar did not look up from his work. At the sound of footsteps approaching, the Lord of the Nexus said merely, "Lazar? Are you here?"

"I am here," intoned a voice.

"...am here," came the sighing echo.

"Excellent."

Xar sat back. His hands were covered with blood; the dagger was dark with it. Lifting his hand above Samah's heart, Xar spoke a word. The heart-rune flashed blue. Fast as lightning, the magic spread from the heart-sigil to the sigil touching it, from that sigil to the one touching it, and soon blue light was flickering and dancing all over the body.

An eerie, glowing form wavered into being near the body, as if the dead man's shadow were made of light instead of darkness. Xar drew in a shivering breath of awe. This pallid image was the phantasm—the ethereal, immortal part of every living being, what the mensch called the "soul."

The phantasm tried to pull away from the body, tried to free itself, but it was caught in the husk of chill and bloody flesh and could only writhe in an agony comparable to that experienced by the body when it had lived in torment.

Suddenly the phantasm disappeared. Xar frowned, but then saw the dead eyes pathetically lit from within: a mockery of life, the spirit joining momentarily with the body.

"I have done it!" Xar cried in exaltation. "I have done it! I have brought life back to the dead!"

But now what to do with it? The lord had never seen one of the dead raised; he had only heard descriptions from Haplo. Appalled and sickened by what he had seen, Haplo had kept his descriptions brief.

Samah's dead body sat bolt upright. He had become a lazar.

Startled, Xar fell back a step. He caused the runes on his skin to glow bright red and blue. The lazar are powerful beings who come back to life with a terrible hatred of all things living. A lazar has the strength of one who is past feeling pain and fatigue.

Naked, his body covered with bloody tracings of Patryn sigla, Samah stared around in confusion, the dead eyes occasionally flickering with pitiable life when the phantasm flitted inside.

Shaken by his triumph, overawed, the lord needed time to think, to calm himself. "Lazar, say something to it." Xar motioned, his hands trembling with excitement. "Speak to it." He drew back against a far wall to watch and to exult in his achievement.

The lazar, a man, obediently stepped forward. Before death—which had obviously come by violence, to judge by the cruel marks still visible on the corpse's throat—the man had been young and comely. Xar paid scant attention to the lazar beyond a brief glance to assure himself that it wasn't Kleitus.

"You are one of my people," said the lazar to Samah. "You are Sartan."

"I am... I was," said the voice of the corpse.

"I am... I was," came the dismal echo from the trapped phantasm.

"Why did you come to Abarrach?"

"To learn necromancy."

"You traveled here to Abarrach," repeated the lazar, its voice a lifeless monotone, "to learn the art of necromancy. To use the dead as slaves to the living."

"I did... I did."

"And you know now the hatred the dead bear for the living, who keep them in bondage. For you see, do you not? You see... freedom..."

The phantasm coiled and wrenched in a futile attempt to escape. The hatred on the face of the corpse as it turned its sightless—yet all too clear-seeing—eyes to Xar caused even the Patryn to blanch.

"You, lazar," the Lord of the Nexus interrupted harshly, "what are you called?"

"Jonathon."

"Jonathon, then." The name meant something to Xar, but he couldn't think what. "Enough talk of hatred. You lazar are free now, free from the weaknesses of the flesh that you knew when you were alive. And you are immortal. It is a great gift we living have given you..."

"One we would be happy to share," said the lazar of Samah in a low, dire voice.

"...to share," came the fearful echo.

Xar was displeased; the rune-glow that came from his body flared. "You waste my time. There are many questions I will ask you, Samah. Many questions you will answer for me. But the first, the most important, is the one I asked you before you died. Where is the Seventh Gate?"

The countenance of the corpse twisted; the body shook. The phantasm peered out through the lifeless eyes with a sort of terror. "I will not..." The blue lips of the corpse moved, but no sound came out. "I will not..."

"You will!" Xar said sternly, though he was somewhat at a loss. How do you threaten one who feels no pain, one who knows no fear? Frustrated, the lord turned to Jonathon. "What is the meaning of this defiance? You Sartan forced the dead to reveal all their secrets. I know, because Kleitus himself told me this, as did my minion, who was here previously."

"This man's will was strong in his life," the lazar answered. "You raised him too quickly, perhaps. If the body had been allowed to remain quiet for the requisite three days, the phantasm would have left the body and then the soul—the will—could no longer have any effect on what the body did. But now the defiance that died with him lives still."

"But will he answer my questions?" Xar persisted, frustration growing.

"He will. In time," Jonathon answered, and there was sorrow in the echoing voice. "In time he will forget all that meant anything to him in life. He will know only the bitter hatred of those who still live."

"Time!" Xar ground his teeth. "How much time? A day? A fortnight?"

"I cannot say."

"Bah!" Xar strode forward, came to stand directly before Samah. "Answer my question! Where is the Seventh Gate? What do you care now?" he added in wheedling tones. "It means nothing to you. You defy me only because that's all you remember how to do."

The light in the dead eyes flickered. "We sent it... away..."

"You did not!" Xar was losing patience. This wasn't turning out as he had foreseen. He'd been too eager. He should have waited. He would wait the next time. When he killed the old man. "Sending the gate away makes no sense. You would keep it where you could use it again if need be. Perhaps you did use it—to open Death's Gate! Tell me the truth. Does it have something to do with a citadel—"

"Master!"

The urgent cry came bounding down the corridor. Xar jerked his head toward the sound.

"Master!" It was Sang-drax, calling and gesturing wildly from the end of the corridor. "Come swiftly! The old man is gone!"

"Dead, then?" Xar grunted. "All for the best. Now let me be—"

"Not dead! Gone! He is gone!"

"What trick is this?" Xar demanded. "He couldn't be gone! How could he escape?"

"I do not know, Lord of the Nexus." Sang-drax's sibilant whisper shook with a fury that startled even Xar. "But he is gone! Come and see for yourself."

There was no help for it. Xar cast a final baleful look at Samah, who appeared completely oblivious to what was going on. Then the lord hastened down the corridor. When the Lord of the Nexus had left, when his voice could be heard rising strident and angry from the far end of the cellblock, Jonathon spoke, quietly, softly.

"You see now. You understand."

"Yes!" The phantasm peered out of the lifeless eyes in despair, as the living man had once peered out of his prison cell. "I see now. I understand."

"You always knew the truth, didn't you?"

"How could I admit it? We had to seem to be gods. What would the truth have made us?"

"Mortal. As you were."

"Too late. All is lost. All is lost."

"No, the Wave corrects itself. Rest upon it. Relax. Float with it, let it carry you."

The phantasm of Samah appeared irresolute. It darted into the body, fled out of it, but could not yet escape. "I cannot. I must stay. I have to hang on..."

"Hang on to what? To hatred? To fear? To revenge? Lie back. Rest upon the Wave. Feel it lift you up."

The corpse of Samah remained seated on the hard stone. The eyes stared up at Jonathon. "Can they forgive me...?"

"Can you forgive yourself?" the lazar asked gently.

Samah's body—an ashen and blood-covered shell—laid slowly down on the stone bed. It shuddered, then was still. The eyes grew dark and now truly lifeless.

Jonathon reached out his hand, closed them.

Xar, suspecting some trick, stared hard into Zifnab's cell. Nothing. No sight of the wet and bedraggled old Sartan.

"Hand me that torch!" Xar commanded, peering about in baffled outrage.

The Lord of the Nexus banished the cell bars with an impatient wave of his hand and strode into the cell, flashing the light into every part of it.

"What do you think you will find, Lord?" Sang-drax snarled. "That he is playing at peekaboo in a corner? I tell you, he is gone!"

Xar didn't like the dragon-snake's tone. The lord turned, held the light so that it would flare into the dragon's one good eye. "If he has escaped, it is your fault! You were supposed to be guarding him! Sea water of Chelestra!" Xar sneered, "takes away their power! Obviously it didn't!"

"It did, I tell you," Sang-drax muttered.

"But he can't get far," Xar reflected. "We have guards posted at the entrance to Death's Gate. He—"

The dragon-snake hissed suddenly—a hiss of fury that seemed to wrap its coils around Xar and squeeze the breath from his body. Sang-drax pointed a rune-covered hand at the stone bed. "There! There!" He could say no more; the breath gurgled in his throat.

Xar held the torchlight to shine on the spot. The lord's eyes caught a glint, a sparkle that came from something on the stone. He reached down, picked it up, held it to the light.

"It's nothing but a scale—"

"A dragon's scale!" Sang-drax glared at it with enmity, made no move to touch it.

"Perhaps." Xar was noncommittal. "A lot of reptiles have scales, not all of them dragons. And what of it? It has nothing to do with the old man's disappearance. It must have been here for ages—"

"Undoubtedly you are right, Lord of the Nexus." Sang-drax was suddenly nonchalant, though his one good eye remained fixed on the scale. "What could a dragon—one of my cousins, for instance—possibly have to do with that daft old man? I will go and alert the guard."

"I give the orders—" Xar began, but his words were wasted.

Sang-drax had vanished.

The lord stared around at the empty cell, fuming, a disturbing and unfamiliar unease jabbing deep beneath his skin.

"What is going on?" he was forced to ask himself, and the simple fact that he had to ask that question indicated to the Lord of the Nexus that he had lost control.

Xar had known fear many times in his life. He knew fear every time he walked into the Labyrinth. But still he was able to walk in; he was able to grapple with his fear and put it to use, channel its energy into self-preservation, because he knew that he was in control. He might not know which enemy the Labyrinth was going to hurl at him, but he knew every enemy that existed, knew their strengths and their weaknesses.

But now. What was going on? How had that feeble-minded old man escaped? Most important, what did Sang-drax fear? What did the dragon-snake know that he wasn't telling?

"Haplo didn't trust them," the lord said to himself, glaring at the scale he held in his hand. "He warned me not to trust them. So did that fool who lies dead over there. Not"—Xar scowled—"that I believe any claim of either Haplo's or Samah's. But I am beginning to believe that these dragon-snakes have their own goals, which may or may not coincide with mine."

"Yes, Haplo warned me against them. But what if he did so only to blind me to the fact that he is in league with them? They called him 'Master' once.\* He admitted as much to me. And Kleitus talks to them. Perhaps they are all in league against me."

\*Serpent Mage, vol. 4 of The Death Gate Cycle.

Xar stared around the cell. The torchlight was failing; the shadows grew darker, began to close in around him. It was nothing to him whether or not he had light. The sigla on his body compensated, would make the darkness bright if he chose. He did choose. He tossed away the useless torch and drove away the shadows with his own magic. He didn't like this world, this Abarrach. He felt constantly stifled, smothered. The air was foul, and though his magic nullified the poison, it could not sweeten the stench of the sulfurous fumes, remove the rank odor of death.

"I must make my move, and quickly," he said.

He would start by determining the location of the Seventh Gate.

Xar left Zifnab's cell, strode rapidly back down the corridor. The lazar that called itself Jonathon (where had Xar heard that name? Haplo, undoubtedly, but in what connection?) stood in the corridor. Jonathon's body itself was unmoving; the phantasm roved restlessly about it in a manner that Xar found extremely disconcerting.

"You have served your purpose," Xar told it. "You may go-"

The lazar made no response. It did not argue. It simply walked away.

Xar waited until it had shambled back down the corridor. Then, putting the disquieting lazar out of his mind, along with the dragon scale and Sang-drax, Xar turned his attention to what was important. To Samah.

The corpse lay on the stone bed. It looked as if it slumbered peacefully. Xar found this more irritating than ever.

"Get up!" he snapped. "I want to speak with you."

The corpse did not move.

A feeling of panic invaded the lord's body. He saw then that the eyes were closed. No lazar that he had ever seen went about with its eyes closed, any more than a living person. Xar bent over the corpse, lifted one of the flaccid eyelids.

Nothing looked back at him. No unholy light of life glimmered and winked. The eyes were empty. The phantasm was gone, fled.

Samah was free.

## CHAPTER 4

### NECROPOLIS

#### ABARRACH

IT DID NOT TAKE MARIT LONG TO PREPARE FOR HER JOURNEY. She selected clothes to wear on Arianus, choosing among the wardrobes left behind by the Sartan, murdered by their own dead. She selected a garment that would conceal the runes on her body, one that would make her look human. Packing this, along with several of her favorite sigla-inscribed weapons, Marit transported the bundle to a Patryn ship floating on Abarrach's lava sea. Then she returned to the castle of Necropolis.

She walked through halls still stained with blood from the dreadful Night of the Risen Dead—the term the lazar used when they spoke of their triumph. The blood was Sartan blood, blood of her enemies, and so the Patryns had made no attempt to remove it, left it splattered on the walls and floors. The dried blood of the Sartan, mingled with the broken runes of their magic, became a symbol to the Patryns of the ultimate defeat of their ancient foe.

Other Patryns passed Marit on her way to her lord's study. They exchanged no greetings, wasted no time in idle conversation. The Patryns Xar had brought with him to Abarrach were the strongest and toughest of a strong, tough breed. Almost all had been Runners. Each had made it either to the Final Gate or near enough. Most had ultimately been rescued by Xar; there were few Patryns alive today who did not owe their lives to their lord.

Marit took pride in the fact that she had fought with her lord, side by side, in the grueling struggle to win her own freedom from the Labyrinth....

She was near the Final Gate when she was attacked by gigantic birds with leather wings and flesh-tearing teeth, who would first disable a victim by pecking out his eyes, then gorge on the warm, still-living flesh.

Marit fought the birds by altering her own form to that of a bird—a gigantic eagle. Her talons ripped jagged holes in the leather wings; her plummeting dives knocked many from the sky.

But, as is the way of the Labyrinth, its heinous magic grew powerful in the face of defeat. The numbers of shrieking leather-winged birds increased. She was hit countless times, wounded by tooth and claw. Her strength gave out. She fell to land. Her magic could no longer support her altered state. She changed back to her own shape and fought what she knew would be a losing battle, as the horrid flapping things swirled about her face, trying to get at her eyes.

Her skin was torn and bleeding. She was knocked to her knees by striking blows from behind. She was nearly ready to give up and die when a voice thundered over her.

"Rise, Daughter! Rise and battle on. You are not alone!"

She opened her eyes, already dimming with approaching death, and saw her lord, the Lord of the Nexus.

He came like a god, wielding balls of flame. He stood protectively over her until she regained her feet. He gave her his hand, gnarled and wrinkled but beautiful to her, for it brought her not only life but hope and renewed courage. Together they fought until the Labyrinth was forced to retreat. The birds—those that survived—flapped away with shrill squawks of disappointment.

Marit fell then. The Lord of the Nexus lifted her in his strong arms and bore her through the Final Gate, carried her to freedom.

"I pledge you my life, Lord," she whispered to him, her last words before she lost consciousness. "Always... forever..."

He had smiled. The lord had heard many such pledges, knew that they would all be redeemed. Marit had been chosen to travel to Abarrach by her lord. She was just one of many Patryns he'd brought with him, all of whom would be willing to give their lives for the man who had given life to them.

Approaching the study now, Marit was disturbed to see a lazar wandering the halls outside. At first, she thought it was Kleitus and was about to order him off. Admittedly the castle had once been his. But the lazar had no business here. Closer examination, which Marit made with extreme repugnance, revealed this lazar to be the one she had sent to serve her lord in the dungeons. What was it doing here? If she could have supposed such a thing possible, she would have said the lazar was lingering in the halls, listening to the voices that came through the closed door.

Marit was about to order it to be gone, when another voice—the eerie echoing voice of another lazar—forestalled her words.

"Jonathon!" Kleitus came shambling along the corridor. "I heard the Patryn lord raging over his failure to raise the dead. It occurred to me that you might have had something to do with that. I was right, it seems."

"It seems..." The echo was mournful.

They were both speaking Sartan, a language Marit found uncomfortable and disturbing to hear, but one she understood. She backed into the shadows, hoping to learn something to her lord's advantage.

The lazar called Jonathon slowly turned. "I could give you the same peace I gave Samah, Kleitus."

The Dynast laughed, a terrible sound, made awful by the echo. It wailed in despair. "Yes, I'm certain you would gladly reduce me to dust!" The corpse's bluish-white hands flexed, long-nailed fingers twitched. "Consign me to oblivion!"

"Not oblivion," Jonathon corrected. "Freedom." His gentle voice and its soft echo coincided with the despairing echo of Kleitus, producing a sad, yet harmonic note.

"Freedom!" Kleitus gnashed his rotting teeth. "I'll give you freedom!"

"...freedom!" The echo howled.

Kleitus rushed forward, skeletal hands clutching at Jonathon's throat. The two corpses grappled together, Jonathon's wasted hands closing over Kleitus's wrists, trying to drag the other off him. The lazar struggled, nails digging into flesh, drawing no blood. Marit watched in horror, disgusted by the sight. She made no move to intervene. This was not her fight.

A cracking sound. One of Kleitus's arms bent at a sickening angle. Jonathon flung his opponent off him, sent the Dynast reeling back against the wall. Kleitus nursed his broken limb, glared at the other lazar in rage and bitter enmity.

"You told Lord Xar about the Seventh Gate!" Jonathon said, standing over Kleitus. "Why? Why hasten to what you must see as your own destruction?"

Kleitus was massaging his broken arm, muttering Sartan runes. The bone was starting to re-form; thus the lazars kept their rotting bodies functional. Looking up at Jonathon, the corpse grinned hideously. "I didn't tell him its location."

"He will find out."

"Yes, he will find out!" Kleitus laughed. "Haplo will show him. Haplo will guide him to that room. They will all be inside the chamber together..."

"...together..." The echo sighed dismally. "And you—waiting for them," said Jonathon. "I found my freedom in that chamber," Kleitus said, blue-gray lips curled in a sneer. "I'll help them find theirs! As you will find yours—"

The Dynast paused, turned his head to stare directly at Marit with his strange eyes, which were sometimes the eyes of the dead and sometimes the eyes of the living.

Marit's skin prickled; the runes on her arms and hands glowed blue. Silently, she cursed herself. She had made a sound, nothing more than a sharp intake of breath, but it had been enough to give her away.

No help for it now. She strode boldly forward. "What are you lazars doing here? Spying on my lord? Begone," Marit commanded, "or must I summon Lord Xar to make you leave?"

The lazar known as Jonathon departed immediately, gliding down the blood-spattered corridor. Kleitus remained, eyeing her balefully. He seemed about to attack. Marit began to weave a rune-spell in her mind. The sigla on her body glowed brightly.

Kleitus withdrew into the shadows, walking with his shuffling gait down the long hall.

Shivering, thinking that any living enemy, no matter how fearsome, was far preferable to these walking dead, Marit was about to knock on the door when she heard from within her lord's voice, raised in anger.

"And you did not report this to me! I must find out what goes on in my universe from a doddering old Sartan!"

"I see now that I was mistaken in not telling you, Lord Xar. I offer as my excuse only the fact that you were deeply involved in the study of necromancy and I did not want to disturb you with grievous news." It was Sang-drax. The dragon-snake was whining again.

Marit wondered what she should do. She did not want to get involved in an argument between her lord and the dragon-snake, whom she heartily disliked. Yet her lord had ordered her to report to him at once. And she could not very well remain standing out here in the hallway. She would look as much an eavesdropper as the lazar. Taking advantage of a lull in the conversation, a lull that perhaps arose from Xar's being speechless with rage, Marit knocked timidly on the kaim-grass door.

"Lord Xar, it is I, Marit."

The door swung open by Xar's magical command. Sang-drax bowed to her with slimy officiousness. Ignoring him, Marit looked at Xar.

"You are engaged, Lord," she said. "I can return—"

"No, my dear. Come in. This concerns you and your journey." Xar had regained his calm demeanor, though his eyes still flashed when they turned to the dragon-snake.

Marit stepped inside and shut the door behind her, first glancing outside to make certain the hall was empty.

"I found Kleitus and another lazar outside your door, My Lord," she reported. "I think they were attempting to overhear your words."

"Let them!" Xar said, without interest. He then spoke to Sang-drax.

"You fought Haplo on Arianus. Why?"

"I was attempting to prevent the mensch from seizing control of the Kicksey-winsey, Lord," the dragon-snake replied, cringing. "The machine's power is immense, as you yourself have surmised. Once it is in operation, it will not only change Arianus, but will affect all the other worlds as well. In the hands of the mensch—" Sang-drax shrugged, leaving that terrible possibility to the imagination.

"And Haplo was assisting the mensch?" Xar pursued. "Not only assisting them, Lord," said the dragon-snake. "He actually provided them with information—undoubtedly obtained from that Sartan friend of his—on how to operate the great machine."

Xar's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you," "He has a book, written in four languages: Sartan, elven, human, and dwarven. Where else could he have obtained it, Lord, but from the one who calls himself Alfred?"

"If what you say is true, he must have had it with him, then, when he last saw me in the Nexus," Xar muttered. "Why would Haplo do such a thing? What reason?"

"He wants to rule Arianus, Lord. And perhaps the rest of the four worlds as well. Isn't that obvious?"

"And so the mensch, under Haplo's guidance, are about to start up the Kicksey-winsey." Xar's fist clenched. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Would you have believed me?" Sang-drax asked softly. "Though I have lost an eye, I am not the one who is blind. You are, Lord of the Nexus. Look! Look at the evidence you have amassed—evidence indicating one thing. Time and again Haplo has lied to you, betrayed you. And you permit it! You love him, Lord. Your love has blinded you as surely as his sword almost blinded me."

Marit trembled, astounded at the dragon-snake's temerity. She waited for Xar's fury to thunder around them. But Xar's clenched fist slowly relaxed. His hand shook. Leaning on his desk, he turned away from Sang-drax, away from Marit.

"Did you slay him?" the lord asked heavily.

"No, Lord. He is one of your people, and so I took care not to kill him. I left him critically wounded, however, for which I apologize. Sometimes I do not know my own strength. I tore his heart-rune open. Seeing him near death, I realized what I had done and, fearing your displeasure, withdrew from the battle."

"And that is how you came to lose your eye?" Xar asked wryly, glancing around. "Withdrawing from the battle?"

Sang-drax glowered; the single red eye glowed, and Marit's defensive runes suddenly glimmered to life. Xar continued to regard the dragon-snake with apparent calm, and Sang-drax lowered his eyelid, extinguishing the red glow.

"Your people are skilled warriors, Lord." The single eye slid to Marit and flared briefly; then its gleam was doused again.

"And what is Haplo's condition now?" Xar asked. "Not good, I should think. It takes time to heal the heart-rune."

"True, Lord. He is exceedingly weak and will not soon recover."

"How did Bane come to die?" Xar asked mildly enough, though his own eyes flickered dangerously. "And why did Haplo attack you?"

"Bane knew too much, Lord. He was loyal to you. Haplo hired a mensch called Hugh the Hand, an assassin friend of Alfred's, to murder Bane. This done, Haplo seized control of the great Kicksey-winsey for himself. When I attempted to stop him—in your name, My Lord Xar—Haplo drove the mensch to attack me and my people."\*

\*Those who have read about the dragon-snakes before will note the difference between Sang-drax's account of the Battle of the Kicksey-winsey and the truth, as recorded in *The Hand of Chaos*, vol. 5 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

"And they defeated you? Mensch defeated you?" Xar was regarding Sang-drax with disgust.

"They did not defeat us, Lord," Sang-drax answered with dignity. "As I said, we withdrew. We feared the Kicksey-winsey might suffer harm if we pursued the battle. We knew that you did not want the great machine damaged, and so, in deference to your wishes, we left Arianus."

Sang-drax looked up; the single eye gleamed. "There was no urgency. What my lord wants, my lord will take. As to the mensch, they may have found peace for the time being, but they will soon misplace it. Such is their way."

Xar glared at the dragon-snake, who stood chastened and abashed before him. "What is happening on Arianus now?"

"Alas, Lord, as I said, our people all left. I can send them back, if you truly believe it necessary. However, might I suggest that my lord's true interest lies in Pryan—"

"Pryan again! What is so important about Pryan?"

"The dragon's scale that was discovered in the old man's cell—"

"Yes, what about it?" Xar demanded impatiently.

"Such creatures come from Pryan, Lord." Sang-drax paused, then added in a low voice, "In the ancient days, Lord, these dragons were servants of the Sartan. It has occurred to me that perhaps the Sartan left something behind on Pryan that they wished to keep secret, well guarded, undisturbed... such as the Seventh Gate."

Xar's anger cooled. He was suddenly thoughtful. He had just recalled where he'd heard about the citadels of Pryan. "I see. And you say these dragons exist only on this world?"

"Haplo himself reported so, Lord. And it was there he ran into the crazed old Sartan. Undoubtedly the dragon and the old Sartan have returned to Pryan. And if they were able to travel here, to Chelestra, who knows but that next time they will return with an army of tytans?"

Xar was not about to let the dragon-snake see his excitement. "Perhaps I will go to Pryan," he said noncommittally. "We will discuss this later, Sang-drax. Know that I am displeased with you. You are dismissed."

Flinching beneath the lash of Xar's anger, the dragon-snake slunk out of the lord's presence.

Xar was silent long moments after Sang-drax's departure. Marit wondered if he had changed his mind about sending her to Arianus, since he'd heard what was happening from the dragon-snake. He was apparently thinking along the same lines, for he said to himself,

"No, I do not trust him!"

But was he, Marit wondered suddenly, speaking of Sang-drax... or of Haplo?

He turned to her, decision made.

"You will travel to Arianus, Daughter. You will learn the truth of the matter. Sang-drax kept this concealed from me for a reason, and I do not believe it was to save me from grief! Although," he added in a softer tone, "the betrayal of one of my own people, particularly Haplo..."

He paused a moment, thoughtful. "I have read that in the ancient world, before the Sundering, we Patrins were a stern and cold people who did not love, who prided ourselves on never feeling affection, not even for each other. Lust was permissible, encouraged, for lust perpetuates our species. The Labyrinth taught us many hard lessons. I wonder if it didn't teach us to love." Xar sighed. "Haplo's betrayal has inflicted a pain on me worse than any I have endured from the creatures of the Labyrinth."

"I do not believe he would betray you, Lord," said Marit.

"No?" Xar asked, gazing at her intently. "And why not? Is it possible that you love him, too?"

Marit flushed. "That is not the reason. I do not believe any Patryn could be so disloyal."

He stared at her as if probing for some deeper meaning. She returned his gaze steadfastly, and he was satisfied.

"That is because your heart is true, Daughter. And therefore you cannot conceive of one that is false." He paused, then said, "If Haplo is proven a traitor—not only to me, but to our people—what punishment would he merit?"

"Death, Lord," said Marit calmly.

Xar smiled, nodded. "Well spoken, Daughter. Tell me," he added with that same piercing stare, "have you ever rune-joined with any man or woman, Marit?"

"No, Lord." She was at first startled by his question, then understood what he was truly asking. "You are mistaken, Lord, if you think that Haplo and I—"

"No, no, Daughter," Xar interrupted smoothly. "I do not ask because of that—although I am glad to hear it. I ask for another, more selfish reason."

Walking to his desk, Xar lifted a long bodkin that lay on it. Also on his desk was a jar of ink, so blue as to be almost black. He muttered over the ink several words of the rune-language used by the Patrins. Then he drew his hood back from his face and lifted the long hair that fell over his forehead to reveal a single blue sigjl tattooed there.

"Will you rune-join with me, Daughter?" he asked gently.

Marit stared at him in astonishment; then she fell to her knees. Her fists clenched, she bowed her head.

"Lord, I am not worthy of this honor."

"Yes, Daughter. Most worthy."

She remained kneeling before him, lifted her face to his. "Then, yes, Lord, I will rune-join with you, and count it the greatest joy of my life." Reaching to the open-necked blouse she wore, she ripped it open, laying bare her rune-marked breasts.

Over the left breast was tattooed her own heart-rune.

Xar brushed back Mark's brown hair from her forehead. Then his hand sought her breasts, which were firm and small and rode high upon the strong muscles of her chest. His hand moved down over her smooth, slender neck to cup and fondle her left breast.

She closed her eyes and shivered, more in awe than in pleasure, at his touch.

Xar noticed. His gnarled hand ceased its caress. She heard him sigh. "Few times I regret my lost youth. This is one."

Marit's eyes flared open. She burned with shame that he should so mistake her. "Lord, I will gladly warm your bed—"

"Ah, that is what you would be doing, Daughter—warming my bed," Xar said dryly. "I am afraid I could not return the favor. The fire died in these loins of mine long ago. But our minds will join, if our bodies cannot."

He placed the point of the bodkin on the smooth skin of her forehead and pricked her flesh.

Marit shuddered, though not at the pain. From the moment of birth, Patryn children are tattooed at various times throughout their lives. They not only become accustomed to the pain but are taught to endure it without flinching. Marit shuddered at the rush of magic into her body, magic which flowed from the lord's body to her own, magic which would grow stronger as he formed the sigla which would bind them together—his heart-rune, entwined with hers.

Over and over he repeated the process, inserting the bodkin into Marit's smooth skin more than a hundred times until the complicated pattern was completely drawn. He shared her ecstasy, which was of the mind rather than the body. After the ecstasy of rune-joining, sexual coupling is generally a letdown.

When he had finished his work and set down the blood- and ink-stained bodkin, he knelt before her and took her in his arms. The two pressed their foreheads together, sigil touching sigil, the circles of their beings closing in one. Marit cried out in gasping pleasure and went limp and trembling in his grasp.

He was pleased with her and held her in his arms until she grew calm again. Then he put his hand on her chin and looked into her eyes.

"We are one. No matter that we are apart, our thoughts will fly each to the other as we desire."

He held her with his eyes, his hands. She was transfixed, adoring. Her flesh was soft and pliable beneath his fingers.

It seemed to her as if all her bones had dissolved at his touch, his look.

"You did once love Haplo." He spoke gently.

Marit hesitated, then lowered her head in shameful, silent acquiescence.

"So did I, Daughter," Xar said softly. "So did I. That will be a bond between us. And if I deem that Haplo must die, you will be the one to slay him."

Marit lifted her head. "Yes, Lord."

Xar regarded her doubtfully. "You speak quickly, Marit. I must know for certain. You lay with him. Yet you will kill him?"

"I lay with him. I bore his child. But if my lord commands, I will kill him."

Marit's voice was calm and even. He would sense no hesitation, feel no tension in her body. But then a thought came to her. Perhaps this was some sort of test...

"Lord," she said, clasping her hands over his, "I have not incurred your displeasure. You do not doubt my loyalty—"

"No, Daughter—or, I should say, Wife." He smiled at her.

She kissed the hands she held in hers.

"No, Wife. You are the logical choice. I have seen inside Haplo's heart. He loves you. You and you alone, among our people, can penetrate the circle of his being. He would trust you where he would trust no one else. And he will be loath to harm you—the mother of his child."

"Does he know about the child?" Marit asked, astonished.

"He knows," said Xar.

"How could he? I left him without telling him. I never told anyone."

"Someone found out." Xar asked the next question, frowning. "Where is the child, by the way?"

Again Marit had the sense that she was being tested. But she could make only one answer, and that was the truth. She shrugged. "I have no idea. I gave the baby to a tribe of Squatters."\*

Xar's frown eased. "Most wise, Wife." He disengaged himself from her grasp, rose to his feet. "It is time for you to depart for Arianus. We will communicate through the rune-joining. You will report to me what you find. Most particularly, you will keep your arrival on Arianus secret. You will not let Haplo know he is under observation. If I deem he must die, you must take him by surprise."

"Yes, Lord."

"Husband,' Marit," he said, chiding her gently. "You must call me 'Husband.' "

"That is far too great an honor for me, Lor—Hus— Husband," she stammered, alarmed that the word should come to her lips with such difficulty.

He brushed his hand across her forehead.

"Cover the sigil of rune-joining. If he saw it, he would recognize my mark and know at once that you and I have become one. He would suspect you."

"Yes, Lor—Husband."

"Farewell, then, Wife. Report to me from Arianus at your earliest opportunity."

Xar turned from her, went to his desk. Sitting down without another look, he began to flip through the pages of a book, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Marit was not surprised at this cold and abrupt dismissal by her new husband. She was shrewd enough to know that the rune-joining had been one of convenience, made in order to facilitate her reporting to him from a far distant world. Still, she was pleased. It was a mark of his faith in her. They were bound for life and, through the exchange of magic, could now communicate with each other through the combined circle of their beings. Such closeness had its advantages, but its disadvantages as well —particularly to the Patryns, who tended to be loners, keep to themselves, refuse to permit even those closest to them to intrude on their inner thoughts and feelings.

Few Patryns ever formally rune-joined. Most settled for simply joining the circle of their beings.\* Xar had conferred on Marit a great honor. He had set his mark\* on her, and anyone who saw it would know they had joined. His taking her to wife would increase her standing among the Patryns. On his death, she might well assume leadership of her people.

\*Haplo describes such a ceremony in *Dragon Wing*, vol. 1 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

\*Either the elder inscribes the rune on the younger, or the one who is first joined inscribes the rune on the one who is not. If both have been previously joined, they inscribe the runes on each other. Once rune-joined, Patryns are forbidden to join with any other, so long as their rune-mate remains alive.

To Marit's credit, she was not thinking of that. She was touched, honored, dazzled, and overwhelmed, unable to feel anything but her boundless love for her lord. She wished that he would live forever so that she could serve him forever. Her one thought was to please him.

The skin on her forehead burned and stung. She could feel the touch of his hand on her naked breast. The memory of that blessed pain and the memory of his touch would remain with her forever.

She left Abarrach, sailing her ship into Death's Gate. It never occurred to her to report to Xar the conversation she'd overheard between the two lazar. She had, in her excitement, forgotten all about it.

Back in Necropolis, in his study, Xar settled down at his desk, took up again one of the Sartan texts on necromancy. He was in a good humor. It is a pleasant thing to be worshipped, adored, and he'd seen worship and adoration in Marit's eyes.

She had been his to command before, but she was doubly his now, bound to him body and mind. She would open herself to him completely, as had so many others before her. Unwritten law prohibits a Patryn from joining with more than one person, so long as the rune-mate is still alive. But Xar was the law, as far as he was concerned. He had discovered that rune-joining opened up many hearts' secrets to him. As for revealing his secrets to others, Xar was far too disciplined mentally to permit such a thing to happen. He revealed as much of himself as he deemed it useful to reveal, no more.

He was pleased with Marit, as he would have been pleased with any new weapon that came into his hand. She would do readily whatever needed to be done—even if it meant slaying the man she had once loved.

And Haplo would die knowing he'd been betrayed.

"Thus," said Xar, "I will be avenged."

## CHAPTER 5

### THE FORTRESS OF THE BROTHERHOOD

#### SKURVASH, ARIANUS

"HE'S ARRIVED," CAME THE REPORT. "STANDING OUT FRONT."

The Ancient looked at Ciang, pleading in his eyes. The formidable elf woman had only to say... No, she had merely to nod... and Hugh the Hand would be dead. An archer sat in a window above the entrance. If the elf woman, sitting stiff and upright in her chair, barely inclined her smooth, skull-like head, the Ancient would leave her presence and carry a wooden knife, with Hugh's name carved in it, to the archer. The archer would without hesitation send a shaft into Hugh's breast.

Hugh knew this. He was taking an enormous risk, returning to the Brotherhood. The knife had not been sent around on him\* (if it had been, he would not have been alive at the moment), but the word had been whispered among the membership that Ciang was displeased with Hugh the Hand, and he had been shunned. No one would kill him, but no one would help him either. A shunning was one step away from the wooden knife. A member finding himself shunned had better get to the Brotherhood and argue his case fast. Thus no one was surprised at Hugh's arrival at the fortress, though a few were disappointed.

\*An expression used among the Brotherhood to indicate a member marked for death. See Appendix I, "The Brotherhood," *The Hand of Chaos*, vol. 5 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

To have been able to claim that you killed Hugh the Hand, one of the greatest assassins the Guild had fostered—such a boast would have been worth a fortune.

No one dared do it without sanction, however. Hugh was—or had been—one of Ciang's favorites. And though her protective arm was gnarled and wrinkled and spotted with age, it was spotted with blood as well. No one would touch Hugh unless Ciang commanded it.

Ciang's small, yellow teeth sank into her lower lip. Seeing this gesture and knowing it for indecision, the Ancient's hopes rose. Perhaps one emotion could still touch the woman's insensate heart. Not love.

Curiosity. Ciang was wondering why Hugh had come back, when he knew his life was nothing but a word on her lips. And she couldn't very well find out from his corpse.

The yellow teeth gnawed flesh. "Let him come in to me."

Ciang spoke the words grudgingly and with a scowl, but she'd said them and that was all the Ancient needed to hear. Fearful she might change her mind, he hastened out of the room, his crooked old legs moving with more speed than they'd used in the past twenty years.

Grabbing hold of the huge iron ring attached to the door, the Ancient himself swung it open.

"Come in, Hugh, come in," the Ancient said. "She has agreed to see you."

The assassin stepped inside, stood unmoving in the dim entryway until his eyes adjusted to the light. The Ancient eyed Hugh quizzically. Other people the Ancient had seen in this position had been limp with relief—some so limp he'd been forced to carry them in. Every member of the Brotherhood knew about the archer. Hugh knew that he'd been a curt nod away from certain death. Still, there was no sign of it on his face, which was harder than the fortress's granite walls.

Yet perhaps the penetrating eyes of the Ancient did catch a flicker of feeling, though not what the Ancient had expected. When the door offering life instead of death had opened to Hugh the Hand, he had appeared, for an instant, disappointed.

"Will Ciang see me this moment?" Hugh asked, voice gruff and low. He raised his hand, palm outward, to show the scars that crossed it. Part of the ritual.

The Ancient peered at the scars intently, though he had known this man for more years than the elder could recall. This, too, was part of the ritual.

"She will, sir. Please go on up. May I say, sir," the Ancient added, his voice trembling, "that I am truly glad to see you well."

Hugh's grim and dark expression relaxed. He laid his scarred hand on the old man's bird-bone-fragile arm in acknowledgment. Then, setting his jaw, the Hand left the old man, began the long climb up the innumerable stairs to Ciang's private quarters.

The Ancient peered after him. The Hand had always been a strange one. And perhaps the rumors about him were true. That would explain a lot. Shaking his head, knowing that he would likely never find out, the Ancient resumed his post at the door.

Hugh walked slowly up the stairs, looking neither to the left nor to the right. He wouldn't see anyone anyway, and no one would see him—one of the rules of the fortress. Now that he was here, he was in no hurry. So certain had he been of his death at the hands of the archer that he hadn't given much thought to what he would do if he didn't die. As he walked, tugging nervously on one of the braided strands of the beard which straggled from his jutting chin, he pondered what he would say. He rehearsed several variations. At length he gave up.

With Ciang, there was only one thing to say—the truth. She probably already knew it anyway.

He traversed the silent, empty hallway paneled in dark, highly polished, and extremely rare wood. At the end, Ciang's door stood open.

Hugh paused outside, looked in.

He had expected to see her seated at her desk, the desk marked with the blood of countless initiates into the Guild. But she was standing in front of one of the diapijond-paned windows, looking out at the wilds of the isle of Skurvash.

Ciang could see everything worth seeing from that window: the prosperous town—a smuggler's haven—rambling along the shoreline; the craggy forest of the brittle hargast trees that separated town from fortress; the single narrow path that led from town to fortress (a dog walking along that path could be seen by every lookout in the Brotherhood); and beyond and above and below, the sky, in which the isle of Skurvash floated.

Hugh's hand clenched; his mouth was so dry he could not for a moment announce himself; his heart beat rapidly.

The elf woman was old; many considered her the oldest living person in Arianus. She was small and fragile. Hugh could have crushed her with one of his strong hands. She was dressed in the bright-colored silken robes the elves fancy, and even at her age there was a delicacy, a grace, a hint of what reputedly had once been remarkable beauty. Her head was bald, the skull exquisitely shaped, the skin smooth and without blemish, an interesting contrast to the wrinkled face.

The absence of hair made her slanted eyes appear large and liquid, and when she turned—not at the sound but at the absence of sound—the penetrating look from those dark eyes was the arrow shaft that had not, until now, lodged in his breast.

"You risk much coming back, Hugh the Hand," Ciang said.

"Not as much as you might think, Ciang," he replied.

His answer was neither flippant nor sarcastic. He spoke in a voice pitched low, its tone dull and lifeless. That arrow shaft, it seemed, would have robbed him of very little.

"Did you come here hoping to die?" Ciang's lip curled. She despised cowards.

She had not moved from her place by the window, nor had she invited Hugh into her room, asked him to be seated. A bad sign. In the ritual of the Brotherhood, this meant that she, too, was shunning him. But he was endowed with the rank of "hand," next to her own—"arm"—the highest ranking in the Brotherhood. She would grant him the favor of listening to his explanation before she passed sentence.

"I wouldn't have been disappointed if the arrow had found its mark." Hugh's expression was grim. "But no. I didn't come here looking for death. I have a contract." He grimaced as he spoke. "I've come for help, advice."

"The contract from the Kenkari." Ciang's eyes narrowed.

Despite all he knew of Ciang, Hugh was surprised at her knowledge of this. His meeting with the Kenkari—the sect of elves who held in their care the souls of elven dead—had been shrouded in secrecy. So Ciang had her spies even among that pious sect.

"No, it is not from them," Hugh explained, frowning. "Though they are the ones who are forcing me to fulfill it."

"Forcing you? To fulfill a contract—a sacred commitment? Do you mean to tell me, Hugh the Hand, that you would not have done so if the Kenkari had not forced you?"

Ciang was truly angry now. Two spots of crimson stained her wrinkled cheeks, mounted up from the wizened neck. Her hand stretched forth like a claw, pointing a skeletal, accusatory finger at him.

"The rumors we have heard about you are true, then. You have lost your nerve." Ciang started to turn around, started to turn her back on him. Once she did, he was a dead man. Worse than dead, for without her help he would not be able to fulfill his contract, and that meant he would die dishonored.

Hugh broke the rules. He walked into the room uninvited, strode across the carpeted floor to Ciang's desk. On the desk was a wooden box, encrusted with sparkling gems. Hugh lifted the lid.

Ciang paused, looked back over her shoulder. Her face hardened. He had broken her unwritten law, and if she decided against him his punishment would now be far more severe. But she appreciated bold and daring moves, and this was certainly one of the boldest anyone had ever made in her presence. She waited to see the outcome.

Hugh reached into the box, pulled out a sharp dagger whose golden hilt was fashioned in the shape of a hand— palm flat, fingers pressed together, the extended thumb forming the crosspiece. Taking the ceremonial dagger, Hugh advanced to stand before Ciang.

She regarded him coolly, with detached curiosity, not in the least frightened. "What is this?"

Hugh fell on his knees. Raising the dagger, he offered it—hilt first, blade pointed at his breast—to Ciang.

She accepted it, her hand wrapping around the hilt with loving skill.

Hugh drew back the collar of his shirt, laid bare his neck. "Stab me here, Ciang," he said, voice harsh and chill. "In the throat."

He did not look at her. His eyes stared out the window, into the dusk. The Lords of Night were spreading their cloaks across Solarus; evening's shadows were crawling over Skurvash.

Ciang held the dagger in her right hand. Stretching forth her left, she grabbed hold of the twisted strands of beard, jerked his head upward and around to face her— also giving her better leverage if she did decide to slit his throat.

"You have done nothing to deserve such an honor, Hugh the Hand," she said coldly. "Why do you demand your death at my hand?"

"I want to go back," he said in a lifeless monotone.

Ciang was rarely startled, but this statement, made so calmly and flatly, took her by surprise. She released him, fell back a step, and peered intently into the man's dark eyes. She saw no gleam of madness. Only an emptiness, as if she looked into a dry well.

Hugh grasped the leather jerkin he wore, wrenched it apart. He ripped the shirt seam wide.

"Look at my chest. Look well. The mark is hard to see."

He was a dark-complexioned man; his breast was matted with thick, curly black hair, beginning to gray.

"Here," he said and guided Ciang's unresisting hand to the part of his breast over the heart.

She looked closely, running her fingers through his chest hair, their touch like bird claws scraping over his flesh. He shivered; the flesh rose in small bumps.

Ciang drew in a deep breath, snatched her hand away. She stared at him in awe slowly crystallizing into understanding.

"The rune-magic!" she breathed.

His head bowed as if in defeat, Hugh sank back on his heels. One hand went to his breast, convulsively grasping the shirt and drawing the two torn halves together again.

The other hand clenched into a fist. His shoulders slumped; he stared unseeing at the floor.

Ciang stood over him, the dagger still balanced in her hand but now forgotten. She had not known fear in a long, long time. How long she couldn't even remember. And then it hadn't been fear like this—a crawling worm in the bowels.

The world was changing, changing in drastic ways. Ciang knew it. She wasn't afraid of change. She had looked into the future and was ready to meet it. As the world changed, so would the Brotherhood. There would be peace among the races now—humans, elves, and dwarves would live together in harmony. The cessation of war and rebellion would be a blow to the organization at first; peace might even mean that the humans and the elves would imagine themselves strong enough to attack the Brotherhood. Ciang doubted that, however. Too many human barons, too many elven lords owed the Brotherhood too many favors.

Ciang wasn't afraid of peace. True peace would be obtained only if every elf and human and dwarf had his or her head cut off and heart cut out. So long as there was life, there would be jealousy, greed, hatred, lust, and so long as there were heads to think and hearts to feel, the Brotherhood would be there to act.

Ciang didn't fear the future in a world where all things were equal. But this—this upset the balance. Knocked over the scale. She must deal with it swiftly, if she could. For the first time in her life, Ciang doubted herself. That was the root of the fear.

She looked at the dagger, dropped it to the floor.

Ciang placed her hands on Hugh's gaunt and hollow cheeks, lifted his head gently. "My poor boy," she said to him softly. "My poor boy."

His eyes dimmed with tears. His body shuddered. He hadn't slept, hadn't eaten for so long he had lost the need for either. He fell into her hands like rotten fruit.

"You must tell me everything," she whispered. Ciang pressed the man's unresisting head against her bony breast, crooned over him. "Tell me everything, Hugh. Only then can I help you."

He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep back the tears, but he was too weak. He gave a wrenching sob, covered his face with his hands.

Ciang held him, rocked with him back and forth. "Tell me everything..."

## CHAPTER 6

### THE FORTRESS OF THE BROTHERHOOD

#### SKURVASH, ARIANUS

"I AM NOT IN TO ANYONE THIS NIGHT," CIANG TOLD THE ANCIENT when he tottered up to her chambers, carrying a message from another member begging an audience.

The Ancient nodded and closed her door behind him as he left, leaving the two alone.

Hugh was now composed again. Several glasses of wine and a hot meal, which he wolfed from the tray placed on the bloodstained desk, restored his physical and, to some extent, his mental strength. He was so far improved as to recall his outburst with chagrin, flushing darkly when he thought about it. Ciang shook her head at his stammered apology.

"It is no small matter," she said, "to brush up against a god."

Hugh smiled bitterly. "God. Alfred—a god."

Night had fallen; the candles were lighted.

"Tell me," Ciang repeated.

Hugh began at the beginning. He told her about the changeling Bane, about the evil wizard Sinistrad, about being hired to kill Bane and falling under the little boy's spell. He told Ciang about falling also under the spell of the boy's mother, Iridal—not a magic spell but one of plain and ordinary love. He told Ciang, unashamed, how he had forsaken the contract to kill the child for love of Iridal and how he had planned to sacrifice his life for her son.

And the sacrifice had been made.

"I died," Hugh said, shuddering at the remembered pain and horror. "I knew torment—terrible torment, far worse than any mortal agony a man can suffer. I was made to see inside myself, see the evil, heartless creature I had become. And I was sorry. Truly sorry. And then... I understood. And when I understood, I was able to forgive myself. And I was forgiven. I knew peace... And then it was all snatched away."

"He... Alfred... brought you back."

Perplexed, Hugh looked up. "You believe me, Ciang. I never thought... That was why I didn't come..."

"I believe you." Ciang sighed. Her hands, resting on the desk, trembled slightly. "I believe you. Now." She stared at his chest. Though it was covered, the rune-mark seemed to shine through the fabric. "I might not if you had come back then. However, what is done is done."

"I tried to go back to my old life, but no one would hire me. Iridal said that I'd become mankind's conscience. Any who plotted evil deeds saw their own evil in my face." The Hand shrugged. "I don't know if that's true or not. At any rate, I hid myself away in the monastery of the Kir monks. But she found me."

"The woman you brought here—Iridal, the boy's mother. She knew you were alive?"

"She was with Alfred when he... did this." Hugh placed his hand on his breast. "Alfred denied it afterward, but Iridal knew what she had seen. She left me to myself, though. She was afraid..."

"The touch of the god," Ciang murmured, nodding.

"And then her son, Bane, turned up again, with the elves. The boy was well named. He was planning to destroy the peace being arranged between Prince Rees'ahn and King Stephen. With the help of the Kenkari, Iridal and I set out to free Bane from the elves, but the boy betrayed us to them. The elves held Iridal hostage, forced me to agree to kill Stephen. As the supposed heir, Bane would take over the human rulership and he would betray them to the elves."

"And Stephen's assassination was the job you bungled," Ciang put in.

Hugh flushed again, glanced up at her, gave a rueful smile. "So you heard about that, too? I planned to get myself killed. It was the only way I could think of to save Iridal. Stephen's guards would take care of me. The king would know Bane was behind it. He'd deal with the boy. But again, I didn't die. The dog jumped the guard who was about to—"

"Dog?" Ciang interrupted. "What dog?"

Hugh began to reply; then an odd look crossed his face. "Haplo's dog," he said softly. "That's strange. I hadn't thought of it until now."

Ciang grunted. "More about that in its proper place. Continue your story. This Bane died. His mother killed him, just as he was about to kill King Stephen. Yes." She smiled at Hugh's look of amazement. "I heard all about it. The mysteriarch, Iridal, returned to the High Realms. You did not go with her. You went back to the Kenkari. Why?"

"I owed them a debt," Hugh said slowly, turning his wine glass around and around in his hand. "I had sold them my soul."

Ciang's eyes widened. She sat back in her chair. "They do not deal in human souls. Nor would the Kenkari buy the soul of any man—human or elven."

"They wanted mine. Or at least I thought they did. You can understand why, of course." Hugh drank down the wine at one gulp.

"Of course." Ciang shrugged. "You had died and had returned. Your soul would have been one of great value. But I can also understand why they did not take it."

"You can?" Hugh paused in the act of pouring himself another glass to focus on her. He was drunk, but not drunk enough. He could never get drunk enough.

"The souls of the elves are held in constraint to serve the living. They are prevented from going beyond. Perhaps they do not even know that such peace as you describe exists." Ciang pointed a bony finger. "You are a danger to the Kenkari, Hugh the Hand. You are more of a threat to them dead than you are alive."

Hugh gave a low whistle. His face darkened. "I never thought of that. The bastards. And I thought..." He shook his head. "They acted so compassionate... And all the time looking out for their own."

"Have you ever known anyone who did not, Hugh the Hand?" Ciang rebuked him. "Once you would not have fallen for such wiles. You would have seen clearly. But you are changed. At least now I know why."

"I will see clearly again," Hugh said softly.

"I wonder." Ciang stared at the bloodstains on the desk. Absently her fingers traced them. "I wonder." She fell silent, absorbed in thought.

Hugh, troubled, did not disturb her.

At length she raised her eyes, regarded him shrewdly. "You mentioned a contract. Who has hired you and for what?"

Hugh moistened his lips, this part coming reluctantly. "Before he died, Bane made me agree to kill a man for him. The man named Haplo."

"The one who traveled with you and Alfred?" Ciang looked surprised at first; then she smiled grimly. It was all starting to make sense. "The one with the bandaged hands."

Hugh nodded.

"Why must this Haplo die?"

"Bane said something about some lord of his wanting Haplo out of the way. The kid was persistent, kept after me. We were coming up on Seven Fields, where Stephen was camped. I had too much to do to fool with a child's whim. I agreed, to shut him up. I wasn't intending to live that long anyway."

"But you did live. And Bane died. And now you have a contract with the dead."

"Yes, Ciang."

"And you were not going to keep it?" Ciang was disapproving.

"I'd forgotten about the damn thing!" Hugh said impatiently. "Ancestors take me, I was supposed to die! The Kenkari were supposed to buy my soul."

"And they did—only not quite the way you expected."

Hugh grimaced. "They reminded me of the contract. Said my soul is bound to Bane. I'm not free to give it to them."

"Elegant." Ciang was admiring. "Elegant and very neat. And so, elegantly and neatly, they escape this great danger that you present to them."

"Danger?" Hugh slammed his hand on the desk. His own blood was there, taken from him years ago when he had been an initiate into the Brotherhood. "What danger? How do they know about this? They were the ones who showed me this mark!" He clutched at his breast as if he would rip out his flesh.

"As for how they know, the Kenkari have access to the ancient books. And then, you see, the Sartan favored them. Told them their secrets..."

"Sartan." Hugh looked up. "Iridal mentioned that word. She said Alfred—"

"—is a Sartan. That much is obvious. Only the Sartan could use the rune-magic, or so they claimed. But there were rumors, dark rumors, of another race of gods—"

"Gods with marks like this, covering their entire bodies? Known as Patryns? Iridal told me about them, too. She guessed that this Haplo was a Patryn."

"Patryn." Ciang lingered over the word, tasting it. Then she shrugged. "Perhaps. Many years have passed since I read the ancient texts, and then I wasn't interested. What had these gods—Patryn or Sartan—to do with us? Nothing. Not anymore."

She smiled, the thin and puckered lips, outlined in red that seeped into the wrinkles, made her look as though she had drunk the blood on her desk. "For which we are grateful."

Hugh grunted. "And now you see my problem. This Haplo has runes like mine tattooed all over his body. They glow with a strange light. Once I tried to jump him. It was like wrapping my hands around a lightning bolt." He made an impatient gesture. "How do I kill this man, Ciang? How do I kill a god?"

"This is why you came to me?" she asked, lips pursed. "To seek my help?"

"Help... death, I'm not sure." Hugh rubbed his temples, which were starting to throb from the wine. "I had nowhere else to go."

"The Kenkari gave you no assistance?"

Hugh snorted. "They almost fainted even talking about it. I forced them to give me a knife—more to have a laugh at them than anything else. Lots of people have hired me to kill for lots of reasons, but I never saw one of them start blubbing over his intended victim."

"The Kenkari wept, you say?"

"The one who handed me the knife did. The Keeper of the Door. He damn near couldn't turn loose of the weapon. I almost felt sorry for him."

"And what did he say?"

"Say?" Hugh frowned, thinking, trying to weave his way among the wine fumes. "I didn't pay much attention to what he said—until he came to the part about this." Hugh thumped himself on the chest. "The rune-magic. About how I wasn't to disrupt the workings of the great machine. And I was to tell Haplo that Xar wanted him dead. That's it. That's the name of this lord of his. Xar. Xar wants him dead."

"The gods fight among themselves. A hopeful sign for us poor mortals." Ciang was smiling. "If they kill each other off, we will be free to go on with our lives without interference."

Hugh the Hand shook his head, not understanding, not caring.

"God or no, Haplo is my mark," he muttered. "How am I supposed to kill him?"

"Give me until tomorrow," Ciang said. "I will study on it this night. As I said, it has been a long time since I read the ancient texts. And you must sleep, Hugh the Hand."

He didn't hear her. Wine and exhaustion had combined to rob him—mercifully—of his senses. He lay sprawled on her desk, his arms stretched out over his head, his cheek resting on the bloodstained wood. The wine glass was still clutched in his hand.

Ciang rose to her feet. Leaning on her desk for support, she walked slowly around to stand over him. In her younger days, long, long ago, she would have taken him for her lover. She had always preferred human lovers to elven. Humans are hot-blooded, aggressive—the flame that burns shorter burns brighter. Then, too, humans die off in good time, leave you free to pursue another. They don't live long enough to make nuisances of themselves.

Most humans. Most who were not god-touched. God-cursed.

"Poor fly," Ciang murmured, her hand on the man's shoulder. "What dreadful sort of web do you struggle in? And who, I wonder, is the spider who has spun it? Not the Kenkari. I begin to think I was mistaken. Their own butterfly wings may be caught in this tangle as well.

"Should I help you? Should I act in this? I can, you know, Hugh." Ciang ran her hand absently through the mass of matted black and gray hair that straggled, uncombed, down his back. "I can help. But why should I? What is in it for me?"

Ciang's hand began to tremble. She rested it on the back of his chair, leaned on the chair heavily. The weakness was back. It came over her more frequently now. A dizziness, a shortness of breath. She clung to the chair grimly, stoically, waited for it to pass. It always passed. But a time was coming when it would grow worse. The time when it would claim her.

"You say that dying is hard, Hugh the Hand," Ciang said when she could breathe again. "That does not surprise me. I've seen death enough to know. But I must admit I am disappointed. Peace. Forgiveness. Yet first we are called to account.

"And I thought there would be nothing. The Kenkari, with their foolish soul-boxes. Souls living in the gardens of their glass dome. What nonsense. Nothing. All is nothing. I gambled on that." Her hand curled over the back of the chair. "I've lost, seemingly. Unless you are lying?"

Bending over Hugh, she looked at him closely, hopefully. Then she sighed, straightened. "No, the wine doesn't lie. And neither have you, Hand, in all the years I've known you. Called to account. Wickedness.

What wickedness have I not done? But what can I do to make amends? I've thrown my dice upon the table. Too late to snatch them back. But maybe another throw, eh? Winner take all?"

Cunning, shrewd, the old woman peered into the dark shadows. "Is it a bet?"

A soft knock fell on the door. Ciang chuckled to herself, half-mocking, half-serious. "Enter."

The Ancient thrust the door open, hobbled inside.

"Ah, me," he said sadly when he saw Hugh the Hand. He looked questioningly at Ciang. "Do we leave him here?"

"We are neither of us strong enough to move him, my old friend. He will do well enough where he is until morning."

She extended her arm. The Ancient took it. Together— his failing strength supporting her faltering steps—they walked slowly the few paces across the dark hall to Ciang's sleeping chambers.

"Light the lamp, Ancient. I will be reading late this night."

He did as she instructed, lighting the glow lamp and placing it on the stand beside her bed.

"Go into the library.\* Bring me any books you find written on the Sartan. And bring me the key to the Black Coffin. Then you may retire."

\*The library of the Brotherhood is quite extensive, according to Haplo's notes on the subject. As one might expect, there are the volumes devoted to the making and use of almost any weapon imaginable—human and elven and dwarven, mundane and magical. Innumerable volumes concern botany and herb lore, particularly as they relate to poisons and antidotes. There are books on venomous snakes and the deadlier types of spiders, books on snares and traps, books on the care and handling of dragons. There are also books of an unexpected nature: books on the inner workings of the hearts and minds of humans, elves, dwarves, and even those earlier beings—the Sartan. Philosophical treatises in an assassins' guild? Odd. Or perhaps not. As the saying goes, "When tracking a victim, you should try to fit your feet into his footprints."

"Very good, madam. And I'll just get a blanket to cover Hugh the Hand."

The Ancient was bobbing his way out when Ciang stopped him.

"My friend, do you ever think about death? Your own, I mean."

The Ancient didn't even blink. "Only when I have nothing better to do, madam. Will that be all?"

## CHAPTER 7

### THE FORTRESS OF THE BROTHERHOOD

#### SKURVASH, ARIANUS

HUGH SLEPT LATE THE NEXT MORNING, THE WINE DULLING HIS mind, permitting exhaustion to lay claim to the body. But it was the heavy, unrefreshing sleep of the grape, which causes one to wake with the brain sodden and aching, the stomach queasy. Knowing that he would be groggy and disoriented, the Ancient was there to guide Hugh's stumbling steps to a large water barrel placed outside the fortress for the refreshment of the lookouts.\* The Ancient dipped in a bucket, handed it to Hugh. The Hand dumped the contents over his head and shoulders, clothes and all. Wiping his dripping face, he felt somewhat better.

\*A measure of the Brotherhood's wealth. Nowhere else in the Mid Realms would one find a water barrel sitting out in the open, unguarded, its precious contents free to all takers.

"Ciang will see you this morning," said the Ancient when he deemed Hugh capable of understanding his words.

Hugh nodded, not quite capable yet of replying.

"You will have audience in her chambers," the Ancient added.

Hugh's eyebrows rose. This was an honor accorded to few. He glanced down ruefully at his wet and slept-in clothes. The Ancient, understanding, offered to provide a clean shirt. The old man hinted at breakfast, but Hugh shook his head emphatically.

Washed and dressed, the throbbing in his temples receding to an ache behind his eyeballs, Hugh presented himself once again to Ciang, the Brotherhood's "arm."

Ciang's chambers were enormous, sumptuously and fancifully decorated in the style elves admire and humans find ostentatious. All the furniture was of carved wood, extremely rare in the Mid Realms. The elven emperor Agah'ran would have opened his painted eyelids wide with envy at the sight of so many valuable and beautiful pieces. The massive bed was a work of art. Four posts, carved in the shapes of mythological beasts, each perched on the head of another, supported a canopy of wood decorated with the same beasts lying outstretched, paws extended. From each paw dangled a golden ring. Suspended from the rings was a silken curtain of fabulous weave, color, and design. It was whispered that the curtain had magical properties, that it accounted for the elven woman's longer than normal life span.

Whether or not that was true, the curtain was marvelously lovely to look on and seemed to invite admiration. Hugh had never before been inside Ciang's personal quarters. He stared at the shimmering multicolored curtain in awe, lifted his hand and reached out to it before it occurred to him what he was doing. Flushing, he started to snatch his hand back, but Ciang, seated in a high-backed monstrosity of a chair, gestured.

"You may touch it, my friend. It will do you some good."

Hugh, recalling the rumors, wasn't certain that he wanted to touch the curtain, but to do otherwise would offend Ciang. He ran his fingers over it gingerly and was startled to feel a pleasurable exhilaration tingle through his body. At this he did snatch his fingers back, but the feeling lasted and he found his head clear, the pain gone.

Ciang was seated on the opposite side of the large room. Diamond-paned windows, which stretched from ceiling to floor, admitted a flood of sunlight. Hugh walked across the bright bands of light spanning the ornate rugs to stand before the high-backed wooden chair.

The chair was said to have been carved by an admirer of Ciang's, given to her as a present. It was certainly grotesque. A skull leered at the top. The blood-red cushions that supported Ciang's frail form were surrounded by various ghostly spirits twining their way upward. Her feet rested on a footstool formed of crouching, cringing naked bodies. She waved a hand in a gracious gesture to a chair opposite hers, a chair which Hugh was relieved to see was perfectly ordinary in appearance.

Ciang dispensed with meaningless pleasantries and struck, arrow-like, at the heart of their business.

"I have spent the night in study." She rested her hand, gnarled and almost fleshless but elegant in its movement and grace, on the dusty leather cover of a book in her lap.

"I am sorry to have disturbed your sleep," Hugh began to apologize.

Ciang cut him off. "To be honest, I could not have slept otherwise. You are a disturbing influence, Hugh the Hand," she added, looking at him with narrowed eyes. "I will not be sorry to see you go. I have done what I could to speed you on your way." The eyelids—lashless, as the head was hairless—blinked once. "When you are gone, do not come back."

Hugh understood. The next time there would be no hesitation. The archer would have his orders. Hugh's face set hard and grim. "I would not have come back in any case," he said softly, staring at the cringing bodies, bent to hold Ciang's small and delicate-boned feet. "If Haplo doesn't kill me then I must find—"

"What did you say?" Ciang demanded sharply.

Hugh, startled, glanced up at her. He frowned. "I said that if I don't kill Haplo—"

"No!" Ciang's fist clenched. "You said 'If Haplo doesn't kill me...!' Do you go to this man seeking his death or your own?"

Hugh put his hand to his head. "I... was confused. That's all." His voice was gruff. "The wine..."

"...speaks the truth, as the saying goes." Ciang shook her head. "No, Hugh the Hand. You will not come back to us."

"Will you send the knife around on me?" he asked harshly.

Ciang considered. "Not until after you have fulfilled the contract. Our honor is at stake. And therefore, the Brotherhood will help you, if we can." She glanced at him and there was an odd glint in her eye. "If you want..."

Carefully she closed the book and placed it on a table beside the chair. From the table she lifted an iron key, which hung from a black ribbon. Extending her hand to Hugh, she allowed him the privilege of helping her to stand. She refused his assistance in walking, making her way slowly and with dignity to a door on a far wall.

"You will find what you seek in the Black Coffin," she told him.

The Black Coffin was not a coffin at all but a vault, a repository for weapons—magical or otherwise. Magical weapons are, of course, highly prized, and the Brotherhood's laws governing them are strict and rigorously enforced. A member who acquires or makes such a weapon may consider it his or her own personal possession, but must apprise the Brotherhood of its existence and how it works. The information is kept in a file in the Brotherhood's library, a file which may be consulted by any member at any time.

A member needing such a weapon as he finds described may apply to the owner and request the weapon's loan. The owner is free to refuse, but this almost never happens, since it is quite likely that the owner himself will need to borrow a weapon someday. If the weapon is not returned—something else that almost never happens—the thief is marked, the knife sent around.

On the owner's death, the weapon becomes the property of the Brotherhood. In the case of elderly members, such as the Ancient, who come back to the fortress to spend their remaining years in comfort, the deliverance of any magical weapons is easily facilitated. For those members who meet the sudden and violent end considered an occupational hazard, collecting the weapons of the deceased can present a problem.

These have sometimes been irrevocably lost, as in cases where the body and everything on it have been burned in a funeral pyre or tossed in rage off the floating isles into the Maelstrom. But so prized are the weapons that once the word goes around that the owner has died (which it does with remarkable swiftness) the Brotherhood is quick to act. All is done quietly, circumspectly. Very often grieving family members are surprised by the sudden appearance of strangers at their door. The strangers enter the house (sometimes before the body is cold) and leave almost immediately. Usually an object leaves with them—the black coffin.

To facilitate the passing on of valuable weapons, members of the Brotherhood are urged to keep such weapons in a plain black box. This has become known as the black coffer. It is thus natural that the repository for such weapons in the Brotherhood's fortress should have become known—in capital letters—as the Black Coffe.

If a member requests the use of a weapon kept in the Black Coffe, he or she must explain in detail the need and pay a fee proportionate to the weapon's power. Ciang has the final say on who gets what weapons, as well as the price to be paid.

Standing before the door of the Black Coffe, Ciang inserted the iron key into the lock and turned it.

The lock clicked.

Grasping the handle of the heavy iron door, she pulled. Hugh was ready to assist her if she asked, but the door, revolving on silent hinges, swung easily at her light touch. All was dark inside.

"Bring a lamp," Ciang ordered.

Hugh did so, catching up a glowlamp that stood on a table near the door, probably for this very purpose. Hugh lit the lamp, and the two entered the vault.

It was the first time Hugh the Hand had ever been inside the Black Coffe. (He had always taken pride in the fact that he had never needed enhanced weaponry.) He wondered why he was being accorded this honor now. Few members were ever permitted inside. When a weapon was needed, Ciang either fetched it herself or sent the Ancient to do so.

Hugh entered the enormous stone-lined vault with quiet step and subdued heart. The lamp drove the shadows back but could not banish them. A hundred lamps with the brightness of Solarus could not banish the shadow that hung over this room. The tools of death created their own darkness.

Their numbers were inconceivable. They rested on tables, reclined against the walls, were sheltered beneath glass cases. It was too much to take in all at one glance.

The light flashed off the blades of knives and daggers of every conceivable shape and type, arranged in a vast, ever expanding circle—a sort of metal sunburst. Pikes and poleaxes and spears stood guard around the walls. Longbows and short were properly displayed, each with a quiver of arrows, undoubtedly the famous elven exploding arrows so feared by human soldiers. Rows of shelving contained bottles and vials, small and large, of magical potions and poisons—all neatly labeled.

Hugh walked past one case filled with nothing but rings: poison rings, snake-tooth rings (containing a tiny needle tipped with snake venom), and magical rings of all sorts, from rings of charming (which grant the user power over the victim) to rings of warding (which protect the user against rings of charming).

Every item in the Black Coffe was documented, labeled in both the human and elven (and, in certain rare cases, dwarven) languages. Words to magical spells—should any be needed—were recorded. The value of it all was incalculable. Hugh's mind boggled. Here was stored the true wealth of the Brotherhood, worth far more than all the bars and jewels of the elven and human royal treasuries combined. Here was death and the means to deal it. Here was fear. Here was power.

Ciang led the way through the veritable maze of shelves, cabinetry, and cases, to an unimportant-looking table shunted off to a distant corner of the room. Only one object rested on that table, an object hidden under a cloth that might once have been black but, covered with dust, looked gray. The table appeared to be chained to the wall by thick cobwebs.

No one had ventured near this table in a long, long time.

"Set the lamp down," Ciang told him.

Hugh obeyed, placing the lamp on a case containing a vast assortment of blow-darts. He looked curiously at the cloth-covered object, thinking there was something strange about it, but not certain what.

"Look at it closely," Ciang ordered, echoing his thought.

Hugh did so, bending cautiously near it. He knew enough about magical weapons to respect this one. He would never touch it or anything pertaining to it until its proper use had been carefully explained—one reason Hugh the Hand had always preferred not to rely on such weapons. A good steel blade—hard and sharp—is a tool you can trust.

Hugh straightened, frowning, tugging on the braided strands of beard dangling from his chin.

"You see?" Ciang asked, almost as if she were testing him.

"Dust and cobwebs over everything else, but no dust or cobwebs anywhere on the object itself," Hugh replied.

Ciang breathed a soft sigh, regarded him almost sadly. "Ah, there are not many like you, Hugh the Hand. Quick eye, quick hand. A pity," she ended coolly.

Hugh said nothing. He could offer no defense, knew that none was invited. He stared hard at the object beneath the cloth, could make out the shape by the fact that dust lay all around it but not over it—a dagger with a remarkably long blade.

"Put your hand on it," Ciang said. "You may do so safely," she added, seeing the flash in Hugh's eye.

Hugh held his fingers gingerly above the object. He wasn't afraid, but he was loath to touch it, as one is loath to touch a snake or a hairy spider. Telling himself it was just a knife (yet wondering why it was covered with a black cloth), he rested his fingertips on it. Startled, he jerked his hand back. He stared at Ciang.

"It moved!"

She nodded, unperturbed. "A quivering. Like a live thing. Barely felt, yet strong enough to shake off the dust of centuries, strong enough to disturb the web-weavers. Yet it is not alive, as you will see. Not alive as we know life," she amended.

She plucked away the black cloth. The dust that caked the edges flew up, formed a nose-tickling cloud that caused them both to back off, wiping the grime and the horrible clinging wispy sensation of cobweb from face and hands.

Beneath the cloth—an ordinary metal dagger. The Hand had seen far better-crafted weapons. In shape and design, it was exceedingly crude, might have been made by some smith's child, attempting to learn his parent's craft. The hilt and crosspiece were forged of iron that appeared to have been beaten into shape while it was cooling. The marks of each hammer blow were plain on both hilt and crosspiece.

The blade was smooth, perhaps because it was made of steel, for it was bright and shiny in contrast to the hilt's dull finish. The blade had been affixed to the hilt with molten metal, the traces of soldering plain to see. The only things that made this knife at all remarkable were the strange symbols etched on the blade. The symbols were not the same as—yet they were reminders of—the one traced on Hugh's chest.

"The rune-magic," said Ciang, her bony finger hovering above, carefully not touching the blade.

"What does the thing do?" Hugh asked, regarding the weapon with disdain mingled with disgust. "We do not know," Ciang answered. Hugh raised an eyebrow, regarded her questioningly. She shrugged. "The last brother to use it died."

"I can understand why." Hugh grunted. "Trying to go up against a mark using a kid's toy."

Ciang shook her head. "You do not understand." She raised her slanted eyes to his, and again there was that strange glint. "He died of shock." She paused, looked down at the weapon, and added, almost casually, "He had grown four arms."

Hugh's jaw sagged. Then he snapped his mouth shut, cleared his throat.

"You don't believe me. I don't blame you. I didn't believe it myself. Not until I saw it with my own eyes." Ciang stared at the cobwebs as if they wove time. "It was many cycles ago. When I became 'arm.' The dagger had come to us from an elven lord, long ago, when the Brotherhood first began. It was kept in this vault, with a warning. A curse was on it, so the warning went. A human, a young man, scoffed at the notion. He did not believe in the curse. He took the knife—for it is written that 'he who masters the knife will be invincible against all foes. Not even the gods will dare oppose him.' "

She eyed Hugh as she said this. "Of course," she added, "this was in the days when there were no gods. Not anymore."

"What happened?" Hugh asked, trying not to sound skeptical. He was, after all, talking to Ciang.

"I am not certain. The partner, who survived, could not give us a coherent account. Apparently the young man attacked his mark, using the knife, and suddenly it was not a knife. It changed to a sword—enormous, whirling, many-bladed. Two ordinary arms could not hold it. Then it was that two more arms sprouted from the young man's body. He stared at his four arms and dropped dead—of terror and shock. His partner eventually went mad, threw himself off the isle. I don't blame him. I saw the body. The man had four arms. I dream of it still sometimes."

She was silent, lips pursed. Hugh, looking at that hard, pitiless face, saw it blanch. The compression of the lips was to hold them firm. He looked at the knife and felt his stomach crawl.

"That incident could have been the end of the Brotherhood." Ciang glanced at him sideways. "You can imagine what rumor would have made of this. Perhaps we—the Brotherhood—had cast the dreadful curse upon the young man. I acted swiftly. I ordered the body brought here under cover of darkness. The partner also. I questioned him before witnesses. I read the tract to them—the tract that came with the knife.

"We agreed that it was the knife itself that was cursed. I forbade its use. We buried the grotesque body in secret. All brothers and sisters were ordered, on pain of death, not to speak of the incident.

"That was long ago. Now," she added softly, "I am the only one left alive who remembers. No one, not even the Ancient, whose grandfather had not yet been born when this occurred, knows about the cursed knife. I have written the injunction against its use in my will. But I have never told the story to anyone. Not until now."

"Cover it up," Hugh said grimly. "I don't want it." His frown darkened. "I've never used magic before—"

"You have never been asked to kill a god before," Ciang said, displeased.

"The dwarf, Limbeck, claims they're not gods. He said Haplo was almost dead when the dwarf first saw him, just like any ordinary man. No, I will not use it!"

Two red spots of anger appeared in the woman's skull-like face. She seemed about to make a bitter rejoinder, then paused. The red spots faded; the slanted eyes were suddenly cool. "It is your choice, of

course, my friend. If you insist on dying in dishonor, that is your own affair. I will not argue further except to remind you that another's life is at stake here. Perhaps you have not considered this?"

"What other life?" Hugh demanded, suspicious. "The boy, Bane, is dead."

"But his mother lives. A woman for whom you hold strong feelings. Who knows but that if you fail and fall, this Haplo would not go after her next? She knows who he is, what he is."

Hugh thought back. Iridal had said something to him about Haplo, but the assassin couldn't remember what. They'd had little time to talk. His mind had been on other things—the dead child he had carried in his arms, Iridal's grief, his own confusion at being alive when he was supposed to be dead. No, whatever she'd said to him about the Patryn, Hugh had lost in the horror-tinged mists of that terrible night. What had it to do with him anyway? He was going to give the Kenkari his soul. He was going to return to that beautiful, peaceful realm...

Would Haplo try to find Iridal? He had taken her son captive. Why not her? Could Hugh afford to take the chance? He owed her something, after all. Owed her for having failed her.

"A tract, you said?" he asked Ciang.

Her hand slid into the large pockets of her voluminous robes, withdrew several sheets of vellum held together by a black ribbon tied around them. The vellum was old and discolored, the ribbon tattered and faded. She smoothed it with her hand.

"I read it again last night. The first time I have read it since that dreadful night. Then I read the tract aloud, to the witnesses. Now I will read it to you."

Hugh flushed. He wanted to read it, study it in private, but he didn't dare insult her. "I have put you to so much trouble already, Ciang—"

"I must translate it for you," she said with a smile that indicated she understood. "It is written in High Elven, a language spoken after the Sundering, a language that is all but forgotten now. You would not be able to understand it."

Hugh had no further objections.

"Bring me a chair. The text is long and I am weary of standing. And put the lamp close."

Hugh brought a chair, set it in a corner beside the table on which rested the "cursed" knife. He remained standing outside the circle of lamplight, not sorry to keep his face hidden in the shadows, his doubts concealed. He didn't believe it. Didn't believe any of it.

Yet he wouldn't have believed a man could die and come back to life again either.

And so he listened to the tale.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE ACCURSED BLADE

SINCE YOU ARE READING THIS, MY SON, I AM DEAD AND MY SOUL has gone to Krenka-Anris, to help in the liberation of our people.\* Since it has come to open war, I trust that you will acquit yourself honorably in battle, as have all those who bear this name who have gone before you.

\*By this we assume that the writer was a member of the Tribus elven clan, who were battling their Paxar cousins in the war that became known as the Brotherblood. See *The Hand of Chaos*, vol. 5 of *The Death Gate Cycle*, for details. Additional note: this manuscript can now be found in Haplo's collection.

I am the first of our family to set down this account on paper. Before now, the story of the Accursed Blade was whispered to the eldest son from his father's deathbed. Thus my father told me and thus his father before him and so on back to before the Sundering. But since it seems likely that my deathbed may be the hard ground of a battlefield and that you, my beloved son, will be far away, I leave this account to be read after my death. And so you will take an oath, my son, by Krenka-Anris and by my soul, that you will pass this account to your son—may the Goddess bless your lady-wife and deliver her safely.

In the armory is a box with a pearl-inlaid lid that holds the ceremonial dueling daggers. You know the one, I am certain, for as a child you expressed your admiration for the daggers, an admiration much misplaced, as you know by now, being a seasoned warrior yourself.\* You have undoubtedly wondered why I kept the fool things, much less accorded them room in the armory. Little did you know, my son, what those daggers concealed.

\*The ancient elven custom of dagger-dueling had gone out of favor by this time, probably because so many elves were fighting for their lives on the battlefield. Dueling came to the fore under the peaceful reign of the Paxar, providing a way for youths to test their courage without placing anyone in real danger. As this elf implies, the daggers were meant more for show than actual use, often having jeweled handles and fancifully shaped blades.

The rules of the duel were complicated. The intent was to slash an ear. An elf walking around with a cropped "human" ear was an object of ridicule. To avoid scarring the face or damaging eyes, elaborate headgear was worn that left only the ears exposed.

Select a time when your lady-wife and her retinue have left the castle. Dismiss the servants. Make absolutely certain that you are alone. Go to the armory. Take up the box. On the lid, you will note that in each corner there is a butterfly. Press down simultaneously on the butterflies in the upper right corner and the lower left. A false bottom at the left-hand side will slide open. Please, my son, for the sake of my soul and your own, do not place your hand in this box!

Inside you will see a knife much less prepossessing than those that nestle above it. The knife is made of iron and appears to have been forged by a human. It is exceedingly ugly and misshapen, and, I trust, you will have as little desire to touch it, once you see it, as I had when I first looked at it. Yet, alas, you will be curious, as I was curious. I beg you, beg you, my dear, dear son, to fight against your curiosity. Look at the blade and see its hideous aspect and heed the warning of your own inner senses, which will recoil in horror before it.

I did not heed that warning. And it brought me a grief that has forever cast a shadow over my life. With this dagger, this Accursed Blade, I murdered my beloved brother.

I imagine you growing pale with shock as you read this. It was always claimed that your uncle died of wounds suffered at the hands of human attackers, who waylaid him in a lonely stretch of road near our castle. That story was not true. He died by my hand, in the armory, probably not far from the spot where you now stand. But I swear, I swear by Krenka-Anris, I swear by the sweet eyes of your mother, I swear by the soul of my dear brother, that it was the blade that killed him—not !!

This is what happened. Forgive the handwriting. Even now, as I relate this, I find I am shaking from the horror of that incident, which happened well over a hundred years ago.

My father died. On his deathbed, he told my brother and me the story of the Accursed Blade. It was a rare and valuable artifact, he said, which had come from a time when two races of dread gods ruled the world. These two races of gods hated and feared each other and each sought to rule over those they called

mensch: humans, elves, and the dwarves. Then came the God Wars—terrible battles of magic that raged over an entire world until at last, fearing defeat, one race of gods sundered the world.

Mostly the gods fought these wars among themselves, but sometimes, if they were outnumbered, they recruited mortals to assist them. Of course, we would be no match for the magical attacks of the gods, and so the Sartan (we know the gods by that name) armed their mensch supporters with fantastic magical weapons.

Most of these weapons were lost during the Sundering, as many of our people were lost, or so the tales relate. Yet a few remained with those who survived and were kept in their possession. This knife is, according to family legend, one of those weapons. My father told us he had called in the Kenkari, to verify the fact.

The Kenkari could not say for certain that the weapon was pre-Sundering, but they did agree that it was magical. And they warned him that its magic was potent and advised him never to use it. My father was a timid man and the Kenkari frightened him. He had this box built specially to hold the weapon, which the Kenkari deemed Accursed. He placed the blade in the box and never looked at it again.

I asked him why he did not destroy it, and he said that the Kenkari had warned him not to try. Such a weapon could never be destroyed, they said. It would fight to survive and return to its owner, and as long as it was in his possession, he could guarantee that it would not have the power to do harm. If he attempted to rid himself of it—perhaps throw it into the Maelstrom—the weapon would simply fall into the hands of another and might do great damage. He vowed to the Kenkari that he would keep it safe and he made each of us take the same solemn oath.

After his death, as my brother and I were settling our father's affairs, we recalled the story of the knife. We went to the armory, opened the box, and found the knife in the false bottom. Knowing my father's timidity and also his love of romantic stories, I am afraid that we discounted much of what he had said. This plain and ugly knife was forged by a god? We shook our heads, smiling.

And, as brothers will, we fell to play. (We were young at the time of my father's death. That is the only excuse I can offer for our heedlessness.) My brother grabbed one of the dueling daggers and I took what we were jokingly calling the Accursed Blade. (Goddess forgive my unbelief!) My brother took a playful slash at me with his dagger.

You will not believe what happened next. I am not certain I believe it myself, to this day. Yet I saw it with my own eyes.

The knife felt strange in my hand. It quivered, as if it were a live thing. And suddenly, when I started to thrust it playfully at my brother, the knife squirmed like a snake and I held—not a knife, but a sword. And before I knew what was happening, the sword's blade had passed clean through my brother's body. It pierced his heart. I will never, never—perhaps not even after my death—forget the look of shocked and awful surprise on his face.

I dropped the blade and caught him in my arms, but there was nothing I could do. He died in my embrace, his blood flowing over my hands.

I think I cried out in terror. I am not certain. I looked up to find our old retainer standing in the door.

"Ah," An'lee said, "now you are the sole heir."

He assumed, you see, that I had slain my brother in order to gain our father's inheritance.

I protested that he was wrong. I told him what had happened, but naturally he did not believe me. How could I blame him? I did not believe myself.

The knife had altered its form again. It was as you see it now. I knew that if An'lee did not believe me, no one else would. The scandal would ruin our family. Fratricide is punishable by death. I would be hanged. The castle and lands would be confiscated by the king. My mother would be thrown out into the streets, my sisters left disgraced and dowryless. Whatever my private grief (and I would have gladly confessed and paid the penalty), I could not inflict such harm upon the family.

An'lee was loyal, offered to help me conceal my crime. What could I do but go along with him? Between us, we smuggled my unfortunate brother's body out of the castle, carried it to a place far distant—known to be frequented by human raiders—and dumped it in a ditch. Then we returned home.

I told my mother that my brother had heard reports of human raiding parties and had gone to investigate. When the body was found, days later, it was assumed that he'd run afoul of those he sought. No one suspected a thing. An'lee, faithful servant, took the secret to his grave.

As for me, you cannot imagine, my son, the torture I have endured. At times I thought my guilt and grief would drive me mad. Night after night I lay awake and dreamed longingly of hurling myself off the parapet and ending this agony forever. Yet I had to go on living, for the sake of others, not my own.

I meant to destroy the knife, but the warning that the Kenkari had given my father burned in my mind. What if it should fall into other hands? What if it should kill again? Why should another suffer as I had? No, as part of my penance, I would keep the Accursed Blade in my possession. And I am forced to hand it on to you. It is the burden our family bears and must bear until time's end.

Pity me, my son, and pray for me. Krenkra-Anris, who sees all, knows the truth and will, I trust, forgive me. As will, I hope, my beloved brother.

And I adjure you, my son, by all that you hold dear— by the Goddess, by my memory, by your mother's heart, by your lady-wife's eyes, by your unborn child—that you keep the Accursed Blade safe and that you never, never touch it or again look upon it.

May Krenka-Anris be with you. Your loving father.

## CHAPTER 9

### THE FORTRESS OF THE BROTHERHOOD

#### SKURVASH, ARIANUS

CIANG FINISHED READING, LOOKED UP AT HUGH. He had stood silently as she read the missive, his hands thrust into the pockets of his leather pants, his back leaning against the wall. Now he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, crossed his arms, stared down at the floor.

"You do not believe," Ciang said.

Hugh shook his head. "A murderer trying to wriggle out from under his deed. He claims no one suspected, but someone obviously did, and he's trying to square himself with his kid before going off to war."

Ciang was angry. Her lips disappeared into a thin, bitter line. "If you were an elf, you would believe. Such oaths he swears are not made lightly, even in this day and age."

Hugh flushed. "I'm sorry, Ciang. I meant no disrespect. It's just... I've seen magical weapons in my time and I've never seen one do anything like that. Or even close."

"And how many men have you met who were dead and came back to life, Hugh the Hand?" Ciang demanded, voice soft. "And how many men have you seen with four arms? Or do you now refuse to believe me as well?"

Hugh lowered his gaze, stared again at the floor. His face darkening, his visage grim, he glanced at the knife. "Then how does it work?"

"I do not know," Ciang answered, her gaze, too, on the crude-looking weapon. "I cannot say. I have my own surmises, but that is all they are—surmises. You now know all the facts that I know."

Hugh stirred restlessly. "How did the knife come into the Brotherhood's possession? Can you tell me that?"

"It was here when I came. But the answer is not so difficult to imagine. The elven war was long and costly. It ruined many elven families. Perhaps this noble family fell on hard times. Perhaps a younger son was forced to seek his fortune and sought it in the Brotherhood. Perhaps he brought the Accursed Blade with him. Krenka-Anris is the only one who knows the truth now. The man who was my predecessor turned it over to me with this missive. He was human. He had not read this, could not understand it. Which was, undoubtedly, why he permitted the knife to be loaned out."

"And you never have allowed anyone to use it?" Hugh asked, studying her intently.

"Never. You forget, my friend," Ciang added, "I helped them bury the man with four arms. Then, too, no one of us before has ever been forced to kill a god." "And you think this weapon will do that?" "If you believe this account, it was designed for just such a purpose. I have spent the night studying the Sartan magic, for though this man you must kill is not one of them, the basis for both their magicks is basically the same."

Ciang rose to her feet, moved slowly from her chair to stand near the table on which lay the knife. As she spoke, she ran a long-nailed finger delicately over the hilt, along its battered metal. She was careful, however, not to touch the blade itself, the blade marked with the runes.

"A Paxar wizard, who lived in the days when the Sartan were still living in the Mid Realms, made an attempt to learn the secrets of Sartan magic. Not unusual. The wizard Sinistrad did the same, or so I am told." Ciang's gaze slid in Hugh's direction.

He frowned, nodded, but said nothing.

"According to this wizard, Sartan magic is far different from elven magic—or human magic—in that the magic does not rely on manipulating natural occurrences, as in the case of humans, or using it to enhance mechanics, as do we elves. Such magicks work either with what is past or what is here and now. Sartan magic controls the future. And that is what makes it so powerful. They do this through controlling the possibilities."

Hugh looked baffled.

Ciang paused, considered. "How shall I explain? Let us suppose, my friend, that we are standing in this room when suddenly thirteen men rush through that door to attack you. What would you do?"

Hugh gave a rueful grin. "Jump out the window."

Ciang smiled, rested her hand on his arm. "Ever prudent, my friend. That is why you have lived long. That would be one possibility, of course. There are many weapons here. They provide you with numerous other possibilities. You might use a pike to keep your enemies at bay. You could shoot the elven exploding arrows into their midst. You might even fling one of the human fire-storm potions at them. All possibilities you could choose.

"And there are others, my friend. Some more bizarre, but all possibilities. For example, the ceiling could unexpectedly give way and crush your enemies. Their combined weight could cause them to drop through the floor. A dragon could fly through the window and devour them."

"Not likely!" Hugh laughed grimly.

"But you admit it is possible."

"Anything's possible."

"Almost. Though the more improbable the probability, the more power is required to produce it. A Sartan has the ability to look into the future, scan the possibilities, and choose the one that suits him best. He summons it forth, causes it to happen. That, my friend, is how you came back to life."

Hugh was no longer laughing. "So Alfred looked into the future and discovered the possibility—"

"—that you survived the wizard's attack. He chose that one and you returned to life."

"But wouldn't that mean I had never died?"

"Ah, here we delve into the forbidden art of necromancy. The Sartan were not permitted to practice it, according to the wizard—"

"Yes, Iridal said something about that. One reason Alfred denied having used his magic on me. 'For every one who is brought back to life untimely, another dies untimely,' she said. Bane, perhaps. Her own son."

Ciang shrugged. "Who knows? It is probable that if Alfred had been present when the wizard attacked you, the Sartan could have saved your life. In that case, you would not have died. But you were already dead. A fact that could not be altered. Sartan magic cannot change the past, it can only affect the future. I spent long hours considering this last night, my friend, using the wizard's text for reference, although he did not bother to consider necromancy, since the Sartan were not then practicing it."

"We know that you died. You experienced an afterlife." Ciang grimaced slightly as she said this. "And now you are alive. Think of this as a child playing at leapfrog. The child starts at this point. He leaps over the back of the child in front of him, arrives at his next point. Alfred cannot change the fact that you died. But he can leap over it, so to speak. He moves from back to front—" "And leaves me trapped in the middle!" "Yes. That is what I believe has happened. You are not dead. Yet you are not truly alive."

Hugh stared at her. "I mean no offense, Ciang, but I can't accept this. It just doesn't make sense!"

Ciang shook her head. "Perhaps I cannot either. It is an interesting theory. And it helped me to pass the long hours of the night. But now, back to this weapon. Knowing more about how the Sartan magic works, we can start to understand how this weapon works—"

"Assuming Patryn magic works like Sartan." "There may be some differences—just as elven magic is different from human. But I believe—as I said—that the basics are the same. First let us consider this account of the elf lord who killed his brother. Let us assume that he is telling the truth. What, then, do we know?"

"He and his brother are engaged in a friendly contest, using knives. But the weapon that he has chosen does not know the contest is a friendly one. It only knows that it is fighting an opponent wielding a knife..."

"And so it counters. And it does so by turning itself into a superior weapon," Hugh said, regarding the blade with more interest. "That much makes sense. A man comes at you with a knife. If you have the ability to choose your weapon, you'll take a sword. He never has a chance to get within your guard."

He looked up at Ciang, awed. "And you think the weapon itself chose to become a sword?"

"Either that," said Ciang slowly, "or it reacted to the elf lord's wish. What if he was thinking, academically, of course, that a sword would be a perfect weapon to use against his knife-wielding opponent. Suddenly he holds the sword in his hand."

"But surely the man who had four arms didn't wish for two more arms?" Hugh protested.

"Perhaps he wished for a larger weapon and he ended up with one so large and heavy that four arms were required to wield it." Ciang tapped the knife's hilt with her fingernail. "It is like the faery story we heard as children—the beautiful young maiden wished for immortal life, and her wish was granted. But she forgot to ask for eternal youth and so she grew older and older, her body withered to a husk. And thus she was doomed to live on and on."

Hugh had a sudden vision of himself, doomed to such an existence. He looked at Ciang, who had lived far longer than the longest-lived elf...

"No," she answered his unspoken question. "I never encountered a faery. I never went looking for one. I will die. But you, my friend—I am not so certain. This Sartan Alfred is the one who is in control of your future. You must find him to regain your soul's freedom."

"I will," said Hugh. "Just as soon as I rid the world of this Haplo. I will take the knife. I may not use it. But it could come in handy. 'Possibly,' " he added with a twisted smile.

Cfang inclined her head, granting him permission.

He hesitated a moment, hands flexing nervously, then —conscious of the elf woman's slanted eyes on him—he swiftly wrapped the knife in its black velvet cloth and picked it up. He held it in his hand, keeping it away from his body, eyeing it suspiciously.

The blade did nothing, though it seemed he could feel it quiver, pulse with whatever magic life it possessed. He started to thrust it into his belt, thought better of it, continued to hold it. He would need a sheath for it, one that he could sling over his shoulder, to keep from coming into contact with the weapon. The touch of the metal knife, squirming like an eel in his hand, was unnerving.

Ciang turned to walk back toward the entrance. Hugh gave her his arm. She accepted it, though she took pains not to lean on him. They walked at a slow pace.

A thought occurred to Hugh. His face reddened. He came to a halt.

"What is it, my friend?" Ciang said, feeling the arm she held grow tense.

"I... cannot pay for this, Ciang," he said, embarrassed. "What wealth I had I gave to the Kir monks. In return for letting me live with them."

"You will pay," said Ciang, and her smile was dark and mirthless. "Take the Accursed Blade away, Hugh the Hand. Take your accursed self away as well. That will be your payment to the Brotherhood. And if you ever return, the next payment will be taken in blood."

## CHAPTER 10

### TERREL FEN, DREVLIN ARIANUS

MARIT HAD NO DIFFICULTY NAVIGATING DEATH'S GATE. THE journey was far easier, now that the gate was open, than the first terrifying journeys her compatriot, Haplo, had made. The choice of destination flashed before her eyes: the fiery lava cauldrons of the world she had just left, the sapphire and emerald jewel that was the water world of Chelestra, the lush jungles of the sunlit world of Pryan, the floating isles

and grand machine of Arianus. And inserted into these, a world of wondrous beauty and peace that was unrecognizable, yet tugged at her heart strangely.

Marit ignored such weak and sentimental yearnings. They made little sense to her, for she had no idea what world this was and she refused to indulge in idle speculation. Her lord—her husband—had told her about the other worlds, and he had not mentioned this one. If Xar had thought it was important, he would have informed her.

Marit selected her destination—Arianus.

In the blinking of an eyelid, her rune-covered ship slid through the opening in Death's Gate, and she was almost instantly plunged into the violent storms of the Maelstrom.

Lightning cracked around her, thunder boomed, wind buffeted and rain lashed her ship. Marit rode out the storm calmly, watched it with mild curiosity. She knew from having read Haplo's reports on Arianus what to expect. Soon the storm's fury would abate, and then she could safely land her ship.

Until the storm passed by, she watched and waited. Gradually the lightning strikes grew less violent; the thunder sounded from a distance. The rain still pattered on the ship's hull, but softly. Marit could begin to see, through the scudding clouds, several floating isles of coral-ite, arranged like stair-steps.

She knew where she was. Haplo's description of Arianus, given to her by Xar, was precise in detail. She recognized the islands as the Steps of Terrel Fen. She guided her ship among them and came to the vast floating continent of Drevlin. She landed her ship at the first site available on the shoreline. For though the ship was guarded by rune-magic and would not therefore be visible to any mensch not specifically looking for it, Haplo would see it and know it at once.

According to Sang-drax's information, Haplo was last known to be in the city that the dwarves on this world called Wombe, on the western side of Drevlin. Marit had no very clear idea where she was, but she assumed by the proximity of the Terrel Fen that she had landed near the continent's edge, possibly near where Haplo himself had been brought to recover from the injuries sustained on that first visit, when his ship had crashed into the Terrel Fen.\*

\*Marit does not know it, but her ship lands not far from the site on which Hugh the Hand and Alfred and Bane landed the Dragon Wing. The part of the machine she sees is in the city of Het.

Looking out the ship's porthole, Marit could see what she presumed was part of the wondrous machine known as the Kicksey-winsey. She found it amazing. Haplo's description and her lord's further explanation had not prepared her for anything like this.

Built by the Sartan to provide water to Arianus and energy to the other three worlds, the Kicksey-winsey was an unwieldy monstrosity that sprawled across a continent. Of fantastic shape and design, the immense machine was made of silver and gold, brass and steel. Its various parts were formed in the shape of either human or animal body parts. These metal arms and legs, talons and claws, ears and eyeballs might once, long ago, have formed recognizable wholes. But the machine—having run on its own for centuries—had completely distorted them in nightmarish fashion.

Steam escaped from screaming human mouths. Gigantic bird talons dug up the coralite; tigerish fangs chewed up hunks of ground and spit it out. At least that's what would have been happening if the machine had been operating. As it was, the Kicksey-winsey had come to a complete and mysterious halt. The reason for the halt—the opening of Death's Gate—had been discovered;\* the dwarves now possessed the means to turn the great machine back on.

\*The Hand of Chaos, vol. 5 of The Death Gate Cycle.

At any rate, that's what Sang-drax had reported. It was up to Marit to find out the truth.

She scanned the horizon, which seemed littered with body parts. She was no longer interested in the machine, but watched to see if anyone had noticed her ship landing. The runes would invoke the possibility that anyone not specifically searching for a ship would not see it, thus rendering the ship practically invisible. But there was always the chance, minute though it might be, that some mensch staring at this one particular patch of ground could see her ship. They couldn't damage it; the runes would see to that. But an army of mensch crawling around her ship would be a distinct nuisance, to say nothing of the fact that word might get back to Haplo.

But no army of dwarves came surging out over the rain-swept landscape. Another storm was darkening the horizon. Already much of the machine was lost in sullen, lightning-charged clouds. Marit knew from Haplo's early experience that the dwarves would not venture out into the storm. Satisfied that she was safe, she changed her clothes, putting on the Sartan clothing she had brought with her from Abarach.

"How do those women stand this?" Marit muttered.

It was the first time she'd worn a dress,\* and she found the long skirts and tight bodice confining, clumsy, and bulky. She frowned down at it. The Sartan fabric was scratchy against her skin. Though she told herself it was all in her mind, she felt extremely uncomfortable, suddenly, wearing the clothes of an enemy. A dead enemy at that. She decided to take the dress off.

\*Women in the Labyrinth, particularly Runners, dress in leather trousers and vests, all rune-enhanced, as do the men. Squatter women, who are foragers and gatherers, will occasionally wear skirts that assist them in these tasks. Such skirts are worn over the trousers and can thus be easily removed if the women need to flee or fight a pursuing foe.

Marit stopped herself. She was being foolish, behaving illogically. Her lord—her husband—would not be pleased. Studying her reflection in the porthole glass, Marit was forced to admit that the dress was perfect camouflage. She looked exactly like one of the mensch, whose pictures she'd seen in her lord's—her husband's—books. Not even Haplo, should he chance to see her, would know her.

"Not that he'd likely know me anyway," she said to herself, walking around the ship's cabin, trying to get used to the long skirts, which kept tripping her until she learned to take small steps. "We've each passed through too many gates since that time."

She sighed as she said it, and the sigh alarmed her. Pausing, she stopped to consider her feelings, examine them for any weakness, much as she would examine her weapons before going into battle. That time. The time they'd been together...

The day had been long and arduous. Marit had spent it battling—not a monster of the Labyrinth, but a piece of the Labyrinth itself. It had seemed as if the very ground were possessed by the same evil magic that ruled the prison-world on which the Patryns had been cast. Her destination—the next gate—lay on the other side of a razor-back ridge. She had seen the gate from the top of the tree where she'd spent the night, but she couldn't reach it.

The ridge was smooth rock on the side she needed to climb, ice-smooth rock that was nearly impossible to scale. Nearly impossible, but not absolutely. Nothing in the Labyrinth was ever absolutely impossible. Everything in the Labyrinth offered hope—teasing hope, mocking hope. One more day and you will reach your goal. One more battle and you can rest in safety. Fight on. Climb on. Walk on. Keep running.

And this ridge was like that. Smooth rock, yet broken by tiny fissures that provided a way up, if raw and bleeding fingers could be forced inside. And just when she was about to pull herself over the top, her foot would slip—or had the crack in which she'd dug her toe deliberately closed? When did the hard surface beneath her foot change suddenly to gravel? Was it sweat that caused her hand to slip or did that strange wetness bleed from the rock itself?

Down she slithered, cursing and grasping at plants to try to stop her fall, plants that jabbed hidden thorns into her palms or that came uprooted easily in her grasp and fell down with her.

She spent a full day in attempting to negotiate the ridge, ranging up and down it in an effort to find a pass. Her search proved futile. Night was nearing and she was no closer to her goal than she had been that morning. Her body ached; the skin of her palms and feet (she had removed her boots to try to scale the rock) was cut and bleeding. She was hungry and had no food, for she had spent the day climbing, not hunting.

A stream ran at the base of the ridge. Marit bathed her feet and hands in the cool water, watched for fish to catch for dinner. She saw several, but suddenly the effort needed to catch them eluded her. She was tired, far more tired than she should have been, and she knew it was the weariness of despair—a weariness that could be deadly in the Labyrinth.

It meant you didn't care anymore. It meant you found a quiet place and lay down and died.

Dabbling her hand in the water, unable to feel the pain anymore, unable to feel anything now, she wondered why she should bother. What use? If I cross this ridge, there will only be another. Higher, more difficult.

She watched the blood trail out of the cuts on her hands, watched it flow into the clear water, swirl down the stream. In her dazed mind, she saw her blood sparkle on the water's surface, form a trail that led to a jog in the stream bank. Lifting her gaze, she saw the cave.

It was small, set into the embankment. She could crawl in there and nothing could find her. She could crawl into its darkness and sleep. Sleep as long as she wanted. Forever, maybe.

Marit plunged into the water, waded the stream. Reaching the other side, she crept into the shallows near the bank, advanced slowly, keeping to the cover of trees that lined the stream. Caves in the Labyrinth were rarely unoccupied. But a glance at her rune-tattooed skin showed her that if there was anything inside, it wasn't particularly large or threatening. Likely she could make short work of it, especially if she surprised it. Or maybe, just once in her life, she would be lucky. Maybe the cave would be empty. Nearing it, not seeing or hearing anything, her sigla giving no indication of danger, Marit sprang out of the water and hurriedly covered the short distance to the entrance. She did draw her knife—her one concession to danger—but that was more out of instinct than because she feared attack. She had convinced herself that this cave was empty, that it was hers.

And so she was extremely startled to find a man sitting comfortably inside.

At first Marit didn't see him. Her eyes were dazzled by the setting sun slanting off the water. The cave's interior was dark and the man sat very quietly. But she knew he was there by his scent and, in the next moment, his voice. "Just hold right there, in the light," he said, and his voice was quiet and calm.

Of course he was calm. He'd watched her coming. He'd had time to prepare. She cursed herself, but she cursed him more.

"The hell with the light!" She bounded inside, heading for the sound of his voice, blinking rapidly to try to see him. "Get out! Get out of my cave!"

She was inviting death at his hands and she knew it. Perhaps she wanted it. He had warned her to stay in the light for a reason. The Labyrinth occasionally sent its own deadly copies of Patryns against them—boggleboes, as they were known. They were exactly like Patryns in all respects, except that the sigla on their skin were all backward, as if one were looking at one's reflection in a lake. He was on his feet in an instant. She could see him now and was impressed, in spite of herself, with the ease and quickness of his movement. He could have killed her—she was armed and had sprung right at him—but he didn't.

"Get out!" She stamped her foot and gestured with her knife.

"No," he said and sat back down.

She had apparently interrupted him in a project of some sort, for he took hold of something in his hands—she couldn't see what because of the shadows and the sudden tears stinging her eyes—and began working at it.

"But I want to die," she told him, "and you're in the way."

He glanced up, coolly nodded. "What you need is food. You probably haven't eaten all day, have you? Take what you want. There's fresh fish, berries."

She shook her head. She was still standing, the knife in her hand.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "You've been trying to scale the ridge?" He must have seen the cuts on her hand. "Me, too," he continued on his own. She gave him no encouragement. "For a week. I was just sitting here thinking, when I heard you coming, that two people might be able to do it together. If they had a rope."

He held up the thing in his hands. That was what he was doing, braiding a rope.

Marit flung herself down on the floor. Reaching for the fish, she grabbed a hunk and began to eat hungrily.

"How many gates?" he asked, deftly twisting the vines together.

"Eighteen," she said, watching his hands.

He glanced up, frowning.

"Why are you looking at me like that? It's true," she said defensively.

"I'm just surprised you've lived that long," he said. "Considering how careless you are. I heard you coming all the way up the stream."

"I was tired," she said crossly. "And I didn't really care. You can't be much older. So don't talk like a headman."\*

\*Leader of a tribe of Squatters, known for wisdom.

"That's dangerous," he said quietly. Everything he did was quiet. His voice was quiet; his movements were quiet.

"What is?"

"Not caring."

He looked up at her. Her blood tingled.

"Caring's more dangerous," she said. "It makes you do stupid things. Like not killing me. You couldn't have known I wasn't a boggleboe, not with just that single quick glimpse."

"You ever fought a boggleboe?" he asked.

"No," she admitted.

He smiled, a quiet smile. "A boggleboe doesn't usually commence an attack by bounding in and demanding that I get out of its cave."

She couldn't help herself. She laughed. She was beginning to feel better. It must have been the food.

"You're a Runner," he said.

"Yes. I left my camp when I was twelve. So I really do have more sense than I showed just now," she said, flushing. "I wasn't thinking right." Her voice softened. "You know how it gets sometimes."

He nodded, kept working. His hands were strong and deft. She edged nearer. "Two people could make it across that ridge. I am called Marit." She drew back her leather vest, revealed the heart-rune tattooed on her breast—a sign of trust.

He set down the rope. Drawing back his own leather vest, he showed his heart-rune. "I'm Haplo."

"Let me help," she offered.

Lifting a huge tangle of vines, she began sorting them out so that he could twine them into rope. As they worked, they talked. Their hands touched often. And soon, of course, it was necessary that she sit very close beside him so that he could teach her how to braid the rope correctly. And soon after that, they shoved the rope to the back end of the cave, to get it out of their way...

Marit forced herself to relive the night, was pleased to feel no unwelcome emotions, no warmed-over, leftover attraction. The only touch that could send fire through her now was her lord's touch. She wasn't surprised that this should be so. After all, there had been other caves, other nights, other men. None quite like Haplo, perhaps, but then even Xar had acknowledged that Haplo was different from other men.

It would be interesting to see Haplo again. Interesting to see how he had changed.

Marit deemed herself ready to proceed. She had learned how to maneuver in the long skirts, though she didn't like them and wondered how a woman, even a mensch, could permit herself to be permanently encumbered in such a manner.

Another storm broke over Drevlin. Marit paid little attention to the slashing rain, the tumbling thunder. She would not have to venture out in it. Magic would take her to her destination. Magic would take her to Haplo. She had only to be careful that the magic didn't take her too near.\*

\*A Patryn who knows another Patryn may act on the possibility that he or she is with this Patryn and the magic will bring them together. But just as a Patryn must be able to visualize a location before being taken there, so Marit must be able to visualize Haplo before she can use the magic to join him.

Marit pulled on a long cloak, covered her head with the hood. She cast one final glance at herself. She was satisfied. Haplo certainly wouldn't recognize her. As for the mensch... Marit shrugged.

Having never before met a human—or any other mensch—she had, as do most Patryns, little respect for them. She looked like one of them, she planned on blending in with them, and figured that they would never notice the difference.

It did not occur to her to think that dwarves might question the sudden appearance of a human female in their midst. To her the mensch were all alike. What was one more rat in the pack?

Marit began to trace the sigla in the air, spoke them, watched them catch fire and burn. When the circle was complete, she walked through it and disappeared.

## CHAPTER 11

### WOMBE, DREVLIN ARIANUS

AT ANY OTHER TIME IN THE LONG AND, SOME MIGHT SAY, INGLORIOUS history of Drevlin, the sight of a human female walking the glimmerglamp-lit halls of the Factree would have occasioned considerable astonishment, not to mention wonder. No human female since the beginning of the world had set foot on the Factree floor. Those few human males who had done so had done so only recently, being part of a ship's crew who had assisted the dwarves in the historic Battle of the Kicksey-winsey.

If discovered, Marit wouldn't have been in any danger, except perhaps being "why'd" and "how'd" and "what'd" to death—the dwarves' deaths, not her own, for Marit was not a Patryn who had learned the lesson of patience in the Labyrinth. What she wanted she took. If anything got in her way, she removed it. Permanently.

Fortunately, Marit happened to arrive in the Factree at one of those moments in history that are both precisely the right moment and precisely the wrong moment. She arrived at precisely the right moment for herself, precisely the wrong moment for Haplo.

At this very moment, when Marit was materializing inside the Factree, stepping out of the circle of her magic, which had altered the possibility that she was here and not somewhere else, a contingent of elves and humans were gathering with the dwarves to form a historic alliance. As usual on such occasions, the high and the mighty could not conduct this business without being observed by the lower and humbler. Thus, a vast number of representatives of all the mensch races were wandering around the Factree floor for the first time ever in the history of Arianus. These included a group of human females from the Mid Realms, ladies-in-waiting to Queen Anne.

Marit kept to the shadows, observed and listened. At first, noting the number of mensch about, she feared she might have stumbled on a mensch battle, for Xar had told her that mensch invariably fought among themselves. But she soon realized that this was not a meeting to fight but what appeared to be a party—of sorts. The three groups were obviously uncomfortable together, but under the watchful eyes of their rulers, they were making every effort to get along.

Humans were talking with elves; dwarves were stroking their beards and endeavoring to make conversation with the humans. Whenever several members of any race broke off and began to group together, someone would come by and disperse them. In the confusion and strained atmosphere, no one was likely to notice Marit.

She added to this possibility a spell that would further protect her—enhancing the likelihood that anyone not looking for her would not see her. Thus she was able to walk from group to group, keeping apart but listening to their conversations. Through her magic, she understood all mensch languages, so she was soon able to figure out what was going on.

Her attention was drawn to a gigantic statue of a robed and hooded man—she recognized it with distaste as a Sartan—not far from her. Three men stood near the statue; a fourth sat on its base. From what she overheard, the three men were the mensch rulers. The fourth was the universally acclaimed hero who had made peace in Arianus possible.

The fourth man was Haplo.

Keeping to the shadows, Marit drew near the statue. She had to be careful, for if Haplo saw her, he might recognize her. As it was, he lifted his head and glanced swiftly and keenly around the Factree, as if he had heard a faint voice speak his name.

Marit swiftly ended the spell she had cast over herself to protect herself from the mensch's view, and shrank back even farther into the darkness. She felt what Haplo must be feeling: a tingle in the blood, a brushing of invisible fingers across the back of the neck. It was an eerie but not unpleasant sensation—like calling to like. Marit had not realized such a thing would happen, could not believe that the feelings they shared were this strong. She wondered if this phenomenon would occur between any two Patryns who happened to be alone together on a world... or if this was something between Haplo and her.

Analyzing the situation, Marit soon came to the conclusion that two Patryns meeting anywhere in a world of mensch would be attracted to each other, as iron to the lodestone. As for her being attracted to Haplo, that was not likely. She barely recognized him.

He looked older, much older than she remembered. Not unusual, for the Labyrinth aged its victims rapidly. But his was not the grim, hard look of one who has fought daily for his life. Haplo's look was haggard and hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed—the look of one who has fought for his soul. Marit didn't understand, didn't recognize the marks of internal struggle, but she vaguely sensed it and strongly disapproved of it. He looked sick to her, sick and defeated.

And at the moment, he looked puzzled as well, trying to place the unheard voice that had spoken to him, trying to find the unseen hand that had touched him. At length he shrugged, put the matter out of his mind. He returned to what he'd been doing, petting his dog, listening to the mensch.

The dog.

Xar had told Marit about the dog. She had found it difficult to believe that any Patryn could indulge in such a weakness. She had not doubted her lord's word, of course, but she considered that he might have been mistaken. Marit knew now he had not been. She watched Haplo stroke the animal's smooth head, and her lip curled in a sneer.

Her attention shifted from Haplo and his dog to the mensch and their conversation. A dwarf, a human, and an elf stood together beneath the statue of the Sartan. Marit dared not cast any magic that would bring their words to her, and so she had to go nearer them.

She did so, moving noiselessly, keeping to the opposite side of the statue. Her main fear was being discovered by the dog, but it appeared to be totally absorbed in and concerned for its master. Its liquid eyes were fixed on him anxiously, and it would occasionally put a paw on his knee, offering a touch of comfort.

"And you are feeling quite well now, Your Majesty?" The elf was speaking to the human.

"Yes, thank you, Prince Rees'ahn." The human, a king of some sort, grimaced, put his hand to his back. "The wound was deep, but fortunately hit nothing vital. I have some stiffness that will be with me the rest of my life, according to Trian, but at least I'm alive, for which I thank the ancestors—and the Lady Iridal." The king looked grim, shook his head.

The dwarf was staring up at each tall mensch in turn, peering at them through squinted eyes, as if he were extremely nearsighted. "A child attacked you, you say? That boy we had down here—Bane? Pardon me, King Stephen." The dwarf blinked rapidly. "But is this normal behavior among human children?"

The human king looked somewhat put out at this question.

"He doesn't mean any offense, Sire," Haplo explained, with his quiet smile. "Limbeck—the High Froman—is only curious."

"Why, yes," said Limbeck, his eyes round. "I didn't mean to imply— Not that it would matter, mind you. It's just that I was wondering if maybe all human—"

"No," said Haplo shortly. "They don't."

"Ah." Limbeck stroked his beard. "I'm sorry," he added somewhat nervously. "That is, I don't mean I'm sorry that all human children aren't murderers. I mean I'm sorry I—"

"That's quite all right," said King Stephen stiffly, but with a smile lurking about the corners of his lips. "I understand completely, High Froman. And, I must admit that Bane was not a very good representative of our race. Neither was his father, Sinistrad."

"No." Limbeck appeared subdued. "I remember him."

"A tragic situation all around," said Prince Rees'ahn, "but at least good has come out of evil. Thanks to our friend Haplo"—the elf placed a slender hand on Haplo's shoulder—"and that human assassin."

Marit was shocked, disgusted. A mensch behaving in such a familiar manner, treating a Patryn as if they were equals. And Haplo permitting it!

"What was that assassin's name, Stephen? [1]" Rees'ahn was continuing. "Something odd, even for humans—"

"Hugh the Hand." Stephen spoke with distaste.

Rees'ahn kept touching Haplo's shoulder; elves were fond of touching, hugging. Haplo appeared uncomfortable at the mensch's caress; Marit gave him credit for that. He managed to evade it politely by rising to his feet, sliding out from under.

"I was hoping to talk to Hugh the Hand," Haplo said. "You don't happen to know where he is, Your Majesty?"

Stephen's face darkened. "I do not. And frankly I don't want to know. And neither should you, sir. The assassin told the wizard he had another 'contract' to fulfill. It is Trian's belief," Stephen added, turning to Rees'ahn, "that this Hugh the Hand is a member of the Brotherhood."

Rees'ahn frowned. "A nefarious organization. We should make it one of our top priorities, when peace is established, to wipe out that nest of vipers. You, sir." He turned to Haplo. "Perhaps you could assist us in this undertaking. I understand from our friend, the High Froman here, that your magic is quite powerful."

So Haplo had revealed his magical powers to the mensch. And from the way it looked, the mensch were all quite taken with him. Revered him. As they should, of course, Marit was quick to allow—but they should be revering him as the servant of the master, not the master. And now was the perfect opportunity for Haplo to inform them of Xar's coming. The Lord of the Nexus would rid the world of this Brotherhood, whatever it might be.

But Haplo was only shaking his head. "I'm sorry. I can't help you. In any case, I think my powers might have been overrated." He smiled down at Limbeck. "Our friend here is a little nearsighted."

"I saw it all," Limbeck insisted stubbornly. "I saw you battle that evil dragon-snake. You and Jarre. She whumped it with her ax." The dwarf swung vigorously through the motions. "Then you jabbed it with your sword. Wham! Stabbed it in the eye. Blood all over the place. I saw it, King Stephen," reiterated Limbeck.

Unfortunately, he addressed Queen Anne, who had come up to stand beside her husband.

A female dwarf jabbed the male dwarf in the ribs.

"That's the king, Limbeck, you druz," she said, grabbing hold of Limbeck's beard and tugging on him until he faced the right direction.

Limbeck was not in the least upset over the mistake. "Thank you, Jarre, my dear," he said, smiling, and blinked benignly at the dog.

The mensch's talk turned to other matters, to the war on Arianus. A combined force of humans and elves was attacking the island of Aristagon, battling an emperor and his followers who had taken refuge in a palace there. Marit wasn't interested in the doings of the mensch. She was far more interested in Haplo.

He had gone suddenly gray; his own smile had slipped. His hand went to his heart, as if his wound still pained him. He leaned back against the statue to mask his weakness. The dog, whining, crept to his side and pressed against Haplo's leg.

Marit knew then that Sang-drax had been telling the truth—Haplo had been critically wounded. Privately she had doubted it. She knew and respected Haplo's ability; she had little use for the dragon-snake, who, as far as she could tell, possessed minimal magical powers, perhaps in the same category as mensch. Certainly none as strong as Patryn magic. She could not see how such a creature could have inflicted a dire wound on Haplo. But she had no doubts now. She recognized the symptoms of a heart-rune injury, a blow that would strike to the core of a Patryn's being. Difficult to heal—alone.

The mensch continued to talk, about how they would start up the Kicksey-winsey, what would happen when they did. Haplo stood silent through their conversation, stroking the dog's smooth head. Marit, not understanding the discussion, only half-listened. This wasn't what she wanted to hear. Suddenly Haplo stirred and spoke, interrupting an involved explanation of whirley-gears and whump-rotors from the dwarf.

"Have you warned your people to take precautions?" Haplo was asking. "According to what the Sartan wrote, the continents will begin to move once the Kicksey-winsey is activated. They'll move slowly, but they will move. Buildings could fall down. People might die of fright if they don't know what is going on."

"We've informed them," Stephen said. "I've sent the King's Own to every part of our lands, carrying the news. Though whether the people will listen is another matter. Half of them don't believe us, and the half who do have been told by the barons that it's some sort of elven plot. There've been rioting and threats to depose me. And what will happen if this doesn't work..." The king's face darkened. "Well, I don't like to think about that."

Haplo shook his head, looked grave. "I can't promise anything, Your Majesty. The Sartan intended to align the continents within a few years of their settling here. They planned to do so before the continents were even inhabited. But when their plans went wrong and they disappeared, the Kicksey-winsey kept on working and building and repairing itself—but without any guidance. Who knows but that during this time it may have done some irreparable damage to itself?"

"The only thing in our favor is this: down through the generations, the dwarves have continued to do exactly what the Sartan taught them to do. The dwarves have never deviated from their original instructions, but passed them on religiously from father to son, mother to daughter. And so the dwarves have not only kept the Kicksey-winsey alive, but they've kept it from running amuck, so to speak."

"It's all... so strange," said Stephen with a distrustful glance at the glimmerglamps and the catwalks and the hooded silent figure of the Sartan, holding a dark eyeball in its hand. "Strange and terrifying. I don't understand any of it."

"In fact," Queen Anne added quietly, "my husband and I are beginning to wonder if we haven't made a mistake. Perhaps we should just let the world go along as it is. We've gotten on well enough before now."

"But we haven't," Limbeck argued. "Your two races have fought wars over water for as long as any of you can remember. Elf fought elf. Human fought human. Then we all fought each other and came close to destroying everything we have. I may not be able to see anything else clearly, but I can see this. If we've no need to fight over water, we've got a chance to find true peace."

Limbeck fished about in his coat, came out with a small object, and held it up. "I have this—the book of the Sartan. Haplo gave it to me. He and I have gone over it. We believe the machine will work, but we can't guarantee it. The best I can say is that if anything does start to go wrong, we can always shut the Kicksey-winsey down and then see if we can fix it."

"What about you, Prince?" Stephen turned to Rees'ahn. "What about your people? What do they think?"

"The Kenkari have informed them that drawing the continents together is the will of Krenka-Annis. No one would dare oppose the Kenkari—openly at least," the prince said with a rueful smile. "Our people are prepared. We have already started to evacuate the cities. The only ones we have not been able to warn are the emperor and those holed up in the Imperanon with him. They refuse to allow the Kenkari inside; they have even fired arrows at them, which has never happened in all the history of our people. My father is undoubtedly mad."

Rees'ahn's face hardened. "I have little sympathy for him. He murdered his own people to obtain their souls. But there are those inside the Imperanon who are innocent of wrongdoing, who support him out of misguided loyalty. I wish there was some way of warning them. But they refuse to talk to us even under a flag of truce. They'll have to take their chances."

"You're all agreed to do this, then?" Haplo asked, looking at each in turn.

Rees'ahn said he was. Limbeck's beard wagged in hearty enthusiasm. Stephen looked at his queen, who hesitated, then nodded once, briefly. "Yes, we're agreed," he said at last. "The High Froman is right. It seems to be the one chance we have for peace."

Haplo pushed himself away from the statue, against which he'd been leaning. "Then it's settled. Two days from this day we start up the machine. You, Prince Rees'ahn, and you, Your Majesties, should go back to your kingdoms, try to keep the people from panicking. Your representatives can remain here."

"I will go back to the Mid Realms. Trian will be present in my stead," Stephen said.

"And I will leave behind Captain Bothar'el, a friend of yours, I believe, High Froman," said Prince Rees'ahn.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" Limbeck clapped his hands. "Then we're all set."

"If that is all you need me for," Haplo said, "I will go back to my ship."

"Are you all right, Haplo?" the female dwarf asked, regarding him anxiously.

He smiled down at her, his quiet smile. "Yes, I'm all right. Just tired, that's all. Come on, dog."

The mensch bade him farewell, speaking to him with obvious deference, concern evident on their faces. He held himself straight and tall; his step was firm, but it was apparent to all observers—including the one unseen observer—that he was exerting all his strength to keep moving. The dog padded behind, its own worried eyes on its master.

The others shook their heads, spoke of him in anxious tones. Marit's lip curled in scorn. She watched him leave, not using his magic but heading for the open Factree door like any mensch.

Marit considered following him, immediately abandoned the idea. Away from the mensch, he would certainly sense her presence. She'd heard all she needed to hear anyway. She lingered only a moment, to listen to the mensch, for they were talking about Haplo.

"He is a wise man," Prince Rees'ahn was saying. "The Kenkari are greatly impressed with him. They urged me to ask him if he would act as intermediary ruler over us all during this period of transition."

"Not a bad idea," Stephen admitted thoughtfully. "The rebellious barons might agree to a third party settling the disputes that must inevitably arise between our people. Especially since he looks human, if you don't count those odd pictures on his skin. What do you think, High Froman?"

Marit didn't wait to hear what the dwarf thought. Who cared? So Haplo was going to rule over Arianus. Not only had he betrayed his lord, but he had supplanted him!

Moving far away from the mensch, into the very darkest regions of the Factree, Marit stepped back through the circle of her magic.

If she had waited a moment, this is what she would have heard:

"He will not do it," said Limbeck softly, looking after Haplo. "I've already asked him to stay here and help our people. We have much to learn if we are to take our place among you. But he refused. He says he must go back to his world, to wherever it is he came from. He must rescue a child of his who is trapped there."

"A child," said Stephen, his expression softening. He took hold of his wife's hand. "Ah, then, we will say no more to him of his staying. Perhaps in saving one child he will make up in some small measure for the child who was lost."

But Marit heard none of this. It might have made no difference if she had. Once on board her ship, as violent storm winds buffeted the vessel, she placed her hand over the mark on her forehead and closed her eyes.

A vision of Xar came to her mind.

"Husband"—she spoke aloud—"what the dragon-snake says is true. Haplo is a traitor. He gave the Sartan book to the mensch. He plans to help the mensch start this machine. Not only that, but the mensch have offered him the rulership of Arianus."

"Then Haplo must die," came back Xar's thought, his response immediate.

"Yes, Lord."

"When the deed is done, Wife, send me word. I will be on the world of Pryan."

"Sang-drax has convinced you to travel to that world," said Marit, not altogether pleased.

"No one convinces me to do what I do not choose to do, Wife."

"Forgive me, Lord." Marit's skin burned. "You know best, of course."

"I am going to Pryan in company with Sang-drax and a contingent of our people. While there, I hope to be able to enslave the tytans, use them to aid our cause. And I have other matters to pursue on Pryan. Matters in which Haplo may be helpful."

"But Haplo will be dead—" Marit began, and then stopped, overwhelmed with horror.

"Indeed, he will be dead. You will bring me Haplo's corpse, Wife."

Marit's blood chilled. She should have expected this, should have known Xar would make such a demand. Of course, her lord must interrogate Haplo, find out what he knew, what he'd done. Far easier to interrogate his corpse than his living person. The memory of the lazar came to her; she saw its eyes, which were dead, yet dreadfully alive...

"Wife?" Xar's prodding was gentle. "You will not fail me?"

"No, Husband," said Marit, "I will not fail you."

"That is well," said Xar, and withdrew.

Marit was left alone in the lightning-blue darkness to listen to the rain thrumming on the ship's hull.

## CHAPTER 12

### GREVINOR

### VOLKARAN ISLES

### ARIANUS

"WHAT POSITION DO YOU SEEK?" THE ELF LIEUTENANT BARELY glanced up at Hugh the Hand as he shuffled forward.

"Wingman, Master," Hugh answered.

The lieutenant kept his eyes on his crew lists. "Experience?"

"Aye, Master," Hugh replied.

"Any references?"

"Want to see me lash marks, Master?"

Now the lieutenant lifted his head. The delicate elven features were marred by a frown. "I don't need a troublemaker."

"Only bein' honest, Master." Hugh chuckled, grinned. " 'Sides, what better references could ye want?"

The elf took in Hugh's strong shoulders, broad chest, and callused hands—all marks of those who "lived in harness," as the saying went—humans who had been captured and forced to serve as galley slaves aboard the elven dragon ships. The elf was apparently impressed not only with Hugh's strength, but with his candor.

"You look old for this line of work," remarked the lieutenant, a faint smile on his lips.

"Another point in me favor, Master," Hugh returned coolly. "I'm still alive."

At this the lieutenant definitely seemed impressed. "True. A good indication. Very well, you're... um... hired." The elf's lips pursed, as if the word was difficult to say. Doubtless the lieutenant was thinking with regret of the old days when all that wingmen earned was their food and water and the whip. "A barl a day, plus your food and water. And the passenger's paying a bonus for a smooth trip there and back."

Hugh argued a bit, just to make it look good, but couldn't eke out another barl, though he did win an extra water ration. Shrugging, he agreed to the terms and put his X on the contract.

"We set sail tomorrow when the Lords of Night pull back their cloaks. Be here tonight, on board, with your gear. You'll sleep in harness."

Hugh nodded and left. On his way back to the squalid tavern where he'd spent the night, again keeping in character, he passed "the passenger," emerging from the crowd of people who were standing on the docks. Hugh the Hand recognized the passenger—Trian, King Stephen's wizard.

Crowds of people stood gawking at the unusual sight of an elven ship swinging at anchor in the human port city of Grevinor. Such a sight had not been seen since the days when the elves occupied the Volkaran Islands. Children, too young to remember, stared in excited awe and wonder, tugged their parents closer to marvel at the brightly colored garb of the elven officers, their flute-like voices.

The parents watched with grim faces. They remembered—all too well. They remembered the elven occupation of their lands and had no love for their former enslavers. But the King's Own stood guard around the ship; their war-dragons circled overhead. What comments were made were made beneath the breath, therefore; all took care that the Royal Wizard should not hear them.

Trian stood among a knot of courtiers and noblemen who were either accompanying him on his journey, seeing him off, or attempting to make last-minute deals with him. He was pleasant, smiling, polite, hearing everything, seeming to promise all in return, but actually promising nothing. The young wizard was adept at court intrigue. He was like the rune-bone player at the fair who can play at any number of games at the same time, remembering every move, beating handily every opponent.

Almost every opponent. Hugh the Hand walked right past him. Trian saw him—the wizard saw everyone—but did not give the ragged sailor a second glance.

Hugh smiled grimly, shoved his way through the crowd. Showing himself to Trian had not been an act of bravado. If Trian had recognized Hugh as the assassin the wizard had once hired to murder Bane, the wizard would have shouted for the guards. In that case, Hugh wanted a crowd around him, a city to hide in.

Once on board, it was not likely that Trian would descend into the ship's belly to hobnob with the galley slaves—or rather, the wingmen, the term now being officially used—but with the wizard, one never knew. Far better to test the disguise here in Crevinor than aboard the small dragon ship, where all the guards had to do was wrap Hugh's legs and arms in bowstrings and toss him overboard into the Maelstrom.

Having obtained a weapon to kill Haplo, the assassin's next problem had been reaching Haplo: The Kenkari had told him that the Patryn was in Drevlin, in the Low Realms—a place nearly impossible to reach under the best of circumstances. Ordinarily, flying to somewhere in Arianus would not be difficult for Hugh, who was expert at handling both dragons and the small, one-person dragon ships.

But small ships did not fare well in the Maelstrom, as Hugh the Hand knew from bitter past experience. And dragons, even the giant ones, would not venture into the treacherous storm. It had been Ciang who had discovered, through her numerous contacts, that the wizard Trian would be flying down the day before the ceremony that would mark the starting up of the Kicksey-winsey.

The wizard, one of the king's most valued counselors, had remained behind to keep an eye on the rebellious barons. When king and queen returned to renew their iron grip on power, Trian would sail to Drevlin to make certain that human interests were represented when the giant machine started up and did whatever it was supposed to do.

Hugh had once served as a galley slave aboard an elven dragon ship. He guessed that the elves would likely need replacement men when they stopped in Grevinor to pick up Trian. Operating the wings of the dragon ships was dangerous and difficult work. A voyage rarely passed without a wingman being injured or killed.

Hugh had not judged wrong. Once in port, the first thing the elven captain did was post a notice stating that he needed three wingmen—one to work and two for spares. It would not be easy to find replacements to fly into the Maelstrom. No matter that the pay was a barl a day—a fortune to some on the Volkaran isles.

The Hand returned to the tavern, made his way to the filthy common room where he'd spent the night on the floor. He gathered up his blanket and knapsack, paid his bill, and sauntered out. He paused to study his

reflection in the dirty, cracked windowpane. Small wonder that Trian hadn't known him. Hugh barely knew himself.

He had shaved every hair from his head—face, scalp, all completely bare. He'd even—at the cost of pain that had brought tears to his eyes—yanked out most of his thick black eyebrows, leaving only a scraggly line that slanted upward to his forehead, making his narrow eyes look abnormally large.

Having been protected from the sun by his hair and beard, his chin and scalp had stood out in pallid contrast to the rest of his face. He'd used the boiled-down bark of a hargast tree to stain brown the pale skin. Now he looked as if he'd been bald all his life. There hadn't really been a chance Trian would recognize him.

There wasn't a chance Haplo would recognize him. Hugh the Hand returned to the ship. Sitting on a barrel on the docks, he observed closely all who came and went, watched Trian boarding, watched the other members of the wizard's party boarding.

Once assured that no one else he knew had gone onto the ship, Hugh the Hand boarded as well. He'd been faintly concerned (or was it faintly hopeful?) that Iridal might be among the party of mysteriarchs accompanying the king's wizard. Well, Hugh was just as glad she wasn't. She would have recognized him. Love's eyes were hard to fool.

Hugh put the woman firmly out of his mind. He had a job to do. He reported to the lieutenant, who turned him over to a mate, who led him into the ship's belly, showed him his harness, and left him to meet his fellow crewmen.

No longer slaves, the humans now took pride in their work. They wanted to win the offered bonus for a smooth trip and asked Hugh more questions about his experience than had the elf lieutenant who hired him.

The Hand kept his answers short and to the point. He promised he'd work as hard as any of them, and then made it plain that he wanted to be left alone.

The others went back to their boning and dicing; they'd lose the bonus to each other a hundred times before they had it in their pockets. Hugh felt to make certain the Cursed Blade, as he had dubbed it, was in his knapsack; then he lay down on the deck beneath his harness and pretended to sleep.

The wingmen didn't earn their bonus that trip. They didn't even come close. There were times when Hugh the Hand guessed that Trian must be sorry he hadn't offered more for simply setting him down on Drevlin alive. Hugh needn't have worried about Trian recognizing him, for the Hand saw nothing of the wizard during the voyage, until the ship finally came to a shuddering landing.

The Liftalofts\* were located in the eye of the perpetual storm that swept over Drevlin. The Liftalofts were the one place on the continent where the storms would swirl away, let Solarus beam through the scudding clouds. Elven ships had learned to wait to land until such times—the only safe times. They set down in relative calm and during this brief period (another storm was already massing on the horizon) swiftly offloaded the passengers.

\*"Nine gigantic arms made of brass and steel thrust up out of the coralite—some of them soaring several menka into the air. Atop each arm was an enormous hand whose thumb and fingers were made of gold with brass hinges at each of the joints and at the wrist. The hands were... large enough to have grasped one of the enormous waterships and held it in a golden palm...." Thus Haplo describes the Liftalofts in *Dragon Wing*, vol. 1 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

Trian appeared. His face was partly muffled, but the wizard looked decidedly green. Leaning weakly on the arm of a comely young woman who was aiding his faltering steps, Trian stumbled down the gangplank. Either the wizard had no magical cure for airsickness or he was playing on the young woman's sympathy. Whatever the case, he glanced neither right nor left, but departed from the vicinity as if he couldn't leave the ship fast enough. Once on the ground, he was met by a contingent of dwarves and fellow humans, who —

seeing the coming storm — cut short the speeches and whisked the wizard away to a place of dryness and safety.\*

\*It appears from this text that the ship has landed on the ground. Those who read Haplo's first account of an elven ship arriving at the Liftalofts will recall that the dragon ship remained in the air. These early waterships were accustomed to leaving before the next storm hit, and while Haplo provides no explanation for the difference, it is logical to assume that elven ships intending to stay for long periods were forced to set down on the ground to ride out the storm.

Hugh knew how Trian felt. Every muscle in the assassin's body ached and burned. His hands were raw and bleeding; his jaw was swollen and bruised — one of the straps controlling the wings had snapped loose in the storm and struck him across the face. For long moments after the ship had landed, Hugh lay on the deck and wondered that they weren't all dead.

But he didn't have time to dwell on his misery. And as for the swollen face, he couldn't have paid money for a better addition to his disguise. With luck, the ache in his head and the ringing in his ears would go away in a few hours. He gave himself that amount of time to rest, wait for a lull in the storm, and rehearse his next course of action.

The crew would not be allowed ashore. Nor, after having sailed through the horrific storm, would they be at all eager to venture out into it. Most had dropped from exhaustion; one — who'd been hit in the head by a broken beam — was unconscious.

In the old days, before the alliance, the elves would have chained up the galley slaves when the ship landed — despite the storm. Humans were known for being reckless, foolhardy, and lacking in common sense. Hugh wouldn't have been much surprised to see the guards descending into the belly anyway—old habits die hard. He waited tensely for them to show up; their presence would have been an extreme inconvenience to him. But they didn't.

Hugh thought it over, decided it made sense—from the captain's viewpoint at least. Why put a guard over men who are costing you a barl a day (payable at the end of the voyage)? If one wants to jump ship without collecting his pay, fine. Every captain carried spare wingmen, the mortality rate among them being high.

The captain might well cause a furor when he discovered one of his crew missing, but Hugh doubted it. The captain would have to report the matter to a superior officer on shore, who would have his hands full with the dignitaries and would be highly annoyed at being bothered over such a minor problem. Likely the ship's captain himself would be the one reamed out.

"Why in the name of the ancestors can't you hang on to your humans, sir? High Command'll have your ears for this when you get back to Paxaria!"

No, Hugh's disappearance would probably not even be reported. Or if it was, it would be conveniently forgotten soon after.

The storm winds were dropping; the thunder was rumbling in the distance. Hugh didn't have much time. He dragged himself to his feet, grabbed his knapsack, and staggered off to the head. The few elves he passed never gave him a second glance. Most were too exhausted by the rigors of the flight even to open their eyes.

In the head, he made most convincing retching sounds. Groaning occasionally, he pulled from the knapsack a lump that looked like nothing so much as the insides of the knapsack. Once Hugh brought the cloth out, however, it began immediately to change color and texture, perfectly matching the wooden hull of the ship. Anyone looking at him would think he was acting very strangely, seemingly dressing himself in nothing. And then he would, to the observer's eyes, disappear altogether.

Much against their will, the Kenkari had provided him with the magical chameleon-like clothing of the Unseen. They didn't have much choice except to accede to Hugh's demands. After all, they were the ones who wanted him to kill Haplo. The clothes had the magical power to blend in with their background, rendering those who wore them practically invisible. Hugh wondered if they were the same clothes he'd worn into the palace that ill-fated night when he and Iridal had stumbled into Bane's trap. He couldn't be sure, and the Kenkari wouldn't tell. Not that it mattered.

Hugh discarded his own clothes—crude homespun that befitted a sailor—and dressed himself in the long, flowing pants and tunic of the Unseen. The clothes, made for elves, were a tight fit. A hood covered his head, but his hands remained bare; he could not hope to fit human hands into elven gloves. But he had learned, the last time he wore the garments, to keep his hands hidden in the folds of the tunic until time to use them. By then, if anyone saw him, it would be too late.

Hugh retrieved his knapsack, which held one more disguise and his pipe, though he would not dare use the latter. Few people smoked stregno, and both Trian and Haplo were likely to notice someone who did, recall Hugh the Hand to mind. The Cursed Blade, safely tucked into its sheath, he wore slung over his shoulder, concealed beneath his clothing.

Moving slowly, allowing the magical fabric time to adjust itself to its surroundings, the assassin glided past the elven guards, who had come up on deck during the lull in the storm to take advantage of the brief moment of sunshine and fresh air. Talking among themselves about the marvels soon to be witnessed when the great machine came on, they once looked straight at Hugh and saw nothing. He glided from the elven ship with as much ease as the freshening wind glided over it.

Hugh the Hand had been on Drevlin before, with Alfred and Bane.\* He knew his way around as he knew his way around any place he'd ever been and more than a few he hadn't. The nine gigantic brass and golden arms thrusting up from the ground were known as the Liftalofts. The elven ship had landed right in the center of a circle formed by the arms. Near the circle's perimeter stood another arm, this one shorter than the rest, known as the Short Arm. Inside this arm was a circular staircase that led up to the nine drooping and lifeless hands atop the nine arms.

\*Dragon Wing, vol. 1 of The Death Gate Cycle.

Darting inside the stairwell, Hugh cast a quick glance around, ascertained that the place was empty and he was alone. He shed the clothes of the Unseen, made what would be his final change of costume.

He had ample time; another storm had crashed down on Drevlin, and he dressed with care. Examining himself in the polished metal interior wall of the staircase, he decided he was too dry to be believable, and stepped outside. In an instant he was drenched to the rich fur lining of his embroidered cape. Satisfied, he returned to the safety of the Short Arm and waited with the patience that all successful assassins know is the true foundation of their craft.

The curtain of rain parted enough so that he could see the elven ship through it—the storm was blowing over. Hugh the Hand was just about to venture out when he saw a female dwarf heading in his direction. He decided it would be more in character to wait for her arrival, and stayed where he was. But when she drew near, Hugh began to curse softly.

Of all the luck! He knew her! And she knew him!

Jarre—Limbeck's girlfriend.

There was no help for it now. He would have to trust to his altered appearance and considerable acting ability.

Splashing heedlessly through puddles, Jarre was peering upward continually at the sky. Hugh deduced that another ship must be expected, probably carrying the elven contingent of dignitaries. Good, she would be

preoccupied and might not pay much attention to him. He braced himself. She opened the door, bustled inside.

"I say!" Hugh rose haughtily to his feet. "It's about time!"

Jarre skidded to a halt, stared at him in astonishment —Hugh was pleased to note that she showed no recognition. He kept his hood up, casting his face into shadow but not hiding it, which might have looked suspicious.

"Wha—what are you doing here?" the dwarf stammered in her own language.

"Don't gabble at me in that strange tongue," Hugh returned pettishly. "You speak human. I know you do. Everyone who is anyone does." He sneezed violently, took the opportunity to draw up the collar of his cape around the lower part of his face, began to shiver. "There, you see, I'm catching my death. I'm wet to my skin." He sneezed again.

"What are you doing here, sir?" Jarre repeated in passable human. "Did you get left behind?"

"Left behind? Yes, I was left behind! Do you think I sought shelter in this beastly place because I wanted to? Was it my fault I was too sick to walk when we landed? Does anyone wait for me? No, no, and no. They're off like arrows, leaving me to the tender mercies of the elves. By the time I staggered onto deck, my friends were nowhere in sight. I made it this far when the storm hit, and now look at me." Hugh sneezed again.

Jarre's mouth twitched. She was about to laugh, thought better of it, and changed it into a polite cough instead.

"We're meeting another ship, sir, but if you'll wait, I'll be happy to show you to the tunnels—"

Hugh glanced outside, saw a whole group of dwarves trudging through the puddles. His sharp eyes picked out the leader, Limbeck. Hugh scanned the rest of the crowd intently, thinking Haplo might be with them. He wasn't.

Hugh drew himself up in offended dignity. "No, I will not wait! I'm halfway to dying of poomonia. If you will simply have the goodness to point me in the correct direction..."

"Well..." Jarre hesitated, but it was obvious she had more important things to do than fool with a sopping wet human numbskull. "See that enormous big building way, way over there? That's the Factree. Everyone's inside." She cast an eye at the distant storm clouds. "If you hurry, you should just about make it before the next downpour hits."

"Not that it would matter." Hugh sniffed. "I can't get much wetter, can I? Thank you, m'dear." He offered her a hand that resembled a wet fish, lightly twiddled his fingers near hers, and retrieved the hand before she could actually touch it. "You've been most kind."

Wrapping his cloak around him, Hugh stalked out of the Liftalofts to meet the startled stares of the dwarves (discounting Limbeck, who was gazing around in blissful myopia and didn't see him at all). Giving them a look that consigned them all unfavorably to their ancestors, Hugh flung his cape over his shoulder and strode past them.

A second elven dragon ship was descending, carrying the representatives from Prince Rees'ahn. Those meeting it soon forgot Hugh, who splashed his way to the Factree, ducking inside just as another storm swooped down on Worn be.

Thronges of elves, humans, and dwarves were gathered in the enormous area that had been, so legend had it, the birthplace of the fabulous Kicksey-winsey. All present were eating and drinking and treating each

other with the nervous politeness of longtime enemies now suddenly friends. Again Hugh searched the crowd for Haplo.

Not here.

Just as well. Now was not the time.

Hugh the Hand made his way to a fire that was burning inside an iron barrel. He dried his clothes, drank some wine, and greeted his fellow humans with outflung arms, leaving them to think confusedly that they must know him from somewhere.

When anyone tried to ask—in a roundabout way—who he was, Hugh looked faintly insulted, replied vaguely that he was "in the party of that gentleman over there, Baron [sneeze, cough], standing by that thingamabob [wave of the hand]."

A polite bow and wiggle of the fingers to the baron. Seeing this obviously wealthy, well-dressed gentleman bowing to him, the baron bowed politely back. The questioner was satisfied.

The Hand took care not to talk to one person too long, but he made certain that he said something to everyone.

By the end of several hours every human in the Factree, including a pale and ill-looking Trian, would have been prepared to swear that he or she had been friends with the richly dressed and politely spoken gentleman for eons.

If they could just think of his name...

The dignitaries gathered in the Factree, forming a circle around the statue of the Manger. The High Froman of the dwarves, Limbeck Bolttightner, would have the honor of opening the statue, being the first to descend into the tunnels, leading the way to the heart and brains of the Kick-sey-winsey.

This was Limbeck's moment of triumph. He held the precious Sartan book\* in his hand (not that the book was necessary; Limbeck had memorized it completely, besides which he couldn't really see it unless he held it up level with his nose), and with Jarre at his side (now Madam High Froman), accompanied by a host of dignitaries, Limbeck Bolttightner approached the Manger. The dwarf, who had started this wondrous upheaval by simply asking "Why?", gave the statue a gentle shove.

\*Foreseeing their doom, realizing they would be forced to leave Arianus without completing their task, the Sartan left detailed instructions informing the mensch how to operate the Kicksey-winsey. The book was written in three languages, dwarven, elven, and human, as well as Sartan. Unfortunately, at this time the mensch races were already at war, divided by hatred and prejudice. The book fell into the hands of the Kenkari elves, a powerful religious order.

Giving in to their own fears, particularly of the humans, the Kenkari hid the book and suppressed all knowledge of it. The current Speaker of the Soul—a studious man who, like Limbeck, suffered from insatiable curiosity—came upon the book and knew instantly what wonderful miracles it could bring to his world. He, too, was afraid of the humans, however, until an incident occurred that caused him to see true evil. He then gave the book to Haplo, to be given to the dwarves. The Hand of Chaos, vol. 5 of The Death Gate Cycle.

The figure of the robed and hooded Sartan turned on its base. Before descending Limbeck paused a moment, stared down into the darkness.

"Take it one step at a time," Jarre advised him in an undertone, conscious of the dignitaries gathered around, waiting for them to proceed. "Don't go too fast and hold on to my hand and you won't fall."

"What?" Limbeck blinked. "Oh, it's not that. I can see fine. All those blue lights,\* you know, make it quite easy. I was just... remembering."

\*Sartan runes placed to guide the way down the stairs.

Limbeck sighed and his eyes misted over, and suddenly the blue lights were more blurred in his vision than before, if such a thing was possible. "So much has happened, and most of it right here in the Factree. They held my trial here, when I first realized that the Manger was trying to tell us how the machine worked, and then the fight with the coppers—"

"When Alfred fell down the stairs and I was trapped in there with him and we saw his beautiful people, all dead." Jarre took hold of Limbeck's hand and squeezed it tight. "Yes, I remember."

"And then we found the metal man and I found that room with the humans and elves and dwarves all getting along together.\* And I realized that we could be like that." Limbeck smiled, then sighed again. "And after that came the horrible fight with the dragon-snakes. You were a hero, my dear," he said, looking at Jarre with pride. He saw her clearly, if he could see nothing else clearly in this world.

\*Ironically, what Limbeck saw was a gathering of the evil dragon-snakes, who had taken on forms of the mensch in order to insinuate themselves into the world. Haplo knows the truth, but, seeing that Limbeck is quite taken with the idea that the races can live and work together in peace, Haplo has never told the dwarf what he really saw.

She shook her head. "All I did was fight a dragon-snake. You fought monsters that were far bigger and ten times more horrible. You fought ignorance and apathy. You fought fear. You forced people to think, to ask questions and demand answers. You are the true hero, Limbeck Bolttightner, and I love you, even if you are a druz sometimes." She said the last in a whisper and then leaned over to kiss him on the side-whiskers, in front of all the dignitaries and half the population of dwarves on Drevlin.

There was much cheering, and Limbeck blushed to the roots of his beard.

"What's the delay?" asked Haplo softly. Quiet, keeping to the shadows, away from the other mensch, he stood near the statue of the Manger. "It's safe. You can go down there now. The dragon-snakes are gone."

At least they're not down in the tunnels anymore, he added, but he added it to himself. Evil was in the world and would always be in the world, but now, with the prospect for peace among the mensch races, evil's influence was lessened.

Limbeck blinked in Haplo's general direction. "Haplo, too," he said to Jarre. "Haplo's a hero, too. He's the one really responsible."

"No, I'm not," Haplo said hastily, irritably. "Look, you'd better get on with this. The people on the other continents above will be waiting. They might start to get nervous if there's a delay."

"Haplo's right," said Jarre, ever practical. She tugged Limbeck toward the entrance to the stairway.

The dignitaries crowded around the statue, preparing to follow. Haplo stayed put. He was feeling uneasy and could find no reason for it.

He looked, for the hundredth time, at the sigla tattooed on his skin, the runes that would warn him of danger. They did not glow with their magical warning, as they would have if danger had threatened—if the dragon-snakes were lurking somewhere below, for instance. But he felt the warning still, a prickling of the skin, a tingle of nerve-endings. Something was wrong.

He retreated into the darkness, planning to take a close look at everyone in the crowd. The dragon-snakes might disguise themselves effectively as mensch, but their glinting red reptile eyes would give them away.

Haplo hoped to remain unnoticed, forgotten. But the dog, excited by the noise and activity, was not about to be left out of the celebrations. With a cheerful bark, it bounded away from Haplo's side and dashed for the stairs.

"Dog!" Haplo made a lunge for the animal and would have caught it, but at that moment he was conscious of movement behind him, movement felt rather than seen, of someone drawing near him, a whispered breath on the back of his neck.

Distracted, he glanced around and missed in his grab for the dog. The animal joyfully leapt for the stairs and promptly entangled itself among the august limbs of the High Froman.

There was a perilous moment when it seemed that the dog and Limbeck would mark this historic occasion by tumbling down the stairs in a confused tangle of fur and beard. But the quick-thinking Jarre grabbed hold of both her renowned leader and the dog, each by their respective napes, and managed to sort them out and save the day.

Keeping firm hold of the dog in one hand and Limbeck in the other, Jarre glanced around. She had never really been all that fond of dogs.

"Haplo!" she called in a stern and disapproving tone.

No one was near him. He was quite alone, not counting the various dignitaries all lined up at the head of the stairs, waiting for their chance to descend. Haplo stared at his hand. For one instant, he had thought the runes were about to activate, to prepare to defend him from imminent attack. But they remained dark.

It was a strange sensation, one he'd never before experienced. He was reminded of a candle flame, extinguished by a breath. Haplo had the disquieting feeling that someone had, with a breath, extinguished his magic. But that wasn't possible.

"Haplo!" Jarre called again. "Come get this dog of yours!"

No help for it. Everyone in the Factree was looking at him and smiling. Haplo had lost all opportunity of remaining comfortably anonymous. Scratching at the back of his hand, he made his way to the top of the stairs and, with a grim expression, ordered the animal to his side.

Aware from its master's tone that it had done something wrong, but not quite certain why all the fuss, the dog pattered meekly up to Haplo. Sitting in front of the statue, the animal lifted a contrite paw, asking to be forgiven. This proceeding highly amused the dignitaries, who gave the dog a round of applause.

Thinking the applause was for him, Limbeck bowed solemnly, then proceeded down the stairs. Haplo, the crowd pressing behind him, had no choice but to join the procession. He cast one quick glance backward, saw nothing. No one was lurking about the statue. No one was paying any particular attention to him.

Perhaps he'd imagined it. Perhaps he was weaker from his injury than he'd thought.

Puzzled, Haplo followed Limbeck and Jarre, the Sartan runes lighting their way into the tunnels.

Hugh the Hand stood against a wall, in the shadows, watching the rest of the mensch file down the stairs. When the last one was down, he would follow—silent, unseen.

He was pleased with himself, satisfied. He knew now what he needed to know. His experiment had been successful.

"A Patryn's magic is said to warn him of danger," Ciang had told Hugh, "much as what we call our sixth sense warns us of danger, except that theirs is far more accurate, far more refined. The runes they have

tattooed on their skin flare with a bright light. This not only warns them of danger, but acts as a defensive shield."

Yes, Hugh remembered—painfully—the time in the Imperanon when he'd tried to attack Haplo. A blue light had flared and a jolt like a lightning bolt had shot through the assassin's body.

"It would seem to me logical that for this weapon to work, it must somehow break down or penetrate the Patryn's magic. I suggest you experiment," Ciang had advised him. "See what it does."

And so Hugh had experimented. That morning, when the group of dignitaries assembled in the Factree, Hugh the Hand was among them. The assassin spotted his prey immediately on entering.

Recalling what he knew of Haplo, the Hand guessed that the quiet, unassuming Patryn would keep to the background, out of the sunlight, as the saying went, staying hidden in the shadows—making Hugh's task relatively simple.

The Hand was not wrong. Haplo stood apart, near that huge statue the dwarves called the Manger. But the dog was with him. Hugh cursed himself softly. He had not forgotten about the dog, but he was simply amazed to find it with its master. The last Hugh had seen of the animal, it had been with him and Bane in the Mid Realms. Shortly after saving Hugh's life, the dog had disappeared. The assassin had not been particularly grateful to the dog for its action, and hadn't bothered to go looking for it.

He had no idea how it had managed to make its way from the Mid Realms to the Low Realms, and he didn't much care. The dog was going to prove a damn nuisance. If need be, he'd kill it first. Meanwhile, Hugh had to see how close he could get to the Patryn, see if the Cursed Blade reacted in any way.

Drawing the knife, keeping it hidden in the folds of his cloak, Hugh drifted into the shadows. The glimmerglamps, which would have turned the Factree's night into bright day, were dark, since the Kickseywinsey that ran them was not working. The humans and elves had brought oil lamps and torches, but these did little to penetrate the darkness of the cavernous building. It was easy for Hugh the Hand, dressed in the clothes of the Unseen, to join that darkness, become one with it.

He crept silently up behind his quarry, came to a halt, waited patiently for the right time to make his move. Too many in Hugh's trade, driven by fear or nervousness or eagerness, rushed to the attack instead of waiting, observing, preparing mentally and physically for the correct moment, which always came. And when it came, you had to know it, you had to react—often in only a splinter of an instant. It was this ability to wait patiently for that moment, to recognize it and act upon it, that had made Hugh the Hand great.

He bided his time, thinking as he did so that the knife had adapted itself wonderfully to his hand. He couldn't have hired a smith to design a hilt that suited him as well.

It was as if the blade had molded itself to his flesh. He watched, waited, keeping his attention more on the dog than on its master.

And the moment came.

Limbeck and Jane were starting down the stairs when suddenly the High Froman stopped. Haplo leaned over to talk to him; Hugh couldn't catch what they were saying, nor did he care. Then the dwarves started down the stairs.

"I wish," Hugh muttered to himself, "the damn dog would go along."

At that moment, the dog sprang after them.

Hugh the Hand was startled by the coincidence but was quick to take advantage of the opportunity. He glided forward. His knife hand slid out from beneath the folds of his cape.

He was not surprised to notice that Haplo was suddenly aware of him. The Hand had a healthy respect for his opponent, had not expected this to be easy. The knife writhed in Hugh's grip—a repulsive sensation, as if he were holding a snake. He advanced on Haplo, waiting grimly for the telltale runes to flare to life, in which case he was prepared to freeze, letting the night-blending magic fabric of the Unseen protect him from sight.

But the runes didn't react. No blue light flared. This appeared to discomfit Haplo, who had sensed a threat and looked to his body for confirmation, only to see nothing.

Hugh the Hand knew in that instant that he could kill Haplo, that the Patryn's magic had failed him, that the knife must have affected it and would affect it again.

But now was not the time to strike. Too many people. And it would disrupt the ceremony. The Kenkari had been most precise in their instructions—on no account was Hugh the Hand to disrupt the turning on of the Kicksey-winsey. This had been a test of his weapon. He now knew it worked.

It was a pity that he'd alerted Haplo to possible danger. The Patryn would be on his guard, but that was not necessarily a bad situation. A man looking over his shoulder is a man who will trip and fall on his face—a common jest among the Brotherhood. Hugh the Hand wasn't planning to ambush his victim, take him by surprise. Part of the assassin's contract—again, a part on which the Kenkari had been most specific—was that he was to tell Haplo, in his final moments, the name of the man who had ordered his death.

The Hand observed the procession from the darkness. When the last elf lord had disappeared down the stairs, the assassin followed, unheard, unseen. His time would come, a time when Haplo was cut off from the crowd, isolated. And at that moment, the Patryn's magic would fail him. The Cursed Blade would see to that.

Hugh the Hand had only to follow, watch, and wait.

## CHAPTER 14

### WOMBE, DREVLIN ARIANUS

"LOOK!" LIMBECK EXCLAIMED, COMING TO A HALT WITH A SUDDENNESS that caused several people traipsing along at his heels to stumble into him. "There's my sock!"

The Sartan tunnels were shadowed and eerie, lit only by the blue rune-lights that flickered along the base of the wall. These runes were leading the party to its destination—or so all of them devoutly hoped, although more than a few were beginning to have serious doubts. No one had brought torches or lamps, Limbeck having assured them all that the tunnels were well lighted. (So they were, to a dwarf.)

Since the departure of the dragon-snakes, the feeling of evil that had wafted through the tunnels like the foul smell of something dead and decaying was no longer prevalent. But there remained in the tunnels a sensation of lingering sadness, regret for mistakes made in the past, regret that there had been no future in which to correct them. It was as if the ghosts of the builders of the Kicksey-winsey walked among them, benevolent but sorrowful.

We're sorry. The words seemed to whisper from the shadows. So very sorry...

Hearts were subdued. The dignitaries bunched together in the darkness, glad to feel the touch of a warm hand—be it human, elven, or dwarven. Trian was visibly moved, and Jarre was just beginning to feel a choke in her throat when Limbeck made his discovery.

"My sock!"

Eagerly the dwarf hurried over to the wall, proudly pointed out a bit of string running along the floor.

"I beg your pardon, High Froman?" Trian was not certain he'd understood the words, which were spoken in dwarven. "Did you say something about a... er..."

"Sock," Limbeck said for the third time. He was about to launch into the exciting tale, which had come to be one of his favorites—all about how they had discovered the metal man, how then Haplo had been captured by the elves, and how he, Limbeck, had been left alone, lost in the tunnels with no way out and only his socks standing between him and disaster.

"My dear," said Jarre, giving his beard a tweak, "there isn't time."

"But I'm certain there will be after the machine is up and running," Trian hastened to add, seeing that the dwarf appeared extremely disappointed. "I would really enjoy hearing your tale."

"You would?" Limbeck brightened.

"Most assuredly," said Trian with such eagerness that Jarre regarded him with suspicion.

"At least," said Limbeck, starting out again, Trian at his side, "now I know we're going in the right direction."

This statement appeared to comfort the vast majority of the procession. They hurried after Limbeck. Jarre lagged behind.

She was sad and grumpy on the day that should have been the most joyous of her life, and she didn't understand why.

A cold, wet nose prodded her in the back of the leg.

"Hullo, dog," she said dispiritedly, timidly patting its head.

"What's wrong?" Haplo asked, coming up beside her.

She looked startled. She'd supposed he was in front, with Limbeck. But then Haplo was rarely where you thought he ought to be.

"Everything's changing," said Jarre with a sigh.

"That's good, isn't it?" Haplo asked. "It's what you wanted. What you and Limbeck worked for. What you risked your lives for."

"Yes," Jarre admitted. "I know. And change will be good. The elves have offered to let our people move up to our ancestral homes in the Mid Realms. Our children will play in the sunshine. And, of course, those who want to stay down here and work on the machine can stay."

"Now your work will have meaning, purpose," Haplo said. "Dignity. It won't be slave labor."

"I know all that. And I don't want to go back to the old days. Not really. It's just... well... there was a lot of good mixed in with the bad. I didn't see it then, but I miss it now. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Haplo quietly. "I understand. Sometimes I'd like to go back to the way things used to be in my life. I never thought I'd say that. I didn't have much, but what I did have, I didn't value. Trying to get something else, I let what was important get away. And when I got what I wanted, it turned out to be worthless without the other. Now I might lose it all. Or maybe I've already lost it past finding."

Jarre understood without understanding. She slid her hand inside Haplo's. They walked slowly after Limbeck and the others. She wondered a little why Haplo should choose to stay in the back of the procession; it was

almost as if he were keeping watch. She noticed he glanced continually this way and that, but he didn't seem to be afraid—which would have made her afraid. He just seemed puzzled.

"Haplo," Jarre said suddenly, reminded of another time when she'd walked hand in hand with another person down in these tunnels. "I'm going to tell you a secret. Not even Limbeck knows."

Haplo said nothing, but he smiled encouragingly down at her.

"I'm going to see to it that no one"—she stared hard at the wizard Trian as she spoke—"that no one ever bothers the beautiful dead people. That no one finds them. I don't know how I'm going to do it yet, but I will." She brushed her hand across her eyes. "I can't bear to think of the humans, with their loud voices and prying hands, barging into that hushed tomb. Or the elves with their twitterings and high-pitched laughs. Or even of my people clumping about with their big, heavy boots. I'll make certain that it all stays quiet. I think Alfred would want it that way, don't you?"

"Yes," said Haplo. "Alfred would want it that way. And I don't believe you have to worry," he added, squeezing her hand. "The Sartan magic will take care of its own. No one will find that room who isn't meant to."

"Do you think so? Then I don't need to worry?"

"No. Now, you'd better go on ahead. I think Limbeck's looking for you."

Indeed, the procession had straggled to a halt again. Limbeck could be seen in the front, in the reflected glow of the Sartan sigla, peering myopically into the shadows.

"Jarre?" he was calling.

"He's such a druz," said Jarre fondly, and started to hurry back up to the front of the line. "Won't you come, too?" she asked Haplo, hesitating. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Just a little weakness," Haplo lied easily. "Let go of the past, Jarre. Reach out to the future with both hands. It will be a good one for you and your people."

"I will," said Jarre decisively. "After all, you gave us that future." She had a sudden funny feeling that she would never see him again.

"Jarre!" Limbeck was getting worried.

"You'd better run along," Haplo told her.

"Good-bye," she faltered, a smothering ache in her chest. Leaning down, she gave the dog a hug that nearly choked the animal; then, blinking back sudden and inexplicable tears, she ran off to join Limbeck.

Change—even good change—was hard. Very hard indeed.

The procession halted outside a door marked by gleaming blue Sartan runes. Bathed in the soft blue light, Limbeck marched up to the door and, acting according to Jarre's instructions (she held the book, reading out directions), the dwarf drew with a stubby finger the Sartan rune that completed the circle of runes on the door.

The door swung open.

A strange clanking sound could be heard within, coming toward them. The elves and humans held back, curious but alarmed.

Limbeck, however, marched right in. Jarre hurried to stay at his side. The wizard Trian nearly tripped on the dwarves' heels, hastening in behind.

The room they entered was brightly lighted by globes hanging from the ceiling. The light was so bright after the darkness of the tunnels that they had to shade their eyes momentarily.

A man made all of metal—silver and gold and brass—walked over to meet them. The metal man's eyes were jewels; it moved stiffly. Sartan runes covered its body.

"It's an automaton," announced Limbeck, recalling Bane's word. The dwarf waved his hand at the metal man with as much pride as if he'd made it himself.

Awed, Trian stared at the automaton, and at the huge glass eyeballs that lined the walls, each eye gazing out watchfully on a certain part of the great machine. The wizard looked around dubiously at the banks of gleaming metal adorned with glass boxes and small wheels, levers, and other fascinating and unfathomable objects.

None of the levers or gears or wheels was moving. All held perfectly still, as if the Kicksey-winsey had fallen asleep and was waiting for the sunlight to shine on closed eyelids, -when it would awake.

"The gate is open. What are my instructions?" asked the metal man.

"It speaks!" Trian was agog.

"Of course it does," Limbeck said proudly. "It wouldn't be much use otherwise."

He gulped in excitement, reached out a shaking hand for Jarre. She caught hold of his hand in hers, held on to the book in the other. Trian was trembling in excitement.

One of the human mysteriarchs, peering in nervously through the door, had broken down and was weeping uncontrollably.

"All lost," he was blubbering incoherently, "all lost, for all these many centuries."

"Now found," Trian breathed. "And bequeathed to us. May the ancestors make us worthy."

"What do I say to the metal man, my dear?" Limbeck quavered. "I... want to make sure I get it right."

" 'Put your hand on the wheel of life and turn,' " Jarre read the directions in\* dwarven.

Trian translated the words into elven and human for those crowding around the door.

"Put your hand on the wheel of life and turn," Limbeck ordered the automaton. The dwarf's voice cracked at first, but, gathering his confidence, he boomed out the last words so that even Haplo, standing alone and forgotten in the hall, heard them.

A gigantic wheel made of gold was affixed to one of the metal walls. Runes were etched all around the wheel. The metal man obediently clanked its way over to the wheel. The automaton placed its hands on the wheel and then looked back with its jeweled eyes at Limbeck.

"How many times do I turn it?" the mechanical voice intoned.

" 'One for each of the worlds,' " said Jarre, sounding doubtful.

"That is correct," said the metal man. "Now, how many worlds are there?"

None of them who'd studied the book was sure about this part. The answer wasn't given. It was as if the Sartan assumed the number would be common knowledge.

They had consulted Haplo. He'd shut his eyes, as if he were seeing moving pictures—like those in the Sartan magic lantern—in his mind.

"Try the number seven," Haplo had advised them, but wouldn't say how he arrived at the answer. "I'm not sure myself."

"Seven," Jarre repeated with a helpless shrug.

"Seven," said Limbeck.

"Seven worlds," murmured Trian. "Can such a thing be?"

Apparently it could, for the automaton nodded and, reaching up its hands, took hold of the wheel and gave it a mighty turn.

The wheel shuddered; its gears squealed from long disuse, but it moved.

The metal man began to speak, saying a word every time it turned the wheel. No one could understand what it said except Haplo.

"The first world, the Vortex," said the automaton in Sartan.

The wheel revolved with a protesting, grinding sound.

"The Vortex," Haplo repeated. "I wonder..." His musings were cut short.

"The Labyrinth," the metal man intoned.

Again the wheel turned.

"The Nexus," said the automaton.

"The Labyrinth, then the Nexus." Haplo considered what he was hearing. He quieted the dog, which had begun to howl dismally—the squealing of the wheel hurt its sensitive ears. "Both of those in order. Perhaps that means the Vortex is in the—"

"Arianus," said the metal man.

"It said us!" Jane cried in delight, recognizing the Sartan word for their world.

"Pryan. Abarrach. Chelestra." At each name in the roll call, the metal man gave the wheel another turn.

When it came to the last name, it stopped.

"Now what?" Trian asked.

"'Heaven's fire will spark life,' " Jarre read.

"I'm afraid we were never very clear on that part," Limbeck said in apology.

"Look!" cried Trian, pointing to one of the crystal eyeballs that looked out upon the world.

Terrible thunderclouds, darker and more ferocious than any that had been seen before on Drevlin, were massing in the skies above the continent. The land grew pitch-black. The very room in which they stood, so brightly lit, seemed darker, though they were far, far beneath the ground.

"My—my goodness," stammered Limbeck, eyes round. Even without his spectacles, he could see the boiling clouds swirling over his homeland.

"What have we done?" Jarre gasped, crowding close to Limbeck.

"Our ships," cried the elves and the humans. "This will wreck our ships. We'll be stranded down here—"

A bolt of jagged lightning shot from the clouds, struck one of the metal hands of the Liftalofts. Arcs of fire swirled around the hand, flashed down the metal arm. The arm twitched. Simultaneously hundreds of other spears of lightning slanted down from the heavens, struck hundreds of metal hands and arms, all over Drevlin. The eyeballs focused on each. The mensch gazed from one to the other in terrified astonishment.

" 'Heaven's fire!'" announced Trian suddenly.

And at that moment all the machinery in the room came to life. The wheel on the wall began to turn of its own accord. The glass eyeballs started to blink and rove, shifting their gazes to different parts of the great machine.

Arrows encased in glass boxes began to inch their way upward.

On all parts of Drevlin, the Kicksey-winsey came back to life.

Immediately the metal man left the large wheel and headed for the levers and the small wheels. The mensch scrambled to get out of its way, for the automaton let nothing stop it.

"Look, oh, look, Limbeck!" Jarre was sobbing and didn't know it.

The whirley-wheels were whirling, the 'lectric zingers zinging, the arrows arrowing, the flash-rafts flashing. The dig-claws began furiously digging; gears were gearing and pulleys pulling. The glimmerglamps burst into light. Bellows sucked in great breaths and whooshed them out, and warm air wafted once again through the tunnels.

The dwarves could be seen swarming out of their homes, hugging each other and whatever parts of the machine they could conveniently hug. The scrift-bosses appeared in their midst and immediately began bossing, which was what they were supposed to do, so no one minded. All the dwarves went back to work, just as they had before.

The metal man was working, too, the mensch taking care to keep out of its way. What it was doing, no one had any idea, when suddenly Limbeck pointed to one of the eyeballs.

"The Liftalofts!"

The storm clouds roiled and swirled around the circle of the nine huge arms, forming a hole through which the sun shone on a waterspout, which was no longer working.

In the old days, the spout had funneled the water collected from the Maelstrom into a water pipe lowered from Aristagon. Elves had seized control of the pipe, and of the life-giving water, thus bringing about the first of many wars. But when the Kicksey-winsey had ceased to work, the waterspout had no longer functioned—for anybody.

Would it begin working now?

"According to this," said Jarre, reading from the book, "some of the water harvested from the storm will be heated until it turns to steam and hot water; then that steam and hot water will shoot up into the sky..."

Slowly the nine hands attached to the nine arms rose straight up in the air. Each hand opened, its metal palm lifted to the sun. Then each hand seemed to catch hold of something, like an invisible string attached to an invisible kite, and began the motion of pulling the string, pulling the kite.

Above, in the Mid Realms and the High, the continents shuddered, moved, began slowly to shift their positions.

And suddenly a sparkling geyser of water burst out of the waterspout. Higher it rose, higher and higher, clouds of steam billowing around it, obscuring it from view.

"It's starting," said Trian softly, reverently.

## CHAPTER 15

### VOLKARAN ISLES

#### ARIANUS

KING STEPHEN STOOD ON THE BATTLEGROUND OF SEVEN FIELDS, outside his royal pavilion, watching and waiting for what many in his realm believed would be the end of the world. His wife, Queen Anne, stood beside him, their baby daughter safe in her arms.

"I felt something that time," Stephen said, peering down at the ground below his feet.

"You keep saying that," Anne told him with fond exasperation. "I didn't feel anything."

Stephen grunted but didn't argue. The two of them had decided to cease the constant bickering that had been all for show anyway. Now they publicly revealed their love for each other. It had been quite amusing, those first few weeks after the peace treaty with the elves had been signed, to watch the various factions, who had supposed they were playing the king and queen off each other, flop about in confusion.

A few barons were trying to stir up trouble and succeeding, in large part because most humans still distrusted the elves and had grave reservations about peace among the races. Stephen kept quiet, bided his time. He was wise enough to know that hatred was a weed that would not wilt just because the sun was shining on it. Patience would be needed to uproot it. With luck and care, his daughter might live to see the weed die. Stephen knew he probably would not.

Still, he had done what he could to help. He was pleased. And if this crazy machine of the dwarves worked, so much the better. If not, well, he and Rees'ahn and the dwarf—what was his name? Bolt-something—would find a way.

A sudden hubbub from the shoreline attracted Stephen's attention. The King's Own were posted on watch, and now most of them were peering cautiously over the edge of the floating island, exclaiming and pointing.

"What the devil—" Stephen started forward to see for himself what was going on, and ran into a messenger coming to report.

"Your Majesty!" The messenger was a young page, so excited he bit his tongue trying to speak his piece. "W-w-water!"

Stephen had no need to move another step, for now he could see... and feel. A drop of water on his cheek. He stared in wonder. Anne, next to him, gripped his arm.

A fountain of water shot up past the island, soaring high into the sky. Stephen craned his neck, nearly fell over backward trying to see. The geyser ascended to a height that the king guessed must be somewhere below the Firmament, then cascaded downward in a sparkling shower like a gentle spring rain.

Steaming hot when it burst up out of Drevlin, the water was cooled by the air through which it passed, still more by the cold air near the ice floes that formed the Firmament. It was tepid when it hit the upturned faces of the humans, who stared in awe at the miracle showering down around them.

"It's... beautiful!" Anne whispered.

Solarus's bright rays burst through the clouds and struck the cascading water, transforming the transparent curtain into shining bands of color. Rings of rainbow hue surrounded the geyser. Droplets of water glittered and glistened, began to gather in the sagging tops of the tents. The baby laughed until a drop hit her squarely in the nose; then she wailed in dismay.

"I'm positive I felt the ground move that time!" Stephen said, wringing water from his beard.

"Yes, dear," said Anne patiently. "I'm going to take the baby inside before she catches her death."

Stephen stayed outside, reveling in the deluge, until he was soaking wet to his skin and then some. He laughed to see the peasants rushing around with buckets, determined to catch every drop of the commodity that was so precious it had become the monetary standard in human lands (one barl equaled one barrel of water). Stephen could have told them they were wasting their time. The water would fall and keep on falling without end, so long as the Kicksey-winsey kept working. And knowing the energetic dwarves, that would be forever.

He wandered for hours around the battlefield, which had now become a symbol of peace, for it was here that he and Rees'ahn had signed the peace accord. A dragon flashed down through the water, its wet wings shining in the sunlight. Coming to rest on the ground, it shook itself all over, appearing to enjoy its shower.

Stephen squinted against the sunlight, trying to see the rider. A female, to judge by the clothing. The King's Own were giving her respectful escort.

And then he knew her. Lady Iridal.

Stephen frowned, resentful. Why the devil was she here? Did she have to ruin this wonderful day? At the best of times, she made him damned uncomfortable. Now, since she'd been forced to kill her own son to save the king's life, Stephen felt even worse. He glanced longingly toward his tent, hoping Anne would come to his rescue. The tent flap not only remained closed, but a hand could be seen popping out, tying it shut.

Queen Anne wanted even less to do with the Lady Iridal than the king.

Lady Iridal was a mysteriarch, one of the most powerful magi in the land. Stephen had to be polite. He splashed through the puddles to meet her.

"My Lady," he said gruffly, giving her his wet hand.

Iridal took it coolly. She was extremely pale, but composed. She kept the hood of her cape over her head, protecting herself from the water. Her eyes, which had once shone as brightly as the rainbows in the water, were now gray, clouded with a sorrow that would remain with her until she died. But she seemed at peace both with herself and with the tragic circumstances of her life. Stephen still felt uncomfortable around her, but now the feeling was one of sympathy, no longer guilt.

"I bring you news, Your Majesty," said Iridal when the polite formalities and exchange of wonderments over the water were finished. "I have been with the Kenkari on Aristagon. They sent me to tell you that the Imperanon has fallen."

"Is the emperor dead?" Stephen asked eagerly.

"No, Sire. No one is quite certain what happened, but from all indications, Agah'rahn disguised himself in the magical garments of the Unseen and, with their aid, managed to slip away in the night. When his people discovered that the emperor had fled, leaving them to die alone, they surrendered peacefully to Prince Rees'ahn."

"That is welcome news, My Lady. I know the prince was loath to have to kill his own father. Still, it is a shame Agah'rahn escaped. He could yet cause mischief."

"There is much in this world that will yet cause mischief," Iridal said, sighing, "And always will. Not even this miracle of water can wash it away."

"Yet perhaps now we are armored against it," Stephen told her, smiling. "There!" He stamped his foot. "Did you feel that?"

"Feel what, Sire?"

"The ground shake. This island is moving, I tell you! Just as the book promised."

"If so, Your Majesty, I doubt you could feel it. According to the book, the movement of the isles and continents would take place very, very slowly. Many cycles will go by before all are in their proper alignment."

Stephen said nothing; the last thing he wanted to do was argue with a mysteriarch. He was convinced he had felt the ground move. He was certain of it. Book or no book.

"What will you do now, Lady Iridal?" he asked, changing the subject. "Will you return to the High Realms?"

He was immediately uncomfortable asking this question, wished he hadn't thought of it. Her son was buried up there, as was her husband.

"No, Your Majesty." Iridal grew paler, but answered him quite calmly. "The High Realms are dead. The shell that protected them has cracked. The sun parches the land; the air is too hot to breathe."

"I'm sorry, Lady," was all Stephen could think of to say.

"Do not be sorry, Your Majesty. It is better this way.

As for me, I am going to serve as a liaison between the mysteriarchs and the Kenkari. We are going to pool our magical talents and learn from each other, to the benefit of all."

"Excellent!" said Stephen heartily. Let the blasted wizards keep to themselves, leave decent people alone. He'd never really trusted any of them.

Iridal smiled slightly at his enthusiasm. Undoubtedly she guessed what he was thinking, but was polite enough to say nothing. Now it was she who changed the subject. "You have just returned from Drevlin, haven't you, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, Lady. Her Majesty and I were there with the prince, looking things over."

"Did you, by chance, see the assassin, Hugh the Hand?" A crimson stain spread over Iridal's cheeks when she spoke the name.

Stephen scowled. "No, thank the ancestors. Why would I? What would he be doing down there? Unless he has another contract—"

Iridal's flush deepened. "The Kenkari..." she began, then bit her lip, fell silent.

"Who's he supposed to kill?" Stephen asked grimly. "Me or Rees'ahn?"

"No... please... I... must have been mistaken." She looked alarmed. "Don't say anything..."

Making him a low curtsy, she drew her hood farther over her face, turned, and hurried back to her dragon. The creature was enjoying its bath and didn't want to fly. She rested her hand on its neck, said soothing words to it, keeping it under her magical control. The dragon shook its head, flapped its wings, a blissful expression on its face.

Stephen hastened for his tent, planning to reach it before Iridal thought of something else to tell him and came back. Once there, he would inform the guard that he wasn't to be disturbed. He should probably find out more about the assassin, but he wasn't going to get the information from her. He'd put Trian on the mystery, when the wizard returned.

As it was, though, Stephen was glad he had spoken to Iridal. The news she brought was good. Now that the elven emperor was gone, Prince Rees'ahn would be able to take over and work for peace. The mysteriarchs would, Stephen hoped, become so interested in Kenkari magic that they would stay out of his hair. As for this business with Hugh the Hand, perhaps the Kenkari had wanted the assassin out of the way, sent him to his doom in the Maelstrom.

"Trust a bunch of elves to dream up something sneaky like that!" Stephen muttered into his beard. Realizing what he'd said, he glanced around hurriedly to make certain no one had heard.

Yes, prejudice was going to take a long time to die.

On his way to his tent, he took out his purse and dumped all the barls into a puddle.

## CHAPTER 16

### WOMBE, DREVLIN ARIANUS

THE DOG WAS BORED. Not only bored, but hungry and bored.

The dog didn't blame its master for this state of affairs. Haplo wasn't well. The jagged wound across the heart-rune had healed, but it had left a scar, a white weal slashing across the sigil that was the center of Haplo's being. Haplo had attempted to tattoo over it, to close the sigil, but for some reason unknown to both the dog and its master, the pigment wouldn't take on the scar tissue; the magic wouldn't work.

"Probably some sort of venom, left by the dragon-snake," Haplo had reasoned when he'd calmed down enough to be reasonable.

The first few moments after he'd discovered that his wound wouldn't completely heal had, in the dog's estimation, rivaled the storm raging outside their ship. The dog had deemed it wise to retreat during the outburst to a place of safety under the bed.

The dog simply couldn't understand all the fuss. Haplo's magic was as strong as ever—or so it seemed to the dog, who, after all, should know, having been not only a witness to some of Haplo's more spectacular feats, but a willing participant in them as well.

The knowledge that his magic was in good working order hadn't pleased Haplo as the dog had hoped it would. Haplo grew silent, withdrawn, preoccupied. And if he forgot to feed his faithful dog, well, the dog couldn't complain much because Haplo often forgot to feed himself.

But there came a time when the dog could no longer hear the glad cries of the mensch, celebrating the wondrous workings of the Kicksey-winsey, because the rumblings of its own empty stomach drowned out the noise. The animal decided enough was enough.

They were down in the tunnels. The metal thing that looked like a man and walked like a man but smelled like one of Limbeck's tool boxes was clanking about, doing nothing interesting that the dog could see, yet receiving all sorts of lavish praise. Only Haplo wasn't interested. He leaned against one of the walls of the tunnel, in the shadows, staring at nothing.

The dog cocked an eye in Haplo's direction and gave a bark that expressed the following thoughts: "Very well, Master. The man-thing without a smell has turned on the machine that hurts our ears. Our little and our big friends are happy. Let's go and eat."

"Hush, dog," said Haplo and patted the animal absent-mindedly on the head.

The dog sighed. Back on board the ship hung rows and rows of sausages—fragrant, stomach-filling sausages. The dog could see them in its mind, could smell them, could taste them. The animal was torn. Loyalty prompted it to stay with its master, who might get into serious trouble on his own.

"However," reasoned the dog, "a dog who is faint with hunger is not a dog who would be much good in a fight."

The animal whined, wriggled against Haplo's leg, and cast a longing look back down the tunnel, the way they'd come.

"You have to go out?" Haplo demanded, eyeing the dog with irritation.

The dog considered the matter. This hadn't been what it intended. And, well, no, it didn't have to go out. Not in the way Haplo meant. Not at the moment. But at least they both would be out—anywhere else besides this rune-lit tunnel.

The dog indicated, by pricking its ears straight up, that yes, indeed, it did have to go out. Once out, there was just a short jaunt to the ship and the sausages.

"Go on, then," said Haplo impatiently. "You don't need me. Don't get lost in the storm."

Lost in the storm! Look who's talking about being lost! Still, the dog had received permission to go and that was the main thing, although permission had been received based on a fraudulent premise. The dog's conscience jabbed it on this point, but hunger pangs hurt worse than conscience pangs and the dog trotted off without giving the matter further consideration.

It was only when the dog was halfway up the stairs leading out of the tunnels, near another man that had no smell but looked like Alfred, that the dog realized it had a problem.

The animal could not get back onto the ship without assistance.

The dog drooped. Its steps faltered. Its tail, which had been waving jauntily in the air, sagged. It would have flopped down on its belly in despair if it hadn't been at that moment ascending a staircase, which made flopping uncomfortable. The dog dragged itself up the stairs. Near the man that had no smell but looked like Alfred, the dog sat down to scratch an itch and consider its current problem.

Haplo's ship was completely guarded by Patryn rune-magic. Not a problem for the dog, who could slide inside the sigla as easily as if it were greased. But paws are not meant to open doors. And while doors and walls had not stopped the dog when it was going to rescue its master, such obstacles might well stop it from sneaking inside to steal sausages. Even the dog could admit that there was a distinct difference.

There was also the unfortunate fact that Haplo kept the sausages hanging up near the ceiling, well out of the reach of hungry dogs. Another point the animal had not considered.

"This simply is not my day," the dog said, or words to that effect.

It had just heaved another sigh and was considering biting something to ease its frustration when it caught a scent.

The dog sniffed. The scent was familiar, belonged to a person the dog knew well. The man's scent was an odd variety, composed of a mixture of elf and human, combined with the flavor of stregno and held together by a sharp smell of danger, of nervous anticipation.

The dog bounded to its feet, searched the room for the source of the scent, and came upon it almost immediately.

His friend, his master's friend—Hugh the Hand. The man had shaved off all his hair for some reason, which the dog didn't bother to try to figure out. Not many of the things people did ever made sense.

The dog grinned, wagged its tail in friendly recognition.

Hugh didn't respond. He seemed disconcerted by the dog's presence. He growled at it, kicked at it with his foot. The dog understood that it was not welcome.

This wouldn't do. Sitting down, the dog lifted a paw to be shaken. For some reason which the animal could never fathom, people found this inane gesture charming.

It appeared to work. The dog couldn't see the man's face, which was hidden beneath a hood (people were so very strange), but the animal knew Hugh was now regarding it with interest. The man squatted down on his haunches, beckoned the dog to come closer.

The dog heard the man's hand move inside the cloak, although the man was trying very hard to move it silently. Hugh the Hand drew something forth with a scraping sound. The dog smelled iron tinged with old blood, a scent the dog didn't like much, but this was no time to be choosy.

Hugh accepted the dog's paw, shook it gravely. "Where's your master? Where's Haplo?"

Well, the dog couldn't see launching into a lengthy explanation at this point. The animal jumped to its feet, eager to go. Here was someone who could open doors, someone who could snag sausages off their hooks. And so the dog told a lie.

It barked once and looked out the Factree door, in the direction of Haplo's ship.

One must note that the dog didn't consider this a lie. This was a mere matter of taking the truth, gnawing at it a bit, and then burying it for later. His master wasn't on the ship at this precise moment—as the dog was leading Hugh to believe—but he soon would be.

In the meanwhile, the dog and Hugh would have a nice visit and share a sausage or two. Time for explanations later.

But, of course, the man couldn't react simply and logically. Hugh the Hand stared around distrustfully, as if expecting Haplo to leap out at him any moment. Not seeing Haplo, Hugh the Hand glared at the dog.

"How did he get past me?"

The dog felt a howl of frustration rising in its throat. Damn the man. There were all sorts of ways Haplo could have slipped past him. Magic, for one...

"I guess he must have used his magic," Hugh the Hand muttered, standing up. There was the scraping sound again, and the smell of iron and old blood was considerably diminished, to the dog's relief.

"So why did he sneak off?" Hugh the Hand was asking. "Maybe he suspects something's up. That must be it. He's not the type to take chances. But then what are you doing running around loose?" The man was staring at the dog again. "He didn't send you out looking for me, did he?"

Oh, for the love of all that was greasy! The dog could have cheerfully bitten the man. Why did everything have to be so complicated? Hadn't this fellow ever been hungry before?

The dog assumed an innocent air, cocked its head to one side, gave the man a melting look with its dark eyes, and whined a bit to protest being falsely accused.

"I guess not," Hugh the Hand said, studying the animal intently. "He couldn't know it's me who's after him, for one thing. And you—you might be my ticket on board his ship. He'd let you in. And when he sees I'm with you, he'll let me in as well. Come on, then, mutt. Lead the way."

Once this man made up his mind, he moved quickly. The dog had to give him credit for that, and so it chose to overlook (for the moment) the use of the highly insulting "mutt."

The dog danced off, dashed out the Factree door. The man followed along closely behind. He appeared slightly daunted at the sight of the tremendous storm raging over Drevlin, but after a moment's hesitation in the entrance, he drew his hood up over his head and advanced grimly into the wind and rain.

Barking back at the thunder, the dog splashed gleefully through puddles, heading for the ship—a hulking mass of rune-glimmering darkness, barely visible through the slanting rain.

Of course, there would come the moment when, once on the ship, Hugh the Hand would discover that Haplo wasn't on board. Which moment might be rather ticklish to handle. The dog hoped, however, that the moment would come only after the man had been persuaded to hand over a few sausages.

Once its stomach was full, the dog felt capable of anything.

## CHAPTER 17

### WOMBE, DREVLIN ARIANUS

ALONE IN THE HALLWAY, HAPLO TOOK A LOOK INSIDE THE Automaton's room. The mensch were talking excitedly among themselves, moving from one glass eye to the next, gazing out at the marvels of the new world. Limbeck was standing squarely in the center of the room, giving a speech. Jarre was the only one listening to him, but he never noticed that he had such a small audience, nor did he much care. Jarre regarded him with loving eyes—her eyes would see quite well enough for the two of them.

"Good-bye, my friends," Haplo told them both from the hallway, where they couldn't possibly hear him. He turned around and left.

Arianus would be at peace now. An uneasy peace, riven with cracks and splits. It would break and crumble and threaten more than once to fall down and crush everyone beneath. But the mensch, guided by their wise leaders, would shore the peace up here, patch it up there, and it would stand, strong in its imperfection.

Which was not what he'd been ordered to do.

"It had to be this way, Lord Xar. Otherwise the dragon-snakes..."

Haplo's hand went, unknowing, to his breast. The wound bothered him sometimes. The scar tissue was inflamed, painful to the touch. He scratched at it absently, winced, and snatched his hand away, cursing. Looking down, he saw his shirt spotted with blood. He'd broken the wound open again.

Emerging from the tunnels, he climbed the stairs, halted at the top, stood before the statue of the Manger. It reminded him more than ever of Alfred.

"Xar won't listen to me, will he?" Haplo asked the statue. "Any more than Samah listened to you."

The statue didn't respond.

"But I've got to try," Haplo insisted. "I've got to make my lord understand. Otherwise we're all in danger. And then, when he knows the danger of the dragon-snakes, he can fight them. And I can return to the Labyrinth, find my child."

Oddly, the thought of going back into the Labyrinth no longer terrified him. Now, at last, he could walk back through the Final Gate. His child. And her child. Perhaps he'd find her as well. The mistake he'd made—letting her go—would be rectified.

"You were right, Marit," he said to her silently. "'The evil inside us,' you said. Now I understand."

Haplo stood staring up at the statue. Once, when he had first seen it, the statue of the Sartan had seemed to him awful, majestic. Now it looked tired, wistful, and faintly relieved.

"It was tough being a god, wasn't it? All that responsibility... and no one listening. But your people are going to be all right now." Haplo rested his hand on the metal arm. "You don't have to worry about them any longer."

"And neither do I."

Once outside the Factree, Haplo headed for his ship. The storm was letting up; the clouds were starting to roll away. And so far as Haplo could see, there wasn't another storm in sight. The sun might actually shine on Drevlin— all of Drevlin, not just the area around the Liftalofts. Haplo wondered how the dwarves would cope.

Knowing dwarves, they'd probably be opposed to it, he decided, smiling at the thought.

Haplo slogged through the puddles, taking care to keep clear of any part of the rumbling Kicksey-winsey that looked as if it might swing, trundle, roll, or smash into him. The air was filled with the various sounds of the machine's intense activity: whistles and hoots, beeps and grindings, the zap of electricity. A few dwarves had actually ventured outside and were peering up at the sky with doubt.

Haplo looked swiftly to his ship, was pleased to see that no one and nothing was near it—this included the Kicksey-winsey. He was not so pleased to note that the dog wasn't around either. But then, Haplo was forced to admit, I haven't been very good company of late. Probably the dog was off chasing rats.

The storm clouds broke up. Solarus burst through, streaming down between the breaks in the clouds. In the distance, a cascade of rainbow colors shimmered around the spouting geyser. The sunlight made the great machine suddenly beautiful—it gleamed on the bright silver arms, glistened off fanciful golden fingers. The dwarves stopped to stare at the amazing sight, then hurriedly shaded their eyes and began to grumble about the brightness of the light.

Haplo stopped, took a long look around.

"I won't be back here," he said to himself suddenly. "Ever again."

The knowledge didn't cause him sorrow, only a kind of wistful sadness, much as he'd seen on the face of the Sartan statue. It wasn't a feeling of ill omen. But it was a feeling of certainty.

He wished, after all, that he'd said good-bye to Linbeck. And thanked him for saving his life. Haplo couldn't remember that he ever had. He almost turned around, then kept going straight ahead, toward his ship. It was better this way.

Haplo removed the runes from the entrance, was about to open the hatch when he stopped again, looked around again.

"Dog!" Haplo called.

An answering "whuff" came from inside. From far inside the ship. Say, around the hold area, where the sausages were hung...

"So that's what you've been up to," Haplo called out grimly. He opened the door and stepped in.

Pain burst at the base of his skull, exploded behind his eyes, and propelled him, struggling, into darkness.

Chill water, splashing on his face, brought Haplo instantly to consciousness. He was wide awake and alert, despite the ache in his head. He found himself lying on his back, his wrists and ankles bound securely with a length of his own rope. Someone had ambushed him. But who? Why? And how had whoever it was gotten on board his ship?

Sang-drax. The dragon-snake. But my magic should have warned me...

Haplo's eyes flicked open involuntarily when the water hit him, but he closed them almost immediately. Groaning, he let his head loll sideways. Then he lay still, pretending to black out again, hoping to hear something to tell him what was happening.

"Come off it. Quit shamming."

Something—probably the toe of a boot—prodded Haplo in the side. The voice was familiar.

"I know that old trick," the voice continued. "You're awake, all right. I can prove it if you want me to. A kick in the side of the knee. Feels like someone's driving a red-hot poker into your flesh. No one can play dead through the pain."

The shock of recognizing the voice, more than the threat—which to Haplo, with his protective runes, was no threat at all—caused him to open his eyes. He stared up dazedly at the man who had spoken.

"Hugh the Hand?" he said groggily.

The Hand grunted in acknowledgment. He was seated on a low wooden bench that ran along the bulkheads. He had a pipe in his mouth, and the noxious odor of stregno wafted through the ship. Although he looked relaxed, he was watchful and undoubtedly had a weapon ready.

Not that any mensch weapon could hurt Haplo. But then, no mensch could possibly break through his magic, sneak on board his ship. Nor could any mensch ambush him.

He'd figure this out later, once he was free of these ropes. Haplo called on the magic that would remove his bonds, dissolve the ropes, burn them away...

Nothing happened.

Astounded, Haplo tugged at the ropes, to no avail.

Hugh the Hand watched, puffed on his pipe, said nothing. Haplo had the odd impression that the Hand was as curious as the Patryn about what was going forward.

Haplo ignored the assassin. He took time to analyze the magic, something he hadn't bothered to do, since a routine spell of this sort was second nature. He scanned the possibilities, only to discover that there was only one possibility—he was bound securely with strong rope. All other possibilities had disappeared.

No, not disappeared. They were still there; he could see them, but they were unavailable to him. Accustomed to having innumerable doors open to him, Haplo was shocked to find that now all but one were shut and locked.

Frustrated, he pulled hard at the bonds, tried to free himself. The rope cut painfully into his wrists. Blood trickled over the sigla on his forearms. Sigla that should have been burning bright red and blue, sigla that should have been acting to free him.

"What have you done?" Haplo demanded, not afraid, just amazed. "How did you do this?"

Hugh the Hand shook his head, removed the pipe from his mouth. "If I told you, you might find a way to fight it. Seems a pity to let you die without knowing, but"—the assassin shrugged—"I can't take the chance."

"Die..."

Haplo's head hurt like hell. None of this was making sense. He closed his eyes again. He wasn't trying to fool his captor anymore. He was simply trying to ease the pain in his skull long enough to figure out what was going on.

"I've sworn to tell you one thing before I kill you," Hugh the Hand said, rising to his feet. "That's the name of the person who wants you dead. Xar. That name mean anything to you? Xar wants you dead."

"Xar!" Haplo's eyes flared open. "How do you know Xar? He wouldn't hire you—a mensch. No, damn it, this doesn't make any sense!"

"He didn't hire me. Bane did. Before he died. He said I was to tell you that Xar wants you dead."

Haplo went numb. Xar wants you dead. He couldn't believe it. Xar might be disappointed with him, angry with him. But want him dead?

No, Haplo said to himself, that would mean Xar is afraid of me. And Xar isn't afraid of anything.

Bane. This was his doing. It had to be.

But now that Haplo had figured that out, what did he plan to do about it?

Hugh the Hand stood over him. The assassin was reaching into his cloak, probably for the weapon he was going to use to finish the job.

"Listen to me, Hugh." Haplo hoped to distract the assassin with talk while he tried surreptitiously to loosen his bonds. "You've been tricked. Bane lied to you. He was the one who wanted me dead."

"Doesn't matter." Hugh the Hand drew a knife out of a sheath strapped behind his back. "A contract's a contract, no matter who made it. I took it. I'm honor-bound to carry it out."

Haplo didn't hear. He was staring at the knife. Sartan runes! But how?... Where?... No, damn it, that didn't matter! What mattered was that now he knew—sort of—what was blocking his magic. If he only understood how the runes worked...

"Hugh, you're a good man, a good fighter." Haplo stared hard at the knife. "I don't want to have to kill you—"

"Good thing," Hugh the Hand remarked with a grim smile. "Because you're not going to have the chance."

Concealed in Haplo's boot was a rune-covered dagger of his own. He acted on the probability that the dagger wasn't in his boot but in his hands.

The magic worked. The knife was in Haplo's hands. But at the same instant the knife in the assassin's hand was suddenly a double-bladed ax.

Hugh fumbled, nearly dropped the heavy weapon, but quickly recovered, held on to it.

So that's how the magic works, Haplo realized. Ingenious. The knife can't stop my magic, but it can limit my choices. It will let me fight, because it can counteract whatever weapon I choose to use. And the weapon works on its own, obviously, judging by the look on Hugh's face. He was more shocked than I was.

Not that this helps much, since the Sartan knife will always give him the upper hand. But does it react to all magic? Or just to a threat...

"I'll make your death quick," Hugh the Hand was saying. He gripped the ax in both hands, raised it over Haplo's neck. "If you people have any prayers to say, you'd best say them."

Haplo gave a low whistle.

The dog—sausage grease on its nose—trotted out from the hold. It paused to regard its master and Hugh with amazed curiosity. Obviously this was a game...

Take him! Haplo ordered silently.

The dog looked puzzled. Take him, Master? He's our friend! I saved his life. He was kind enough to feed me a sausage or two. Surely you 're mistaken, Master.

Take him! Haplo ordered.

The dog might have, for the first and only time in its life, disobeyed. But at that moment Hugh raised the ax.

The dog was baffled. The game had suddenly turned ugly. This couldn't be allowed. The man must be making a mistake. Silently, not growling or barking, the dog jumped for Hugh.

The Hand never knew what hit him. The animal struck him solidly from behind. The assassin lost his balance; the ax flew from his hands, thudded harmlessly into the wall. Hugh stumbled, fell. The human's heavy weight crashed down on top of Haplo.

Hugh the Hand gave a great groan. His body stiffened. Haplo felt a rush of warm blood cover his hands and arms.

"Damn!" Haplo pushed on the assassin's shoulder, rolled him over onto his back.

Haplo's knife protruded from the man's gut.

"Damn it! I didn't mean— Why the hell did you—" Cursing, Haplo crouched over the man. A major artery had been severed. Blood was pulsing out of the wound. Hugh was still alive, but he wouldn't be for long.

"Hugh," Haplo said quietly. "Can you hear me? I didn't mean to do this."

The man's eyes flickered open. The Hand seemed almost to smile. He tried to speak, but the blood rattled in his throat. His jaw fell slack. The eyes fixed. His head rolled to one side.

The dog trotted over, pawed at the dead man. Game's over. That was fun. Now it's time to get up and play again.

"Leave him alone, boy," Haplo said, shoving the dog back.

The dog, not understanding but having the idea that this was all somehow its fault, flopped down on its belly. Nose between its paws, it gazed from its master to the man, who was now lying quite still. The dog hoped someone would tell it what was going on.

"You of all people," Haplo said to the corpse. "Damn it!" He beat gently on his leg with a clenched fist. "Damn it all. Bane! Why Bane—and why this? What cursed fate put this weapon into your hands?"

The Sartan weapon lay on the blood-spattered deck beside the body. The weapon, which had been an ax, was now again a crude knife. Haplo didn't touch it. He didn't want to touch it. The Sartan runes etched into its metal were hideous, repulsive, reminded him of the corrupt Sartan runes he'd seen on Abarrach. He left it where it was.

Angry at Hugh, himself, fate—or whatever one might call it—Haplo stood up, stared grimly out the ship's porthole.

The sun was pouring down on Drevlin with blinding intensity. The rainbow geyser sparkled and danced. More and more dwarves were coming up to the surface, staring around them in dazzled bewilderment.

"What the devil am I going to do with the body?" Haplo demanded. "I can't leave it here, on Drevlin. How would I explain what happened? And if I just dump it out, the humans will suspect the dwarves of murder. All hell will break loose. They'll all be back right where they started."

"I'll take him back to the Kenkari," he decided. "They'll know what to do. Poor bastard—"

A great and terrible cry of rage and anguish, coming from directly behind him, froze Haplo's heart to awed stillness. He was unable to move for an instant, his brain and nerves fused by fear and disbelief.

The cry was repeated. Haplo's icy blood surged through his body in chilling waves. Slowly he turned around.

Hugh the Hand was sitting up, looking down at the knife hilt protruding from his stomach. Grimacing as if in memory of the pain, the assassin took hold of the hilt and pulled the blade out. With a bitter curse, he hurled the weapon—stained with his own blood—away from him. Then he let his head sink into his hands.

It took only a moment for the initial shock to wear off, for Haplo to understand what had happened. He said one word.

"Alfred."

Hugh the Hand looked up. His face was ravaged, haggard; the dark eyes burned. "I was dead, wasn't I?"

Wordlessly Haplo nodded.

Hugh's hands clenched; fingernails dug into flesh. "I... couldn't leave. I'm trapped. Not here. Not there. Will it be like this always? Tell me! Will it?"

He sprang to his feet. He was nearly raving. "Must I know death's pain and never its release? Help me! You have to help me!"

"I will," Haplo said softly. "I can."

Hugh halted, regarded Haplo with suspicion. His hand went to his breast, tore open the bloodstained shirt. "You can do something about this? Can you get rid of it?"

Haplo saw the sigil, shook his head. "A Sartan rune. No, I can't. But I can help you find the one who can. Alfred put it there. He's the only one who can free you. I can take you to him, if you have the courage. He's imprisoned in—"

"Courage!" Hugh gave a roaring laugh. "Courage! Why do I need courage? I can't die!" His eyes rolled in his head. "I don't fear death! It's life I'm scared of! It's all backward, isn't it? All backward."

He laughed and kept laughing. Haplo heard a high, thin note, of hysteria, of madness. Not surprising, after what the human had endured, but he couldn't be permitted to indulge in it.

Haplo caught hold of Hugh's wrists. The assassin, scarcely knowing what he was doing, struggled violently to free himself.

Haplo held him fast. Blue light shone from the runes on Haplo's hands and arms, spread its soothing glow to Hugh the Hand. The light wrapped itself around him, twined up his body.

The Hand sucked in his breath, stared at the light in awe. Then his eyes closed. Two tears squeezed out from beneath his lids, trailed down his cheeks. He relaxed in Haplo's hold.

Haplo held him, drew him into the circle of his being. He gave his strength to Hugh, took Hugh's torment into himself.

Mind flowed into mind; memories became tangled, shared. Haplo flinched and cried out in agony. It was Hugh the Hand, his potential killer, who supported him. The two men stood, locked in an embrace that was of spirit, mind, and body.

Gradually the blue light faded. Each man's being returned to its own sanctuary. Hugh the Hand grew calm. Haplo's pain eased.

The Hand lifted his head. His face was pale, glistening with sweat. But the dark eyes were calm. "You know," he said.

Haplo drew a shivering breath and nodded, unable to speak.

The assassin stumbled backward, sat down on a low bench. The dog's tail stuck out from underneath. Hugh's resurrection had apparently been too much for it.

Haplo called to the animal. "Come on, boy. It's all right. You can come out now."

The tail brushed once across the deck, disappeared.

Haplo grinned and shook his head. "All right, stay there. Let this be a lesson about purloining sausages."

Glancing out the porthole, Haplo saw several of the dwarves, blinking in the sunlight, looking curiously in the ship's direction. A few were even pointing and beginning to wander toward the ship.

The sooner they left Arianus, the better.

Haplo put his hands on the steering mechanism, began speaking the runes, to make certain that all were unbroken, that the magic was ready to take them back through Death's Gate.

The first sigil on the steering stone caught fire. The flames spread to the second, and so on. Soon the ship would be airborne.

"What's happening?" Hugh the Hand asked, staring suspiciously at the glowing runes.

"We're getting ready to leave. We're going to Abarrach," said Haplo. "I have to report to my lord..." He paused.

Xar wants you dead.

No! Impossible. It was Bane who wanted him dead.

"Then we'll go find Alf—" Haplo began, but never finished.

Everything that was three-dimensional suddenly went flat, as if all juice and pulp and bone and fiber were sucked out of every object aboard the ship. Without dimension, brittle as a dying leaf, Haplo felt himself pressed back against time, unable to move, unable to so much as draw breath.

Sigla flared in the center of the ship. A hole burned through time, broadened, expanded. A figure stepped through the hole: a woman, tall, sinewy. Chestnut hair, tipped with white, flowed around her shoulders and down her back. Long bangs feathered over her forehead, casting her eyes in shadow. She was dressed in the clothes of the Labyrinth—leather pants, boots, leather vest, blouse with loose sleeves. Her feet touched the deck, and time and life surged back into all things.

Surged back into Haplo.

He stared in wonder. "Marit!"

"Haplo?" she asked, her voice low and clear.

"Yes, it's me! Why are you here? How?" Haplo stammered in amazement.

Marit smiled at him. She walked toward him, held out her hand to him. "Xar wants you, Haplo. He has asked me to bring you back to Abarrach."

Haplo reached out his hand to her...

## CHAPTER 18

### WOMBE, DREVLIN ARIANUS

"LOOK out!" HUGH THE HAND SHOUTED. JUMPING TO HIS FEET, he leapt at Marit, caught hold of her wrist.

Blue fire crackled. The sigla on Mark's arms flared. The Hand was flung backward by the shock. He hit the wall, slid down to the floor, clutching his tingling arm.

"What the—" Haplo was staring from one to the other.

The assassin's fingers touched cold iron: his knife, lying on the floor beside him. The numbing shock that had sent his muscles into painful spasms disappeared. Hugh's fingers closed over the hilt.

"Beneath her sleeve!" he shouted. "A throwing dagger."

Haplo stared in disbelief, unable to react.

Marit drew forth the dagger that she wore in a sheath on her arm and flung it all in the same smooth motion.

Had she caught Haplo unaware, her attack would have felled him. His defensive magic would not react to protect him from a fellow Patryn. Particularly not from her.

But even before Hugh's warning, Haplo had experienced a glimmer of distrust, unease.

Xar wants you, she had said to him.

And in his mind, Haplo heard the echo of Hugh's words.

Xar wants you dead.

Haplo ducked. The dagger fell harmlessly over his head, chest, bounced off, fell to the floor with a clatter.

Marit lunged for her fallen weapon. The dog shot out from underneath the bench, intent on putting its body between its master and danger. Marit tripped over the animal, crashed into Haplo. He lost his balance. Reaching out to save himself from falling, he caught hold of the steering stone.

Hugh the Hand raised the knife, intending to defend Haplo.

The Cursed Blade had other plans. Wrought ages ago, designed specifically by the Sartan to fight their most feared enemies,\* the knife recognized that it had two Patryns to destroy, not just one. What Hugh the Hand wanted counted for nothing. He had no control over the blade; rather, it used him. That was how the Sartan, with their disdain for mensch, had designed it. The blade needed a warm body, needed that body's energy, nothing more.

\*See Appendix I, The Accursed Blade.

The blade became a live thing in Hugh's hand. It squirmed and writhed and began to grow. Appalled, he dropped it, but the blade didn't mind. It no longer had any need of him. Taking the form of a gigantic black-winged bat, the knife flew at Marit.

Haplo felt the runes of the steering stone beneath his hand. Marit had recovered her dagger. She lunged to stab him. His defensive magic, which would have reacted instantly to protect him from an attack by a mensch or a Sartan, was unable to respond to danger from a fellow Patryn. The sigla on his skin remained pale, would not shield him.

Haplo flung up one arm to fend off Marit's attack, attempted to activate the steering stone's magic with the other. Blue and red light flared. The ship soared upward.

"Death's Gate!" Haplo managed to gasp.

The sudden motion of the ship threw Marit off balance, caused her to miss. The knife slashed across Haplo's forearm, leaving a streak of glistening red blood. But he was lying on the deck in an awkward and vulnerable position.

Marit regained her balance swiftly. With the skilled, single-minded purpose of a well-trained fighter, she ignored the ship's erratic motion and went after Haplo again.

He was staring not at her but past her.

"Marit!" he yelled. "Look out!"

She was not about to fall for a trick she had learned to avoid as a child. She was more worried about the wretched dog, which was in her way. Marit stabbed at the dog. Something large, with scratching claws, struck her from behind.

Tiny, sharp teeth whose bite was like searing flame sank into the flesh at the base of her skull, above the protective tattoos. Wings flapped against the back of her head. Marit knew her attacker—a bloodsucker. The pain of its bite was excruciating; worse, the creature's teeth were venomous, injecting a paralyzing poison into its victim to bring her down. Within moments she would be unable to move, helpless to stop the bat from draining her life's blood.

Fighting down panic, Marit dropped the knife. Reaching behind her, she grabbed hold of the furry body. The bat had dug its claws deep into her flesh. Its teeth were nipping and slashing, hunting for a large vein. The poison burned through Marit, making her sick and dizzy.

"Break its hold!" Haplo was shouting. "Quick!"

He was trying to help her, but the lurching of the ship made it difficult for him to reach her.

Marit knew what she had to do. Gritting her teeth, she gripped the flapping bat in her hands and yanked on it as hard as she could. The claws tore her flesh out with them; the bat squealed and bit her hands. Every bite shot another dose of poison into her.

She flung the bat away, hurling it with her remaining strength into the wall. She slumped to her knees. Haplo dashed past her; the dog bounded over her. Marit felt her dagger beneath her palm. Her fingers closed on it. She slid it up the sleeve of her blouse. Keeping her head down, she waited for the sickness to pass, waited for her strength to return.

Behind her she heard a snarling and thumping, and then Haplo's voice.

"Hugh, stop that damn knife!"

"I can't!"

The sunlight that had been shining through the porthole was gone. Marit looked up. Arianus had been replaced by a dazzling display of swiftly altering images. A world of green jungle, a world of blue water, a world of red fire, a world of twilight, a world of terrible darkness, and a bright white light.

The thumping ceased. She heard the heavy, labored breathing of the two men, the dog panting.

The images repeated themselves, swirls of color to her dazed mind: green, blue, red, pearl gray, dark, light. Marit knew how Death's Gate worked. She focused on the green.

"Pryan," she whispered. "Take me to Xar!"

The ship altered course immediately.

Haplo was staring blankly at the dog. The dog was staring at the deck. Growling, wondering where its prey had gone, the animal began pawing at the rune-covered wooden hull of the ship, thinking perhaps that the bat had somehow managed to crawl into a crack.

Haplo knew better. He looked around.

Hugh the Hand was holding the weapon—a crude iron knife. Pale and shaken, he dropped it. "I never did trust magic. You got any idea how the damn blade works?"

"Not much," Haplo said. "Don't use it again."

The Hand shook his head. "If we were on solid ground, I'd bury the cursed thing." He looked out the window, his expression dark. "Where are we?"

"Death's Gate," said Haplo, preoccupied. He knelt down beside Marit. "How are you?"

She was shivering hard, almost convulsively.

Haplo took hold of her hands.

Angrily Marit snatched them away, pulled back from him. "Leave me alone!"

"You've got a fever. I can help..." he began, and started to brush aside the feathery chestnut bangs that she wore low over her forehead.

She hesitated. Something inside her wanted him to know the truth, knew it would hurt him worse than the knife's blade. But Xar had warned her not to reveal this secret power she possessed, this link to him.

Marit shoved Haplo's hand aside. "Traitor! Don't touch me!"

Haplo lowered his hand. "I'm not a traitor."

Marit eyed him with a grim smile. "Our lord knows about Bane. The dragon-snake told him."

"Dragon-snake!" Haplo's eyes flashed. "What dragon-snake? One who calls himself Sang-drax?"

"What does it matter what the creature calls himself? The dragon-snake told our lord about the Kicksey-winsey and Arianus. How you brought peace when you were ordered to bring war. And all for your own glory."

"No." Haplo's voice grated. "He lies."

Marit made an impatient negating motion with her hand. "I heard what the mensch said for myself. Back there on Arianus. I heard your mensch friends talking." Her lip curled. She cast a scornful glance back at Hugh the Hand. "Mensch friends armed with Sartan weapons— made by our enemy for our destruction! Weapons you undoubtedly intend to use on your own kind!"

The dog whined, started to creep over to Haplo.

Hugh the Hand whistled, spoke gruffly, "Here, boy. Come to me."

The dog gazed woefully at its master. Haplo appeared to have forgotten its existence. Ears drooping, tail hanging limp, the dog wandered over to Hugh and flopped down at his side.

"You betrayed our lord, Haplo," Marit continued. "Your betrayal hurt him deeply. That was why he sent me."

"But I didn't betray him, Marit! I haven't betrayed our people. Everything I've done has been for them, for their own good. The dragon-snakes are the true betrayers—"

"Haplo," the Hand called warningly, casting a significant look out the porthole. "We've changed course, seemingly."

Haplo barely glanced out. "This is Pryan." He eyed Marit. "You brought us here. Why?"

She was rising shakily to her feet. "Xar ordered me to bring you here. He wants to question you."

"He can't very well do that if I'm dead, can he?" Haplo paused, remembering Abarrach. "On second thought, I guess he can. So our lord has learned the forbidden Sartan art of necromancy."

Marit chose to ignore the emphasis. "Will you come to him peacefully, Haplo? Surrender yourself to his judgment? Or must I kill you?"

Haplo stared out the window at Pryan—a hollow stone ball, its suns shining in the center. Basking in eternal daylight, the plant life on Pryan grew so thickly that vast mensch cities were built in the limbs of gigantic trees. Mensch ships sailed oceans floating on broad moss plains far above the ground.

Haplo looked at Pryan, but he wasn't seeing it. He was seeing Xar.

How easy it would be. Fall on my knees before Xar, bow my head, accept my fate. Quit the fight. Quit the struggle.

If I don't, I'll have to kill her.

He knew Marit, knew how she thought. Once the two of them had thought alike. She honored Xar. Haplo did, too. How could he not? Xar had saved his life, saved the lives of all their people, led them forth from that heinous prison.

But Xar was wrong. Just as Haplo had been wrong.

"You were the one who was right, Marit," he told her. "I couldn't understand then. Now I do."

Not following his thoughts, she eyed him with suspicion.

" 'The evil is in us,' you said. We are the ones who give the Labyrinth strength. It feeds off our hatred, our fear. It grows fat on our fear," he said with a bitter smile, recalling Sang-drax's words.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Marit said disdainfully. She was feeling better, stronger. The poison was abating, her own magic acting to dilute it. "I said lots of things I didn't mean then. I was young."

Mentally, silently, she spoke to Xar. I am on Pryan, Husband. I have Haplo. No, he is not dead. Guide me to the meeting place.

She rested her hand on the steering stone. Runes flared. The ship had been drifting aimlessly; now it began to fly swiftly through the green-tinged sky. Her lord's voice flowed inside her, drew her to him.

"What is your decision?" Course set, Marit let go the stone. She pulled her dagger from her sleeve, held it firmly, steadily.

Behind her the dog growled low in its throat. Hugh the Hand quieted the animal, petting it gently. He watched intently; his own fate—bound up in Haplo, who would lead him to Alfred—was at stake. Marit kept the human in her line of vision, but she was paying scant attention to him. She discounted him as a threat, as she would discount any mensch.

"Xar's made a terrible mistake, Marit," Haplo told her quietly. "The dragon-snakes are his true enemy. They're the ones who will betray him."

"They are his allies!"

"They pretend to be his allies. They will give Xar what he seeks. They'll crown him ruler of the four worlds, bow down to him. Then they'll devour him. And our people will be destroyed as surely as were the Sartan.

"Look at us," he continued. "Look what they've done to us. Since when, in the history of our people, have two Patryns fought each other?"

"Since one of them betrayed his people," she returned scornfully. "You are now more Sartan than Patryn. So my lord says."

Haplo sighed. He called the dog to his side. The animal, ears alert, tail wagging happily, trotted over. Haplo scratched its head. "If it were just me, Marit, I'd give up. I'd go with you. I'd die at my lord's hands. But I'm not alone. There's our child. You did bear my child, didn't you?"

"I bore her. Alone. In a Squatter's hut." Her voice was hard, sharp as the blade in her hand.

Haplo was silent, then asked, "A girl-child?"

"Yes. And if you're thinking to soften me, it won't work. I learned well the one lesson you taught me, Haplo. Caring about something in the Labyrinth brings only pain. I gave her a name, tattooed the heart-rune on her chest, and then I left her."

"What did you name her?"

"Rue."

Haplo flinched. He was pale; his fingers curled, dug into the dog's flesh.

The animal yelped, gave him a reproachful glance.

"Sorry," he muttered.

The ship had descended, was skimming over the tops of the trees, moving at an incredible speed, far faster than when Haplo had first visited this world.

Xar's magic, drawing them to him.

Below, the jungle was a dizzying green blur. A flash of blue, briefly seen and then gone, was an ocean. The ship was dropping lower and lower. In the distance Haplo could see the sparkling beauty of a white city: one of the Sartan citadels. Probably the one he himself had discovered.

It would be logical for Xar to visit the citadel; he had Haplo's account to guide him.

What does Xar expect my corpse to tell him? Haplo wondered suddenly. Obviously he suspects me of having hidden knowledge. Something I've kept from him. But what? I've told him everything... almost... And what's left isn't important to anyone but me.

"Well?" Marit demanded impatiently. "Have you made your decision?"

The spires of the citadel loomed above them. The ship was flying over the wall, descending into an open courtyard. Two mensch standing beneath were staring up at them in open-mouthed astonishment. Haplo could not see Xar, but the lord must be somewhere nearby.

If I'm going to make my move, it has to be now.

"I won't go back, Marit," Haplo said. "And I won't fight you. It's what Sang-drax wants us to do." His gaze shifted from the porthole, slid with deliberate slowness around the ship, flicked over Hugh the Hand, returned to Marit.

Haplo wondered how much the human had understood of what had passed. Haplo had spoken in human for the assassin's benefit, but Marit had been using the Patryn language.

Well, if he didn't understand before, he would now.

"I guess you'll have to kill me," said Haplo.

Hugh the Hand dove for the knife—not the Cursed Blade, but Haplo's knife, stained with the human's own blood, which lay on the deck. He intended to distract the woman; he knew he didn't stand a chance of stopping Marit.

She heard him, whirled, stretched out her hand. The sigla on her skin flashed. Runes danced in the air, spun themselves into a flaring rope of fire that wrapped around the human. Hugh screamed in agony and crashed to the deck, the blue and red runes twining around him.

Haplo took advantage of the diversion to grasp the steering stone. He spoke the runes, willed the ship to leave.

Resistance. Xar's magic held them fast.

The dog gave a warning bark. Haplo turned. Marit had dropped the knife. She was going to use her magic to kill him. Sigla on the backs of her hands began to gleam.

The Cursed Blade came to life.

## CHAPTER 19

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

THE CURSED BLADE ALTERED FORM A TYTAN—ONE OF THE terrifying, murderous giants of Pryan—stood over them.

The tytan's huge hands were clenched to fists as big around as boulders. Its blind face contorted in rage; it lashed out brutally at creatures it sensed rather than saw.

Marit heard the thing roaring above her, saw on Haplo's face a look of fear and astonishment that was certainly not feigned. Her magic changed swiftly from an offensive attack to a defensive shield.

Haplo plummeted into her, dragged her with him to the deck. The giant's fist swung harmlessly over them. Marit struggled to regain her feet, her mind still concentrating on killing Haplo. She didn't fear the monster until she suddenly realized that her defensive shield-magic was beginning to crumble.

Haplo saw her runes starting to fade, saw her look of astonishment.

"The tytans know Sartan magic!" he shouted to her above the giant's roar.

Haplo himself couldn't believe what was happening, and his confusion hindered his ability to respond. Either the ship had expanded to accommodate the giant, or the giant had shrunk to fit inside the ship.

Hugh the Hand, freed of Marit's spell, lay groaning near one of the bulkheads. The sound attracted the tytan's notice. It turned, raised its enormous foot over the prostrate man, prepared to stamp him to death. Then, unaccountably, the tytan lowered its foot, left him alone. The giant shifted its attention back to the Patrins.

The Sartan blade, Haplo realized. It's not a real tytan at all, but a creation of the blade. It won't hurt its master.

But the Hand was barely conscious; there was no hope now of his controlling the blade, if he ever could—something Haplo was beginning to doubt.

Death's Gate. Perhaps it had been only coincidence, but the bat had disappeared; the blade's magic had failed when they entered Death's Gate.

"Dog, attack!" Haplo cried.

The dog darted around behind the giant, nipped at the tytan's heel. The dog's bite must have seemed less than a beesting to the giant, but apparently hurt it enough to distract it. The tytan swung around, stamping in rage. The dog nimbly sprang to one side, dove in again, sinking its teeth into the other heel.

Haplo cast a defensive spell. Blue sigla flared around him, looking like an eggshell and just as fragile. He turned to Marit, who was crouched on the deck, staring up at the giant. Her sigla were fading. She was muttering the rune-language, apparently about to cast another spell.

"You can't stop it!" Haplo grabbed hold of her. "Not by yourself. We've got to create the circle."

She shoved him aside.

The tytan kicked the dog, sent the animal flying across the deck. Its body crashed into a wall, quivered, and lay still. The tytan's eyeless head turned this way and that, sniffing out its prey.

"Create the circle!" Haplo yelled at her savagely. "It's our only chance. The thing is a Sartan weapon. It means to kill us both!"

The giant's fist hammered down on Haplo's magic shield. The sigla started to crack, began to fade. Marit stared at it. Perhaps she was beginning to understand. Or perhaps the instinct for survival, honed in the Labyrinth, goaded her to action. She reached out, grasped hold of Haplo's hands. He held fast to hers. They spoke the runes swiftly together.

Combined, both their magicks strengthened; they formed a shield stronger than the strongest steel. The tytan's fist slammed down on the glowing rune-structure.

The sigla wavered but held fast, Haplo saw a tiny break in it, however. The shield wouldn't last long.

"How do we fight it?" Marit demanded, begrudging his help but aware of the necessity.

"We don't," he said grimly. "We can't. We've got to get out of here. Listen to me: the bat that attacked you vanished when we entered Death's Gate. The gate's magic must somehow disrupt the blade's magic."

The tytan, in a frustrated rage, rained blow after blow down on the glowing shield, kicking at it with its feet, drumming on it with its hands. The cracks widened.

"I'll hold it off!" Haplo yelled above the tytan's roars. "You take us back to Death's Gate!"

"This is a trick," she cried, glaring at him, hating him. "You're only trying to escape your fate. I can fight this thing."

She broke loose of Haplo's grasp. The shield around them burst into flame, engulfing the tytan's hands. It shrieked in pain, snatched its hands back out of the blaze. Sucking in a huge breath, it blew on the fire, and suddenly the flames were engulfing Marit.

She screamed. Her rune-magic acted to protect her, but the sigla on her skin were starting to wither in the heat.

Swiftly Haplo formed his own runes into a huge spear, cast it at the tytan. The spear slammed into the giant's chest. The point penetrated flesh and muscle. The tytan was wounded, though not seriously, and in pain. The flames around Marit died.

Haplo caught hold of her, dragged her to where the steering stone rested. Outside the window, he could see two mensch—an elf and a human—waving their arms and dashing frantically around the ship, as if searching for a way in. He paid them scant attention. He placed his hands on the stone and spoke the runes.

Blinding light flared. The sigla on the ship's walls glowed with dazzling brilliance. The mensch outside the window vanished, as did the citadel and the jungle around it.

They were in Death's Gate. The tytan was gone.

Colors flashed and swirled: blue water, red fire, green jungle, gray storm, darkness, light. Faster and faster the images spun. Haplo was caught in a whirlwind of color. He tried to fix on a single image, but they all swept past him too rapidly. He could see nothing except the colors. He lost sight of Marit, of Hugh, of the dog.

Lost sight of everything except the Sartan blade. It lay on the deck, a quivering, malevolent force. Once again it was an iron knife. Once again they'd defeated it. But they were nearly finished and the blade's magic was powerful. It had lasted through centuries, perhaps. Survived its makers. How could he destroy it?

The colors—the choices—swirled around him. Blue. One force existed which might destroy the knife. Unfortunately, it might destroy all of them.

Haplo shut his eyes against the colors and chose blue. His ship left Death's Gate and slammed into a wall of water.

The blur of colors disappeared. Haplo could see the ship's interior again and, outside the window, the peaceful aqua sea that was the world of Chelestra.

"Where the hell are we now?" Hugh the Hand demanded. He was conscious again, staring in bewilderment out the porthole.

"The fourth world."

Haplo could hear ominous sounds in his ship. A groan from somewhere in the hold, strange whispering sighs, as if the ship were lamenting its fate.

Marit heard them, too. She tensed, looked around in alarm. "What is that?"

"The ship is breaking apart," Haplo answered grimly. His eyes were on the knife. Its runes glowed faintly.

"Breaking apart?" Marit gasped. "That's not possible. Not with the rune-magic to protect it. You're... you're lying."

"Fine, I'm lying." Haplo was too tired, too badly hurt, too preoccupied to argue. Keeping a wary gaze on the knife, he cast a glance around at the steering stone. It stood on a wooden pedestal well above the deck. Still, when the ship began to break up that wouldn't matter. "Give me your vest," Haplo told Marit. "What?"

"The vest! Your leather vest!" He glared at her.

"Damn it, I don't have time to explain! Just give it to me!"

She was suspicious. But the creakings were growing louder; the dismal sighs had given way to sharp cracks.

Taking off the leather vest, which was covered with protective runes, Marit flung it at Haplo. He tossed it over the steering stone.

The runes on the Cursed Blade glowed an ugly green. The dog, apparently unhurt and now morbidly curious, crept near, sniffed at the knife. The animal leapt back suddenly, hackles rising.

Haplo looked up at the ceiling. He recalled the last time he'd landed on Chelestra—his ship breaking apart, the rune-magic failing, the water starting to seep through the cracks. Then he'd been amazed, raging, afraid. Now he prayed for a drop.

There it was! A tiny trickle of sea water, running down one of the bulkheads.

"Hugh!" Haplo shouted. "Grab the knife! Put it in the water!"

Hugh the Hand didn't respond. He didn't move. He was crouched against the hull of the ship, holding on to it for dear life, staring with gaping mouth and frantic eyes at the water.

The water. Haplo cursed himself for a fool. The human came from a world where people fought over water; a bucket of the precious liquid was wealth. He had undoubtedly never in his entire life seen this much water. And he certainly hadn't seen it as a terrifying fist closing over the ship, slowly crushing its wooden shell.

Perhaps there was no word in the mensch language on Arianus for drowning, but Hugh the Hand didn't need a word. He could picture such a death vividly. Haplo understood; he'd gone through this himself.

The choking, the smothering, the bursting lungs. Useless to try to explain to Hugh the Hand that he could breathe the water as easily as he could breathe air. Useless to explain to him that if they acted quickly they could leave before the ship broke apart. Useless to remind him he couldn't die. At this juncture, that might not appear to be much of a blessing.

A drop of water, falling from one of the slowly widening cracks in the wooden hull, fell on Hugh's face. He shuddered all over, gave a hollow cry.

Haplo lurched across the deck. Grabbing hold of the assassin, the Patryn dug his nails into Hugh's arm. "The blade! Grab it!"

The knife flew from the deck, sprang into Hugh's hand. It had not altered form, but its greenish glow intensified. Hugh the Hand stared at it as if he'd never seen it before.

Haplo backed swiftly away.

"Hugh!" The Patryn tried desperately to break through the man's terror. "Put the knife in the water!"

A yell from Marit stopped him.

She was pointing out the porthole, her face pale and horrified. "What... what is it?"

Foul ooze, like blood, stained the water. The beautiful aqua was dark now, and hideous. Two red-green glowing eyes peered in at them, eyes that were bigger than the ship. A toothless mouth gaped in silent, mocking laughter.

"The dragon-snakes ... in their true form," Haplo answered.

The knife. That's why the Cursed Blade hadn't changed form. It didn't need to change. It was drawing on the greatest source of evil in the four worlds.

Marit couldn't look away. Slowly she shook her head. "No," she said thickly. "I don't believe... Xar would not permit it..." She stopped, whispered almost to herself, "The red eyes..."

Haplo didn't answer. He waited tensely for the dragon-snake to attack, to batter the ship to pieces, seize them and devour them.

But the dragon-snake didn't, and then Haplo realized it wouldn't. I grow fat on your fear, Sang-drax had said to him. There was enough fear and hatred and mistrust on board this ship to feed a legion of dragon-snakes. And with the ship breaking apart slowly, the dragon-snake had only to wait for its victims' magic to diminish and die, wait for them to feel the full extent of their helplessness. Their terror would only increase.

Another snapping crack, a series of cracks from farther back in the ship. Water dripped on Haplo's hand. The sigla, which had flared blue and red at the appearance of the dragon-snake, began to dim; their light—his magic— was growing faint.

Soon his magic would break apart, as his ship was breaking apart.

Revulsion twisting inside him, Haplo reached out and snatched the Cursed Blade from Hugh's unresisting grasp.

The pain was worse, far worse than if he'd taken hold of a red-hot poker. His instinct was to drop it. He gritted his teeth against the pain, held on. The burning iron seared his skin, melted into it, seemed to flow from his hand into his very veins.

The blade came to life, twisted and wrapped around his hand, burrowed insidiously into his flesh. It devoured his bone. It was beginning to devour him.

Reeling, in a blind and frantic effort to free himself of the pain, he stumbled to his knees, thrust his hand into a pool of water forming on the deck.

The Cursed Blade went instantly dark and cold.

Shivering, clutching his wounded hand, afraid of looking at it, Haplo crouched on his knees, doubled over, sick and retching.

A blow hit the ship. A timber above the human snapped, caved in. Hugh the Hand gave a great bellow. Water poured down on top of him, on both of them. Haplo was drenched. His magic was gone.

The dog barked warningly. A red glow lit the interior of the cabin.

Haplo looked outside the window. The Cursed Blade was dead, apparently, but the dragon-snake had not vanished as had the tytan and the bat. The knife had summoned it, and now it would not be dismissed. But the dragon-snake saw that the ship was now breaking apart; those inside had a chance to escape. The snake couldn't afford to wait. Its tail struck the ship again.

"Marit," Haplo whispered. His throat was raw; he couldn't talk.

She was far from where the water was pouring in, and since the ship was listing in the opposite direction, she was still relatively dry.

"The steering stone!" He knew she couldn't hear him; the words had come out a croak. He tried again. "The stone! Use it..."

She either heard or seized on the same idea herself. She could see at a glance the effect the water was having on her own magic, and now she understood why Haplo had covered the steering stone with the leather vest.

The dragon-snake's eyes glowed hideously. It read her thoughts, understood her intent. Its toothless maw opened.

Marit cast one frightened glance at it, then resolutely ignored it. She snatched the leather vest off the stone.

Crouching over it, protecting the magic from the dripping water with her body, she wrapped her hands around it.

The dragon-snake struck. The ship seemed to Haplo to explode. Water swept him away; he was sinking beneath it.

Then strong arms caught him, held him. A voice spoke to him, soothed him.

All pain vanished. He rested, drifting on the water's surface, at peace with himself.

The voice called again.

He opened his eyes, looked up and saw...

Alfred.

## CHAPTER 20

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

"No! DON'T LEAVE us! TAKE us WITH YOU! TAKE us WITH YOU!"

"Oh, stop it, Roland, for Orn's sake," the elf snapped testily. "They're gone."

The human glowered at his companion and, more for the sake of defiance than because he thought he might accomplish anything constructive, he continued to wave his arms and shout at the strange ship, which was no longer even in sight.

At length, feeling a fool and growing tired of waving his arms above his head, Roland left off shouting and turned around to take his frustration out on the elf.

"It's your fault we lost them, Quindiniar!"

"Mine?" Paithan gaped.

"Yes, yours. If you'd let me talk to them when they first landed, I could have made contact. But you thought you saw a tytan inside! Hah! One of those monsters couldn't get its little toe into that ship," Roland scoffed.

"I saw what I saw," returned Paithan sullenly. "And you couldn't have talked to them anyway. The ship was all covered with those weird pictures, like that Haplo's ship, when he was here. You remember him?"

"Our savior? I remember. Brought us here to this blasted citadel. Him and the old man.\* I'd like to have both of them in front of me right now." Roland swung a clenched fist, which, quite by accident, smacked Paithan in the shoulder.

\*Haplo was tricked by the wizard Zifnab into transporting the human siblings Roland and Rega and the elven siblings Paithan and Aleatha and the dwarf Drugar to the Sartan citadel on Pryan. Their adventures are recorded in *Elven Star*, vol. 2 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

"Oh, sorry," Roland muttered.

"You did that on purpose!" Paithan nursed his bruised arm.

"Bosh. You got in my way. You're always getting in my way."

"Me getting in your way! You're the one who keeps following me around! We divided this city into two halves. If you'd stay in your half, as we agreed, I wouldn't get in your way."

"You'd like that!" Roland jeered. "Rega and I stay on our side and starve to death while you and your bitch of a sister grow fat—"

"Fat! Fat!" Paithan had switched to elven, as he often did when exasperated—and he seemed to be speaking a lot more elven these days. "Where do you think we're getting food?"

"I don't know, but you spend a lot of time in that fool Star Chamber or whatever you call it." Roland was deliberately and irritably speaking human.

"Yes, I'm growing food there. In the darkness. Aleatha and I are living on mushrooms. And don't call my sister names."

"I wouldn't put it past you. Either of you. And I'll call her exactly what she is—a scheming little bit—"

"Scheming little what?" came a throaty, sleepy voice from the shadows.

Roland choked, coughed, glowered in the voice's general direction.

"Oh, hello, Thea," Paithan greeted his sister without enthusiasm. "I didn't know you were here."

An elven woman stepped into Pryan's eternal sunlight. One might guess, from her languorous appearance, that she had just waked from a nap. By the look in her blue eyes, her sleep had been filled with sweet dreams. Her ashen-blond hair was disheveled; her clothes appeared to have been thrown on hastily, were just the tiniest bit disarranged. The fabric and lace seemed to want some strong male hand to shift them into proper place—or to take them off and start over.

She stayed in the sunlight only a few moments, long enough to let it shine on her hair. Then she glided back into the shadows cast by the high city wall surrounding the plaza. Bright light was damaging to her fair complexion and made wrinkles. Languidly she leaned against the wall and regarded Roland with an amusement which glittered sapphire blue from beneath long and sleepy eyelashes.

"What were you about to call me?" Aleatha asked again, eventually growing bored at hearing him stammer and sputter.

"You know well enough what you are," Roland managed to get out at last.

"No, I don't." Aleatha's eyes opened wide for just a fraction of a second, long enough to absorb him inside; then—as if the effort were too exhausting—she lowered the lashes again. Cast him out. "But why don't you meet me in the maze garden at winetime and tell me."

Roland muttered something to the effect that he'd meet her in hell first and—his face mottled—stalked off.

"You shouldn't tease him like that, Thea," said Paithan when Roland was out of earshot. "Humans are like savage dogs. Baiting only makes them—"

"More savage?" suggested Aleatha with a smile.

"You may find toying with him amusing, but it makes him damn difficult to live with," Paithan told his sister.

He began walking back through the human section of the city toward the main part of the citadel. Aleatha fell into slow step beside him.

"I wish you'd just leave him alone," Paithan added.

"But he's the only source of entertainment I have in this dreary place," Aleatha protested. She glanced at her brother; a slight frown marred the delicate beauty of her face. "What's the matter with you, Pait? You never used to scold me like this. I swear, you're getting more like Gallic every day—a stringy old maid—"

"Stop it, Thea!" Paithan caught hold of her wrist, jerked her around to face him. "Don't you talk about her like that. Gallic had her faults, but she held our family together. Now she's dead and father's dead and we're all going to die and—"

Aleatha snatched her hand away, used it to slap her brother across his face. "Don't say that!"

Paithan rubbed his stinging cheek, regarded his sister grimly. "Hit me as much as you like, Thea, it won't change things. We're going to run out of food eventually. When that happens—" He shrugged.

"We'll go out and find more," Aleatha said. Two spots of fevered color burned in her cheeks. "There's loads of food out there: plants, fruit—"

"Tytans," Paithan said dryly.

Gathering up her full skirts, which were admittedly growing a bit frayed at the hem, Aleatha flounced off, moving at a much more rapid pace than previously.

"They're gone," she said over her shoulder.

Paithan had difficulty keeping up with her. "That's what the last group said when they left. You know what happened to them."

"No, I don't," Aleatha retorted, walking quickly through the empty streets.

Paithan caught up. "Yes, you do. You heard the screams. We all heard them."

"A trick!" Aleatha tossed her head. "A trick to deceive us, trick us into staying in here. The others are probably out there feasting on... on all sorts of wonderful things and laughing at us..." Despite herself, her voice quavered. "Cook said there was a ship out there. She and her children found it and they flew away from this dreadful place..."

Paithan opened his mouth to argue, shut it again. Aleatha knew the truth. She knew well enough what had really happened that terrible night. She and Roland, Paithan and Rega and Drugar, the dwarf, had stood on the steps, watching anxiously as Cook and the others left the safety of the citadel and entered the distant

jungle. It was the emptiness and the loneliness that drove them to risk leaving the safety of the citadel's walls. That and the constant quarreling, the arguing over dwindling food supplies. Dislike and distrust had strengthened into fear and abhorrence.

None of them had seen or heard signs of the tytans—the terrifying giants who roamed Pryan—for a long, long time. They all assumed—everyone except Paithan—that the creatures had left, roamed off. Paithan knew that the tytans were still there, knew because he'd been reading a book he'd found in a dusty old library in the citadel.

The book was handwritten in elven—a rather old-fashioned and outdated elven—and was illustrated with lots of pictures, one reason Paithan had chosen it. Other books in the library were written in elven, but they had more writing than pictures. He snored just looking at them.

Some type of godlike beings who called themselves "Sartan" were the ones who had—so they claimed—brought the elves and humans and dwarves to this world.

"Heretical nonsense," his sister Gallic would have termed it.

The world of Pryan—world of fire—was one of four worlds, purportedly.

Paithan didn't believe that part, having found a diagram of the supposed "universe"—four balls hanging suspended in midair, as if some juggler had tossed them up and then walked off and left them.

"What kind of fools do they take us for?" he wondered.

A green and lush tropical world whose suns, located in the heart of the hollow planet, shone constantly, Pryan was—according to the book—intended to provide light and food to the other three worlds.

As for the light, Paithan readily conceded that he had more light than he knew what to do with. Food was a different matter. Admittedly the jungle was full of food, if he wanted to fight the tytans for it. And how was he supposed to send it to these other worlds anyway?

"Throw it at them, I guess," said Paithan, considerably tickled at the thought of flinging pua fruit into the universe. Really, these Sartan must think they were all idiots to believe a tale like this!

These Sartan had built this citadel. And, according to them, they had built a whole lot more citadels. Paithan found this idea intriguing. He could almost believe it. He'd seen their lights shining in the sky. According to the book, the Sartan had brought the elves, humans, and dwarves to live with them in the citadels.

Paithan believed that, too, mainly because he could see evidence with his own eyes of the fact that others like himself had once inhabited this city. There were buildings built the way elves liked them, with lots of gewgaws and curlicues and useless columns and arched windows. And there were buildings meant to house humans—solid and dull and square. And there were even tunnels down below, made for dwarves. Paithan knew because Drugar had taken him down there once, right after they had first entered the city, when the five of them had still been speaking to each other.

The citadel was very beautiful and practical, and the person who had written this book appeared to be baffled by the fact that it hadn't worked. Wars had started. The elves, humans, and dwarves (the writer called them "mensch") had refused to live in peace, had begun to fight each other.

Paithan, however, understood perfectly. There were only two elves, two humans, and one dwarf living in the city now, and these five couldn't get along. He could imagine what it must have been like back then—whenever "then" was.

The mensch (Paithan came to hate that word) populations had grown at an alarming rate. Unable to control the ever expanding numbers, the Sartan (may Orn shrivel their ears and any other part that seemed

suitable) had created fearsome beings they called tytans, which were apparently supposed to act as nursemaids to the mensch and also work in the citadels.

The light beaming from the citadel's Star Chambers was so bright that any ordinary mortal who looked on it would be blinded, and so the tytans were created without eyes. To compensate for the handicap (and to control them better), the Sartan had provided the tytans with strong telepathic skills; the tytans could communicate by thought alone. The Sartan had also given the tytans very limited intelligence (such strong and powerful beings would be a threat if they were too smart) and had also endowed them with their rune-magic or something like that.

Paithan wasn't much on reading; he had tended to skim over the boring parts.

The plan had worked, apparently. The tytans roamed the streets, and the elves, humans, and dwarves were too intimidated by the monsters' presence to fight.

All well and good. But what had happened after that? Why did the mensch leave the cities and venture into the jungle? How did the tytans get loose? And where were these Sartan now and what did they intend to do about this mess?

Paithan didn't have the answers, because at that point the book ended.

The elf was miffed. He'd gotten interested in the story in spite of himself and wanted to know how it turned out. But the book didn't tell him. It looked as if it had intended to, since there were more pages bound into it, but these pages were blank.

He'd read enough, however, to know that the tytans had been created in the citadels, and so it seemed more than likely that they should be drawn to the citadels. Especially since the tytans kept asking everyone they met (before they bashed their brains out) questions such as "Where is the citadel?" Once the tytans found the citadel, they wouldn't be likely to leave it.

That's what he'd told the others.

"I'm staying right here, inside these walls. The tytans are still out there, hiding in the jungle, waiting for us. Mark my words," he'd said.

And he'd been right. Horribly right. He would sometimes wake up in a cold sweat, thinking he heard the screams of the dying out in the jungle, beyond the walls.

Paithan had refused to go with Cook and the others. And because he refused to go, Rega—Roland's sister and Paithan's lover—had refused to go. And because Rega had refused to go, Roland had decided to stay. Or perhaps it was because Aleatha—Paithan's sister—had refused to go that Roland had decided to stay. He said it was because of Rega, but his eyes kept darting to Aleatha as he spoke. No one was certain quite why Aleatha stayed, except that she was fond of her brother and it would have taken a great deal of effort to leave.

As for Drugar, the dwarf, he stayed because he was given to know that he wasn't welcome to join the party that was leaving. Not that he was particularly welcome among those who stayed behind, but they would never say as much to him aloud, since he was the one who had saved them all from being devoured by the dragon.\* The dwarf did what he wanted anyway and kept his own counsel about it, rarely talking to any of them.

\*Zifnab's dragon. See *Elven Star*, vol. 2 of *The Death Gate Cycle*.

But apparently Drugar agreed with Paithan, because the dour dwarf had shown no desire to leave the citadel, and when the screaming began he had simply stroked his beard and nodded his head, as if he'd been expecting it.

Paithan thought about all this and sighed and put his arm around his sister's shoulders.

"What were you and Roland doing together in the plaza anyway?" Aleatha asked, indicating by her change of subject that she was sorry she'd hit him. "You looked a couple of idiots when I saw you from the walls—jumping around and shouting at the sky."

"A ship came down," Paithan answered, "out of nowhere."

"A ship?" Her eyes opened wide; she forgot, in her astonishment, that she was wasting their beauty on a mere brother. "What kind of ship? Why didn't it stay? Oh, Paithan, maybe it will come back and fly us out of this horrible place!"

"Maybe," he said, not wanting to dampen her hopes and get his face slapped again. Privately he had his doubts. "As for why it didn't stay, well, Roland doesn't agree with me but I could swear that the people on board were fighting a tytan. I know it sounds crazy, the ship was small, but I saw what I saw. And I saw something else, too. I saw a man who looked like that Haplo."

"Oh, well, then, I'm glad he left," Aleatha said coldly. "I wouldn't have gone anywhere with him! He led us into this dreadful prison, pretending to be our savior. Then he left us. He was the cause of everything rotten that's happened to us. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one who brought the tytans down on us in the first place."

Paithan let his sister rant on. She had to have someone to blame and, thank Orn, this time it wasn't him.

But he couldn't help thinking that Haplo had been right. If the three races had allied to fight the tytans, maybe their people would be alive right now. As it was...

"Say, Thea." Paithan came out of his gloomy reverie as a thought struck him. "What were you doing down in the market plaza,\* anyway? You never walk that far."

\*Haplo's description of the citadel of Pryan, made on his first journey, places the market plaza right inside the city gates.

"I was bored. No one to talk to except that human slut. Speaking of Rega, she said to tell you that something funny was going on in that beloved Star Chamber of yours."

"Why didn't you say so?" Paithan glared at her. "And don't call Rega a slut!"

Breaking into a run, he dashed through the streets of the shining marble city, a city of spires and domes and wondrous beauty. A city that was likely to become their tomb.

Aleatha watched him go, wondering how he could expend all that energy on something as senseless as going into a gigantic room and fiddling with machines that never did anything and weren't ever likely to do anything. Nothing constructive—such as grow food.

Well, they weren't starving yet. Paithan had attempted to impose some sort of rationing system on them, but Roland had refused to accept it, stating that humans—being bigger—needed more food than elves and so it was unfair of Paithan to allot to Roland and Rega the same amount of food that he allotted to himself and Aleatha.

At which Drugar had spoken up—a rarity for him—and claimed that dwarves, because of their heavier body mass, needed twice as much food as either elves or humans.

At which Paithan had thrown up his hands and said he didn't care. They could gorge themselves. They'd only die that much sooner and he, for one, would be glad to be rid of them.

At which Rega had flown into a rage and said that no doubt he'd be thankful if she was the first one to die and she hoped she was because she couldn't go on living with a man who hated her brother.

At which they'd all stormed off and no one had ended up rationing anything.

Aleatha looked down the empty street and shivered in the bright sunlight. The marble walls were always cold. The sun did nothing to warm them, probably because of the strange darkness that flowed over the city every night. Having been raised in a world of perpetual light, Aleatha had come to enjoy the artificial night that fell on the citadel and nowhere else on Pryan. She liked to walk in the darkness, reveling in the mystery and velvet softness of the night air.

It was especially nice to walk in the darkness with someone. She glanced around. The shadows were deepening. The strange night would fall soon. She could either go back to the Star Chamber and be bored to tears watching Paithan dither over his stupid machine or she could go and see if Roland would really meet her at the garden maze.

Aleatha glanced at her reflection in a crystal window of a vacant house. She was somewhat thinner than she had been, but that didn't detract from her beauty. If anything, her narrow waistline only made her full breasts more voluptuous. Artfully she rearranged her dress to best advantage, brushed her fingers through her thick hair.

Roland would be waiting for her. She knew it.

## CHAPTER 21

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

THE GARDEN MAZE WAS AT THE BACK OF THE CITY, ON A GENTLE slope that dipped down from the city proper to the protective wall that surrounded it. None of her companions particularly liked the maze; it had a strange feel to it, Paithan complained. But Aleatha felt drawn to the maze and often walked near it during winetime. If she had to be by herself (and it was getting more and more difficult to find company these days), this was where she liked to be.

"The garden maze was built by the Sartan," Paithan told her, having acquired the knowledge from one of the books he bragged about reading. "They made it for themselves because they were fond of being outdoors and it reminded them of wherever it was they came from. It was off-limits to us mensch." His lip curled when he said the word. "I don't know why they bothered. I can't imagine any elf in his right mind who'd want to go in there. No offense, Thea, but what do you find so fascinating about that creepy place?"

"Oh, I don't know," she'd answered with a shrug. "Perhaps because it is kind of frightening. Everything—and everyone—around here is so boring."

According to Paithan, the maze—a series of hedges, trees, and bushes—had once been carefully clipped and maintained. The paths led, by various circuitous routes, to an amphitheater in the center. Here (away from the eyes and ears of the mensch) the Sartan had held secret meetings.

"I wouldn't go into it if I were you, Thea," Paithan had warned her. "According to the book, these Sartan laid some type of magic on the maze, meant to trap anyone who wasn't supposed to be there."

Aleatha found the warning thrilling, just as she found the maze fascinating.

Over the years, abandoned and left to itself, the garden maze had gone wild. Hedges that had once been neatly trimmed now soared high into the air, grew over the paths, forming green and tangled ceilings that

shut out the light and kept the maze cool and dark even during the hot daylight hours. It was like venturing into a green tunnel of plant life, for something kept the paths themselves clear, perhaps the strange markings carved into the stone, marks that could be seen on the buildings in the city and on its walls. Marks that Paithan said were some type of magic.

A gate made of iron (a rarity on Pryan, where few people had ever seen the ground) led to an arch formed by a hedge over a stone pathway. Each stone on the path was marked with one of the magical symbols. Paithan had told her that the marks might hurt her, but Aleatha knew better. She'd paid no attention to them before finding out what they were. She'd walked on them many times. They hadn't hurt her feet a bit.

From the gate, the path led straight into the maze. High walls of vegetation soared overhead; flowers filled the air with sweet fragrance.

The path ran straight for a short distance, then forked, slanting off in two different directions, each leading deeper into the maze. The fork was the farthest Aleatha had ever ventured. Both paths took her out of sight of the gate, and Aleatha, though wild and reckless, was not without common sense.

At the fork were a marble bench and a pool. Here Aleatha sat in the cool shadows and listened to hidden birds singing, admiring her reflection and wondering idly what it would be like to wander deeper into the maze. Probably boring and not worth the effort, she'd decided after having seen a drawing of the maze in Paithan's book. She'd been dreadfully disappointed to learn that the paths led to nothing but a circle of stone surrounded by tiers of seats.

Walking down the empty street (so very empty!) that led to the maze, Aleatha smiled. Roland was there, pacing moodily back and forth, casting dark and dubious glances into the bushes.

Aleatha permitted her skirts to rustle loudly, and at the sound Roland straightened, shoved his hands into his pockets, and began to saunter about quite casually, regarding the hedge with interest, as if he had just arrived.

Aleatha smothered a laugh. She'd been thinking about him all day. Thinking how much she didn't like him. Thinking that she detested him, in fact. Thinking that he was boorish, and arrogant and... well... human. Recalling how much she hated him, it was only natural for her to think about the night they'd once made love. There had been extenuating circumstances, of course. Neither had been responsible. Both had been recovering from the terrible fright of being nearly eaten by a dragon. Roland had been hurt and she'd only been trying to comfort him...

And why did she have to keep remembering that night and his strong arms and soft lips and the way he'd loved her, a way in which no other man had ever dared to love her...

It wasn't until the next day she'd remembered he was human and had peremptorily ordered him never to touch her again. He apparently had been only too glad to obey—judging by what he'd said to her in response.

But she took a grim delight in teasing him—it was the only pleasure she had. And he seemed to take equal delight in irritating her.

Aleatha stepped out into the pathway. Roland, lounging against the hedge, glanced at her and smiled what she considered a nasty smile.

"Ah, I see you came," he said, implying that she had come because of him, robbing her of the line that had been on her lips—implying that he'd come because of her—and thereby making her instantly furious.

And when Aleatha was furious, she was simply sweeter and more charming than ever.

"Why, Roland," she said, with a very natural start of surprise. "Is that you?"

"And who the hell would it be? Lord Dumdrun, perhaps?"

Aleatha flushed. Lord Dumdrun had been her elven fiance, and while she hadn't loved him and she'd been going to marry him only for his money, he was dead and this human had no right to make fun of him and... oh, never mind!

"I wasn't certain," she said, tossing her hair back over a bare shoulder (the sleeve of her dress didn't quite fit properly anymore because she'd lost weight, and it kept slipping down her arm, revealing a white shoulder of surpassing loveliness). "Who knows what slimy thing might have crawled up from Below?"

Roland's eyes were drawn to her shoulder. She permitted him to look and yearn (she trusted he was yearning), and then she slowly and caressingly covered her shoulder with a lacy shawl she'd found in an abandoned house.

"Well, if something slimy did crawl up out of nowhere, I'm certain you'd frighten it off." He took a step nearer her, glanced again pointedly at her shoulder. "You're turning all bony."

Bony! Aleatha glared at him, so angry she forgot to be charming. She bounded at him, her hand raised to strike.

He caught her wrist, twisted it, bent down and kissed her. Aleatha struggled exactly the right length of time—not too long (which might discourage him), but long enough to force him to tighten his hold on her. Then she relaxed in his arms.

His lips brushed over her neck. "I know this is going to disappoint you," he whispered, "but I only came to tell you I wasn't coming. Sorry." And with that, he let go of her.

Aleatha had been leaning her full weight on him. When he removed his hold, she tumbled onto her hands and knees. He grinned at her.

"Begging for me to stay? Won't do any good, I'm afraid." Turning, he sauntered off.

Enraged, Aleatha struggled to her feet, but her heavy skirts hampered her, and by the time she was upright and ready to claw his eyes out, Roland had rounded a corner of a building and was gone.

Aleatha paused, breathing heavily. To run after him now would look like just that—running after him. (If she had gone after him, she would have discovered him slumped against a wall, shivering and wiping sweat from his face.) Digging her nails into her palms, she stormed through the gate that led into the maze, flounced down the stones marked with Sartan runes, and threw herself on the marble bench.

Certain she was alone, hidden, where no one could see her if her eyes turned red and her nose swelled, she began to cry.

"Did he hurt you?" a gruff voice demanded.

Startled, Aleatha jerked her head up. "What—oh, Drugar." She sighed, at first relieved, then not so. The dwarf was strange, dour. Who knew what he was thinking? And he had tried to kill them all once...'

"No, of course not," she replied scornfully, drying her eyes and sniffing. "I'm not crying." She gave a light little laugh. "I had something in my eye. How... long have you been standing here?" she asked, airy, nonchalant.

The dwarf grunted. "Long enough." And what he meant by that, Aleatha hadn't a clue.

His name among the humans was Blackbeard, and he suited it. His beard was long and so thick and full that it was difficult to see his mouth. One rarely knew whether he was smiling or frowning. The glittering black eyes, shining out from beneath heavy, beetling brows, gave no hint of his thoughts or feelings.

Then Aleatha noticed that he had come from the inner part of the maze, the part into which she'd never dared venture. She was intrigued. Obviously no wicked magic had stopped him. She was about to ask him eagerly what he'd seen, how far he'd gone, when he disconcerted her by asking her a question first.

"You love him. He loves you. Why do you play these hurtful games?"

"I? Love him?" Aleatha gave a lilting laugh. "Don't be ridiculous, Drugar. Such a thing is impossible. He's a human, isn't he? And I'm an elf. You might as well ask a cat to love a dog."

"It is not impossible. I know," he answered.

His dark eyes met hers and then their gaze shifted away. He stared into the hedge, gloomy, silent.

Blessed Mother! Aleatha thought, her breath taken away. Though Roland might not love her (and she was quite convinced, at this moment, that he did not and never would), here was someone who did.

Except it was not love which had stared at her hungrily from those eyes. It was more. Almost adoration.

Had it been any other man—elf or human—Aleatha would have been amused, accepting his infatuation as her due, taking his love and hanging it up for show with the rest of her trophies. But her feeling at the moment was not triumph over another conquest. Her feeling was pity— deep and profound.

If Aleatha appeared heartless, it was only because her heart had been hurt so much that she had locked it up in a box and hidden the key. Everyone she had ever cared about had abandoned her—first her mother, then Callie, then her father. Even that fop Durndrun—who had been a sap, but rather a dear sap—had managed to get himself killed by the tytans.

And if she ever had been attracted to Roland (Aleatha was careful to put that in the past tense), it was only because he'd never seemed the least bit interested in finding the key to the box containing her heart. Which made the game safe, fun. Most of the time.

But this wasn't a game. Not with Drugar. He was lonely, as lonely as she was herself. Lonelier, for his people, everyone whom he had loved and cared for, were gone, destroyed by the tytans. He had nothing, nobody.

Pity was swallowed by shame. For the first time in her life, Aleatha was at a loss for words. She didn't have to tell him his love was hopeless—he knew that for himself. She didn't worry that he would become a nuisance. He would never mention it again. This time had been an accident— he'd spoken out of sympathy for her. From this moment forward, he'd be on his guard. She couldn't prevent him from being hurt.

The silence was becoming extremely uncomfortable. Aleatha lowered her head, her hair hanging around her face, hiding him from her sight, hiding her from his. She began to pick little holes in the lace shawl.

\*Tytans wiped out Drugar's people. Blaming the humans and elves for abandoning the dwarves, Drugar swore vengeance on Roland, Rega, and Paithan. Elven Star, vol. 2 of The Death Gate Cycle.

Drugar, she wanted to say. I'm a horrible person. I'm not worthy. You haven't seen me. Not the real me. I'm ugly inside. Truly, truly ugly!

"Drugar," she began, swallowing, "I'm a—"

"What's that?" he growled suddenly, turning his head.

"What's what?" she asked, leaping up from the bench. The blood rushed to her face. Her first thought was that Roland had sneaked back and had been spying on them. He would know... This would be intolerable...

"That sound," said Drugar, brow wrinkling. "Like someone humming. Don't you hear it?"

Aleatha did hear it. A humming noise, as the dwarf said. The humming wasn't unpleasant. In fact, it was sweet, soothing. It reminded her of her mother, singing a lullaby. Aleatha breathed a sigh. Whoever was humming, it certainly wasn't Roland. He had a voice like a cheese-grater.

"How curious," Aleatha said, smoothing her dress, dabbing at her eyes to make certain all traces of tears were gone. "I suppose we had better go see what's causing it."

"Ya," said Drugar, hooking his thumbs into his belt. He waited deferentially for her, to precede him down the path, not presuming to walk beside her.

She was touched by his delicacy and, reaching the gate, she paused, turned to face him.

"Drugar," she said with a smile that was not the least flirtatious, but was a smile from one lonely person to another, "have you gone far inside the maze?"

"I have," he answered, lowering his eyes before hers.

"I'd love to go in there sometime myself. Would you take me? Just me. None of the others," she added hurriedly, seeing the frown lines appear.

He glanced up at her warily, perhaps thinking she was teasing. His face softened. "Ya, I'll take you," he said. An odd glint came into his eyes. "There's strange things to be seen in there."

"Truly?" She forgot the eerie humming. "What?"

But the dwarf only shook his head. "It will be the dark-time," he said. "And you have no light. You will not be able to find your way back to the citadel. We must go now."

He held the gate open for her. Aleatha swept past him. Drugar shut the gate. Turning to her, he made a clumsy bow, rumbled something deep in his chest, something that was probably in dwarven, for she couldn't understand the words. But they sounded rather like a blessing. Then, turning on his heel, he stalked off.

Aleatha felt a tiny pulse of unaccustomed warmth in her heart, shut in its box.

## CHAPTER 22

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

TAKING THE STEPS TWO AT A TIME IN HIS EXCITEMENT, PAITHAN dashed up the spiral staircase that led to the very topmost tower of the citadel, into a large room he had named the Star Chamber.\* He could now see—and hear—for himself that some type of change had befallen his star machine (he took a proprietary interest in it, having discovered it), and he cursed Roland heartily for having kept him from viewing the change as it occurred.

\*Haplo refers to this room in his account as the sanctuary.

He was also considerably surprised, and considerably alarmed, to receive the message from Rega about the machine. Humans were not comfortable around machinery. They generally tend to distrust it, and when confronted with it, usually break it. Rega had turned out to be worse than most.

Although at first she had evinced interest in the machine and had looked on admiringly as Paithan displayed its more prominent features, she had gradually developed a most unreasonable dislike for the marvelous contraption. She complained about the amount of time he spent with it, accused him of being more interested in it than he was in her.

"Oh, Fait, you are so thick," Aleatha told him. "She's jealous, of course. If that machine of yours were another woman, she'd tear its hair out."

Paithan scoffed at the notion. Rega had too much sense to be jealous of a bunch of gleaming metal clockwork, even though it was more elaborate than any other clockwork device he'd ever seen in his life, resplendent with sparkling stones called "diamonds" and rainbow-makers known as "prisms" and other wonders and beauties. But now he began to think Aleatha might be right, and that was why he was taking the stairs two at a time. Perhaps Rega had torn up his machine. He flung open the door, ran into the Star Chamber, and immediately ran back out. The light inside the room was blinding. He couldn't see a thing. Huddling in a shadow cast by the open door, he massaged his aching eyeballs. Then, squinting, he tried to make out what was going on.

But all he could come up with were the obvious facts— his machine was beaming with dazzling, multicolored light while simultaneously grinding, revolving, ticking and... humming.

"Rega?" he yelled from behind the door. He heard a strangled sob. "Paithan? Oh, Paithan!" "It's me. Where are you?" "I'm ... in here!"

"Well, come out," he said with a certain amount of exasperation.

"I can't!" she wailed. "It's so bright. I can't see! I'm scared to move. I ... I'm afraid of falling in that hole!" "You can't fall in the 'hole,' Rega. That diamond—I mean the thing you call a rock—is wedged into it."

"Not anymore! The rock moved, Paithan! I saw it! One of those arms picked it up. Down in the hole it was like a fire burning, and the light got so bright I couldn't see, and then the glass ceiling started to open—"

"It's open!" Paithan gasped. "How did it work? Did the panels slide over each other? Like a giant lotus blossom? Like in the picture—?"

Rega, shrieking almost incoherently, informed him just what he could do with his picture and his lotus blossoms. Finishing with a hysterical burst, she demanded that he get her the hell out of there.

At that moment the light shut off. The humming stopped. It was dark and silent in the room, dark and silent throughout the citadel, throughout the world—or so it seemed.

But it wasn't truly dark—not like the strange "night" that spread over the citadel for some unknown reason, not dark the way it was Below. For though night might fall on the citadel itself, the light of Pryan's four suns continued to beam down into the Star Chamber, much like an island in a sea of black fog. Once his eyes had adjusted to normal sunlight, as opposed to blinding rainbow-colored starlight, Paithan was able to enter the chamber.

He found Rega flattened against a wall, her hands over her eyes.

Paithan cast a hurried and anxious glance around the chamber. He knew the moment he entered that the light hadn't shut off for good; it was just resting, perhaps. The clockwork above the hole in the floor (he called it the "well") kept ticking. The ceiling panels were closing. He paused to watch, enraptured. The book had been right! The panels, made of glass covered with strange pictures, were shutting up just like the

petals of a lotus blossom. And there was an air of expectation, anticipation. The machine was quivering with life.

Paithan was so excited he wanted to run around and examine everything, but his first duty lay with Rega. Hastening to her, he took her gently in his arms. She grasped hold of him as if she were going under for the third time, keeping her eyes squinched shut.

"Ouch! Don't pinch me. I've got you. You can look now," he added more tenderly. She was shivering uncontrollably. "The light's gone out."

Rega cautiously opened her eyes, took one look, saw the ceiling panels moving, and immediately shut her eyes again.

"Rega, watch," Paithan coaxed her. "It's fascinating."

"No." She shuddered. "I don't want to. Just... get me out of here!"

"If you'd only take the time to study the machine, my dear, you wouldn't be frightened of it."

"I was trying to study it, Paithan," she said with a sob. "I've been looking at those damn books you're always reading and I came... came in here"—she hiccuped—"this winetime to... to look around. You... you were so ... interested in it ... I thought it would make you happy if I was—"

"And it does, dear, it does," said Paithan, stroking her hair. "You came in here and you looked around. Did you... touch anything, my dear?"

Her eyes flared open. She went stiff in his arms. "You think I did this, don't you?"

"No, Rega. Well, maybe not on purpose, but—"

"Well, I didn't! I wouldn't! I hate it! Hate it!"

She stamped her foot. The clock gave a lurch. The arm that held the diamond above the well creaked and started to turn. Rega flung herself into Paithan's arms. He held her, watching, fascinated, as a red light started to beam out of the well, pulsing up from its fathomless depths.

"Paithan!" Rega whimpered.

"Yes, yes, dear," he said. "We'll leave." But he made no move to go.

The books provided a complete diagram of the way the Star Chamber worked and explained exactly what it did.\* Paithan could understand the part that dealt with the machinery, but he didn't understand the part that dealt with the magic. Now if it had been elven magic, he could have comprehended what was going on, for though not magically inclined himself, he had worked with the elven wizards in his family's weapons business long enough to have learned the fundamentals.

\*A part of this explanation and accompanying diagram can be found in Appendix II.

The Sartan magic—dealing as it did with such concepts as "probabilities" and making use of the pictures known as "sigla"—was beyond him. He felt as awed and baffled in its presence as he knew Rega must feel in the presence of elven magic.\*

\*Humans do use magic, but their magic deals with the manipulation of nature and all things natural, as opposed to elves, who work with mechanical magicks. Elves tend to discount human magic, therefore, considering it crude and backward. This accounts for Paithan's superior attitude. Unfortunately, most

humans on Pryan, accustomed to using elven magical technology, feel the same way about their own magic as do the elves. Human wizards are accorded very little respect.

Slowly, gracefully, silently, the lotus-blossom ceiling started to reopen.

"This... this is how it all began, Paithan," Rega whimpered. "I didn't touch anything! I swear it. It's... doing this all by itself."

"I believe you, dear. I truly do," he answered. "It's all... so wonderful!"

"No, it isn't! It's horrible. We'd better leave. Quickly, before the light comes back on."

"Yes, I guess you're right." Paithan started for the door, moving slowly, reluctantly.

Rega went with him, clutching him so close that their feet tangled.

"Why are you stopping?"

"Rega, darling, I can't walk like this..."

"Don't let go of me! Just hurry, please!"

"It's hard to hurry, dearest, with you standing on my foot..."

They edged their way across the polished marble floor, circling the well—capped with its gigantic multifaceted jewel—and the seven enormous chairs that faced outward from the hole.

"The tytans sat here," Paithan explained, placing his hand on the leg of one of the chairs, a leg that extended far over his head. "I can see now why the creatures are blind."

"And why they're insane," Rega muttered, tugging him along.

The red light beaming up from the depths of the well was growing brighter. The clockwork hand that held the diamond turned it this way and that. The light glinted and danced off the jewel's sheer planes. The sunlight, shining in through the ever widening panels, was sliced into colors by the prisms.

Suddenly the diamond seemed to catch fire. Light blazed. The clockwork mechanism ticked more rapidly. The machine came to life. The light in the room grew brighter and brighter and even Paithan admitted that it was time to get out. He and Rega ran the rest of the way, sliding across the polished floor, and dashed out the door just as the strange humming sound started again.

Paithan slammed the door shut. The brilliant multicolored rainbow light shone out from the Cracks, illuminated the hallway.

The two stood leaning against a wall, catching their breath. Paithan stared at the closed door longingly.

"I wish I could see what was going on! If I could, perhaps I could figure out how it works!"

"At least you got to see it start," said Rega, feeling much better. Now that her rival had, in essence, spurned the devotion of a smitten follower, Rega could afford to be generous. "The humming is quite nice, isn't it?"

"I hear words in it," said Paithan, frowning. "As if it's calling ..."

"As long as it's not calling you," Rega said softly, her hand twining around his. "Sit down here with me a moment. Let's talk."

Paithan, sighing, slid down the wall. Rega curled up on the floor, nestled beside him. He looked at her fondly, put his arm around her.

They made an unusual couple, as unlike in appearance as they were in almost everything else. He was elven. She was human. He was tall and willowy, white-skinned, with a long, foxish face. She was short and full-figured, brown-skinned, with brown hair that hung straight down her back. He was a hundred years old—in his youth. She was in her twenties—in her youth. He was a wanderer and a philanderer; she was a cheat and a smuggler and casual in her relationships with men. The only thing they had in common was their love for each other—a love that had survived tytans and saviors, dragons, dogs, and daft old wizards.

"I've been neglecting you lately, Rega," Paithan said, resting his cheek on her head. "I'm sorry."

"You've been avoiding me," she said crisply.

"Not you in particular. I've been avoiding everyone."

She waited for him to offer some explanation. When he didn't, she moved her head out from beneath his chin, looked at him.

"Any reason? I know you've been involved with the machine—"

"Oh, Orn take the machine," Paithan growled. "I'm interested in it, certainly. I thought maybe I could get it to work, even though I'm not really certain what it's meant to do. I guess I hoped it might help us. But I don't think it will. No matter how much it hums, no one will hear it."

Rega didn't understand. "Look, Paithan, I know Roland can be a bastard sometimes—"

"It's not Roland," he said impatiently. "If it comes to that, what's mostly wrong with Roland is Aleatha. It's just... well..." He hesitated, then blurted it out. "I found some more stores of food."

"You did!" Rega clapped her hands together. "Oh, Paithan, that's wonderful!"

"Isn't it," he muttered.

"Well, of course it is! Now we won't starve! There... there is enough, isn't there?"

"Oh, more than enough," he said gloomily. "Enough to last a human lifetime, even an elven lifetime. Maybe even a dwarven lifetime. Especially if there aren't any more mouths to feed. Which there won't be."

"I'm sorry, Paithan, but I think this is wonderful news and I don't see what you're so upset about—"

"Don't you?" He glared at her, spoke almost savagely. "No more mouths to feed. We're it, Rega! The end. What does it matter whether we live two more tomorrows or two million more tomorrows? We can't have children.\* When we die, maybe the last humans and elves and dwarves on Pryan die. And then there will be no more. Ever."

\*Due to genetic differences, elves, humans, and dwarves cannot cross-breed.

Rega stared at him, stricken. "Surely... surely you can't be right. This world is so big. There must be more of us... somewhere."

Paithan only shook his head.

Rega tried again. "You told me that each one of those lights we see shining in the heavens is a city, like this one. There must be people like us in them."

"We would have heard from them by now."

"What?" Rega was amazed. "How?"

"I'm not sure," Paithan was forced to admit. "But it says in the book that in the old days, the people living in the cities could communicate with each other. We haven't been communicated with, have we?"

"But maybe we just don't know how... That humming sound." Rega brightened. "Maybe that's what it's doing. It's calling the other cities."

"It's calling someone, I think," Paithan conceded thoughtfully, listening intently. The next sound, however, he heard all too well. A human voice, booming loudly.

"Paithan! Where are you?"

"It's Roland." Paithan sighed. "Now what?"

"We're up here!" Rega shouted. Standing up, she leaned over the rail of the staircase. "With the machine."

They heard booted feet clattering up the stairs. Roland arrived, gasping for breath. He glanced at the closed door, the light welling from underneath.

"Is that where... this strange sound's... coming from?" he demanded, sucking in air.

"What of it?" Paithan returned defensively. He was on his feet, eyeing the human warily. Roland was no fonder of the machine than was his sister.

"You'd better turn the damn thing off, that's what," Roland said, his face grim.

"We can't—" Rega began, but stopped when Paithan stepped on her foot.

"Why should I?" he asked, sharp chin jutting outward in defiance.

"Take a look out the window, elf."

Paithan bristled. "Talk to me that way and I'll never look out another window as long as I live!"

But Rega knew her half-brother, guessed that his belligerent facade was covering up fear. She ran to the window, stared out a moment, not seeing anything. Then she gave a low cry.

"Oh, Paithan! You'd better come see this."

Reluctantly the elf moved to her side, peered out. "What? I don't see..."

And then he did see.

It looked as if the entire jungle were moving; it appeared to be advancing on the citadel. Large masses of green were surging slowly up the mountain. Only it wasn't the jungle, it was an army.

"Blessed Mother!" Paithan breathed.

"You said the machine was calling something!" Rega moaned.

It was. It was calling the tytans.

## OUTSIDE THE CITADEL PRYAN

"MARIT! WIFE! HEAR ME! ANSWER ME!" XAR SENT out his command in silence and it returned to him in silence.

No response.

Frustrated, he repeated her name several times, then ceased. She must be unconscious... or dead—the only two circumstances in which a Patryn would refuse to answer such a summons.

Xar pondered what to do. His ship was already in Pryan; he'd been attempting to guide Marit to the landing site when she had vanished. He considered changing course—Marit's last frantic message to him had been from Chelestra. But at length he decided to continue to the citadel. Chelestra was a world made up of magic-nullifying water, water that would weaken his power. It was not a world Xar had much interest in visiting. He would go to Chelestra after he had discovered the Seventh Gate.

The Seventh Gate.

It had become an obsession with Xar. From the Seventh Gate, the Sartan had cast the Patryns into prison. From the Seventh Gate—Xar determined—he would free them.

In the Seventh Gate, Samah had sundered the world, created new worlds out of the old. In the Seventh Gate, Xar would forge his own new world—and it would be all his.

This was the true reason for his journey to Pryan.

The ostensible reason—the reason he gave his people (and Sang-drax)—was to gain ascendancy over the tytans and incorporate them into his army. The real goal was to discover the location of the Seventh Gate.

Xar was certain it must be in the citadel. He made the deduction based on two facts: (one) Haplo had been to the citadel on Pryan and, according to both Kleitus and Samah, Haplo knew the location of the Seventh Gate; (two) as Sang-drax had said, if the Sartan had something they wanted to protect, what better guards than the tytans?

Following Haplo's coordinates, which would lead to the citadel, the Lord of the Nexus, accompanied by Sang-drax and a small force of about twenty Patryns, eventually reached Pryan. The citadel itself was easy to find. An intensely bright light, made up of bands of brilliant color, beamed from it, acting as a guiding beacon.

Privately Xar was astonished at the massive size of Pryan. Nothing Haplo had written had prepared his lord for what he found. Xar was forced to revise his plans, forced to think that maybe conquering this enormous world with its four ever-shining suns was going to be impossible—even with the help of the tytans.

But not impossible if he were master of the Seventh Gate.

"The citadel, My Lord," announced one of his people.

"Bring the ship down inside the walls," Xar commanded.

He could see a perfect landing site—a large, open area just inside the walls, probably a marketplace. He waited impatiently for the ship to set down.

But the ship couldn't land. It couldn't even get close to the site. When it came level with the walls of the citadel, the ship seemed to hit an invisible barrier, bumping into it gently, not damaged, but unable to fly through. The Patryns tried again and again, to no avail.

"It must be Sartan magic, Lord," said Sang-drax.

"Of course it's Sartan magic!" Xar repeated, irritated. "What did you expect to be guarding a Sartan city?"

He hadn't expected it, though, and that was what made him angry. Haplo had entered the citadel. How? The Sartan magic was strong. Xar couldn't unravel it; he couldn't find the beginning of the rune-structure. Such a feat was possible, but it might take him years.

Xar reread Haplo's report, hoping for a clue.

The city is built up off the jungle floor, rising from behind an enormous wall, rising taller than the tallest trees. A towering, pillared crystal spire balances on a dome formed of marble arches that stand in the city's center. The top of the spire must be one of the highest points in this world. It is from this center spire that the light beams most brightly.

But in Haplo's case, the light had been white—or so Xar recalled. Not this dazzling array of colors. What had caused the light to alter its aspect? And most important, how was he going to get inside to find out? Xar read on.

The center spire is framed by four other spires, duplicates of the first; they stand on the platform holding the dome. On a level beneath that stand eight more identical spires. Gigantic marble steppes rise from behind these spires. And finally, at each end of the guard walls stands another pillar. There are four such pillars, placed at the cardinal direction points.

A path leads up the mountain straight to a large metal door formed in a hexagon and inscribed with Sartan runes—the city's gate. The gate is sealed shut.

Sartan rune-magic would open the gate, but I refused to use the magic of our enemies. I entered by going through the marble wall, using an ordinary solvent rune-structure.

That is the difference, then, Xar reasoned. Haplo had entered by going through the walls. The Sartan magic must extend above the walls, like an invisible dome, to keep out flying enemies such as dragons. The magic of the wall itself was either weaker to begin with or had been weakened over time.

"Land the ship in the jungle," Xar ordered. "As near the citadel as possible."

His crew brought the ship down in a clearing they found some distance outside the walls of the citadel. The huge warship was one of the steam-powered dragon ships used by the Sartan on Abarrach to sail the molten seas. It was completely refitted to suit the Patryns, and it drifted down easily among the treetops, sank into a vast bed of moss.

Shafts of the striated, multicolored light filtered through the thick foliage that surrounded them, slid over the ship, shifting around it in an ever changing pattern.

"My Lord!" One of the Patryns pointed out the porthole.

A gigantic being stood near the ship, so near that had they been standing on the prow, they could have reached out and touched it. The being was shaped like a man, but its skin was the color and the texture of the jungle, so that it blended perfectly with the trees—one reason they had nearly landed on top of it and had not seen it until now. Its huge head had no eyes, but it appeared to be staring fixedly at something. It stood motionless, almost as if it were in a trance.

"A tytan!" Xar was vastly interested. He could see more of them, now that he looked for them. Six or so were around his ship.

He recalled Haplo's report:

Creatures thirty feet tall. Skin that blends in with its background, making them difficult to see. No eyes; they're blind, but they have other senses that more than make up for their lack of sight. They are obsessed with one thing: the citadels. They ask questions about the citadels of everyone they meet, and when these questions aren't answered satisfactorily (and no one has yet discovered what a satisfactory answer is) the creatures fly into a murderous rage, killing any living being near them. Created by the Sartan to oversee the mensch (and possibly for some other purpose having to do with the light) they use a crude form of Sartan magic....

These creatures very nearly destroyed me. They came close to destroying my ship. They are powerful, and I see no way of controlling them.

"You saw no way of controlling them," Xar remarked. "But then, Haplo, my son, you are not me.

"Nothing could withstand a fighting force of these creatures!" he added with satisfaction to Sang-drax. "They don't look all that dangerous. They're certainly not bothering us."

The dragon-snake appeared nervous, however. "True, Lord Xar. I think it likely that they are under some type of spell. If you are going to the citadel, you should go now. Before whatever spell they are under wears off."

"Nonsense, I can deal with them," Xar replied with scorn. "What is the matter with you?"

"I sense a presence of great evil," Sang-drax said in a low voice. "A malevolent force—"

"Not these mindless entities, surely," Xar interrupted with a glance at the tytans.

"No. It is intelligent, cunning." Sang-drax was silent a moment, then said softly, "I think we may have fallen into a trap, Lord of the Nexus."

"You were the one who advised me to come," Xar reminded the dragon-snake.

"But it was not I who put the idea into your head, Lord," Sang-drax returned, his single red eye hooded.

Xar was displeased. "First you badger me to come here, now you're warning me to leave. If you continue talking out of both sides of your mouth, my friend, you'll choke!"

"I am only concerned about my lord's safety—" "And not your own precious skin, eh? Well, come on, if you're going with me. Or will you stay here, hiding from the 'evil' force?"

Sang-drax made no response, but he also made no move to leave the ship.

Xar opened the hatch, descended the ship's gangplank to the floor of the jungle. He cast a swift glance around, eyed the tytans warily.

The monsters paid him no attention. He might have been a bug at their feet. Their heads were turned in the direction of the citadel. The rainbow light bathed the creatures in radiance.

And it was then he heard the humming sound. "Who is making that irritating noise?" the lord demanded.

He motioned to a Patryn who stood on the ship's upper deck, ready to run and do whatever his lord might require of him. "Find out where that strange humming sound is coming from and put a stop to it."

The Patryn left swiftly. "My Lord," he reported on his return, "everyone in the ship can hear it, but no one has any idea what is causing it. The sound does not appear to be coming from the ship itself. If you notice, Lord, it seems to be louder out here than inside."

True, Xar admitted. The sound was louder out here. He cocked his head. It appeared to be coming from the direction of the citadel.

"There are words in that sound," said Xar, listening intently.

"It's as if it were speaking to someone, Lord," the Patryn offered.

"Speaking!" Xar repeated to himself. "Yes, but what is it saying? And to whom?"

He listened closely and carefully; he could distinguish alterations of pitch and tone that might indicate words being formed. He could almost make out what they were, but never quite. And that, he concluded, was what was so irritating about the sound. All the more reason, then, to reach the citadel.

He stepped onto the moss, started walking in the direction of the citadel. He was not worried about finding a clear path. His magic would cut a swath through the thickest tangle of undergrowth. He kept his eyes on the tytans, however, moving cautiously, prepared to defend himself.

The tytans paid no attention to him. Their sightless heads faced in one direction—the citadel.

Xar had ventured only a short distance away from his ship when Sang-drax suddenly appeared at his side.

"If the citadel is now working, it could mean that Sartan are inside, operating it," Sang-drax warned.

"Haplo reported the citadel uninhabited—"

"Haplo is a traitor and liar!" the dragon-snake hissed.

Xar saw no reason to respond to that. Keeping his attention fixed on the tytans, he ventured farther and farther away from his ship. None of the monsters appeared to take the slightest interest in him.

"More likely, the light has something to do with the starting up of the Kicksey-winsey," Xar returned coldly.

"Or both," Sang-drax rejoined. "Or worse," he added beneath his breath.

Xar flicked him a glance. "Then I will find out. Thank you for your concern. You may now return to the ship."

"I have decided to go with you, Lord."

"Indeed? And what of this 'evil force' that so terrified you before?"

"I wasn't terrified," Sang-drax replied sullenly. "I respect it, as you would be wise to do, Lord of the Nexus, for it is your enemy as much as mine. I have been asked to investigate it."

"By whom? I did not give any such command."

"My brethren, Lord. If that meets with your approval?"

Xar detected a note of sarcasm in the snaky voice, disliked the implication. "There is no greater enemy than the Sartan, no more powerful force than theirs—and ours—in the universe. You will do well to remember that. You and your brethren."

"Yes, Lord," Sang-drax said humbly enough, apparently chastened. "I meant no insult. I have found out that the Kicksey-winsey has been started on Arianus. My brethren have asked me to see if there might be some connection."

Xar didn't see how there could be—or why there should be. He gave the matter no more thought, left the clearing, and entered the jungle. His magic caused the tree branches to lift to allow him passage. The tangled vines slithered apart to give him clearance. He looked back at his people, lined up on the deck, ready to come to his defense if necessary. He indicated with a wave of his hand that he was going on. They were to remain with the ship, guard it, keep it safe.

Xar rounded the bole of a tree and suddenly came face to shinbone with one of the tytans. The creature gave a grunt, began to move. The Lord of the Nexus instantly prepared to defend himself. But the tytan had not sensed him, apparently. It was taking a slow and halting step forward.

Xar, staring up at the creature, saw on its sightless face an expression of happiness.

And then he could distinguish the words of the humming.

Return... return to...

And just when he thought he was going to be able to sort out the rest, the humming stopped. The rainbow light went out. And although Pryan's four suns continued to shine in the sky, the jungle seemed vastly darker by contrast.

The tytan shifted its head. The eyeless face turned toward Xar. The tytan no longer looked happy.

## CHAPTER 24

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

"SHUT THE MACHINE OFF!" ROLAND YELLED.

"I can't!" Paithan shouted.

"It's calling the tytans!"

"Maybe it is and maybe it isn't. Who knows? Besides, look at the tytans. They act like they're drunk..."

"Drunk, my ass! You just don't want to turn off your precious machine. You think more of that damn thing than you do of us!"

"Oh, Roland, that's not true—" Rega began.

"Don't you 'Oh, Roland' me!" he snapped at his sister. "It was you who said that very thing last night!"

"But I didn't mean it," she said hastily, with an apologetic smile for Paithan.

"You try to shut it down. Go ahead!" Paithan yelled, waving a hand at the door.

"Maybe I will!" Roland said loftily, somewhat daunted but unable to refuse the challenge.

He took a step toward the door. The light went out; the humming stopped.

Roland stopped, too.

"What did you do?" Paithan demanded, pouncing on him angrily.

"Nothing! I swear! I didn't go near the damn thing!"

"You broke it!" Paithan clenched his fists.

Roland clenched his own fists, fell into a fighting stance.

"There's someone out there!" Rega cried. "Don't try to trick me, Rega." Roland and Paithan were circling each other. "It won't work. I'm going to tie those pointed ears around his neck—"

"Stop it, both of you!" Rega grabbed hold of Paithan, nearly dragging him off his feet, and hauled him over to the window. "Look, damn it! There are two people—two humans, by the look of them—out beyond the gate."

"Orn's ears, there are people out there!" Paithan said in astonishment. "They're running from the tytans."

"Oh, Paithan, you were wrong!" Rega said excitedly. "There are more people on this world."

"They won't be on it for long," Paithan said grimly. "There must be fifty of those monsters out there and only two of them. They'll never make it."

"The tytans! They've got them! We have to help!" Rega started to run off.

Paithan caught her around the waist. "Are you mad? There's nothing we can do!" "He's right, sis." Roland had lowered his fists, was peering out the window. "If we went out there, we'd only die, too—"

"Besides," Paithan added in awed tones, "it doesn't look as if they need our help. Blessed Mother! Did you see that?"

Loosening his hold on Rega in his amazement, Paithan leaned out the window. Roland crowded in beside him. Rega pulled herself up on her tiptoes to look out over their shoulders.

The citadel was built on one of the few mountains tall enough to rise above the mass of Pryan's vegetation. The jungle encircled it, but had not encroached upon it. A path, cut into jagged rock, led from the jungle to the citadel, to the large metal door formed in the shape of a hexagon and inscribed with the same picture-writing the books termed "runes."

Once, many cycles ago, the five trapped in the citadel had run up that path themselves, pursued by a flesh-devouring dragon. It was the dwarf, Drugar, who had figured out how to open that magical door. Escaping inside, they had shut the dragon out.

Now two more people were running along that same treacherous path, attempting to reach the safe haven of the citadel. The tytans, carrying branches clutched in massive fists, were bearing down on their foes, who looked smaller and more fragile than insects.

But then one of the strangers, clad in black robes,\* turned to face the advancing tytans. The figure raised his hands. Blue light flared around him, danced and twined, and then spread out to form an enormous blue wall, a blue wall that burst into flame.

\*Probably what led Paithan to deduce that Xar was human. No elf ever wears black, considering the color ill-omened.

The tytans fell back before the magical fire. The strangers took advantage of the monsters' confusion to continue running up the path.

"Haplo," Paithan muttered.

"What?" Rega asked.

"Ouch! Do you have to dig your nails into my shoulder? The blue fire reminds me of that Haplo, that's all."

"Maybe. But look, Paithan! The fire isn't stopping the tytans!"

The magical fire was flickering, dying out. The tytans continued their advance.

"But the two have almost reached the gate. They'll be safe enough."

The three fell silent, watching this life-or-death race.

The strangers—the one in black robes and the other dressed in ordinary human-type clothing—had reached the metal gate. They came to a sudden halt.

"What's stopping them?" Roland wondered.

"They can't get in!" Rega cried.

"Sure they can," Roland scoffed. "Any wizard who can work magic like that ought to be able to open a gate."

"That Haplo got in," Paithan said. "Or at least he claimed he did."

"Would you quit yammering about Haplo!" Rega shouted at him. "I tell you they can't get in! We've got to go down there and open the gate for them."

Paithan and Roland exchanged glances. Neither moved.

Rega cast them each a furious look; then, turning, she headed toward the stairs.

"No! Wait! If you open the gate for them, you'll let the tytans in, too!"

Paithan made a grab for her, but this time Rega was prepared. She darted out of his reach and was off and running down the hall before he could stop her.

Paithan swore something in elven and started after her. Noticing he was alone, he stopped, turned. "Roland! Come on! It'll take both of us to fight the tytans off—"

"Not necessary," Roland said. He waved Paithan back to the window. "Drugar's down there. He's opening the gate."

The dwarf took the pendant that hung from around his neck and placed it in the center of the runes as he had done once before, only this time he was inside the gate instead of outside. The sigil on the dwarf's pendant burned with blue fire, expanded. Wherever its fire touched one of the sigla on the gate, that sigil burst into blue flame. Soon a circle of magic burned brightly.

The gates swung open. The two strangers darted inside, the tytans roaring on their heels. The magical fire daunted the monsters, however. They fell back. The gates shut; the flames died.

The tytans began to beat on the gates with their fists.

"They're attacking the citadel!" Paithan exclaimed in horror. "They never did that before. Do you think they can get in?"

"How the hell should I know?" Roland retorted. "You're the expert. You're the one who's read all those damn books! Maybe you should turn that machine of yours back on again. That seems to calm them down."

Paithan would gladly have turned the machine on again, but he didn't have any idea how. He couldn't tell Roland that, however, and for the moment, Roland was actually regarding Paithan with a certain amount of grudging respect.

What the human doesn't know won't hurt him, was Paithan's theory. Let him think I'm a mechanical genius. If I'm lucky, the machine will cycle itself back up again. If not, and the tytans manage to break down the wall, well, the truth won't matter much then anyway.

"The machine ... uh ... has to rest. It'll come back on soon." Paithan prayed to Orn he was right.

"It had better. Or we're all going to be resting—resting in peace, if you know what I mean."

They could hear clearly, through the open window, the tytans roaring and bashing at the walls in a frantic effort to get inside. Rega was down there now, talking with the human in the black robes.

"One of us ought to go down there," Paithan suggested, prodding Roland.

"Yeah, you should," Roland agreed, prodding Paithan.

Suddenly an enormous shape filled the window, blotting out the sunlight. A dank, dark smell choked them.

Frightened half out of their wits, the two grabbed hold of each other, dragged each other down. A massive green-scaled body slid past the window, scraping along the outside wall of the citadel at tremendous speed.

"A dragon!" Paithan quavered.

Roland said something not repeatable.

A gigantic talon thrust through the window.

"Oh, god!" Paithan quit hugging Roland and hugged the floor.

Roland flung his arms over his head.

But the talon disappeared after breaking out a section of the marble wall. The dragon had apparently used the window to give itself leverage. The green-scaled body slithered off. Sunlight shone through.

Trembling, the two clutched at the windowsill, pulled themselves cautiously back up, peered out over the ledge.

The dragon was sliding down the tower, wrapping its wingless body around tall spires, then dropping onto the courtyard below. Those in the courtyard—Rega, Drugar, and the two strangers—appeared to be frozen with terror. None of them made a move. The dragon lurched toward them.

Paithan moaned and covered his eyes with his hand.

"Rega! Run for it!" Roland screamed out the window.

But the dragon thundered past them without a glance, heading straight for the gates. The Sartan runes flashed blue and red, but the dragon soared right through the magic and through the metal gates as well.

Outside the walls, the dragon reared up to an astonishing height, its head nearly at a level with the citadel's tall spires. The tytans turned and fled, their enormous bodies moving with incongruous fluid grace.

"It saved us!" Paithan cried.

"Yeah, for lunch," Roland said grimly.

"Nonsense!" said a voice behind them.

Paithan jumped, cracked his head on the casement. Roland whirled around, lost his balance, and nearly fell backward out the window. Fortunately Paithan, feeling the need to grab hold of something substantial, grabbed hold of Roland. Both stood staring.

An old man with a stringy white beard, mouse-colored robes, and a disreputable hat was stalking down the hall, waving his arms and looking extremely pleased with himself.

"Dragon's under my complete control. Hadn't been for me, you'd be guava jelly right about now. Showed up in the nick of time—whoever Nick is. Dukes ate mackinaw, you might say."

The old man planted himself triumphantly in front of the elf and the human, folded his arms across his chest, and rocked back on his heels.

"What dukes?" Paithan asked feebly.

"Dukes ate mackinaw," repeated the old man, scowling. "With ears as big as yours, you'd think you could hear. I flew down to save your lives, arrived right in the nick of time. Dukes ate mackinaw. That's Latin," the old man added importantly. "Means... well, it means... well, that I showed up... in the... er... nick of time."

"I don't understand." Paithan gulped.

Roland was rendered speechless.

"'Course you don't understand," said the old man. "You have to be a great and powerful wizard to understand. You're not, by chance, a great and powerful wizard?" He appeared somewhat nervous.

"N-no." Paithan shook his head.

"Ah, there, you see?" The old man was smug.

Roland drew a quivering breath. "Aren't... aren't you Zifnab?"

"Am I? Wait!" The old man closed his eyes, held out his hands. "Don't tell me. Let me guess. Zifnab. No. No. Don't believe that's it."

"Then... who the devil are you?" Roland demanded.

The old man straightened, threw out his chest, stroked his bearded chin. "Name's Bond. James Bond."

"No, sir," came a sepulchral voice from down the hall. "Not today, I'm afraid, sir."

The old man flinched, drew nearer Paithan and Roland. "Don't pay any attention. That's probably only Money Penny. Got the hots for me."

"We saw you die!" Paithan gasped.

"The dragon killed you!" Roland gargled.

"Oh, they're always trying to kill me off. But I come back in the last reel. Dukes ate mackinaw and all that. You wouldn't have a dry martini about you, would you?"

Measured footfalls echoed in the hallway. The closer the footfalls came, the more nervous the old man appeared, although he was obviously doing his best to ignore the ominous sound.

A very tall, imposing gentleman walked up to the old man. The gentleman was dressed all in somber black—black waistcoat, black vest, black knee-breeches with black ribbons, black stockings and shoes with silver buckles. His long hair was white and tied in the back with a black ribbon, but his face was young, and rather stern about the mouth. The gentleman bowed.

"Master Quindiniar. Master Redleaf. I am pleased to see you again. I trust I find you in good health?"

"Zifnab died!" Paithan insisted. "We saw him!"

"We can't have everything, can we?" The imposing gentleman gave a long-suffering sigh. "Excuse me, please." He turned to the old man, who was staring hard at the ceiling. "I am sorry, sir, but you cannot be Mr. Bond today."

The old man began to hum a tune. "Dum deedle-um dum—dum, dum, dum. Dum deedle-um dum—dum, dum, dum. Bomp—de-urn."

"Sir." The imposing gentleman's voice took on an edge. "I really must insist."

The old man appeared to deflate. Taking off his hat, he twirled it around and around by the brim, darting swift glances from beneath his brows at the imposing gentleman.

"Please?" the old man whined.

"No, sir."

"Just for the day?"

"It simply wouldn't do, sir."

The old man heaved a sigh. "Who am I, then?"

"You are Zifnab, sir," said the imposing gentleman with a sigh.

"That doddering idiot!" The old man was quite indignant.

"If you say so, sir."

The old man stewed and fumed and made a complete shambles of his hat. Suddenly he cried, "Ah, ha! I can't be Zifnab! He's dead!" He stabbed a bony finger at Paithan and Roland. "They'll tell you! By cracky, I've got witnesses!"

"Deus ex machina, sir. You were saved in the final reel."

"Damn the dukes!" Zifnab cried in a towering rage.

"Yes, sir," said the imposing gentleman serenely, "And now, sir, if you will permit me to remind you. The Lord of the Nexus is in the courtyard—"

"The courtyard... Blessed Mother! The dragon!" Paithan whirled, almost fell out the window. He caught himself, blinked. "It's gone."

Roland turned. "What? Where?"

"The dragon. It's gone!"

"Not precisely, sir," said the imposing gentleman with another bow. "I believe that would be me to whom you are referring. I am the dragon." The gentleman turned back to Zifnab. "I, too, have business in the courtyard, sir."

The old man looked alarmed. "Will this end up in a fight?"

"I trust not, sir," said the dragon. Then its voice softened. "But I'm afraid I may be gone for some considerable length of time, sir. I know that I leave you in good company, however."

Zifnab reached out a trembling hand. "You will take care of yourself, won't you, old chap?"

"Yes, sir. And you will remember to take your warming drink at night, won't you, sir? It would never do to have you irregular—"

"Uh, yes, yes. Warming drink. Certainly." Zifnab flushed and glanced askance at Paithan and Roland.

"And you will keep an eye on the Lord of the Nexus? Not let him find out about—you know."

"Do I know?" Zifnab asked, puzzled.

"Yes, sir, you do."

"Well, if you say so," Zifnab said with an air of resignation.

The dragon did not seem overly pleased with this, but the old man had placed his hat back on his head and was racing off down the hall.

"Gentlemen." The dragon bowed a last time to Paithan and Roland. Then it disappeared.

"I've got to lay off the hard stuff." Roland wiped sweat from his brow.

"Hey, you two!" Zifnab came to a halt, peered back over his shoulder. "Are you coming?" He pointed majestically down the staircase. "You have a guest! The Lord of the Nexus has arrived."

"Whoever he is," Paithan muttered.

Not knowing what else to do, having no idea what was going on but hoping desperately to find out, Paithan and Roland trailed along reluctantly behind the old man.

As they passed the door of the Star Chamber, the machine started up again.

## CHAPTER 25

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

XAR WAS IN AN ILL HUMOR. HE HAD BEEN FORCED TO FLEE FROM a bunch of blind behemoths; then he'd been blocked from entering a gate by magic that even a mensch could unravel. Finally, he owed, if not his life, then at least his dignity and well-being to a dragon. This galled him. This and the knowledge that Haplo had been able to enter this citadel and he, the Lord of the Nexus, could not.

"Haplo was telling the truth," said Sang-drax beneath his breath.

The two stood just inside the gate. Three mensch—two females and a male—were staring at them stupidly, much as Xar might have expected from mensch.

"Haplo told the truth," Xar returned grimly. "I saw into his heart. He was here. He was inside this citadel. And these—these weak-minded mensch managed to get inside." He was speaking in Patryn and so could express his thoughts freely. "And what is the matter with you?"

Sang-drax had been glancing around nervously, his one eye swiveling to take in every part of the citadel—walls, spires, windows, the shadows on the ground below, the blue-green sky above.

"I was wondering where the dragon went, Lord."

"What does it matter? The wyrm's gone. Leave it at that. We have other, more important things to consider."

Sang-drax continued to look about. The mensch were now staring at him, obviously wondering what was wrong with him.

"Stop that!" Xar commanded Sang-drax, further irritated. "You look a fool! One would almost think you were frightened."

"Only for you and your safety, Lord," Sang-drax returned with an oily smile that had a strained quality. The single red eye ceased its roving, fixed itself on the mensch.

One of them, a human female, stepped forward. "Welcome, sirs," she said, speaking human. "Thank you for driving off the tytans. That was wonderful magic!" She was gazing at Xar with reverence and awe.

Xar was pleased, felt better. "Thank you, madam, for permitting me entrance into your city. And you, sir"—he bowed to the dwarf—"for your assistance with the gate."

Xar stared hard at the pendant the dwarf wore around his neck. The Patryn recognized a Sartan sigil when he saw one.

The dwarf, glowering, put his hand over the pendant, thrust it back beneath heavy leather armor.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Xar humbly. "I didn't mean to be rude. I was admiring your amulet. Might I ask where you acquired it?"

"You can ask," the dwarf said gruffly.

Xar waited.

The dwarf remained silent.

The human female, casting the dwarf an angry glance, slid in front of him, came nearer Xar.

"Don't mind Drugar, sir. He's a dwarf," she added, as if that explained everything. "My name is Rega Redleaf. And this is Aleatha Quindiniar." She gestured toward another female—this one an elf.

The female was quite lovely, for a mensch. Xar bowed to her. "I am charmed, madam."

She gave him a cool, languid nod. "Did that Haplo send you here?"

Sang-drax hastily intervened. "This is Xar. Lord Xar. The man Haplo is my lord's subject. My lord sent Haplo. Haplo did not send my lord."

Rega looked impressed. Drugar's frown deepened. Aleatha stifled a yawn, as if this was all too boring for words. Rega continued introductions. Two males—a human and an elf—had just dashed up.

"This is my brother, Roland, and my... er ... friend, Paithan Quindiniar."

"Hullo, sir." Paithan gave Xar a quick glance, then turned immediately back to Rega. "Have you seen him? Did he come down here?"

"Where've you been during all the excitement, Roland?" Aleatha asked in dulcet tones. "Hiding under your bed?"

"I was not!" Roland said hotly, rounding on her. "I was—"

"Roland." Rega tugged at him. "You're being rude. This is Lord Xar."

"Good to meet you, sir." Roland gave the lord a nod, then turned back to Aleatha. "If you must know, Paithan and I were trapped up in the tower with a—"

"He was right in front of us!" Paithan struck in. "He must be here!"

"Who are you talking about?"

"The dragon!" said Roland.

"Zifnab!" said Paithan at the same time.

"Who did you say?" Rega demanded.

"Zifnab."

Rega stared at Paithan in shock.

Xar and Sang-drax exchanged swift glances. Xar's lips tightened.

"Zifnab," Rega repeated in perplexity. "Paithan, that's impossible. He's dead."

"Oh, no, he's not," said Roland.

Aleatha began to laugh.

"It's not funny, Thea," Paithan snapped. "He was here. That was his dragon. Didn't you recognize the beast?"

Sang-drax sucked in a breath. The single red eye glistened, narrowed. He made a hissing sound.

"What is it?" Xar asked in Patryn.

"The old man. I know now what he is."

"He's a Sartan—"

"No. Or rather, he was. But not anymore. He has become one of them"

"Where are you going?"

Sang-drax had begun to sidle toward the gate. "Beware the old man, My Lord. Beware—"

An imposing gentleman dressed all in black materialized out of the shadows.

At the sight of him, Sang-drax pointed. "He's the dragon, Lord! Trap him! Kill him! Quickly, while he's in this weak body!"

Xar didn't need to be told. The sigla on his skin flared red and blue, burned with the fire that warned him of an enemy.

"Ever the coward, aren't you?" The dragon faced Sang-drax. "This is our battle."

"Kill him, Lord!" the dragon-snake urged. He turned to the others, who, not understanding the language, were staring in perplexity. "My brethren." He spoke in human. "Don't be deceived. This man is not what he seems. He is a dragon! And he plans to slaughter us all. Kill him! Swiftly!"

"Go find shelter, friends. I will deal with this," Xar said to the mensch.

But they didn't move. Afraid, confused, too stupid— who knew? Stupid or not, they were in his way.

"Run, fools!" Xar yelled, exasperated.

The imposing gentleman ignored both Xar and the mensch, continued to advance on Sang-drax. Snarling curses, Sang-drax was slowly giving ground, sidling back toward the gate.

"Slay him, My Lord!" he hissed.

Xar gnashed his teeth. He couldn't cast a spell that would kill the dragon without killing the mensch. And he needed them, needed to question them.

Perhaps if they saw the dragon in its true form, they would be frightened into fleeing.

The lord drew a single sigil in the air. The spell was a simple one, not being battle magic. The sigil flared red, expanded, blazed through the air toward the gentleman dressed all in black.

At that moment the gentleman caught hold of the whining Sang-drax by the throat. The sigil struck both of them, flared around them, entwining them in magical flame.

An enormous wingless dragon with bright, shining green scales, the color of the jungle in which it dwelt, reared up over the walls of the city. Confronting it was a huge serpent, its foul body covered in slime, reeking of the dead of centuries. Its head had only one red eye.

Xar was nearly as startled by the sight of this apparition as the mensch were. He had never seen a dragon-snake in its true form. He had read Haplo's description of them on Chelestra, but now Xar understood fully Haplo's loathing, revulsion, even fear. Xar, Lord of the Nexus, who had battled innumerable terrible foes in the Labyrinth, was shaken and unnerved.

The dragon opened massive jaws, closed them on the serpent's neck, just below the toothless head. The serpent's tail lashed out, coiled around the dragon with crushing force, seeking to squeeze the life out of its foe. Twisting and screaming in fury, the two thrashed and flailed, threatening to destroy the citadel. The walls shivered; the gate trembled as the massive bodies crashed into them. If the walls fell, the tytans would be able to enter the city.

The mensch did not flee, but remained rooted to the spot with terror. Xar could not work his magic—either out of fear of hitting Sang-drax or fear of Sang-drax. The lord wasn't certain, and his confusion angered him, caused him to hesitate.

And suddenly the two were gone. The dragon and serpent, bound in a deadly embrace, vanished.

The mensch stood staring stupidly at nothing. Xar sought to gather his rattled thoughts. An old man clad in mouse-colored robes wandered out of the shadows.

"Take care of yourself, you sorry excuse for a reptile," Zifnab called, waving good-bye sadly.

## CHAPTER 26

### THE CITADEL PRYAN

XAR STOOD IN AMAZEMENT. THE TWO WERE GONE, DEFINITELY gone. He reached out mentally, searching for them. He sought them in Death's Gate. He sought them on the other worlds. No trace. They were, quite simply, gone. And he had no idea where.

If one believed Haplo...

But Xar didn't. He put that notion out of his mind.

He was baffled, enraged... intrigued. If the dragon and its foe were gone from this world, this universe, then they must have found a way out. Which meant that there was a way out.

"Well, of course there is!" A hand clapped Xar soundly on the back. "A way out. A way to the Immortal."

Xar turned swiftly. "You!" He scowled.

"Who?" The old man brightened.

"Zifnab!" Xar spat the name.

"Oh." The old man sagged despondently. "Not someone else? You weren't expecting someone else? A Mr. Bond, perhaps?"

Xar recalled Sang-drax's warning. Beware the old man. It seemed almost laughable. Still, the old man had escaped from the prisons of Abarrach.

"What are you talking about?" Xar demanded, eyeing the old man with more interest.

"Beats the hell out of me," said Zifnab, quite cheerful.

"What was I talking about? I rarely remember. I try not to remember, in fact."

His face went gray. His eyes lost their vague expression, were suddenly focused, suddenly pained. "It hurts— remembering. I don't do it. Not my memories. Other people's memories... easier, much easier..."

Xar was grim. " 'A way out,' you said. 'A way to the Immortal...'"

Zifnab's eyes narrowed. "The final Jeopardy answer, eh? I have thirty seconds to write down the question. Dum-de-dum, dum, da-doo-de-doo. There! I think I've got it." He looked triumphantly at Xar. "What is the Seventh Gate?"

"What is the Seventh Gate?" Xar asked casually. "That's the question!" Zifnab said. "But what's the answer?" Xar was rapidly losing patience.

"That's the answer! To the question. Do I win?" Zifnab asked hopefully. "Chance to come back tomorrow?"

"I may give you a chance to stay alive today!" Xar snarled. Reaching out, he took hold of the wizard's arm, gripped it tightly. "Enough foolery, old man. Where is the Seventh Gate? Your companion obviously knew—"

"Why, so did yours," Zifnab countered. "Didn't he tell you? Mind you don't crumple the fabric..."

"Companion? Sang-drax? Nonsense. He knows only that I am searching for it. If he had known, he would have taken me to it."

Zifnab looked extremely wise and intelligent—or at least he made the attempt. He drew near Xar, whispered, "On the contrary, he's leading you away from it."

Xar gave the old man's arm a painful twist. "You know where the Seventh Gate is!"

"I know where it isn't," Zifnab said meekly. "If that's any help."

"Leave him alone!"

Preoccupied with the old Sartan, Xar had forgotten the mensch. He turned to find one of them daring to interfere. "You're hurting him!" The elven female (Xar couldn't recall her name) was attempting to pry his hand off Zifnab's arm. "He's only a daft old man. Leave him alone. Paithan! Come help!"

Xar reminded himself again that he needed these mensch—at least until they had shown him the secrets of the citadel. Xar removed his hand from Zifnab's arm, was about to make some explanatory remark when another mensch dashed up. This one looked scandalized.

"Aleatha! What are you doing? This really isn't any of our business. I apologize, sir, for my sister. She's somewhat... well, somewhat..." The elf hesitated.

"Pigheaded?" offered a human male, coming up behind the elven female.

Her name was apparently Aleatha. She whirled around, slapped the human male across the face.

At this point, a human female entered the fray, "What did you hit Roland for? He didn't do anything!"

"Rega's right," said the man called Roland. He was nursing a red cheek. "I didn't do anything."

"You said I had the face of a pig!" Aleatha stated haughtily.

"He said you were pigheaded, Aleatha." Paithan attempted to explain. "It doesn't mean the same thing in human that it means in elven..."

"Oh, don't pander to her, Paithan!" Rega snapped. "She knows perfectly well what he meant. She speaks human better than she lets on."

"Excuse me, Rega, but this is between me and my sister—"

"Yes, Rega," interjected Aleatha, arching her eyebrows. "We don't need any outsiders interfering in our family business."

"Outsiders!" Rega flushed, glared at Paithan. "So that's what you think of me! An outsider! Come on, Roland. We outsiders are going back to our side of the city!"

Grabbing hold of her brother's arm, Rega hauled him down the street.

"Rega, I never said that..." Paithan started to run off after them. Pausing, he glanced back at Xar. "Uh, excuse me, won't you?"

"Oh, Paithan, for Orn's sake, find a backbone!" Aleatha cried.

Paithan didn't answer, continued following after Rega. Aleatha flounced off in another direction.

This left the dwarf, who had not said a word. He glowered darkly at both Xar and Zifnab; then, with a parting grunt, he turned on his heel and trudged off.

Long ago the Sartan and Patryns fought over who would control these creatures. Why did we bother? Xar wondered. We should have tied them all up in a sack and drowned them!

"Haplo knows," Zifriab announced.

"So I've been told," Xar said irritably.

"He doesn't know he knows, but he knows." Zifnab took off his disreputable hat, rubbed his hair until it stood straight up on his head.

"If this is some trick on your part to try to keep Haplo alive, it won't work," Xar snapped testily. "He will die. He may already be dead. And his corpse will lead me to the Seventh Gate."

"Trick." Zifnab sighed. "The trick is on you, I'm afraid, old chap. Die. Yes, Haplo may well die. In a place where you'll never find him."

"Ah, then you know where he is?" Xar didn't believe it, but he was playing along, still hoping for something useful.

"Well, of course I know!" Zifnab said, insulted. "He's in—uip!" The old man clapped his hand over his mouth.

"Yes?" Xar prodded.

"Can't say. Top secret. For your eyes only. My eyes, that is."

Xar had an idea.

"Perhaps I was too precipitous in my decision to execute Haplo," the lord said, musing. "He is a traitor, but I can be generous. I will be generous. I pardon Haplo. There, you see. I forgive him—as a father should forgive his erring child. And now you say he is in some type of danger. We will go and find him. You and I. You will lead me to him."

Xar began steering the old man toward the city gate. "We'll go back to my ship. Rescue Haplo..."

"I'm touched. Truly touched," said Zifnab, moist-eyed. "My dragon often says that about me, you know. But it's really quite impossible."

Xar began forming a spell. "You will come with me, old man..."

"Oh, I'd be tickled to death to come with you," Zifnab said cheerfully. "If you were going anywhere. But you're not. Your ship, you see..." His gaze shifted to the sky.

Xar's ship was lifting above the treetops, sailing away.

The lord was momentarily astounded; then he swiftly cast a spell, a spell that should have taken him instantly on board. The runes flared on his body. He started to leap forward through time and space, but fell back as if he'd struck a wall. Sartan magic. He tried again, only to run into the invisible barrier.

Furious, Xar rounded on the old man, set to cast a spell that would wither the flesh from the fragile bones.

The imposing gentleman dressed all in black stepped out of the shadows. He was bloody and disheveled, his clothes torn, and he looked exhausted. But he took hold of Xar's wrist in his, gripped it with a strength that the Lord of the Nexus with all his magic could not break.

"Leave him alone," said the gentleman. "He's not responsible. Your friend the serpent, the one you know as Sang-drax. He escaped me. He's the one who is blocking your magic. He's the one stealing your ship."

"I don't believe you!"

The lord's ship was now nothing more than a speck in the sky.

"He's taken your form, Lord of the Nexus," said the gentleman. "Your people think Sang-drax is you. They'll obey all his commands—and he'll probably repay them with death."

"If what you say is true, then he must have some urgent need for the ship," Xar said confidently, trying to calm himself, though he cast a swift and frowning glance at his disappearing vessel.

The gentleman was speaking to Zifnab. "You don't look well, sir."

"Not my fault," the old man said, pouting. He pointed an accusing finger at Xar. "I told him I was Bond. James Bond. He didn't believe me."

"What else did you tell him, sir?" the gentleman asked, looking severe. "Nothing you weren't supposed to, I take it?"

"Well, now, that depends," said Zifnab, rubbing his hands together nervously, not meeting the gentleman's eye. "We did have such a nice chat."

The imposing gentleman nodded gloomily. "That's what I feared. You've done damage enough for one day, sir. Time to go inside and have your warming drink. The human female will be happy to make it for you, sir."

"Of course she'd be happy to! Make her day! But she won't!" Zifnab whined querulously. "She doesn't know how. No one makes it the way you do."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir. I'm very sorry, sir, but I won't be able to... fix your drink tonight." The gentleman had gone extremely pale. He managed a wan smile. "I'm not feeling very well. I'll just take you to your bedchamber, sir..."

Once they were gone, Xar could give vent to his anger. He glared around the city's walls, walls that were suddenly prison walls, for though he could walk out of that gate with ease (not counting the tytans, which were suddenly the least of his worries), he had no ship, no way to travel back through Death's Gate. No way to reach Haplo—either dead or alive.

That is, if he believed what the old man had told him. Feeling weak and old and tired—unusual feelings for the Lord of the Nexus—Xar sat down on a bench in the strange gathering darkness that appeared to be falling on the citadel and nowhere else. Xar tried again to reach Marit, but there was no answer to his urgent summons.

Had she betrayed him? Had Sang-drax betrayed him?...

"Would you believe my enemy?" The whisper came from the night, startling Xar. He stared into the shadows, saw glowing there a single red eye.

Xar rose. "Are you here? Come out where I can see you!"

"I am not here in actual physical presence, Lord. My thoughts are with you."

"I had much rather my ship was with me," Xar said angrily. "Bring my ship back to me."

"If you command, Lord, I will." Sang-drax was humble. "But may I present an alternate plan? I overheard the conversation between you and that old fool, who may not be as foolish as he would have us believe. Allow me to search for Haplo, while you go on with your business here."

Xar pondered. Not a bad idea at that. He had too much to do, too much at stake to leave now. His people were on Abarrach, poised for war. He had to continue looking for the Seventh Gate; and he still needed to determine whether he had learned the art of bringing life to the dead. Several of those goals might be accomplished here.

In addition, he would find out whether Sang-drax was loyal.

He was beginning to see the outline of a plan.

"If I agree to let you search for Haplo, how do I return to Abarrach?" Xar demanded, not wanting Sang-drax to think he had the upper hand.

"Another ship is available to you, Lord. The mensch know its location."

Probably inside the city somewhere, Xar reasoned.

"Very well." The lord gave his permission magnanimously. "I will let you know the moment I hear from Marit. Meanwhile, do what you can to find him on your own. Remember, I want Haplo's corpse—and in good condition!"

"I live only to serve you, Lord Xar," Sang-drax said humbly. The single eye closed in reverence, and then the presence was gone.

"Excuse me, sir," came a voice, speaking elven.

Xar had been aware of the young elf's presence for some time, but, absorbed in his mental conversation with Sang-drax, he hadn't paid any attention. Now was the moment, however, to start putting his plan into action.

The Lord of the Nexus gave an affected start of surprise, peered through the shadows.

"I beg your pardon, young man. I didn't hear you come up. What was your name again? Forgive me for asking, but I'm old and my mind wanders."

"Paithan," said the elf kindly. "Paithan Quindiniar. I came back to apologize for the way we behaved. We've all been under a lot of strain lately. And then, what with the dragon and that horrible serpent and Zifnab... That reminds me, have you seen the old man lately?"

"No, I'm afraid not," Xar answered. "I must have dozed off. When I woke up, he was gone."

Paithan looked alarmed. He glanced around anxiously. "Orn take him, the crazy old buggler. I wonder where he's got to? No good searching for him tonight, though. You must be tired and hungry. Please, come, share

dinner with my sister and me. We... uh ... usually eat with the others, but I don't suppose they'll be joining us tonight."

"Why, thank you, my boy." Xar reached out a hand. "Would you mind assisting me? I'm somewhat feeble..."

"Oh, certainly, sir." Paithan offered Xar his arm.

The Lord of the Nexus clasped the elf close to him, and together—the elf supporting the lord's faltering steps—they proceeded slowly along the streets toward the citadel.

And while they were walking, Xar received a response to his summons.

"Marit," he said silently. "I have been waiting to hear from you . . . ,"

## CHAPTER 27

### LOST

MARIT SAT WITH HER BACK AGAINST A CHILL STONE WALL, watching the human assassin keep watch over her. He was leaning back against the wall opposite, a pipe in his mouth and a most foul-smelling smoke issuing from it. His eyelids were closed, but she knew that if she so much as brushed a strand of hair out of her face, she'd see the black glitter of his deep-sunken eyes.

Lying on a pallet on the floor between the two, Haplo slept fitfully, uneasily, not the healing sleep of her kind. Beside him another set of eyes kept careful watch, dividing their attention between her and the master. Hugh the Hand sometimes slept. The dog never did.

Growing irritated at the unrelenting scrutiny, Marit turned her back on both the watchers and, hunkering down, began to hone her dagger. It didn't need honing, nor did it need the sigla redrawn. But fussing with the dagger gave her something to do besides pacing the chill floor—around and around, around and around until her legs ached. Perhaps, though she didn't really expect it, if she quit watching them, the watchers might relax and grow careless.

She could have told them they were worrying over nothing. She wasn't going to harm him. Not now. Her orders had been changed. Haplo was to live.

Knife sharpened, Marit thrust it into a minute crack between two of the large blocks of white polished stone that formed the floors, walls, and domed ceiling of the strange room in which they'd been imprisoned. She slid the dagger along the crack, probing, testing for a weakness she knew wouldn't be there. Sartan runes were engraved on each block. Sartan runes surrounded her, were on the floor, everywhere she looked. The runes didn't harm her, but she avoided touching them. They made her nervous, uncomfortable, just as this room made her nervous and uncomfortable.

And it was impossible to leave.

She knew. She'd tried.

The room was large, well lit, with a diffused white light that shone from everywhere at once and nowhere in particular. A maddening sort of light—it was beginning to annoy her. There was a door, but it was covered with Sartan sigla. And though again the runes didn't react when Marit came near, she was loath to touch the door they guarded.

She couldn't read the Sartan writing; she'd never learned. Haplo could, though. She'd wait until he woke up to tell her what it said. Since he was to live.

Haplo was to live. Marit made a vicious stab into the crack, levered the dagger against the block in a completely futile attempt to wiggle the stone loose. It didn't budge. She was likely to break her dagger first. Angry, frustrated, and—though she refused to admit it—frightened, she snatched the dagger from the crack and hurled it away. The blade skidded across the polished floor, caromed off the wall, and slid back to the center of the room.

The assassin's eyes opened, two glittering slits. The dog lifted its head, regarded her warily. Marit ignored them both, turned her back on them.

"Is Haplo dead?"

"No, Lord. I am afraid I failed in my—"

"He is not dead. Has he escaped you?"

"No, Lord. I am with him—"

"Then why is he not dead?"

A knife, she could have said. A cursed Sartan knife. He saved my life, she could have said. Saved it even though I'd tried to kill him. All these things she could have said.

"I have no excuse, Lord," was what she did say. "I failed."

"Perhaps this task is too difficult for you, Marit. I have sent Sang-drax to deal with Haplo. Where are you?"

Marit blushed again, hotly, at the memory of her shame-filled reply. "In a Sartan prison, Lord."

"A Sartan prison! Are you certain?"

"All I know, Lord, is that I am in a white room covered with Sartan runes and there is no way out. A Sartan is here, keeping guard on us. He is the one you described, Lord, the one known as Alfred. A friend of Haplo's. This Alfred was the one who brought us here. Our ship was destroyed on Chelestra."

"The two are in this together, undoubtedly. Tell me what happened."

She told him: the strange weapon with the Sartan runes, the tytan, the waters of Chelestra, the steering stone in her hands, the dragon-snakes.

"We were brought here, Lord—by the Sartan."

"He brought you? How?"

"He... he put his foot in the gate. That's the only way I can describe it."

"I remember the water rising; the ship was breaking apart, our magic failing. I took hold of the steering stone. It was still dry, its magic still working. Images of the worlds flashed before my mind. I grasped the first I saw and clung to it and Death's Gate opened for me. Then the water was washing over me, drowning me, drowning the magic. The gate began to close. The ship began sliding beneath the water; the dragon-snakes were coiled around it."

"A serpent head smashed through the wood, dove straight for Haplo, I reached out, caught hold of him, and dragged him out of the creature's jaws. The horrible red eyes swiveled until they found me. The gate was closing fast, too fast for me to stop it. And then the gate stuck about halfway, as if something had jammed it open."

"A bright light shone on me. Silhouetted against the light was the figure of a stooped and gangling man, who was peering at us worriedly. He reached out his hands to Haplo. I hung on to him and I was pulled through the gate. Just as it began to shut again, I fell and kept on falling."

There had been something else, but it was a vague shadow, on the fringes of her consciousness, and so she did not think it proper to mention it to Xar. It was unimportant anyway. Nothing more than a voice—a kindly voice— saying to her, "There now, I've got him. He's safe. You can let go." She remembered being relieved of a dragging weight and of sinking thankfully into sleep.

"What is the Sartan doing to you?"

"Nothing, Lord. He comes and goes like a thief, creeping in and out of the room. He refuses to look at me or talk to me. The Sartan's only concern is for Haplo. And no, Lord, I have not spoken to the Sartan. Nor will I give him the satisfaction!"

"True. It would make you look weak, vulnerable. What is this Alfred like?"

"A mouse. A scared rabbit. But I assume this is only his disguise, Lord, intended to lull me into a false sense of security."

"Undoubtedly you are right. I wonder one thing, though, Wife. You saved Haplo's life on Chelestra. You could have left him to die, it seems."

"Yes, I saved him, Lord. You wanted his corpse."

No mention of the fact that the dragon-snakes terrified her. That it had seemed likely she would die on Chelestra, along with Haplo. Xar trusted the dragon-snakes. He knew them better than she did. It was not her place to question...

"The dragon-snakes would have brought him to me," Xar returned. "But then I suppose you could not have known that. Describe this prison."

She did so. An empty room, made of polished white stone, covered with Sartan runes. "And thus my magic will not work here," she said ruefully. "I am surprised we are still able to communicate, Husband."

"That is because such magic is internal. It does not attempt to reach into the possibilities, and thus the Sartan magic does not affect it. As you say, Haplo will be able to read the Sartan runes. He will know where you are. Or perhaps his 'friend' will tell him. Haplo won't kill you, will he? Since you tried to kill him?"

"No, Lord. He will not kill me."

It was well Xar could hear only words through the magic. He could not hear her sigh.

"Excellent. On second thought, I think it would be best if you stayed with him."

"Are you certain, Lord? Once I escape this place, I can find a ship. I know I can. I—"

"No. Stay with Haplo. Report to me what he and his Sartan friend say to each other about this room, about Pryan, about any of the other worlds. From now on, Marit, report to me everything Haplo says."

"Yes, Lord." She was now a spy. Her final humiliation. "But what am I to say to him? He'll wonder why I don't try to kill him—"

"You slept with him. You bore his child. He loves you still. Do you need me to elaborate, my dear?"

No, she didn't. And that was how their conversation ended.

Marit's stomach clenched. She was almost physically ill. How could Xar ask such a thing of her? To pretend to make love to Haplo! To ingratiate herself to him, cling to him and, while she was clinging, suck his blood like a leech. No! Such an insidious scheme was dishonorable! No Patryn would agree to it. She was disappointed, bitterly disappointed in Xar, that he could even suggest such a repulsive—

Her anger, her disappointment seeped away.

"I understand. You don't think I would be pretending," she said softly to the absent Xar. "I failed you. I saved Haplo's life. You think I am still in love with him, don't you, Lord! Otherwise you would never have asked me to do this."

There had to be a way—another way—to convince Haplo that she was, if not exactly for him, at least no longer against him.

Patryn law! Marit lifted her head, almost smiled, but checked herself, with a stealthy glance at the mensch assassin. It wouldn't do to look suddenly pleased with herself.

She continued to sit quietly in the prison; she had no idea how long. Alfred came and went. She watched him distrustfully. Hugh the Hand watched her distrustfully. The dog watched them all (with the exception of Alfred) distrustfully, and Alfred appeared extremely upset and unhappy about the whole thing.

At length, bone-tired, Marit lay down to sleep. She had nearly drifted off when a voice jerked her to wakefulness.

"Haplo, how are you feeling?"

Hugh the Hand was asking the question. Marit shifted her position slightly so that she could see. Haplo was sitting up on his pallet, staring around in amazement. The dog, with a pleased bark, was on its feet, nosing its master eagerly. Haplo petted it, rubbed its muzzle and jowls. The animal's tail wagged furiously.

"How long have I been out?" Haplo asked.

"Who knows?" the Hand answered with disgust. "How can you tell in this place? I don't suppose you have any idea where we are now?"

Haplo glanced around again, frowned. "I've seen some place like this before... but I can't remember..."

His gaze flicked over to Marit, held. He'd caught her staring at him. Too late to try to pretend she was asleep. She stiffened, looked away. She was aware suddenly of her dagger, lying in the middle of the floor, lying between them.

"Don't worry," Hugh the Hand grunted, following Haplo's gaze. "Between the dog and me and Alfred, we haven't let her get close to you."

Haplo propped himself up on one elbow. He was weak, far too weak for a Patryn who had been through the healing sleep. The wound on the heart-rune. Such a wound would have doomed him in the Labyrinth.

"She saved my life," he said.

Marit could feel his eyes on her. She wished there was someplace to hide in this damn room, some way to escape. She might even try the door, but she'd look a fool if she couldn't break out. Gritting her teeth, keeping a tight hold on herself, she sat up and pretended to be absorbed in lacing her boot. After all, what Haplo had just said was going to work to her advantage.

The assassin grunted. Removing the pipe from his mouth, he knocked the bowl against the wall, dumped ashes on the floor.

Haplo's attention shifted back to the human.

"Did you say Alfred?"

"Yeah. I said Alfred. He's here. Off somewhere, getting food." He jerked a thumb at the door.

Haplo took in his surroundings. "Alfred. Now I remember what this place reminds me of—the mausoleum, on Arianus."

Marit, recalling Xar's command, listened carefully. The words meant nothing to her, but she felt a chill go over her. Mausoleum. It reminded her of Abarrach—a world that was a mausoleum.

"Did Alfred say where we are?"

Hugh smiled—a terrible smile that tightened his lips, darkened his eyes. "Alfred hasn't had much to say to me. In fact, he's been avoiding me."

"I'm not surprised."

Haplo sat up straight, looked down at his hand—the hand that had picked up the cursed Sartan knife. It had been black, the flesh burned off. Now the arm was whole, uninjured. He looked over at her.

Marit knew what he was thinking as well as if he'd said it aloud. She was still close to him, and that irritated her.

"You track my thoughts like a wolfen tracks a wounded man," he'd said once, teasing her.

What she had never told him was how closely he'd been able to track hers. At first she'd hungered for such closeness, one reason that she'd stayed with him so long, longer than any other man she'd ever been with before. But then she'd found herself liking him too much, counting on him, becoming dependent on him. And it was then she'd realized she was going to have his child. It was then she'd left.

Bad enough knowing she'd lose him to the Labyrinth; to have to face losing the child, too...

Be the one who leaves. Don't be the one left. It had become her credo.

She looked at him and knew exactly what he was thinking. Someone has healed me. Someone has closed the circle of my being. He looked at her, wanting it to be her. Why? Why couldn't he realize it was over?

"The Sartan healed you," she said to him. "Not me." Slowly and deliberately, she turned away again.

Which was all very well and all very dignified, but sometime soon she was going to have to explain that she wasn't out to kill him anymore.

Marit wove the runes, hoping to snare her dagger, which was still lying in the center of the floor. Her magic fizzled, petered out; the damn Sartan magic in this dreadful room was unraveling her spells.

"Tell me what happened." Haplo had turned his attention back to Hugh the Hand. "How did we get here?"

The human sucked on his pipe, which had gone out. The dog lay at Haplo's side, crowding as close as it could get, its eyes gazing anxiously into its master's face. Haplo gave it a reassuring pat, and it sighed and nestled even closer.

"I don't remember much," the Hand was saying. "Red eyes and giant serpents and you with your hand on fire. And terror. Being more afraid than I've ever been in my life. Or death."

The assassin smiled wryly. "The ship burst apart. Water filled my mouth and my lungs and then the next thing I knew I was in this room, on my hands and knees, heaving up my guts. And you were lying next to me, with your hand and arm like charred wood. And that woman was standing over you with her dagger and the dog was about to go for her throat, and then Alfred came stumbling through the door.

"He said something to her in that strange language you people talk and she seemed about to answer him when she toppled over. She was out cold.

"Alfred looked at you and shook his head; then he looked at her and shook his head again. The dog had shut up by this time, and I'd managed to get onto my feet.

"I said, 'Alfred!' and walked toward him, only I couldn't walk very well. It was more of a lurch."

The Hand's smile was grim. "He turned around and saw me and gave a kind of croak and then he toppled over and he was out cold. And then I must have passed out, because that's the last thing I remember."

"And when you came to?" Haplo asked.

Hugh shrugged. "I found myself here. Alfred was fussing over you and that woman was sitting over there, watching, and she wasn't saying anything and neither was Alfred. And I stood up and went over to Alfred. This time I made sure I didn't scare him.

"But before I could open my mouth, he was up like a startled gazelle and took off through that door, muttering something about food and I was to keep watch until you came around. And that was a while ago and I haven't seen him since. She's been here the whole time."

"Her name is Marit," said Haplo quietly. He was staring at the floor, running his finger around—but not touching—a Sartan sigil.

"Her name's Death, my friend, and you're the mark."

Marit drew a deep, shivering breath. Might as well get it over.

"Not any longer," she said.

Rising to her feet, she walked over, picked up her dagger from the stone floor.

The dog leapt up, stood over its master protectively, growling. Hugh the Hand rose, too, his body supple, his movement swift. He said nothing, just stood there, watching her through narrowed eyes.

Ignoring them both, Marit carried the dagger to Haplo. Kneeling down, she offered the dagger to him—hilt first.

"You saved my life," she said, cold, grudging. "By Patryn law, that must settle any quarrel between us in your favor."

"But you saved my life," Haplo countered, looking at her with a strange intensity that made her extremely uncomfortable. "That makes us even."

"I didn't." Marit spoke with scorn. "It was your Sartan friend who saved you."

"What's she saying?" Hugh the Hand demanded. She had spoken in the Patryn language.

Haplo translated, adding, "According to the law of our people, because I saved her life, any dispute between us is settled in my favor."

"I hardly call trying to murder you a 'dispute,' " Hugh said dryly, sucking on the pipe and eyeing Marit distrustfully. "This is a ruse. Don't believe her."

"Stay out of this, mensch!" Marit told him. "What do worms such as you know of honor?" She turned back to Haplo. She was still holding the dagger out to him. "Well, will you take it?"

"Won't this put you in disfavor with Lord Xar?" he asked, still looking at her with that penetrating intensity.

She forced herself to keep her eyes on his. "That's my concern. I cannot in honor kill you. Just take the damn dagger!"

Haplo took it slowly. He looked at it, turning it around and around in his hand as if he'd never seen anything like it before in his life. It wasn't the dagger he was examining. It was her. Her motives.

Yes, whatever had once been between them was over.

Turning around, she started to walk away.

"Marit."

She glanced back.

He held the dagger out to her. "Here, you shouldn't go unarmed."

Swallowing, jaw clenched, Marit stalked back, grabbed the dagger, slid it into the top of her boot.

Haplo was about to add something. Marit was turning away so that she wouldn't have either to hear him or to respond, when they were all startled by a flash of rune-light and the sound of a stone door creaking open.

Alfred walked into the room, but when he saw them all staring at him, he started backing hastily out.

"Dog!" Haplo ordered.

Giving a joyful bark, the animal dashed forward. It caught hold of the Sartan's coattails and tugged the reluctant Alfred, tripping and stumbling, into the room.

The door shut behind him.

Caught, Alfred cast a meek and unhappy glance at each of them and then, with an apologetic smile and a slight shrug of his thin shoulders, he fainted.

## CHAPTER 28

### LOST

IT TOOK SOME TIME TO RESTORE ALFRED, WHO APPEARED VASTLY reluctant to rediscover his consciousness. At length his eyes fluttered open. Unfortunately, the first thing he saw was Hugh the Hand, looming over him.

"Hullo, Alfred," the Hand said grimly.

Alfred turned pale. His eyes rolled back in his head.

The assassin reached down, caught hold of Alfred by his frayed lace collar. "Faint again and I'll choke you!"

"No, no. I'm... all right. Air. I need... air."

"Let him up," Haplo said.

Hugh the Hand released his grip, backed off. Alfred, gasping, staggered to his feet. His gaze fixed firmly on Haplo. "I'm very happy to see you..."

"Happy to see me, too, Alfred?" Hugh the Hand demanded.

Alfred slid a swift glance in Hugh's direction and was apparently sorry he'd done so, because his gaze slid away again quite rapidly.

"Uh, certainly, Sir Hugh. Surprised..."

"Surprised?" Hugh growled. "Why are you surprised? Because I was dead that last time you saw me."

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact, now that I think of it, you were. Quite dead." Alfred flushed, stammered. "You obviously made a... a miraculous re—recovery..."

"I don't suppose you'd know anything about that, do you?"

"Me?" Alfred raised his eyes to the level of Hugh's knees. "I'm afraid not. I was rather busy at the time. There was the Lady Iridal's safety to worry about, you see..."

"Then how do you explain this?" Hugh the Hand ripped his shirt open. The Sartan rune was visible on his breast, now glowing faintly, as if with pleasure. "Look at it, Alfred! Look what you've done to me!"

Alfred raised his eyes slowly, reluctantly. He cast one stricken glance at the rune, then groaned and covered his face with his hands. The dog, whimpering in sympathy, trotted over and placed its paw gently on Alfred's over-large foot.

Hugh the Hand glared in fury, then suddenly grabbed Alfred and shook him. "Look at me, damn it! Look at what you've done! Wherever I was, I was content, at peace. Then you wrenched me back. Now I can't live, I can't die! End it! Send me back!"

Alfred crumpled, hung like a broken doll in Hugh's hands. The dog, squashed between the two, looked confusedly from one to the other, uncertain which to attack, which to protect.

"I didn't know I did it!" Alfred was babbling, practically incoherent. "I didn't know. You must believe me. I don't remember..."

"You—don't—remember!" Hugh the Hand punctuated each word with a shake that eventually drove poor Alfred to his knees.

Haplo rescued the dog, which was in danger of being trampled, and then rescued Alfred.

"Let him alone," Haplo advised. "He's telling the truth—as weird as that might sound. Half the time he doesn't know what he's doing. Like changing himself into a dragon to save my life. Come on, Hugh. Let him go. He's our way out. At least I hope he is. If we're trapped here, none of this is going to matter anyway."

"Let him go!" Scarcely able to breathe around his rage, Hugh the Hand glowered, then finally threw the Sartan to the floor. "Who's going to let me go?"

Turning on his heel, he walked to the door, flung it open, and left. Marit, watching closely, noted with interest that the Sartan magic made no apparent attempt to stop the mensch. She considered following him, just to escape this room herself, but instantly abandoned the idea. She couldn't leave Haplo. Her lord had commanded her to stay.

"Dog, go with him," Haplo ordered.

The animal dashed off after Hugh the Hand. Haplo knelt down beside Alfred. Marit took advantage of the confusion to fade quietly into the background, as much as she possibly could in this wide-open room.

Alfred lay huddled on the floor in a heap, pitiful and pathetic. Marit regarded him with scorn. This Sartan didn't look as if he could raise bread dough, let alone raise the dead. Hugh the Hand must be mistaken.

The Sartan was a middle-aged man, with a bald crown and wispy hair straggling down on the sides of his head; he had a gangly, ungraceful body and large feet and hands—all of which appeared to think they belonged to someone else. He was clad in faded velvet breeches, a velvet coat that didn't fit, shabby hose, and a ruffled shirt decorated with tattered lace.

Taking a frayed handkerchief from a torn pocket, Alfred began to mop his face.

"Are you all right?" Haplo asked gruffly, with a kind of grudging concern.

Alfred glanced up at him, flushed. "Yes, thank you. He... he had every right to do that, you know. What I did— if I did it, and I truly don't remember doing it—was wrong. Very wrong. You recall what I said on Abarrach about necromancy?" He whispered the last word.

"When a life is brought back untimely, another dies untimely.' I remember. But look, is there any way you can help him?"

Alfred hesitated a moment. He was about to answer no, it seemed; then he sighed. His bony shoulders sagged. "Yes, I think it would be possible." He shook his head. "But not here."

"Then where?"

"Do you remember the chamber ... on Abarrach? The one they call the Chamber of the Damned?"

"Yes," said Haplo, looking uncomfortable. "I remember. I wanted to go back there. I was going to take Xar, to prove to him what I meant about a higher power—"

"Oh, dear, no!" Alfred protested, alarmed. "I don't believe that would be at all wise. You see, I've discovered what that chamber is. Orla told me."

"Told you what?" Haplo demanded.

"She was convinced that we had discovered the Seventh Gate," Alfred said softly, in awed tones.

Haplo shrugged. "Yeah? So what?" Alfred looked startled at this reaction; then he sighed. "I guess you wouldn't know, at that. You see, when the Sartan sundered the world—"

"Yes, yes," Haplo interrupted impatiently. "Death's Gate. The Final Gate. I've been through enough gates to last me a lifetime. What about this one? What makes it so special?"

"That was where they were when they sundered it," Alfred said in a low voice. "They were in the Seventh Gate."

"So Samah and Orla and the Council got together in this chamber—"

"More than that, Haplo," Alfred said gravely. "They not only came together in the chamber, they imbued the chamber with magic. They tore apart a world and built four new ones from that chamber—"

Haplo gave a whistle. "And it still exists, with all its magic... all its power..." He shook his head. "No wonder they put warding runes to prevent anyone's getting inside."

"According to Orla, Samah wasn't responsible for that," Alfred said. "You see, when the magic was complete and the worlds were formed, he realized how dangerous this chamber could become—"

"Worlds that could be created could also be destroyed."

"Precisely. And so he sent the chamber into oblivion." "Why didn't he just destroy the chamber?" "He tried," Alfred said quietly. "And he discovered he couldn't."

"The higher power stopped him?" Alfred nodded. "Afraid of what he'd tapped into, unable or unwilling to understand it, Samah sent the chamber away, hoping it would never be discovered. That was the last Orla knew of it. But the chamber was discovered, by a group of Sartan on Abarrach—a group desperately unhappy with what was happening to their own people. Fortunately, I don't believe they had any idea what they'd found."

"Yeah, all right, so we were in the Seventh Gate. What has any of this got to do with Hugh the Hand?"

"I think that if he went into the Seventh Gate, he would be free."

"How?"

"I can't be sure," Alfred answered evasively. "Not that it matters anyway. We're not going anywhere."

Haplo glanced around. "Where the devil are we? And did you escape Samah? This place looks familiar, like that tomb on Arianus. I don't suppose we're back on Arianus?"

"No, no, we're not on Arianus."

Haplo waited patiently for the Sartan to continue.

Alfred kept quiet.

"You do know where we are?" Haplo asked dubiously.

Alfred conceded the point with a reluctant nod.

"Then where are we?"

Alfred wrung his hands together. "Let me think how best to explain. First, I must tell you that I didn't escape Samah."

"I'm not interested—"

"Please, let me finish. Have you traveled through Death's Gate since it's been open?"

"Yes. I went back to Arianus. Why?"

"Images of each of the worlds flashed before your eyes, giving you a choice of where you want to go. Do you recall a world that was very beautiful, a world you've never visited, never seen? A world of blue skies, sunlight, green trees, vast oceans—an ancient, ancient world."

Haplo nodded. "I saw that. I wondered at the time—"

"That's where we are," said Alfred. "The Vortex."

Haplo looked around at the bare white marble. "Blue sky. Sunshine. Wonderful." His gaze returned to Alfred. "You're making even less sense than usual."

"The Vortex. The center of the universe. Once it led to the ancient world—"

"A world no longer in existence."

"True. But the images of it must have been accidentally retained—"

"Or put there deliberately, a Sartan trap for someone traveling Death's Gate who shouldn't have been," Haplo said grimly. "I damn near came here myself. Is this where I would have ended up?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Although you'll find it's not bad, once you get used to it. All our wants and needs are provided. The magic sees to that. And it's safe. Perfectly safe."

Haplo was looking around again. "And to think I've been worrying about you in the Labyrinth, picturing you dead or worse. And all the time you've been here." He waved his hand. "Safe. Perfectly safe."

"You were concerned about me?" Alfred asked, his wan face brightening.

Haplo made an impatient gesture. "Of course I was concerned. You can't walk across an empty room without causing some sort of catastrophe. And speaking of empty rooms, how do we get out of this one?"

Alfred didn't reply. Lowering his head, he stared at his shoes.

Haplo eyed him thoughtfully. "Samah said he was sending you and Orla to the Labyrinth. Either he made a mistake or he wasn't quite the bastard he made out to be. He sent you both here." A thought seemed to occur to him. "Where is Orla, anyway?"

"Samah wasn't a bad man," Alfred said softly. "Just a very frightened one. But he's not afraid anymore. As for Orla, she left. She went to be with him."

"And you just stayed here? You didn't go with her? You could have at least gone back to warn the other Sartan on Chelestra—"

"You don't understand, Haplo," Alfred said. "I stay here because I have to. There is no way out."

Haplo stared at him in exasperation. "But you said Orla left—"

Alfred began to sing the runes. His ungainly body was suddenly graceful, swaying and whirling to the rhythm of the song. His hands formed the sigla in the air.

The melody was sad, yet sweet, and Marit was suddenly reminded of the last time she'd held her baby in her arms. The memory hurt her, the song hurt her, and the pain made her angry. She was about to lash out, to disrupt the magic spell he was casting—a spell that was undoubtedly meant to weaken her—when a portion of the stone wall disappeared.

Inside the wall, lying in a crystal coffin, was a Sartan woman. Her face was quiet, her eyes closed. She seemed to smile faintly.

Haplo understood. "I'm sorry..."

Alfred smiled sadly. "She is at peace. She left to join her husband." He shifted his gaze to Marit; his expression grew stern. "Orla saw what happened to him, saw how he died."

"He was executed for his crimes." Marit was defensive, defiant. "He suffered as he made us suffer. He deserved what he got. More, even. Far more."

Alfred said nothing. He cast a fond glance at the woman in the crystal coffin, rested his hand on the window with a gentle touch. Then, slowly, his hand moved to another crystal coffin beside hers. This coffin was empty.

"What's that?" Haplo demanded.

"Mine," Alfred said, "when the time comes. You are right. This place is very much like Arianus."

"Too damn much," said Haplo. "You've found another tomb. 'Perfectly safe!'" He snorted. "Well, you're not crawling into it. You're coming with me."

"I'm afraid not. You're not going anywhere. I've told you, there's no way out." Alfred looked back at Orla. "Except her way."

"He's lying!" Marit cried, fending off panic, fighting a sudden terrifying desire to tear at the solid stone with her bare hands.

"No, he's not lying. He's a Sartan. He can't lie. But he's very good at not telling the truth." Haplo eyed Alfred. "Death's Gate is around here somewhere. We'll go out through Death's Gate."

"We don't have a ship," Marit reminded him.

"We'll build one." Haplo kept his gaze on Alfred, who was once more staring at his shoes. "What about it, Sartan? Death's Gate? Is that the way out?"

"The gate swings only one way," Alfred said in a low voice.

Frustrated, not certain what to do, Haplo stared at the Sartan.

Marit knew what to do. Leaning down, she slid the dagger from her boot.

"I'll make him talk."

"Leave him alone, Marit. You won't get anything out of him that way."

"I'll try not to damage your 'friend' too much. You don't have to watch."

Haplo stepped in front of her. He said nothing. He simply put his body between her and Alfred.

"Traitor!" Marit tried to dodge around him.

Haplo caught her, his movement quick and deft. He held on to her tightly. She was strong, perhaps stronger than he was at this moment, and she fought to escape. Their arms and hands locked, and as they held each other fast, a blue glow began to shimmer from each hand, each arm.

The rune-magic, coming to life.

Except that this magic wasn't acting either to attack or to defend. It was acting as it would when any two Patrins touched. It was the magic of joining, of closing the circle. It was a magic of healing, of shared strength, shared commitment.

It began to seep inside Marit.

She didn't want it. She was empty inside, empty and hollow, dark and silent. She couldn't even hear her own voice anymore, just the echo of words spoken long ago coming back to her. The emptiness was cold, but at least it wasn't painful. She'd pushed out all the pain, given birth to it, cut the cord.

But the blue glow, soft and warm, spread from Haplo's hand to hers. It began creeping into her. A tiny drop, like a single tear, fell into the emptiness...

"Haplo, you'd better come and see this."

It was Hugh the Hand, standing in the door. His voice was harsh, urgent.

Distracted, Haplo turned. Marit broke free of his grasp. He turned back to her, looking at her, and in his eyes was the same warmth she'd felt in the rune-magic. His hand reached out toward her. She had only to take it...

The dog came trotting up. Tail wagging, tongue lolling, it started toward her, as if it had found a friend.

Marit threw her dagger at it.

Her aim was rotten. She was upset, could barely see. The dagger grazed the animal along the left flank.

The dog yelped in pain, flinched away from her. The dagger thudded against the wall somewhere near the assassin's right calf. Hugh put his foot on it. Alfred was staring in horror, so pale it seemed he might faint again.

Marit turned her back on them all. "Keep that beast away from me, Haplo. By law, I can't kill you. But I can kill that damn dog."

"Come here, boy," Haplo called. He examined the animal's wound. "It's all right, dog. Just a scratch. You were lucky."

"In case anybody's interested," Hugh the Hand said, "I found the way out. At least I think it's a way out. You'd better come and look. I've never seen anything like it."

Haplo glanced at Alfred, who had flushed bright red "What's wrong with it? Is it guarded? Magic?"

"Nothing like that," the Hand answered, "More like a joke."

"I doubt it's a joke. The Sartan don't have much of a sense of humor."

"Someone did. The way out is through a maze."

"A maze..." Haplo repeated softly.

He knew the truth then. And Marit knew at the same moment Haplo knew. The emptiness inside her filled, filled with fear, fear that twisted and kicked inside her like a living thing. She was almost sick with it.

"So Samah did keep his word," Haplo said to Alfred.

The Sartan nodded. His face was deathly white his expression bleak. "Yes, he kept it."

"He knows where we are?" Hugh the Hand demanded.

"He knows," Haplo said quietly. "He's known all along. The Labyrinth."

## CHAPTER 29

### THE LABYRINTH

THEY LEFT THE ROOM OF WHITE MARBLE AND ITS CRYSTAL COFFINS. Following Hugh's lead, they traversed a narrow hallway carved out of gray rough-cut rock. The corridor sloped, straight and even, steadily downward. At its end an arched doorway, also carved out of rock, opened into a gigantic cavern.

The vault of the cavern's roof was high overhead, lost in shadows. A dull gray light, shining from a point far opposite the entrance, glistened off the wet surfaces of huge stalactites. Stalagmites thrust up out of the cavern floor to meet them, like teeth in a gaping mouth. Through gaps in the wet teeth a river of black water swirled, flowing in the direction of the cheerless light.

An ordinary enough cavern. Haplo looked at the arched doorway. Touching Marit's arm, he silently called her attention to a mark scratched above it—a single Sartan rune. Marit looked at it, shuddered, leaned against the chill wall.

She was shivering, her bare arms clasped tightly. Her face was averted; her hair hung over it, hiding it. Haplo knew that if he smoothed back that tangled mass of hair, touched her cheek, he'd feel tears. He didn't blame her. Once he would have wept himself. But now he felt strangely elated. This was, after all, where he'd intended to come all along.

Marit couldn't read the Sartan rune-language, but she could read that one sigil. All Patryns could. They could read them and they had come to hate and detest them.

"The First Gate," said Haplo. "We stand at the very beginnings of the Labyrinth."

"Labyrinth," Hugh the Hand repeated. "Then I was right. That is a maze out there." He gestured beyond the gate.

Rows of stalagmites spread out into the darkness. A path, wet and sleek, led from the arch into the stalagmites. Haplo could see from where he stood -the first fork in the path, two diverse courses, slanting left and right, each wandering off amid rock formations that had not been naturally created, but had been formed by magic and fear and hate.

There was one right way. All others led to disaster. And they were standing at the very first gate.

"I've been in a few caves in my life," the Hand continued. He gestured into the darkness with the stem of his pipe. "But nothing like this. I walked out onto the path until I came to that first fork; then I caught a glimpse of where it led." He rubbed his chin. The hair was beginning to grow back on his face and his head, a blue-black stubble that must have itched. "I figured I'd better come back before I got myself lost."

"Getting lost would have been the least of your worries," said Haplo. "The wrong turn in that maze leads to death. It was built that way on purpose. The Labyrinth is more than a maze. It's a prison. And my child is trapped in there."

Hugh the Hand removed his pipe from his mouth, stared at Haplo. "I'll be damned."

Alfred huddled in the back, as far from the arched doorway as he could get and still remain near the group. "You want to tell him about the Labyrinth, Sartan, or shall I?"

Alfred looked up briefly, an expression of hurt in his eyes. Haplo saw the pain, knew the reason for it, chose to ignore it. Alfred wasn't Alfred anymore. He was the enemy. No matter that they were all in this together now. Haplo needed someone to hate, needed his hate as a strong wall to lean against for support, or he'd fall and maybe never get up.

The dog had been standing beside Haplo, near the open archway, sniffing the air and not liking what it smelled. It shook itself all over, padded to Alfred. The dog rubbed against the Sartan's leg, its plummy tail brushing back and forth slowly, gently.

"I understand how you feel," Alfred said. Reaching out, he gave the dog a timid pat on the head. "I'm sorry."

Haplo's wall of hate began to crumble; fear started climbing up over the pieces. He gritted his teeth. "Damn it, Alfred, stop apologizing! I've told you before, it's not your fault!" The echo came bounding back at him.

Your fault... your fault... your fault...

"I know. I will. I'm s-s-s—" Alfred made a hissing sound like a spent teakettle, caught Haplo's eye, and fell silent.

The Hand looked from one to the other. "I don't give a damn whose fault it is. Somebody explain what's going on."

Haplo shrugged. "A long time ago there was a war between his people and mine. We lost and they won—"

"No," Alfred corrected gently, sadly, "nobody won."

"At any rate, they shut us up in this prison, then went off to find prisons of their own. Is that how you'd put it, Alfred?"

The Sartan did not answer.

"This prison is known as the Labyrinth. It's where I was born. It's where she was born." He gestured at Mark. "It's where our child was born. And where our child lives."

"If she lives," Marit muttered beneath her breath.

She had regained a certain amount of control; she was no longer shaking. But she did not look at them. Leaning against the wall, she kept her arms clasped about her tightly, holding herself together.

"It's a cruel place, filled with cruel magic that delights not only in killing, but in killing slowly, torturing, tormenting you until death comes as a friend.\* The two of us managed to escape, with the help of our lord, Xar. But many don't. Many haven't. Generations of our people have been born, have lived and died in the Labyrinth.

\*One of the Patryn words for "death" is, in fact, the same as the word for "friend."

"And there are none of our people now living," Haplo finished quietly, "who started at the First Gate and made it all the way through to the end."

The assassin's expression darkened. "What are you saving?"

Marit turned to him, anger burning her tears dry. "It took our people hundreds of years to reach the Final Gate. And they did it by standing on the bodies of those who fell before them! A dying father points out the way ahead to his son. A dying mother hands her daughter to those who will carry the child on. I escaped and now I'm back."

She gulped, a dry, wrenching sob. "To face it all over again. The pain, the fear... And no hope of escape. We're too far away."

Haplo wanted to comfort her, but he guessed his sympathy wouldn't be appreciated. Besides, what comfort could he offer? She spoke the truth.

"Well, no use standing around here. The sooner we start the sooner we're finished," he said, and didn't realize the dark import of his words until he heard Marit's bitter laughter.

"I was coming on this journey with the intent of going back inside the Labyrinth," he went on, deliberately brisk, businesslike. "I just hadn't planned on entering from this direction. But I guess one way is as good as another. Maybe the best. Now I won't miss anything."

"You were going back?" Marit stared at him in wonder. "Why?" Her eyes narrowed. "To escape Xar?"

"No," Haplo answered. He didn't look at her. His gaze shifted to the cavern, to the gray light gleaming off the eddies in the dark water. "I was going back to find you. And our daughter."

She seemed about to say something; her lips parted. Then they closed over the words. Her eyes lowered.

"I am going in there now to search for our daughter," Haplo said. "Will you go with me?"

Marit raised her head, her face pale. "I... I don't know. I have to think..."

"Marit, you don't have much choice. There's no other way out."

"According to the Sartan!" She sneered. "Maybe you trust him. But I don't. I have to think about it."

She saw the pity on Haplo's face. Very well. Let him think she was afraid. Let him think she needed time to bolster her courage. What did it matter to her what he thought?

Her body rigid, she stalked up the path toward the mausoleum. Coming level with Alfred, she glared at him until he cringingly fell back out of her way, stumbling over the dog as he did so. Marit swept past him, disappeared up the corridor.

"Where's she off to?" Hugh the Hand demanded, suspicious. "Maybe one of us should go with her."

"Leave her alone. You don't understand. We both nearly died in there. Going back isn't easy. Are you coming?"

The Hand shrugged. "Either that or spend eternity here. I don't suppose I could die of boredom?" He cocked an eye at Alfred.

"No, I'm afraid... not," said Alfred, thinking the question was serious.

Hugh laughed, bitter and sharp. "I'll go with you. What can happen to me?"

"Good." Haplo's spirits lightened. He almost began to think they had a chance. "We can use your skills. You know, when I first contemplated going back inside, I thought of you for a companion. Strange the way it's all worked out. What weapons do you carry?"

Hugh the Hand started to answer, but Alfred interrupted.

"Uh... that won't matter," he said in a small voice.

"What do you mean, it won't matter? Of course it matters—"

"He can't kill," said Alfred.

Haplo stared, struck dumb with astonishment. He didn't want to believe it, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made—at least from a Sartan point of view.

"You understand?" Alfred asked hopefully.

Haplo intimated that he did with a few brief and unrepeatable words.

"Well, I sure as hell don't!" Hugh the Hand snarled.

"You can't be killed. You can't kill. It's as simple as that," said Haplo.

"Think about it," Alfred continued in a low voice. "Have you killed anything—even a bug—since your... uh... return?"

Hugh stared, his face going sallow beneath the black sprouts of beard.

"That's why no one would hire me," he said harshly. Sweat glistened on his skin. "Trian wanted me to kill Bane. I couldn't. I was supposed to kill Stephen. I couldn't. I was hired to kill you"—he gave Haplo a haunted look—"and I couldn't. Damn it, I couldn't even kill myself! I tried"—he stared at his hands—"and I couldn't do it!"

He looked at Alfred, eyes narrowed. "Would the Kenkari have known that?"

"The Kenkari?" Alfred was puzzled. "Ah, yes. The elves who keep the souls of the dead. No, I don't believe they would have known. But the dead would," he added after a moment's thought. "Yes, they would have known. Why?"

"The Kenkari were the ones who sent me to kill Haplo," the Hand said grimly.

"The Kenkari?" Alfred was amazed. "No, no, they would never kill anyone or hire it done. You may be certain, you were sent for some other reason..."

"Yes," said the Hand, eyes glittering, "I'm beginning to understand. They sent me to find you."

"Isn't that interesting, Alfred," Haplo added, regarding the Sartan intently. "They sent Hugh the Hand to find you. I wonder why?"

Alfred's eyes slid out from beneath both of their gazes. "I can't imagine—"

"Wait a minute," Haplo interrupted. "What you said can't be right. Hugh the Hand did damn near kill me. And Marit as well. He has some sort of magical weapon—"

"Had," Hugh the Hand corrected with grim satisfaction. "It's gone. Lost in the sea water."

"A magical weapon?" Alfred shook his head. "From the Kenkari? They are quite gifted in magic, but they would never use their magic to make weapons—"

"Naw," Hugh the Hand growled. "I got it from... well, let's just say it came from another source. The blade was supposedly of ancient Sartan make and design. Your people used it during some long-ago war..."

"Perhaps." Alfred looked extremely unhappy. "Many magical weapons were made, I'm afraid. By both sides. I don't know anything about this particular one, but my guess is that the weapon itself was intelligent, could

act on its own. It used you, Sir Hugh, simply as a bearer, a means of transport. That and your fear and will to guide it."

"Well, it's lost now, so it doesn't matter," Haplo said. "Lost in the waters of Chelestra."

"A pity we cannot flood the universe with such water," said Alfred quietly to himself.

Haplo looked into the cavern, into the dark water that flowed through it. He could hear the water now that he listened, hear it churn and gurgle and lap against the bordering rocks. He could imagine what horrid things swam in its foul currents, what dread creatures might crawl out of its dark depths.

"You're not coming with us, are you," Haplo said.

"No," said Alfred, staring at his shoes. "I'm not."

Almost sick with fear, Marit took her time returning to the white room, knowing she must compose herself before she spoke to Xar. He would understand; he always understood. She had seen him—countless times—comfort those unable to go back into the Labyrinth. He was the only one who'd ever done so. He would understand, but he would be disappointed. Marit entered the round room.

The crystal coffins were no longer visible, covered over by Sartan magic, but she sensed their presence. And being around dead Sartan didn't give her as much pleasure as she might have imagined.

Standing at the opposite end of the room from the coffins, as far away as she could get, she placed her hand on the sigil tattooed on her forehead and bowed her head.

"Xar, My Lord," she murmured.

He was with her immediately.

"I know where we are, Lord," she said softly, unable to check a sigh. "We are in the center of the Labyrinth. We stand at the very first gate."

Silence. Then Xar said, "And will Haplo enter?"

"He claims he will. But I doubt he has the courage." She doubted she had the courage, but she didn't mention that. "No one has ever gone back before, Lord, except you." Still, what do we have if we stay here? Our own tombs.

Marit recalled the face of the woman in the crystal coffin. She rested peacefully, wherever she was. Her death had been an easy one.

"What reason does Haplo give for entering the Labyrinth?" Xar asked.

Marit found it difficult to answer. She hesitated, felt him press her—an uncomfortable sensation.

"The—the child, Lord," she said at last, stammering. She'd almost said, our child.

"Bah! What a paltry excuse! He must take me for a fool! I know his true reason. He has become ambitious, has Haplo. He has succeeded in seizing control of Arianus. Now he and that Sartan friend of his plan to try to subvert my own people, turn them against me. He will enter the Labyrinth and raise his own army! He must be stopped... You doubt me, Marit?"

She sensed his displeasure, almost anger. Yet she couldn't help what she felt. "I think he is serious... He has certainly never mentioned..."

"Of course he wouldn't." Xar dismissed her admittedly weak arguments. "Haplo is cunning and clever. But he will not succeed. Go with him, Daughter. Stay with him. Fight to stay alive. And do not fear. Your time there will not be long. Sang-drax is on his way to the Labyrinth. Through me, he will find you and Haplo. Sang-drax will bring Haplo to me." Since you have failed.

Marit heard the rebuke. She accepted it in silence, knowing she deserved it. But the image of the horrid dragon-snakes she'd glimpsed on Chelestra rose hideously in her mind. Firmly she banished the vision. Xar was asking other questions.

"Haplo and the Sartan. What did they talk about? Tell me everything they have said."

"They spoke of Hugh the Hand, how the Sartan might be able to lift the curse of immortal life from the human. They talked of Abarrach and a chamber there. It is called the Chamber of the Damned—"

"Again that wretched chamber." Xar was angry. "Haplo talks of nothing else! He is obsessed with it! He once wanted to take me to it. I—"

A pause.

A long, long pause.

"I... have been a fool. He would have taken me," Xar murmured. His words were soft, brushing across her forehead like the wings of a butterfly. "What did he say about this chamber? Did he or the Sartan mention something called the Seventh Gate?"

"Yes, Lord." Marit was astounded, awed. "How did you know?"

"A fool, a blind fool!" he repeated bitterly, and then he was urgent, compelling. "What did they say about it?"

Marit related all she could remember.

"Yes, that is it! A room imbued with magic! Power! What can be created can be destroyed!"

Marit could feel Xar's excitement; it quivered through her like an electric jolt.

"Did they say where it was on Abarrach? How to reach it?"

"No, Lord." She was forced to disappoint him.

"Speak to him about this chamber further! Find out all you can! Where it is! How to enter!" He grew calmer. "But don't rouse his suspicions, Daughter. Be circumspect, cautious. Of course, that is how they plan to defeat me. Haplo must never come to suspect—"

"Suspect what, Lord?"

"Suspect that I know about this chamber. Keep in contact with me, Daughter... Or perhaps I should say Wife."

He was pleased with her again. Marit had no idea why, but he was her lord and his commands were to be obeyed without question. And she would be glad to have his counsel when they were in the Labyrinth. But his next statement proved troubling.

"I will let Sang-drax know where you are."

That brought no comfort to her, though she knew it should. Only unease.

"Yes, Lord."

"Of course, I do not need to tell you—mention none of what we have discussed to Haplo."

"No, Lord."

He was gone. Marit was alone. Very much alone. That was what she wanted, what she'd chosen. He travels fastest who travels alone. And she'd traveled fast, very fast indeed.

All the way back to where she'd started.

The four (and the dog) stood at the entrance to the cavern, the entrance to the Labyrinth. The gray light had grown not brighter, but stronger. Haplo judged it must be midday. If they were going, they should go now. No time was a good time to travel in the Labyrinth, but any time during the daylight was better than at night.

Marit had rejoined them. Her face was pale but set, her jaw clenched. "I will go with you," was all she'd said, and she'd said that much sullenly, with reluctance.

Haplo wondered why she'd decided to come. But he knew asking would do no good. Marit would never tell him, and his asking would only alienate him from her further. She had been like this when they'd first met. Walled up inside herself. He had managed, with patience and care, to find a door—only a small one, but it had permitted him inside. And then it had slammed shut. The child—he knew now that was why she'd left him and he thought he understood.

Rue, she'd named the baby.

And now the door was closed and shuttered, walled up. There was no way in. And from what he could tell, she'd sealed the only way out.

Haplo glanced up at the Sartan sigil shining above the archway. He was entering the Labyrinth, the deadliest place in existence, without any weapons—except for his magic. But that, at least, wasn't a problem. In the Labyrinth, there were always plenty of ways to kill.

"We should go," Haplo said.

Hugh the Hand was ready, eager to get on with it. Of course, he had no idea what he was walking into. Even if he couldn't die... and who knew? Against the Labyrinth's cruel magic, the Sartan heart-rune might not protect him. Marit was frightened, but resolved. She was going forward, probably because she couldn't go back.

Either that or she was still hoping to murder him.

And the one person—the last person Haplo would have said he needed or wanted...

"I wish you'd come, Alfred."

The Sartan shook his head. "No, you don't. I'd only be in your way. I would faint..."

Haplo regarded the man grimly. "You've found your tomb again, haven't you? Just like in Arianus."

"And this time I'm not going to leave." Alfred gazed fixedly downward. He must know his shoes very well by now. "I've caused too much trouble already." He lifted his eyes, cast a quick glance at Hugh the Hand, lowered his eyes again. "Too much," he repeated. "Good-bye, Sir Hugh. I'm really... very sorry."

"Good-bye? That's it?" the Hand demanded angrily.

"You don't need me to end the... curse," Alfred said softly. "Haplo knows where to go, what to do."

No, Haplo didn't, but then he figured it wouldn't matter anyway. They'd likely never get that far.

He was suddenly angry. Let the damn Sartan bury himself. Who cared? Who needed him? Alfred was right. He'd only be in the way, be more trouble than he was worth.

Haplo entered the Labyrinth. The dog cast one mournful look back at Alfred, then trotted along at its master's heels. Hugh the Hand followed. He looked grim but relieved, always grateful for action. Marit brought up the rear. She was very pale, but she didn't hesitate.

Alfred stood at the entryway, staring at his shoes.

Haplo walked the path carefully. Coming to the first fork, he halted, examined both branches. One way looked much the same as the other, both probably equally bad. The tooth-like rock formations thrust out from all sides, blocking his view. He could see only upward, see what looked like dripping fangs. He could hear the dark water swirling onward, into the heart of the Labyrinth.

Haplo grinned to himself in the darkness. He touched the dog on the head, turned the dog's head toward the entrance.

Toward Alfred.

"Go on, boy," Haplo commanded. "Fetch!"

CHAPTER 30

THE CITADEL

PRYAN

"I DON'T LIKE THAT HORRID WIZARD, PAITHAN, AND I THINK YOU should tell him to leave."

"Orn's ears, Aleatha, I can't tell Lord Xar to leave. He has as much right to be here as we do. We don't own this place—"

"We were here first."

"Besides, we can't send the old gentleman out into the arms of the tytans. It would be murder."

The elf's voice dropped, but not low enough that Xar couldn't hear what was being said.

"And he could prove useful, help protect us if the tytans manage to break inside. You saw how he got rid of those monsters when he first came. Whoosh! Blue lights, magic fire."

"As to that magic fire"—this was the human male, adding his small modicum of wisdom—"the wizard might do the same to us if we make him mad."

"Not likely," Xar murmured, smiling unpleasantly. "I wouldn't waste the effort."

The mensch were having a meeting—a private, secret meeting, or so they supposed. Xar knew all about it, of course. He was seated at his ease in the Sartan library in the citadel. The mensch were gathered down by the garden maze—a good distance away, but Xar clearly heard every word they were saying.

"What is it you don't like about him, Aleatha?" the human female was asking.

What was her name? Xar couldn't recall. Again, he didn't waste the effort.

"He gave me this lovely necklace," the human was continuing. "See. I think it must be a ruby. And look at the cunning little squiggly mark cut into it."

"I got one, too," said the elf Paithan. "Mine's a sapphire. And it has the same squiggle. Lord Xar said that when I wore it, someone would be watching over me. Isn't it pretty, Aleatha?"

"I think it's ugly." The elf female spoke with scorn. "And I think he's ugly—"

"He can't help how he looks."

"Something I'm certain you can understand, Roland," Aleatha interjected coolly. "As to those 'gifts,' he tried to give me one. I refused. I didn't like the look in his eye."

"Come on, Thea. Since when have you turned down jewels? As for that look, you've seen it a thousand times before. Every man looks at you that way," Paithan said.

"Then they get to know her," Roland muttered.

Either Aleatha didn't hear him or she chose to ignore him. "The old man only offered me an emerald. I've been offered better than that a hundred times over."

"And taken them up on their offers a hundred times over, I'll wager," Roland said, more loudly this time.

"Come on, you two, stop it," Paithan intervened. "What about you, Roland? Did Lord Xar give you one of these jewels?"

"Me?" Roland sounded amazed. "Look, Paithan, I don't know about you elves, but among us humans, guys don't give necklaces to other guys. As to guys who accept jewelry from other guys, well..."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing, Paithan," Rega intervened. "Roland's not saying anything. He took the necklace; don't let him fool you. I saw him asking Drugar about the jewel, trying to get it appraised."

"What about it, Drugar? How much are they worth?"

"The gem is not of dwarf-make. I cannot tell. But I wouldn't wear one. I get a bad feeling from them." The dwarf's voice was low and gruff.

"Sure you do," Roland scoffed. "Such a bad feeling you'd gladly take every one of them for yourself. Look, Drugar, old buddy, never try to swindle a swindler. I know all the tricks. It has to be dwarf-made. Your people are the only ones who dig deep enough below the leaf-level to find jewels like this. Come on. Tell me what it's worth."

"What does it matter what it's worth?" Rega flared. "You'll never get a chance to cash in on it. We're trapped in here for the rest of our lives and you know it."

The mensch all fell silent. Xar yawned. He was growing bored, and this mindless chatter was starting to irritate him. He was beginning to regret giving them the magical gems, which brought every word of what they said to him. Then suddenly he heard what he'd been wanting to hear all along.

"I guess that brings up the real reason for our meeting," Paithan said quietly. "Do we tell him about the ship? Or keep it to ourselves?"

A ship! Sang-drax had been right. The mensch did have a ship hidden around here. Xar shut the Sartan book he'd been attempting to read, concentrated on listening.

"What difference does it make?" Aleatha asked languidly. "If a ship really does exist—which I doubt—we can't reach it. We have only Cook's word on it, and who knows what she and her brats thought they saw out there? The tytans have probably smashed it to toothpicks anyway."

"No," Paithan said after another moment's silence. "No, they haven't. And it does exist."

"How do you know?" Roland demanded, suspicious.

"Because I've seen it. You can—from the top of the citadel. From the Star Chamber."

"You mean all this time you knew that the others were telling the truth about what they saw? That a ship was out there and still in good shape and you didn't tell us?"

"Don't shout at me! Yes, damn it, I knew! And I didn't tell you for the simple reason that you would have acted stupid the way you're acting now and rushed out like the others and gotten your fool head bashed in—"

"Well, and so what if I did? It's my head! Just because you're sleeping with my sister doesn't make you my big brother."

"You could use a big brother."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Stop it, both of you, please—"

"Rega, get out of my way. It's time he learned..."

"You're all behaving like children."

"Aleatha! Where are you going? You shouldn't go into that maze. It's..."

"I'll go where I please, Rega. Just because you're sleeping with my brother—"

Imbeciles! Xar clenched his fists. For an instant he considered transporting himself down to them, shaking the truth out of them. Or perhaps choking it out of them. He grew calmer, however, and soon forgot about them. But not about what they'd said.

"You can see the ship from the top of the citadel," he muttered. "I'll go up there and look for myself. The elf might well be lying. And they're not likely to come back soon."

Xar had been meaning to take a look inside what the mensch referred to as the Star Chamber, but the elf—Paithan—had the annoying habit of hovering around the room, treating it as if it were his own personal and private creation. He'd very proudly offered to give Xar a tour. Xar had been careful not to evince too much interest, much to Paithan's disappointment. The Lord of the Nexus would examine the Star Chamber in his own good time—by himself.

Whatever Sartan magic happened in the Star Chamber was the key to controlling the tytans. That much was evident.

"It's the humming sound," Paithan had said. "I think that's what's drawing them."

Obvious enough that even a mensch had seen it. The humming sound undoubtedly did have a startling effect on the tytans. From what Xar had observed, the humming sent them into some sort of trance. And when it stopped, they flew into a frenzy, like a fretful child who will only be quiet when it hears its mother's voice.

"An interesting analogy," Xar remarked, transporting himself to the Star Chamber with a spoken word of magic. He disliked climbing the stairs. "A mother's soothing voice. A lullaby. The Sartan used this to control them, and while they were under this influence, they were slaves to the Sartan's will. If I could just learn the secret..."

Reaching the door that led into the Star Chamber, Xar peered cautiously inside. The machine was shut down. The blinding light was off. The machine had been running erratically ever since the lord's arrival. The elf thought it was supposed to work this way, but Xar guessed not. The Lord of the Nexus knew little about machinery; he truly missed the child Bane at this moment. The boy had figured out how to work the Kicksey-winsey; he could undoubtedly have solved the mystery of this far simpler machine.

Xar was confident that he himself would solve it in time. The Sartan, as was their custom, had left behind innumerable volumes, some of which must contain something other than their constant whining—complaints about how tough things were, how awful their lives had become. He grew irritated every time he tried to read one.

What with wading through books of useless twaddle, listening to the mensch bicker and quarrel, and keeping an eye on the tytans, who had once again massed outside the citadel's walls, Xar had found very little information to help him.

Until now. Now he was beginning to get somewhere.

He entered the Star Chamber, stalked over to the window, and stared outside. It took him several moments of intense searching to find the ship, partly hidden in the thick jungle foliage. When he located it, he wondered how he could have missed it. His eye was instantly drawn to it—the only ordered thing in a world of wild disorder.

He examined it intently, excited, tempted. The ship was in plain view. He could whisk himself there at this moment. Leave this world, leave the mensch. Return to the Labyrinth, return to find Haplo.

Haplo—who knew the location of the Seventh Gate on Abarrach. Who wanted nothing more than to take his lord with him...

Sartan runes.

Xar narrowed his eyes, brought the ship into tighter focus. He could not be mistaken. The hull of the vessel—it was built to resemble some type of giant bird—was covered with Sartan runes.

Xar cursed. The Sartan magic would keep him out as effectively as it had kept him out of the citatlel.

"The mensch..." he whispered.

They had managed to enter the citadel; they could certainly enter the ship. That dwarf with his amulet and his puny little bit of Sartan rune-magic. The mensch could get inside the ship, take Xar with them. The mensch would be thrilled to leave this place.

But between the mensch and the ship, between Xar and the ship, was an army of tytans.

Xar cursed again.

The creatures—hundreds of them—were camped outside the walls. Whenever the machine flared to life, they swarmed out of the jungle, surrounded the citadel, blind heads turned in the direction of the gate, waiting for it to open. This transfixion lasted as long as the humming and the brilliant starlight. When the machine shut off, the tytans came out of the trance and attempted to break into the citadel.

Their rage was truly frightening. The tytans beat on the walls with their fists and tree-branch clubs. Their silent shouts reverberated in Xar's head until it almost drove him mad. But the walls held; Xar gave grudging thanks to the Sartan for that much at least. Eventually, worn out, the tytans would shuffle back into the cover of the jungle and wait.

They were waiting now. He could see them. Waiting to question the first living being who came out of the citadel, waiting to club him to death when they didn't get the right answer.

This was maddening, truly maddening. I know now the location of the Seventh Gate—back on Abarrach. Haplo could lead me to it. He will lead me to it. Once Sang-drax finds him...

But what about Sang-drax? Does Sang-drax know? Has the dragon-snake deliberately lied—

Movement outside the door. A shuffling sound. Drat those snooping mensch! Couldn't they leave him alone an instant?

A rune flared from his hand; the door dissolved. A startled-looking old man, clad in mouse-colored robes, with his hand raised to the now nonexistent door handle, was staring into the room in amazement.

"I say," he said. "What'd you do with the door?"

"What do you want?" Xar demanded.

"This isn't the men's room?" The old man glanced about in wistful expectation.

"Where did you come from?"

The old man shuffled into the room, still looking about hopefully. "Oh, down the hall. Take a right at the potted palm. Third door on the left. I asked for a room with a bath, but—"

"What are you doing here? Were you following me?"

"I don't believe so." The old man considered the matter. "Can't think why I would. No offense, old chap, but you're not exactly my type. Still, I suppose we should make the best of it. Two girls left at the altar, aren't we, my dear? Abandoned at the church door..."

The old man had wandered over near the well. A magical shove and Xar would be rid of this irritating fool for good. But Xar found what the old man was saying intriguing.

"What do you mean... abandoned?"

"Dumped is more like it," said the old man with increasing gloom. "So I won't get hurt. 'You'll be safe here, sir,' " he mimicked, scowling. "Thinks I'm too old and frail to mix it up in a good brawl anymore. I'll show you, you hyperthyroid toad..."

He shook a scrawny fist in the general direction of nothing, then sighed and turned to Xar. "What was the excuse yours gave you?"

"Who gave me?" Xar was playing along. "I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Why, your dragon. Geriatric? Feeble? Slow him down? I— Ah, of course." The old man's vague expression grew disconcertingly sharp. "I understand. Quite clever. Lured you here. Got you here. Left you here. And now he's gone. And you can't follow."

Xar shrugged. The old man knew something. Now to keep him talking. "Are you referring to Sang-drax?"

"On Abarrach, you're too close. Kleitus has already talked too much. He might say more. Sang-drax is worried. Suggests Pryan. Wasn't expecting my dragon, though. Opposing team. Rip side. Change in plans. Haplo trapped in Labyrinth. You here. Not perfect, but better than nothing. Takes ship. And people. Leaves you—lurch. Goes to Labyrinth. Kills Haplo."

Xar shrugged. "Dead or alive, it doesn't matter to me."

"That's true." The old man pondered. "So long as Sang-drax brings you the body. But that... that's the one thing he won't do."

Xar stared out the window. He stared long and hard out the window. Stared long and hard at the ship guarded by the Sartan runes, an army of tytans between him and escape.

"He'll bring him," said Xar at last.

"No, he won't," the old man replied. "Care to wager?"

"Why wouldn't he? What would be his reason?"

"To keep you and Haplo from reaching the Seventh Gate," the old man said triumphantly.

"So," Xar said, turning to face the old man. "You do know about the Seventh Gate."

The old man tugged nervously at his beard. "The fourth race at Aqueduct. A horse. Seventh Gate. Six to one. Prefers a muddy track."

Xar frowned. He advanced on the old man, stood so close that his breath disturbed the wispy gray hair. "You will tell me. If you don't, I can make the next few minutes very unpleasant for you..."

"Yes, I've no doubt you could."

The vague look left the old man's eyes, leaving them filled with an inexpressible pain, a pain Xar could never hope to replicate.

"It wouldn't matter what you did to me." The old man sighed. "I truly don't know where the Seventh Gate is. I never went there. I disapproved, you see. I was going to stop Samah, if I could. I told him so. The Council members sent their guards to bring me by force. They needed my magic. I am powerful, a powerful wizard..."

The old man smiled briefly, sadly.

"But when they came, I wasn't there. I couldn't leave the people. I hoped I might be able to save them. And so I was left behind. On Earth. I saw it. The end. The Sundering."

The old man drew in a trembling breath. "There was nothing I could do. No help. Not for them. Not for any of them—the 'deplorable but unavoidable civilian casualties.'... 'It's a question of priorities,' Samah said. 'We can't save everyone. And those who survive will be better off.'"

"And so Samah left them to die. I saw... I saw

A tremor shook the old man's thin body. Tears filled his eyes and a look of horror began to contort his face—a look so dreadful, so awful, that despite himself, Xar recoiled before it.

The old man's thin lips parted as if he would scream, but no scream came out. The eyes grew wider and wider, reliving horrors only he could see, only he could remember.

"The fires that devoured cities, plains, and forests. The rivers that ran blood-red. The oceans boiling, steam blotting out the sun. The charred bodies of the countless dead. The living running and running, with nowhere to run to."

"Who are you?" Xar asked, awed. "What are you?"

The old man's breath rattled in his throat; spittle flecked his lips. "When it was over, Samah caught me, sent me to the Labyrinth. I escaped. The Nexus, the books you read—mine. My handiwork." The old man looked faintly proud. "That was before the sickness. I don't remember the sickness, but my dragon tells me about it. That was when he found me, took care of me..."

"Who are you?" Xar repeated.

He looked into the old man's eyes... and then Xar saw the madness.

It dropped like a final curtain, dousing the memories, putting out the fires, clouding over the red-hot skies, blotting out the horror.

The madness. A gift? Or a punishment.

"Who are you?" Xar demanded a third time.

"My name?" The old man smiled vacantly, happily. "Bond. James Bond."

## CHAPTER 31

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

ALEATHA FLOUNCED THROUGH THE GATE LEADING INTO THE maze. Her skirt caught on a bramble. Swearing, she tore it loose, taking a certain grim satisfaction in hearing the fabric rip. So what if her clothes were in shreds? What did it matter? She would never get to go anywhere, never get to do anything with anybody of interest ever again....

Angry and miserable, she curled up on the marble bench, giving herself up to the luxury of self-pity. Outside the maze, through the hedgerows, she could hear the other three continuing to bicker. Roland asked if they shouldn't go in after Aleatha. Paithan said no, leave her alone, she wouldn't go far and what could happen to her anyway?

"Nothing," said Aleatha drearily. "Nothing will happen. Ever again."

Eventually their voices faded away; their footsteps trailed off. She was alone.

"I might as well be in prison," she said, looking at her surroundings, the green walls of the hedges with their unnaturally sharp angles and lines, strict and confining. "Except prison would be better than this. Every prisoner has some chance of escape, and I have none. Nowhere to go but this same place. No one to see except these same people. On and on and on ... through the years. Wearing away at each other until we're all stark, raving mad."

She flung herself down on the bench and began to cry bitterly. What did it matter if her eyes turned red, her nose dripped? What did it matter who saw her like that? No one cared for her. No one loved her. They all hated her. She hated them. And she hated that horrid Lord Xar. There was something frightening about him...

"Don't do that, now," came a gruff voice. "You will make yourself sick."

Aleatha sat up swiftly, blinking back her tears and fumbling for what remained of her handkerchief, which—from being put to various uses—was now little more than a ragged scrap of lace. Not finding it, she wiped her eyes with the hem of her shawl.

"Oh, it's you," she said.

Drugar stood over her, gazing down at her with his black-browed frown. But his voice was kind and almost shyly tender. Aleatha recognized admiration when she saw it, and though it came from the dwarf, she felt comforted.

"I didn't mean that the way it sounded," she said hurriedly, realizing her previous words hadn't been exactly gracious. "In fact, I'm glad it's you. And not any of the others. You're the only one with any sense. The rest are fools! Here, sit down."

She made room for the dwarf on the bench.

Drugar hesitated. He rarely sat in the presence of the taller humans and the elves. When he sat on furniture made for them, his legs were too short to permit his feet to touch the ground; he was left with his limbs dangling in what was to him an undignified and childlike manner. He could see in their eyes—or at least he presumed he could see—that they tended to think less of him as a result.

But he never felt that way around Aleatha. She smiled at him—when she was in a good humor, of course—and listened to him with respectful attention, appeared to admire what he did and said.

Truth to tell, Aleatha reacted to Drugar as she reacted to any man—she flirted with him. The flirtation was innocent, even unconscious. Making men love her was the only way she knew to relate to them. And she had no way at all to relate to other women. She knew Rega wanted to be friends, and deep inside, Aleatha thought it might be nice to have another woman to talk to, laugh with, share hopes and fears with. But early on in her life, Aleatha had understood that her older sister, Gallie, unlovely and undesirable, had hated Aleatha for her beauty, at the same time loving her all the more fiercely.

Aleatha had come to assume that other women felt the same as Gallie—and admittedly most did. Aleatha flaunted her beauty, threw it into Rega's face like a glove, made of it a challenge. Secretly believing herself inferior to Rega, knowing she wasn't as intelligent, as winning, as likable as Rega, Aleatha used her beauty as a foil to force the other woman to keep her distance.

As for men, Aleatha knew that once they discovered she was ugly inside, they'd leave her. And so she made a practice of leaving them first, except that now there was nowhere to go. Which meant that sooner or later, Roland would find out, and instead of loving her, he'd hate her. If he didn't hate her already. Not that she cared what he thought of her.

Her eyes filled with tears again. She was alone, so desperately alone...

Drugar cleared his throat. He had perched on the edge of the bench, his toes just touching the ground. His heart ached for her sorrow; he understood her unhappiness and her fear. In a strange way, the two of them were alike—physical differences keeping them apart from the others. In their eyes, he was short and ugly. In their eyes, she was beautiful. He reached out, awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. To his amazement, she nestled against him, resting her head on his broad chest, sobbing into his thick black beard.

Drugar's aching heart almost burst with love. He understood, though, that she was a child inside, a lost and frightened child, turning to him for comfort—nothing more. He gazed down at the blond, silken tresses, mingling with his own coarse black hair, and he had to close his own eyes to fight back the burn of tears. He held her gently until her sobs quieted; then, to spare them both embarrassment, he spoke swiftly.

"Would you like to see what I have discovered? In the center of the maze."

Aleatha raised her head, her face flushed. "Yes. I'd like that. Anything is better than doing nothing at all." She stood up, smoothing her dress and wiping her tears from her cheeks.

"You won't tell the others?" Drugar asked.

"No, of course not. Why should I?" Aleatha said haughtily. "They have secrets from me—Paithan and Rega. I know they do. This will be our secret—yours and mine." She extended her hand.

By the One Dwarf, he loved her! Drugar took her hand. Small as his was, hers fit well inside it. He led her by the hand down the maze path until it grew too narrow for them to walk together. Releasing her, he admonished her to stay close behind him, lest she get lost in the myriad turns and twists of the maze.

His injunction was needless. The hedges were tall and overgrown, often forming a green roof that blotted out all sight of the sky or anything around them. Inside it was greenly dark and cool and very, very quiet.

At the beginning of their journey into the maze, Aleatha tried to keep track of where she was going—two right turns, a left, another right, another left, then two more lefts, a complete circle around a statue of a fish. But after that she was confused and hopelessly lost. She kept so near the dwarf she nearly tripped him up, her long skirts constantly getting under his heels, her hand plucking at his sleeve.

"How do you know where you're going?" she asked nervously.

He shrugged. "My people have lived all their lives in tunnels. Unlike you, we are not easily confused once we cannot see the sun or the sky. Besides, there is a pattern. It is based on mathematics. I can explain it," he offered.

"Don't bother. If I didn't have ten fingers I couldn't count that high. Is the center much farther?" Aleatha had never been strongly attracted to physical exertion.

"Not far," Drugar growled. "And there is a place to rest when we get there."

Aleatha sighed. This had all started out to be exciting. It was eerie inside the hedges and fun to pretend that she might be lost, all the time enjoying the comforting knowledge that she wasn't. But now she was growing bored. Her feet were beginning to hurt.

And they still had to go all the way back.

Tired and ill-tempered, she now eyed Drugar suspiciously. He had, after all, tried to kill them all once. What if he was bringing her down here for some nefarious purpose? Far away from the others. No one would hear her scream. She paused, glanced behind, half-toying with the idea of turning around and going back.

Her heart sank. She had no idea which way to turn. Had it been to the right? Or maybe they hadn't turned at all, but taken the path in the middle...

Drugar came to a halt so suddenly that Aleatha, still looking behind, stumbled into him.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she said, steadying herself with her hands on his shoulders and then snatching her hands away hurriedly.

He looked up at her, his face darkening. "Don't be afraid," he said, hearing the strain in her voice. "We are here." He waved his hand. "This is what I wanted to show you."

Aleatha looked around. The maze had ended. Rows of marble benches, set in a circle, surrounded a mosaic of variously colored stones arranged in a starburst. In the center were more of those strange symbols like those on the pendant the dwarf wore around his neck. Above them was open sky, and from where she stood Aleatha could see the top of the citadel's center spire. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least now she had some idea of where she was—the amphitheater. Though her knowledge wasn't likely to help her much in getting out of this place.

"Very pretty," she said, looking back at the starburst in the multicolored tile, thinking she should say something to keep the dwarf happy.

She would have liked to rest; there was a calm, pleasant feeling to this place that urged her to linger. But the silence made her nervous—that and the dwarf staring at her with his shadowed, dark eyes.

"Well, this has been fun. Thank you for—"

"Sit down," said Drugar, gesturing to a bench. "Wait. You have not yet seen what I wanted you to see."

"I'd love to, really, but I think we should be getting back. Paithan will be worried—"

"Sit down, please," Drugar repeated and his brows came together in a frown. He glanced up at the citadel's spire. "You will not have to wait long."

Aleatha tapped her foot. As usual when her will was thwarted, she was starting to get angry. She fixed the dwarf with a stern and imperious gaze that never failed to cut any man down to size, only this time it lost some of its effectiveness as it slanted down her nose instead of flashing upward from chilling eyes. And it was completely lost on Drugar anyway. The dwarf had turned his back on her and walked over to a bench,

Aleatha gave a final hopeless glance down the path and, sighing again, followed Drugar. Plopping herself down near him, she fidgeted, looked back at the spire, sighed loudly, shuffled her feet, and gave every indication that she was not amused, hoping he'd take the hint.

He didn't. He sat, stolid and silent, staring into the center of the empty starburst.

Aleatha was about ready to try her luck in the maze. Getting lost in there wouldn't be nearly as bad as being bored to death out here. Suddenly the light from the Star Chamber, on the top of the citadel, began to glow. The strange humming sound began.

A shaft of strong white light slanted down from the citadel's tower, struck the starburst mosaic.

Aleatha gasped, rose from the bench, would have backed up except that the bench was behind her. As it was, she nearly fell. The dwarf reached out a hand, caught hold of her.

"Don't be afraid."

"People!" Aleatha cried, staring. "There are... people there!"

The stage of the amphitheater, which had been empty, was now suddenly crowded with people. Or rather, with wisps of people. They weren't whole, flesh and blood as she and Drugar were. They were transparent shadows. She could see through them—to the other seats in the theater, to the hedgerow of the maze beyond.

Her knees weakening, she sat back down on the bench and watched the people. They stood in groups, talking earnestly, walking slowly, moving from group to group, coming into her view and then passing out of it as they stepped into and then out of the shaft of light.

People. Other people. Humans, elves, dwarves—standing together, talking together, apparently companionably, with the exception of one or two groups who seemed—by their gestures and posture—to be disagreeing about something.

Groups of people gathered for only one purpose, so far as Aleatha was concerned.

"It's a party!" she cried joyfully and leapt up from her seat to join them.

"No! Wait! Stop! Don't go near the light!" Drugar had been viewing the scene with reverent awe. Shocked, he attempted to catch Aleatha as she darted past.

He missed his hold, and she was suddenly in the center of the crowd.

She might as well have been standing in a thick fog.

The people flowed around her, flowed through her. She could see them talking, but couldn't hear them. She was standing near them, but couldn't touch them. Their eyes bright, they looked at each other, never at her.

"Please! I'm here!" she pleaded in frustration, reaching out eager hands.

"What are you doing? Come out of there!" Drugar commanded. "It is a holy place!"

"Yes!" she cried, ignoring the dwarf, talking to the shadows. "I hear you! Can't you hear me? I'm right in front of you!"

No one answered.

"Why can't they see me? Why won't they talk to me?" Aleatha demanded, facing the dwarf.

"They are not real, that is why," Drugar said dourly.

Aleatha looked back. The fog-people slid past her, over her, around her.

And suddenly the light went out, and they were gone.

"Oh!" Aleatha gasped, disappointed. "Where are they? Where did they go?"

"When the light goes, they go."

"Will they come back when the light comes back?"

Drugar shrugged. "Sometimes yes. Sometimes no. But generally, this time in the afternoon, I find them here."

Aleatha sighed. She felt more alone than ever now.

"You said they aren't real. What do you think they are?"

"Shadows of the past, maybe. Of those who used to live here." Drugar stared into the starburst. He stroked his beard, his expression sad. "A trick of the magic of this place."

"You saw your people there," said Aleatha, guessing what he was thinking.

"Shadows," he said again, his voice gruff. "My people are gone. Destroyed by the tytans. I am all that is left. And when I die, the dwarves will be no more."

Aleatha looked back around the floor of the amphitheater, now empty, so very empty.

"No, Drugar," she said suddenly. "You're wrong."

"What do you mean, I am wrong?" Drugar glowered. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing," Aleatha admitted. "But I think one of them heard me when I spoke."

Drugar snorted. "You imagined it. Don't you think I have tried?" he demanded grimly. His face was haggard and ravaged by sorrow. "To see my people! To see them talking and laughing. I can almost understand what they say. I can almost hear the language of my homeland once again."

His eyes squeezed shut. He turned away from her abruptly, stalked back among the seats of the amphitheater.

Aleatha watched him go. "What a selfish beast I've been," she said to herself. "At least I have Paithan. And Roland, though he doesn't count for much. And Rega's not a bad sort. The dwarf has no one. Not even us. We've done our best to freeze him out. He's come here—to shadows—for comfort."

"Drugar," she said aloud. "Listen to me. When I was standing in the starburst, I said, 'I'm right in front of you!' And then, I saw one of the elves turn and look in my direction. His mouth moved and I swear he was saying, 'What?' I spoke again and he looked confused and glanced all around, as if he could hear me but couldn't see me. I know it, Drugar!"

He cocked his head, looking back at her dubiously but obviously wanting to believe. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," she lied. She laughed gaily, excited. "How could I stand in a group of men and not be noticed?"

"I don't believe it." The dwarf was glum again. He eyed her suspiciously, mistrusting her laughter.

"Don't be mad, Drugar. I was only teasing. You looked ... so sad." Aleatha walked over to him. Reaching out, she touched the dwarf's hand with her own. "Thank you for bringing me. I think it's wonderful. I... I want to come back with you again. Tomorrow. When the light shines."

"You do?" He was pleased. "Very well. We will come. But you will say nothing to the others."

"No, not a word," Aleatha promised.

"Now we should be getting back," Drugar said. "The others will be worried about you."

Aleatha heard the bitter emphasis on the last word. "Drugar, what would it mean if those people are real? Would it mean that we aren't alone, as we think?"

The dwarf stared back at the empty starburst. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "I do not know."

CHAPTER 32

THE CITADEL

PRYAN

THE SUDDEN FLARING OF THE LIGHT IN THE STAR CHAMBER drove Xar from the room. He managed to rid himself of the old Sartan, foisting him off onto the elf, who had come upstairs to talk nonsense. Figuring that the mensch and the madman would get along well together, Xar left them standing in front of the door to the Star Chamber, both of them staring inanely at the bright light seeping out from underneath.

The old man was expounding on some theory concerning the workings of the chamber, a theory Xar might once have found interesting. Now the Lord of the Nexus could not have cared less. He sought sanctuary in the library, the one place where he was certain the mensch would not bother him. Let the Sartan light shine from this Star Chamber and any others like it. Let it bring light and energy into Death's Gate. Let it light Abarrach's terrible darkness, thaw Chelestra's frozen sea moons. What did Xar care?

What if the old man was right? What if Sang-drax was a traitor?

Xar unrolled a scroll, flattened it out on the desk. The scroll was a Sartan work, portraying the universe as they had remade it—four worlds, air, fire, stone, water, connected by four conduits. Conquering these worlds had seemed so simple in the beginning. Four worlds, populated by mensch, who would fall before Xar's might like rotten fruit dropping from the tree.

But one thing after another had gone wrong.

"The fruit on Arianus isn't all that rotten," he was forced to admit to himself. "The mensch are ripe and strong and intent on clinging to the tree with tenacity. And who could have foreseen the tytans on Pryan? Not even I could have supposed the Sartan would be stupid enough to create giants, endow them with magic, and then lose control over them.

"And the magic-destroying sea on Chelestra? How the devil am I to conquer a world where all some mensch has to do is throw a bucket of water on me to render me harmless!

"I need the Seventh Gate! I need it. Or I might fail."

Failure. In all his long life, the Lord of the Nexus had never permitted that word to enter his brain, had certainly never spoken it aloud. Yet now he was forced to concede it was a possibility. Unless he could find the Seventh Gate—the place where it all began.

The place where—with his help—it would all end.

"Haplo would have shown me, if I had let him. He came to the Nexus, that last time, for that purpose. I was blind, blind!" Xar's fingers, like talons, clenched over the scroll, crushed the ancient parchment, which crumbled to dust in his hands. "I cared. That was my failing. His betrayal hurt me, and I should not have permitted such a weakness. Of all the lessons the Labyrinth teaches, this is the most important: to care is to lose. If only I had been able to listen to him dispassionately, to cut to the core of his being with the cold knife of logic.

"He accomplished what I sent him to accomplish. He did what he was commanded to do. He tried to tell me. I wouldn't listen. And now, perhaps, it is too late."

Xar went over every word of Haplo's—the spoken and the unspoken.

The sigla had been running consistently along the base of the wall ever since we left the dungeon. At this point, however, they left the base of the wall, traveled upward to form an arch of glowing blue light. I squinted my eyes against the brilliance, peered ahead. I could see nothing beyond but darkness.

I walked straight for the arch. At my approach, the runes changed color; blue turned to flaring red. The sigla smoldered, burst into flame. I put my hand in front of my face, tried to advance. Fire roared and crackled; smoke blinded me. The superheated air seared my lungs. The runes on my arms glowed blue in response,

but their power did not protect me from the burning flames that scorched my flesh. I fell back, gasping for air...

Runes of warding... I couldn't enter.

These runes are the strongest that could possibly be laid down. Something terrible lies beyond that door...

Standing before the archway, a preposterous, ungainly figure, Alfred began to perform a solemn dance. The red light of the warding runes glimmered, faded, glimmered, and died.

We could go in now...

The tunnel was wide and airy, the ceiling and walls dry. A thick coating of dust lay undisturbed on the rock floor. No sign of footprints or claw marks or the sinuous trails left by serpents and dragons. No attempt had been made to obliterate the (Sartan) sigla; the guide-runes shone brilliantly, lighting our way ahead...

If it hadn't been too preposterous, Lord, I could have sworn I actually felt a sense of peace, of well-being that relaxed taut muscles, soothed frayed nerves... The feeling was inexplicable...

The tunnel led us straight forward, no twists or turns, no other tunnels branching off this one. We passed beneath several archways, but none were marked with the warding runes as had been the first. Then, without warning, the blue guide-runes came to an abrupt halt, as if we'd run into a blank wall.

Which we had.

A wall of black rock, solid and unyielding, loomed before us. It bore faint markings on its smooth surface. Sartan runes. But there was something wrong with them.

Runes of sanctity.

And inside... a skull.

Bodies. Countless bodies. Mass murder. Mass suicide.

Runes appeared, running in a circle around the upper portion of the chamber.

"Any who bring violence in here will find it visited upon themselves."

Why is this chamber sacred, Lord? What is it sacred to?

I almost had the answer... I was so close...

And then Haplo and his party were attacked by... Kleitus.

Kleitus knew the location of the Chamber of the Damned! Or, as Xar now supposed he should start considering it, the Seventh Gate. Kleitus had died in that chamber!

Xar went over Haplo's report again and again in his mind. Something about a force opposing them, ancient and powerful... a table, an altar, a vision...

The Council set the Sartan the task of contacting the other worlds, to explain to them their desperate peril and beg them to send the aid promised before the Sundering. And what was the result? For months they did nothing. Then suddenly they came forward, prattling nonsense that only a child would believe—

Of course, Xar realized. How utterly logical. These wretched Sartan on Abarrach, cut off from their people for innumerable generations, had forgotten much of the rune-magic, lost much of their power. A group of

them, stumbling across the Seventh Gate, had suddenly rediscovered what had been lost. No wonder they had been intent on hiding it, keeping it for themselves. Making up stories about opposing forces, ancient and powerful. Even Haplo had fallen for their lies.

The Sartan hadn't known what to do with such power.

But Xar did.

If only he could find the chamber. Could he do so, perhaps, without Haplo? The Lord of the Nexus walked through Haplo's mind, as he had done on Haplo's return from Abarrach. Xar recognized the dungeons where Haplo had almost died. He had escaped from the dungeons, run down a corridor, guided by blue Sartan rune-lights.

Which corridor? What direction? There must be hundreds down there. The Lord of the Nexus had explored the catacombs beneath the castle in Necropolis. It was a maze worthy of the Labyrinth, a rat's warren of tunnels and corridors—some naturally formed, others burrowed into the rock by magic. It might take a man a lifetime to find the right one.

But Haplo knew the right one. If he escaped from the Labyrinth.

Xar brushed the ashes of the scroll from his hands.

"And I am trapped here! Unable to help. A ship within sight. A ship covered with Sartan runes. The mensch can break the runes, they broke them to enter here. But they'd never reach the ship alive because of the tytans. I must..."

"Alive!"

Xar drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly, thoughtfully. "But who said the mensch need to be alive?"

## CHAPTER 33

### THE LABYRINTH

THE PATH THROUGH THE CAVERN LEADING INTO THE LABYRINTH was long and torturous. It took them hours to traverse, inching their way slowly forward, each of them forced to test every step, for the ground would shift and slide beneath the feet of one person after another had passed over it safely.

"Is the damn rock alive?" Hugh the Hand asked. "I swear I saw it deliberately throw her off."

Breathing heavily, Marit stared down into the black and turbid water swirling beneath her. She had been negotiating a narrow section of rock ledge that ran along the sheer wall of the cavern when suddenly the ledge beneath her feet gave way. Hugh the Hand, following close behind her, caught her as she started to slide down the wet walls. Flattening himself out on the ledge, the assassin held fast to Marit's wrist and arm until Haplo could reach them from the opposite side of the broken ledge.

"It's alive. And it hates us," Haplo answered grimly, pulling Marit up to the relative safety of the section of path on which he stood.

Hugh the Hand jumped across the gap, landed beside them. This part of the trail was narrow and cracked, winding through a jumble of boulders, beneath a curtain of stalactites.

"Maybe that was its last jab at us. We're near the exit..."

Only a few feet away was the cavern opening—gray light, straggly trees, fog-damp grass. A heart-bursting dash would take them there. But they were all of them bone-weary, hurting, afraid. And this was only the beginning.

Haplo took a step forward.

The ground shivered beneath his feet. The boulders around him began to wobble. Dust and bits of rock fell in cascades from the ceiling.

"Hold still! Don't anyone move!" Haplo ordered.

They held still, and the rumbling ceased.

"The Labyrinth," Haplo muttered to himself. "It always gives you a chance."

He looked at Marit, who was standing on the path beside him. Her face was scratched, hands cut and bleeding from her fall. Her face was rigid, her eyes on the exit. She knew as well as Haplo.

"What is it? What's the matter?" It was Alfred, quavering.

Haplo turned his head slowly. Alfred was behind, standing on the narrow ledge that had already tried to throw Marit into the roiling black water. Part of that ledge was missing. He'd have to jump for it, and Haplo remembered clearly what a wonder Alfred was at leaping across chasms. His feet were wider than the ledge he would have to traverse. Hugh the Hand had already saved the clumsy and accident-prone Sartan from falling into two pits and a crack.

The dog remained near Alfred, occasionally nipping at his heels to urge him along. Cocking its head, the dog whined unhappily.

"What's wrong?" Alfred repeated fearfully when no one answered.

"The cavern's going to try to stop us from leaving," Marit said coldly.

"Dear me," said Alfred, amazed. "Can it... can it do such a thing?"

"What do you think it's been doing?" Haplo demanded irritably.

"Oh, but come now." Alfred took a step forward to argue the point. "You make it sound as if—"

The ground heaved. A ripple passed through it, almost —Haplo could have sworn—as if it laughed. Alfred gave a cry, wavered, twisted. His feet slid out from under him. The dog sank its teeth into his breeches and hung on. Arms flailing wildly, Alfred managed, with the dog's help, to regain his balance. Eyes closed in terror, he flattened himself against the rock wall, sweat trickling down his bald head.

All inside the cavern was suddenly still.

"Don't do that again!" Marit ordered, grinding the words through clenched teeth.

"Blessed Sartan!" Alfred murmured, his fingers trying to dig into the rock.

Haplo swore. "It was you blessed Sartan who created this. How the devil are we going to get out?"

"You shouldn't have brought me," Alfred said in a trembling voice. "I warned you I would only slow you down, put you in danger. Don't worry about me. You go on ahead. I'll just go back..."

"Don't move—" Haplo began, then fell silent.

Ignoring him, Alfred had started to walk back, and nothing was happening. The ground remained still.

"Alfred, wait!" Haplo called.

"Let him go!" Marit said scornfully. "He's slowed us up enough already."

"That's what the Labyrinth wants. It wants him to go, and I'll be damned if I'll obey. Dog, stop him."

The dog obediently caught hold of Alfred's flapping coattails, hung on. Alfred looked back at Haplo piteously. "What can I do to help you? Nothing!"

"You may not think so, but the Labyrinth does. Strange as it may seem, Sartan, I've got the feeling that the Labyrinth is afraid of you. Maybe because it sees its creator."

"No!" Alfred shrank back. "No, not me."

"Yes, you. By hiding in your tomb, by refusing to act, by keeping 'perfectly safe,' you feed the evil, perpetuate it."

Alfred shook his head. Catching hold of his coattails, he began to tug at them.

The dog, thinking it was a game, growled playfully and tugged back.

"At my signal," Haplo said beneath his breath to Marit. "You and Hugh the Hand make a run for the opening. Be careful. There may be something waiting for us out there. Don't stop for anything. Don't look back."

"Haplo..." Marit began. "I don't want to—" She faltered, flushing.

Startled, hearing a different tone in her voice, he looked at her. "To what? Leave me? I'll be all right."

Touched, pleased by the look of concern in her eyes—the first softness he'd seen in her—he reached out his hand to brush the sweat-damp hair back from her forehead. "You're hurt. Let me take a look—"

Eyes flaring, she pulled away from him. "You're a fool." She flicked a disparaging glance at Alfred. "Let him die. Let them all die."

She turned her back on him, fixed her eyes on the cave's opening.

The ground trembled beneath Haplo's feet. They didn't have much time. He held out his hand across the broken ledge. "Alfred," he said quietly, "I need you."

Alfred lifted a haggard, drawn face, stared at Haplo in amazement. The dog, at a silent signal from its master, released its hold.

"I can't do this alone," Haplo continued. He held out his hand, held it steady. "I need your help to find my child. Come with me."

Alfred's eyes filled with tears. He smiled tremulously. "How? I can't..."

"Give me your hand. I'll pull you across."

Alfred leaned precariously over the broken ledge, reached out his hand—bony, ungainly, the wrist protruding from the frayed lace of his too-short cuffs. And, of course, he was blubbing. "Haplo, I don't know what to say..."

The Patryn caught hold of the Sartan's wrist, clasped it tightly. The ground heaved and buckled. Alfred lost his footing.

"Run, Marit!" Haplo shouted, and began to work his magic.

At his command, blue and red sigla burned in the air. He spun the runes into a blue-glowing rope that snaked from his arm to wrap around Alfred's body.

The cavern was collapsing. Risking a quick glance, Haplo saw Marit and Hugh running madly for the exit. A rock plummeted down from the ceiling, struck Marit a glancing blow. The runes on her body protected her from harm, but the weight of the rock knocked her down. Hugh the Hand picked her up. The two dashed on. The assassin looked behind him once, to see if Haplo was coming. Marit did not look.

Hauling on the rope, Haplo swung the Sartan—arms and legs dangling like a dead spider—across the gap to his side of the ledge. Just at that moment, the part of the ledge on which Alfred had been standing gave way.

"Dog! Jump!" Haplo yelled.

The dog gathered itself and, as the rock slid out from beneath its feet, hurled its body into the dust-laden air. It slammed into Alfred, sent them both sprawling.

Boulders fell across the path, blocking it, blocking their way out. Haplo picked the Sartan up, shook him. Alfred's eyes were starting to roll back in his head; his body was going limp.

"If you faint, you'll die here. And so will I!" Haplo shouted at him. "Use your own magic, damn it!"

Alfred blinked, stared. Then he drew in a sucking breath. Singing the runes in a quavering voice, he spread his arms and began to fly toward the exit, which was rapidly growing smaller.

"Come on, boy," Haplo commanded the dog and plunged ahead. His rune-magic struck the boulders that blocked his path, burst them apart, sent them bounding out of his way.

Alfred swooped up and out of the cavern opening. His arms flapping, feet stretched out behind him, he looked like a coattailed crane.

A huge rock thundered down on top of Haplo, bowled him over, pinned his leg beneath it. The opening was closing; the mountain itself was sliding down on top of him. A tiny glimmer of gray light was all that remained. Haplo used his magic as a wedge, pried the boulder off his leg, lunged forward, thrusting his hand through the narrowing gap—The tunnel of light grew wider. Sartan runes flared around his hand, strengthening the glow of the Patryn runes.

"Pull him out!" Alfred was shouting. "I'll hold it open!"

Hugh the Hand grabbed hold of Haplo, pulled him through the magic-wrought tunnel. Haplo scrambled to his feet, began to run. The assassin and Alfred were at his side, the dog barking and racing in front of them. Alfred naturally stumbled over his own feet. Haplo didn't even pause, but swept the Sartan up and kept going. Marit stood on a ridge, waiting for them.

"Take cover!" Haplo shouted at her.

An avalanche of rock and splintered trees roared down the mountainside.

Haplo flung himself face forward on the ground, dragged Alfred down with him. The Patryn's rune-magic sheltered him, and he hoped Alfred had sense enough to use his own magic for protection. Rock and debris bounced off the magical shields, crashed around them. The ground shook, and then suddenly all was quiet.

Slowly, Haplo sat up.

"I guess you won't be going back now, Alfred," he said.

Half the mountain had collapsed in on itself. Gigantic slabs of stone lay across what had been the cavern's entrance, sealing it shut, perhaps forever.

Haplo stared at the ruin with a strange foreboding. What was wrong? He hadn't really planned to come back this way. Perhaps it was nothing more than the instinctive fear of having a door slammed shut at his back. But why had the Labyrinth suddenly decided to seal off their exit?

Marit unknowingly spoke his thoughts.

"That leaves us just one way out now—the Final Gate."

Her words came back, a dismal echo, bouncing off the ruined mountain.

The Final Gate.

CHAPTER 34

THE LABYRINTH

"I CAN'T GO ON," ALFRED GULPED, SINKING ONTO A FLAT ROCK. "I have to rest."

The last panicked dash and the fall of the mountain on top of him had been too much for the Sartan. He sat hunched over, wheezing and gasping. Marit cast a disdainful glance at him, then one at Haplo. Then she looked away.

I told you, said her scornful gaze. You are a fool.

Haplo said quietly, "There's no time, Alfred. Not now. We're exposed, out in the open. We find cover, then we rest."

"Just a few moments," Alfred pleaded meekly. "It seems quiet..."

"Too quiet," Marit said.

They were in a small grove of scrub trees that appeared, from their stunted growth and twisted limbs, to have waged a desperate struggle for life in the shadow of the mountain. A sparse smattering of leaves clung dejectedly to the branches. Now that the mountain had collapsed, the Labyrinth's sun touched the trees for perhaps the first time. But the gray light brought no cheer, no comfort. The leaves rustled mournfully, and that, Marit noticed uneasily, was the only sound in the land.

She drew her knife out of her boot. The dog jumped up, growled. Hugh the Hand eyed her suspiciously. Ignoring the animal, ignoring the mensch, Marit said a few words to the tree in her own language, apologizing for harming it, explaining her dire need. Then she began to hack at a branch.

Haplo, too, had apparently noted the silence. "Yes, it's quiet. Too quiet. That avalanche must have been heard for miles. You can bet someone is on their way to investigate. And I don't intend to be here when they arrive."

Alfred was perplexed. "But... it was only an avalanche. A rock slide. Why would anyone care?"

"Of course the Labyrinth cares. It dropped a mountain on us, didn't it?" Haplo wiped sweat and rock dust from his face.

Marit cut off the branch, began to strip away small twigs and half-dead leaves.

Haplo squatted down on his haunches, faced Alfred.

"Don't you understand yet, damn it? The Labyrinth is an intelligent entity. I don't know what rules it or how, but it knows—it knows everything." He was silent, thoughtful. "But there's a difference about the Labyrinth. I can sense it, feel it. Fear."

"Yes," agreed Alfred. "I'm terrified."

"No, not our fear. Its fear. It's afraid."

"Afraid? Afraid of what?"

Haplo grinned, though his grin was strained. "Strange as it sounds, us; you, Sartan."

Alfred shook his head.

"How many heretical Sartan were sent through the Vortex? Hundreds... a thousand?" Haplo asked.

"I don't know." Alfred spoke into the lace of his draggled shirt collar.

"And how many had mountains dropped on them? None, I'll wager. That mountain has been standing there a long, long time. But you—you enter the Vortex and bam! And you can be damn sure that the Labyrinth's not going to give up."

Alfred looked at Haplo in dismay. "Why? Why would it be afraid of me?"

"You're the only one who knows the answer to that," Haplo returned.

Marit, sharpening the point of the branch with her knife, agreed with Alfred. Why would the Labyrinth fear a mensch, two returning victims, and a weak and sniveling Sartan? Yet she knew the Labyrinth, knew it as Haplo knew it. It was intelligent, malevolent. The avalanche had been a deliberate attempt to murder them, and when the attempt had failed, the Labyrinth had sealed off their only route of escape. Not that it had been much of an escape route, with no ship to take them back through Death's Gate.

Fear. Haplo's right, Marit realized, with a sudden heady elation. The Labyrinth's afraid. All my life I've been the one who was afraid. Now it is. It is as scared as I ever was. Never before has the Labyrinth tried to keep someone from entering. Time and again, it permitted Xar to enter the Final Gate. The Labyrinth even seemed to welcome the encounter, the chance to destroy him. It never shut the gate on Xar, as it tried to shut it on us. Yet not one of us, nor all of us combined, is nearly so powerful as the Lord of the Nexus.

Then why? What does the Labyrinth fear from us? Her elation faded, left her chilled. She needed to talk to Xar, report to him what had occurred. She wanted his counsel. Chopping off another branch, she wondered how she could find an opportunity to slip off by herself.

"I don't understand any of this," said Hugh the Hand, glancing around nervously, his face darkening. "And I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen how that damn Cursed Blade took on a life of its own. But I know fear. I know how it works in a man and I suppose it's no different in a bunch of intelligent rocks. Fear makes a man desperate, reckless." The assassin looked down at his hands, smiled grimly. "I grew rich off other men's fear."

"And it will make the Labyrinth the same," Haplo said. "Desperate, reckless. That's why we can't afford to stop. We've already spent too much time here as it is." The sigla on his hands and arms were glowing a pale blue, tinged with red.

Marit glanced at the tattoos on her body, saw the same warning. Danger was not near, but it wasn't far away either.

Alfred, pale and shaken, rose to his feet. "I'll try," he said gamely.

Marit traced a sigil of healing on the tree, then cut off another branch. Silently she handed the first crude spear she had made to Haplo. He hesitated, astonished that she should think of him, pleased that she was concerned. He accepted the spear, and as he took it, their hands touched.

He smiled that quiet smile of his. The light in his eyes, in that smile, which was so achingly familiar, seeped into Marit's heart.

But the only effect the light had was to illuminate the emptiness. She could see inside every part of her, see the bleak walls, barred windows, shuttered doors.

Better the darkness.

She turned away. "Which direction?"

Haplo didn't answer immediately. When he did, his voice was cool, perhaps with disappointment. Or perhaps she was accomplishing her goal—perhaps he was learning to hate her.

"The top of that ridge up ahead." He pointed. "We should be able to get a view of the countryside, maybe find a path."

"There's a path?" Hugh the Hand stared around in disbelief. "What made it? This place looks deserted."

"It has been deserted, probably for hundreds of years. But yes, there's a path. This is the Labyrinth, remember? A deliberately crafted maze, made by our enemies. The path runs all the way through it. The path leads the way out—in more ways than one. There's an old saying, 'You abandon the path at your peril. You keep to the path at your peril.'"

"Wonderful." Hugh the Hand grunted. Reaching into the folds of his clothing, he drew out his pipe, regarded it with longing. "I don't suppose there's such a thing as stregno in this god-awful place?"

"No, but when we reach one of the Squatter villages, there's a dried leaf mixture that they smoke on ceremonial occasions. They'll give you some." Haplo grinned, turned to Marit. "Do you remember that village ceremony where we—"

"You'd better see to your Sartan friend," she interrupted. She had been thinking of exactly the same time. His hand was on the door of her being, trying to force it open. She put her shoulder to it, barred his entry. "He's limping."

They had only traveled a short distance and already the Sartan was lagging behind.

"I seem to have twisted my ankle," Alfred said apologetically.

"It would have been more useful if he'd twisted his neck," Marit muttered scornfully.

"I'm dreadfully sorry—" Alfred began. He caught Haplo's baleful glance and swallowed the rest.

"Why don't you use your magic, Alfred?" Haplo suggested with elaborate patience.

"I didn't think there was time. The healing procedure—"

Haplo checked an exasperated exclamation. "Not to heal yourself! You can float, fly. As you did just now when you flew out of the cavern. Or have you forgotten already?"

"No, I didn't forget. It's just that—"

"You might even prove useful," Haplo went on quickly. He didn't want to give Alfred time to think. "You can see what's ahead."

"Well, if you really believe it would help—" Alfred still sounded dubious.

"Just do it!" Haplo said through clenched teeth.

Marit knew what he was thinking. The Labyrinth had left them in peace too long.

Alfred went into his little dance—a hopping sort of dance, on his sore foot. He waved his hands and hummed a tune through his nose. Slowly, effortlessly, he rose into the air, drifted gently forward. The dog, in a high state of excitement, gave a joyful bark and leapt playfully for Alfred's dangling feet as the Sartan sailed overhead.

Haplo, breathing a sigh, turned and started up the ridge. He was almost at the top when the wind hit, slamming into him like a doubled-up fist.

The wind came out of nowhere, as if the Labyrinth had sucked in an enormous breath and was blowing it back out. The blast sent Marit staggering. Hugh the Hand, at her side, was cursing and rubbing his eyes, half-blinded by wind-blown dust. Haplo stumbled, unable to keep his balance.

Above them, Alfred let out a strangled cry. The wind caught hold of the floating Sartan. Arms and legs flapping wildly, he was being flung at incredible speed right into the mountain.

Only the dog was able to move. It raced after Alfred, snapped at the man's flying coattails.

"Catch him!" Haplo shouted. "Drag him—" But before he could finish, the wind smote him a blast from behind, knocked him flat.

Hearing the urgency in its master's voice, the dog bounded high into the air. Teeth closed over fabric. Alfred sagged down; then the fabric tore. The dog tumbled to the ground in a flurry of legs. The wind rolled the animal over and over. Alfred was blown away, and then suddenly he stopped. His body, his clothes, had become entangled in the limbs of one of the stunted trees. The wind fretted and whipped at him in frustration, but the tree refused to let loose.

"I'll be damned," said Hugh the Hand, wiping grit from his eyes. "The branches reached up and grabbed him!"

Alfred hung from the tree limbs, dangling helplessly, gazing about in bewilderment. The strange wind had ceased blowing as suddenly as it had started, but there remained an ominous feeling in the air, a sullen anger.

The dog dashed over to stand protectively beneath Alfred. The Sartan was starting to sing and wave his hands.

"Don't!" Haplo shouted urgently, scrambling to his feet. "Don't move or say or do anything! Especially not magic!"

Alfred froze.

"His magic," Haplo muttered; then he began to swear beneath his breath. "Every goddamn time he uses his magic. And what will happen to him if he doesn't? How can he get through the Labyrinth alive without it? Not that he's going to get through alive with it. This is hopeless. Hopeless. You're right," he said bitterly to Marit. "I am a fool."

She could have answered him. The tree saved him. You didn't see it, but I did. I saw it catch hold of him. Some force is working for us, trying to help us. There is hope. If we've brought nothing else, we've brought hope.

But she didn't say that. She wasn't certain hope was what she wanted.

"I suppose we'll have to get him down," growled Hugh the Hand.

"What's the use?" Haplo demanded dispiritedly. "I've brought him here to die. I've brought us all here to die. Except you. And maybe that's worse. You'll be forced to just keep on living..."

Marit edged close to him. Instinctively, she reached out a hand to comfort him, then realized what she was doing.

She stopped, confused. It seemed she was two different people—one hating Haplo, the other... not hating him. And she didn't much trust either.

Where am I in all this? she wondered angrily. What is it I want?

That doesn't matter, Wife. She could hear Xar's voice. What you want is not important. Your job is to bring Haplo to me.

And I'll do it, she decided. Me! Not Sang-drax!

Hesitantly Marit brushed her fingers against Haplo's arm.

Startled at her touch, he turned.

"What the human said is true," Marit told him, swallowing. "Don't you understand? The Labyrinth's acting out of fear. And that makes us its equal." She moved closer to him. "I've been thinking about my child, my daughter. I do sometimes, at night. When I'm all alone, I wonder if she is all alone. I wonder if she ever thinks of me, as I think of her. If she wonders why I left her ... I want to find her, Haplo. I want to explain..."

Tears filled her eyes. She hadn't meant that to happen. She lowered the lids swiftly so that he wouldn't see.

But it was too late. And then, because she wasn't looking at him, she couldn't move away from him fast enough to prevent his putting his arms around her.

"We'll find her," he was saying softly. "I promise."

Marit looked up at him. He was going to kiss her.

Xar's voice was in Marit's head. You slept with him. You bore his child. He loves you still. This was perfect. What Xar wanted. She would lull Haplo into feeling secure around her; then she would disable him, capture him.

She closed her eyes. Haplo's lips touched hers.

Marit shivered all over and suddenly shrank back, pulled away.

"You'd better go get your Sartan friend out of the tree." Her voice was sharp as the knife clutched tightly in her hand. "I'll keep watch. Here, you'll need this."

Marit handed him the knife, left him, not looking back. She was shaking all over, tremors tightening her arms and the muscles of her thighs, and she walked blindly, hating him, hating herself.

Reaching the top of the ridge, she leaned against a huge boulder, waited for the shaking to cease. She permitted herself one swift glance behind to ascertain what Haplo was doing. He had not followed her. He had gone off, the dog trotting along at his heels, to try to extricate Alfred from the treetop.

Good, Marit told herself. The trembling was under control. She quelled her inner turmoil, forced herself to scan the area carefully, closely, searching for telltale signs of an enemy.

She felt calm enough to talk to Xar.

But she didn't get the chance.

CHAPTER 35

THE LABYRINTH

ALFRED DANGLED HELPLESSLY FROM THE TOP OF THE TREE; A sturdy limb running up the back of his frock coat supported him like a second—and in Alfred's case firmer—backbone. The Sartan's legs and arms waved feebly; there was no way he could get himself down.

The dog paced beneath, mouth open in a tongue-lolling grin, as if it had treed a cat. Haplo, arriving on the scene, stared upward.

"How the devil did you manage that?"

Alfred spread his hands. "... I really haven't any idea." Twisting his head, he struggled to peer over his shoulder. "If ... if it didn't sound too strange, I'd say the tree caught me as I went flying past. Unfortunately, it now appears reluctant to let me go."

"I don't suppose there's any chance of that back seam on your coat ripping?" Haplo called.

Alfred shifted his weight experimentally, began to sway back and forth. The dog, cocking its head, was fascinated.

"It's a very well-made coat," Alfred returned with an apologetic smile. "The dressmaker to Her Majesty, Queen Anne, fashioned the first one for me. I became quite fond of it and so I've... well... I've made them myself from the same pattern ever since."

"You made it."

"I'm afraid so."

"Using your rune-magic?"

"I've become rather good at tailoring," Alfred answered defensively.

"Raising people from the dead and tailoring," Haplo muttered. "Just what I need."

The sigla on his body continued to glow faintly, but now they had begun to itch and bum. The danger, whatever it was, was drawing nearer. He peered up at the ridge. He couldn't see Marit, but then he shouldn't be able to see her. He guessed she had hidden herself in the shadow of a large rock.

"I don't remember the damn tree being this tall," Hugh the Hand remarked, craning his neck to see. "You could stand on my shoulders and we still wouldn't be able to reach him. If he'd unbutton his coat and free his arms from the sleeves, he'd drop down."

Alfred was considerably alarmed at the suggestion. "I don't think that would work, Sir Hugh. I'm not very adept at things of that sort."

"He's right there," Haplo agreed grimly. "Knowing Alfred, he'd end up hanging himself."

"Can't you"—Hugh the Hand glanced at Haplo's blue-glowing skin—"magic him down?"

"Using the magic drains my strength, just as running or jumping drains yours. I'd rather conserve it for important things like surviving, not little things like getting Sartan out of trees." Haplo tucked the dagger into his belt, walked over to the base of the tree. "I'll climb up there and cut him loose. You stay down here and be ready to catch him."

Hugh the Hand shook his head, but couldn't suggest any other option. Removing the pipe from his mouth, he slid it safely into his pocket and took up a position directly underneath the dangling Alfred. Haplo climbed the tree, tested the limb holding the Sartan before crawling out on it. He had been afraid, by the look of it, that the branch wouldn't hold his weight. But it was stronger than he'd supposed. It bore his weight—and Alfred's—easily.

"Caught him as he went flying past," Haplo repeated in disgust. Still, he'd seen stranger things. Most of them involving Alfred.

"It's... it's an awfully long fall," Alfred protested in a trembling voice. "I could use my magic..."

"Using your magic's what got you here in the first place," Haplo interrupted, crawling gingerly out onto the limb, flattening himself in order to distribute his weight evenly.

The branch sagged. Alfred gasped in terror, waved his arms, and kicked his feet. The limb creaked ominously.

"Hold still!" Haplo ordered in irritation. "You'll bring us both down!" He slid his dagger between the coat and the branch, began to cut through the seam.

"What... what do you mean—my magic got me into this?" Alfred asked, closing his eyes tightly.

"That wind didn't pick up any of the rest of us and try to impale us on a mountain. Just you. And the mountain didn't start to collapse until you began to sing those damn runes of yours."

"But why?"

"Like I said, you tell me," Haplo grunted.

He was about halfway through, cutting slowly, hoping to let Alfred down as easily as possible, when he heard a low whistle. The sound went through him like a bolt of hot iron, burning him, piercing him.

"What an odd-sounding bird," said Alfred.

"It's not a bird. It's Marit. Our signal for danger."

Haplo gave the knife a jerk, slit the coat seam in one long, jagged tear. Alfred had time for one wild yell; then he was plummeting through the air. Hugh the Hand stood stolidly, feet planted firmly, body braced. He caught Alfred, broke the Sartan's fall, but the two went over together in a heap.

Haplo, from his vantage point in the tree, looked to the ridge. Marit detached herself from the boulder long enough to point to her left. She gave another low whistle and added a series of three cat-like howls.

Tiger-men.

Marit raised her hands, spread all ten fingers wide, then repeated this gesture twice.

Haplo swore softly. A hunting pack, at least twenty of the fierce beasts, who were not really men at all, but were known as such because they walked upright on two strong hind legs and used their front paws, complete with prehensile thumbs, like hands.\*

\*Tiger-men are taller than most humans, with thick fur pelts and long tails. They can run on back legs or drop down on all fours, are capable of leaping incredible distances, and are as much at home in trees as on the ground. They are adept at using weapons, but prefer killing with fang and claw, dragging down their prey and sinking their teeth into the neck, ripping out the throat. They know rune-magic, using it primarily to enhance their weapons. They kill for sport as well as food.

They could, therefore, use weapons, and were skilled with one known as a cat's paw, intended to cripple rather than kill. A disk-shaped piece of wood with five sharp stone "claws" attached, the cat's paw was either thrown or flung from a sling. Its magic was weak against Patryn magic, but effective. No matter what part of a sigla-covered body it struck, the cat's paw inserted its claws through the small breaks in the tattoos, bit deep into muscle, and clung there tenaciously. Often hurled at the legs of a victim, the cat's paw tearing into a calf muscle or thigh felled the prey with deadly efficiency.

Tiger-men prefer their meat fresh.

Haplo cast a fleeting glance behind him at the ruined mountain, knew before he looked that it was useless. No hope of crawling back into that cave. He scanned the horizon, then noticed that Marit was waving to him, urging him to hurry.

Haplo slid down the tree. Hugh the Hand was picking Alfred up, attempting to help him stand. The Sartan crumpled like a rag doll.

"Looks like in the fall he did something to his other ankle," Hugh the Hand said.

Haplo swore again, louder and more graphically.

"What's all that hand-waving and shrieking about?" the assassin asked, looking in Mark's direction.

She was no longer visible, having retreated behind the boulder again to keep the tiger-men from seeing her. Although, if what Haplo suspected was true, they didn't need to see her. They knew what they were looking for and probably where to find it.

"Tiger-men are coming," Haplo said shortly.

"What're they?"

"You have house cats on Arianus?"

Hugh the Hand nodded.

"Imagine one taller, stronger, faster than I am, with teeth and claws to match."

"Damn." Hugh looked impressed.

"There's a hunting pack, maybe twenty of the beasts. We can't fight them. Our only hope is to outrun them. Though where we're going to run to is beyond me."

"Why don't we just lie low? They couldn't have spotted us yet."

"My guess is they know we're here. They've been sent to kill us."

Hugh the Hand frowned skeptically but didn't argue. Reaching into his pocket, he fished out his pipe, stuck it between his teeth, and stared down at Alfred, who was rubbing his injured ankles and trying to look as if the massage was helping.

"I'm really very sorry—" he began.

Haplo turned away.

"What do we do about him?" the Hand asked in a low voice. "He can't walk, much less run. I could carry him..."

"No, that would weigh you down. Our only chance is to run and keep running until we drop. Tiger-men are fast, but only in short bursts. They're not good at long distances."

A low and urgent whistle from Mark emphasized the need for haste. Haplo glanced over at the dog, then back at Alfred.

"You've ridden dragon-back, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes." Alfred perked up. "In Arianus. Sir Hugh would remember. It was when I was tracking Bane—"

But Haplo wasn't listening. He pointed at the dog, began speaking the runes softly. The animal, aware something involving it was about to happen, was on its feet, its tail, its entire body seeming to wag with excitement. Blue sigla flared from Haplo's hand, flashed through the air, and twined about the dog.

The runes sparkled over its body like the 'lectric zingers of the Kicksey-winsey gone mad. The dog began to grow in size, expanding, enlarging. It came to Haplo's waist; then its muzzle was level with his head, and then it was looking down at its master, tongue lolling, bathing them all in a rain of slobber.

Hugh the Hand gasped and staggered backward. Shaking his head, he rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, the dog was even bigger. "I've had drunken hallucinations that weren't this bad."

Alfred sat on the ground, stared up at the magically transformed animal with a doleful expression. Halting the magic, Haplo started toward the injured Sartan. Alfred made a pathetic attempt to stand, scrabbling backward up a convenient boulder.

"I'm much better. Truly I am. You go on ahead. I—"

His protestations were cut short by an exclamation of pain. He would have fallen, but Haplo planted his shoulder in the Sartan's middle, lifted him, and tossed him onto the back of the dog before Alfred knew precisely what had happened, where he was, or which end of him was up.

Once he figured all these out, he realized he was sitting on the back of the dog—now the size of a young dragon—and he was well above the ground. Giving a low moan, shutting his eyes, Alfred flung his arms around the dog's neck and hung on for dear life, nearly choking the animal.

Haplo managed to pry loose the Sartan's death-like grip, at least enough to let the dog breathe.

"Come on, boy," he said to the animal. He looked over at the assassin. "You all right?"

Hugh the Hand gave Haplo a quizzical glance. "You people could take over the world."

"Yeah," said Haplo. "Let's go."

He and the assassin set off at a run. The dog—with Alfred clinging and groaning and keeping his eyes shut—trotted easily along behind.

Haplo—keeping low—crept up the side of the ridge to join Marit. He left the others at the bottom, awaiting his signal before proceeding.

"What have we got?" he asked softly, though by now he could see for himself.

Off to his left, a large group of tiger-men was crossing the plain below. They loped along at a leisurely pace on two legs. They didn't pause to look around, but kept coming. And there were at least forty.

"This is no ordinary hunting pack," Haplo said.

"No," Marit agreed. "There're too many of them. They're not fanning out, not stopping to sniff the air. And they're all armed."

"All heading straight in this direction. And us with our backs against the mountain." Haplo scanned the vast plain in discouragement. "And no help down there."

"I'm not so sure," Marit said, sweeping her hand to her right. "Look over there, on the horizon. What do you see?"

Haplo looked, squinted. Gray clouds hung low; fingers of mist dragged over the tops of a distant stand of fir trees. The jagged peaks of snow-capped mountains could be seen when the mist lifted. And there, above the dull green of the firs, about halfway up the side of one of the mountains...

"I'll be damned!" Haplo breathed. "A fire."

Now that his attention was drawn to the brilliant spot of orange, he wondered that he hadn't noticed it immediately, for it was the only splotch of color in the dismal world. He let hope, kindled by the flame, warm him an instant, then quickly stamped it out.

"A dragon attack," he said. "It has to be. Look how far it is above the treetops."

Marit shook her head. "I've been watching the fire while you were down there fooling with the Sartan. It burns steadily. Dragon-flame comes and goes. It may be a village. I think we should try for it."

Haplo looked at the tiger-men, steadily decreasing the distance between themselves and their prey. He looked back at the flame, which continued to burn steadily, brightly, almost defiantly lighting the gloom. Whatever decision they made would have to be made soon. Heading for the fire would carry them down the ridge, into the plains, clearly into view of the tiger-men. It would be a desperate race.

Hugh the Hand crawled up on his belly beside Haplo.

"What is it?" he grunted. His eyes widened at the sight of the cats moving purposefully toward them. But he said nothing beyond another grunt.

Haplo pointed. "What do you make of that?"

"A beacon fire," Hugh the Hand said promptly. "There must be a fortress near here."

Haplo shook his head. "You don't understand. Our people don't build fortresses. Mud and grass huts, easily put up, easily abandoned. Our people are nomads—for reasons like that." He glanced at the tiger-men.

Hugh the Hand chewed thoughtfully on the pipe stem. "It sure as hell looks like a beacon fire to me. 'Course," he added dryly, removing the pipe, "in a place where house cats are as big as men and dogs are as big as trees, I could be mistaken."

"Beacon fire or not, we have to try for it. There's no other choice," Marit insisted.

She was right. No other choice. And no more time to stand here arguing about it. Besides, if they could just make the forest safely, that might discourage their pursuers. The tiger-men didn't like the forests, the territory of their longtime foes, wolfen and snogs.

Wolfen and snogs—other threats they'd have to face. But—one way of dying at a time.

"They'll spot us the moment we break cover. Run down the ridge and across the plains. Make straight for the trees. If we're lucky, they won't follow us into the forest. Not much use in setting an order of march. Try to keep together." Haplo looked around, brought the dog forward with a gesture.

Alfred opened his eyes, took one look at the band of tiger-men moving toward them, gave a groan, and shut his eyes again.

"Don't faint," Haplo told him. "You'll fall off and I'll be damned if I'm going to stop and put you back on."

Alfred nodded, clutched the dog's fur even more tightly.

Haplo pointed toward the woods. "Take him there, boy," he ordered.

The dog, realizing this was serious work now, cast a baleful glance at the tiger-men and then stared at the forest with fixed determination.

Haplo drew in a deep breath. "Let's go."

They plunged down the side of the ridge. Almost instantly, wild cat screams rose on the air—horrible sounds that raised the hair on the back of the neck, sent shivers through the body. Fortunately, the ridge was made of granite, solid and hard, and they were able to scramble down it swiftly. Moving at an angle away from the tiger-men, the small band reached the level plains ahead of their pursuers.

The ground was now smooth and flat; whatever type of vegetation had once covered it appeared to have been deliberately cut down, allowing them to run unobstructed. The thought occurred to Haplo, bounding swiftly over the dark black dirt, that he might have been dashing across lush farmland perched high in the mossbeds of Pryan. The idea was ludicrous, of course. His people were hunters and gatherers, fighters and roamers, not farmers. He put the thought out of his mind, put his head down, and concentrated on pumping his legs.

The level ground was an advantage to Haplo and his group, but it was also a distinct advantage to the tiger-men. Haplo, glancing behind, saw that the creatures had dropped to all fours, their powerful limbs galloping with ease over the dirt and plant stubble.

Their slant-eyes glittered green; the glistening fangs in their panting mouths were spread wide in grins of blood-lust and the thrill of the chase. The dog had raced on ahead, Alfred bumping and jouncing, his legs flung up and back and sideways. The dog easily outdistanced those on foot. Casting a worried backward glance at its master, it started to slow, waited for him to catch up.

"Go on!" Haplo shouted.

The dog, though seemingly unhappy about leaving him behind, did as it was told. It sped for the woods.

A clunk at Haplo's left side caused him to look down. The wicked sharp edges of a cat's paw shone white against the soil. The weapon had fallen short of its mark, but not by much. He increased his speed, using his magic to enhance his body's strength and stamina. Marit was doing the same.

Hugh the Hand was keeping up gamely when suddenly he pitched forward and lay face down in the dirt. Blood dribbled from a wound on his head. A cat's paw lay at his side. Haplo veered off course to help. Another cat's paw whined through the air.

Haplo ignored it. The assassin was out cold.

"Marit!" Haplo called.

She glanced back, first at him, then at their pursuers gaining on them. She made a swift motion with her hand that said, Leave him! He's finished!

Haplo had his hand under Hugh's left shoulder, was dragging the unconscious man to his feet. Marit appeared at the human's right side. Something struck Haplo in the back, but he paid little attention to it. A cat's paw, but it had landed the wrong way, claws outward.

"Join the circle!" he told Marit.

"You're crazy!" she retorted. "You'll get us all killed! And for what? A mensch!" Her tone was bitter, but when she looked at Haplo, he was startled and warmed to see grudging admiration in her eyes.

Catching hold of Hugh the Hand, she whispered the runes beneath her breath. The blue and red glow from her body flowed over the human as Haplo's magic flowed over him from the other side. Hugh the Hand began to stumble forward, legs acting at the magic's command, not his own. He ran in a sleepwalking stupor, reminding Haplo of the automaton back on Arianus.

Their combined magic kept the human going, but only at a cost to both the Patryns. The forest appeared to be farther off than it had at the beginning of their mad dash. Haplo could hear the tiger-men close behind them now, hear the thud of their paws in the dirt, the low growls and whines of pleasurable anticipation of the kill.

No more cat's paws were thrown. Haplo wondered why at first, then realized grimly that the beasts had decided their crippling weapons were no longer necessary. The prey was obviously wearing out.

Haplo heard a snarl. Marit screamed a warning; she let Hugh fall. A heavy weight hit Haplo from behind, dragged him down. Fetid breath on his face sickened him; claws tore at his flesh. His defensive magic reacted—blue rune-fire crackled. The tiger-man howled in pain; the weight on top of Haplo lifted.

But if one tiger-man had caught him, others wouldn't be far behind. Haplo levered himself up with his hands, struggled to regain his feet. He could hear Marit's shrill battle cries, caught a glimpse of her jabbing at one of the tiger-men with a wooden spear. Haplo drew his dagger as another tiger-man struck him, this time from the side. He and the tiger-man went down, rolling over and over, Haplo stabbing with the knife, the tiger-man tearing at the Pa-tryn's unprotected face with ripping claws.

A loud booming bark, roaring like thunder, erupted from overhead. The dog had dropped off Alfred, returned to join the fray. Grabbing hold of the tiger-man on top of Haplo, the dog yanked the beast off and began to shake it back and forth, hoping to break its spine.

And suddenly, astonishingly, Haplo heard calls and yells coming from the forest. Arrows whistled above him; several of the tiger-men shrieked and slumped to the ground.

A group of Patryns emerged from the trees. Hurling spears and javelins, they drove the tiger-men away. Another flight of arrows sent the beasts fleeing back across the plains in thwarted rage.

Haplo was dazed and bleeding; the cuts on his face burned like fire. "Marit," he said, trying to find her in the confusion.

She stood over the body of a tiger-man, her bloodied spear in her hand. Seeing her unhurt, Haplo relaxed. Several Patryns had hold of Hugh the Hand, and, although obviously perplexed at the sight of a man bereft of tattoos, they were carrying him gently but hastily into the shelter of the woods.

Haplo wondered wearily what they must think of Alfred.

A woman knelt down beside Haplo. "Can you walk? We caught the tiger-men by surprise, but a pack that large will soon get its courage back. Here, I will lend you my help—"

The woman reached for Haplo's hand to assist him to his feet, perhaps to share her magic with him. But someone moved in front of the woman. Mark's hand clasped his.

"Thank you, Sister," said Marit. "He has help already."

"Very well, Sister," said the woman with a smile and a shrug. She turned to keep an eye on the tiger-men, who had retreated but were prowling about at a safe distance.

Haplo, with Marit's assistance, rose stiffly to his feet. He'd fallen with one knee bent at an angle, and when he tried to put his weight on it, pain shot through his leg. Reaching up his hand, he gingerly touched his face, drew his fingers back red with blood.

"You were lucky, the claws just missed your eye," Marit told him. "Here, lean on me."

Haplo's injury wasn't serious; he could have managed to walk on his own. But he didn't particularly want to. He draped his arm over Marit's shoulder. Her strong arms encircled him, supported him.

"Thanks," he said softly. "For this and—"

She cut him off. "We're even now," she returned. "Your life for mine."

And though her voice was chill, her touch was gentle. He tried to see into her eyes, but she kept her face averted from his. The dog had transformed back to its normal size, was gamboling happily at his side.

Looking ahead, into the forest, Haplo saw Alfred standing on one foot like an ungainly bird, peering out at them, wringing his hands in anxiety. The Patryns had carried Hugh the Hand into the woods. He had regained consciousness, was already attempting to sit up, waving off both their aid and their baffled and curious inspection.

"We would have made it safely," Marit said abruptly, "if you hadn't stopped to help the mensch. It was foolish. You should have left him."

"The tiger-men would have killed him."

"But according to you, he can't die!"

"He can die," said Haplo, accidentally putting his injured leg to the ground. He winced. "He comes back to life and the memory comes back as well. The memory's worse than the dying." Pausing a moment, he added, "We're a lot alike—he and I."

She was silent, thoughtful. He wondered if she understood. They had almost reached the edge of the woods. Stopping, she looked sideways at him.

"The Haplo I knew would have left him."

What was she saying? He couldn't tell by her tone. Was it oblique praise?

Or denunciation?

## CHAPTER 36

### THE LABYRINTH

THE TIGER-MEN SET UP A HOWL OF DISAPPOINTMENT WHEN THE Patryns entered the woods.

"If you and your friends can manage to go on a little farther without healing," the woman told Haplo, "we should push ahead. The tiger-men have been known to follow prey into the forest before now. And in such large numbers, they won't give up easily."

Haplo looked around. Hugh the Hand was pale; blood covered his head; but he was on his feet. He couldn't understand the woman's words, but he must have guessed their import. Seeing Haplo's questioning glance, the assassin nodded grimly.

"I can make it."

Haplo's gaze shifted to Alfred. He was walking on two feet as well as he ever walked on two feet, which meant that even as Haplo looked at him, Alfred tripped over an exposed tree root. Regaining his balance, he smiled; his hands fluttered. When he spoke, he spoke human. As did Hugh the Hand.

"I took advantage of the confusion... When they went out to help you, while no one was looking, I... well... The idea of riding on the dog again ... I thought it would be easier..."

"You healed yourself," Haplo concluded.

He also spoke human. The Patryns were watching them. They could use their magic to understand the mensch language but they weren't doing it; probably out of politeness. They wouldn't need their magic in order to understand Sartan language, however—a language based on the runes. While they might not like it, they would have no difficulty recognizing it.

"Yes, I healed myself," Alfred replied. "I deemed it best. Save time and trouble..."

"And unfortunate questions," Haplo said softly.

Alfred glanced sideways at the other Patryns and flushed. "That too."

Haplo sighed, wondered why he hadn't thought of this sooner. If the Patryns discovered Alfred was a Sartan—their ages-old enemy, an enemy that they'd been taught to hate from the moment they could understand what hatred was—there was no telling what they might do to him. Well, Haplo would try to keep up the pretense that Alfred was a mensch, like Hugh the Hand. That would be difficult enough to explain—most Patryns living in the Labyrinth would have never heard of any of the so-called "lesser" races. They all would have heard of the Sartan.

Alfred was looking sideways at Marit.

"I won't betray you," she replied scornfully. "At least not yet. They might take out their wrath on the rest of us."

With a scathing glance at the Sartan, she left Haplo's side. Several of the other Patryns were moving on, to act as scouts for the trail ahead. Marit joined them.

Haplo dragged his thoughts back to the immediate, dangerous circumstances. "Keep near Hugh," he ordered Alfred. "Warn him not to mention anything about Sartan. We don't want to give them ideas."

"I understand." Alfred's gaze followed Marit, walking with several of the Patryn men. "I'm sorry, Haplo," he added quietly. "Because of me, your people have become your enemies."

"Forget it," Haplo said grimly. "Just do as you're told. Here, boy."

Whistling to the dog, he began to limp on down the trail. Alfred fell back to walk beside Hugh the Hand.

The Patryns left the two strangers alone, though Haplo noticed that several Patryns took up places behind, their eyes on Hugh and Alfred, their hands never far from their weapons.

The woman—the leader of what Haplo assumed was a hunting party—joined him, walked along beside. She was burning with questions; Haplo could see the glittering light in her brown eyes. But she would not ask them. It was for sven the the headman of the tribe to question a stranger-strangest of strangers.

"I am called Haplo," he said, touching briefly the heart-rune on his left breast. He wasn't required to tell her his name, but he did so out of courtesy and to indicate his gratitude for her rescue.

"I am Kari," she replied, smiling at him, touching her own heart-rune.

She was tall and lank, with the hard-muscled body of a Runner. Yet she must be a Squatter; otherwise what was she doing leading a hunting party?

"It was lucky for us you came when you did," Haplo remarked, limping along painfully.

Kari did not offer to assist him; to do so would have been an insult to Marit, who had made it clear that she had some sort of interest in Haplo. Kari slowed her own pace to match his. She kept quiet watch as they walked, but she didn't appear particularly concerned that they were being followed. Haplo could see no indication from the sigla on his skin that the tiger-men were trailing them, "It was not luck," Kari replied calmly. "We were sent to find you. The headman thought you might be in trouble."

Now it was Haplo's turn to burn with questions, but— out of politeness—he dared not ask them. It was the headman's prerogative to explain his reasons for doing something. Certainly the rest of the tribe would never consider offering explanations of their own, putting their words into another's mouth.

The conversation lagged a bit at this point. Haplo glanced about with a nervousness that was not all feigned. "Don't worry," said Kari. "The tiger-men are not following us."

"It wasn't that," Haplo answered. "Before we met them, we saw flames. I was afraid that perhaps a dragon was attacking a village nearby—"

Kari was amused. "You don't know much about dragons, do you, Haplo?"

Haplo smiled and shrugged. It had been a nice try. "All right, so it isn't dragon-fire—"

"It is our fire," Kari said. "We built it."

Haplo shook his head. "Then apparently you're the ones who don't know much about dragons. The blaze can be seen a long way off—"

"Of course." Kari continued to be amused. "It is meant to be seen. That's why we light it on the tower. It is a welcome fire."

Haplo frowned. "Forgive me for saying this, Kari, but if your headman has made this decision, it seems to me that he must suffer from the sickness.\* I'm surprised you haven't been attacked before now."

\*Probably a reference to Labyrinth sickness—a form of insanity affecting Patryns, brought on by the terrors and hardship of life in the Labyrinth.

"We have been," Kari said nonchalantly. "Many, many times. Far more in past generations than these days, of course. Very few things in the Labyrinth are strong enough or daring enough to attack us now."

"Past generations?" Haplo's jaw sagged.

Who in the Labyrinth could speak of past generations? Few children knew their own parents. Oh, occasionally some large Squatter tribe might date itself back to a headman's father, but that was rare. Generally the tribes were either wiped out or scattered. Survivors joined up with, were absorbed into other tribes.

The past, in the Labyrinth, went back no further than yesterday. And one never spoke of a future.

Haplo opened his mouth, shut it again. To ask any more would be insulting. He'd already overstepped the bounds as it was. But he was uneasy. He glanced more than once at the telltale sigla on his skin. None of this made sense. Were they being lured into some sort of elaborate trap?

We are, he reminded himself, in the very heart, at the very beginning of the Labyrinth.

"Come, speak freely, Haplo," Kari said, sensing his discomfort, perhaps his suspicion. "What question is in your mind?"

"I've come here for a purpose," he said to her. "I'm looking for someone. A little girl. Her age would be seven, maybe eight gates. She is called Rue."

Kari nodded calmly.

"You know her?" Haplo's pulse quickened with hope. He couldn't believe it. He had found her already...

"I know several," Kari answered.

"Several! But how—"

"Rue is not an uncommon name in the Labyrinth," Kari said with a wry smile.

"I... I suppose not," Haplo mumbled.

To be honest, he'd never thought about it, never considered the possibility that there might be more than one child in the Labyrinth named Rue. He was not used to thinking of people in terms of names. He couldn't recall his parents' names. Or the name of the headman in the tribe that had raised him. Even Marit. She had been "the woman" to him, when he thought about her. The Lord of the Nexus was just that—his lord.

Haplo looked down at the dog trotting along next to him. The animal had saved his life—and he'd never bothered to give it a name. It wasn't until he had passed through Death's Gate, wasn't until he had entered

the worlds of mensch, that he'd really become conscious of names, come to think of people as separate beings—important beings, distinct and individual.

And he wasn't the only one who had a problem with names. Haplo slid a glance back at Alfred—traipsing down the path, stumbling over any obstacle that presented itself, tripping over smooth ground if nothing else was available.

What's your true name, Sartan? Haplo wondered suddenly. And why haven't you ever told anyone?

The Patryns had covered a long distance. Haplo's leg was giving him increasing trouble, causing him increasing pain before Kari finally called a halt. The gray gloom was darkening; night was coming. It was dangerous to travel through the Labyrinth at any time, but far more dangerous after dark.

They had reached a clearing in the forest, near a stream. Kari examined it, consulted with her party, then announced that they would camp here for the night.

"Heal yourselves," she told Haplo. "We have food for you. Then sleep in peace. We will keep watch."

The Patryns brought them hot food, cooking it over a small fire that they built in a clearing. Haplo was astounded at their boldness, but said nothing. To have registered any sort of protest would have been to question Kari's authority, something that—as a stranger and one who'd been rescued by her—he had no right to do. He was relieved to note that they were at least sensible enough not to allow the blaze to smoke.

Once her guests were served, Kari asked courteously if there were other comforts she could provide for them.

"Your two friends do not speak our language," she said, with a glance at Hugh and Alfred. "Are their needs different from ours? Is there anything special we can bring them?"

"No," Haplo replied. "Thank you."

He had to give her credit. That, too, had been a nice try.

Kari nodded and left. She set the watch, posting lookouts on the ground and in the trees. Then she and the rest of her people sat down to eat. She did not ask Haplo and the others to join her circle. This could be taken for a bad sign—one didn't share food with one's enemy. Or again, it might be courtesy, an assumption that since the two strangers did not speak the language they would be more comfortable alone with their companions.

Marit returned, silently joined them. She kept her eyes on her meal—a mixture of dried meat and fruit wrapped and cooked in grape leaves. The dog shared Haplo's meal, then flopped over on its side and, with a tired sigh, fell sound asleep.

"What's going on, Haplo?" Hugh the Hand questioned, keeping his voice low. "These people may have saved our lives, but they don't seem overfriendly. Are we their prisoners now? Why are we hanging around with them?"

Haplo smiled. "It's nothing like that. They're uncertain of us. They've never seen people like you two and they don't understand. No, we're not their prisoners. We could leave anytime we wanted and they'd never say a word. But it's dangerous traveling in the Labyrinth—as you've seen. We need to rest, heal our wounds, build up our strength. They'll escort us to their village—"

"How do you know you can trust them?" the Hand demanded.

"Because they're my people," Haplo returned quietly.

Hugh the Hand grunted. "That little murderer Bane was one of my people. So was that accursed father of his."

"It's different with us," said Haplo. "It's this place, this prison. For generations, ever since we were sent here, we've had to work together to simply survive. From the moment we're born, our lives are in someone else's keeping—either father or mother, or maybe complete strangers. It doesn't matter. And it continues like that throughout our lives. No Patryn would ever hurt or kill or... or..."

"Betray his lord?" Marit asked.

She flung her food to the ground. Jumping to her feet—startling the sleeping dog to wakefulness—she stalked off.

Haplo started to call her back, faltered, and fell silent. What could he say?

The other Patrins had stopped talking to stare at her, wondering what was wrong, where she was going, Marit grabbed a water skin and walked down to the small stream, where she made a pretense of filling it. There were no stars or moon in the Labyrinth, but the firelight reflected off the leaves of the trees, glanced off the surface of the stream, providing enough light to see by. She took care to keep within the light—to do otherwise was to invite trouble.

The other Patrins went back to the meal and their talk. Kari followed Marit with her eyes, then turned a cool, thoughtful gaze on Haplo.

He was cursing himself for a fool. What had he been thinking about? My people—so superior. He was beginning to sound like a Sartan. Well, the late Samah, at least. Certainly not Alfred—a Sartan who had difficulty feeling superior to dirt worms.

"So what's your point?" Hugh the Hand asked, filling in the awkward silence.

"Nothing," Haplo muttered. "Never mind." Maybe they did in fact have to worry about these Patrins. We were sent to find you. The tiger-men had been sent to find them, too. And Haplo was lying to his people, deceiving them, bringing the ancient enemy into their midst.

A Patryn male, who had accompanied Marit during the day, went to the stream, started to sit down beside her. She turned her shoulder to him, averted her face. Shrugging, the Patryn walked off.

Haplo stood up painfully, limped down to the stream. Marit was sitting alone, shoulders hunched, knees drawn up, her chin resting on her knees. Rolling herself into a ball, Haplo had once teasingly described this position.

Hearing his footsteps, she glanced up, frowning, ready to repel any intrusion. Seeing that it was him, she relaxed somewhat, did not drive him away, as he had more than half-expected.

"I came for some water," he said stupidly.

She made no comment. The inane remark certainly didn't deserve one. He bent down, cupped his hand, drank, though he wasn't really thirsty. He sat down beside her. She did not look at him, but stared into the water, which was clear and cold and fast-running.

"I asked about our daughter," he said. "There are several girls in the village about her age named Rue. I don't know why, but I didn't expect that."

She said nothing, stared at the water. Picking up a stick, she thrust it into the stream. The water altered course, swirled around it in whorls and ripples, kept going.

"I hate this place," she said abruptly. "I loathe it, fear it. I left it. But I never really left it. I dream of it, always. And when I came back, I was frightened, but a part of me... a part of me..." She swallowed, frowned, shook her head angrily.

"—felt as if you'd come home," he finished for her.

Her eyes blinked rapidly. "But I haven't," she said in a low voice. "I can't." She glanced over her hunched shoulder at the Patryns, gathered together. "I'm different." Another moment's silence, then she said, "That's what you meant, wasn't it?"

"About Hugh and me being alike?" Haplo knew exactly what she was thinking, feeling. "Now I'm beginning to understand how the Sartan came to name Death's Gate. When we passed through Death's Gate, you and I both died, in a way. When we try to come back here, come back to our old life, it isn't possible. We've both changed. We've both been changed."

Haplo knew what had changed him. He wondered very much what had happened to change Marit.

"But I didn't feel like this when I was in the Nexus," Marit protested.

"That's because being in the Nexus isn't truly leaving the Labyrinth. You can see the Final Gate. Everyone's thoughts are centered in the Labyrinth. You dream about it, as you said. You feel the fear. But now, you dream about other things, other places..."

Did Hugh the Hand dream? Did he dream about that haven of peace and light he'd described? Was that what made it so hard, so very hard to come back?

And what did Marit dream?

Whatever it was, she obviously wasn't going to tell him.

"In the Labyrinth, the circle of my being encompassed only myself," Haplo went on.—"It never really included anyone else, not even you."

She looked over at him.

"Just as yours never really included me," he added quietly.

She looked away again.

"No names," Haplo continued. "Only faces. Circles touched, but never joined—"

She shivered, made a sound, and he stopped talking, waited for her to say something.

She kept silent.

Haplo had hit some vital part of her, but he couldn't tell what. He went on talking, hoping to draw her out. "In the Labyrinth, my circle was a shelf protecting me from feeling anything. I planned to keep it that way, but first the dog broke the circle, and after that, when I went beyond Death's Gate, other people just sort of seeped inside. My circle grew, expanded.

"I didn't intend it. I didn't want it. But what choice did I have? It was either that or die. I've known fear out there, worse than any fear in the Labyrinth. I healed a young man—an elf. I was healed by Alfred—my enemy. I've seen wonders and horrors. I've known happiness, hurt, sorrow. I've come to know myself.

"What changed me? I'd like to blame it on that chamber. That Chamber of the Damned. Alfred's Seventh Gate. A brush with the 'higher power' or whatever it was. But I don't think that was the cause. It was Limbeck

and his speeches and Jarre calling him a druz. It was the dwarf maid Grundle and the human girl, Alake, who died in my arms."

Haplo smiled, shook his head. "It was even those four irritating, quarreling mensch on Pryan: Paithan, Rega, Roland, and Aleatha. I think about them, wonder if they've managed to survive."

Haplo touched the skin of his forearm; the tattoos were glowing faintly, indicating danger, but a danger that was far away. "You should have seen how the mensch stared when they first saw my skin start to glow. I thought Grundle's eyes were going to roll out of her head. Now, among my own people, I feel the way I did among the mensch—I'm different. My journeys have left their mark on me and I know that they must be able to see it. I can never be one of them again."

He waited for Marit to say something, but she didn't. She jabbed the stick into the water and huddled away from him. Obviously she wanted to be alone.

Standing up, he limped back to his bed, to heal himself—as far as possible—and try to sleep.

"Xar," Marit pleaded silently after Haplo had gone. "Husband, Lord, please help me, guide me. I'm so afraid, so desperately afraid. And alone. I don't know my own people anymore. I'm not one of them."

"Do you blame me for that?" Xar questioned mildly.

"No," Marit answered, poking the stick into the stream. "I blame Haplo. He brought the mensch here, and the Sartan. Their presence puts us all in danger."

"Yes, but it may work for us in the end. You say you are at the very beginning of the Labyrinth. This village, from what you describe, must be an incredibly large one, larger by far than any I ever knew existed. This suits me well. I have formed a plan."

"Yes, Lord." Marit was relieved, vastly relieved. The burden was to be lifted from her shoulders.

"When you reach the village, Wife, this is what you will do..."

It was now extremely dark; Haplo could barely find his way back to the group. Hugh the Hand looked up at him hopefully, a hope that died when he saw that Haplo's hands were empty. "I thought you'd gone to get us something more to eat."

Haplo shook his head. "There is nothing more. We have a saying: 'The hungrier you are, the faster you'll run.'"

The Hand growled, and—scowling darkly—he went to the stream to fill his stomach with water. He moved silently, stealthily, as he always moved, as he had trained himself to move. Marit didn't hear him coming, apparently, and when he drew near, she gave a violent start.

"A guilty start," the Hand told Haplo later, describing the incident. "And I could have sworn I heard her talking to someone."

Haplo brushed it off; what else could he do? She was hiding something from him, of that he was certain. He longed to be able to trust her, but he couldn't. Did she feel the same about him? Did she want to trust him? Or was she only too happy to hate him?

Marit walked over to join the circle of Patryns, tossing down her water skin among them as an offering. Perhaps she was out to prove that she, at least, was still one with her people.

Kari looked over at Haplo, extending an invitation. He could have joined them if he had wanted, but he was too tired, too sore to move. His leg ached and the scratches on his face burned like fire. He needed to heal

himself, to close the circle of his being—as best he could, considering the circle was torn and would be forever.

He scraped together a bed of dried fir needles and lay down.

Hugh the Hand sat down beside him.

"I'll take the first watch," the assassin offered quietly.

"No, you won't," Haplo told him. "To do so would be an insult, would look as if we didn't trust them. Lie down. Get some rest. You, too, Alfred."

The Hand thought he was going to argue; then he shrugged and stretched himself out on the ground, propped up against the curved bole of a tree. "Anything says I've got to fall asleep?" he asked, crossing his legs and taking out his pipe.

Haplo smiled tiredly. "Just don't make it look too obvious." He petted the dog, which had curled up beside him.

It raised its head lazily, blinked at him, went back to its dreams.

Hugh the Hand stuck the pipe between his teeth. "I won't. If anyone asks, I'll say I'm troubled with insomnia. Eternal insomnia." He cast a dark glance at Alfred.

The Sartan flushed, his face reddening in the glow cast by the fire. He had been attempting to find himself a place to sleep, but first he'd struck his head on a buried rock; then he'd apparently sat down on an anthill, because he suddenly leapt to his feet and began slapping at his legs.

"Stop it!" Haplo commanded irritably. "You're drawing attention to yourself."

Alfred collapsed hastily to the ground. A faint expression of pain crossed his face. He reached underneath him, removed a pine cone, and tossed it away. Catching Haplo's disapproving glance, the Sartan hunkered down in the dirt and attempted to look comfortable. Surreptitiously, his hand slid underneath his bony posterior, removed another pine cone.

Haplo closed his eyes, began the healing process. Slowly the pain in his knee receded, the burning cuts on his face closed. But he couldn't sleep. Eternal insomnia, as Hugh the Hand had put it.

The other Patryns set the watch, doused the fire. Darkness closed over them, lit only by the softly glowing sigla on the skin of his people. Danger was around them, always around them. Marit did not return to her group, nor did she stay with the other Patryns, but chose a place to sleep about halfway between both.

Hugh the Hand sucked on the empty pipe. Alfred began to snore. The dog chased something in a dream.

And just when Haplo had decided that he couldn't sleep, he slept.

## CHAPTER 37

### THE CITADEL

#### PRIAN

XAR HAD REACHED A DECISION. HIS PLANS WERE FORMED; NOW he set about putting them into action. He had arranged with Marit for the Patryns of the Labyrinth to deal with Haplo, keep him safe until Sang-drax reached him.

As for Sang-drax, Xar had concluded that the question of the dragon-snake's loyalty was not a factor. After much thought on the matter, Xar was confident that Sang-drax's primary motivation was hatred—the dragon-snake hated Haplo, wanted revenge. Sang-drax would not rest until he had sought out Haplo and destroyed him. That would take some time, Xar reasoned. Even for someone as powerful as Sang-drax, the Labyrinth was not easily traversed. By the time the dragon-snake had his coils wrapped around Haplo, Xar would be there to see to it that his prize was not damaged beyond usefulness.

Xar's immediate problem was the killing of the mensch. Given the lord's power and skill in magic, the murder of two elves, two humans, and a dwarf (none of them overly intelligent) should not be a concern. The Lord of the Nexus could have destroyed them all simultaneously with a few gestures in the air and a spoken word or two. But it was not the manner of their dying that worried him, it was the condition of the corpses after death.

He studied the mensch under various circumstances for a day or two, and concluded that, even dead, they would never be able to stand up to the tytans. The elven male was tall, but thin, with fragile bone structure. The human male was tall with good bones and muscle. Unfortunately, this male appeared to be suffering from pangs of thwarted love and consequently had let his body go to ruin. The human female was stocky, but muscular. The dwarf, though short in stature, had the strength of his race and was the best of a bad lot. The elven female was hopeless.

It was essential, therefore, that the mensch in death should be better than they were in life. Their corpses had to be fit and strong. And, most important, they had to be endowed with a strength and stamina the wretches did not currently possess. Poison was the best way to murder them, but it needed to be a special concoction—one that would kill the body and at the same time make it healthier. A most intriguing dichotomy.

Xar began with a flask of ordinary water. Working the rune-magic, considering the possibilities, he altered the water's chemical structure. At last he felt confident that he had succeeded; he had developed an elixir that would kill—not immediately, but after a short period, say an hour or so, during which the body would begin a rapid acceleration of muscle and bone tissue, a process that would later be further enhanced by the necromancy.

The poison had one drawback: the bodies would wear out far faster than ordinary corpses. But Xar did not need these mensch long; they had only to buy him enough time to reach the ship.

The elixir finished, including the final additive of a pleasing flavor of spiced wine, Xar prepared a feast. He concocted food, then placed the poisoned wine in a large silver pitcher in the center of the table, and went to invite the mensch to a party.

The first one he came across was the human female—he could never recall her name. In his most charming manner, Xar asked her to join him that evening for a dinner of the most wonderful delicacies, all compliments of the lord's magical talent. He urged her to bring the others, and Rega, excited by this break in their dull routine, hastened to do just that.

She went hunting for Paithan. She knew, of course, where to look for him. Opening the door to the Star Chamber, she peered inside.

"Paithan?" she called, hesitant about entering. She hadn't gone into the chamber since the time the cursed machine had nearly blinded her. "Could you come out here? I have something to tell you."

"Uh, I can't leave right at the moment, sweetheart. I mean, well, it might be a while..."

"But, Paithan, it's important."

Rega took a tentative step inside the doorway. Paithan's voice was coming from an odd direction.

"It will have to wait... I'm not really able... I've gotten myself in a bit of a... Can't quite figure out how to get down, you see..."

Rega couldn't see, at least not at the moment. Irritation overcoming her fear of the light, she walked into the Star Chamber. Hands on her hips, she glared around the room.

"Paithan, quit playing games this instant. Where are you?"

"Up... up here." Paithan's voice drifted down from above.

Astonished, Rega tilted her head, stared in the direction indicated. "Name of the ancestors, Pait, what are you doing up there?"

The elf, perched on the seat of one of the enormous chairs, peered back down at her. He looked and sounded extremely uncomfortable. "I came up here to... um... well ... see what it was like from up here. The view, you know."

"Well, how is it?" Rega demanded.

Paithan winced at the sarcasm. "Not bad," he said, glancing around and feigning interest. "Really quite nice..."

"View—my ass!" Rega said loudly.

"I can't, dear. Not from this angle. If you could bend over—"

"You climbed up there to try to figure out how the damn chair works!" Rega informed him. "And now you can't get back down. What did you have in mind? Pretending you're a tytan? Or maybe you thought the machine would mistake you for a tytan! Not but what it might. You've got all the brains of one."

"I had to try something, Rega," Paithan excused himself plaintively. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. The tytans are the key to this machine. I just know it. That's why it's not working properly. If they were here—"

"—we'd all be dead," Rega inserted grimly, "and there'd be nothing to worry about, least of all this stupid machine! How did you get up there?"

"Going up was easy—the chair legs are sort of rough with lots of footholds, and elves were always pretty fair climbers and—"

"Well, just come down the same way."

"I can't. I'll fall. I tried once. My foot slipped. I was barely able to hang on. I could just picture myself pitching head first into that well." Paithan clutched the edge of the chair seat. "You can't believe how deep and dark that well looks from up here. I'll bet it goes clear into the center of Pryan. I could imagine myself falling and falling and falling..."

"Don't think about it!" Rega told him irritably. "You're only making it worse!"

"It can't get much worse," Paithan said miserably. "Just looking down, I feel like I might throw up." His face did have a greenish tinge.

"This whole business makes me feel like I might throw up," Rega muttered, taking a step or two backward, just to be out of range. She eyed him thoughtfully. "The first thing I'm going to do—if and when I ever get him out of here—is lock the door to this damn room and throw away the key."

"What did you say, dear?"

"I said what if Roland tosses up a length of rope? You could secure it to the arm of the chair, then shinny down it."

"Do you have to tell your brother?" Paithan groaned. "Why can't you do it?"

"Because it's going to take a strong arm to throw the rope that far," Rega returned.

"Roland will never let me live this down," Paithan said bitterly. "Look, I've got an idea. Go ask the wizard—"

"Eh?" came a quavering voice. "Someone call for a wizard?"

The old man wandered into the room. Seeing Rega, he smiled, doffed his decrepit hat. "Here I am. Glad to be of service. Bond's the name. James Bond."

"The other wizard!" Paithan hissed. "The useful one!"

"Great Scott!" The old man froze. "It's Dr. No! He's found me! Don't be afraid, my dear." He reached out trembling hands. "I'll save you—"

"I can't get Lord Xar." Rega was explaining to Paithan. "That's what I came to tell you. He's busy planning a party. We're all invited—"

"A party. How wonderful!" The old man beamed. "I'm quite fond of parties. Have to get my tux out of mothballs—"

"A party!" Paithan repeated. "Yes, that would be great fun! Ateatha loves parties. We'll get her away from that strange maze where she spends all her time now—"

"And get her away from the dwarf," Rega added. "I haven't said anything because, well, she is your sister, but I think there's something sort of odd going on there."

"What are you implying?" Paithan glared down at Rega.

"Nothing, but it's obvious that Drugar adores her and, let's face it, she's not really choosy about men—"

"Oh, yes. After all, she did fall for your brother!" Paithan said viciously.

Rega flushed in anger. "I didn't mean—"

The old man, following Rega's gaze upward, gave a violent start. "I say! It is Dr. No!"

"No—" Paithan began.

"You see!" Zifnab yelled, triumphant. "He admits it!"

"I'm Paithan!" Paithan shouted, leaning farther over the edge of the chair seat than he'd intended. Shuddering, he slid hurriedly backward.

"The fool is stuck up there," Rega explained in icy tones. "He's scared to come down."

"I'm not either," Paithan retorted sullenly. "I have the wrong shoes on, that's all. I'll slip."

"You're sure he's not No?" the old man asked nervously.

"Yes, he's not No. I mean no, he isn't... Never mind." Rega was starting to feel dizzy herself. "We've got to get him down. Do you have any spells?"

"Dandy spell!" the old man said immediately. "Fire... Fire... Fireball! That's it! We set the chair legs on fire and when they burn up—"

"I don't think that will work!" Paithan protested loudly.

The old man snorted. "'Course it will. The chair goes up in flames, and pretty soon the seat doesn't have a leg to stand on and whoosh! Down she comes!"

"Go get Roland," Paithan said in resigned tones. "And take him with you," he added, with a dark glance at the old man.

"Come on, sir," said Rega. Trying not to laugh, she guided the old man, protesting, out of the Star Chamber. "Yes, I do think it would be fun to set the chair on fire. I wouldn't even mind setting Paithan on fire. But maybe some other time. Perhaps you could go help Lord Xar with the party arrangements..."

"Party," the old man said, brightening. "I do love a good party!"

"And hurry!" Paithan's voice cracked in panic. "The machine's starting up! I think the starlight's about to come on!"

As Paithan had said, Aleatha had been spending most of her time with Drugar in the maze. And, as she had promised, she had told no one about her discovery. She might have, if they'd been nice to her; Aleatha rarely troubled herself with the bother of keeping secrets. But the others, including Roland (especially Roland), were all just as idiotic and juvenile as always.

"Paithan's involved with that stupid machine of his," Aleatha told Drugar as they traversed the maze. "Rega's involved with trying to uninvolve Paithan with the stupid machine, and, as for Roland, who knows—or cares—what he's doing." She sniffed. "Let them hang around with that horrid, ugly Xar. You and I have found interesting people. Haven't we, Drugar?"

Drugar agreed. He always agreed with everything she said and was more than willing to take her into the maze anytime she wanted to go.

They had gone the very next morning, when the star machine was on, but, as Drugar had warned her, the fog-people weren't around. Aleatha and the dwarf waited for a long time, but no one came. The starburst mosaic in the amphitheater remained deserted.

Aleatha, bored, wandered around the mosaic, staring down at it.

"Why, look, Drugar," she said, kneeling. "Isn't this pattern the same one that's on the city gate?"

Drugar bent over to examine it. Yes, it was the same pattern. And in the center of the runes was an empty place, the same as the empty place on the city gate.

Drugar fingered the amulet he wore around his neck. When he placed that amulet in the empty place, the gate opened. His fingers grew cold; his hand shivered. He backed away from the starburst hurriedly and glanced at Aleatha, fearing she had noticed, would have the same idea.

But Aleatha had already lost interest. The people weren't here. The place was—for her—boring. She wanted to leave, and Drugar was quite ready to leave with her.

That afternoon, however, the two came back. The light from the star machine was on and shining brightly. The people were walking around the same as before.

Aleatha sat and watched them in mingled frustration and joy, tried to listen to them.

"They're talking," she said. "I can see their mouths move. Their hands move when they talk, help shape their words. They're real people. I know they are! But where are they? What are they talking about? It's so irritating not to know!"

Drugar fingered his amulet, said nothing.

But her words stuck in the dwarf's mind. The two returned to the maze the next afternoon, and the afternoon after that. The dwarf now began to view the fog-people the way Aleatha viewed them—as real people. He began to notice things about them; he thought he recognized some of the dwarves from the day previous. Elves and humans looked alike to him; he couldn't tell whether they were the same or not. But the dwarves—one in particular—he was certain had been there before.

This dwarf was an ale merchant. Drugar could tell by the plaiting of his beard—it was knotted in the guild braids—and by the silver mug. Hanging from a velvet ribbon around the dwarf's neck, the mug was used to offer customers a taste of his brew. And apparently his ale was good. The dwarf was well-to-do, to judge by his clothes. Elves and humans greeted him with respect, bowing and nodding. Some of the humans even dropped down on one knee to talk with the dwarf, putting themselves at his eye level—a courtesy Drugar had never in his life imagined a human offering a dwarf.

But then, he'd never in his life had much to do with humans or elves, for which he'd always been grateful.

"I've named that elf right there Lord Gorgo," Aleatha said. Since the fog-people wouldn't talk to her, she'd started talking about them. She'd begun to give them names and imagine what their relationships were to each other. It amused her, in fact, to stand right next to one of the shadowy men and discuss him with the dwarf.

"I knew a Lord Gorgo once. His eyes stuck out just like that poor man's eyes stick out. He does dress well, though. Much better than Gorgo, who had no taste in clothes. That woman he's with—frightful. She must not be his wife—look how she's clutching him. Low-cut dresses appear to be the fashion there, but if I had her bosoms, I'd button my collar up to my chin. What very handsome human males they have there. And walking about as freely as if they owned the place. These elves treat their human slaves very carelessly. Why, look, Drugar, there's that dwarf with the silver mug. We saw him yesterday. And he's talking to Lord Gorgo! And here's a human coming up to join them. I believe I shall call him Rolf. We had a slave once named Rolf, who..."

But Drugar had stopped listening. Taking hold of the amulet, the dwarf left the bench where he'd been sitting and for the first time ventured out into the midst of the people who seemed so real and were so false, who talked so much and were so silent.

"Drugar! You're here with us!" Aleatha laughed and whirled in a dance, her skirts billowing around her. "Isn't it fun?" Her dance ceased; she pouted. "But it would be more fun if they were real. Oh, Drugar, sometimes I wish you'd never brought me here! I like it, but it makes me so homesick... Drugar, what are you doing?"

The dwarf ignored her. Removing the amulet from around his neck, he knelt down in the center of the starburst and placed the amulet in the empty spot, just as he had placed it in the same empty spot in the center of the city gate.

He heard Aleatha scream, but the sound was distant, far distant, and he wasn't certain he was even hearing it at all...

A hand clapped him on the back.

"You, sir!" A voice boomed, speaking dwarven. A silver mug waved in front of Drugar's nose. "You'll be a stranger to our fair city, I'm wagering. Now, sir, how would you like a taste of the finest ale in all of Pryan?"

## CHAPTER 38

### THE LABYRINTH

HAPLO WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, HEALED AND RESTED, AND LAY quietly for long moments, listening to the sounds of the Labyrinth. He had hated this place while he was trapped here. It had taken from him everything he had ever loved. But it had given him everything he had ever loved as well. Only now did he realize it; only now did he come to admit it.

The tribe of Squatters that had taken him in when he was a boy, after his parents had been killed. He couldn't remember any of their names, but he could see their faces in the pale gray light that was little more than a brightening of the darkness, but was morning to the Labyrinth. He hadn't thought about them in a long time, since the day he'd left. He'd put them out of his mind then, as he'd assumed they must have put him out of their minds. Now he knew better.

The men who'd rescued that frightened little boy might still think about him. The old woman who'd housed and fed him must wonder about him, wonder where he was, what had happened to him. The young man who'd taught him the art of inscribing the sigla on weapons might be interested to know that his teaching had proved valuable. Haplo would have given a great deal now to find them, to tell them, to thank them.

"I was taught to hate," he mused, listening to the rustle of small animals, the bird calls he'd never truly heard until now, never truly forgotten. He rubbed the jowls of the dog, which was snoozing with its head on its master's chest. "I was never taught to love."

He sat up suddenly, disturbing the dog, which yawned, stretched, and dashed off to annoy foraging squirrels. Marit lay by herself, apart from Haplo and his group, apart from the other Patryns. She slept as he remembered seeing her sleep, curled up in the same tight ball. He remembered sleeping beside her, his body wrapped around hers, his stomach pressed against her back, his arms cradling her protectively. He wondered what it might have been like, sleeping with her and the baby, the child between them, sheltered, protected, loved.

To his astonishment, his eyes burned with tears. Hastily, embarrassed and half-angry at himself, he rubbed the moisture dry.

A stick snapped behind him.

Haplo started to turn, but before he could hoist himself up, Hugh the Hand had leapt to his feet, was confronting Kari.

"It's all right, Hugh," Haplo said, standing up. He spoke human. "She let us know she was coming."

True enough. Kari had stepped on the stick on purpose, courteously calling attention to her nearness.

"These you term mensch, don't they require sleep?" she asked Haplo. "My people noticed your friend was awake all night."

"They have no rune-magic to protect them," Haplo explained, hoping she hadn't taken offense. "We have been through many dangers. He... that is, they"—Haplo had to remember to include Alfred—"are naturally nervous, being in such a strange and terrifying place."

And why have they come to this strange and terrifying place? was the question on Kari's lips. Haplo could hear the words as surely as if she'd spoken them. But to ask such a question was not her duty. She gave

Hugh the Hand a pitying look, spoke a few words in Patryn to Haplo, then handed over a chunk of hard bread.

"What was that all about?" the Hand wondered, glowering darkly after Kari.

Haplo grinned. "She says that you must be able to run like a rabbit, otherwise you'd never have lived this long."

Hugh the Hand wasn't amused. He glanced around grimly. "I'm amazed anything lives long around here. There's a bad feeling to these woods. I'll be glad to get out of them." He stared morosely at the lumps of colorless dough Haplo held in his hands. "That breakfast?"

Haplo nodded.

"I'll pass." Pipe in his mouth, the assassin wandered over to the stream.

Haplo glanced to where Marit had been sleeping. She was awake now, doing what a Patryn always did first thing in the morning—checking old weapons, making new ones. She was eyeing a spear, a full-sized one with a sigla-engraved rock head. It was a fine weapon, most likely a gift from one of the Patrjns. Haplo recalled the man who had met her by the stream. Yes, he'd been carrying a spear like that.

"Very fine," Haplo said, coming up to her. "Well made."

Marit jumped up, her hand tightening reflexively around the haft of the spear.

"I'm sorry," he said, startled at her reaction. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Marit shrugged, cold, nonchalant. "I didn't hear you coming, that's all. This horrible place," she said abruptly, glancing around. "I'd forgotten how much I hate it!" Taking out a knife—another present, probably—she began improving a sigil carved on the spear's head. She had not once looked directly at him. "I hate it," she repeated in a low voice.

"This may sound strange," said Haplo, "but I was thinking this morning that it was sort of good to be back. My memories aren't all bad—" Impulsively he reached out to her.

Her head snapped back. She whipped around. Her hair, flying, struck him, stung his face. She held the spear between them. "We are even now. I saved your life. I owe you nothing. Remember that."

Spear in hand, she walked off. Several of Kari's group were heading out, going to scout the path ahead. Marit joined them, took her place beside the man who had given her the spear.

Confused, Haplo stared after her. Yesterday she had claimed him as hers, warned Kari away from him. Last night she'd talked to him. She had been glad—or so he had thought—to have him near her.

All was ended. All was suddenly different. What had happened between then and now?

Haplo couldn't guess. Kari and her people were breaking down their crude camp, preparing to travel. The birds had fallen silent. The only sounds were the angry chattering of three squirrels, up a tree, throwing nutshells at the dog, barking beneath. Haplo looked at his skin; the sigla glowed softly. Danger, not near, but not far. Never far.

He gnawed at a piece of bread. It filled the stomach; that was about all he could say for it.

"Could... could I have some of that?" Alfred was standing beside him, eyeing the bread.

Haplo practically threw it at him.

Alfred fumbled, caught it, nibbled at a corner. He started to say something, but Haplo interrupted.

"Here, stupid dog!" He whistled. "Stop that noise!"

The animal, hearing the sharp and unaccustomed note of rebuff, fell immediately silent. Head down, it trotted back meekly, wondering what it had done wrong.

"Aren't you hungry?" Alfred ventured.

Haplo shook his head.

"You really should eat—"

"You're in danger here," Haplo said grimly.

Alfred looked alarmed, nearly dropped the bread. He glanced fearfully around him, probably expecting to see packs of tiger-men swarming through the trees. Instead he saw only Hugh the Hand, stripped to the waist, plunging his head and shoulders into the rushing stream. Nearby, Kari and her group were ready to move out.

Kari waved to Haplo, motioned for him and his friends to join them. He waved back, indicating that she was to go on ahead. Kari looked at him dubiously, frowning. It wasn't wise to split up. He knew that as well as she. But then, he thought bitterly, he wasn't really part of her group anyway. He smiled reassuringly, held his hand up, palm out, to indicate that he would be all right, that they'd catch up in a moment. Kari shrugged and left.

"What you said about danger... I don't understand—" Alfred began.

"You should go back."

"Back where?" Alfred stared, helpless, confused.

"To the Vortex. Hugh the Hand'll go. Hell, you couldn't pry him loose from you. You'd stand a pretty fair chance of making it, I think. The tiger-men—if they're still around—will be tailing us."

"But the Vortex is destroyed."

"Not for you, Sartan. I've seen your magic! You killed the king dragon-snake. You raised the dead. You could probably lift up the pieces of that damn mountain and put it back together again."

Alfred protested. "You said I wasn't to use my magic. You saw what happened—"

"I think the Labyrinth will let you—especially if it knows you're leaving."

Alfred flushed. His head down, he glanced at Haplo sideways. "You... you said you needed me..."

"I lied. I don't need you. I don't need anyone. What I came to do is hopeless anyway. My child is dead. Murdered in your damn prison. Go on, Sartan. Get out."

"Not 'Sartan.' My name is—"

"Don't say Alfred!" Haplo was suddenly furious. "That isn't your name! Alfred's a mensch name you took when you decided to hide out by becoming a mensch. No one knows what your real name is, because it's a Sartan name and you've never trusted anybody enough to tell them. So just—"

"It is Coren."

"What?" Haplo blinked, pulled up short.

"My name is Coren," Alfred repeated quietly.

"I'll be damned." Haplo mulled over what he knew of Sartan rune-language. "That means 'to choose' or something like that."

Alfred smiled faintly. "'Chosen.' Me—chosen. Ludicrous, isn't it? The name doesn't mean anything, of course. It's quite common among Sartan. Almost every family has—er—had a boy they named Coren. Hoping for a self-fulfilling prophecy. You see why I never told you. It wasn't that I didn't trust you. I didn't want you to laugh."

"I'm not laughing," Haplo said.

Alfred looked very uncomfortable. "You should be. It's really quite amusing."

Hugh the Hand, shaking the water off his head and shoulders, walked back up from the stream. He stopped to stare around the empty clearing, probably wondering what had happened to the others.

"You didn't think that name of yours was so amusing when you woke up and found yourself alone in that mausoleum, did you, Coren?" Haplo asked quietly.

Alfred was red again, then pale. His hands trembled. He dropped the bread—to the extreme gratification of the dog. Sinking onto a tree stump, Alfred sighed, his breath rattling in his throat.

"You're right. Chosen. Chosen to live when everyone I had ever loved had died. Why? For what? They were all so much better. So much more worthy." Alfred looked up, his pale face hard. His trembling hand clenched. "I hated my name then. I hated it. I was happy to take the name I bear now. I planned to forget the other one. And I succeeded. I had forgotten it—until I met you."

Alfred sighed again. He smiled sadly. Haplo looked back at the assassin, made him a sign. Hugh swung himself easily up into the branches of a tree, gazed ahead, in the direction the other Patrins had taken. He motioned back, raised one finger.

So Kari was keeping an eye on them. She'd left one of the group to wait for them. Courtesy again. She was concerned, didn't want them to get lost. Haplo snorted.

Alfred was prattling on, obviously deeply relieved to talk.

"Whenever you spoke to me, Haplo, even though you called me Alfred, I kept hearing Coren. It was frightening. And yet it felt good to me, all at the same time. Frightening because I didn't understand. Yet good—you reminded me of my past, my distant past, when my family and friends were still alive.

"How could you do this? I wondered. Who are you? At first I thought you might be one of my people, but I knew immediately that wasn't right. Yet you obviously weren't a mensch. And then I remembered. I remembered the ancient history. I remembered the stories about the—forgive me—the old enemy.

"That night on Arianus, when we were imprisoned in the vat, I cast a spell on you, put you to sleep." Haplo stared, astonished. "A spell on me! You?" Alfred flushed. "I'm afraid so. It was only a sleep spell. You wore the bandages around your hands, to hide the tattoos. I crept over, lifted one of the bandages, and I saw..."

"So that's how you knew." Haplo motioned for the assassin to join them. "I wondered. And as fascinating as this trip down memory lane has been, Coren, it doesn't change the fact that you're in danger and you should leave—"

"But it does," Alfred said, standing up so swiftly that he startled the dog. It bounded to its feet with a whuff, ears up, hackles raised, wondering what was wrong. "Now I know what my name means."

"It's just a name, damn it! It doesn't mean anything. You said so yourself."

"But it does mean something—to me. You have taught me, Haplo. You even said it. Not 'chosen,' past tense. But 'to choose.' Present tense. Everyone else has always made my choices for me. I faint." Alfred spread his hands helplessly. "Or fall down. Or"—he cast a guilty glance at Hugh the Hand—"when I do take action, I 'forget.' "

Alfred stood up very straight, very tall. "But now that's different. I choose to be here, Haplo. You said you needed me. You made me ashamed. You had the courage to come into this dreadful place—for what? For ambition? For power? No. You came for love. The Labyrinth is afraid. Yes, but not of me. It's afraid of you, Haplo. You have brought into it the one weapon it doesn't know how to fight."

Reaching down, Alfred timidly petted the dog, stroked its silky ears. "I know it's dangerous and I'm not certain how much help I can be, but I choose to be here," he said softly, not looking at Haplo. "I choose to be here with you."

"They're watching us," said Hugh the Hand, coming up from behind. "In fact, four of them have started back in this direction. They're all armed. Of course, it could be that they like us so much they can't bear to let us out of their sight. But I doubt it."

The Hand took the pipe out of his pocket, studied it thoughtfully. Putting it into his mouth, he spoke through his teeth. "She betrayed us, didn't she?"

"Yes," said Haplo, looking far back the way they'd come, far back to the ruined mountain.

## CHAPTER 39

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

ROLAND, REGA, AND PAITHAN STOOD OUTSIDE THE STAR CHAMBER. Bright light welled out from under the door. Both Paithan and Roland were rubbing their eyes.

"Can you see yet?" Rega asked anxiously.

"Yeah," said Roland bitterly. "Spots. If you've blinded me, elf—"

"It'll go away." Paithan was surly. "Just give it time."

"I told you not to look down!" Roland snarled. "But no. You have to go stare into that damn well and pass out—"

"I did not! My hands slipped! As for the well"—Paithan shivered—"it's fascinating, in a creepy kind of way."

"Sort of like your sister," Roland sneered.

Paithan aimed a blow in the human's general direction. Missing, slamming his fist into a wall, he groaned and began to suck on his bleeding knuckles.

"Roland's just teasing, Pait," said Rega. "He doesn't mean anything. He's so in love with her himself he can't see straight."

"I may never be able to see anything!" Roland retorted. "As for my being in love with that slut—"

"Slut!" Paithan hurled himself bodily at Roland. "Apologize!"

The two went down in a heap, rolling around, pummeling each other.

"Stop it!" Rega stood over them, screaming and occasionally kicking the one who happened to roll nearer her. "Stop it, both of you! We're supposed to be going to the party..." Her voice died away.

Xar had appeared at the bottom of the stairs leading to the Star Chamber. Arms crossed over his chest, he was staring up at them, the expression on his face dark and grim.

"Party," Rega repeated nervously. "Paithan! Xar's here! Get up. Roland, come on! You look like idiots! Both of you!"

Still not able to see too well, but hearing the note of tension in Rega's voice, Paithan left off hitting, staggered to his feet. His face burned with shame. He could imagine what the old man must be thinking.

"You knocked a tooth loose," Roland mumbled. His mouth was bloody.

"Shut up!" Rega hissed.

The aftereffects of the bright light were wearing off; Paithan could see the wizard now. Xar was trying to look as if he found them amusing, but though the lines around his eyes were crinkled in a tolerant smile, the eyes themselves were colder and darker than the well in the Star Chamber. Staring into them, Paithan had the same sort of queasy feeling in his stomach. He even found himself taking an involuntary step backward, away from the edge of the staircase.

"Where are the other ones?" Xar asked, voice pleasant, benign. "I want all of you to come to my party."

"What other ones?" Rega asked, hedging.

"The other female. And the dwarf," Xar said, smiling.

"You ever notice how he never seems to remember our names?" Roland said out of the corner of his mouth to Paithan.

"You know"—Rega gulped—"Aleatha was right. He is ugly." She reached out, clasped hold of Paithan's hand. "I really don't want to go to this party."

"I don't think we have much choice," Paithan said quietly. "What excuse could we offer?"

"Tell him we just don't want to go," Roland said, edging behind Paithan.

"Me tell him? What's wrong with you telling him?" Paithan snapped.

"I don't think he likes me."

"Where is your sister, elf?" Xar's brows came together over his nose. "And the dwarf?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen them. We'll... go look for them!" Paithan offered hurriedly. "Won't we?"

"Yeah. Right now."

"I'll help."

Roland and Rega and the elf clattered down the stairs. At the bottom, they stopped. Xar stood before them, blocking their way. The two humans shoved Paithan to the front.

"Uh, we're just going to find Aleatha... my sister," Paithan said faintly. "And the dwarf. Drugar. The dwarf."

Xar smiled. "Hurry. The food will grow cold."

"Right!" Paithan wormed his way around the wizard and bolted for the door,

Rega and Roland were right behind him. None of them stopped running until they were out of the main building, standing on the wide marble steppes that overlooked the empty and deserted city below. The citadel had never appeared quite so empty or so deserted as it did now.

"I don't like this," Rega said, her voice shaking. "I don't like him. What does he want with us?"

"Hush, be careful," Paithan warned. "He's watching us! No, don't look. He's up there, on a balcony."

"What are we going to do?"

"What can we do?" Roland demanded. "We go to his party. Do you want to make him mad? Maybe you don't remember what he did to those tytans, but I do. Besides, how bad can it be? I say we're all jumping at our own shadows."

"Roland's right. It's only a party. If the wizard wanted to do anything bad to us—and there's no reason why he should—then he could do it from where he's standing."

"I don't like the way he looked at us," Rega said stubbornly. "And he seems too eager. Excited."

"At his age and with his looks, he probably doesn't get invited to a lot of parties," Roland suggested.

Paithan glanced at the dark-robed figure, standing still and silent on the balcony. "I think we should humor him. We'd better find Drugar and Aleatha right away."

"If they've gone into that maze, you won't find them at all, much less right away," Rega predicted.

Paithan sighed, frustrated. "Maybe you two should go back and I'll try to find Aleatha—"

"Oh, no!" Roland said, latching on to Paithan firmly. "We're all going."

"Well," Paithan began, "I suppose then that we should split—"

"Look! There's Aleatha now!" Rega cried, pointing.

The broad steppe they stood on overlooked the back of the city. Aleatha had just appeared around the corner of a building, her tattered dress a bright spot of color against the white marble.

"Good. That only leaves Drugar. And surely the old man won't mind if we're missing the dwarf—"

"Something's wrong with her," Roland said suddenly. "Aleatha!"

He went dashing down the stairs, racing toward Aleatha. She had been moving toward them—running toward them, in fact— Paithan tried to remember the last time he'd ever seen his sister run. But now she had stopped and was leaning against the wall of a building, her hand pressed over her breast as if in pain.

"Aleatha!" Roland said, coming up to her.

Her eyes were closed. Opening them, she looked at him thankfully, and with a sob reached out to him, nearly fell into his arms.

He clasped her, held her fast. "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"Drugar!" Aleatha managed to gasp.

"What did he do to you?" Roland cried, clutching her fiercely. "Did he hurt you? By the ancestors, I'll—"

"No, no!" Aleatha was shaking her head. Her hair floated around her face in an ashen-blond, shimmering cloud. She gasped for breath. "He's... disappeared!"

"Disappeared?" Paithan came up, Rega alongside. "What do you mean, Thea? How could he disappear?"

"I don't know!" Aleatha lifted her head, her blue eyes wide and frightened. "One minute he was there, next to me. And the next..."

She put her head against Roland's chest, began to cry. He patted her on the back, looked questioningly at Paithan. "What's she talking about?"

"Beats me," said Paithan.

"Don't forget Xar," Rega inserted quietly. "He's still watching us."

"Was it the tytans? Thea, don't go getting hysterical..."

"Too late," Rega said, eyeing her.

Aleatha was sobbing uncontrollably. She would have fallen but for Roland.

"Look, something terrible must have happened to her." He lifted her tenderly in his arms. "She doesn't normally come apart like this. Not even when the dragon attacked us."

Paithan had to agree. He was now growing anxious and upset himself. "But what should we do?"

Rega took charge. "We've got to get her calmed down long enough for her to tell us what happened. Take her back into the main building. We'll go to the stupid party, get her a glass of wine to drink. If something dreadful did happen—like the tytans broke in and snatched Drugar— then Lord Xar should know about it. He may be able to protect us."

"Why would the tytans come in and snatch Drugar?" Paithan asked—a perfectly logical question, but one which went unanswered.

Roland couldn't hear him over Aleatha's gulping sobs, and Rega gave the elf a disgusted look and shook her head at him.

"Get her a glass of wine," she repeated, and the three returned in a procession back to the main building.

Xar met them at the door, frowned at the sight of the hysterical elven woman.

"What is wrong with her?"

"She's had some sort of shock," Paithan said. Rega had elected him spokesperson with a jab in his back. "We don't know what's wrong because she's too upset to tell us."

"Where is the dwarf?" Xar asked, frowning.

At this, Aleatha gave a strangled scream. "Where is the dwarf? That's a good one!" Covering her face with her hands, she began to laugh wildly.

Paithan was growing more and more worried. He had never seen his sister this upset over anything. "He's been going into the maze—"

Rega chimed in nervously. "We thought a glass of wine—"

Both realized they were talking at once and fell silent. Xar gave Rega a sharp look.

"Wine," he said. His gaze went back to the elf woman. "You are right. A glass of wine will improve her spirits immensely. All of you must take one. Where did you say the dwarf was?"

"We didn't," Paithan returned somewhat impatiently, wondering why this emphasis on Drugar. "If we can just get Aleatha calmed down, perhaps we'll find out."

"Yes," Xar said softly, "we will calm her down. And then we will find out all we need to know. This way." He sidled around behind them, extended his arms. "This way."

Paithan had seen human farmers walking their fields at harvest time, sweeping their scythes through the tall grain, cutting it down with broad strokes. Xar's arms were like those scythes, sweeping the small group up, cutting them down. Paithan's instinct was to bolt. He forced himself to go along with the others, however.

What's there to be afraid of? he asked, feeling foolish. He wondered if the other two shared his apprehensions and cast them a quick glance. Roland was so worried about Aleatha he would have walked right off a cliff without knowing it. But Rega was obviously nervous. She kept peering over her shoulder at Xar as he urged them forward with those scythe-blade arms.

He shepherded them toward a large circular room that might have formerly served as either a banquet hall or a meeting room. A round table stood in the center. The room was beneath the Star Chamber, and it was one place in the deserted citadel that none of the mensch ever entered.

At the arched doorway, Paithan came to a sudden stop, so sudden that Xar bumped into him, the old man's gathering arm encircling him. Rega halted beside Paithan and, reaching out her hand, plucked her brother's sleeve, alerting Roland to their whereabouts.

"What is it now?" Xar's voice had an edge to it.

"We... we don't go in here," Paithan said.

"This room doesn't want us in here," Rega added.

"Nonsense," Xar snapped. "It's only a room."

"No, it's magical," Paithan said in a low, awed voice. "We heard voices. And the globe—" He paused, stared.

"It's gone!" Rega gasped.

"What is?" Xar was mild again. "Tell me."

"Why... there used to be a crystal globe, hanging over the table. It had four strange lights inside. And when I went over to look at it, I put my hand on the table and suddenly I heard voices. They spoke in a strange language. I couldn't understand them. But they didn't seem to want me in here. So... I left."

"And we've never been back since," Rega said, shivering.

"But now the globe is gone." Paithan looked hard at Xar. "You moved it."

Xar appeared amused. "I moved it? And why would I do such a thing? This room is no different from any other in the citadel. I found no globe, heard no voices. But it does make an excellent place for a party, don't you agree? Come, please, come inside. No magic, I assure you. Nothing will harm you—"

"Look at all that wonderful food!" Roland gasped. "Where did all that come from?"

"Well," Xar said modestly, "perhaps a little magic. Now, please, come, sit, eat, drink ..."

"Put me down," Aleatha commanded in a perfectly calm, if somewhat tear-ragged, voice.

Roland jumped, almost dropped her. He'd been staring at the food.

"We have to go back!" Aleatha wriggled in his arms. "Put me down, you dolt! Don't you understand? We have to go to the maze! Drugar went with them. We have to make him come back."

"Drugar went where? With who?" Paithan demanded. "Put me down!" Aleatha glared at Roland, who—his face grim—dumped her unceremoniously on the floor.

"I hope you don't think I enjoyed that," he said coldly and walked over to the delicacy-laden table. "Where's the wine?"

"In a pitcher." Xar gestured, his gaze on Aleatha. "Where did you say the dwarf was, my dear?"

She cast him a haughty glance, turned her back on him, spoke to Paithan. "We were in the maze. We found... the theater. There are people there, lots of people. Elves and humans and dwarves..."

"Quit kidding, Thea..." Paithan flushed, embarrassed.

"Where's the wine?" Roland mumbled, his mouth full.

"I'm serious," Aleatha cried, stamping her foot. "They're not real people. They're only fog-people. We can see them when the starlight comes on. But... but now..." Her voice quivered. "Drugar's... one of them! He's... changed into fog."

She grabbed hold of Paithan's arm. "Just come, will you?" she insisted angrily.

"Maybe after we have some food." Paithan attempted to placate his sister. "You should eat something, too, Thea. You know how you see things on an empty stomach."

"Yes!" Xar hissed the word unpleasantly. "Eat, drink. You will all feel much better."

"I found the wine pitcher," Roland called. "But it's empty. The wine's all gone."

"What?" Xar whipped around.

Roland held out the empty pitcher. "See for yourself."

Xar snatched the pitcher, glared inside. A small amount of reddish liquid sloshed around in the bottom. He sniffed at it. He raised his gaze to the four, who shrank back, alarmed at his fury.

"Who drank this?"

From beneath the table came a thin, strident voice, raised in song.

"Goldfinger..."

Xar's face blanched, then went red with outrage. Reaching beneath the table, he caught hold of a protruding foot, tugged on it, dragged the foot out. The rest of the old man came along with it, sliding on his back, singing happily to himself.

"You drank the wine... all the wine!" Xar could barely talk.

Zifnab gazed up at him with watery eyes. "Lovely bouquet. Exquisite color. Slightly bitter finish, but I suppose that must be due to the poison..." He lay on his back, began singing again. "You only live twice..."

"Poison!" Paithan caught hold of Rega, who clutched at him.

Roland choked on the food, spit it out all over the floor.

"He's lying!" said Xar harshly. "Don't believe the old fool. This is a prank..."

The Lord of the Nexus bent down swiftly, put his hand on the old man's chest, began to mutter and move his fingers in a strange pattern. But suddenly the old man's face contorted in pain. He let out a horrible cry. His hands clawed at the air, his body twisted and twitched. Reaching out, he grabbed hold of the hem of Aleatha's skirt. "Poison! He meant... for you!" Zifnab gasped. His body curled in on itself; he writhed in agony. Then he stiffened, shuddered. A final convulsive scream, and the old man lay still. His eyes were open, wide and staring. His hand was locked firmly on to Aleatha's skirt. He was dead. Horror-stricken, Paithan stared at the corpse. Roland was off in a corner, heaving his guts out.

Xar's eyes swept over them, and Paithan saw the gleam of the scythe blade sweeping past, mowing them down.

"It would have been a painless death," Xar said. "Swift, simple. But this fool has changed all that. You must die. And you will die..."

Xar reached out his hand toward Aleatha. She stood terrified, unable to move, her dress caught in the corpse's grip. Aleatha had a dim impression of Paithan leaping in front of her, knocking aside the wizard's hand...

Wanting only to escape this horrible place, this terrible man, the hideous corpse, Aleatha tore her skirt from the dead man's hand and ran, panic-stricken, from the chamber.

## CHAPTER 40

### THE LABYRINTH

"WHAT DO YOU MEAN, 'SHE'S BETRAYED us'?" ALFRED ASKED nervously.

"Marit's told them you're a Sartan," Haplo answered. "And that I brought you into the Labyrinth."

Alfred gave the matter careful thought. "Then she's only really betrayed me. I'm the one putting you in danger." He thought longer, brightened. "You could tell them that I am your prisoner. That..." His words died out at the sight of Haplo's grim expression.

"Marit knows better. She knows the truth. And I've no doubt she's told them. I just wonder," Haplo added somberly, staring into the forest, "what else she's told them."

"Are we just going to stand here?" Hugh the Hand demanded, scowling.

"Yes," said Haplo quietly. "We're just going to stand here."

"We could run—"

Haplo pointed. "A good idea. I've been trying to convince Coren here to—"

"Alfred," the Sartan corrected meekly. "Please. That is my name. I... I don't know that other person. And no, I'm not going back."

"I go where he goes," said Hugh the Hand. The Patryns were in sight now and moving closer. "We can fight."

"No," said Haplo, not pausing, not even considering, "I won't fight my own people. Bad enough..." He stopped, let it hang.

"They're taking their own sweet time. Maybe you made a mistake about her?"

Haplo shook his head. "They know we're not going anywhere." His mouth twisted in a grim smile. "Besides, they're probably trying to figure out what to do with us."

Hugh the Hand gave him a puzzled look.

"You see," Haplo explained, "they're not used to taking another Patryn prisoner. There's never been any need." He looked around at the gray sky, the dark trees. When he spoke, it was softly, to himself. "This was always a terrible place, dangerous, deadly. But at least we were united—one against it. Now, what have I done...?"

The Patryns, led by a stoic Kari, surrounded the three.

"Serious charges have been leveled against you, Brother," she said to Haplo.

Her gaze went to Alfred, who flushed clear up his bald scalp and managed to look extremely guilty. Kari frowned, glanced back at Haplo. Probably she was expecting him to deny everything.

Haplo shrugged his shoulders, said nothing. He began walking. Alfred, Hugh the Hand, and the dog followed. The Patryns closed ranks behind them.

Marit was not among them.

The group moved silently through the forest, the Patryns ill at ease, uncomfortable. When Alfred fell—as he did repeatedly, circumstances and his surroundings combining to make him clumsier than usual—the Patryns waited grimly for him to regain his feet. They did not offer help, nor would they permit Haplo or Hugh to go near the Sartan.

At first they'd regarded him with grim-faced enmity. But now, after he'd tumbled headlong over a tree root, walked into a bog, and nearly brained himself on an overhanging limb, they began exchanging questioning glances among themselves, even as they redoubled their watchfulness. It could, of course, all be an act, designed to lull them into complacency.

Haplo recalled thinking exactly the same thing himself the first time he'd met Alfred,

Boy, did they have a lot to learn. As for the human assassin, the Patryns treated him with disdain. Most likely they had never heard of mensch; Haplo himself had not learned of the existence of these "lesser races" until Xar informed him.\* But Marit would have told them that Hugh the Hand lacked the rune-magic, was therefore harmless. Haplo wondered if she had thought to tell them that this man could not be killed.

\*Xar learned of the existence of the mensch in the Nexus, reading the literature left behind by the Sartan.

When his fellow Patryns looked at Haplo at all, which was rarely, they were shadow-eyed and angry. Again he wondered uneasily what Marit had told them. And why.

The trees began to thin out. The hunting party was nearing the edge of the forest, and at this point, Kari called a halt. Before them stretched a vast open field of short-cropped waving grass. Haplo was astonished to see signs that some animal had been grazing in the area. If these were mensch, he would have guessed they were raising sheep or goats. But these weren't mensch. They were his people and they were Runners, fighters—not shepherds.

He would have liked very much to ask Kari, but she wouldn't answer any question of his now; wouldn't so much as tell him whether it was day or night.

Across the grass, about a hundred paces away, a river of dark water churned and hammered through steep banks. And beyond that...

Haplo stared.

Beyond the river, with its black and ugly water, was built a city.

A city. In the Labyrinth.

He couldn't believe it. But there it was. Blinking didn't cause it to disappear. In a land of Squatters, nomads who spent their lives trying to escape their prison, was a city. Built by people who weren't trying to escape. People who were settled, content. Not only that, but they'd lit the beacon fire, the call to others: come to us, come to our light, come to our city.

Strong buildings, made of stone, covered with rune-markings, stood stolidly on the side of a gigantic mountain, on the top of which burned the beacon fire. Probably, Haplo guessed, these buildings had started as caves. Now they extended outward, the floors of some resting on the roofs of others. They marched down the mountainside in an orderly manner, gathered together at the bottom. The mountain itself seemed to stretch out protective arms around the city built on its bosom; a large wall, made of the mountain's stone, encircled the city. Rune-magic, inscribed on the wall, enhanced its defenses.

"My goodness," said Alfred, "is... is this usual?"

No, not usual.

Marit was here. She was obviously not pleased at being here, but with the dangerous river crossing to be made, out in the open, a prey to any enemy, she'd been forced to wait for the rest of the party. She stood apart from the others, her arms crossed over her chest. She did not look at Haplo, pointedly avoided looking at him.

He would have liked to talk to her. He took a step toward her, but several Patryns moved to block his way. They appeared uncomfortable; perhaps never in their lives had they feared or distrusted one of their own.

Haplo sighed, wondered how he could make them understand. He raised his hands, palms outward, indicating he meant no harm, that he would obey their rules.

But the dog was under no such constraints. The trip through the forest had been a boring one for the animal. Whenever it had sniffed up something interesting, prepared to set off in pursuit, its master had called it sharply to heel. This would have been bearable if the dog had been made to feel that its presence was appreciated. But Haplo was preoccupied, wrapped in dark and gloomy thoughts, and refused to pat the dog's head or acknowledge its friendly licks.

If it hadn't been for Alfred, the dog would have considered this trip a waste of footpad. The Sartan, as usual, had proved highly diverting. The dog had recognized that it was going to be responsible for steering Alfred safely through the forest. Certain minor disasters couldn't be helped—a dog can only do so much. But the animal successfully averted several major catastrophes—such as pulling Alfred out of the tangles of a loathsome bloodvine and knocking him flat when he would have otherwise walked into a spike-lined pit, a trap set by roving snogs.

At last they had reached level, unobstructed ground, and while the dog knew that this didn't necessarily mean Alfred was safe, the Sartan was, for the moment, standing perfectly still. If anyone could get himself in trouble standing still it was Alfred; but the dog considered that it might relax its vigil.

The Patryns gathered at the edge of the forest, while several of their number fanned out to make certain that they would be safe crossing the river. The animal looked at its master, saw—with regret—that nothing could be done for him beyond a licked reminder that a dog was here and available for comfort. An absentminded pat was the animal's reward. The dog glanced about for new diversion and saw Marit.

A friend. Someone not seen in a few hours. Someone who—by the looks of her—needed a dog.

The dog trotted over.

Marit stood in the shadow of a tree, staring at nothing that the dog could see. But what she was doing might have been important, and so the dog padded up softly, so as not to disturb her. The dog pressed its body against Marit's leg, looked up at her with a joyful grin.

Startled, Marit jumped, which made the dog jump, too, causing both to fall backward, eye each other warily.

"Oh, it's you," Marit said, and while not understanding the words, the dog understood the tone, which, while not exactly welcoming, wasn't unfriendly either.

The woman sounded lonely and unhappy, desperately unhappy. The dog, forgiving her for startling it, once again came forward, tail wagging, to renew old acquaintance.

"Go away," she said, but at the same time her hand caressed the dog's head. The caress changed to a desperate clutch; her fingers dug painfully into the animal's flesh.

This was not very comfortable, but the dog restrained a yelp, sensing that she was in pain herself and that somehow this helped. The animal stood calmly at the woman's side, letting her maul its ears and crush its head against her thigh, wagging its tail slowly and gently, giving its presence, since it could give nothing more.

Haplo lifted his head, looked over at them. "Here, dog! What are you doing? Don't bother her. She doesn't like you. Keep close to me."

Marit's fingers had stopped their painful kneading, were soft and stroking. But suddenly she jabbed sharp nails into the dog's flesh.

Now it yelped.

"Get!" Marit said viciously, pushing the animal away.

The dog understood. It always understood.

If only it could impart such understanding to its master.

"We can cross now. It's safe," Kari reported. "Safe enough, at any rate."

Made of a single narrow span of rock, carved with runes, the bridge across the river was no wider than a man's foot. Slick with the spray of the turbid water rushing far below, the bridge was part of the defenses the Patryns had established around their city. Only one person could cross at a time, and that with the utmost care. One slip and the river would claim its victim, drag him down into its bone-chilling black and foaming rapids.

The Patryns, accustomed to the crossing and bolstered by their natural magic, ran over the bridge with ease. Once on the other side, several headed for the city, probably alerting the headman to their coming. Marit crossed over in one of the first groups, but—Haplo noticed obliquely— she waited on the shore.

Kari came up to Haplo. She and three other Patryns were spread out along the riverbank, keeping watch on the woods behind them. "Have your people cross now," she said. "Tell them to hurry." She looked down at the sigla on her skin, on Haplo's. Both glowed blue, brighter than before.

Hugh the Hand, pipe in his mouth, frowned down at the narrow bridge, examined it closely; then, shrugging, he strolled across with nothing more than a wobble or two, a pause to ascertain his footing. The dog trotted along behind, pausing midway to bark at something it thought it saw in the water.

And that left Haplo. And Alfred.

"I... I have to... to..." The Sartan stared at the bridge and stammered.

"Yes, you have to," Haplo replied.

"What's the matter with him?" Kari asked irritably.

"He's afraid of..." Haplo shrugged, left the rest of the sentence unsaid. Kari could fill in the blank.

She was suspicious. "He possesses magic."

"Didn't Marit tell you about that, too?" Haplo knew he sounded bitter, but he didn't particularly care. "He can't use his magic. The last time he did, the Labyrinth caught it, used it on him. The way the chaodyn will catch a thrown spear, use it on the one who threw it. Damn near killed him."

"He is our enemy—" she began.

"That's strange," Haplo said quietly. "I thought the Labyrinth was our enemy."

Kari opened her mouth, shut it again. She shook her head. "I don't understand this. Any of this. I will be glad to turn you over to Headman Vasu. You had better find some way to get your friend across—quickly."

Haplo went over to where Alfred stood, staring with wide, frightened eyes at the narrow bridge. Kari and her three companions kept an uneasy watch on the forest behind them. The other Patryns waited for them on the opposite shore.

"Come on," Haplo urged. "It's just a river."

"No, it isn't," Alfred said, with a shuddering glance at the rushing water. "I get the feeling... it hates me."

Haplo paused, startled. Well, yes, as a matter of fact, the river might very well hate him. He considered telling Alfred a comforting lie, but knew Alfred wouldn't believe him. The truth was probably better than whatever Alfred might dredge up out of his imagination.

"This is the River of Anger. It winds through the Labyrinth, runs deep and fast. According to legend, this river is the one thing in the Labyrinth we Patryns created. When the first of our people were cast into this prison, their rage was so terrible that it spewed forth from their mouths, became this river."

Alfred stared at him in horror.

"The water is deathly cold. Even I, protected by my rune-magic, could only survive in it a short time. And if the cold doesn't kill you, the water will batter you to death on the rocks, or the weeds will drag you down and hold you underneath the water until you drown."

Alfred had gone white. "I can't..."

"You crossed the Fire Sea," said Haplo. "You can cross this."

Alfred smiled faintly. A tinge of color returned to his pale cheeks. "Yes, I did cross the Fire Sea, didn't I?"

"Crawl on your hands and knees," Haplo advised, prodding Alfred toward the bridge. "And don't look down."

"I crossed the Fire Sea," Alfred was repeating to himself.

Reaching the narrow span, he blanched, gulped, and, drawing in a deep breath, placed his hands on the wet stone. He shivered.

"And you'd better hurry," Haplo advised, leaning over to speak in his ear. "Something nasty's gaining on us."

Alfred stared at him, his mouth open. He might have thought Haplo was just saying this to urge him on, but the Sartan saw the blue glow on the Patryn's skin. Nodding dismally, Alfred squinched his eyes tight shut and, by feel alone, started crawling across.

"What's he doing?" Kari demanded, amazed.

"Crossing the bridge."

"With his eyes closed?"

"He doesn't manage all that well with his eyes open," Haplo said dryly. "I figure this gives him a chance."

"It's going to take him the rest of the day," Kari observed after a tense few moments spent watching Alfred inching his way along.

And they didn't have the rest of the day. Haplo scratched at his hand; the rune-glow, warning of danger, was growing brighter. Kari peered back into the forest. The Patryns on the opposite shore watched with dark expressions.

Several people had arrived, coming from the direction of the city. In their midst was a young man, probably near Haplo's age. Absorbed in mentally urging Alfred along, Haplo would not have noticed one man among the rest except that this particular man was markedly unusual.

Most Patryns—male and female alike—are lean and hard-muscled, from lives spent either in running or in fighting to survive. This man's sigla-covered flesh was soft, his body rounded, shoulders heavy, stomach protruding. But by the deferential way the other Patryns treated him, Haplo guessed that this was the headman—Vasu, a name that meant "bright," "beneficent," "excellent."

Vasu came to stand on the shoreline, watching, listening with slightly inclined head as several Patryns explained what was happening. He gave no commands. Kari was, by rights, in charge here. It was her group. In this situation, the headman was an observer, taking control only if things began to fall apart.

And so far, everything was going well. Alfred was making progress. Better than Haplo had dared hope. The bridge's rock surface, though wet, was rough. The Sartan was able to dig his fingers into cracks and crevices and pull himself along. Once his knee slipped. Catching himself, he managed to hang on. He straddled the bridge with his legs. Eyes tightly shut, he gamely kept going.

He was halfway across when the howl rose from the forest.

"Wolfen," said Kari, with a curse.

The howling sounds made by the wolfen are eerie and unnerving. The howl is bestial, but there are words in it, singing of torn flesh and warm blood and cracked bones and death. One howl rose from the forest; others answered it.

Alfred, startled and alarmed, opened his eyes. He saw the black water boiling below. Panic-stricken, he flung himself flat, clung to the bridge, and froze.

Haplo swore. "Don't faint! Damn it, just don't faint!"

Wolfen don't howl, don't make their presence known, unless they are ready to attack. And by the sounds, it was a pack of them, far too many for Kari and her small band to fight alone.

Vasu made a swift gesture with his hand. The Patryns ranged along the bank, taking aim with bow and arrow and spear, prepared to cover their crossing. Calling to Alfred to keep moving, Hugh the Hand edged down near the bridge as far as he dared, ready to pull the Sartan to shore.

Haplo jumped on his end of the bridge.

"You'll never make it!" Kari cried. "The bridge's magic only permits one person to cross at a time. I will take care of this."

She raised her spear, aimed it at Alfred.

Haplo grabbed her arm, stopped her throw. She wrestled away from him, glared at him.

"He's not worth the lives of three of my people!"

"Get ready to cross," Haplo told her.

He started forward, but at same time the dog leapt past Hugh the Hand, landed on the bridge, and headed for the Sartan.

Haplo paused, waited. The magic would certainly thwart him, but it might not affect the dog. Behind him, he could hear the wolfen crashing through the underbrush. The howls were growing louder. Alfred lay on his belly, staring down in horrible fascination at the water, unable to move.

The dog ran lightly over the bridge. Reaching Alfred, the animal barked once, tried to rouse him from his stupor.

Alfred didn't even seem to hear it.

Frustrated, the dog looked to its master for help.

Kari lifted her spear. Across the water, Vasu made a sharp, peremptory motion with his broad hand.

"His collar!" Haplo shouted. "Grab the collar!"

Either the dog understood or it had reached the same conclusion. Digging its teeth firmly into Alfred's collar, the dog tugged.

Alfred moaned, grasped the bridge even more tightly.

The dog growled, deep in its throat. Collar or flesh? Which will it be?

Gulping, Alfred let go of his desperate hold. The dog, edging its way backward across the narrow span, dragged the limp and unresisting Sartan along with it. Hugh the Hand and several Patryns waited at the far end. Catching hold of Alfred, they hauled him up safely onto the shore.

"Go!" Kari ordered, her hand on Haplo's shoulder.

She was in charge; it was her privilege to be the last one to cross. Haplo didn't waste time arguing, but hastened over the bridge. When he was clear, the other Patryns followed behind him.

The wolven broke from the forest just as Kari set her foot on the span. The wolven barked in dismay at the sight of their prey escaping and dashed after Kari, hoping to catch one at least. A rain of spears and arrows—enhanced by the rune-magic—flew across the river and halted their pursuit. Kari reached the other side safely. Marit stood waiting for her, pulled the woman up onto the bank.

The wolven ran onto the bridge. The sigla on the rock flared red; the wet stone burst into magical flame. The wolven fell back, snarling and snapping. They paced the bank, staring at their prey with yellow, hungry eyes, but they dared not cross the river.

Once Kari was safe, Haplo went to see how Alfred was doing. Vasu also walked over to take a look. The headman moved with grace for such a flabby and ungainly man. Reaching the Sartan's side, the Patryn chieftain stared down at his prisoner.

Alfred lay on the bank. He was the color of something that had been in the river several days. He shook until his teeth rattled. His limbs twitched and jerked with leftover terror.

"Here is the ancient enemy," Vasu said and it seemed he sighed. "Here is what we have been taught to hate."

## CHAPTER 41

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

"RUN, ALEATHA!" ROLAND SHOUTED AND JUMPED IN FRONT OF Xar. The Lord of the Nexus caught the human by the throat and flung him to one side as if he'd been one of the elves' magical talking dolls. Xar called on the possibilities, worked the rune-magic. Within the blinking of an eye, every arched doorway that led into and out of the circular chamber was walled up, sealed shut.

This done, Xar glanced around, then began to curse bitterly. He'd trapped three mensch in the chamber. Only three. The elf female had escaped.

But perhaps, Xar reflected, this is all for the best. She will lead me to the dwarf.

Xar turned back to his captives. One of them—the elf male—was staring down at the dead body of the old man, at the empty pitcher lying on the floor beside him.

The elf raised his head, turned a horrified face to Xar. "You poisoned the wine? You meant for us to drink it?"

"Of course I did," Xar returned testily. He had no time for mensch inanities. "And now I will have to take your lives in a manner far less suitable to my needs. However, there are compensations." He nudged the corpse with his toe. "I have an extra body. I hadn't counted on that."

The mensch huddled together, the human female kneeling over the human male, who was lying on the floor, his throat torn and bleeding as if claws had raked it.

"Don't go anywhere," said Xar with fine sarcasm. "I'll be back."

He used the rune-magic to escape the sealed room, went after the elf female and the dwarf. And, most importantly, the dwarf's Sartan amulet.

Run, Aleatha!

Roland's warning pounded in her heart, throbbed in her ears. And above the words, she could hear the footsteps of the terrible wizard.

Run, Aleatha! Run!

Consumed by fear, she ran.

She could hear the dread footfalls behind her. Lord Xar was pursuing her. And it seemed to her that he, too, was whispering Roland's last words to her.

"Run, Aleatha," he was urging her.

His voice was terrifying, laughing at her, mocking. It impelled her to run faster, kept her from being able to think coherently. She ran to the one place where instinct told her she might be safe—the maze.

Xar discovered Aleatha easily. He watched her dash down the street in a flurry of torn silken skirt and tattered petticoat. He pursued her at his leisure, driving her as he might have driven sheep. He wanted her terror, wanted panic. Half-mad, she would unwittingly lead him to the dwarf.

Too late, Xar realized his mistake. He realized it when he saw the maze, saw Aleatha racing for it, saw the Sartan runes that surrounded the entrance.

Aleatha vanished inside. Xar halted outside, glared balefully at the Sartan runes, and considered this latest difficulty.

The three trapped inside the circular chamber stared at the bricked-up walls, at each other, at the corpse of the old man, lying twisted and cold on the floor.

"This isn't real," Rega said in a small, tight voice. "This isn't happening."

"Maybe you're right," Paithan said eagerly and hurled himself at the brick wall that had once been a door.

He smashed into it, groaned in pain, and slid to the floor. "It's real enough, all right." A bleeding gash in his forehead proved it.

"Why is Xar doing this to us? Why... why kill us?" Rega quavered.

"Aleatha." Roland sat up, blinked dazedly. "Where's Aleatha?"

"She escaped," Rega said gently. "Thanks to you."

Roland, gingerly touching his bleeding throat, managed a smile.

"But Xar went after her," Paithan added. He looked at the magic brick walls, shook his head. "I don't think she stands much of a chance."

Roland was on his feet. "There must be a way out!"

"There isn't," Paithan said. "Forget it. We're finished."

Roland ignored him, began hammering on the bricks and shouting. "Help! Help us!"

"You ninny!" Paithan scoffed. "Just who do you think's going to hear you?"

"I don't know!" Roland turned on him savagely. "But it beats the hell out of standing here whining and waiting to die!" He turned to the wall, was about to beat on it again, when the imposing gentleman, dressed all in black, stepped through the bricks as if he were walking through the erstwhile door.

"Excuse me, sir," he said deferentially to the astounded Roland, "but I thought I heard you call. Might I be of assistance?"

Before Roland could answer, the imposing gentleman saw the corpse. His face paled.

"Oh, dear, sir. What have you done now?"

The gentleman knelt beside the body, felt for a pulse. Finding none, he looked up. His expression was terrible, stern, fey.

Paithan, alarmed, caught hold of Rega, pulled her close. The two stumbled backward into Roland.

The imposing gentleman stood up ...

...and kept standing.

His body grew taller and taller, rose higher and higher. His frame filled out. An enormous scaled tail thrashed in anger. Reptile eyes flared in fury. The dragon's voice shook the sealed room.

"Who has killed my wizard?"

Aleatha ran through the maze. She was lost, hopelessly lost, but she didn't care. In her terror-frazzled mind, the more lost she was, the better her chances of losing Xar. She was so frightened, she didn't realize he was no longer pursuing her.

The hedges tore at her dress, caught her hair, scratched her hands and arms. The stones on the path bruised her tender feet. A stabbing pain tore at her side every time she drew a breath. Footsore, dazed, she was forced by sheer exhaustion to stop her panic-stricken dash. She sank down onto the path, gulping and sobbing.

A hand touched her.

Aleatha shrieked, fell backward into the hedge. But it wasn't the black robes and cruel face of Xar that loomed over her. It was the black-bearded and concerned face of the dwarf.

"Drugar?" Aleatha couldn't see very well through a blood-tinged haze. Was the dwarf real—or still one of the fog-people?

Yet the touch of his hand had been real.

"Aleatha!" Drugar bent down, his expression anxious. He didn't try to touch her again. "What is the matter? What has happened?"

"Oh, Drugar!" Aleatha timidly reached out her hand, gingerly touched his arm. Finding him solid and substantial, she clutched at him frantically, grabbing on to him with strength born of hysteria, nearly dragging him off his feet. "You're real! Why did you leave me alone? I was so frightened! And then... then Lord Xar. He— Did you hear that?"

She turned, stared fearfully behind her. "Is he coming? Do you see him?" She struggled to stand. "We have to run, get away..."

Drugar was not accustomed to dealing with hysteria; dwarves are never hysterical. He knew something dire had happened; he needed to find out what. He had to get Aleatha calmed down and he didn't have time to coddle her (as was his instinctive tendency). He was momentarily at a loss, but a memory from his past—recently revived by his mind-shattering experience—came to his aid.

Dwarven children are noted for their stubbornness. A dwarven baby, not getting its way, will sometimes hold its breath until it turns blue and loses consciousness. On such occasions, the parent will throw water into the child's face. This causes it to gasp, involuntarily draw in a breath.

Drugar didn't have any water, but he did have ale, brought with him to prove that where he had been wasn't an illusion. He uncorked the clay bottle and tossed ale into Aleatha's face.

Never in her life had such a thing happened to Aleatha. Dripping and sputtering, she returned to herself — with a vengeance. All the horrors she had witnessed and experienced were deluged, drowned in a flood of foul-smelling brown liquid.

She was quivering with rage. "How dare—"

"Lord Xar," said Drugar, latching on to the one thing she'd said that made sense. "Where is he? What did he do to you?"

His words brought back everything, and at first Drugar feared he'd gone too far. Aleatha began to shake. The dwarf held up the clay bottle. "Drink," he ordered. "Then tell me what has happened."

Aleatha drew in a deep breath. She detested ale, but, taking the bottle, she swallowed some of the cool liquid. The bitter taste made her gag, but she felt better. With many fits and starts and ramblings, she told Drugar all she had seen, all she had heard.

Drugar listened, his expression grim, his hand continually stroking his beard.

"They're probably all dead by now." Aleatha choked on her tears. "Xar murdered them, then came after me. He may be in here now, looking for me. Us, I mean. He kept asking about you."

"Did he, now?" Drugar fingered the amulet he wore at his throat. "There is one thing we can do, one way to stop him."

Aleatha peered at the dwarf hopefully through her sodden mass of hair. "What?"

"We must open the gate, let the tytans into the city."

"You're mad!" Aleatha stared at the dwarf, began to edge away from him.

"No, I am not mad!" Drugar caught hold of her hand. "Listen to me. I was coming to tell you. Look! Look at this!" He held up the ale. "Where do you think I got this?"

Aleatha shook her head.

"You were right," Drugar continued, "the fog-people are not shadows. They are real. If it hadn't been for you, I would have never... never..."

The dwarf's eyes shimmered. He cleared his throat, frowned in embarrassment. "They live in another citadel, like this one. I was there, I saw it. My people, your people. Even humans. They live together in a city and they get along. They live!" Drugar repeated, his eyes shining. "They are alive. My people! I am not the last of my kind."

He looked down at the clay bottle with affection. "They gave me this, to bring back. To prove my words."

"Another city." Aleatha was following him slowly. "You went to another city. Elves and humans. Ale. You brought back ale. Pretty dresses..." Her shaking hands smoothed her own torn gown. "Can... can I go there with you, Drugar? Can we go now! We'll escape Xar—"

Drugar shook his head. "There is still a chance the others are alive. We have to open the gate, let the tytans in. They will help us stop Xar."

"They'll kill him," said Aleatha in a dull and lifeless voice, her spirit crushed. "They'll kill us, too, but I guess that doesn't matter—"

"They will not," Drugar said sternly. "You must trust me in this. I learned something while I was in the citadel. It was all a mistake, all a misunderstanding. 'Where is the citadel?' the tytans kept asking. All we had to say to them was: 'Here. Here is the citadel. Come inside.'"

"Truly?" Aleatha looked hopeful, then wary. "Show me. Take me to that place."

Drugar frowned. "Do you want your brother to die?" The dwarf's voice grew harsh. "Do you want to save Roland?"

"Roland," Aleatha repeated softly, drooping. "I love him. I really do love him. I don't know why. He's so... so—" She sighed. "He told me to run. He jumped in front of me. He saved my life..."

"We will go now," Drugar urged. "We will go and see what has happened to them."

"But we can't leave the maze," Aleatha said, the hysterical edge tinting her voice. "Xar's out there, waiting for us. I know he is—"

"Perhaps he has left," Drugar said. He began walking back up the path. "We will see."

Aleatha watched him go. She was terrified of following him, but she was even more terrified of being left alone. Gathering her torn skirts, she hastened after the dwarf.

Xar could not go into the maze. The Sartan runes blocked his entry. He cursed and paced, considered the possibilities. He could blast his way through the hedge, but he'd probably have to burn down the entire maze to find the mensch. And charred corpses would not be of much use to him.

Patience was what was required of him now. The elf female would have to emerge sometime, Xar reasoned. She couldn't spend her life in there. Thirst, hunger would drive her out. The other three mensch were safely ensconced in the walled room. He could wait here for as long as necessary.

Xar expanded his range of hearing, listened for her. He heard her, running and sobbing, heard her fall. Then he heard another voice.

Xar smiled. He'd been right. The dwarf. She'd led him to the dwarf. He listened to their conversation, ignored most of it. What an inane story. The dwarf was drunk; that much was obvious. Xar laughed aloud at the suggestion that the citadel's gates be opened to the tytans. Mensch were more stupid than he'd thought.

"I will open the gates, dwarf," Xar said. "When you are dead! And you can make friends with the tytans then!"

The two were emerging from the maze. Xar was pleased. He hadn't expected them to come out so soon.

He strolled over to one of the nearby buildings and hid in the shadows. From here he could see the entrance to the maze, yet remain unobserved. He would allow them to get far enough from the maze so that they could not run back to it for protection.

"I will kill these two now," he said to himself. "Leave their bodies here for the time being. When the others are dead, I will return for the corpses, begin the preparations to raise them."

He could hear the heavy footfalls of the dwarf, moving down the path, nearing the entrance. The elf female was with him, her footfalls much lighter, barely discernible. But he could plainly hear her frantic whispers.

"Drugar! Don't go out there! Please. I know he's there. I know it!"

Perceptive, these elves. Xar forced himself to wait patiently and was rewarded by the sight of the dwarf's black-bearded face popping out around the corner of the hedgerow. The face vanished again immediately, then, after a pause, reappeared.

Xar was careful not to move, was one with the shadow in which he hid.

The dwarf advanced a tentative step, hand on an ax he wore at his belt. He looked up the street and down. At length he gestured.

"Aleatha, come now. It is safe. Lord Xar is nowhere in sight."

The elf female crept out. "He's here somewhere, Drugar. I know he is. Let's run!"

She caught hold of the dwarf's hand. Together they began running up the street—away from the maze, straight toward Xar.

He let them get close; then he stepped out into the street, directly in front of them.

"What a pity you had to miss my party," he said to the dwarf. Raising his hand, Xar wove the runes that would slay them both.

The sigla shimmered in the air, swept down on the stunned mensch in a bright flash and, suddenly, began to unravel.

"What—?" Furious, Xar started to recast his magic; then he saw the problem.

The dwarf stood in front of the elf female. In his hand he held the amulet with the Sartan runes. The amulet was protecting them both.

Not for long. Its magic was limited. The dwarf had no idea how to use it beyond this feeble attempt. Xar strengthened his spell.

His sigla burned, flared. Their light was blinding and burst upon the dwarf, upon his puny amulet, with a roar of fire. A shattering explosion, a cry of pain, a terrible scream.

When the smoke cleared, the dwarf lay on the pavement. The elf female knelt over him, pleading with him to get up.

Xar took a step toward her to finish her off.

A voice thundered through the air, halted him.

"You killed my wizard!"

A dark shadow obliterated the sun. Aleatha looked up, saw the dragon, saw that it was attacking Xar. She didn't understand, but understanding didn't matter. She bent over Drugar. Tugging on his beard, she begged him, pleaded with him to wake up, to help her. She was so frantic, she never noticed that her hands—where they touched the dwarf—were covered with blood.

"Drugar, please!"

The dwarf's eyes opened. He looked up at the lovely face, so near his own, and he smiled at her.

"Come on, Drugar!" she urged tearfully. "Stand up! Hurry! The dragon—"

"I'm going... to be with... my people..." Drugar told her gently.

"No, Drugar!" Aleatha choked. She saw the blood now. "Don't leave me..."

He frowned to quiet her. With his fast-fading strength, he pressed the amulet into her hands. "Open the gate. The tytans will help. Trust me! You must... trust me!" He stared up at her, pleading.

Aleatha hesitated. The magic thundered around her; the dragon roared in fury; Xar's voice chanted strange words.

Aleatha clasped her hands tightly around the dwarf's.

"I trust you, Drugar," she said.

His eyes closed. He gasped in pain, yet he smiled. "My people..." He breathed softly, finally.

"Drugar!" Aleatha cried, clutching the amulet in her bloodstained hands.

Xar's magic flashed. A tremendous wind, raised by the violent lashing of the dragon's gigantic tail, blew her hair into her face.

Aleatha was no longer crying. She was calm now, surprised at her calmness. Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing.

Holding fast to the amulet, unnoticed by either the wizard or the dragon, the elf kissed the dwarf tenderly on his forehead. Then she rose to her feet and walked, with purpose and resolve, down the street.

Paithan and Roland and Rega stood knee-deep in a vast pile of bricks, fallen timbers, and tumbled blocks of marble.

"Are... are any of us hurt?" Paithan asked, looking around in dazed confusion.

Roland lifted his foot, displacing an enormous mound of bricks that had been covering it. "No," he said hesitantly, as if he couldn't believe it himself. "No, I'm all right. But don't ask me how."

Rega brushed rock dust from her face and out of her eyes. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," Paithan answered. "I remember the man in black asking about his wizard and then he was a dragon shrieking about his wizard and then... then ..."

"The room sort of exploded," Roland continued. He climbed up and over the rubble until he reached them. "The dragon's head bashed through the ceiling and the room started collapsing and I remember thinking, 'This is it, pal. You're finished.'"

"But we're not," said Rega, blinking. "We're not finished. I wonder how we survived?" She gazed around at the terrible destruction. Bright sunlight flooded the room; the dust sparkled in it like myriad tiny jewels.

"Who cares how we survived?" Roland said, heading for a large hole that had been blasted through the wall. "We did, and that's enough for me. Let's get the hell out of here! Xar is probably after Aleatha!"

Helping each other, Paithan and Rega clambered over a pile of bricks and rubble.

Before he left, Paithan glanced behind. The circular room, with its round table, was destroyed. Whatever voices had once spoken in that room would speak no more.

The three ran out of the hole in the wall just in time to see a gigantic ball of fire illuminate the sky. Frightened, they fell back, took shelter in a doorway. A boom shook the ground.

"What is it? Can you see?" Roland demanded. "Do you see Aleatha? I'm going out there."

"No, you're not!" Paithan caught hold of him. "I'm just as worried about her as you are. She's my sister. But you won't help her by getting yourself killed. Wait until we know what's going on."

Roland, sweating and ashen-faced, stood trembling; he seemed prepared to race off anyway.

"The dragon's fighting Xar," Rega whispered, awed.

"I think you're right," Paithan agreed, pondering. "And if the dragon kills Xar, we're probably next."

"Our only hope is that they kill each other."

"I'm going to go find Aleatha!" Roland ran down the stairs.

"Roland! Don't! You'll be killed!" Rega went running after him.

"There's Aleatha! Over there! Thea!" Paithan yelled. "Thea! We're up here!"

He dashed down the steps to the street level. Aleatha was at the bottom, walking along the street. She either couldn't hear her brother's shout, or she was ignoring him. She walked swiftly, didn't stop, although now Roland had added his powerful voice to the elf's weaker one.

"Aleatha!" Roland raced past Paithan. Reaching Aleatha, he grabbed hold of her arm.

"You're hurt!" he cried, seeing blood on the front of her dress.

Aleatha stared at him coldly. "Let go of me."

She spoke so calmly and with such authority that Roland, amazed, let go.

Aleatha turned, continued walking down the street.

"What's the matter with her? Where's she going?" Paithan asked breathlessly, coming level with Roland.

"You can see where she's going!" Rega gasped. "The gate."

"And she's carrying Drugar's amulet..."

The three caught up with Aleatha. This time Paithan stopped her. "Thea," he said, his voice shaking, "Thea, take it easy. Tell us what happened. Where's Drugar?"

Aleatha looked at him, looked at Roland and Rega, seemed at last to know who these people were. "Drugar's dead," she said faintly. "He... died saving me." She held fast to the amulet.

"Thea, I'm sorry. It must have been terrible for you. C'mon, now. Back to the citadel. It's not safe out here."

Aleatha pulled away from her brother. "No," she said with that strange calm. "No, I'm not going back. I know what I have to do. Drugar told me to do it. They're real, you see. Their city is real. And their dresses are very beautiful."

Turning, she started off again. The city gate was in plain sight now. The starlight beamed out from the Star Chamber; the odd humming vibrated in the air. Explosions and crashes shook the citadel from inside. Outside the walls, the tytans stood in a hypnotic trance.

"Thea!" Paithan called desperately.

The three leapt to catch her.

Aleatha whipped around, held the amulet up before her, as she had seen Drugar hold it up before Xar.

Startled, the others fell back. Either the magic of the amulet stopped them, or else it was Aleatha's commanding presence.

"You don't understand," she said. "That's what this whole thing has been all along. A misunderstanding. Drugar told me. 'The tytans will save us.'" She looked at the gate. "We just... didn't understand."

"Aleatha! Drugar tried to kill us once!" Rega cried.

"You can't trust him! He's a dwarf!" Paithan shouted.

Aleatha gave him a pitying glance. Sweeping her tattered skirts up in her hand, she walked over to the gate, placed the amulet in the center.

"She's gone mad!" Rega whispered, frantic. "She's going to get us all killed!"

"What does it matter?" Roland asked suddenly, with a reckless laugh. "The dragon, the wizard, the tytans... One of them's bound to kill us. What the devil does it matter which?"

Paithan tried to move, but his body seemed extremely tired, unwilling to support him. "Thea, what are you doing?" he cried, anguished.

"I'm going to let the tytans in," Aleatha replied.

The amulet flared. The gate swung open.

## CHAPTER 42

ABRI

### THE LABYRINTH

ESCORTED BY VASU, HAPLO AND HIS COMPANIONS WALKED through the giant iron gates that led into the streets of Abri. No other Patryns guarded them; the headman had taken this responsibility on himself. He told Kari and her people to go to their homes, rest after their labors. But the Patryns gathered—at a respectful distance—to view the strangers. Word spread swiftly and soon the streets were crowded with men, women, and children, more curious than hostile.

Of course, Haplo thought grimly, the lack of guards doesn't mean they trust us. After all, we're trapped inside a walled city, with only one way out—rune-guarded, man-guarded gates. No, Vasu's not taking much of a chance.

Abri was, as its name meant, a shelter of rock. The buildings were all made of stone. The streets were dirt, little more than wide tracks, hard packed by long use. But the roads were smooth and level, well suited to the wagons and handcarts that trundled up and down. The buildings were utilitarian, with square corners and small windows that could be sealed up swiftly when the city was under attack.

And, in case of dire necessity, there were caves in the mountains to which the population could flee for protection. No wonder the Labyrinth had found it difficult to destroy Abri and its people.

Haplo shook his head. "And yet it's still a prison. How can you choose to stay here, Headman? Why don't you try to escape?"

"You were a Runner, I am told, Haplo."

Haplo glanced at Marit, on the other side of Vasu. Marit kept her eyes forward, her chin jutted out. She was cold and impenetrable, solid and forbidding as the stone walls.

"Yes," Haplo replied. "I was a Runner."

"And you succeeded in escaping. You reached the Final Gate."

Haplo nodded, unwilling to talk about it. The memory was not a pleasant one.

"And what is the world like beyond the Final Gate?" Vasu inquired.

"Beautiful," said Haplo, his thoughts going to the Nexus. "A city, immense, enormous. Forests and rolling hills, food in abundance—"

"Peaceful?" Vasu asked. "No threat? No danger?"

Yes, Haplo was about to respond; then, remembering, he kept silent.

"There is a threat, then?" Vasu persisted gently. "Danger?"

"A very great danger," Haplo replied in a low voice. He was thinking of the dragon-snakes.

"Were you happy there, in your Nexus, Haplo? Happier there than you were here?"

Haplo glanced again at Marit. "No," he said quietly.

She still did not look at him. She didn't need to. She understood his meaning. A flush as of a burning fever rose from her neck, suffused her cheeks.

"Many of those walking free are in prison," observed Vasu.

Haplo met the headman's eyes, was startled, impressed. The eyes were brown, soft as the body. But they were lit from behind by an inner light, intelligence, wisdom. Haplo began to revise his opinion of this man. Ordinarily, the headman in the tribe is chosen because he is the strongest, a survivor. Thus the headman or headwoman is often one of the oldest members of the tribe, hard and tough. This Vasu was young, flabby, and could never have withstood a challenge from another tribal member. Haplo had wondered, on first encounter, how a weak, soft man like Vasu had managed to retain his hold over a proud, fierce people.

He was beginning to understand why. "You are right, Headman!" Alfred spoke up. His face was radiant; he was regarding Vasu with awe. And, Haplo noted, the Sartan was actually managing to walk without falling over himself. "You are right! I've been keeping myself prisoner for so long... so long." He sighed, shook his head. "I must find a way to set myself free."

"You are a Sartan," Vasu said, the wonderful eyes turning on Alfred, turning him inside out. "One of those who cast us in here?"

Alfred blushed.

Haplo gritted his teeth, expecting stammering, apologies, the usual.

"No," Alfred said, pausing, drawing himself up to his full height. "No, I am not. I mean, yes, I am a Sartan. But no, I am not one who cast you in here. My ancestors were responsible, not me. I take responsibility for myself, for my own actions." The blush increased; he looked over sadly at Hugh the Hand. "Those are burden enough."

"An interesting argument," said Vasu. "We are not responsible for the crimes of our fathers, only for our own. And we have one here who is an immortal, or so I'm told."

Hugh the Hand took the pipe from his mouth. "I can die," he said bitterly. "I just can't be killed."

"Another prisoner." Vasu was sympathetic. "Speaking of prisons, why did you return to the Labyrinth, Haplo?"

"To find my daughter."

"Your daughter?" Vasu raised an eyebrow. The answer had taken him by surprise, though he must have heard as much from Kari. "When was the last time you saw her? What tribe was she with?"

"I never saw my child. I have no idea where she is. Her name is Rue."

"And this is the reason you came back? To find her?"

"Yes, Headman Vasu. That is the reason."

"Look around, Haplo," said Vasu softly.

Haplo looked. The street in which they stood was filled with children: boys and girls at play and at work, stopping to stare with bright eyes at the strangers; babes riding in harness on a parent's back; toddlers getting underfoot, tumbling down, only to stand up again with the stubborn persistence of the very young.

"Many are orphans," Vasu said gently, "who come to us by way of the beacon fire. And many of them are named Rue."

"I know my search seems hopeless," Haplo argued, "but—"

"Stop it!" Marit cried suddenly, angrily. She rounded on him. "Stop lying! Tell him the truth!"

Haplo stared, truly astonished. All of them stopped walking, waited to see what would happen next. Crowds of Patrins moved near, watching, listening. At a gesture from Vasu, the Patrins moved back a discreet distance, but still they waited.

Marit turned to face the headman. "Have you heard of Xar, the Lord of the Nexus?"

"Yes," said Vasu, "we have heard of him. Even here, in the center of the Labyrinth, we have heard of Lord Xar."

"Then you know that he is the greatest one of our people ever to have lived. Xar saved this man's life." Marit pointed at Haplo. "Xar loves this man like a son. And this man has betrayed him."

Marit flung back her head, regarded Haplo with scorn.

"He is a traitor to his own people. He has conspired with the enemy"—her accusatory gaze went to Alfred—"and with the mensch"—her eyes shifted to Hugh the Hand—"to destroy Xar, Lord of the Patrins. Haplo's true reason for coming to the Labyrinth is to raise an army. He plans to lead that army from the Labyrinth in a war against his lord."

"Is this true?" Vasu asked.

"No," Haplo replied, "but why should you believe me?"

"Why indeed, traitor?" came a voice from the crowd. "Especially since your minion carries an ancient knife of foul magic, wrought by the Sartan for our destruction!"

Astonished, Haplo looked to see who had spoken. The voice sounded vaguely familiar, perhaps that of the man who had accompanied Marit on the trail. Oddly, though, Marit herself appeared startled, perhaps even troubled by this latest accusation. She, too, it seemed, was trying to locate the person who had spoken.

"I had such a weapon." Hugh the Hand took the pipe from his mouth, spoke up boldly. "But it was lost, as she well knows!" He pointed the pipe stem at Marit.

Only it wasn't a pipe.

"Blessed Sartan!" cried Alfred in horror.

The assassin held the Cursed Blade, the iron knife, inscribed with Sartan runes of death.

Hugh the Hand flung the weapon from him. The knife fell to the ground and lay there squirming, wriggling like a live thing.

The sigla tattooed on Haplo's skin flared to life, as did the runes on Vasu and Marit and every other Patrinn in the vicinity.

"Pick it up!" Alfred said through pale and trembling lips.

"No!" The Hand shook his head vehemently. "I won't touch the damn thing!"

"Pick it up!" Alfred commanded, his voice rising. "It feels threatened! Quickly!"

"Do it!" Haplo said grimly, dragging back the dog, which was trotting over to take a sniff.

Reluctantly, gingerly, as if he were preparing to grab a poisonous snake by the back of the head, Hugh the Hand bent down, retrieved the knife. He glared at it.

"I swear... I didn't know I had it! My pipe..."

"The blade would not let him go," Alfred intervened. The Sartan looked miserable. "I wondered at the time, when you said it was lost. The blade would find a way to stay with him, and it did so, by changing its form to that of his most valued possession..."

"Headman Vasu, I would most respectfully suggest that you disperse your people," Haplo said, tense, his gaze on the knife. It was still glowing, although not quite as brightly as before. "The danger is very great."

"And it grows proportionately," Alfred added in a low voice, his face flushed with shame. So much for the crimes of the fathers. "With all these people around it..."

"Yes, I sense that," Vasu said grimly. "You, return to your homes. Take the children indoors."

Take the children. One little girl was trying to see, moving near, not understanding the danger. Her face was oval, her chin pointed—not unlike Marit's. The child would be about the right age...

A man came to the girl, laid his hand protectively on her shoulder, drew her back. His eyes met Haplo's for a brief instant. Haplo felt his face burn. The man led the child away.

The crowd dispersed swiftly, obeying the headman's orders without question. But Haplo could see faces, eyes, watching him balefully, distrustfully from the shadows. He could guess that many hands were on weapons.

And whose had been the voice that spoke? And what force had caused the knife to reveal its true nature?

"Alfred," said Haplo, thinking back, "why didn't the knife change when the tiger-men attacked us?"

Alfred shook his head. "I'm not sure. But as you recall, Sir Hugh was knocked out by a blow to the head."

Or maybe it was the knife itself that had summoned the tiger-men.

"Never before in the history of Abri, which has been here since the beginning, has one of our own brought such danger to us," Vasu was saying. The brown eyes were hard, stern and unforgiving.

"You must imprison them, Headman," Marit told him. "My lord Xar is coming. He will deal with them."

So, Xar is coming, Haplo thought. How long has she known? A lot was beginning to make sense now...

"I do not want to imprison one of our own kind. Will you, Haplo, wait in Abri for Lord Xar?" Vasu asked. "Will you give me your word of honor that you will not attempt to flee?"

Haplo hesitated. He could see his own reflection in the headman's brown eyes, so marvelously clear and soft. And in that moment, he made his decision. He came to know himself.

"No, I will not make such a pledge, for I could not keep it. Lord Xar is my lord no longer. He is being guided by evil. His ambition is not to rule but to enslave. I've seen where such ambition leads. I will no longer follow or obey him." Haplo added quietly, "I will do all within in my power to thwart him."

Marit sucked in a sharp breath. "He gave you life!" She spat at his feet, turned on her heel, and stalked off.

"So be it," said Vasu. "I have no choice but to deem you and your two companions a danger to the people. You will be held in prison to await the arrival of Lord Xar."

"We will go peacefully, Headman," said Haplo. "Hugh, put the knife away,"

Scowling, not at Haplo but at the Cursed Blade, the assassin thrust it securely into his belt. "I suppose this means I've lost my pipe," he said glumly,

Vasu made a gesture and several Patrins appeared out of the shadows, ready to escort the prisoners.

"No weapons," Vasu commanded. "You will not need them."

He looked back at Haplo, who saw something in the brown eyes, something perplexing, unfathomable.

"I will accompany you," Vasu offered. "If you don't mind?"

Haplo shrugged. He wasn't in a position to mind.

"This way." Vasu was brisk, efficient. He even offered a hand to Alfred, who had slipped on a pebble and was now lying on his back looking helpless, like an upturned turtle.

With the headman's help, Alfred struggled to his feet. His stooped shoulders were bowed as if, once again, he had taken on some enormous burden.

They walked toward the mountain, their destination probably the caverns, deep underground—caverns far below the beacon fire burning its welcome through the gray mists.

The dog crowded against Haplo's leg, looked up at him questioningly with its liquid eyes. Do we go along with this indignity? it asked. Or do you want me to put a stop to it?

Haplo gave the animal a reassuring pat. With a sigh that said the dog hoped Haplo knew what he was doing, the animal trotted along meekly at its master's side.

That strange look in the headman's eyes. What did it mean? Thinking of this, wondering, Haplo remembered Kari's saying Vasu had sent her out deliberately to find them, bring them back.

How had Vasu known? What did Vasu know?

When Marit had left, she had not gone far, only far enough to take her out of Haplo's sight. Keeping to the shadows of a tall, sheltering oak tree, she waited to see Haplo and the others marched off to prison. She was trembling with what she told herself was outrage. Haplo had admitted his guilt, actually admitted it! And to make such statements, to accuse Xar of being guided by evil! It was monstrous!

Xar was right about Haplo. He was a traitor. And Marit had done the right thing in obeying Xar's commands, in having Haplo arrested and held prisoner until Xar could come for him. And Xar would come soon, perhaps any moment.

She would tell her lord, of course, what Haplo had said. And that would seal Haplo's fate. Which was right and just. Haplo was a traitor... a traitor to them all...

Then why this gnawing doubt? Marit knew why. She had told no one about the Sartan knife. No one.

She watched until the three were well out of sight; then she suddenly became aware that several fellow Patryns were approaching her, eyeing her curiously, probably wanting to discuss this unusual occurrence in their lives.

Marit was in no mood to talk. Pretending she didn't see them, she turned and walked away, trying to look as if she knew where she was going. Actually, she didn't. She didn't even see where she was going. She needed to think, to try to figure out what was wrong...

Her skin itched. The sigla on her hands and arms were glowing faintly. Odd. She raised her head swiftly. She had come farther than she'd intended, was near the wall surrounding Abri. Danger was everywhere in the Labyrinth; she should not be surprised to feel the warning magic. Yet the city had seemed so safe, so secure.

A hand closed over her arm. Marit had her dagger out of its sheath before she saw who held her. A fellow Patryn.

She lowered the dagger, but kept it in her hand. She could not see the man's face; his hair was long and unkempt and hung over his eyes. The tingling warning signs had not abated. If anything, they were now stronger.

Marit drew back, away from the strange Patryn. As she did so, she noticed that his magic was not reacting to the danger; the tattoos on his skin were not glowing. And then she saw that the runes could not glow; they were not true rune-structures, only copies.

Marit wasted no time in talk or in wondering who or what this creature might be. Those who waited to ask questions rarely lived long to hear the answer. Certain species in the Labyrinth, such as the boggleboe, had the power of shape-shifting. Gripping her dagger, Mark lunged at the impostor.

Her weapon vanished, changed to smoke that drifted harmlessly through the air.

"Ah, you recognize me," said a familiar voice. "I thought you might."

She hadn't; not really. She had known he wasn't a Patryn, but she had not recognized him—until he brushed the tangled hair back from his face to reveal the single red eye.

"Sang-drax," she said ungraciously. She should have been pleased to see him, but her unease grew. "What do you want?"

"Didn't Lord Xar inform you of my coming?" The single red eye blinked.

"My lord informed me that he was coming," Marit said coldly. Her thoughts went to the hideous sight of the dragon-snakes of Chelestra. She didn't like being around Sang-drax, wanted to get away from him. "Perhaps Xar is here? If so, I will go—"

"My lord has been unfortunately detained," Sang-drax interrupted. "He has sent me to retrieve Haplo."

"My lord said he was coming," Marit reiterated, not liking this change, wondering what was going on. "He would have told me otherwise if he were not."

"Lord Xar finds it a bit difficult to communicate just at the moment," Sang-drax replied, and though his tone was respectful, it seemed to Marit that the dragon-snake smirked.

"If my lord sent you for Haplo, then you had better go and find him," Marit said coldly. "What do you want with me?"

"Ah, getting to Haplo is proving rather a problem," Sang-drax said. "I managed to have him arrested, but I—"

"You were the one!" Marit said. "You knew about the knife!"

"I mean no disrespect, but Headman Vasu is a weak-minded fool. He was prepared to let Haplo and his Sartan friend roam the city at will. My lord Xar would not have liked that. I saw that you were not going to act"—Sang-drax's red eye glinted—"and so I was forced to do what I could.

"As I was about to say, my goal was to have Haplo placed in a dungeon, where he will be rendered helpless— he and his Sartan friend. I will be able to capture him quite easily without endangering your people." The dragon-snake inclined his head; the red eye slid shut for an instant.

"But now you can't get to him," Marit guessed.

"Too true." Sang-drax shrugged, smiled in a deprecating manner. "The guards would recognize me immediately as an impostor. But if you were to take me in..."

Marit gritted her teeth. It took a physical effort to remain standing this close to the dragon-snake. Every instinct urged her to kill it or run.

"We should hurry," Sang-drax added, noting her hesitation. "Before the guards can get organized."

"I must speak to my lord first," Marit said, her way clear. "This countermands Xar's earlier orders to me. I must make certain this is his will."

Sang-drax was obviously displeased. "My lord may be difficult to reach. He is, shall we say, otherwise occupied." His voice had an ominous tone.

"Then you will have to wait," Marit returned. "Haplo isn't going anywhere."

"Do you honestly believe that?" Sang-drax gave her a pitying look. "Do you believe that he will stay meekly in his cell, waiting for Xar to come for him? No, Haplo has some plot in mind, you may count upon it. I repeat, I must capture him now!"

Marit didn't know what to believe, but one thing was certain: she didn't believe Sang-drax. "I will speak to my lord," she said resolutely. "When I receive his instructions, I will obey them. Where can I find you?"

"Don't worry, Patryn. I will find you." Turning, Sang-drax left, continuing on his way down the deserted street.

Marit waited until the dragon-snake was about twenty paces from her; then, keeping to the shadow of the wall, she followed him.

What was he really after? Marit didn't believe Xar had sent him, nor did she believe Sang-drax's implications that Xar was in some sort of trouble.

She would see where Sang-drax went, discover what he was up to.

The dragon-snake, maintaining his Patryn form, rounded a corner of a building. He was taking care, Marit noticed, to keep to the shadows himself, taking care to avoid any true Patryn. He didn't run into many. This part of the city, near the wall, was mostly deserted. The buildings here were older, probably dating to a time before the wall had been constructed, and had probably been left behind as another line of defense. A perfect place for the dragon-snake to hide.

But how had Sang-drax entered the city? Patrysts manned the walls and the gate; their magic would keep out all but the most powerful intruder. Yet Sang-drax was here, and he had obviously remained unobserved; otherwise the city would be in an uproar.

Doubt began to edge its sharp point into Mark's mind. How powerful was the dragon-snake? She had always assumed that he was less powerful than she. The Patryns are the strongest force in the universe—aren't we? Isn't that what Xar said, time and again?

Guided by evil, Haplo had said.

Marit put Haplo out of her mind.

Sang-drax turned into an alley with no way out. Marit paused at the entrance, not wanting to find herself trapped. The dragon-snake continued down the alley, moving at a leisurely pace.

Marit crossed to the opposite side of the alley and entered a doorway from which she could watch unobserved.

The dragon-snake glanced behind him occasionally, but never more than a glance and an uninterested one at that. He was about halfway down the alley when he stopped, looked more carefully up and down. Then he stepped into a shadowed doorway and disappeared.

Marit waited tensely, not wanting to move closer until she was certain he wasn't going to reemerge.

Nothing happened; nothing stirred. The alley was empty. But she could hear voices, low and indistinct, coming from the building Sang-drax had entered.

Marit traced a series of sigla in the air. Tendrils of fog began to swirl down the alley. She waited patiently, worked the magic slowly. The sudden appearance of a thick fog-bank would look extremely suspicious.

When she could no longer see the squat, square shape of the building across from her, Marit walked across the alley, using the enveloping cloud as cover. She had already marked her destination—a window in the building's side, on a wall that ran perpendicular to the alley.

Sang-drax would have had to be standing in the alley itself, watching for her, to have seen her. And he was nowhere in sight. As it was, she would be only a vague shape, made visible by the faint warning glow of the runes on her bare hands and arms.

Reaching the window, she flattened herself against the wall, then risked a look inside.

The room was small, bare. Former nomads, Patryns didn't have much use for furniture in their dwellings, no such things as tables and chairs. Mats for sitting and pallets for sleeping were all the furnishings considered necessary.

Sang-drax stood in the middle of the empty room, talking to four other Patryns—who were not Patryns, Marit quickly determined. She couldn't see the rune-markings clearly—the fog outside had caused the interior of the building to grow quite dark. But the very fact that the room was dark was the determining factor. A true Patryn's sigla would have been glowing, even as Marit's were.

More dragon-snakes, disguised as Patryns. They spoke the Patryn language well—all of them. Marit found this disturbing. Sang-drax spoke her language, but then he had spent a great deal of time with Xar. How long had these other snakes had her people under observation?

"—are proceeding. Our people are massed at the Final Gate. We wait only for your signal," one of the dragon-snakes was saying.

"Excellent," Sang-drax replied. "My signal will not be long in coming. The armies of the Labyrinth are gathering. At what passes for dawn in this land, we will attack this city and destroy it. When the city is leveled, I will allow a handful of 'survivors' to flee, to spread their tale of destruction, stir up terror at our coming."

"You will not permit Alfred the Sartan to survive?" asked another in a hissing voice.

"Of course not," Sang-drax replied harshly. "The Serpent Mage will die here, as will Haplo the Patryn. Both are far too dangerous to us, now that Lord Xar knows about the Seventh Gate. It is only a matter of time before either Haplo or the Serpent Mage figures out that he has been there. Curse that fool Kleitus for telling Xar in the first place."

"We must find a way to deal with the lazar," observed one dragon-snake.

"All in good time," Sang-drax returned. "When this is finished, we will return to Abarrach, take care of the lazar, then deal with Xar himself. First, however, we will conquer and control the Labyrinth. When we seal shut the Final Gate, the evil trapped in this place will grow a hundredfold—and our power along with it. Our kind will thrive and multiply here, safe from interference, assured of a continual source of nourishment. Fear, hatred, chaos will be our harvest—"

"What was that?" A dragon-snake turned its head toward the window. "A spy?"

Marit had made no sound, although what she had overheard very nearly caused her to sink, weak-kneed, to the ground.

Sang-drax was walking toward the window.

Silent, soft-footed, Marit glided into the thick fog, ran swiftly down the alley.

"Did she hear?" The dragon-snake asked. Sang-drax dispelled the fog with a wave of his hand. "She heard," he replied with satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 43

### THE CITADEL

#### PRYAN

THE STARLIGHT SHONE BRIGHTLY FROM THE CITADEL'S TOWER. The faint humming sound, whose words could be heard but not distinguished, vibrated through the streets. Outside the walls, the tytans stood in their trance. Inside, Aleatha was holding the amulet on the gate.

"We'd better run for it," advised Paithan, licking dry lips.

"I'm not leaving without Aleatha," said Roland.

"I'm not going without Roland," said Rega, standing next to her brother.

Paithan regarded them both with exasperation and despairing fondness. "I won't go anywhere without you two." Bracing himself, he added, "I guess this means we're all going to die."

"At least we'll be together," Rega said softly, reaching out one hand to hold Paithan's while her other took her brother's.

"We'll be safe as long as the light keeps shining." Roland was considering the matter. "Paithan, you and I'll run to the gate, grab Aleatha, and then head for the citadel. Then—"

At that moment the gates swung open and the starlight suddenly went off. The tytans outside the walls began to stir about. Paithan tensed, waiting for the tytans to surge inside and start bashing them into the ground. He waited... and waited.

The tytans remained unmoving, sightless heads turned toward the open gate. Aleatha stood before them, just inside the gate. "Please," she said, with the gracious gesture of an elf queen, "please, come inside."

Paithan groaned. He exchanged glances with Roland. The two made ready to dash forward.

"Stop!" Rega ordered, awed. "Look!"

Quietly, humbly, reverently, the tytans dropped their tree-sized clubs to the ground and began to file peacefully up the hill to the gate.

The first tytan to reach the gate stopped and turned its sightless head toward Aleatha.

Where is the citadel? What must we do?

Paithan shut his eyes. He couldn't look. Next to him, Roland moaned in anguish.

"Here is the citadel," Aleatha said simply. "You are home."

Wounded and exhausted, Xar sought refuge inside the library. He managed to make his way that far before he collapsed onto the floor. For long moments he lay there, his body bleeding and broken, too weak to heal himself.

The Lord of the Nexus had fought many powerful opponents in his long lifetime. He'd fought many dragons, but never one as strong in magic as this wingless beast of fury.

But the lord had given as good as he'd got.

Lightheaded, dazed with pain and loss of blood, Xar had no very clear idea what had happened to the dragon. Had he killed it? Wounded it so severely it had been forced to withdraw? He didn't know, and at this moment he didn't particularly care. The beast had disappeared. Xar must heal himself quickly, before those fool mensch found him in this weakened state.

The Lord of the Nexus clasped his hands together, closed the circle of his being. Warmth spread through him, sending him into the restorative sleep that would return him fully to strength and health. He very nearly succumbed to it, but an urgent voice, calling to him, woke him up.

Swiftly he shook off the drowsiness. There was no time for sleep. In all probability the dragon was lurking somewhere, healing itself.

"Marit, you come to me in good time. Have you obeyed my commands? Are Haplo and the Sartan in prison?"

"Yes, Lord. But I fear you've... you've made a terrible mistake."

"I've made a mistake." Xar was upright, rigid, lethal. "What do you mean, Daughter—I've made a mistake?"

"Sang-drax is a traitor. I overheard him plotting. He and the others of his kind are going to attack this city and destroy it. Then they plan to seal shut the Final Gate. Our people will be trapped. You must come—"

"I will come," Xar said, barely able to contain his anger. "I will come and deal with Haplo and this Sartan, who have obviously subverted you to their foul cause—"

"No, Lord. I beg of you! You must believe me..."

Xar silenced her voice as he would silence the woman herself when he next encountered her. She was probably attempting to invade his thoughts, spy on him.

This is one of Haplo's tricks—trying to lure me back into the Labyrinth with these foolish tales.

"I will return to the Labyrinth," Xar said grimly, rising to his feet, his strength renewed, far more than if he'd slept a fortnight. "And both of you, my children, will be sorry to see me."

But first he needed to find the mensch, particularly that elf woman who had run off with the dwarf's amulet.

Xar listened, magically extending his hearing, listened for the bickering voices of the mensch, the hideous growl of the dragon. He had a difficult time hearing either at first. The irritating humming from the top of the citadel seemed louder than ever. Then, fortunately, the humming ceased, the light shut off.

And then he heard the mensch, and what he heard amazed and appalled him. They were opening the gates to the tytans! The idiots, the fools, the...

Words failed him.

Xar strode over to the solid stone wall, drew a sigil on the marble. A window appeared, as if one had existed in that wall all along. Xar was able to see the gate now, could see the mensch huddled together like the stupid sheep they were. He watched the gate open, saw the tytans marching inside.

Xar waited—with a certain grim anticipation—for the tytans to beat the mensch to a bloody pulp. It would only serve them right, though their deaths in such a manner considerably upset his plans. Still, he might be able to take advantage of the tytans' momentary distraction to make good his escape.

To Xar's astonishment, the tytans walked past the four mensch, not quite oblivious to them—one tytan actually picked up the human male and moved him from its path with a gentle hand—but neither paying them much attention. The giants' eyeless heads tilted upward. The light of the citadel came back on, beamed down on them, illuminated them, made them almost beautiful.

The tytans were heading in Xar's direction. Their destination was the citadel.

The seven chairs. Giants who could not see, who would not be affected by the mind-shattering light. The tytans were coming back to the citadel to fulfill their destiny— whatever that might be.

But most important—the gate stood open. The tytans were distracted. The dragon was nowhere around. This was Xar's chance.

He left the library, moved swiftly through the building, exiting from the back just as the tytans were entering at the front.

Keeping to the side streets, Xar hastily made his way to the gate. Once it was in sight, he stopped to reconnoiter. Only seven tytans had entered the citadel. The rest remained outside, but on their faces was the same beatific expression worn by those within. The three mensch stood just inside the gate, staring in bug-eyed astonishment at the tytans. The fourth mensch, the elf woman, stood directly in Xar's path, blocking the gate. His gaze focused eagerly on the bloodstained amulet she held in her hands.

The amulet would get him past the Sartan runes, onto the Sartan ship. Apparently he no longer had to worry about the tytans.

The seven tytans were walking slowly and steadily, two abreast, toward the citadel. Xar took a chance, stepped out in plain sight. The tytans walked past, never noticing him.

Excellent, he thought, rubbing his hands.

He walked swiftly to the gate.

Of course the sight of him threw the mensch into an uproar. The human woman shrieked; the elven male yammered; the human male dashed forward to do Xar bodily harm. The lord tossed a sigil at them as he might have tossed a bone to a pack of ravening wolves. The sigil struck them and the mensch went very quiet, stood very still.

The elven female had turned to face him. Her eyes were wide and frightened.

Xar approached her, his hand outstretched.

"Give me the amulet, my dear," he said to her softly, "and no harm will come to you."

The elf's mouth opened, but no words came out. Then, drawing a deep breath, she shook her head. "No!" She hid the amulet behind her back. "This was Drugar's. I... I don't care what you do to me, you can't have it. Without it, I can't travel to the other city..."

Nonsense, all of it. Xar had no idea what she was talking about, didn't care. He was about to suck her dry, leave her a pile of dust—with the amulet resting safely on top—when one of the tytans stepped through the gate and came to stand in front of Aleatha.

You will not harm her. The voice resounded in Xar's head. She is under our protection.

Sartan magic, crude but immensely powerful, shone from the tytan as the starlight shone from the top of the citadel.

Xar could have fought the magic, but he was weak from his battle with the dragon, and besides, a fight wasn't necessary.

The lord simply chose the possibility that he was standing behind the elf woman instead of in front. She had the amulet clutched in her hands, safely—so she thought—behind her back. Xar switched places, reached out, plucked the amulet from her fingers, and hastened out the gate.

Behind him, he could hear the elf woman crying in dismay.

The tytans paid no heed to Xar as he ran past them, on his way into the jungle, on his way to the ship and, from there, to the Labyrinth.

"Poor Drugar," said Rega softly. She brushed her hand across her eyes. "I wish... I wish I'd been nicer to him."

"He was so alone." Aleatha knelt beside the body of the dwarf, holding his cold hand in her own.

"I feel rotten," said Paithan. "But who knew? I thought he wanted to be by himself."

"Which of us bothered to ask?" Roland said quietly. "Too busy thinking about ourselves."

"Or some machine," Paithan added beneath his breath. He cast a surreptitious glance in the direction of the Star Chamber.

The tytans were up there now, probably sitting in those huge chairs. Doing what? The machine was dark; the starlight hadn't come on for a long time now. Yet the air quivered with tension, a good tension, a suppressed excitement. Paithan wanted more than anything to go up there and see for himself. And he would go. He wasn't afraid of the tytans anymore. But he owed this to Drugar. He owed a lot to Drugar... and it seemed the only way he could repay him was to stand over the dwarf's body and feel wretched.

"He looks happy," Rega ventured.

"Happier than he was here with us," Paithan muttered.

"Come on, Aleatha," Roland said, helping her to stand. "There's no need for you to cry. You were kind to him. I... I have to say I admire you for that."

Aleatha turned, looked at him in astonishment. "You do?"

"So do I, Aleatha," said Rega timidly. "I used to not like you very much; I thought you were weak and silly. But you're the strongest one of all of us. I want... I really want to be your friend."

"You're the only one of us with any eyes," Paithan added ruefully. "The rest of us were as blind as the tytans. You saw Xar for what he was. And you saw Drugar for what he was."

"Lonely," Aleatha murmured. She stared down at the dwarf. "So very lonely."

"Aleatha, I love you," Roland said. Reaching out, he took hold of her shoulders, drew her near. "And what's more, I like you."

"You like me?" Aleatha repeated, amazed.

"Yes, I do." Roland flushed, uncomfortable. "I didn't used to. I loved you, but I didn't like you. You were so... beautiful." He said the word with contempt. Then his eyes grew warm; he smiled. "Now you're beautiful."

Aleatha was confused. She touched her hair, which was filthy, unkempt, straggling over her thin shoulders. Her face was streaked with dirt, stained with tears, her nose swollen, her eyes red. He loved her, but he hadn't liked her. Yes, she could understand that. No one had ever liked her. Not even herself.

"No more games, Aleatha," Roland said softly, his grip on her tightening. His gaze went to the body of the dwarf. "We never know when the game's going to come to an end."

"No more games, Roland," she said, and rested her head against his chest.

"What do we do about Drugar?" Paithan asked after a moment's silence. His voice was husky. "I don't know anything about dwarven burial customs."

Take him to his people, came a tytan's voice.

"Take him to his people," Aleatha repeated.

Paithan shook his head. "That'd be fine, if we knew where they were. Or even if they were still alive..."

"I know," said Aleatha. "Don't I?"

"Who are you talking to, Thea?" Paithan looked a little frightened.

You know, came the answer.

"But I don't have the amulet," she said.

You don't need it. Wait until the starlight shines.

"This way," said Aleatha confidently. "Come with me."

Taking off her shawl, she laid it reverently over the dwarf's body. Roland and Paithan lifted Drugar. Rega went to walk at Aleatha's side. Together they entered the maze.

"Can I stand up now?" came a peevish voice.

"Yes, sir, but you must hurry. The others might be back at any moment."

The pile of bricks began to move. A few on top slid down, clattered to the floor.

"Please be quiet, sir!" intoned the dragon.

"You could give me a hand," muttered the peevish voice. "Or a claw. Whatever you've got available at the moment."

The dragon, with a long-suffering sigh, began to sift through the rubble with a green-scaled forearm. Snagging the old man by the collar of his mouse-gray robes—now brick-reddish robes—the dragon hauled the old man up out of the ruin.

"You dropped that wall on me on purpose!" the old man said, shaking his clenched fist.

"I had to, sir," the dragon answered gloomily. "You were breathing."

"Well, of course I was breathing!" the old man cried in high dudgeon. "A fellow can only hold his breath so long, you know! I suppose you expected me to turn blue and pass out!"

A bright and happy gleam lit the dragon's eyes; then it sighed, as over something lost, gone forever.

"I meant, sir, that you were being obvious about your breathing. Your chest was rising and falling. At one point, you even made a sound. Not a very corpse-like thing to do—"

"Beard flew up my nose," the old man muttered. "I thought I was going to sneeze."

"Yes, sir," said the dragon. "That was when I dropped the wall on you, sir. And now, sir, if you're quite ready ..."

"Are they all right?" the old man asked, peering out the hole in the wall. "Will they be safe?"

"Yes, sir. The tytans are inside the citadel. The seven chosen will take their places in the seven chairs. They will begin to channel the energy up from the well, use their mental powers to beam it out into Pryan and, eventually, through Death's Gate. The two humans and the two elves will be able to communicate with others of their kind in the other citadels. And now that the tytans are back under control, the humans and the elves will be able to venture forth into the jungle. They will find others of their races— and the dwarven race as well. They will lead them to safety inside these walls."

"And they'll live happily ever after," the old man concluded, beaming.

"I wouldn't go that far, sir," said the dragon. "But they'll live as happily as can reasonably be expected. They will have plenty to keep them busy. Particularly after they've made contact with their people on the other worlds of Arianus and Chelestra. That should give them quite a bit to think about."

"I'd like to stay and see that," said the old man wistfully. "I'd like to see people happy, working together, building their lives in peace. I don't know why"—he frowned—"but I think it would help me get over these terrible dreams I have sometimes."

He began to tremble. "You know the dreams I mean. Horrible dreams. Dreadful fires and buildings falling and the dying... I can't help the dying..."

"Yes, you can, Mr. Bond," said the dragon gently. He passed a clawed hand over the old man's head. "You are Her Majesty's finest secret agent. Or perhaps you would rather be a certain befuddled wizard today? You were always rather fond of that one—"

The old man pursed his lips. "Nope. No wizards. I don't want to get typecast."

"Very good, Mr. Bond. I think Money Penny is trying to get hold of you."

"She's always trying to get hold of me!" the old man said with a cackle. "Well, off we go. Let's be quick about it. Mustn't keep Q waiting."

"I believe the initial is M, sir—"

"Whatever!" the old man snapped.

The two began to fade into the air, became one with the dust. The table built by the Sartan lay shattered beneath the bricks and the fallen stone.

Many cycles later, when Paithan, along with his wife, Rega, had become rulers of the city named Drugar, the elf commanded that this chamber be sealed off.

Aleatha claimed she could hear voices inside it, sad voices, talking a strange language. No one else could hear them, but since Aleatha was now High Priestess of the Tytans and her husband was High Priest Roland, no one questioned her wisdom.

The chamber was made into a memorial for a rather daft old wizard who had twice given his life for them, and whose body—so far as any of them knew—lay buried beneath the rubble.

## CHAPTER 44

ABRI

### THE LABYRINTH

"EXCUSE ME, HAPLO..." Alfred's whisper drew Haplo away from an internal struggle. He looked over at the Sartan, not sorry to put his mental weapons down, turn his dark thoughts to something else, probably equally dark.

"Yes, what is it?"

Alfred cast a fearful glance at their guards, marching at their side, edged his way closer to Haplo.

"I— Oh, dear me! Where did that come from?"

Haplo caught hold of Alfred, kept him from walking straight into a solid rock wall.

"The mountain's been here a long time," Haplo said, and steered Alfred into the cavern entrance.

He kept fast hold of the Sartan, whose fumbling feet discovered every loose rock, every crack and fissure. The guards, after a long, frowning scrutiny, apparently decided Alfred was harmless, for they left him alone. Most of their attention was centered on Hugh the Hand.

"Thank you," Alfred murmured. "What... what I wanted to ask... and this may sound like a stupid question..."

"Coming from you?" Haplo was amused.

Alfred smiled, embarrassed. "What I was wondering is about this prison. I didn't think your people did that sort of thing ... to each other."

"I didn't think we did," Hapto said pointedly.

Vasu, who had been walking alongside, as silent and preoccupied as Haplo himself, looked up.

"Only in cases of dire necessity," the headman replied gravely. "Mainly for the prisoner's own good. Some of our people suffer from what we call Labyrinth sickness. In the lands out beyond the walls, the sickness usually leads to death."

"Out beyond these walls," Haplo added grimly, "a person with Labyrinth sickness puts his or her entire tribe in danger."

"What happens to them? What do they do?" Alfred asked.

Haplo shrugged. "Usually they go crazy and jump off a cliff. Or charge a pack of wolves alone. Or drown themselves in the river..."

Alfred shuddered.

"But we have discovered that, with time and patience, these people can be helped," Vasu said. "We keep them in a place where they are safe, where they can do no harm to themselves or to others."

"And that's where you're going to be putting us," Haplo said.

"Essentially it's where you're putting yourselves," Vasu replied. "Isn't that true? If you wanted to leave, you could do so."

"And bring destruction on my own people? I didn't come here to do that," Haplo replied.

"You could leave this human—and the knife he carries —behind."

Haplo shook his head. "No, it's my responsibility. I brought the knife in here—unknowingly, but I brought it. Between the three of us—he took in Alfred and Hugh the Hand—"maybe we can figure out how to destroy it."

Vasu nodded in understanding and agreement.

Haplo was silent a moment; then he said quietly, "But I won't let Xar take me."

Vasu's expression hardened. "He will not take you without my consent. That I promise you. I will hear what he has to say and make my judgment accordingly."

Haplo almost laughed out loud. Struggling, he maintained a straight face. "You've never met Xar, Headman Vasu. My lord takes what he wants. He's not accustomed to being denied anything."

Vasu smiled indulgently. "Meaning that I won't have any say in the matter." He patted his round stomach complacently. "I may look soft, Haplo. But don't underestimate me."

Haplo remained unconvinced, but arguing would not have been polite. When the time came, he alone would have to deal with Xar. Haplo went back to his dark inner struggle.

"I can't help but wonder, Headman Vasu"—this was Alfred—"how exactly do you keep people imprisoned? Considering that our magic is based on possibilities and with the vast range of possibilities for escape

available... Not that I plan to try to escape," he added hastily. "And if you'd prefer not to tell me, I understand—"

"It is really quite simple," Vasu answered gravely. "In the realm of possibility, there is always the possibility, that there are no possibilities."

Alfred's eyes glazed over.

The dog nipped him on the ankle, saved him from falling into a hole.

"No possibilities," Alfred repeated, thinking. He shook his head, baffled.

Vasu smiled. "I will be happy to explain. As you must surmise, the reduction of all possibilities to no possibilities is an extremely difficult and complex spell to cast. We place the person in a small, enclosed area, such as a prison cell or a dungeon. The need for such an enclosure is due to the nature of the spell, which requires that, within this area, time itself must be stopped, for only by stopping time can one stop the possibility of things occurring within time. It would be neither feasible nor advisable to stop time for the entire population of Abri.

"Thus we have constructed what is known as a 'well'— a small chamber deep inside the cavern where time literally comes to a halt. A person exists within a frozen second and, during that second, so long as the magic is operative, there exists no possibility of escape. The person within the cell continues to live, but—if held for a long period— would not physically change, would not age. People suffering from Labyrinth sickness are never kept in here long, just long enough for us to counsel and heal them."

"How ingenious!" Alfred was admiring.

"Isn't it," Haplo remarked dryly.

Worried and alone, Marit roamed the city streets until long after the Labyrinth's grayness had darkened to night. Numerous Patrins offered her hospitality, but Marit refused, regarded them warily, suspiciously.

She didn't trust them, couldn't trust her own people anymore. The knowledge grieved her. She felt more alone than ever.

I should go to Vasu, she thought. Warn him, but of what? My story sounds wild, implausible. Snakes disguised as Patrins. An attack on the city. Sealing shut the Final Gate...

"And why should I trust Vasu?" she asked herself. "Perhaps he's in league with them. I must wait for my lord. Those are my orders. And yet... And yet..."

Guided by evil...

Haplo would believe her. He was the one person who would, the one person who would know what to do. Yet to take this to him was to betray Xar's trust.

I came to find my daughter...

And what about that daughter, that baby she'd given up so long ago? What would happen to her, to all the daughters and the sons of the Patrins if the Final Gate was sealed shut? Was it possible Haplo had been telling the truth?

Marit turned her steps toward the mountain dungeon.

The streets were dark and silent. The Patrins holed up in their dwellings to keep themselves and their families safe from the insidious evil of the Labyrinth, evil whose strength increased at night.

She passed the houses, the lighted windows, heard voices from inside. Families together. Safe, for the moment...

Her steps quickened, driven by fear.

Abri had started inside the mountain, but no Patryns lived there now. The need to lurk in caves, like hunted animals, was over for them.

Entrances into the mountain had been sealed up, a Patryn told her in answer to her question. Closed off, used only in time of emergency. One entrance remained open, the entrance that led to the dungeons.

Marit headed for it, rehearsing what she would say to the guards, figuring how to convince them to let her see Haplo. It was only when she noticed that her arm was itching, burning, that she realized she wasn't the only one intent on entering the cavern.

Marit could see the cavern entrance, a black hole against the gray, softer darkness of night. Two Patryns stood guarding it. Except that they weren't Patryns. No runes glowed on their skin.

Marit blessed the magic for its warning. Otherwise she would have walked right into their arms. Hiding in the shadows, she watched and listened.

Four shapes converged on the cavern. The voices of the guards, soft and hissing, slid through the night.

"You can approach safely. No one has been around."

"Are the prisoners alone in there?"

Marit recognized Sang-drax's voice.

"Alone and trapped in a time well," was the report.

"A marvelous irony," said Sang-drax. "By imprisoning the only people who could save them, these fool Patryns will be responsible for their own destruction. We four will enter. You two stay here, make certain we are not disturbed. I don't suppose you know where they are being held?"

"No, we could not very well accompany them, could we? We would have been recognized."

Sang-drax shrugged. "No matter. I will find them. I can smell the scent of warm blood even now."

The false Patryns laughed.

"Will you be long at your 'task'?" one asked.

"They deserve to die slowly," said another. "Especially the Serpent Mage, who murdered our king."

"I must make their deaths quick, unfortunately," Sang-drax replied. "The armies are gathering and I need to be on hand to organize them. And you must hasten to the Final Gate. But do not be disappointed. We will feast on blood tomorrow and, once the Final Gate is sealed, for all eternity."

Marit reached for her dagger. The single red eye swiveled, glanced over at her. She cowered into the darkness. The red eye mesmerized her, conjured up images of death —terrible, tortured. She wanted to run and hide. Her hand fell, nerveless, from the dagger's hilt.

The red eye laughed, passed on.

Helpless, Marit watched the four dragon-snakes enter the cave. The other two took up their positions outside.

Once Sang-drax had disappeared, Marit recovered. She had to get inside the cavern, had to get inside that magical room to warn Haplo, to free him, if possible. The thought of Xar came fleetingly to her mind.

"If my lord were here," she reasoned, "if he heard the dragon-snakes as I have heard them, he would do the very same thing."

Marit lifted the sharpened stick she carried with her. The throw would be easy from this distance. As she held the crude spear in her hand, she remembered the terrible dragon-snake she had seen in the waters of Chelestra. What if she only wounded one? Would it change back to its original form? She imagined the gigantic serpents, wounded and thrashing about, wreaking havoc on her people.

And even though I might kill both of them, how can I reach Haplo ahead of Sang-drax? She was wasting time. Leave the dragon-snakes for now. Her magic would take her to Haplo, as it had once before, on Arianus. She drew the sigla in the air, imagined herself with Haplo...

Nothing. The magic failed. Of course, she cursed bitterly. He is in a prison. He can't get out. I can't get in!

"Vasu," she said to herself. "I must find him. He holds the key. He can take me there."

And if the headman proved reluctant...

Marit fingered her dagger. She'd force him to obey her. But now she had to find out where he lived... and quickly.

Marit ran into the street, searching for some wakeful Patryn who could give her information. She hadn't gone far when she stumbled into ajanan, muffled in a cloak, who stepped out of the shadows.

Startled, nervous, Marit fell back a pace. "I must find Headman Vasu," she said, eyeing the cloaked figure suspiciously. "Don't come near me. Just tell me where he lives."

"You have found him, Marit," said Vasu, throwing back the hood of his cloak.

She could see her glowing skin reflected in his eyes. And she saw, beneath his cloak, the sigla on his skin glowing.

Marit clutched at him gratefully, never stopping to wonder how he came to be here. "Headman, you must take me to Haplo! Right now!"

"Certainly," Vasu said. He took a step toward the cavern.

"No, Headman!" Marit dragged him back. "We must use the magic. Haplo is in dire peril. Don't ask me to explain—"

"You mean from the intruders?" Vasu asked coolly.

Marit gaped at him.

"I have been aware of them ever since they came. We have kept them under surveillance. I am pleased to know," he added with more gravity, the brown eyes intent on her, "that you are not in league with them."

"Of course not! They are hideous, evil." Marit shivered.

"And Haplo and the others?"

"No, Headman, no! Haplo warned me... He warned Xar..." Marit fell silent.

"And what of Lord Xar?" Vasu asked her gently.

Guided by evil...

Marit shook her head. "Please, Headman, there is no time! The dragon-snakes are in the cave right now! They are going to kill Haplo—"

"They will have to find him first," Vasu said. "And they may discover that task more difficult than they imagine. But you are right. We should make haste."

The headman gestured, and the streets Marit had thought slumbered so peacefully were suddenly alive with Patryns. No wonder she hadn't seen them. They were all cloaked, to hide the glowing, warning runes on their bodies. At a sign from Vasu, the Patryns left their posts and began gliding stealthily toward the cavern.

Vasu took hold of Mark's arm, swiftly traced a series of runes with his hand. The sigla surrounded them, blue and red, and then there was darkness.

Haplo lay on a pallet on the floor, gazing up into the shadows. Like the walls of the small, squarish cavern, the ceiling was covered with sigla, gleaming faintly, red and blue. That and four small burning cresset-stones, placed in the corners of the chamber, gave the only light.

"Relax, boy," he said to the dog.

The animal was restive and unhappy. It had been pacing about the small chamber until it began to make Haplo himself nervous. He ordered it again to settle down. The dog obeyed, relapsing by his side. But though it lay still, it kept its head up, ears pricking to sounds only it could hear. Occasionally it would growl deep in its throat.

Haplo soothed it as best he could, patting it on the head and telling it that all was fine.

He wished someone would pat him on the head, tell him the same thing. Neither of his companions was much comfort.

Alfred was enthralled by the chamber, by the sigla on the walls, by the spell that reduced all possibilities to a single possibility that there were no possibilities. He asked questions, gabbled on about how brilliant it all was until Haplo wished for just one other possibility, and that was a window out of which he could throw Alfred.

Eventually, thankfully, the Sartan fell asleep and was now sprawled on his pallet, snoring softly.

Hugh the Hand had not said a word. He sat bolt upright, as far from the glowing wall as he could get. His left hand clasped and unclasped. Occasionally he would absentmindedly lift his hand to his mouth, as if he held his pipe. Then, remembering, he would scowl and lower his hand back to his leg, where it lay clasping and unclasping.

"You could use the pipe," Haplo advised him. "It would be a real pipe, so long as nothing threatens you."

Hugh the Hand shook his head, glowered. "Never. I know what it is. If I put in my mouth, I could taste the blood on it. Curse the day I ever saw it."

Haplo lay back on his pallet. Stranded in time, he was trapped within this chamber, but his thoughts were free to roam beyond it. Not that they were doing much good. His thoughts kept traveling in the same circle—going nowhere, coming back to the beginning.

Marit had betrayed him. She was going to turn him over to Xar. Haplo should have expected as much—after all, she had been sent to kill him. But if so, why hadn't she tried to kill him when she had the chance? They were even. She had saved his life. The law was satisfied, if she had ever cared about the law. Perhaps that had just been an excuse. Why the change? And Xar was coming for him now. Xar wanted him. Why? Or did it matter? Marit had betrayed him...

He looked up to find Marit standing over him.

"Haplo!" She gasped in relief. "You're safe! You're safe!"

Haplo was on his feet, staring at her. And suddenly she was in his arms, and he was in her arms, neither with any clear idea of how it happened. The dog, not to be left out, crowded between them.

He held her tightly. The questions didn't matter. None of it mattered. Not the betrayal, not whatever danger had brought her here. At that moment, Haplo could have blessed it. And he could have wished this moment frozen in time, with no possibility of its ending.

The sigla on the walls flared and went dark. Vasu stood in the center of the room, the spell broken.

"Sang-drax," Marit said, and that was all she needed to say. "He's here. He's coming to kill you."

"What? What? What's going on?" Alfred was sitting up, blinking sleepily at them like an aging owl.

Hugh the Hand was on his feet, poised, ready for trouble.

"Sang-drax!" Suddenly Haplo felt extremely tired. The wound over his heart began to throb painfully. "He was the one who knew about the cursed knife."

"Yes," Marit answered, her fingers digging into his arms. "And, oh, Haplo! I heard Sang-drax and the other dragon-snakes talking! They're going to attack the city and—"

"Attack Abri?" Alfred repeated, startled. "Who is Sang-drax?"

"He's one of the dragon-snakes of Chelestra," Haplo said grimly.

Alfred went ashen, staggered backward against the wall. "How... how did those monsters get here?"

"They entered Death's Gate—courtesy of Samah. They're in every world now, spreading chaos and evil. And they're here now, too, apparently."

"And preparing to attack Abri?" Vasu couldn't believe it. He shrugged. "Many have tried—"

"Sang-drax spoke of armies," Marit said urgently. "Maybe thousands! Snogs, chaodyn, wolfen—all our enemies. Coming together. Organized. They're going to attack at dawn. But first he's going to kill you, Haplo, and— someone called the Serpent Mage, who killed the king dragon-snake."

Haplo looked at Alfred.

"That wasn't me!" Alfred protested. He had gone so pale he seemed almost translucent. "It wasn't me!"

"No," said Haplo. "It was Coren."

Alfred shuddered, stared down miserably at his feet. His shoes appeared to be doing strange things on their own, shuffling in and out, toes and heels clattering on the stone floor.

"How did you find out all this?" Vasu demanded.

"I recognized Sang-drax," Marit said, uncomfortable. "I knew him from... someplace else. He asked me to take him to Haplo. He claimed Xar sent him to bring Haplo back. I didn't believe him. I refused to do so, and when he left me, I followed him. I overheard him talking to the others. They didn't know I was listening..."

"Oh, yes, they did," Haplo interrupted. "He had no need to use you to get to me. They wanted you to know their plans. They want our fear—"

"They've got it," Alfred whispered unhappily.

"Haplo, they're on their way here!" Marit said desperately. "They're going to kill you. We've got to get out—"

"Yes," said Vasu. "Time for questions later." He obviously had a great many questions. "I will take you—"

"No, I don't think you will," came a hiss from the darkness.

Sang-drax, still in Patryn form, and three of his fellows appeared in the chamber, walking through a wall.

"This will be simple, like shooting rats in a barrel. A pity I don't have time to make it more fun. I would so like to see you suffer. Especially you, Serpent Mage!" The red eye focused on Alfred, glowing malevolently.

"I think you have the wrong person," Alfred said meekly.

"I think we don't. Your disguise is as easy to penetrate as my own." Sang-drax whipped around to face Vasu. "Try if you like, Headman. You won't find that your magic does you much good."

Vasu stared in astonishment at the sigla he had cast, burning, in the air. The runes were coming unraveled, their magic dying, dwindling to meaningless wisps of smoke.

"Oh, dear," said Alfred, and slid gracefully to the floor.

The dragon-snakes moved in. The dog, snarling and yapping, crouched in front of Haplo and Marit. She held her spear in her hand. Haplo had her dagger. Not that the weapons would do them much good.

Weapon... weapon...

The Patryns were moving nearer and nearer. Sang-drax had chosen Haplo. The snake's hand was outstretched, reaching for the heart-rune.

"I will finish what I began," he said.

Haplo fell back, pulling Marit and the snarling dog with him. He came up against Hugh the Hand.

"The Sartan knife!" Haplo whispered. "Use it!"

Hugh the Hand drew forth the Cursed Blade, jumped in front of Haplo. Sang-drax laughed, preparing to slaughter the human, then finish off the Patryns.

Sang-drax found himself confronting a tytan, wielding a tree branch for a club.

Roaring, the giant struck savagely at the dragon-snake. Sang-drax ducked, fell back. The other snakes fought the tytan, hurling spears and magic. But their magic did nothing to stop the Cursed Blade.

"Retreat!" Sang-drax called. He grinned wickedly at Haplo. "A clever ploy. But now what will you do? Come, friends. Let their own weapon finish them."

The dragon-snakes vanished.

"Hugh, call it off!" Haplo cried.

But in the presence of its ancient enemy, the Cursed Blade continued to try to kill. The tytan raged around the chamber, bashing its club into walls, its sightless head sniffing them out.

Sigla burned again in the air, but almost immediately dwindled and died.

"I feared as much." Vasu swore in frustration. "The snakes have cast some type of spell in this chamber. My magic won't work."

The tytan rounded on them, its head swiveling in response to Vasu's voice.

"Don't attack!" Haplo halted Marit, who was prepared to hurl her spear. "If it doesn't feel threatened, perhaps it will leave us alone."

"I think so long as any Patryn remains alive, it will feel threatened," Hugh the Hand said grimly.

The tytan approached.

Hugh the Hand ran in front of the tytan, shouting at it, hoping to distract it. Haplo grabbed hold of the comatose Alfred, who was in danger of being trampled by the monster's lumbering feet, and pulled him into a corner.

Vasu and Marit tried circling around the giant, planning to attack it from behind. But the tytan sensed their movement. It whirled, struck. The tree branch whistled horribly, crashed into the wall behind Marit. If she had not thrown herself flat, the blow would have crushed her skull.

Haplo slapped Alfred across the face. "Wake up! Damn it, wake up! I need you!"

The dog added its help, covered Alfred's cheeks with sloppy wet licks. The tytan's huge, stamping feet shook the cavern. Hugh the Hand stood protectively in front of Haplo. Vasu was attempting to cast another spell and not having much success.

"Alfred!" Haplo shook the Sartan until his teeth rattled.

Alfred opened his eyes, took one terrified look at the howling tytan, and, with a gentle groan, shut his eyes.

"No, you don't!" Haplo gripped the Sartan by the neck, forced him to sit upright. "That's not a real tytan. It's the Sartan knife! There must be some sort of magic you can use to stop it! Think, damn it! Or it's going to kill us all!"

"Magic," Alfred repeated, as if this were a new and original concept. "Sartan magic. Why, you're right. I believe there might be a way."

He clambered unsteadily to his feet. The tytan paid no attention to him. Its sightless head was fixed on the Patryns. A massive hand reached down, brushed Hugh the Hand to one side. The tytan headed for Haplo.

Alfred stepped in front of the giant. Solemnly, a comic figure in his shabby finery, his wispy hair trailing down from the bald spot on his head, he raised a trembling hand and, in a shaking voice, said, "Stop."

The tytan vanished.

On the cavern floor, at Hugh's feet, was the Cursed Blade. It quivered an instant, its sigla gleaming. Its light flared, then went out.

"Is it safe now?" Haplo asked, staring hard at the knife.

"Yes," said Alfred. "So long as nothing threatens Sir Hugh again."

Haplo glared at him. "Do you mean to tell me that you could have done that all along? Just say stop in Sartan?"

"I suppose so. It didn't occur to me until you mentioned it. And I wasn't really certain it would work. But once I thought about it, it seemed logical to me that the knife's Sartan maker would have provided the user with some means of control. And it would have, in all probability, been something simple that could be taught easily to mensch..."

"Yeah, yeah," Haplo said wearily. "Save the explanation. Just teach the damn word to Hugh, will you?"

"What does all this mean?" The assassin was in no great hurry to retrieve his weapon.

"It means that from now on you can control the knife. It won't attack anything you don't want it to. Alfred will teach you the magic you need to know."

"We can leave," said Vasu, staring around the chamber. "Whatever spell those creatures cast has ended. But I've never faced such power. It's far greater than my own. Who are they? What are they? Who created them? The Sartan?"

Alfred blanched. "I'm afraid so. Samah told me that he once asked the creatures that very question. 'Who created you?' 'You did, Sartan,' they said."

"Odd," remarked Haplo quietly. "That's the very same answer they gave me when I asked, 'Who created you?' 'You did,' they said."

"What does it matter who created them?" Marit cried impatiently. "They're here and they're going to attack the city. And then, when it's destroyed..." She shook her head, arguing with herself. "I can't believe it. Surely Sang-drax was bluffing."

"What else did they say?" Haplo asked.

"Sang-drax said he was going to seal shut the Final Gate."

CHAPTER 45

ABRI

THE LABYRINTH

VASU MADE READY TO LEAVE THE CAVERNS, TO PREPARE HIS people to face a dawn attack. He offered to take Hugh the Hand and Alfred with him; not that they could be of much help, but the headman wanted to keep watch on both of them—and the cursed knife. Marit should have gone with him—she could be of help—but when the headman looked in her direction, she was intently looking somewhere else and refused to catch his eye.

Vasu glanced at Haplo, who was playing with the dog, also keeping his gaze averted. The headman smiled and, taking Hugh and Alfred with him, departed.

Haplo and Marit were alone, not counting the dog. It flopped on its belly on the floor, hiding what might have been a grin with its nose in its paws.

Marit, suddenly uneasy, seemed astonished to find that they were the only two people in the room.

"I guess we should go. There's a lot of work—"

Haplo took her in his arms. "Thank you," he said, "for saving my life."

"I did it for our people," Marit said, stiff in his grasp, still not looking at him. "You know the truth about Sang-drax. You're the only one. Xar—" She paused, horrified. What had she been about to say?

"Yes," said Haplo, his grip on her tightening. "I know the truth about Sang-drax. And Xar does not. Is that what you were going to say, Marit?"

"It's not his fault!" she protested. Against her will and inclination, she found herself relaxing in Haplo's strong arms. "They flatter him, beguile him. They don't let him see their true shape—"

"I used to tell myself that," Haplo said softly. "But I stopped believing it. Xar knows the truth. He knows they are evil. He listens to their flattery because he enjoys it. He thinks he controls them. But the more he thinks that, the more they control him."

Xar's sigil burned into Marit's skin. Her hand started to touch it, rub it as one rubs a bruise, to rub out the pain. She caught herself. The thought of Haplo seeing that mark turned her stomach to water.

And yet, she asked herself angrily, why shouldn't he see it? Why should I be ashamed? It is an honor, a great honor. He is wrong about Xar. Once my lord knows the truth about the dragon-snakes...

"Xar is coming," she said stubbornly. "Perhaps he will arrive during the battle. He will save us, his people, fight for us, as he has always fought for us. And then he will understand. He will see Sang-drax for what he is..."

Marit pushed Haplo away, turned her back on him. She put her hand to her forehead, scratched the mark hidden beneath her thick hair. "I think we should help with the defenses. Vasu will be needing us—"

"Marit," said Haplo, "I love you."

The sigil on her forehead was like an iron band around her skull, tightening, constricting. Her temples throbbed.

"Patrins don't love," Marit said thickly, not turning around.

"No, we only hate," Haplo replied. "Maybe if I had loved more and hated less, I wouldn't have lost you. I wouldn't have lost our child."

"You'll never find her, you know."

"Yes, I will. I have, in fact. I found her today."

Marit turned, stared at him. "What? How could you be certain—"

Haplo shrugged. "I'm not. In fact, I don't suppose it was her. But it could have been. And it's because of her we'll fight. And we'll win because of her. And somehow, for her sake, we'll keep Sang-drax from shutting the Final Gate..."

Marit was in his arms again, holding him fast. The circles of their beings joined to form one circle, unbroken, never ending.

Seeing that no one was likely to need a dog for a while, the animal sighed contentedly, rolled over, and went to sleep.

Outside the caverns, walking the streets of Abri, Vasu made his preparations for war. Surrounded by a hostile environment, continually under threat, if not attack, the city walls were reinforced with magic; the very roofs of the dwelling places were marked with protective runes. Very few of the Labyrinth's creatures attempted to attack Abri. They lurked beyond the walls, in the forests, waiting to ambush groups of farmers, pick off the herders. Occasionally one of the winged beasts—dragons, griffins, the like— would take it into its head to raid within the city walls. But such an occurrence was rare.

It was this talk of armies that worried Vasu. As Haplo had said, the monsters in the Labyrinth had up until now remained largely unorganized. The chaodyn often attacked wolfen. Wolfen were continually defending their territory against roving tiger-men. Marauding dragons killed whatever looked fit to eat. But Vasu wasn't deluding himself. Such minor rivalries and disputes would be fast forgotten if a chance came to band together and invade the fortress city that had stood against them for so long.

Vasu sounded the alarm, gathered the people together in the large central meeting place, and told them of their danger. The Patryns took the dire news calmly, if grimly! Their silence spoke their support. Dispersed, they went about their tasks efficiently, with a minimum of talk. Weapons had to be gathered, their magic strengthened. Families parted, said good-bye briefly, without tears. Adults took up duty on the walls. Older children led younger ones into the mountain caverns, which were unsealed to receive them. Scouting parties, shrouded in black to hide the runes that now glowed ominously, slipped out of the iron gate, ranged along the river, reinforcing the magic on the bridges, attempting to gauge the strength and disposition of the enemy.

"What about that damn fire?" Hugh the Hand squinted up at the beacon flame. "You say there are dragons around here. That will draw them like moths."

"It has never been doused," said Vasu. "Not since the beginning." He glanced down at the gleaming sigla on his skin. "I don't think it will make much difference," he added dryly. "The moths are already swarming."

Hugh the Hand shook his head, unconvinced. "Mind if I take a look around at the rest of your defenses? I've had some experience in this sort of thing."

Vasu appeared dubious.

"The Cursed Blade will be safe enough now," Alfred assured him. "And Sir Hugh knows how to control it. Tomorrow, though, if there is fighting—"

Hugh the Hand winked. "I've got an idea about that. Don't worry."

Alfred sighed, gazed bleakly around the city.

"Well, we have done all we can," Vasu said, echoing Alfred's sigh. "I, for one, am hungry. Would you like to come to my house? I am certain you are in need of food and drink."

Alfred was pleased, astonished. "I would be honored."

As they walked through the city, Alfred noticed that no matter how busy or preoccupied, every Patryn they met accorded Vasu some show of respect, even if it was nothing more than a slight inclination of the head or a gesture of a hand, drawing a swift ritual friendship sigil in the air. Vasu unfailingly returned the sign with one of his own.

His home was no different from any of the other Patryn dwellings, except that it appeared older than most and stood apart. Braced against the mountain, it was like a stalwart guard who plants his back against a secure surface to take on his foes.

Vasu entered first. Alfred followed, tripping over the doorstep but managing to catch himself before he fell face first on the floor. The dwelling was clean and neatly kept and, like all Patryn homes, almost devoid of furniture.

"You are not married... joined?" Alfred asked, seating himself awkwardly on the floor, his long legs folding beneath him with difficulty.

Vasu was taking bread from a basket suspended from the ceiling. Rows of sausages, also hanging from the ceiling, brought Alfred a fond memory of Haplo's dog.

"No, I live alone for now," Vasu replied, adding some type of unrecognizable fruit to the simple meal. "I haven't been headman very long. I inherited the position from my father, who only recently died."

"I am sorry for your loss," Alfred said politely.

"His life was one well lived," Vasu returned. "We celebrate such lives, not mourn them." He placed the food on the floor between them, sat down himself. "Our family has held this position for generations. Of course, any man or woman has the right to challenge us, but no one ever has. My father worked hard to govern well, govern justly. I strive as best I can to emulate his good example."

"It seems you are succeeding."

"I hope so." Vasu's troubled gaze shifted to the small window, out into the darkness. "My people have never faced so great a challenge, so grave a threat."

"What about the Final Gate?" Alfred asked timidly, aware that such matters were really none of his business, that he knew very little about it. "Shouldn't someone be sent to warn... somebody?"

Vasu sighed softly. "The Final Gate is far, far from here. They would never reach it in time... or alive."

Alfred looked at the food, but he had very little appetite.

"But enough dismal talk." Vasu returned to the meal with a cheerful smile. "We need the strength food offers us. And who knows when we may have time to eat again? Shall I offer the blessing? Or will you?"

"Oh, you, please!" Alfred said hastily, blushing. He had no idea what a Patryn might consider a proper blessing.

Vasu extended his hands, began to speak. Alfred joined in the words unconsciously, repeating them without thinking—until it occurred to him that Vasu was speaking the blessing in Sartan.

Alfred's breath caught in his throat, making such a strange half-strangled clicking noise that it caught the headman's attention. Vasu ceased the blessing in the middle, looked up.

"Are you all right?" he asked, worried.

Alfred stared wildly and confusedly at Vasu's glowing, tattooed skin. "You're not... Are you?... You can't be ... S-s-sartan!"

"About half," Vasu said imperturbably. He held up his arms, gazed at the sigla with pride. "Our family has adapted over the centuries. In the beginning, we wore the tattoos only for disguise. Not to delude the Patrins, mind you; we only wanted to fit in. Since then, through intermarriage, we have come to be able to

use the magic— although not as well as a full-blooded Patryn. But what we lack, we compensate for by using Sartan magic."

"Intermarriage! But ... the hatred?" Alfred thought back to the River of Anger. "Surely you must have been persecuted..."

"No," said Vasu quietly. "They knew why we were sent here."

"The Vortex!"

"Yes, we came from beneath the mountain, where we were sent because of our heretical beliefs. My ancestors opposed the Sundering; they opposed the building of this prison. They were a danger, a threat to the established order. Like yourself, or so I must imagine. Although you are the first Sartan to arrive in the Vortex in many long ages. I had hoped that things had changed."

"You are still here, aren't you?" Alfred said quietly, pushing his food around with trembling fingers.

Vasu regarded him for a long moment in silence. "I suppose explanations would be too long, too complex."

"Not really." Alfred sighed. "We Sartan locked ourselves in our own prison, just as surely as we locked you in yours. Our prison walls were pride; our iron bars were fear. Escape was impossible, for that would have meant tearing down the walls, opening up the barred gates. We dare not do that. Our prison not only kept us in, you see— it kept them out. We stayed inside, and shut our eyes, and went to sleep. And we've been asleep all these years. When we woke, everything had changed except us. And now our prison is the only place we know."

"But not you," said Vasu.

Alfred blushed. "I can take no credit for it." He smiled faintly. "I met a man with a dog."

Vasu was nodding. "It would have been easy for our people, when we were first sent here, to give up and die. It was the Patrins who kept us alive. They took us in, accepted us, protected us from harm until we grew strong enough to protect ourselves."

Alfred was beginning to understand. "And it must have been a Sartan idea to build this city."

"I think perhaps it was. Somewhere back in long-forgotten times. It would be natural for the Sartan, who came from cities and liked to live in large groups. We could see the advantages gained by banding together, dwelling in one place, working to make it strong.

"Even back in the ancient world, the Patrins were nomads, tended to be loners. The family unit was—and still is—important to them. But in the Labyrinth, many families were wiped out. The Patrins had to adapt or cease to survive. They did so by expanding the family unit into the tribe. The Patrins learned the importance of banding together for mutual defense from the Sartan. And the Sartan learned the importance of family from the Patrins."

"The worst in both our peoples brought us to this end." Alfred spoke with emotion. "The worst perpetuated it. You have taken the best and used it to build stability, find peace in the midst of chaos and terror."

"Let us hope," said Vasu somberly, "that this is not the end."

Alfred sighed, shook his head.

Vasu observed him closely. "The intruders called you the Serpent Mage."

Now Alfred smiled; his hands fluttered. "I know. I have been called that before. I don't know what it means."

"I do," said Vasu unexpectedly.

Alfred looked up, astonished.

"Tell me what happened to earn you this title," Vasu said.

"Why, that's just it. I don't know. You think I'm being evasive. Or that I don't want to help. I do! I would give anything... Let me try to explain.

"To make a long story short, I woke from my sleep to find myself alone. My companions had all died. I was on the air world of Arianus, a world populated by mensch."

He paused, looked at Vasu to see if he understood. Apparently he did, though he said nothing. His attentive silence encouraged Alfred to proceed.

"I was terrified. All this magical power"—Alfred stared at his hands—"and I was alone. And afraid. If anyone discovered what I could do, they might... try to take advantage. I could imagine—the coercion, the pleadings, the urgings, the threats. Yet I wanted to live among the mensch, to be of service to them. Not that I was much help."

Alfred sighed again. "Anyway, I developed a most unfortunate habit. Whenever danger threatens, I... faint."

Vasu looked amazed.

"It was either that or use my magic, you see," Alfred continued, his face red. "But that's not the worst. Apparently I have worked some very remarkable magic—quite remarkable, in fact—and I don't remember doing it. I must have been fully conscious at the time, but when it's all over I haven't the slightest memory of it. Well, I guess I do. Deep inside." Alfred laid his hand on his heart. "Because I feel uncomfortable whenever the matter comes up. But I swear to you"—he gazed earnestly at Vasu—"I can't consciously remember!"

"What sort of magic?" Vasu asked.

Alfred swallowed, licked dry lips. "Necromancy," he said in a low, anguished voice, barely audible. "The human, Hugh the Hand. He was dead. I brought him back to life."

Vasu drew in a deep breath, let it out slowly. "And what else?"

"I was told that I... I changed into a serpent—a dragon, to be exact. Haplo was in danger, on Chelestra. And there were children... The dragon-snakes were going to kill them." Alfred shuddered. "They needed my help, but, as usual, I fainted. At least, that's what I thought I did. Haplo tells me that I didn't. I don't know." Alfred shook his head. "I just don't know."

"What happened?"

"A magnificent dragon—green and gold—appeared out of nowhere and fought the snakes. The dragon destroyed the king snake. Haplo and the children were saved. The only thing I remember was waking up on the beach."

"Indeed, a serpent mage," Vasu said.

"What is a serpent mage, Headman? Does it have anything to do with these dragon-snakes? If so, how is that possible? They were unknown to the Sartan at the time of the Sundering—at least so far as I can determine."

"It seems odd that you—a pure-bred Sartan—don't know," Vasu responded, regarding Alfred with some misgiving. "And that I—a half-breed—do."

"Not so strange," Alfred said, smiling bleakly. "You have kept the fire of memory and tradition burning brightly. In our obsession with trying to put back together what we destroyed, we let our fire go out. And then I was very young when I went to sleep. And very old when I woke up."

Vasu considered this in silence; then, relaxing, he smiled. "The Serpent Mage has nothing to do with those you call dragon-snakes, although it is my guess that they have been around far longer than you credit them. 'Serpent Mage' is a title denoting ability—nothing more."

"At the time of the Sundering, there was a hierarchy of magi among the Sartan, denoted by animal names. Lynx, Coyote, Deer... It was very involved, complicated." Vasu's remarkable eyes were fixed on Alfred. "Serpent was near the top. Extraordinarily powerful."

"I see." Alfred was uncomfortable. "I suppose there was training involved, years of study—"

"Of course. With that much power comes responsibility."

"The one thing I've never been very good at."

"You could be of immense help to my people, Alfred."

"If I don't pass out," Alfred said bitterly. "But then again, you might be happier if I did. I could bring more danger to you than I'm worth. The Labyrinth seems to be able to turn my magic against me—"

"Because you're not in control of your magic. Or of yourself. Take control, Alfred. Be the hero of your own life. Don't let someone else play that role."

"Be the hero of my own life," Alfred repeated softly. He almost laughed. It was so very ludicrous.

The two men sat together in companionable silence. Outside, the black began to soften to gray. Dawn—and battle—approached.

"You are two people, Alfred," said Vasu at length. "An inner person and an outer. A chasm exists between the two. Somehow you must bridge it. The two of you must meet."

Alfred Montbank—middle-aged, balding, clumsy, a coward.

Coren—life-giver; a creature of power, strength, courage, the chosen.

These two could never come together. They had been apart far too long.

Alfred sat dejected. "I think I would only fall off the bridge," he said miserably.

A horn sounded, a call of warning. Vasu was on his feet. "Will you come with me?"

Alfred attempted to look brave. Squaring his shoulders, he stood up... and tripped over the corner of the rug.

"One of us will come," he said, and picked himself up with a sigh.

CHAPTER 46

ABRI

THE LABYRINTH

BY THE GRAY LIGHT OF DAWN, IT SEEMED TO THE PATRYNS THAT every enemy in the Labyrinth was ranged against them.

Until that moment, when they looked out over the walls and stared in horrified awe, some had doubted, not believed the warnings. They thought the headman's fears exaggerated. There had been intruders in the city, but they had done no harm. A few packs of wolfen might attack. Or perhaps even a legion of the hard-to-kill\* chaodyn. How could such vast forces as the headman spoke of gather unobserved? The forest and the surrounding lands had been no more dangerous than normal.

\*Insect-like creatures, the chaodyn have a hard outer shell that is extremely difficult to penetrate even with magical weapons. A chaodyn must be struck directly, die instantly, or else an attacker will find himself facing two where one stood before.

Now the land crawled with death.

Wolfen, chaodyn, tiger-men, snogs, and hosts of other monsters, born and bred by the evil magic of the Labyrinth, were massed along the riverbank, their ranks rippling with activity, until it seemed that they formed another River of Anger.

The forest concealed the numbers hidden within, but the Patryns could see the tops of the trees swaying, stirred by the movement of armies below. Dust rose from where giant trees were being felled to serve as bridges and battering rams, were being made into ladders to scale the walls.

And beyond the forest, the grass plains that lay fallow, ready for the planting, sprouted a hideous crop. Springing up in the night like weeds that thrive on darkness, the ranks of the foe stretched to the horizon.

Leading the armies were creatures never before seen in the Labyrinth: huge serpents, without wings or feet, gray-scaled, their wrinkled bodies dragging over the ground. They oozed slime that poisoned the land, the water, the air —anything they touched. Their foul smell, of rot and decay, was like a film of oil on the wind. The Patryns could taste it on their tongues and in their throats, feel it coating their arms and hands, obscuring their vision.

The red eyes of the serpents burned hot with bloodlust. Their toothless mouths gaped wide, sucking in the terror and the fear the sight of them inspired, gorging on it, growing fat and strong and powerful.

One of the serpents, however, had only one eye. And it scanned the top of the city walls with evil intent, as if searching for someone in particular.

The dawn came, gray light shining from a source never seen, serving only to illuminate, doing little to warm or cheer. But this day the gray was brightened by a halo of blue, an aura of red. The Patryns' rune-magic had never before gleamed so brilliantly, reacting to the powerful forces arrayed against it with power of its own.

The sigla flared on the protecting wall, its light so dazzling that many standing on the riverbank, awaiting the signal to attack, were forced to shade their eyes against it. The bodies of the Patryns themselves gleamed as if each individual burned with his or her own vibrant flame.

Only one person stood in darkness, forlorn, almost suffocating with terror.

"This is hopeless!" Alfred peered over the edge of the battlements. His hands, gripping the wall, shook so that fragments of rock dislodged, came down in a rain of gritty dust that covered his shoes.

"Yes, it is hopeless," answered Haplo beside him. "I'm sorry I got you into this, my friend."

The dog pattered back and forth nervously along the wall, whining because it couldn't see, occasionally alert and growling at the sound of a wolfen's challenging howl or a dragon-snake's taunting hiss. Marit stood next to Haplo; her hand was twined fast in his. They looked at each other every so often, smiling, finding comfort and courage in each other's eyes.

Alfred, watching them, felt that comfort include him. For the first time since he had met Haplo, Alfred saw the Patryn almost whole, almost at peace. He was not fully whole, not completely—the dog was with him still. Whatever had led Haplo to come back to the Labyrinth had led him home. And he was content to stay here, to die here.

My friend, he had said.

Alfred heard the words dimly above the shrieks of the invading foe. The words kindled a small fire inside him.

"Am I?" he asked Haplo timidly.

"Are you what?"

The conversation had moved on, at least between Haplo and Marit and Hugh the Hand. Alfred hadn't been listening to them. He'd been listening to the voice across the chasm.

"Your... what you said. Friend," Alfred said shyly.

"Did I say that?" Haplo shrugged. "I must have been talking to the dog." But he was smiling.

"You weren't, were you?" Alfred said, red with pleasure.

Haplo was silent. The armies below them hooted and howled, gibbered and cursed. Haplo's silence wrapped around Alfred like a comforting blanket. He couldn't hear the screams of death. Only Haplo, when he spoke.

"Yes, Alfred, you are my friend." Haplo held out his hand—the hand that was powerful, tattooed on the back with blue runes.

Alfred extended his hand—white, shriveled, with knobby wrists and thin bones, its flesh cold and clammy with fear.

The two hands met, clasped, gripped each other firmly.

Two people, reaching across a chasm of hate. At that moment, Alfred looked inward and met himself.

And he was no longer afraid.

Another shrill blast of the trumpet and the battle began.

The Patrins had either destroyed the bridges across the river or set magical traps on them. These obstructions halted the enemy only momentarily, were no more than a minor inconvenience. The narrow rock bridge that had cost Alfred some painful moments exploded in a flash of magic, taking out a host of the enemy who had foolishly ventured onto it.

But before the last fragments had fallen down into the raging water, six logs were hauled by tusked behemoths to the river's bank. Dragons—true dragons of the Labyrinth\* —lifted the logs with claw and with magic and dropped them down. Legions of the dread host swarmed across. If any of their number slipped and fell into the torrent—which many did—they were abandoned to their fate.

\*As opposed to the evil serpents (dragon-snakes) or the good dragons of Pryan. The Labyrinth dragons are descendants of those of ancient Earth, pre-Sundering. They are hideous reptiles, large, with vast wingspan, powerful in magic and abominably evil. They do not kill a victim outright, but enjoy taking prisoners and will torment their victims for days, allowing them to die slowly. Haplo mentions elsewhere that the dragons of the Labyrinth are the one creature he never fought. He ran for his life whenever he feared one was near. So far as Haplo records, Xar, Lord of the Nexus, was the only Patryn ever to fight a Labyrinth dragon and

Higher up among the cliffs stood permanent bridges of stone. These the Patrins left standing, but used the magic of their engraved sigla to confound the enemy, arousing an intense fear in those trying to cross, causing the ones in front to turn and flee in panic, disorganizing and stampeding those in the rear.

The Patrins guarding the walls were heartened by the sight, assuming that the bulk of the enemy would be unable to reach the city. Their cheering died when the enormous serpents reared up and crashed headlong into the under-section of the bridges, a part left unprotected by magic. The sigla on the sides flashed wildly, but cracks spread through it, disrupting the magic, weakening it—in some cases completely destroying it. The enemy commanders rallied their troops with furious shouts. The retreat was halted, the armies of the Labyrinth raced across the damaged bridges, which trembled beneath the weight, but held.

By midmorning, the sky above Abri was dark with the wings of dragons and griffins, gigantic bats, and leather-winged birds of prey that swooped down on the Patrins from above. Hordes of chaodyn, wolfen packs, and tiger-men dashed across the no-man's-land below. Siege towers were raised, ladders thrust up along the sides of the walls. Battering rams thundered against the iron gates.

The Patrins rained down magic on their foes—spears kindled into bolts of flame, javelins burst overhead in a shower of flesh-consuming sparks, arrows that could not miss flew directly to the heart of the chosen victim. Smoke and magical fog obscured the sight of the monsters descending from the air; several crashed headlong into the mountain. The magic of the rune-inscribed walls and buildings of Abri repelled invaders. Ladders thrown up against the walls turned from wood to water. Siege towers caught fire and burned. Iron battering rams melted, the molten metal consuming all those who stood near it.

Daunted by the force and power of the Patryn magic, the armies of the enemy faltered and fell back. Alfred, watching from his place on the walls, began to think he'd been wrong.

"We're winning," he said excitedly to Haplo, who had paused to rest.

"No, we're not," Haplo said grimly. "That was only the first wave. Meant to soften us up, force us to expend our weapons."

"But they're retreating," Alfred protested. "Regrouping. And this"—Haplo held out a spear—"is my last. Marit's gone to find more, but she won't be successful."

Archers were on their hands and knees, searching for any arrow dropped or spent. They pulled shafts out of the bodies of the dead for use against their killers. On the ground below, those too old to fight hunched over the few remaining weapons, hastily inscribing them with sigla, repairing them with magic that was already starting to wane.

And it still wouldn't be enough to hold back the foes, already massing for the next attack. All along the battlements, the Patrins drew knife and sword, prepared to face the assault, which would be fought hand to hand.

Marit returned, carrying two javelins and a broken spear. "All I could find."

"May I?" Alfred asked, his hand hovering over the weapons. "I can replicate them."

Haplo shook his head. "No. Your magic—remember? Who knows what these might turn into."

"I can't be of any help," Alfred said, discouraged.

"At least," Haplo observed, "you didn't faint."

The Sartan looked up, mildly astonished. "No, I didn't, did I?"

"Besides, I don't think it will matter at this point," Haplo said dryly. "You could make spears from every branch of every tree in the forest and it wouldn't matter. The dragon-snakes are leading this attack."

Alfred stared over the top of the wall. His knees weakened; he very nearly lost his balance. The dog edged close, bolstering him with an encouraging lick and a wagging tail.

The River of Anger had frozen, probably from the magic of the serpents. Armies of creatures now marched across its solid black surface. Surrounding the city, the serpents began to fling themselves bodily at the walls. The sigla-inscribed stone shook beneath the blows. Cracks speared through the structure, small at first, then growing larger. Time and again, the serpents attacked the very bones of Abri. The cracks spread and began to widen, dividing the runes, weakening the magic.

The Patryns atop the walls fought the serpents with every weapon, every magical spell they could think to cast. But weapons struck the gray-scaled skin and bounced off harmlessly; magic burst over the serpents, did no damage. It was afternoon. The armies of the enemy stood on the frozen river and cheered the serpents on, waited for the walls to fall.

Headman Vasu climbed up to where Haplo stood atop the wall. A shuddering blow rocked it beneath his feet. "You said you once fought these creatures, Haplo. How can we stop them?"

"Steel," Haplo yelled back. "Inscribed with magic. Drive it into the head. Can you find me a sword?"

"That would mean fighting them outside the wall," Vasu shouted.

"Give me a group of our people skilled with sword and dagger," Haplo urged.

"We would have to open the gates," Vasu said, his expression dark.

"Just long enough to let us out. Then shut them behind us."

Vasu shook his head. "No, I can't permit it. You would be trapped out there..."

"If we fail, it won't matter," Haplo returned grimly. "Either we die out there or we die in here. And out there, we've got a chance."

"I'll go with you," Marit offered.

"So will I," said Hugh the Hand, frustrated, eager for action.

The assassin had tried fighting, but every spear he threw went wide of its mark; the arrows he shot might have been flowers for all the damage they did.

"You can't kill," Haplo reminded him.

The Hand grinned. "They don't know that."

"You've got a point," Haplo admitted. "But maybe you should stay here, protect Alfred..."

"No," said Alfred resolutely. "Sir Hugh is needed. You will all be needed. I'll be all right."

"You sure?" Haplo regarded him intently.

Alfred flushed. Haplo wasn't asking if Alfred was sure he'd be all right, but if he was sure about something else. Haplo had always been able to see through him. Well, friends could do that sort of thing.

"I'm sure," Alfred said, smiling.

"Good luck, then, Coren," Haplo said.

Accompanied by the dog and Hugh the Hand, the Patryns—Haplo and Marit—left, disappearing into the fog and smoke of battle.

"Good luck to you, my friend," Alfred said softly.

Closing his eyes, he delved into the very depths of his being—a place he had never before visited, consciously at least—and began to search among the clutter and the refuse for the words of a spell.

Kari and her band of hunters volunteered to go with Haplo to fight the serpents. They armed themselves with steel, taking the time to inscribe the magic on the blades as Haplo instructed.

"The head of the serpent is the only vulnerable part that I know of," Haplo told them. "Between the eyes."

No need to add what they could all see, that the serpents were powerful, that the lashing tails could batter them until their own shielding magic gave way, the enormous bodies crush them, the gaping toothless maws devour them.

Four serpents crawled around the walls, including Sang-drax.

"He's ours," said Haplo, exchanging glances with Marit, who nodded grim agreement. The dog barked in excitement, dashed in circles in front of the gate.

The walls continued to hold, but they wouldn't much longer. Cracks spread from base to top now; the flaring light of the runes was starting to dim and in places had gone out. Hosts of the enemy were taking advantage of the weakness to throw up ladders, begin scaling the walls. The attacking serpents occasionally knocked down their own allies, but paid little heed. Another swarm arrived to take the places of the dead.

Haplo and his group stood by the gates.

"Our blessing on you," Vasu said, and, raising his hand, he gave the signal.

Patryns who were guardians of the gate's magic placed their hands on the runes. The sigla flashed and darkened. The gates began to open. Haplo and his people dashed out rapidly, squeezing through the crack. Seeing the breach in the defenses, a pack of wolven let out a howl and flung themselves at it. The Patryns cut them down swiftly. Those few wolven who managed to win through were caught between the iron gates as they boomed shut.

Haplo and those with him were now locked outside their own city, with no way back in. The gates would not— by Haplo's own orders—open again until the serpents were dead.

The magic of the Patryns' swords and their own bodies shone brightly. At Haplo's command, the teams separated, spread out, breaking off into small groups to challenge the serpents individually, prevent them from banding together, draw them away from the walls.

The serpents mocked them, turned from their destruction to eliminate these petty nuisances and go back to the task at hand. Only Sang-drax understood the danger. He shouted a warning, but it wasn't heeded.

One serpent, seeing puny creatures attacking it, dove straight down upon them, intending to seize them in its jaws and fling the bodies back over the walls.

Kari, flanked by three of her people, stood fast against the horror descending on her. Gripping her sword, she waited until the terrible head was right above her; then, with all her strength, she plunged the sharp blade—its magic flaming blue and red—into the reptile head.

The blade bit deep. Blood spurted. The serpent reared up in agony, yanked the sword from Kari's hands. Blinded by the blood that rained down on her, sickened by the foul, poisonous smell, Kari fell to the ground. The serpent's gigantic body rolled to crush her, but her people dragged her out from beneath it. The serpent's tail lashed out, would have smashed them, but its thrashings grew feeble. The serpent head crashed to the ground, just missing the wall, and lay still.

The Patryns cheered; their enemies cursed. The other serpents, more cautious now that one of their number had been slain, viewed their attackers with respect, making the Patryns' work far more dangerous.

The head of the one-eyed serpent loomed over Haplo.

"This will be our last meeting, Sang-drax!" he called.

"True enough, Patryn. You have outlived your usefulness to me."

"Because I'm no longer afraid of you!" Haplo retorted.

"Ah, but you should be," Sang-drax returned, his snake-head swiveling, trying to see Marit and Hugh, who lurked on his blind side. "As we speak, several of my kind are speeding toward the Final Gate, with orders to seal it shut. You will be trapped here for all eternity!"

"The people of the Nexus will fight them!"

"But they cannot win. You cannot win. How many times have you struck me down only to see me rise again!"

Sang-drax's head dove for Haplo, but the move was only a feint. The serpent's tail whipped around, struck Haplo from behind. The Patryn's body magic protected him, or the blow would have broken his spine. The tail knocked him flat, stunned him. His sword flew from his hand.

The dog stood protectively over its fallen master, teeth bared, hackles raised.

The serpent ignored Haplo, however. He was down and no longer a threat. The red eye found Marit. Sang-drax's jaws opened wide, swooped in for the kill. Marit stood waiting—apparently frozen with terror—making no move to defend herself. The jaws were snapping shut when a heavy weight struck the serpent on its blind side.

Hugh the Hand had thrown himself bodily onto the serpent's head. Using a rune-covered Patryn dagger, he tried to stab into the gray scales. But the dagger broke. The Hand hung on tenaciously, fingers clutching the empty eye socket. He had hoped that the Cursed Blade might come to life, attack this foe for him, but perhaps the serpents were controlling the knife now, as they seemed to have done in the past. Hugh could do nothing but hang on, at least hamper the serpent's attack, give Marit and Haplo time to kill it.

Sang-drax flailed about, shaking his head, trying to break the human's grip. Hugh the Hand was strong and hung on with grim determination. Yellow lightning crackled along the serpent's gray skin. The assassin bellowed in pain. An electrical surge jolted through his body, caused him to loosen his hold in agony.

He slid to the ground, but he'd bought Marit time enough to move in close. She drove her sword into Sang-drax's head. The blade bit into the serpent's jaw and up into the snout, causing pain, but not killing.

Marit tried to free her sword, but Sang-drax flung his head up, jerked it from her blood-slick grasp.

Haplo was on his feet, his sword in hand. But he was staggering, hurt and confused. Marit ran to grab his sword. His hand closed over hers.

"Behind me!" he whispered urgently.

Marit understood his plan. She crowded behind him, taking care to keep clear of his sword arm, which now dangled limply at his side. The dog danced in front, jumping into the air, snapping and taunting the serpent with shrill yelps and barks.

In hideous pain, seeing his foe weak and wounded, Sang-drax plunged down for the kill. Too late he saw the shining blade lifted to meet him, saw the magic flare in a radiance that blinded his one good eye. He could not stop his downward momentum, but he could at least destroy the man who was about to destroy him.

Marit stood up. The serpent's plunging head had narrowly missed her. She had been ready to join in the attack, but at the last moment Haplo had shoved her backward. The serpent's head smashed down, impaled itself on Haplo's blade. Gripping his sword with both hands, Haplo plunged the sword deep into Sang-drax, then both he and his dog disappeared without a cry beneath the serpent's flailing head.

Around her other battles were raging. One of the serpents had slain the Patryns who attacked it and was now assisting its fellow. Kari had gone to the aid of her people, fighting for their lives. Marit spared them only a glance. She could see Haplo, covered with blood—his own and the serpent's. He was not moving.

She ran to him, tried to lift the heavy head of the dead serpent off him. Hugh the Hand, sitting up, shaking his head muzzily, called out a warning.

Marit turned. A wolfen was closing in for the kill. It leapt on her, knocked her down, claws mauling her, fangs tearing at her throat.

And then suddenly it was off her. Opening her eyes, Marit had the wild impression that the wolfen was flying away backward, when she realized it was being carried upward in the claws of a creature more beautiful and wonderful than anything she had ever seen in her life.

A dragon, green-scaled and golden-winged, with a burnished crest that shone like a sun, flew down into the gray of the smoke-filled sky. It caught hold of the wolfen, flung the beast to its death against the sharp rocks of a cliff face. Then the dragon swooped low and snagged the dead serpent, dragged it away from Haplo.

The other serpents, alarmed by the sight of this new foe, left off their battle against the Patryns, turned to fight the dragon.

Marit lifted Haplo in her arms. He was alive; the sigla on his skin gleamed a faint blue. But blood soaked his shirt, over the heart-rune. His breathing was labored and shallow. The dog—amazingly on its feet and uninjured after being buried by the serpent—trotted over to give its master an anxious lick on the cheek.

Haplo opened his eyes, saw Marit. Then he saw—above her—the glistening green and flashing gold wings of the wondrous dragon,

"Well, well," he whispered, smiling. "Alfred."

"Alfred!" Marit gasped in astonishment, stared upward.

But a shadow blocked her sight. A figure loomed over her. She couldn't tell what or who it was at first, could see nothing more than a black shape against the bright radiance cast by the dragon. Haplo's breath caught in his throat; he struggled vainly to sit up.

And then a voice spoke and then Marit knew.

"So that is your friend Alfred," said Xar, Lord of the Nexus, peering upward. "Truly—a very powerful Sartan."

The lord's gaze shifted back down to Marit, to Haplo. "A good thing for me he is otherwise occupied."

## CHAPTER 47

ABRI

### THE LABYRINTH

XAR FOUND THE CITY OF ABRI BY THE BEACON FIRE. BURNING ON the top of the mountain, above the smoke and mists, above the shimmer of the magic protecting the city, the beacon fire shone bright, and Xar made directly for it.

He had taken his ship into the ruins of the Vortex; there are advantages to traveling in a ship with Sartan runes, although it had been an uncomfortable journey for the Patryn. Leaving Pryan, he had not had time to reconstruct the sigla on the outside of the ship. He had been cautious about altering those on the inside. He knew he might very well need all his strength for whatever he faced in the Labyrinth.

Although not easily impressed, Xar had been appalled by the numbers of enemy forces attacking the city. Arriving at the outset of the battle, he had watched from a safe location, high in the mountains, near the beacon fire and its flame. Xar warmed himself by the fire as he watched the armies of chaos attack his people.

He was not surprised to see the dragon-snakes. He had admitted to himself that Sang-drax would betray him.

The Seventh Gate. It all had to do with the Seventh Gate.

"You know that if I find it, I will control you," he told the dragon-snakes whose gray, slime-covered bodies were launching their assault on the city walls. "The day Kleitus told me of the Seventh Gate—that was the day when you began to fear me. That was when you became my enemy."

It didn't matter to Xar that Haplo had warned him of the dragon-snakes' treachery all along. Nothing mattered for Xar now except the Seventh Gate. It loomed large in his vision, blotting out everything else.

His task now was to find Haplo among the thousands of Patryns battling the foe. Xar was not unduly worried. Knowing men and women as he did, he was fairly certain that wherever he found Marit—and that would be easy, since they were joined—he would find Haplo. Xar's only concern was that the meddlesome Sartan, Alfred, might interfere.

The battle was taking a long time. The Patryns defended themselves well; Xar felt a swelling of pride in his heart. His people. And once he found the Seventh Gate, he would raise them to glory. But he was fast losing patience. Time wasted here was time that could be used to find that very gate. He placed his hand on the sigil, was about to summon Marit, about to go down and search for Haplo himself, when he saw the city gate open, saw the small band of heroes come forth to drive away the dragon-snakes.

And of course—Xar knew without bothering to look—Haplo would be among them. His last battle with Sang-drax had ended in a draw; each had given and taken wounds that would not heal. Haplo would not miss this opportunity to finish off his enemy, despite the odds against him.

"Of course you won't," Xar said, observing the duel with interest and approval. "You are my son."

The lord waited until the battle was ended and Sang-drax destroyed; and then Xar called on the rune-magic to lift him up and carry him down to the bloody ground below.

Marit's first reaction, on seeing Xar, was one of vast relief. Here was the strong father who would—once again—defend, protect, and succor his children.

"My Lord, you have come to aid us!"

Haplo tried to sit up, but he was extremely weak and in pain. Blood soaked his shirt front, had even stained the leather vest he wore over it. He felt the jagged edges of broken bones grind together; any movement at all was sheer agony.

Marit helped him, lending him her strength, her support. She looked up to find Xar's eyes dark on her, but she was too battle-dazed, too elated by his presence to notice the shadow he cast over them.

"My Lord." Haplo's voice was weak. Xar had to kneel beside him to hear him. "We can hold our own here. The gravest threat, the greatest danger is at the Final Gate. The dragon-snakes plan to seal it shut. We..." He choked, coughed.

"We will be trapped in this prison house, Lord," Marit continued urgently. "Its evil will grow; the dragon-snakes will see to that. The Labyrinth will become a death chamber, without hope, for there will be no way to escape."

"You are the only one of us who can reach the Final Gate in time, Lord," Haplo said, every word costing him obvious pain. "You are the only one who can stop them."

He sank back into Marit's arms. Her face was near his, her anxiety and concern for him obvious. The three paid no heed to the battle raging around them; Xar's magic enclosed them in a cocoon of safety and silence, protected them from death and the turmoil of war.

Xar's gaze turned, his eyes searched far, far into the distance, until he could see the Final Gate from where they stood—which, with his magical power, was within the realm of possibility. His face grew drawn and grave, the brows came together, the eyes narrowed in anger. He was seeing, Marit guessed, the terrible battle being waged, the people of the Nexus leaving their peaceful homes to defend the only means of escape for their brethren caught inside.

Was the battle already taking place? Or was Xar seeing the future?

His gaze came back, and the eyes were hard and cold and calculating. "The Final Gate will fall. But I will open it again. When I have found the Seventh Gate, then I will take my revenge."

"Lord Xar, what do you mean?" Marit stared at him, not understanding. "Lord, do not worry about us. We will manage here. You must save our people."

"I intend to do so, Wife," Xar said curtly.

Marit flinched.

Haplo heard the word, felt the quiver run through the arms whose touch was so comforting, so welcome. He opened his eyes, looked up at her. Her face was streaked with blood—his own, her own, the dragon-snake's. Her hair was disheveled, and now he could see, on her forehead, the mark, the entwined sigla—hers and Xar's.

"Leave him to me, Wife," Xar commanded.

Marit shook her head, crouched over Haplo protectively. Xar reached down, laid his hand on her shoulder. She cried out and slumped to the ground, her body limp, its rune-magic disrupted.

Xar turned to Haplo. "Don't fight me, my son. Let go. Let go of the pain and the despair, the heartache of this life."

The Lord of the Nexus slid his arms beneath Haplo's broken body. Haplo made a feeble attempt to free himself. The dog dashed up, barked at Xar frantically.

"I know I cannot hurt the animal," Xar said coldly. "But I can hurt her."

Marit, curled up, helpless, moaned and shook her head. The sigil on her forehead blazed like fire.

"Dog, stop," Haplo whispered through ashen lips.

The dog, whining, not understanding but trained to obey, fell back. Xar lifted Haplo in his arms as easily and tenderly as if he were a small injured child.

"Rise, Wife," he said to Marit. "When I am gone, you will need to defend yourself."

The magic that held her paralyzed released her. Weak, Marit stood up. She took a step nearer Xar, nearer Haplo.

"Where are you taking him, Lord?" she asked, hope fighting a final struggle in her heart. "To the Nexus? The Final Gate?"

"No, Wife." Xar's voice was cold. "I return to Abarrach." He looked with satisfaction on Haplo. "To the necromancy."

"How can you let this evil happen to your people, Lord?" she cried in anger.

Xar's eyes flared. "They have suffered all their lives. What is one more day or two or three? When I come back in triumph, when the Seventh Gate is open, their suffering will end!"

It will be too late! The words were on her lips, but she looked into Xar's eyes and dared not say them. Catching hold of Haplo's hand, she pressed it against her own heart-rune. "I love you," she said to him.

His eyes opened. "Find Alfred!" He spoke without a voice, his lips moving, stained with his own blood. "Alfred can... stop them..."

"Yes, find the Sartan," Xar sneered. "I am certain he will be more than happy to defend the prison his kind built."

The lord spoke the runes; a sigil formed in the air. The flaring rune struck Marit, slashed across her forehead.

The pain seared through her as if he'd cut her with a knife. Blood flowed down over her eyes, blinding her. Gasping, dizzy with the agony and the shock, she fell to her knees.

"Xar! My Lord!" she cried wildly, wiping the blood from her eyes.

Xar ignored her. Bearing Haplo in his arms, the lord walked calmly across the field of battle. A shield of magic surrounded them, protected them.

Trotting along behind, unnoticed and forlorn, was the dog.

Marit sprang to her feet with some desperate notion of stopping them, attacking Xar from behind, rescuing Haplo, but at that moment a whirlwind of sigla spun about them—all three of them, including the dog—and all three were gone.

## CHAPTER 48

ABRI

### THE LABYRINTH

THE BATTLE CAME TO AN END WITH THE EVENING. THE DRAGON-SNAKES were vanquished, destroyed; they no longer threatened to breach the walls. The wondrous green dragon—the likes of which no one had ever before seen in the Labyrinth—joined with the Patryns to defeat the serpents. The walls held, their magic swiftly reinforced. The gate stood fast. Hugh the Hand was the last one through before it shut. He bore Kari in his arms. He had found her lying wounded beneath a score of dead chaodyn.

He carried her inside the gate, gave her into the arms of her people.

"Where are Haplo and Marit?" the Hand demanded.

Vasu, directing the renewing of the gate's magic, looked at him in sudden consternation. "I thought they were with you."

"They haven't come in here?"

"No, they haven't. And I've been here the entire time."

"Open the gate again," Hugh ordered. "They must still be out there."

"Open it!" Vasu commanded his people. "I will come with you."

Hugh the Hand, glancing at the pudgy headman, was about to protest, but then remembered that he could not kill.

The gate swung open; the two men ran out into a host of the enemy. But with their leaders dead, the lust for battle seemed to have drained from the foe. Many were beating a retreat across the river, and these were creating confusion among the ranks.

"There!" Hugh the Hand pointed.

Hurt and bewildered, Marit was wandering alone near the base of the wall. A pack of wolfen, drawn by the scent of blood, were tracking her.

Vasu began to sing in a deep baritone.

Hugh the Hand decided the man had gone mad. This was no time for an aria! But suddenly an enormous bush, with long, spearing thorns, thrust up out of the ground, surrounded the wolfen. Thorns caught their thick fur, held them fast. Supple branches wrapped around their paws. The wolfen howled and shrieked, but the more they fought to escape, the more entangled they became.

Marit did not even notice. Vasu continued singing; the thorns grew deeper, denser. Above, Patryns waited until Marit was safe to finish off the wolfen trapped in the bush.

Hugh the Hand ran to her, caught hold of her. "Where is Haplo?"

She stared at him from eyes almost gummed shut by clotted blood. Either she couldn't see him clearly or she didn't recognize him. "Alfred," she said to him in Patryn. "I must find Alfred."

"Where is Haplo?" Hugh repeated in human, frustrated.

"Alfred." Marit spoke the name over and over.

Hugh saw that he would get nothing from her in her dazed condition. He swept her up in his arms and ran back to Vasu. The headman sheltered them in his magic until they had safely reached the gate.

When night fell, the beacon fire still burned bright. The magic of the sigla on the walls glimmered and flickered, but their light continued to shine. The last of the foe slunk off into the wilderness, leaving their dead behind.

The elders who had spent the day inscribing the weapons with death-dealing runes now spent the night restoring life to those injured and dying.

Marit's head wound was not life-threatening, but the healers could not heal it completely. Whatever weapon had torn her flesh must have been poisoned, they told Hugh the Hand when they showed him the raw and inflamed mark on her skin.

But at least Marit was conscious—far too conscious, as far as the healers were concerned. They had difficulty keeping her in her bed. She kept demanding to see Vasu, and at last they sent for him, since nothing else would calm her.

The headman came—exhausted, grieving. The city of Abri stood, but many had given their lives, including Kari. Including someone Vasu dreaded to name, especially to the woman who watched him draw near her sickbed.

"Alfred," Marit said immediately. "Where is he? None of these fools knows or will tell me. I must find him! He can reach the Final Gate in time to fight the dragon-snakes! He can save our people."

Patryns could not lie to each other, and Vasu was Pa-tryn enough to know that she would see through his deceit, no matter how kindly meant.

"He is a serpent mage. He changed into dragon form—"

"I know all that!" Marit snapped impatiently. "Surely he has changed back by now. Take me to him!"

"He... did not return," Vasu said.

The life drained from Marit's eyes. "What do you mean?"

"He fell from the skies, perhaps mortally wounded. He'd been fighting a legion of dragons..."

"Perhaps!" Marit grabbed the word, clung to it. "You didn't see him die! You don't know if he's dead!"

"Marit, we saw him fall—"

She rose from her bed, shoving aside the restraining hands of the healers. "Show me where."

"You can't go out there," Vasu said sternly. "It's too dangerous. There are roving bands of wolven and tiger-men, furious at their defeat, waiting to catch one of us alone."

"The human assassin. Where is he?"

"Here, Marit." Hugh the Hand stood up. He had been watching by her bedside, unseen, unnoticed. "I'll go with you. I need to find Alfred myself," he added grimly.

"He is our only hope," Marit said. Her eyes glimmered with tears for a moment. "He is Haplo's only hope." She blinked the tears away and reached for her weapons, which the healers had set aside.

Vasu did not ask what she meant. Xar's magic had not blinded the headman's eyes. He had seen the Lord of the Nexus, had witnessed the meeting of the three. He had seen Xar leave with Haplo... and the dog. He had guessed that the Lord of the Nexus was not traveling to the battle of the Final Gate.

"Let her go," he said to the healers.

They stood aside.

Vasu led Marit and Hugh the Hand to the wall. He pointed out to them where he had seen the dragon—flaming green and gold—fall from the skies. He opened the gate of Abri and saw them depart into the darkness.

Then he stood for long, long hours, until the dawn, watching in despair a sullen red glow that lit the horizon in the direction of the Final Gate.

## APPENDIX I

### THE ACCURSED BLADE

#### SPECULATIONS\*

\*Written by Alfred Montbank sometime during his sojourn in the Labyrinth.

OF ALL THE UNFORTUNATE THINGS MY PEOPLE DID JUST BEFORE the Sundering, the development of a weapon such as this cursed knife—now in the possession of Sir Hugh—is one of the most deplorable. Here is evidence that we involved innocent people—humans, elves, dwarves, the very people we were supposed to be protecting—in our battle against the Patryns.

That the blade was intended for use by the mensch is beyond doubt. I have examined it, examined the runes inscribed on it, and I am convinced. It was crafted in haste—that much is obvious from its crude design and manufacture—and therefore, most probably, the blades were turned out in large quantities.

Were Samah and the Council members so terrified of the Patryns that they armed entire legions of mensch with these heinous weapons? I can only suppose that the answer is, sadly, yes. Yet nowhere have I read that any wars involving mensch took place in the final days of pre-Sundering Earth. Such battles as did occur between Patryn and Sartan were generally fought on an individual basis, terrible tourneys of magic which invariably proved fatal to one or both combatants.

But from information about those last days obtained from my dear Orla, I think I can speculate on what happened. Consumed by fear, terrified that the Patryns were forming their own armies (this may or may not have been the case), Samah and the Council decided to prepare a defense, armed vast numbers of mensch with these magical weapons. I doubt they meant to send the mensch to war (For one thing, Samah wouldn't trust them!). Most likely, the mensch armies were to be used as cover, to fight a delaying action, allowing the Sartan time to enter the Seventh Gate and proceed with the Sundering.

Such a battle apparently never took place. Perhaps the mensch revolted (I hope so!), or perhaps even Samah felt some twinges of conscience over forcing others to fight his battles for him. Apparently most of the cursed weapons were either destroyed in the Sundering or confiscated by the Sartan before establishing the mensch on the new worlds.

How did this one escape? It undoubtedly fell into the hands of an unscrupulous elf who, impressed by the weapon's power, decided to keep it for himself. The blade itself would be a willing ally, eager to assist in its own survival. The elf was trained in the blade's use, but, due to circumstance—perhaps his untimely death—such information was not passed along to future generations. Only the blade was handed down. The elf could have no idea he was passing on such a deadly legacy.

How does the blade work?

The following are my speculations based on Hugh's and Haplo's accounts of the blade in action, and my own study of the sigla inscribed on the weapon. (An interesting point: in enhancing the weapon with runemagic, we Sartan did exactly what we had always claimed we despised the Patryns for doing, giving life to that which is not meant to have it!)

1. The first action the blade takes is to block the enemy's ability to sense danger. Thus Haplo had no warning that Hugh the Hand was stalking him in the Factree, never knew that the assassin was waiting in ambush on the ship.
2. The blade's second action reduces an enemy's possibilities of retaliation. The blade cannot eliminate all possibilities; that would take far greater power than the blade possesses. But it can and does limit the choice of options to those it can easily handle.
3. The blade's third action analyzes both the enemy's strength and weakness and reacts accordingly. Sometimes this reaction is a very simple one for the blade to perform, as in the unfortunate "fight" between the two elf brothers. The blade, facing a dueling dagger, had only to turn itself into a sword to kill its foe. When Hugh the Hand first encountered Haplo, the blade changed itself to an ax against Haplo's knife.

Notice, however, that when the blade encounters additional opponents, its strength increases. The blade became a bat when attacking both Marit and Haplo. When this attack failed, the blade turned into a tytan.

Also of interest is the fact that the blade appears to draw on the memories and thoughts of the victims. Haplo says that he does not recall thinking specifically of tytans during the brief stop their ship made in Pryan (admittedly, he did have a great deal on his mind!), but it seems logical to me that he must have at least had the giants he encountered on that world in his subconscious.

And that is all I have been able to determine about the blade so far. As to any further speculations, I would have to see the blade in action (something I'd rather not do!) to be able to provide additional information on it.

I take this moment to add some information that I have acquired on the Cursed Blade.\* The first bit of information is good: the blade can be controlled by the user. All one has to do is to say the word "stop" in Sartan.

\*This last is written in an agitated style, from which we must conclude that Alfred probably recorded this information just before the Siege of Abri.

The second piece of information is very bad. Apparently the blade can also be controlled by outside forces! I have evidence that the dragon-snakes are able to wield some sort of influence over it.

The weapon was created out of fear, designed to kill, and so it would naturally be drawn to the dragon-snakes.

They, in turn, appear to be able to control the blade's magic. They cannot, it seems, cause the blade to turn against its user. But the snakes can direct the blade's actions and reactions to suit their own purposes. Haplo thinks now that it was the Cursed Blade that brought the tiger-men down on us. And the blade apparently issued some sort of call to the dragon-snakes, alerting them to its presence in Abri.

There must be some way to destroy this weapon. Unfortunately, I can't think of any at the moment, but then my mind is rather flurried. Perhaps if I had time to reflect and study the matter further...

(Editor's note: Here the text ends.)

Starchamber of the Pryan Citadels

## APPENDIX II

### THE STAR CHAMBER OF PRYAN

Being excerpts from The Book of Stars as written by Paithan, Lord Master of Drugar Citadel, who has edited and amended the text.\* May the reader enjoy the enlightenment of the stars.

\*I am indebted to the tytans and to my sister, Aleatha, for the translation of Sartan runes.

#### EYE OF SUNS\*

\*A phrase, peculiar to the Sartan, which means "a perspective from on high" or, in this case, an overview.

Pryan is a world of power. It keeps the other worlds beyond our own operating. Its heartbeat brings the lifeblood of power, heat, and light to these Sundered Realms. Without the power of the stars that shine above our home and the strength of our light, worlds beyond our understanding only sleep, half dead from lack of nourishment.

Pryan's stationary suns keep all of their life-giving power within the confines of the world's vast interior. The suns' light brings life to the world's inhabitants. Yet this important function is but a portion of its true purpose of creation.

The light of Pryan's suns—which originates from four separate celestial bodies rather than the single sun perceived by us from our distant ground—is transferred either directly or indirectly into the rock that is the foundation of the world. I myself have seen this very rock and affirm that it does in fact exist.\* This rock foundation then collects the energy generated by the suns and forests above it, and stores it in ever increasing amounts deep within its stone. The energy is then collected by the citadel, whose roots sink deep into the foundations of Pryan. These roots radiate energy from the citadel and store it in the well—known as the Well of the World. Only the cap of the Worldgem holds this energy in place.\*

\*Paithan adds this for those who live on the high surface of Pryan. There the ground consists of the tops of immense trees whose roots remain unknown to those who are born, live, and die in their boughs.

\*"Well of the World" and "Worldgem," in addition to many other fanciful names in the text, are undoubtedly Paithan's constructions. While they do reflect his romantic nature, they are not necessarily instructive in terms of the function of the machine itself. The term "Worldgem," however, may be a mensch rendering of the Sartan Eort-Batu'h rune. Eort signifies life and power—a cross structure in magic that bridged Fire and Water magicks. Batu'h would refer to the concept of "foundation" rather than a crystalline stone. If this is the case, then this "Worldgem" is the focal point of a life or power wave—probably the emissions from the "well."

#### GENERAL STRUCTURE AND MOTION

The Star Chamber's lower area houses Seven Thrones, which surround and face the Well of the World. These thrones are immense, so that tytans may sit comfortably in them. The presence of the tytans is essential for the operation of the machine. The throne chamber is separated from the chamber above by a framework and the mechanism for the Star Machine.

This second chamber is enclosed by a huge dome formed of several curved panels to resemble the petals of a lotus blossom. Each panel is made up of colored glass mounted in a latticework of metal. The glass is inscribed with Sartan runes which, according to the tytans, channel the light into the Star Machine. When the machine is operating, the panels open fully to shine forth its power.

The Star Machine itself has two major parts: the lower clockworks called the Stellar Clock and the upper known as the Conduit Clock. Both sections of the mechanism are suspended by mobile mountings over the Seven Thrones. The Worldgem is held at the end of the Liftarm, suspended from the Stellar Clock down into the Well of the World, which is located in the floor.

The Worldgem seals the Well of the World. A gigantic arching metal arm ending in a metal hand grips the gem and holds it in place while the machine is dormant. This extends downward from a retraction mechanism that pulls the Worldgem out of the well when conditions merit.\* The arm itself is retracted into a Spatial Fold—a marvelous magic sphere.

\*I am still not sure just what these "conditions" might be.

The Stellar Clock is cradled inside two opposing mounted rings which are in turn set on a massive swivel mount. The retracted Worldgem and the two rings surrounding it can be positioned in any configuration.

The major mounting for the Stellar Clock is called the Alignment Rotation Ring.\* This is a rotating mount which can turn the entire lower clockwork around the axis of the well. An Alignment Clock, which is driven by the Primary Orientation Clock and sequenced independently by Babbage Difference Engines,\* turns the Alignment Rotation Ring and, with it, the Stellar Clock.

\*This is a direct translation of the Sartan rune-structure. I'm not sure what it means. I feel like a child examining with wonder the workings of my father's old watch and trying to understand how it operates.

\*This again is a direct translation from the runes.

Inside the Alignment Rotation Ring is mounted the Diffusion Ring. An amazing number of gears, rods, and cams are positioned along this arc. They swivel and otherwise adjust the orientation of convex mirrors, prisms, and gems which all find their focal point on the Stellar Clock. As with the Alignment Rotation Ring, the Diffusion Ring can be tilted by the Diffusion Clock Drive, which appears to operate on the same principles as the Alignment Clock.

A third ring is mounted inside the Diffusion Ring and is called the Combinant Ring. This ring, too, is fitted with a vast number of gears, screws, and clockworks which support concave mirrors, prisms, and gems. It, too, focuses on the Stellar Clock. Its name implies the combining of force and would seem to act counter to the Diffusion Ring around it. Perhaps these two—the Diffusion Ring and the Combinant Ring—act to cancel each other out and keep forces balanced?\*

\*On the other hand, it could be that the Diffusion Ring separates the power drawn up from the roots of the world into more basic wave forms and narrower spectra of energy, which could then be recombined selectively through the Combinant Ring

The Upper Alignment Ring is the foundation mount for the Conduit Clock. Like the Alignment Rotation Ring, the Upper Alignment Ring also rotates around the axis of the Well of the World being driven by the Primary Orientation Clock.\* It is this clockwork which seems to provide the power for the rest of the device as well.

\*I find no drive or power mechanism for this clockwork which normally would have a weight-and-pendulum arrangement. I surmise that within the mechanism itself is some means of gaining energy from the stream of force coming from the Well of the World. In fact, I suspect that this is the purpose of the Diffusion Field Collector shown in the drawing.

The Primary Orientation Clock is mounted on a great curving frame that can be rotated by the Upper Orientation Ring. Near the top of this frame is set the Secondary Orientation Clock, which traverses the upper curve of the frame via a screw device.

This Primary Orientation Clock and Secondary Orientation Clock then positions the fork and rings of the Conduit Clock into alignment with spindles mounted below it.\* These Conduit Spindles apparently interact with the power generated in the lower mechanism in order to be transferred to the other Realms.

\*According to the tytans, these conduits link the Sundered Realms to each other.

I have not been present when the machine is in full motion, for the light in the room is so bright as to blind the viewer. Only the tytans can withstand that light, and they cannot give sufficient description.

Still, I have witnessed the earlier stages of the process. Energy build-up in the Well triggers the mechanism into action. The energy is then carried up the Liftarm and sets the machine in motion. This is the beginning of the cycle.

As the machine begins to move, the Alignment Rotation Drive turns the Alignment Rotation Ring, the Diffusion Ring, and the Combinant Ring. The mirrors of both lower rings and the Stellar Clock begin to rotate into position. Gems and prisms flash as they orient themselves. The Liftarm begins to raise the Worldgem out of the Well and into the Stellar Clock. A powerful, throbbing light issues from the Well of the World as the gem rises higher into the machine. The Conduit Clock also begins to move, shifting the position of its rings and spindles. I have noticed that this orientation differs each time the motion begins and is never exactly repeated.

During this process, the lotus-blossom sections of the dome start to open. It is at this point that the Worldgem is set into the center of the Stellar Clock and the entire chamber is filled with such brilliant light that further observation is impossible. It is this light that we used to believe were the "stars."

The tytans now operate the Star Chamber. Its powerful light radiates from the tallest spire of our city. Darkness, too, still comes to our city regularly in each cycle, yet even through the darkness this light shines. Across the heavens, we view the constant light of a thousand stars. The citadel was built by those who are now gone. We see our purpose here as a sacred trust to add our light to those that shine in the sky. Someday others in far distant worlds may see that light and find their way home.

Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman  
Deathgate Cycle 7  
THE SEVENTH GATE

## CHAPTER 1

### ABRI THE LABYRINTH

VASU STOOD ON THE WALL ABOVE THE GATES OF THE CITY OF Abri, stood silent and thoughtful as the gates boomed shut beneath his feet. It was dawn, which meant, in the Labyrinth, nothing more than a graying of night's black. But this dawn was different than most. It was more glorious than most . . . and more terrifying. It was brightened by hope, darkened by fear.

It was a dawn which saw the city of Abri, in the very center of the Labyrinth, still standing, victorious, after a terrible battle with its most implacable enemies.

It was a dawn smudged with the smoke of funeral pyres; a dawn in which the living could draw a tremulous breath and dare to hope life might be better.

It was a dawn lit by a lurid red glow on the far distant horizon, a red glow that was brightening, strengthening. Those Patryns who guarded the city walls turned their eyes to that strange and unnatural glow, shook their heads, spoke of it in low and ominous tones.

"It bodes nothing good," they said grimly.

Who could blame them for their dark outlook? Not Vasu. Certainly not Vasu, who knew what was transpiring. He would have to tell them soon, destroy the joy of this dawning.

"That glow is the fire of battle," he would have to say to his people. "A battle raging for control of the Final Gate. The dragon-snakes who attacked us were not defeated, as you thought. Yes, we killed four of them. But for every four that die, eight are born. Now they are attacking the Final Gate, seeking to shut it, seeking to trap us all in this dread prison.

"Our brothers, those who live in the Nexus and those near the Final Gate, are fighting this evil—we have reason to believe. But they are few in number and the evil is vast and powerful.

"We are too far away to come to their aid. Too far. By the time we reached them—if we ever did reach them, alive—it would be too late. It may already be too late.

"And when the Final Gate is shut, the evil in the Labyrinth will grow strong. Our fear and our hatred will grow stronger to match and the evil will feed off that fear and that hatred and grow stronger still."

It is hopeless, Vasu told himself, and so he must tell the people. Logic, reason said to him it was hopeless. Yet why, standing on the wall, staring at that red glow in the sky, did he feel hopeful?

It made no sense. He sighed and shook his head.

A hand touched his arm.

"Look, Headman. They have made it safely to the river."

One of the Patryns, standing beside Vasu, had obviously mistaken his sigh, thought it indicated fear for the two who had left the city in the dark hour before the dawn. They were embarking on a dangerous and probably futile search for the green and golden dragon who had fought for them in the skies above Abri. The

green and golden dragon was the Serpent Mage, who was also the bumbling Sartan with the mensch name, Alfred.

Certainly Vasu was afraid for them, but he was also hopeful for them. That same illogical, irrational hope.

Vasu was not a man of action. He was a man of thought, of imagination. He had only to look at his soft and pudgy Sartan body, tattooed with Patryn runes, to know that. He must give thought to what his people should do next. He should make plans, he should decide how they must prepare for the inevitable. He should tell them the truth, give his speech of despair.

But he didn't do any of that. He stood on the walls, watching the mensch known as Hugh the Hand and the Patryn woman Marit.

He told himself he would never see them again. They were venturing out into the Labyrinth, dangerous at any time but doubly dangerous now that their defeated enemies skulked about in anger and waited for revenge. The two were going on a foolhardy and hopeless mission. He would never see them again, nor Alfred, the Serpent Mage, the green and golden dragon, for whom they searched.

Vasu stood on the wall and waited ~~hopefully~~ for their return.

The River of Anger, which flowed beneath the city walls of Abri, was frozen. Its water had been frozen by their enemies, by spells cast on it. The hideous dragon-snakes had turned the river to ice in order that their troops could cross more easily.

Clambering down the rock-strewn sides of the river-bank, Marit smiled grimly. The tactics of her enemy would serve her.

There was just one small problem.

"You say this was done by magic?" Hugh the Hand, sliding down the bank behind her, skidded to a halt beside the black ice floe. He jabbed at it with the toe of his boot. "How long will the spell last?"

That was the problem.

"I don't know," Marit was forced to admit.

"Yeah." Hugh grunted. "I thought as much. It might end when we're standing in the middle."

"It might." Marit shrugged. If that happened, they would be lost. The rushing black water would suck them down, chill their blood, grind their bodies against the sharp rocks, fill their lungs with the black and now blood-tinged water.

"There's no other way?" Hugh the Hand was looking at her, at the blue sigla tattooed on her body.

He meant, of course, her magic.

"I might be able to get myself across," she told him. Then again, she might not. She was weakened in body from yesterday's battle, weakened in her spirit from yesterday's confrontation with Lord Xar. "But I'd never be able to manage you."

She set foot on the ice, felt its cold strike through to the very marrow of her bones. Clamping her teeth together to keep them from chattering, she stared at the far shore and said, "Only a short run. It won't take us long."

Hugh the Hand said nothing. He was staring ~~not~~ at the shore, but at the ice.

And then Marit remembered. This man, a professional assassin, afraid of nothing in his world, had come across something in another world he did fear—water.

"What are you scared of?" Marit jeered, hoping to bolster his courage by shaming him. "You can't die."

"I can die," he corrected her. "I just don't stay dead. And, lady, I don't mind telling you, this sort of dying doesn't appeal to me."

"It doesn't appeal to me either," she said snappishly back at him, but she noticed she wasn't going anywhere, had hurriedly snatched her foot back off the ice.

She drew in a deep breath. "You can follow or not, as you please."

"I'm of little use to you anyway," he said bitterly, hands clenching and unclenching. "I can't protect you, defend you. I can't even protect or defend myself."

He couldn't be killed. He couldn't kill. Every arrow he fired missed its mark, every blow he aimed fell short, every slash of his sword went wide.

"I can defend myself," Marit answered. "I can defend you, too, for that matter. I need you because you know Alfred better than I do."

"No, I don't," Hugh returned. "I don't think anyone knew Alfred. Not even Alfred knew Alfred. Haplo did, maybe, but that's not much help to us now."

Marit said nothing, bit her lip.

"But you're right to remind me, lady," Hugh the Hand continued. "If I don't find Alfred, this curse on me will never end. Come on. Let's get it over with."

He set foot on the ice, began to walk across it. His swift and impetuous move took Marit by surprise. She was hurrying after him before she quite knew what she was doing.

The ice was slippery and treacherous. The bone-numbing cold shot through her; she began shivering uncontrollably. She and Hugh clung to each other for support, his arm saving her from more than one sliding fall, her arm steadying him.

Halfway across, an eardrum-shattering crack split the ice, almost beneath their feet. A fur-covered clawed hand and arm shot up from the gurgling water, tried to grab hold of Marit. She grappled for the hilt of her sword.

Hugh the Hand stopped her.

"It's only a corpse," he said.

Marit, looking more closely, saw he was right. The arm was flaccid, sucked down by the current almost immediately.

"The spell's ending," she said, irritated at herself. "We have to hurry."

She continued across. But a thin layer of water was now seeping over the ice, making it even more slippery. Her feet slid out from underneath her. She grabbed at Hugh, but he, too, had lost his footing. They both fell. Landing on her hands and knees, she stared into the horribly grinning mouth and bulging eyes of a dead wolfen.

The black ice split right between her hands. The wolfen popped out, lunged straight at her. Involuntarily, Marit shrank backward. Hugh the Hand caught hold of her.

"The ice is breaking apart," he yelled. "Hurry!"

They were at least two body lengths from the shoreline.

Marit scrambled toward the shore, crawling since she could not stand. Her arms and legs ached with the cold; the pain was intense. Hugh the Hand slithered along beside her. His face was livid, his jaw clenched so tight it resembled the ice. His eyes were wide and staring. For him—born and raised on a waterless world—drowning was the worst possible death imaginable. Terror had very nearly robbed him of his senses.

They were close to the bank, close to safety.

The Labyrinth was intelligent evil, cunning malevolence. It permitted you to hope, let you imagine that you could make it to safety.

Marit's numb hand clutched at a large rock, one of several lining the riverbank. She struggled to grip it with unfeeling fingers, pull herself up.

The ice gave way beneath her. She plunged to her waist in frothing black water. Her hand slid off the rock. The current was carrying her down . . .

A terrific boost from strong arms propelled Marit up and onto the bank. She landed hard, the breath knocked from her body. She lay, gasping, until a gurgle and a wild yell caused her to turn around.

Standing precariously on an ice floe, Hugh clung with one hand to the trunk of a scrub tree growing out of the bank. He had thrown her to safety, then managed to grab hold of the tree.

But the rushing water was tearing the ice floe out from under him. The current was strong. His tenuous hold on the tree was slipping.

Marit flung herself bodily on Hugh just as he lost his grasp. Her numb fingers clutching at the back of his leather vest, she fought to pull him from the river. She was on her knees; the water was rising. If she failed, they would both go under. Desperately she held on to his vest, pulled it up nearly over his head. Digging her knees into the mud, she dragged the man's heavy body backward. Hugh was strong; he gave her what help he could. He kicked with his feet, sought purchase with his flailing legs, and, finally, managed to squirm his way onto the bank.

He lay still, gasping and shivering with cold and terror. Hearing a rumbling sound, Marit looked upriver. A wall of black water tinged with red foam, pushing huge chunks of ice in its path, thundered downstream.

"Hugh!" she cried.

He raised his head, saw the rushing floodwaters. He staggered to his feet, began scrambling up the bank. Marit was past helping him; she could barely make it herself. She collapsed onto firm, level ground; was dimly aware of Hugh the Hand falling somewhere near her.

The river roared in rage at losing its prey; or perhaps that was only her imagination. She stilled her rapid breathing, calmed the wild beating of her heart. Letting the rune-magic warm her, she banished the terrible cold.

But she couldn't lie here long. The enemy—chaodyn, wolfen, tiger-men—must be hiding in the woods, perhaps watching them even now. She glanced at the sigla tattooed on her skin; the glow of the runes would warn her of approaching danger. Her skin was slightly blue, but that was with cold. The sigla were dark.

This should have been reassuring, but it wasn't. It was illogical. Certainly some of those who had attacked the city with such fury yesterday must still be lurking outside the city walls, waiting for a chance to pick off a scouting party.

But the runes did not glimmer, except perhaps very, very faintly. If any of the enemy were about, they were far away and not interested. Marit couldn't understand it and she didn't like it. This uncanny absence of the foe frightened her more than the sight of a pack of wolves.

Hope. When the Labyrinth offers you hope, it means that it is just about to snatch that hope away.

She pushed herself to a crouching position, alert and wary. Hugh the Hand lay huddled on the ground. He was shivering uncontrollably, his body racked by chills. His lips were blue, his teeth chattering so violently he'd bitten his tongue. Blood dribbled from his mouth.

Marit didn't know much about *mensch*. Could he die of the cold? Perhaps not, but he might fall sick, slow her up. Moving about, walking, would warm his blood, but she had to get him on his feet first. She recalled hearing from Haplo that rune-magic would work to heal *mensch*. Crawling over to Hugh, she clasped her hands over his wrists, let the magic flow from her body to his.

His shaking ceased. Slowly, a tinge of color returned to his pallid face. At length, he sighed, fell back on the ground, closed his eyes, letting the blissful warmth spread through his body.

"Don't fall asleep!" Marit warned.

Touching his tender tongue to his teeth, he groaned, grunted. "Back on Arianus, I used to dream that when I was a wealthy man, I'd wallow in water. Have a big barrel of it outside my house and I'd jump in it, splash it over my head. Now—~~he~~ grimaced—~~may~~ the ancestors take me if I so much as drink a sip of the cursed stuff!"

Marit stood up. "We can't stay here, out in the open like this. If you're feeling up to it, we have to move."

Hugh was on his feet immediately. "Why? What is it?"

He looked at the runes on her hands and arms; he'd been around Haplo long enough to know the signs. Seeing the sigla dark, he glanced up at her questioningly.

"I don't know," she answered, staring hard into the forest. "There's nothing close, seemingly. But . . ." Unable to explain her uneasiness, she shook her head.

"Which way?" Hugh asked.

Marit considered. Vasu had pointed out the site where the green and golden dragon ~~Alfred~~ had last been seen. That was to the gateway side of the city, the side facing the next gate. [1] She and Vasu had judged the distance to be within half a day's walk.

Marit gnawed her lip. She could enter the woods,

1 Directions in the Labyrinth are based on the "gates," those markers which indicate how far one has progressed through the Labyrinth. The first gate is the Vortex. The city of Abri is between the first and second gates. Since the Labyrinth's innumerable gates are scattered around randomly, directions are based on where one is at the time in relation to the next gate.

which would give them shelter but would also make them more vulnerable to their enemies, ~~wh~~ if they were out there ~~were~~ undoubtedly using the woods to conceal their own movements. Or she could keep to the riverbank, keep in view of the city. For a short distance, any foe who attacked her would be in range of the magical weapons held by the guards on the city walls.

Marit decided to stay near the river, at least until the city could offer no more protection. Perhaps by then she would have picked up a trail that would lead her to Alfred.

What that trail might be, she didn't like to think.

She and Hugh moved cautiously along the river's shoreline. The black water churned and fumed in its banks, brooding over the indignities it had suffered. The two took care to keep clear of the slippery bank on one side and avoid the forest shadows on the other.

The woods were silent, strangely silent. It was as if every living being had gone away . . .

Marit halted, sick with realization, understanding.

"That's why no one's around," she said aloud.

"What? Why? What are you talking about?" Hugh the Hand demanded, alarmed by her sudden stop.

Marit pointed to the ominous red glow in the sky. "They've all gone to the Final Gate. To join the fight against my people."

"Good riddance, then," said Hugh the Hand.

Marit shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Hugh continued. "So they've left. Vasu said the Final Gate was a long way from here. Not even those tiger-men could reach it anytime soon."

"You don't understand," Marit replied, overwhelmed by despair. "The Labyrinth could transport them there. It could move them in the blink of an eye, if it wanted. All our enemies, all the evil creatures of the Labyrinth . . . joined together, fighting against my people. How can we survive?"

She was ready to give up. Her task seemed futile. Even if she found Alfred alive, what good could he do? He was only one man, after all. A powerful mage, but only one.

Find Alfred! Haplo had told her. But he couldn't know how great the odds were against them. And now Haplo was gone, perhaps dead. And Lord Xar was gone, too.

Her lord, her liege lord. Marit put her hand to her forehead. The sigil he had tattooed on her skin, the sigil that had been a sign of her love and trust, burned with a dull and aching pain. Xar had betrayed her. Worse, it seemed he had betrayed his people.

He was powerful enough to withstand the onslaught of evil beings. His presence would inspire his people, his magic and his cunning give them a chance for victory.

But Xar had turned his back on them . . .

Shaking the wet hair out of her eyes, Marit resolutely put everything out of her mind except the immediate problem. She'd forgotten an important lesson. Never look too far ahead. What you see could be a mirage. Keep your eyes on the trail on the ground.

And there it was. The sign.

Marit cursed herself. She'd been so preoccupied, she had almost missed what she'd been searching for. Kneeling down, she carefully picked up an object, held it out for Hugh the Hand to see.

It was a green, glittering scale. One of several scales—green and gold—lying on the ground.

Surrounding it were large dollops of fresh blood.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LABYRINTH

"ACCORDING TO VASU, THE LAST TIME HE SAW ALFRED—THE dragon Alfred—he was falling from the skies. Wounded, bleeding." Mark turned the green scale over and over in her hand.

"There were lots of dragons fighting," Hugh protested.

"But the Labyrinth dragons are red-scaled. Not green. No, this has to be Alfred."

"Whatever you say, lady. I don't believe it myself. A man changing himself into a dragon!" He snorted.

"The same man who brought you back from the dead," Marit said crisply. "Let's go."

The trail of blood—pitifully easy to follow—led into the forest. Marit found glimmering drops on the grass and splattered on the leaves of the trees. Occasionally she and Hugh were forced to make a detour around some impassable tangle of bramble bushes or thick undergrowth, but they could always pick the trail up easily; too easily. The dragon had lost a lot of blood.

"If the dragon was Alfred, he was flying away from the city," Hugh the Hand observed, crawling over a fallen log. "I wonder why? If he was hurt this badly, you'd think he would have come back to the city for help."

"In the Labyrinth, a mother will often run away from safety to lure the enemy from her child. I think that's what Alfred was doing. That's why he didn't fly toward the city. He was being pursued and so he deliberately led his enemy away from us. Careful. Don't go near that!"

Marit caught hold of Hugh, stopped him from stepping into an innocent-looking tangle of green leaves. "That's a choke vine. It'll tighten around your ankle, cut right through the bone. You won't have a foot left."

"Nice place you've got here, lady," Hugh muttered, falling back. "The damn weed is all over! There's no way around it."

"We'll have to climb." Marit pulled herself up into a tree, began crawling from branch to branch.

Hugh the Hand followed more clumsily and more slowly, his dangling feet barely clearing the choke vine. Its green leaves and tiny white blossoms stirred and rustled beneath him.

Marit pointed grimly to streaks of blood running down the tree trunk. Hugh grunted, said nothing.

Across the vine-patch, Marit slid back down to the ground. She scratched at her skin. The sigla had begun to itch and glow faintly, warning her of danger. Apparently, not all their enemies had rushed to do battle at the Final Gate. She pushed forward with greater urgency, greater caution.

Emerging from a dense thicket, she stepped suddenly and unexpectedly into a cleared space.

"Would you look at this!" Hugh the Hand gave a low whistle.

Marit stared, amazed.

A wide swath of destruction had been cut into the forest. Small trees lay broken on the ground. Their limbs, snapped and twisted, hung from scarred trunks.

The undergrowth had been flattened into the mud. The ground was littered with twigs and leaves. Green and golden scales were scattered around, sparkling like jewels in the gray dawn.

Some enormous green-scaled body had fallen from the sky, crashed down among the trees. Alfred, without doubt.

Yet where was he now?

"Could something have carried—" Marit began.

"Hsst!" Hugh the Hand emphasized his warning with a crushing grip on her wrist, dragged her down into the underbrush.

Marit crouched, held perfectly still. She strained to hear whatever sound had caught the Hand's attention.

The silence of the forest was broken now and again by the fall of a branch, but she heard nothing else. Quiet. Too damn quiet. She looked at Hugh question-ingly.

"Voices!" He leaned over, whispered into her ear. "I swear I heard something that could have been a voice. It stopped talking when you spoke."

Marit nodded. She hadn't been talking all that loudly. Whatever it was must be close, with sharp hearing.

Patience. She counseled herself to keep still, wait for whatever was out there to reveal itself. Hardly breathing, she and Hugh waited and listened.

They heard the voice then. It spoke with a grating sound, horrible to hear, as if jagged edges of broken bones were grinding against each other. Marit shuddered and even Hugh the Hand blanched. His face twisted in revulsion.

"What the—"

"A dragon!" Marit whispered, cold with dread.

That was why Alfred hadn't flown back to the city.

He was being pursued, probably attacked, by the most fearsome creature in the Labyrinth.

The runes on her body glowed. She fought the impulse to turn and flee.

One of the laws of the Labyrinth: never fight a red dragon unless it has you cornered and escape is impossible. Then you fight only to force the dragon to kill you swiftly.

"What's it talking about?" Hugh asked. "Can you understand?"

Marit nodded, sickened.

The dragon was speaking the Patryn language. Marit translated for Hugh's benefit.

"I don't know what you are, man-wyrm," the dragon was saying. "I've never seen anything like you. But I plan to find out. I must have leisure to study you. Take you apart."

"Damn!" Hugh the Hand muttered. "The very sound of the thing makes me want to piss my pants. Is it talking to Alfred, do you think?"

Marit nodded. Her lips compressed to a thin line. She knew what she had to do; she only wanted the courage to do it. Rubbing her burning arm, the sigla flaring red and blue, she ignored their warning and began creeping forward toward the voice, using its rumbling as cover for her own movement through the brush. Hugh the Hand followed her.

They were downwind of the dragon. It shouldn't be able to pick up their scent. Marit only wanted to get the creature in sight, to see if it had truly captured Alfred. If not—and she was hoping desperately it had not—then she could follow common sense and run.

No shame in running from such a powerful foe. Lord Xar was the only Patryn Marit had ever known who had fought a Labyrinth dragon and survived. And he never spoke of the battle; his face would darken whenever it was mentioned.

"The ancestors have mercy!" Hugh the Hand breathed.

Marit squeezed Hugh's hand, cautioned him to keep quiet.

They could see the dragon easily now. Marit's hope was dashed.

Standing propped up against the bole of a shattered tree was a tall and gangling man with a bald head—smeared with blood—dressed in the tattered remnants of what had once been breeches and a velvet frock coat. He had been in dragon form when they saw him during the battle. Certainly by the destruction in the forest—he must have been in dragon form when he crashed headlong into the woods.

He was not in dragon form now. Either he was too weak to sustain the magical transformation or, perhaps, his enemy had used its own magic to reveal the Sartan's true appearance.

Surprisingly, considering that his first reaction to any sort of danger was to faint dead away, Alfred was conscious. He was even managing to face this terrible foe with a certain amount of dignity, though this was rather impaired by the fact that he was nursing a broken arm and his face was gray and drawn with pain.

The dragon towered over its prey. Its head was huge, blunt-nosed and rounded, with rows of razor-sharp teeth protruding from the lower jaw. The head was attached to a neck that seemed too thin to support it. The head swung back and forth—such constant oscillating motion could sometimes hypnotize hapless victims. Two small and cunning eyes, on either side of the head, moved independently of each other. The eyes could rotate in any direction, focus forward or backward as required, allowing the dragon to see everything around it.

Its two front legs were strong and powerful, with claw-like "hands," which could lift and carry objects in flight. Enormous wings sprouted from the shoulders. The hind legs were muscular, used to push the dragon off the ground and into the air.

The tail was the deadliest part of the creature, however. The red dragon's tail curled up and over the body. On the end was a bulbous stinger that injected venom into the victim, venom that could either kill or, in small doses, paralyze.

The tail flicked out near Alfred.

"This may burn a little," the dragon said, "but it will keep you docile during our trip back to my cave."

The tip of the stinger grazed Alfred on the cheek. He screamed; his body jerked. Marit clenched her hands tight, dug the nails into her flesh. Beside her, she could hear Hugh the Hand breathing hard, gulping for air.

"What do we do?" His face was covered with sweat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Marit looked at the dragon. A limp and unresisting Alfred dangled from the creature's front claws. The dragon carried the man carelessly, as a small child might carry a rag doll.

Unfortunately, the wretched Sartan was still conscious, his eyes open and wide with fear. That was the worst part of the dragon's venom. It kept the victim paralyzed but conscious; feeling, knowing everything.

"Nothing," Marit answered quietly.

Hugh the Hand glowered. "But we have to do something! We can't let it fly off—"

Marit put her hand over the man's mouth. He hadn't spoken above a whisper, yet the dragon's huge head was shifting swiftly toward them, its roving eyes searching the forest.

The baleful gaze raked across them, passed on. The dragon continued its search a bit longer; then, losing interest perhaps, it began to move.

It was walking,

Mark's hopes rose.

The dragon was walking, not flying. It had begun to lumber through the forest, carrying Alfred in its claws. And now that the creature had turned toward her. Mark could see that it was injured. Not critically, but enough to keep it grounded. The membrane of one wing was torn, a gaping hole sliced through it.

Score one for Alfred, Marit said silently, then sighed. That wound would only make the dragon all the more furious. It would keep Alfred alive for a long, long time.

And he wouldn't like it much.

She stood unmoving, silent, until the dragon was well out of eyesight and earshot. Every time Hugh the Hand would have spoken, Marit frowned, shook her head. When she could no longer hear any sound of the dragon crashing through the forest, she turned to Hugh.

"The dragons have excellent hearing. Remember that. You nearly got us killed."

"Why didn't we attack it?" he demanded. "The damn thing is hurt! With your magic—" He waved his hand, too angry to finish.

"With my magic, I could have done exactly nothing," Marit retorted. "These dragons have their own magic, far more powerful than mine. Which it probably wouldn't have even bothered to use! You saw its tail. That stinger moves fast, strikes like lightning. One touch and you're paralyzed, helpless, just like Alfred."

"So that's it." Hugh eyed her grimly. "We give up?"

"No, we don't," Marit said.

She turned her back on him so that he couldn't see her face, couldn't see how wonderful the words "give up" sounded. Resolutely, she began to make her way through the twisted trees, the flattened undergrowth.

"We'll track it. The dragon said it was taking Alfred back to its cave. If we can find the dragon's lair, we can rescue the Sartan."

"What if it kills Alfred on the way?"

"It won't," Marit said. This was one thing she knew for a certainty. "Labyrinth dragons don't kill their prey right off. They keep them for sport."

The dragon's trail was easy to follow. It mowed down everything in its path, never deviating from a straight route through the forest. Giant trees were uprooted with a blow from the massive tail. Scrub trees and brush were crushed beneath the large hind feet. Choke vines, trying to wrap their cutting tendrils around the dragon, realized too late what they had caught. The vines lay black and smoldering on the ground.

Hugh and Marit trudged along in the dragon's devastating wake. The way had been made easier for them; the dragon cleared the path quite effectively. But they moved cautiously, at Marit's insistence, although Hugh protested that with all the noise the dragon was making it wouldn't be likely to hear them. And when the creature changed direction, began traveling upwind of them, Marit stopped to coat her body in foul-smelling mud from a bog. She forced Hugh to do the same.

"I saw a dragon destroy a Squatters' village once," Marit said, dabbing mud on her thighs, smearing it over her legs. "The beast was clever. It could have attacked the village, burned it, killed the inhabitants. But what sport is there in that? Instead, it captured two men alive—~~young~~ men, strong. Then the dragon proceeded to torture them.

"We heard their screams—~~terrible~~ screams. The screaming went on for two days. The headman decided to attack the dragon, rescue his people—~~or~~ at least put them out of their misery. Haplo was with me," she added softly. "We knew about the red dragons. We told the headman he was a fool, but he wouldn't listen to us. Armed with weapons enhanced by magic, the warriors marched on the dragon's lair.

"The dragon came out of its cave, carrying the still living bodies of its two victims—~~one~~ in each clawed hand. The warriors fired rune-spiced arrows at the dragon, arrows that cannot possibly miss their target. The dragon distorted the runes with its own magic. It didn't stop the arrows; it simply slowed them down. The dragon caught the arrows—~~with~~ the bodies of the two men.

"When they were dead, the dragon tossed the bodies back to their companions. By this time, a few of the arrows had found their mark. The dragon was wounded, beginning to get annoyed. It lashed out with its tail, moving so fast the warriors couldn't escape. It would sting one, then another, then another, darting here and there among the ranks. Each time, the person screamed in horrible pain. His body convulsing, he fell helpless, writhing on the ground.

"The dragon plucked up his victims, tossed them into the cave. More sport. The dragon always chose the young and the strong. The headman was forced to pull his forces back. In trying to save two, he'd lost more than twenty. Haplo advised him to pack up, move his people away. But the headman was half insane by this time, vowed to rescue those the dragon had taken. Turn around," Marit ordered abruptly. "I'll coat your back."

Hugh turned, allowed Marit to slather mud on his back and shoulders. "What happened then?" he asked gruffly.

Marit shrugged. "Haplo and I decided it was time to leave. Later, we came across one of the Squatters, one of the few to survive. He said the dragon kept up the game for a week—~~coming~~ out of its cave to fight, snatching up new victims, spending the nights torturing them to death. At last, when there was no one left except those too sick or too young to provide any amusement, the dragon razed the village.

"There, now, do you understand?" Marit asked him. "An army of Patryn warriors could not defeat one of these dragons. Do you see what we are up against?"

Hugh did not immediately answer. He was slathering mud on his arms and hands. "What's your plan, then?" he asked when he was finished.

"The dragon has to eat, which means it will have to go out and hunt—"

"Unless it decides to eat Alfred."

Marit shook her head. "Red dragons don't eat their victims. That would be a waste of good sport. Besides, this one is trying to figure out what Alfred is. The dragon's never seen a Sartan before. No, it will keep Alfred alive, probably longer than he wants. When the dragon leaves the cave to feed, we'll slip in and rescue Alfred."

"If there's anything left to rescue," Hugh muttered.

Marit made no reply.

They pushed on, following the dragon's trail. It led them through the forest, heading away from the city, in the direction of the next gate. The ground began to rise; they were in the foothills of the mountains. They had been traveling all day, pausing only to eat enough to keep up their strength, and to drink whenever they came across clear water.

The gray light of day was dwindling. Clouds filled the sky. Rain began to fall, which Hugh counted as a blessing. He was sick of the stench of the mud.

The rain was fortunate in another way. They had left the thick forest behind, and were climbing up a barren hillside dotted by rocks and boulders. They were out in the open; the rain provided cover.

The dragon's trail was still relatively easy to track—so long as they had light enough to see by. Its feet tore up the ground, gouging out great chunks of dirt and rock. But night was coming.

Would the dragon hole up for the night, perhaps in some cave in the mountains? Or would it press on until it reached its lair? And should they press on, even after dark?

The two discussed it.

"If we stop and the dragon doesn't, it'll be a long way ahead of us by morning," Hugh argued.

"I know." Marit stood, irresolute, thinking.

Hugh the Hand waited for her to continue. When it was obvious she wasn't going to, he shrugged, spoke.

"I've done my share of tracking. I've been in this situation before. Usually I rely on what I know of my mark, try to put myself in his place, figure out what he'd do. But I'm used to tracking men, not beasts. I leave this up to you, lady."

"We'll go," she decided. "Track it by my rune-light." The glow of the runes on her skin faintly illuminated the ground. "But we'll have to move slowly. We have to be careful that we don't accidentally stumble across its lair in the darkness. If the dragon hears us coming . . ." She shook her head. "I remember once, Haplo and I—"

Marit stopped. Why did she keep talking about Haplo? The pain was like a dragon's claw in her heart.

Hugh settled down to rest and eat, chewing on strips of dried meat. Marit nibbled at hers without appetite. When she realized she couldn't swallow the soggy, tasteless mass, she spat it out. She shouldn't keep thinking about Haplo, shouldn't speak his name. It was like speaking the runes; she conjured up his image, a distraction when she needed to concentrate all her faculties on the problem at hand.

Haplo had been dying when Xar took him away. Closing her eyes, Marit saw the lethal wound, the heart-rune ripped open. Xar could save him. Surely, Xar would save him! Xar would not let him die ...

Marit's hand went to the torn sigil on her forehead. She knew what Xar would do. No use fooling herself. She remembered Haplo's face, the astonishment, the pain when he had known she and Xar were joined. In that

moment, he had given up. His wounds were too deep for him to survive. He'd left all he had—their people—in her care.

A hand closed over hers.

"Haplo will be all right, lady." Hugh the Hand spoke awkwardly, not used to offering comfort. "He's tough, that one."

Marit blinked back her tears, angry that he'd caught her in this weakness.

"We should get moving," she said coldly. Standing up, she walked off, assuming he would follow.

The rain had stopped for the moment, but the lowering clouds, obliterating the tops of the mountains, meant that more was coming. A hard rain would wash out the dragon's tracks completely.

Marit climbed onto a boulder, peered up the mountainside, hoping to catch a glimpse of the dragon before darkness fell. Her attention was caught, shifted to the sullen red glow lighting the skyline on the horizon. She watched it in terrible fascination.

What was the glow? Was it a great conflagration, started by the dragon-snakes, meant to act as a beacon fire to lure all evil creatures to the battle? Was the city of the Nexus itself burning? Or was it, perhaps, some type of magical defense thrown up by the Patryns? A ring of fire to protect them from their enemies?

If the Gate fell, they'd be trapped. Trapped inside the Labyrinth with creatures worse than the red dragons, creatures whose evil power would grow stronger and stronger.

Haplo was dying, thinking she didn't love him.

"Marit."

Startled, she turned too swiftly, almost fell from the boulder.

Hugh the Hand steadied her. "Look!" He pointed upward.

She looked, couldn't see anything.

"Wait. Let the clouds pass. There it is! See!"

The clouds lifted momentarily. Marit saw the dragon, moving across the mountainside, heading for a large dark opening in the cliff face.

And then the clouds dropped down again, obscuring the dragon from view. When they lifted, the creature was nowhere in sight.

They had found the dragon's lair.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE LABYRINTH

THEY SPENT THE NIGHT CLIMBING THE HILLSIDE, LISTENING TO Alfred scream.

The screaming was not constant. The dragon apparently allowed its victim time to rest, recuperate. During such lulls, the dragon's voice could be heard, rumbling from the cave, its words only partially discernible. It was describing to its victim, in lurid detail, exactly what torment it planned to inflict on him next. Worse still, it was destroying hope, robbing him of his will to survive.

"Abri . . . rubble," was some of what the red dragon was saying. "Its people . . . slaughtered . . . wolfen, tiger-men overrun . . ."

"No," Marit said softly. "No, it's not true, Alfred. Don't believe the creature. Hold on ... hold on."

At one point, Alfred's silence lasted longer than usual. The dragon sounded irritated, as might someone attempting to wake a sound sleeper.

"He's dead," Hugh the Hand whispered.

Marit said nothing. She continued climbing. Just when Alfred's silence had lasted long enough to almost convince her that Hugh was right, she heard a low and pleading moan—the victim begging for mercy—that rose to a high-pitched cry of torment, a cry punctuated by the cruel, triumphant voice of the dragon. Listening again to Alfred's screams, the two pushed on.

A narrow path wound along the hillside, leading up toward the cave, which had undoubtedly been used for shelter by a great many of the Labyrinth's population over the years—until the dragon moved in. The path was not difficult to climb, even in the steadily pouring rain, and Marit need not have worried about losing the dragon's trail in the darkness. In its eagerness to reach its lair, the injured dragon dislodged trees and boulders. The beast's gigantic feet dug deep gouges into the soil, forming crude steps.

Mark didn't particularly like all this "help." She had the distinct impression that the dragon knew it was being followed and was quite pleased to do what it could to lure new victims to torment.

She had no choice but to go on. And if ever once she despaired, thought of giving up and turning back, the red glow on the horizon reflected off the storm clouds, drove her forward.

At about midnight, she called a halt. The two were as near the lair as Marit deemed safe. Finding a shallow depression in the rock that would at least offer them some shelter from the rain, she crawled into it, motioned Hugh to follow her.

He did not. He remained crouched on the narrow ledge that led up the hill to the gaping darkness of the dragon's lair. Marit could see, by her rune-light, the mensch's face twisted with hatred and ferocity. One of those terrible, ominous silences had just fallen, after a particularly long session of torture.

"Hugh, we can't go on!" Marit warned him. "It's too dangerous. We have to wait until the dragon leaves!"

A fine plan, except that Alfred's cries were weakening.

Hugh didn't hear her. He stared with narrowed eyes up the cliff face. "I'd live this wretched existence forever," he whispered passionately, reverently, "if I could just, this once, have the power to kill!"

Hatred. Marit knew the feeling well, and she knew how dangerous it could be. Reaching out, she grabbed hold of the man and dragged him bodily inside.

"Listen to me, mensch!" she said, arguing as much with herself as with him. "You're feeling exactly what the dragon wants you to feel! Don't you remember anything of what I told you? The dragon's doing this on purpose, torturing us as well as Alfred. It wants us to rush in and attack mindlessly. And that's why we won't. We're going to sit right here until it leaves or we think of something else."

Hugh glowered at her and for a moment Marit thought he was going to defy her. She could stop him, of course. He was a strong man, but he was a mensch, without magic and therefore weak, compared to her. She didn't want to have to fight him, however. A magical battle would alert the dragon to their presence—if it didn't already know—and then again there was that cursed Sartan knife Hugh carried . . .

Marit sucked in a breath. Her hold on Hugh the Hand eased.

Hugh wedged his body into the narrow space beside her. "What? You've thought of something?"

"I might just let you rush in mindlessly, after all. That Cursed Blade. Do you still have it?"

"Yes, I've got the damn thing. It's like this cursed life of mine—I can't seem to get rid of either . . ." Hugh paused, the same idea occurring to him. "The blade would save Alfred!"

"Maybe." Marit gnawed her lip. "It's a powerful weapon, but I'm not sure even such a magical object could stand up against a red dragon. Still, the Cursed Blade could at least buy us time, provide a diversion."

"The blade has to believe that Alfred's in danger. No, belay that," Hugh said, thinking swiftly. "It only has to believe that I'm in danger."

"You charge in. The dragon will attack you. The Cursed Blade will attack the dragon. I'll find Alfred, use my magic to cure him enough to get him on his feet, and we'll leave."

"Just one problem, lady. The blade could go for you, too."

Marit shrugged. "You've heard Alfred's cries. He's growing weaker. Maybe the dragon's tiring of its sport or maybe, since Alfred's a Sartan, the dragon doesn't know how to keep him alive. Whatever . . . Alfred's dying. If we wait any longer, it may be too late."

Perhaps now was too late. The words hung between them, unspoken. They had heard nothing from Alfred, not even a moan, in all the moments they'd been crouched in the narrow cave. The dragon, too, was strangely silent.

Hugh the Hand fumbled about in his belt, produced the crude, ugly Sartan knife—the Cursed Blade, as he had named it. He eyed it narrowly, held it gingerly.

"Ugh," he grunted, grimacing in disgust. "The damn thing wriggles in my hand like a snake. Let's get on with this. I'd as soon face that dragon as hold on to this knife much longer."

Grafted by the Sartan, the Cursed Blade was intended to be used by mensch to defend their "superiors"—the Sartan—in battle. The blade was sentient; would, of its own accord, assume a form necessary to defeat its foe. It needed Hugh, or any mensch, merely as a means of transport. It did not need his direction to fight. The blade would defend him as its carrier. It would defend any Sartan in danger. Unfortunately, as Hugh had pointed out, the blade had been designed to battle the Sartan's ancient enemy—the Patryns. The blade was just as likely (perhaps more likely) to attack Marit as it was to attack the dragon.

"At least now I know how to control the damn thing," he told her. "If it goes for you, I can—"

"—rescue Alfred." Marit cut him off. "Take him back to Abri, to the healers. Don't stop to try to help me, Hugh," she added, as he opened his mouth to protest. "At least the blade will kill me quickly."

He regarded her intently, not meaning to argue with her, but taking her measure, trying to decide if she was all talk or if she had the courage to back her words.

Marit gazed back at him, unblinking.

Nodding once, Hugh slid out of the rock depression. Marit crawled after him. As luck—or the Labyrinth—would have it, the rain that had concealed their movement now stopped. A gentle breeze stirred the trees, producing miniature rainstorms when the water fell from the leaves. The two stood on the ledge, hardly daring to breathe.

Not a whimper, not a moan . . . and the cave's entrance was only a hundred steps away. Both could see it clearly, a gaping black hole against the white glimmer of the rock. In the distance, the red glow in the sky seemed to burn brighter.

"Perhaps the dragon's asleep!" Hugh the Hand hissed into her ear.

Marit conceded the possibility with a nod and a shrug. She found little comfort in the idea. The dragon would wake soon enough when it smelled fresh sport.

Hugh the Hand took the lead. He trod softly, testing each step, padding along the path with a skill and ease Marit deemed impressive. She crept after him, making no noise at all. Yet Marit had the uneasy feeling that the dragon could hear them coming, that it was lying in wait.

They reached the cavern's entrance. Hugh flattened himself back against the rock wall, wormed his way along the cliff face, hoping to be able to peer inside, see without being seen. Marit waited at a distance, hiding behind a bush, keeping the entrance to the cave in plain sight.

Still no sound. Not an indrawn breath, nor the grating noise of a large body rubbing against stone, nor the rustle of a damaged wing scraping along a rock floor. The rain had washed the mud from her body, and now the runes on Marit's skin glowed brilliantly. The dragon had only to glance outside to know it had company. The light would make her a tempting target when she entered the cave, but it would also give her the chance to find Alfred in the darkness, and so she did not attempt to conceal the glow.

Hugh twisted his body, peered around the rock wall, tried to see inside the cavern. He stared for long moments, head cocked, listening as much as looking. With a wave of his hand, he motioned Marit to join him. Keeping her eye on the cave entrance, she darted across the path, flattened herself next to him.

He leaned over, spoke in her ear. "Dark as an elf's heart in there. Can't see a damn thing. But I thought I heard a gasping breath coming from your right, as you face the cave. It could be Alfred."

Which meant he was still alive. A tiny surge of relief warmed Marit; hope added fuel to her courage.

"Any sign of the dragon?"

"Other than the stench?" he asked, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "No, I didn't see anything of the beast."

The smell was horrible—decayed, rotting flesh.

Marit didn't like to think of what they'd find in there. If Vasu had been missing any of his people lately—the shepherd picked off while guarding the flocks, the child who had wandered too far from his mother, the scout who had never come home—the remains were probably in this cave.

Marit hadn't seen the dragon leave. And surely she could have heard it if it were still inside. Perhaps the cavern extended far beneath the hills. Perhaps the dragon had a back way out. Perhaps it didn't know they were here. Perhaps the dragon's injury was worse than Marit had thought. Perhaps the wounded creature had crawled far back in its lair to sleep. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . .

Few events in Marit's life had ever worked to her advantage. She always made the wrong decision, ended up in the wrong place, did or said the wrong thing. She had made the mistake of staying with Haplo; then she had made the mistake of leaving him. She had made the mistake of abandoning their child. She had made the mistake of trusting Xar. Finding Haplo again, she had made the mistake of loving him again, only to lose him again.

Surely, now, something in her life must go right! Surely, she was owed this much!

For the dragon to be asleep.

She asked only for the dragon to be asleep.

The two slipped, wary and silent, inside the cave.

Marit's runes illuminated the cavern. The entrance was not very wide or high—the dragon must have a tight fit to squeeze inside, as was evidenced by a crust-like coating of glittering red scales lining the top and sides of the rock.

The entry tunnel opened, expanding upward and outward to form a large, roughly circular room. Marit's bluish-red rune-light reflected off damp walls, lit most of the chamber except the top—which disappeared into darkness—and an opening in the very back. She drew Hugh's attention to that opening. It was big enough for the dragon to use. And apparently, that was what it had done, because the chamber in which they stood was empty.

Empty, except for the dragon's gruesome trophies.

Corpses in various states of decomposition hung from chains on the walls. Men and women and children—all having obviously died in pain and torment. Hugh the Hand, who had lived with death, seen it in all its forms during his life, was sickened. He doubled over and retched.

The sheer brutality, the wanton cruelty overwhelmed even Marit. The horror of it and the attendant rage at the creature that could so callously commit such heinous acts combined to nearly rob her of her senses. The cavern began to swim in her sight. She was lightheaded, dizzy.

Afraid she was about to pass out, she lurched forward, hoping movement would stir her blood.

"Alfred!" Hugh wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He pointed.

Marit peered through the rune-lit darkness, found Alfred. She concentrated on him, banished everything else from her mind, and felt better. He was alive, though just barely, by the looks of him.

"Go to him," Hugh said, his voice harsh from vomiting. "I'll keep watch." He held the Cursed Blade, drawn and ready. It had begun to glow with an ugly, greenish light.

Marit hurried to Alfred's side.

Like the countless other victims, the Sartan hung from chains. His wrists were manacled to the wall above his head. His feet dangled near the floor, the toes barely touching. His head was bowed down. He might have been dead but for the sound of rasping breath which Hugh had heard outside the cavern. His gasping breaths were much louder in here.

Marit touched him as gently as she could, hoping to rouse him without frightening him. But at the brush of her fingers against his cheek, Alfred moaned, his body convulsed, his heels clattered against the rock wall.

Marit clapped her hand over his mouth, forced his head up, made him look at her. She dared not say anything aloud, and a whisper would probably mean little to him in his state.

He stared at her with wild, bulging eyes in which there was no recognition, only fear and pain. He struggled instinctively against her, but he was far too weak to break free. His clothes were soaked with blood. Blood spread in pools beneath his feet, yet his flesh—as far as Marit could tell—was whole and undamaged.

The dragon had slashed and torn his flesh, then healed him back up. Probably many times. Even the broken arm had been healed. But the true damage was in the mind. Alfred was very far gone.

"Hugh!" Marit had to risk calling, and though it was no more than a loud whisper, the name echoed eerily through the cavern. She flinched, did not dare repeat it.

Hugh edged his way toward her, never taking his eyes from the back of the cave. "I thought I heard something move inside there. Better make this quick."

Just exactly what she couldn't do!

"If I don't heal him," she said softly, "he'll never make it out of the cave alive. He doesn't even recognize me."

Hugh glanced at Alfred, then at Marit. Hugh had seen the Patryn healers at work; he knew what it entailed. Marit would have to concentrate all her magical power on Alfred. She would have to draw his injuries into herself, release her life-giving energy to him. For long moments, she would be as incapacitated as he was. When the healing process was concluded, both of them would be weak.

Hugh gave a brief nod to show he understood; then he returned to his post.

Marit reached up, touched the manacles that held Alfred, softly spoke the runes. Blue fire twined from her arm; the manacles released. Alfred sagged to the cavern floor, lay sprawled in his own blood. He had lost consciousness.

Swiftly, Marit knelt beside him. Clasp~~ing~~ his hands in hers—right in left, left in right—she joined the circle of their beings, called on the magic to heal him.

A series of fantastic, beautiful, wonderful, and frightening images flooded Mark's mind. She was above Abri, far above Abri—not just on the city walls, but as if she stood on the top of a mountain, looking down on the city below. And then she leapt from the mountain and fell—but she was not falling. She was soaring in the sky, gliding on unseen currents as she might have glided on water. She was flying.

The experience was terrifying until she grew accustomed to it. And then it was thrilling. She had enormous, powerful wings, taloned front claws, a long and graceful neck, tearing teeth. She was huge and awe-inspiring, and when she swooped down upon her enemies, they fled in shrieking terror. She was Alfred, the Serpent Mage.

She hovered protectively over Abri, scattered its enemies, threw down those bold enough to fight. She saw Lord Xar and Haple—small and insignificant creatures—and she felt Alfred's fear for his friends, his determination to help . . .

And then a shadow glimpsed from the corner of the eye ... a desperate swerve in midair . . . too late. Something struck her side, sent her rolling, out of control. She was tumbling, spiraling downward. Frantically, she beat her wings, clawed her way back up. She could see her enemy now, a red dragon.

Taloned feet extended, the dragon plunged through the sky, aiming for her . . .

Confused images of falling, crashing to the ground. Marit shuddered in pain, bit her lip to keep from crying out. Part of her was Alfred, part of her was flowing into Alfred, but part of her was still in the dragon's cavern, still very much aware of the danger.

And she could see Hugh, tense and alert, staring into the blackness in the back of the cavern, his face gone rigid. He turned toward her, gesturing, mouthing something. She couldn't hear, but then she didn't need to hear.

The dragon was coming.

"Alfred!" Marit pleaded, clasping the man's wrists more tightly. "Alfred, come back!"

He stirred and groaned. His eyelids fluttered. He caught hold of her, held on to her.

Horrid images slammed into Marit—abulbous tail inflicting searing, paralyzing, numbing pain; swirling hot darkness; waking to torment and agony. Marit could no longer hold back the screams.

The dragon slid into the cavern.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE LABYRINTH

THE DRAGON HAD BEEN CONCEALED IN THE SHADOWS OF ITS back exit all along, watching the two would-be saviors, waiting for the precise moment when they were weakest, most vulnerable, to attack. It had first heard the two in the forest, guessed that they had come in search of their friend. The dragon would have attacked them then and there, since it knew by experience that few Patryns would attempt such a hopeless rescue. But the dragon quite simply didn't feel up to such a fight and so it had, with regret, contented itself with one toy.

To the dragon's delight, however, these two had decided to follow it. Patryns weren't often this stupid, but the dragon sensed something odd about these two. One of them had a strange smell, unlike anything the dragon had previously encountered in the Labyrinth. The other one the dragon understood well. She was a Patryn and she was desperate. The desperate were often careless.

Once back in its lair, the dragon took its time torturing the Thing it had captured, the Thing that had been a dragon and had then transformed itself back into a man. The Thing was powerful in magic; it was not a Patryn, yet it was like a Patryn. The dragon was intrigued by it, but not intrigued enough to waste time investigating. The Thing had not proved as amusing as the dragon had hoped. It gave up too easily and actually seemed on the verge of dying.

Becoming bored with tormenting the wretched Thing, and feeling weak from its injury, the dragon had crawled back into the inner part of the cavern to heal its wounds and wait for prey that might prove more entertaining.

The two were better than the dragon had hoped. The Patryn female was actually healing the Thing, which was fine with the dragon. Saved it time and trouble, gave it a stronger victim, one who might now live until next nightfall. As for the Patryn, she was young and defiant. She would last a long time. The male the dragon was unsure about. He was the one with the peculiar smell and no magic about him whatsoever. More like an animal, a deer, for example. Not much sport to him, but he was large and well fleshed. The dragon would have no need to go out in search of a meal this day.

The dragon waited until it saw the Patryn's rune-magic wholly consumed by the healing process. Then it moved.

The dragon crawled slowly out of the darkness of the cavern. The tunnel seemed large to Hugh, but it was small for the dragon, which had to duck its head to creep beneath the overhang. Hugh stood his ground, assuming that the dragon would wait until its entire body, including the stinging tail, was out in the open before it would attack. The Sartan knife squirmed in Hugh's grip.

He held it up in challenge, willed it to change form to fight the dragon.

If it had been possible, he would have sworn that the knife seemed ill at ease, unsure. Hugh wished he understood more about the Cursed Blade, tried frantically to recall everything either Haplo or Alfred had said in regard to it. All he could come up with at the moment was that the blade was Sartan-made. And at that moment it occurred to him that the Labyrinth and the creatures in it—including this dragon—had also been made by the Sartan.

The blade was confused. It recognized the same magic inherent in itself, but it also recognized threat. If the dragon had remained patient, gone after Marit, the Sartan blade would not have altered form. But the dragon was hungry. It planned to catch and devour Hugh; then, with a comfortably full stomach, it could go after the other, more difficult prey. Most of the dragon's body was still inside the back part of the cavern; it could not yet use its tail in the attack. But the dragon didn't think it would need such an advantage. Almost lazily, it swiped out a clawed forefoot, intending to impale Hugh the Hand and eat him while his flesh was still warm.

The move caught Hugh by surprise. He ducked and flung himself backward. A giant claw raked across his stomach, tearing the leather armor as if it had been finest silk, slashing through flesh and muscle.

At the attack, the Sartan blade was quick to respond. It wrenched itself free of Hugh's grasp.

A gigantic sweeping tail knocked him aside. Hugh rolled across the cavern floor, bumped up against Marit and Alfred. The two looked terrible—Marit now almost as bad as Alfred. Both seemed dazed, barely conscious. The Hand regained his feet quickly, prepared to defend himself and his helpless companions. He stopped, frozen, staring.

Two dragons were inside the cavern.

The second dragon—actually the Cursed Blade—was a gorgeous creature. Long and slender, this dragon was wingless; its scales sparkled and gleamed like myriad tiny suns, shining in a blue-green sky. It dove for its victim before the Labyrinth dragon had time to fully assimilate what was happening. The blue-green dragon's head darted in close, jaws opened and snapped shut on the Labyrinth dragon's neck.

Shrieking in fury and pain, the red dragon twisted out of its captor's grasp, freeing itself but leaving a bloody chunk of flesh in its enemy's mouth. The red dragon heaved its body from beneath the overhang, its tremendous strength literally bearing back the attacker. The bulbous tail struck out, stinging the blue-green dragon again and again.

Hugh had seen enough. The dragons were fighting each other, but he and his friends were in peril of being smashed by the flailing, struggling bodies.

"Marit!" He shook her.

She was still holding fast to Alfred; her face was gray and drawn, but she was now alert, staring at the two dragons in astonishment. Alfred was conscious, but he obviously had no idea where he was, who was with him, or what was going on. He was gazing about in dazed perplexity.

"Marit, we've got to get out of here!" Hugh shouted.

"Where did that other dragon—"she began.

"The Cursed Blade," Hugh answered shortly. He bent over Alfred. "Grab his other arm!"

Hugh instructed her needlessly. Marit had already taken hold. Between the two of them, they dragged Alfred to a semistanding position and—half dragging, half carrying him—headed for the cave opening.

The going was difficult. Their way was blocked by reptile bodies that twisted and grappled. Slashing clawed feet tore up the dirt floor. Enormous heads cracked into the cavern ceiling; rock shards and dust drifted down on top of them. Magical attacks flared and burst around them.

Half blind, choking, fearful of being trampled to death or caught in a magical fire-storm, the three staggered out of the cavern entrance. Once in the clear, they fled down the narrow pathway, kept going until Alfred collapsed, Hugh and Marit paused, gasping for breath. Behind them, the dragons roared in pain and rage.

"You're hurt!" Marit looked concerned at the sight of the gaping wound across Hugh's stomach.

"It'll heal," he said grimly. "Won't it, Alfred? I'll carry him."

Hugh started to lift Alfred bodily, but the Sartan pushed him away.

"I can make it," he said, struggling to regain his feet. A fierce shriek of fury caused him to blench, glance back at the cavern. "What—"

"No time to explain! Run!" Marit ordered. Grabbing hold of Alfred, she shoved him along ahead of her.

Alfred stumbled, managed to regain his feet and followed orders.

Hugh twisted around. "Where?"

"Down!" Marit answered. "You help Alfred. I'll keep watch behind."

The ground shook with the ferocity of the battle being waged inside the cavern. Hugh moved swiftly down the path, slipping and sliding on the rain-wet rock. Marit followed more slowly, keeping one eye on the path, the other on the cavern. She scrambled down the hillside, often losing her footing in the loose soil. Alfred tumbled head over heels, was well on his way to rolling down the hill when he came up hard against a boulder. By the time they reached the bottom, they were all scratched, bruised, and bleeding.

"Listen!" Marit called a halt.

All was quiet now. Very quiet. The battle had ended.

"I wonder who won?" Hugh asked.

"I can live without knowing," Marit answered.

"If we're lucky, they killed each other," Hugh commented. "I wouldn't care if I never saw that damn blade again."

The silence continued; it had an ominous feel to it. Marit wanted to be farther away, much farther.

"How are you?" she asked, including both Hugh and Alfred.

Hugh grunted, pointed. His wound had almost closed; the rent in his armor was the only indication of where it had been. In explanation, he pulled aside his shirt, revealing a single Sartan sigil, gleaming faintly on his chest. Alfred, at the sight, flushed bright red and averted his gaze.

Suddenly, an explosion rocked the ground, coming from the direction of the cave. They stared at each other, tense, fearful, wondering at the portent.

Then, once again, all was silent.

"We better push on," Marit said, keeping her voice low.

Alfred nodded befuddled agreement. Taking a step, he stumbled over his own feet, lurched headlong into a tree.

Marit, sighing, reached out to take hold of his arm. Hugh the Hand, on Alfred's other side, moved to do the same.

"Hugh!" Marit pointed at the bloodstained leather belt around his waist.

Hanging from it, wrapped snugly in its sheath, was the Cursed Blade.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE LABYRINTH

"I CAN'T ... GO ON." ALFRED PITCHED FORWARD, LAY VERY still.

Marit eyed him, frustrated. They were wasting time. Yet, though she didn't like to admit it, she could not go much farther. Thinking back, she couldn't remember how long it had been since she'd slept.

"You can rest," she said curtly, sitting on a tree stump. "But only a few moments, till we catch our breath."

Alfred lay with his eyes closed, his face half buried in the mud. He looked old-old and shrunken. Marit found it difficult to believe that this gangling, frail Sartan had once been a creature as beautiful and powerful as the green and golden dragon she'd seen soaring above Abri.

"What's the matter with him now?" Hugh the Hand demanded, entering the small clearing where they had stopped. The Hand had been following some distance behind, keeping watch to make certain nothing was tracking them.

Marit shrugged, too tired to respond. She knew what was wrong with Alfred: the same thing that was wrong with her. What was the use? Why bother to keep struggling?

"I found some water," Hugh said, gesturing. "Not far from here . . ."

Marit shook her head. Alfred made no move.

Hugh sat down, nervous, ill at ease. He sat with what patience he could for a few moments, then was on his feet again. "We'll be safer in Abri—"

"For how long?" Marit returned bitterly. "Look. Look up there."

Hugh peered through the tangled branches of the trees. The sky, which had been gray, was now tinged with a faint pinkish-orange glow.

The runes on her skin barely tingled at all. No enemy was near them. Yet that red fire in the sky seemed to be burning up her hope.

She closed her eyes wearily.

And she saw, once again, the world from the dragon's eyes. She was flying above Abri, and saw its buildings and its people, saw its sheltering walls, the arms of the land reaching out to encircle the land's children.

Her children. Her child. Hers and Haplo's.

A girl-child. Her name ~~Rue~~. She was eight gates now, or around there. Marit could see her ~~skinny~~ and wiry, tall for her age, with chestnut hair like her mother and her father's quiet smile.

Marit could see it all so clearly.

"We taught Rue how to snare small game, how to skin a rabbit, how to catch fish with her hands," Marit was telling Headman Vasu, who had inexplicably appeared out of nowhere. "She's old enough to be of some help to us now. I'm glad we decided to keep her with us, instead of leaving her with the Squatters."

Rue could run fast, when need arose, and she could fight if cornered. She had her own rune-covered dagger—a gift from her mother.

"I taught her how to use it," Marit was saying to the headman. "Not long ago, Rue faced down a snog with it. She held the creature at bay until her father and I could rescue her. She wasn't afraid, she said, though she shook in my arms afterward. Then Haplo came and teased her and made her laugh and we were all three of us laughing . . ." "Hey!"

Marit jerked to sudden wakefulness. Hugh's hand was on her shoulder. He'd caught her just as she was about to topple over.

She flushed deeply. "I'm sorry. I must have fallen asleep."

Rubbing her burning eyes, she stood up. The temptation to slip back into that sweet dream was too strong. For an instant she let herself believe, superstitiously, that the dream held meaning for her. Haplo was alive. He would come back to her. Together, they would find their lost child.

The warmth of that dream lingered in her; she felt surrounded by love and caring . . . Angrily, she banished it.

A dream, she told herself coldly, firmly. Nothing more. Nothing I can ever attain. I threw it all away.

"What?" Alfred sat up. "What did you say? Something about Haplo?"

Marit didn't think she had spoken aloud, but then she was so tired she didn't know what she was doing anymore.

"We better get going," she said, avoiding the subject. Alfred staggered to his feet, continued to stare at her with a strange, sad intensity.

"Where is Haplo? I saw him with Lord Xar, Are they in Abri?"

Marit turned away from him. "They left for Abar-rach."

"Abarrach ... the necromancy." Alfred sank down despondently on the trunk of a fallen tree. "The necromancy." He sighed. "Then Haplo is dead."

"He isn't!" Marit cried, rounding on Alfred viciously. "My lord would not let him die!"

"Like hell!" Hugh the Hand snorted. "You tried to kill Haplo on your lord's orders!"

"That was when he thought Haplo was a traitor!" Marit flared. "My lord knows better now! He knows Haplo was telling him the truth about the dragon-snakes. My lord won't let Haplo die! He won't ... he won't . . ."

She was so tired, she began to sob like a frightened child. Embarrassed, ashamed, she tried to stop crying, but the pain inside was too great. The emptiness she had nurtured and cherished for so long was gone, filled by a terrible, burning ache only tears seemed to ease. She heard Alfred take a step toward her. Blindly, she turned from him, made it clear she wanted to be left alone.

His footsteps stopped.

When at last Marit was more composed, she wiped her nose, brushed away her tears. Her stomach hurt from sobbing; the muscles in her throat constricted spasmodically. She gulped, coughed.

Hugh the Hand was staring grimly at nothing, kicking moodily at a clump of weeds. Alfred sat hunched over, shoulders stooped, gangling arms dangling between his bony knees. His gaze was abstracted; he appeared deep in thought.

"I'm sorry," Marit said, trying to sound brisk. "I didn't mean to fall apart. I'm tired, that's all. We better get back to Abri—"

"Marit," Alfred interrupted timidly, "how did Lord Xar enter the Labyrinth?"

"I don't know. He didn't say. What does it matter?"

"He must have come through the Vortex," Alfred reasoned. "He knew we entered from that direction. I assume you told him that?"

Marit's skin burned. She lifted her hand involuntarily to touch the sigil on her forehead, the sigil that Xar had rent open, the sigil that had once linked her and her lord together. Seeing Alfred watching her, she snatched her hand away.

"But the Vortex was destroyed—"

"It can never be destroyed," Alfred corrected. "The mountain fell on it. Entering would not be easy, but it could be done. However . . ." He paused, thoughtful.

"He couldn't leave that way!" Marit cried. "'The Gate swings in only one direction.' You said that to Haplo!"

"If what Alfred said was true," Hugh the Hand growled. "Remember, he was the one who didn't want to leave."

"I told you the truth," Alfred said, blushing. "It makes sense, if you stop to think about it. If the Gate swung in both directions, all the Patryns sent into the Labyrinth would have been able to escape back the way they came."

Marit was no longer tired. Renewed energy surged through her. "Xar would have to leave through the Final Gate! That's the only way out. Once he was there, he would see our danger! Our people would cry to him for help. He couldn't leave them to fight alone. We'll find my lord there, at the Final Gate. And Haplo will be with him."

"Perhaps," said Alfred. And now it was his turn to avoid her eyes.

"Of course he will be," Marit said resolutely. "Now we must get there. Quickly. I could use my magic. It will take me tō—"

She had been about to say to Xar, but then she remembered the wound on her forehead. She forbore to touch it, though it had begun to burn painfully.

"To the Final Gate," she finished lamely. "I've been there. I can see it in my mind."

"You could go," said Alfred. "But you couldn't take us with you."

"What does it matter?" Marit said, alive with hope. "What do I need with you now, Sartan? My lord will battle his foes and emerge triumphant. And Haplo will be healed . . ."

She made ready to draw the rune-circle, to step inside. Alfred was on his feet, babbling, apparently going to try to stop her. Marit ignored him. If he came too close, she would . . .

"Could I be of assistance, sir, madam?"

A gentleman imposing, dressed all in black: black breeches, black velvet coat, black silk stockings; white hair, tied in back with a black ribbon—stepped out of the forest. He was accompanied by an old man, with flowing beard and hair, wearing mouse-colored robes, all topped by a shabby and sorry-looking pointed hat.

The old man was singing.

"'One is one . . . and all alone . . . and ever more shall be so.' " He smiled gently, sadly, sighed, and began again. " Til give you one-o, every day I grow, ei-o. What is your one-o? One is one . . . ' "

"Excuse me, sir," said the gentleman in a low voice, "but we are not alone."

"Eh!" The old man gave a violent start. His hat fell off his head. He eyed the three astonished people facing him with deep suspicion. "What are you doing here? Get out!"

The gentleman in black sighed a long-suffering sigh. "I don't believe that would be at all wise. These are the people we came to find, sir."

"You sure?" The old man appeared dubious.

Marit stared. "I know you! In Abarrach. You're a Sartan, a prisoner of my lord."

Marit recalled his rambling, nonsensical conversation in the cells of Abarrach. She had thought him mad.

"Now I wonder if I am," she muttered.

Did the old man truly exist? Or had he leapt into being from her own exhausted mind? People who went without sleep too long began to see things that weren't there. She looked at Hugh the Hand, was relieved to see him staring at the old man, as was Alfred. Either they had all fallen under some extraordinary spell, or the old man was really standing in front of her.

Marit drew her sword.

The old man was regarding them with equal perplexity. "What does this remind me of? Three desperate-looking characters wandering around lost in a forest. No, don't tell me. I'll get it. Great Auntie Em's ghost! The Scarecrow." Rushing forward, the old man grabbed Alfred's hand and shook it heartily.

The old man turned to Hugh. "And the Lion. How do you do, sir? And the Tin Man!" He lunged toward Marit, who lifted the point of her sword to the old man's throat.

"Stay away from me, old fool. How did you get here?"

"Ah." The old man fell back a step, gave her a cunning look. "Not been to Oz, yet, I see. Hearts are free there, my dear. Of course you do have to open yourself up to put the heart inside. Some find that rather an inconvenience. Still—"

Marit made a threatening motion with the sword. "Who are you? How did you get here?"

"As to who I am . . ." The old man was thoughtful. "Good point. If you're the Scarecrow, you the Lion, and you the Tin Man, then that must make me ... Dorothy!"

The old man simpered, gave a curtsey, extended his hand. "My name is Dorothy. A small-town girl from a small town west of Topeka. Like my shoes?"

"Excuse me, sir," the gentleman interrupted. "But you are not—"

~"And this," the old man cried triumphantly, flinging his arms around the gentleman in black, "is my little dog Toto!"

The gentleman appeared extremely pained at this suggestion. "I'm afraid not, sir." He attempted to extricate himself from the old man's embrace. "Forgive me, sirs, madam," he added. "This is all my fault. I should have been watching him."

"I know! You're Zifnab!" cried Alfred.

"Bless you," the old man returned politely. "Need a hankie?"

"He means you, sir," the gentleman said in resigned tones.

"Does he?" The old man was considerably astonished.

"Yes, sir. You are Zifnab today."

"Not Dorothy?"

"No, sir. And I must say, sir, I never cared for that one," the gentleman added with some asperity.

"He's not referring, perhaps, to Mr. Bond?"

"I am afraid not, sir. Not today. You are Zifnab, sir. A great and powerful wizard."

"Well, of course I am! Pay no attention to the man behind the shower curtain. He's just awakened from a bad dream. Takes a great and powerful wizard to come to the Labyrinth, doesn't it? And ~~Why~~, there, there, old chap. It's nice to see you, too."

Alfred was shaking hands with Zifnab solemnly. "I am so pleased to make your acquaintance, sir. Haplo told me about meeting you. On Pryan, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was it! I remember!" Zifnab beamed; then his face darkened. He grew sad. "Haplo. Yes, I do remember." He sighed. "I'm so sorry—"

"That will be quite enough, sir," interrupted the gentleman in stern tones.

"What does he mean?" Marit demanded. "What about Haplo?"

"He means nothing," said the gentleman. "Do you, sir?"

"Uh, no. That's right. Nothing. Nada. Zip." Zifnab began toying nervously with his beard.

"We overheard you speaking of going to the Final Gate," the gentleman continued. "I believe that I and my brethren might be of assistance. We are traveling there ourselves."

He glanced skyward. Marit looked up, following his gaze distrustfully. A shadow flowed over her. Another and another. She stared, dazzled and dazed, at hundreds of dragons, blue-green as the sky of Pryan, scales gleaming bright as Pryan's four suns.

And now, towering over her, its great bulk blotting out the gray sun of the Labyrinth, was a huge dragon. Blue-green scales glistened. The gentleman in black was gone.

Marit trembled with fear, but not for her safety or well-being. She was afraid because suddenly her world, her universe, had been ripped asunder, as her lord had ripped open the sigil on her skin. Through the rent, she caught a glimpse of radiant light, suddenly overwhelmed by terrible darkness. She saw the gray sky of

the Labyrinth, the Nexus in flames, her people—small, fragile creatures, trapped between the darkness and the light—fighting a last desperate battle.

She struck out at the dragon with her sword, barely knowing what she was attacking or why, only knowing that she was consumed with despair.

"Wait!" Alfred caught hold of her arm. "Don't fight!" He peered up at the dragon. "These dragons are here to help us, Marit. To help your people. They are the enemies of the serpents. Isn't that true?"

"The Wave acts to correct itself," said the Pryan dragon. "So it has been, since the beginning of time. We can take you to the Final Gate. We are taking others."

Patrins rode on the backs of the dragons. Men and women, carrying weapons in their hands. Marit recognized Headman Vasu in the vanguard, and she understood. Her people were leaving the safety of their walled city, going to fight the enemy at the Final Gate.

Hugh the Hand had already mounted the dragon's broad back, was now assisting Alfred—with some difficulty—to climb on behind.

Marit hesitated, preferring to trust in her magic. Then she realized that she might not make it. She was tired. So very tired. She would need all her strength once they reached the Final Gate.

Marit clambered up on the dragon, sat on the great broad back of the beast, between the shoulder blades where sprouted the enormous, powerful wings. [1] The wings began to beat on the air.

1 Those familiar with the dragons of Pryan will recall that they are described as wingless. One can only guess that, like their enemies the dragon-snakes, the Pryan dragons can assume whatever form suits their needs.

Zifnab, who had been directing operations, completely oblivious to the fact that no one was paying any attention to him, suddenly gave a strangled cry. "Wait! Where am I going to sit?"

"You're not going, sir," said the dragon. "It would be too dangerous for you."

"But I just got here!" Zifnab whined.

"And done far more damage than I would have thought possible in such a short period of time," the dragon remarked gloomily. "But there is that other little matter we spoke about. In Chelestra. I assume you can handle that without incident?"

"Mr. Bond could," said Zifnab craftily.

"Out of the question!" The dragon flicked its tail in annoyance.

Zifnab shrugged, twiddled his hat. "On the other hand, I could be Dorothy." He clicked his heels together. "'There's no place like home. There's no place—'"

"Oh, very well," the dragon snapped. "If nothing else will suit you. Try not to make a pig's breakfast of this one, will you?"

"You have my word," said Zifnab solemnly, saluting, "as a member of Her Majesty's Secret Service."

The dragon heaved a sigh. It waved a claw, and Zifnab disappeared.

Wings beat, raising clouds of dust, obscuring Marit's sight. She clasped hold tightly of gleaming scales that were hard as metal to the touch. The dragon soared into the sky. The treetops fell away beneath her. Light—warm and bright as the beacon fire—touched her face.

"What is that light?" she cried fearfully.

"Sunlight," said Alfred, awed.

"Where does the light come from?" she asked, staring all around. "There is no sun in the Labyrinth."

"The citadels," Alfred answered. Tears glimmered in his eyes. "The light beams from the citadel of Pryan. There is hope, Mark. There is hope!"

"Keep that in your heart," said the dragon grimly. "For if all hope dies, then we die."

Turning their faces from the light, they flew toward the red-tinged darkness.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE CHALICE CHELESTRA

THE WORLD OF CHELESTRA IS A GLOBE OF WATER, HANGING IN the cold blackness of space. Its outside is ice; its inside—wamed by Chelestra's free-floating sun—is water, warm, breathable as air, destructive of Sartan and Patryn magic. The mensch of Chelestra, brought here by the Sartan, dwell on seamoons—living organisms that drift through the water, following Chelestra's erratic sun. The seamoons make their own atmosphere, surrounding themselves with a bubble of air. On these moons, the mensch build cities, raise crops, and sail the water in their magical submersibles.

On Chelestra, unlike the worlds of Arianus and Pryan, the mensch live together in peace. Their world and their lives had remained undisturbed for centuries, until the arrival of Alfred through Death's Gate. [1] He

1 Alfred writes: Looking at the recent history of the four worlds, it is instructive to note that the events which were to play such significant roles in the worlds' future all took place near the same time—the time when Haplo first entered Death's Gate.

At this time, the evil dragon-snakes, long held prisoners in Chelestra by the ice, first felt the warmth of the sun. On Arianus, King Stephen hired an assassin to kill the changeling Bane. On Abarrach, Prince Edmund led his people to the doomed city of Necropolis. On Pryan, the tytans began their murderous rampage. The good dragons, sensing the awakening of their evil cousins, left their underground homes and prepared to enter the worlds. I do not believe we can consider such timing coincidence. It is, as we are beginning to learn, the Wave correcting itself.

accidentally waked a group of Sartan—the very ones who had Sundered the world—from a stasis sleep. Once considered demigods by the mensch, the Sartan attempted again to rule over those believed to be inferior.

Led by Samah, Head of the Council—the man who had ordered the Sundering—the Sartan were angered and amazed to find that these mensch not only refused to bow down and worship, but actually had the temerity to defy the so-called gods and wall the Sartan up in their own city, keeping them prisoners by flooding that city with the magic-destroying seawater.

Also living on Chelestra were the manifestation of evil in the worlds. Taking the form of enormous serpents, the evil dragon-snakes, as the dwarves named them, had long been seeking a way off Chelestra and into the other three worlds. Samah inadvertently provided it. Enraged at the mensch, fearful, no longer able to control men or events, Samah fell unwitting victim to the dragon-snakes. Despite the fact that he had been warned against it, the Sartan opened Death's Gate. [2] Thus the evil dragon-snakes were able to enter the

2 Some confusion has arisen over this term. If Death's Gate has not previously been open, how have Haplo and Alfred traveled through it? Imagine a room with seven doors leading out of it. On his first journey, Haplo opens the door from the Nexus, shuts it behind him, travels across the room to the door of Arianus, enters. The door shuts behind him. Thus he travels from one place to another, but all other doors remain closed.

Samah, entering the room, causes the doors to open wide, and they remain open, providing ease of travel between the worlds, but also giving access to those who might otherwise have found it difficult or impossible to gain access. The only way to shut the doors now is through the Seventh Gate.

other worlds, where they worked to foment the chaos and discord that are their meat and drink.

Secretly appalled at what he had done, Samah left Chelestra, intending to travel to Abarrach. Here, as he had learned from Alfred, the Sartan were practicing the ancient and forbidden art of necromancy.

"If," Samah reasoned, "I could bring the dead back to life, we would have a force strong enough to defeat the dragon-snakes, and once again rule the four worlds."

Samah never lived to learn the art of raising the dead. He was captured, along with a strange old Sartan who called himself Zifnab, by their ancient enemy the Patryns, who had accompanied their lord Xar to Abarrach. Xar was there also to learn the art of necromancy. He ordered Samah executed, then attempted to raise the Sartan's body through magical means.

Xar's plan was thwarted. Samah's soul was freed by an undead Sartan named Jonathon, of whom the prophecy says, "He will bring life to the dead, hope to the living, and for him the Gate will open."

Following the departure of Samah from Chelestra, the other Sartan remaining on the Chalice—the only stable piece of land in the water-bound world—have been waiting impatiently, and with growing anxiety, for his return.

"The Councillor has been gone well past the time he himself set. We can no longer function leaderless. I urge you, Ramu, to accept your father's position of Head of the Council of Seven."

Ramu glanced around at each of the other six members. "Is this what you all think? Are you all of one mind?"

"We are." They spoke in nods and words. [3]

Ramu had been carved from the same cold stone as Samah, his father. Not much could warm either man. Hard and unyielding, Ramu would shatter before he would bend. It was never twilight in Ramu's vision—it was day or night. The sun shone brightly or darkness engulfed his world. And even when the sun shone, it cast shadows.

But he was basically a good man, honorable, a devoted father, friend, and husband. And if his worry over his own father's disappearance was not etched on the rock-hard surface of his face, it had been burned deep within.

"Then I accept," Ramu said. Glancing around the group again, he added, "until such time as my father returns."

All on the Council gave agreement. To do otherwise would have been to disparage Samah.

Rising to his feet, his white robes brushing softly against the surface of the floor—a surface that was still cold and damp to the touch, despite the fact that the flood-waters had receded—Ramu moved from his seat at the end of the table to take his place in the chair in the center.

The other members of the Council of Seven re-

3 The leadership of the Council is not hereditary, just as membership on the Council is not hereditary. The seven chosen to serve on the Council, the governing body of the Sartan, elect one of themselves to serve as leader. Just how the seven themselves were chosen in those early days is not known, was kept secret by the Sartan, who undoubtedly feared some Patryn might attempt to influence the decision.

Ramu was servitor to the Council—aposition required before one can become a member. Either Ramu was promoted to full Council member during the emergency period when the mensch flooded the dty or he took over his exiled mother's Council post.

arranged themselves to suit, three sitting on Ramu's left and three on his right.

"What business is brought before the Council this day?" Ramu asked.

One of the members stood up. "The mensch have returned a third time to sue for peace, Councillor. They have asked to meet with the Council."

"We have no need to meet with them. For a peaceful settlement, they must meet our terms, as given to them by my father. They know what those are, I believe?"

"Yes, Councillor. The mensch either move off the Chalice, move off our lands which they usurped by force, or they agree to swear fealty to us, to permit themselves to be governed by us."

"And what is their answer to these terms?"

"They will not leave the lands they have taken, Councillor. To be quite fair, they have nowhere else to go. Their former homelands, the seamoons, are now locked in ice."

"They could climb in those boats of theirs and sail after the sun, go search for new homelands."

"They see no need for such a traumatic upheaval in their lives, Councillor. There is land enough for all here on the Chalice. They cannot understand why they cannot settle it."

The Sartan's tone implied that he could not quite understand it, either. Ramu frowned, but at that moment, another Council member rose, asked leave to speak.

"To be fair to the mensch, Councillor," she said deferentially, "they are ashamed of their past actions and are quite willing to ask our forgiveness and be friends. They have made improvements to the land, begun to build homes, establish businesses. I've seen these myself."

"Indeed, Sister?" Ramu's face darkened. "You have traveled among them?"

"Yes, Councillor. It was at their invitation. I saw no harm and the other members agreed with me. You were not available—"

"What's done is done, Sister." Ramu coldly ended the discussion. "Please continue. What have the mensch done to our land?"

No one missed the emphasis on the pronoun.

The Sartan nervously cleared her throat. "The elves have settled near the seashore. Their cities are going to be extraordinarily beautiful, Councillor, with dwellings made of coral. The humans have settled farther inland, in the forests which they love, but with access to the sea, granted them by the elves. The dwarves have moved into caverns in the mountains in the interior. They are mining the minerals, raising goats and sheep. They have set up forges—"

"Enough!" Ramu's face was livid with anger. "I've heard enough. They have set up forges, you say. Forges to make weapons of steel which they will use to attack either us or their neighbors. The peace of our lives will be shattered, just as it was long ago. The mensch are quarrelsome, violent children who need our direction and control."

The Council member was inclined to argue. "But they appear to be living quite peacefully—"

Ramu waved his hand, brushed her words away. "The mensch may get along for a time, particularly if they have some new toy to keep them occupied. But their own history shows that they cannot be trusted. They will either agree to live by our rules, under our laws, or they can depart."

The Sartan glanced uncertainly around the Council. The other members indicated with nods that she was to continue. "Then ... uh ... the mensch have given me their terms for peace, Councillor."

"Their terms!" Ramu was amazed. "Why should we bother to listen to their terms?"

"They consider that they won a victory over us, Councillor," said the Sartan. She flushed beneath Ramu's baleful gaze. "And it must be admitted that they could do the very same thing to us again. They control the floodgates. They could open them at any time, flood us out. The seawater is devastating to our magic. Some of us have only just recently regained complete use of our power. Without our magic, we are more helpless than the mensch—"

"Mind what you say, Sister!" Ramu warned.

"I speak the truth, Councillor," the Sartan returned quietly. "You cannot deny it."

Ramu did not argue. His hands, lying flat on the table, drew inward; the fingers curled over nothing. The stone table was cold, smelled wet and musty. "What about my father's suggestion? Have we made any attempt to destroy these floodgates, seal them shut?"

"The floodgates are far below water level, Councillor. We cannot reach them, and even if we could, our magic would be rendered powerless by the water itself. Besides—~~her~~ voice lowered—"Who knows but that the evil dragon-snakes are down there still, lying in wait."

"Perhaps," Ramu said, but would add nothing further. He knew, because his father had told him before he left, that the dragon-snakes had entered Death's Gate, had left Chelestra, taken their evil to other worlds . . .

. . . "This is my fault, my son," Samah said. "One reason I travel to Abarrach is in hopes of making reparation, of finding the means to destroy the dread serpents. I begin to think—~~he~~ hesitated, glanced at his son from beneath lowered eyelids—"I begin to think that Alfred was right all along. The true evil is here. We created it."

His father placed his hand over his own heart.

Ramu did not understand. "Father, how can you say that? Look at what you created! It is not evil."

Ramu gestured, a broad and sweeping motion that included not only the buildings and ground and trees and gardens of the Chalice, but the world of water itself, and beyond that, the worlds of air and fire and stone.

Samah looked where his son had pointed. "I see only what we destroyed," he said.

Those were his last words, before he walked through Death's Gate.

"Farewell, my father," Ramu called after him. "When you return triumphant, with legions marching behind you, your spirits will lift." . . .

But Samah had not returned. And there had been no word of him.

And now, though Ramu was loath to admit it, the mensch had to all intents and purposes conquered the gods. Conquered us! Their superiors! Ramu could see no way out of the present difficulty. Since the floodgates were under the magic-nullifying water, the Sartan could not destroy the floodgates with magic. We might resort to mechanical means. In the Sartan library are books which tell how, in ancient days, men manufactured powerful explosive devices.

But Ramu could not fool himself. He lifted his hands, turned them palm up, stared at them. The palms were soft and smooth, the fingers long and shapely. A conjurer's hands, taught to handle the insubstantial. Not a craftsman's. The clumsiest dwarf could manufacture in an eyeblink what it would take Ramu long hours of toil to produce with nothing but his hands.

"We might, after cycles and cycles, produce something mechanical capable of closing or blocking off the floodgates. But at that point we have become mensch," Ramu said to himself. "Better to just open the floodgates and let the water rush in!"

It was then that the thought occurred to him. Perhaps we should leave. Let the mensch have this world. Let them look after themselves. Let them destroy each other, as so Alfred had reported the mensch were doing on other worlds.

Let the unruly and ungrateful children come home to find that their long-suffering parents have gone.

He was suddenly conscious of the other Council members exchanging glances, their expressions anxious, worried. He realized, too late, that his dark thoughts had been reflected on his face. His expression hardened. To leave now was to give up, surrender, admit defeat. He would sooner drown in that blue-green water.

"Either the mensch abandon the Chalice or agree to place themselves under our control. Those are their only two options. I assume the rest of the Council agrees with me?" Ramu glanced around.

The rest of the Council did agree, at least by voice. Any disagreement or dissent was not spoken aloud. This was no time for disunity.

"If the mensch refuse to meet these terms," Ramu continued, frowning, speaking slowly and distinctly, his gaze fixing in turn on each person in the room, "there will be consequences. Dire consequences. You may tell them that."

The Council members appeared more hopeful, relieved. Obviously, their Councillor had a plan. They delegated one of their number to speak to the mensch, then moved on to other business, such as cleaning up damage left by the floodwaters. When there were no other matters left to consider, the Council voted to adjourn. Most of them went about their business, but a few lingered behind, talking with Ramu, hoping to discover some hint of what the Councillor had in mind.

Ramu was expert at keeping his own counsel. He gave away nothing, and the other Council members at length departed. Ramu remained seated at the table, glad to be alone with his thoughts, when he suddenly realized he wasn't alone.

A strange Sartan had entered the room.

The man looked familiar, but was not immediately recognizable. Ramu regarded him intently, trying to place him. Several hundred Sartan lived on the Chalice. A good politician, Ramu knew them all by sight and could generally put a name to a face. It disturbed him that he couldn't remember this one. Yet he was positive he'd seen this man before.

Ramu rose politely to his feet. "Good day, sir. If you have come to present a petition to the Council, you are too late. We have adjourned."

The Sartan smiled and shook his head. He was a man of middle age, handsome, with a receding hairline, strong jaw and nose, sad and thoughtful eyes.

"I come in time, then," the Sartan said, "for I have come to talk to you, Councillor. If you are Ramu, son of Samah and Orlah?"

Ramu frowned, annoyed by this reference to his mother. She had been exiled for crimes against the people; her name was never to be spoken. He was about to make some comment on this when it occurred to him that perhaps the strange Sartan (what was his name!) did not know of Orlah's exile to the Labyrinth, in the company of the heretic Alfred. Gossip had undoubtedly spread the word, but, Ramu was forced to admit, this dignified stranger did not look the type to indulge in whispers over the back fence,

Ramu bit back his irritation, made no comment. He answered the question with a slight emphasis that should have given the stranger a clue. "I am Ramu, son of Samah."

At that point, Ramu was faced with a problem. Asking the man's name was not a politic move, would reveal that Ramu did not remember him. There were diplomatic ways around this, but being generally a blunt and forthright man—Ramu could think of none at the moment.

The strange Sartan, however, settled the matter. "You don't remember me, do you, Ramu?"

Ramu flushed, was about to make some polite reply, but the Sartan went on.

"Not surprising. We met long, long, long ago. Before the Sundering. I was a member of the original Council. A good friend of your father's."

Ramu's mouth sagged open. He did remember now ... in a way. He remembered something disquieting in regard to this man. But what was of more immediate interest was the fact that this Sartan was obviously not a citizen of Chelestra. Which meant he had come from another world.

"Arianus," said the Sartan with a smile. "World of air. Stasis sleep. Much like you and your people, I believe."

"I am pleased to know you again, sir," Ramu said, trying to clear his confusion, recall what he knew about this man, and, at the same time, revel in the newfound hope the stranger brought. There were Sartan alive on Arianus!

"I trust you will not be insulted, but it has been, as you say, a long time. Your name . . ."

"You may call me James," said the Sartan.

Ramu eyed him distrustfully. "James is not a Sartan name."

"No, you're right. But as a compatriot of mine must have told you, we on Arianus are not accustomed to using our true Sartan names. I believe you have met Alfred?"

"The heretic? Yes, I've met him." Ramu was grim. "I think it only fair to warn you that he was exiled . . ."

Something stirred in Ramu, a distant memory, not of Alfred. Further back, much further back in time.

He had almost grasped it, but before he could lay hands on the memory, the strange Sartan unraveled it.

James was nodding gravely. "Always a troublemaker, was Alfred. I'm not surprised to hear of his downfall. But I didn't come to speak of him. I came on a far sadder mission. I am the bearer of unhappy news and evil tidings."

"My father," Ramu said, forgetting everything else. "You come with news of my father."

"I am sorry to have to tell you this." James drew near to Ramu, placed a firm hand on the younger man's arm. "Your father is dead."

Ramu bowed his head. He didn't for a moment doubt the stranger's words. He'd known, deep inside, for some time.

"How did he die?"

The Sartan grew more grave, troubled. "He died in the dungeons of Abarrach, at the hands of one who calls himself Xar, Lord of the Patryns."

Ramu went rigid. He could not speak for long moments; then he asked, in a low voice, "How do you know this?"

"I was with him," James said softly, now intently regarding the young man. "I was myself captured by Lord Xar."

"And you escaped? But not my father?" Ramu glowered.

"I am sorry, Councillor. A friend assisted me to escape. Help came too late for your father. By the time we reached him . . ." James sighed.

Ramu was overcome by darkness. But anger soon burned away his grief—anger and hatred and the desire for revenge.

"A friend helped you. Then there are Sartan living on Abarrach?"

"Oh, yes," James replied, with a cunning look. "Many Sartan on Abarrach. Their leader is called Balthazar. I know that is not a Sartan name," he added quickly, "but you must remember that these Sartan are twelfth-generation. They have lost or forgotten many of the old ways."

"Yes, of course," Ramu muttered, not giving the matter further thought. "And you say that this Lord Xar is also living on Abarrach. This can only mean one thing."

James nodded gravely. "The Patryns are attempting to break out of the Labyrinth—such are the evil tidings I bear. They have launched an assault on the Final Gate."

Ramu was appalled. "But there must be thousands of them . . ."

"At least," James replied complacently. "It will take all your people, plus the Sartan of Abarrach—"

"to stop this evil!" Ramu concluded, fist clenched.

"To stop this evil," James repeated, adding solemnly,

"You must go at once to the Labyrinth. It's what your father would have wanted, I think."

"Certainly." Ramu's mind was racing ahead. He forgot all about where he might have met this man, under what circumstances. "And this time, we will not be merciful to our enemy. That was my father's mistake."

"Samah has paid for his mistakes," James said quietly, "and he has been forgiven."

Ramu paid no attention. "This time, we will not shut the Patryns up in a prison. This time, we will destroy them utterly."

He turned on his heel, was about to leave, when he remembered his manners. He faced the elder Sartan. "I thank you, sir, for bringing this news. You may rest assured my father's death will be avenged. I must go now, to discuss this with the other members of the Council, but I will send one of the servitors to you. You will be a guest in my house. Is there anything else I can do to make you comfortable?"

"Not necessary," said James, with a wave of his hand. "Go along to the Labyrinth. I'll manage on my own."

Ramu felt again that same sense of unease and disquiet. He did not doubt the information the strange Sartan had brought to him. One Sartan cannot lie to another. But there was something not quite right . . . What was it about this man?

James stood unmoving, smiling beneath Ramu's scrutiny.

Ramu gave up trying to remember. It was probably nothing, after all. Nothing important. Besides, it had all happened long ago. Now he had more urgent, more immediate problems. Bowing, he left the Council Chamber.

The strange Sartan remained standing in the room, staring after the departed man. "Yes, you remember me, Ramu. You were among the guards who came to arrest me that day, the day of the Sundering. You came to drag me to the Seventh Gate. I told Samah I was going to stop him, you see. He was afraid of me. Not surprising. He was afraid of everything by then."

James sighed.

Walking over to the stone table, he traced his finger through the dust. Despite the recent flood, the dust continued to drift down from the ceiling, coating every object in the Chalice with a thin, fine, white powder.

"But I was gone when you arrived, Ramu. I chose to stay behind. I couldn't stop the Sundering, and so I tried to protect those you left behind. But I couldn't do anything to help them. There were too many dying. I wasn't of much use to anyone then.

"But I am now."

The Sartan's aspect changed, altered. The handsome middle-aged man evolved, transformed in an instant into an old man with a long, scraggly beard, wearing mouse-colored robes and a battered, shapeless hat. The old man stroked his beard, looked extremely proud of himself.

"Pig's breakfast, indeed! Just wait till you hear what I've done now! I handled that just exactly right. Did exactly what you told me, you elongated toad of a dragon . . .

"That is"—Zifnab thoughtfully tugged at his beard—"I believe I did what you said. 'At all costs, get Ramu to the Labyrinth.' Yes, those were your exact words . . .

"I think those were the exact words. Urn, now that I recall . . ." The old man began to twist his beard into knots. "Perhaps it was 'At all costs, keep Ramu away from the Labyrinth'? . . .

"I've got the 'at all costs' bit down pat." Zifnab appeared to take some comfort from this fact. "It's the part that comes after I'm a bit muddled on. Maybe . . . Maybe I just better pop back and check the script."

Mumbling to himself, the old man walked into a wall and vanished.

A Sartan, happening to enter the Council Chamber at that moment, was startled to hear a grim voice saying gloomily, "What have you done now, sir?"

## CHAPTER 7

### THE LABYRINTH

THE BLUE-GREEN DRAGON OF PRYAN ROSE HIGH ABOVE THE treetops. Alfred glanced down at the ground once, shuddered, and resolved to look anywhere except that direction. Somehow, flying had been different when he'd been the one with the wings. He gripped the dragon's scales more tightly. Trying to take his mind off the fact that he was perched precariously and unsteadily on the back of a dragon, soaring far, far above solid ground, Alfred searched for the source of the wondrous sunlight. He knew it shone from the citadels, but those were located on Pryan. How was the light shining into the Labyrinth? Turning slowly and carefully, he risked peering back tentatively over his shoulder.

"The light shines from the Vortex," Vasu shouted. The headman was flying on another dragon. "Look, look toward the ruined mountain."

Sitting up as tall as he dared, clinging nervously to the dragon, Alfred stared in the direction indicated. He gasped in awe.

It was as if a sun burned deep within the mountain's heart. Shafts of brilliant light beamed from every crack, every crevice, illuminated the sky, poured over the land. The light touched Abri's gray walls, causing them to glisten silver. The trees that had lived so long in the gray day of the Labyrinth seemed to lift their twisted limbs to this new dawn, as an aged man reaches aching fingers to a warm fire.

But, Alfred saw sadly, the light did not penetrate far into the Labyrinth. It was a tiny candle flame in the vast darkness; nothing more. And soon the darkness consumed it.

Alfred watched for as long as he could, until the light was blotted out by mountains, rising jagged and sharp, like bony hands thrust into his face to prohibit hope. He sighed, turned away, and saw the fiery red glow on the horizon ahead.

"What is that?" he called. "Do you know?"

Vasu shook his head. "It began the night after the attack on Abri. In that direction lies the Final Gate."

"I saw the elves burn a walled city on the Volkaran Islands," Hugh the Hand said, dark eyes squinting to see. "Flames leapt from house to house. The heat was so intense, some buildings exploded before the fire even reached them. At night, the blaze fit up the sky. It looked very much like that."

"It is undoubtedly magical fire, created by my lord to drive off the dragon-snakes," Marit said coolly.

Alfred sighed. How could she continue to have faith in Lord Xar? Her hair was gummed together with her own blood, drawn by Xar when he obliterated the sigil which had joined them together. Perhaps that was the reason. She and Xar had been in communication. She was the one who had betrayed them to Xar, had told him their location. Perhaps, somehow, Xar continued to exert his influence over her.

"I should have stopped her at the very beginning," he said to himself. "I saw that sigil when I brought her into the Vortex. I knew what it meant. I should have warned Haplo she would betray him."

And then, as usual, Alfred began to argue with himself. "But Marit saved Haplo's life in Chelestra. It was obvious she loved him. And he loved her. They brought love into a prison house of hate. How could I slam shut the door against it? Yet maybe if I had told him, he could have protected himself ... I don't know." Alfred sighed bleakly. "I don't know ... I did what I thought was best . . . And who can say? Perhaps her faith in her lord will be justified."

The blue-green dragons of Pryan flew on through the Labyrinth, circling around the tall mountains, diving through the passes. As they drew nearer the Final Gate, they dipped low, barely skimming the treetops, hiding as best they could from watchful eyes. The darkness grew deeper, an unnatural darkness, for nightfall was some hours distant. This darkness affected not only the eyes, but the heart and the mind as well. An evil, magical darkness, cast by the dragon-snakes, it brought with it the ages-old fear of night we first know as children. It spoke of unknown, hideous things lurking just beyond sight, ready to leap out and drag us off.

Marit's face, bathed in the light of her own warning rune-glow, was pale and strained. The blood on her forehead looked black by contrast. Hugh the Hand constantly turned to stare around.

"We're being watched," he warned.

Alfred cringed at the words, which seemed to bounce back from the darkness in laughing, mocking echoes. Crouching, trying to hide behind the dragon's neck, Alfred grew faint—his preferred form of defense. He knew the signs, and he fought against them: lightheaded, his stomach crawling, his forehead beaded with sweat. He pressed his face against the dragon's cool scales and closed his eyes.

But being blind was worse than seeing, because suddenly Alfred had the vivid memory of falling from the air, spiraling downward, too weak and wounded to stop his descent. The ground spun crazily, soared up to meet him . . .

A hand shook him.

Alfred gasped, jerked upright.

"You damn near fell off," Hugh the Hand told him. "You aren't planning to faint, are you?"

"No-no," Alfred murmured.

"Good thing," the Hand said. "Take a look ahead."

Alfred sat up, wiped the chill sweat from his face. It took a moment for the fog of dizziness to clear from his eyes, and at first he had no idea what it was he was seeing. The darkness was so intense, and now it was mingled with a choking smoke . . .

Smoke. Alfred stared, all things coming into terrible focus.

The city of the Nexus, the beautiful city built by the Sartan for their enemies, was ablaze.

The dragons of Pryan were not affected by the dragon-snakes' magical darkness. They flew through it unerringly, keeping to their destination, whatever that might be. Alfred had no idea where he was being taken, nor did he much care. It would be horrible, wherever it was. Sick at heart, terrified, he longed to turn around, flee back to the bright light shining from the mountain.

"It is a good thing I am riding on the back of this dragon," Vasu said somberly, his voice coming out of the darkness. The runes on his skin glimmered brightly, red and blue. "Otherwise, I would not have had the courage to come this far."

"It shames me to say it, Headman," Marit said in a low voice, "but I feel the same."

"No shame," said the dragon. "The fear grows from seeds planted within you by the serpents. Fear's roots seek out every dark part of you, every memory, every nightmare, and, once found, the roots sink into those dark parts and drink deep. Fear's evil plant flourishes."

"How can I destroy it?" Alfred quavered.

"You cannot," said the dragon. "Fear is a part of you. The serpents know this and that is why they use it. Don't let fear overwhelm you. Don't become afraid of the fear."

"Just what I've been all my life!" Alfred said miserably.

"Not all your life," the dragon said—and it might have been Alfred's imagination, but he thought he could see the dragon smile.

Marit gazed down at the buildings of the Nexus, their walls and pillars, towers and spires now black skeletons, lit from within by the devouring flames. The buildings were made of stone, but the support beams and floors and walls within were wood. The stone was protected by runes, wrought by the Sartan, strengthened by the Patryns. Marit wondered at first how the city could have fallen; then she remembered the walls of Abri. They, too, had been protected by the rune-magic. The serpents had thrown themselves bodily against the walls, causing small cracks to form, cracks that widened and spread until they broke apart the runes, tore apart the magic.

The Nexus. Marit had never considered the city beautiful. She had always thought of it in terms of practicality, as did most Patryns. Its walls were thick and sound, its streets well laid and smooth, its buildings strong and solid and sturdy. Now, by the light of the fire that was destroying it, she noticed its beauty, the grace and delicacy of its tall spires, the harmonious simplicity of its design. Even as she watched, one of the spires toppled and fell, sending up a shower of sparks and a cloud of smoke.

Marit despaired. Her lord could not have let this happen. He could not be here. Or if he was, he must now be dead. All her people must now be dead.

"Look!" Vasu cried suddenly. "The Final Gate! It's still open! We're holding it!"

Marit dragged her gaze from the burning city, stared through the smoke and darkness, trying to see. The dragons tipped their wings, turned, started to descend from the sky in large spirals.

Patryns on the ground below lifted their faces upward. Marit was too far away to see their expressions, but she guessed by their actions what thoughts were running through their minds. The arrival of a vast army of winged beasts could only mean one thing—defeat. The death blow.

Understanding their fear, Vasu began to sing; his voice—using Sartan rune-language—carried clearly through the smoke and the flame-lit darkness.

Marit couldn't understand the words; she had the feeling they weren't meant to be understood. But they lifted her heart. The horrible terror that had almost suffocated her in its choking grasp shriveled and lost some of its strength.

The Patryns on the ground below stared up in wonder. Vasu's song was echoed by Patryn voices, shouting encouragement and war chants. The dragons flew low, allowing their passengers to jump off. Then the dragons returned to the skies, some circling, keeping watch, others departing, scouring the area for the enemy or flying back to the interior of the Labyrinth, to bring more Patryns to the battlefield.

Between the Labyrinth and the Nexus stood a wall covered with Sartan runes—runes strong enough to kill anything that touched them. The wall was immense, stretching from one mountain range to another in an irregular gigantic semicircle. Barren plains extended from the wall on both sides. The city of the Nexus offered life on one side; the dark forests of the Labyrinth offered death on the other.

Those in the Labyrinth who came within sight of the Final Gate faced their most terrible challenge in trying to reach it. The plains were a no-man's-land, bare of any cover, providing an enemy a clear view of anyone attempting to cross. Here was the Labyrinth's last chance to hang on to its victims. Here, on this plain, Marit had nearly died. Here her lord had rescued her.

Flying over the ground that had been churned up and blasted by magic and battle, Marit searched the crowd of weary, bloodied Patryns, looking for Xar. He must be here. He must! The wall stood, the Gate held. Only her lord could have performed such powerful magic.

But if he was in the crowd, she couldn't find him.

The dragon settled to the ground, the Patryns giving it a wide berth, regarding it with dark looks, wary suspicion. The dragon carrying Vasu also landed, both dragons remaining, while the rest returned to the skies and their duties.

The howls of wolfen reverberated from the forests, punctuated by the unnerving clicking sounds made by the chaodyn before a fight. Numerous red dragons flew through the smoke, their scales reflected in the flames of the burning city, but they didn't attack. To her astonishment, Marit saw no sign of the serpents.

But she knew they were near; the sigla on her skin flared almost as brightly as the fire.

The Abri Patryns banded together, waited silently for orders from their headman. Vasu had gone to make himself known to the Patryns at the Gate. Marit accompanied him, still searching for Lord Xar. They passed by Alfred, who was gazing sadly at the wall, wringing his hands.

"We built this monstrous prison," he was lamenting softly. "We built this!" He shook his head. "We have much for which to answer. Much."

"Yes, but not now!" Marit chided him. "I don't want to have to explain to my people what a Sartan is doing here. Not that my people would likely give me much chance to explain before they ripped you apart. You and Hugh keep out of sight, as much as possible."

"I understand," Alfred said unhappily.

"Hugh, keep an eye on him," Marit ordered. "And for all our sakes, keep control of that cursed knife!"

The Hand nodded in silence. His gaze was taking in everything about his surroundings, revealing nothing of his thoughts. He put his hand over the Cursed Blade, as if endeavoring to restrain it.

Vasu strode across the burned and blasted plains, his people remaining silently behind him, showing him respect and support. A woman left the group of Patryns guarding the Gate, walked to meet him.

Marit's heart lurched. She knew this woman! They had lived near each other in the Nexus. Marit was tempted to rush forward, demand to know where Xar was, demand to know where he had taken the wounded Haplo.

She choked back her need. To speak to the woman before Vasu would be a serious discourtesy. The woman, rightly, would rebuff Marit, would refuse to answer her questions. Containing herself, Marit kept as close to Vasu as possible. She glanced back worriedly at Alfred, fearful he would give himself away. He remained on the fringes of the crowd, Hugh the Hand beside him. Nearby, alone, stood the gentleman dressed in black. The blue-green dragon of Pryan had disappeared.

"I am Headman Vasu of the village of Abri." Vasu touched his heart-rune. "A village several gates from here. These are my people."

"You and your people are welcome, Headman Vasu, though you come here only to die," said the woman.

"We will die in good company," Vasu responded politely.

"I am Usha," the woman said, touching her heart-rune. "Our headman is dead. More than one are dead," she added, her voice grim, her gaze going to the Gate. "The people have turned to me to lead them." [1]

Usha had many gates, as the saying went. Her hair was streaked with gray, her skin wrinkled. But she was strong, in far better physical condition than Vasu. She was, in fact, regarding him with drawn brows and a doubtful look.

"What beasts are these you have brought with you?" she demanded, her gaze going to the dragons wheeling in the sky above them. "I have never seen their like in the Labyrinth before."

"You have obviously never been to our part of the Labyrinth before, Usha," Vasu said.

She frowned, recognizing the answer as evasive. Marit had been wondering how Vasu was going to explain the dragons. One Patryn could not lie outright to another, but certain truths could be kept concealed. It

1 If a headman dies during battle, another member of the tribe may take over for the duration of the emergency. Usha is technically headman, but may not lay claim to the title, which can only be awarded by the tribal council. At that time, any challenges to the new headman's rule are accepted.

would take a long time to explain the presence of the dragons of Pryan, even if he could.

"You are saying that these creatures come from your part of the Labyrinth, Headman?"

"They do now," Vasu answered gravely. "You need not worry about them, Usha. They are under our control. They are immensely powerful and will aid us in our battle. In fact, these dragons may very well save us."

Usha crossed her arms over her chest. She did not appear convinced, but to argue further would be to challenge Vasu's authority, perhaps might be taken as a challenge to his right to rule. With several hundred Patrins backing him, obviously supporting him loyally, to do such a thing during this time of turmoil would be foolish.

Her stern expression relaxed. "I say again, you are welcome, Headman Vasu. You and your people and—" She hesitated, then said with a grudging smile, "these you call your dragons. As for saving us . . ." Her smile vanished. She sighed, glanced back at the fire raging in the Nexus. "I do not think there is much hope of that."

"What is your situation?" Vasu asked.

The two leaders withdrew to talk. At this point, the tribes were free to mingle with each other. The Patrins of Abri advanced. They had brought with them weapons, food, water, and other supplies. They offered their own healing strength, to renew those in need.

Marit cast another worried glance at Alfred. He was, fortunately, keeping to himself and out of trouble. She noticed that Hugh had a firm grip on the Sartan's arm. The gentleman in black was no longer anywhere in sight. Her mind at ease about Alfred, Marit trailed after Usha and Vasu, anxious to hear what they said.

". . . serpents attacked us at dawn," Usha was saying. "Their numbers were immense. They struck the city of the Nexus first. Their intent was to trap us in the city, destroy us there, then, when we were dead, they would seal shut the Final Gate. They made no secret of their plans, but told us, laughing, what they plotted. How they would trap our people in the Labyrinth, how the evil would grow . . ." Usha shuddered. "Their threats were terrible to hear."

"They want your fear," said Vasu. "It feeds them, makes them strong. What happened after that?"

"We fought them. The battle was hopeless. Our magical weapons are useless against such a powerful foe. The serpents hurled themselves bodily at the city walls, broke the runes, swarmed inside." Usha glanced

back at the burning buildings. "They could have destroyed us then, every one of us. But they didn't. They let most of us live. At first, we couldn't understand why. Why didn't they kill us, when they had the chance?"

"They wanted you inside the Labyrinth," Vasu guessed.

Usha nodded, her face grim. "We fled the city. The serpents drove us in this direction, murdering any who tried to elude them. We were caught between the terror of the Labyrinth and the terror of the serpents. Some of the people were half mad with fear. The serpents laughed and ringed us around, driving us closer and closer to the Gate. They picked off victims at random, increasing the terror and chaos.

"We entered the Gate. What choice did we have? Most of the people found the courage. Those who did not . . ." Usha fell silent. Lowering her head, she blinked her eyes rapidly, swallowed before she could speak again. "We heard them screaming for a long time."

Vasu was slow to reply, his own anger and pity choking his voice. Marit could remain silent no longer.

"Usha," she said desperately. "What of Lord Xar? He is here, isn't he?"

"He was here," replied Usha.

"Where has he gone? Was . . . was anyone with him?" Marit faltered, her skin flushing.

Usha eyed her, her expression dark. "As to where he has gone, I neither know nor care. He left us! Left us to die!" She spat on the ground. "That for Lord Xar!"

"No!" Marit murmured. "It's not possible."

"Was anyone with him? I don't know. I couldn't tell." Usha's lip curled. "Lord Xar was riding on a ship, a ship that flew in the air. And it was covered with those markings." She cast a scathing glance at the wall, the Gate. "The runes of our enemy!"

"Sartan runes?" Marit said, in sudden realization. "Then it couldn't have been Lord Xar you saw! It must have been a trick of the serpents! He would never fly a ship with Sartan runes. This proves it couldn't have been Xar!"

"On the contrary," said a voice. "I am afraid it proves it was Lord Xar."

Angry, Marit turned to face this new accusation. She was somewhat daunted to find the gentleman in black standing near her. He was regarding her with deep sorrow.

"Lord Xar left Pryan on just such a ship. It was of Sartan make and design—a vessel formed in the likeness of a dragon, with sails for wings?" The gentleman glanced questioningly at Usha.

She confirmed his description with an abrupt nod.

"It can't be!" Marit cried angrily. "My lord couldn't have gone off and left his people! Not when he saw what was happening! Not when he saw that the serpents had betrayed him! Did he say anything?"

"He said he would be back!" Usha snapped the words off bitterly. "And that our deaths would be avenged!"

Her eyes flashed; she glared distrustfully at Marit.

"This may help explain, Usha," said Vasu. Brushing Marit's tangled, blood-encrusted hair from her face, Vasu revealed the torn mark on her forehead.

Usha gazed at it; her expression softened.

"I see," she said. "I am sorry for you."

Turning away from Marit, Usha continued her conversation with Vasu.

"At my suggestion, our people ~~now~~ caught inside the Labyrinth again ~~have~~ concentrated their magic on defending the Final Gate. We are attempting to keep it open. If it shuts—" She shook her head grimly.

"That will be the end for us," Vasu agreed.

"The Sartan death-runes on the walls ~~so~~ long a curse ~~now~~ prove to be a blessing. After they drove us in here, the serpents discovered that they could not come through the Final Gate or even get near it. They attacked the wall, but the runes were one magic they could not destroy. Whenever they touch the runes, blue light crackles around them. They bellow in pain and back off. It does not kill them, but it seems to weaken them.

"Seeing this, we wove the same blue fire across the Final Gate. We cannot get out, but neither can the serpents seal shut the Gate. Frustrated, the serpents roamed for a while outside the walls. Then, suddenly, they mysteriously departed.

"And now the scouts report that other enemies ~~all~~ the creatures of the Labyrinth ~~are~~ massing in the forest behind us. Thousands of them."

"They'll attack from both directions, then," Vasu said. "Pin us against the wall."

"Crush us," said Usha.

"Perhaps not," said Vasu. "What if we . . ."

The two continued talking strategy, defense. Marit ceased to listen, wandered away. What did it all matter anyway? She had been so certain of Xar, so sure . . .

"What is happening?" Alfred asked worriedly. He had waited until she was alone to come talk to her. "What's going on? Where's Lord Xar?"

Marit said nothing. Instead, the gentleman in black answered. "Lord Xar has gone to Abarrach, as he said he would."

"And Haplo is with him?" Alfred's voice quivered.

"Yes, Haplo is with him," replied the gentleman softly.

"My lord has taken Haplo to Abarrach to heal him!" Marit glared at them, daring them to refute her.

Alfred was silent a moment; then he said quietly, "My way is clear. I will go to Abarrach. Perhaps I can . . ." He glanced at Marit. "Perhaps I can help," he finished lamely.

Marit knew all too well what he was thinking. She, too, saw the living corpses of Abarrach. Dead bodies transformed into mindless slaves. She remembered the torment in the unseeing eyes, the trapped soul peering out through its prison of rotting flesh . . . She saw Haplo . . .

She couldn't breathe. A yellow-tinged blackness blinded her. Gentle arms caught hold of her, steadied her. She gave in to their support, so long as the darkness lasted. When it began to recede, she pushed Alfred away from her.

"Leave me alone. I'm all right now," she muttered, ashamed of her weakness. "And if you're going to Abarrach, so am I."

She turned to the gentleman. "How do we travel there? We don't have a ship."

"You will find a vessel near Lord Xar's dwelling place," said the gentleman. "Or rather ~~his~~ former dwelling place. The serpents burned it."

"But they left a ship intact?" Marit was suspicious. "That doesn't make sense."

"Perhaps it does ~~to~~ them," the gentleman replied. "If you are resolved, you must leave quickly, before the serpents return. If they discover the Serpent Mage, and catch him out in the open, they will not hesitate to attack him."

"Where are the dragon-snakes?" Alfred asked nervously.

"They are leading the Patryn's enemies: wolfen, snogs, chaodyn, dragons. The armies of the Labyrinth are massing for a final assault."

"There aren't that many of us left to fight them." Marit wavered in her decision to leave, looking at her people, thinking of the vast numbers of the enemy.

"Reinforcements are already on the way," the gentleman said, with a reassuring smile. "And our serpent cousins won't be expecting to find us here. We will come as a nasty surprise to them. Between us, we can hold them off for a long time. As long as it takes," he added with a peculiar look at Alfred.

"What does that mean?" Alfred asked.

The gentleman rested his hand on Alfred's wrist, gazed at him intently. The dragon's eyes were blue-green as Pryan sky, as Chelestra's magic-ending water. "Remember, Coren, hope's light now shines into the Labyrinth. And it will continue to shine, though the Gate is shut."

"You're trying to tell me something, aren't you? Riddles, prophecies! I'm not good at this!" Alfred was sweating. "Why don't you just come out and say it? Tell me what I'm supposed to do!"

"So few people follow instructions these days," the gentleman said, shaking his head gloomily. "Even simple ones."

He patted Alfred's hand. "Still, we do what we can with what we have. Trust to your instincts."

"My instinct is usually to faint!" Alfred protested. "You expect me to do something grand and heroic. But I'm not the type. I'm only going to Abarrach to help a friend."

"Of course you are," said the gentleman softly, and he sighed and turned away.

Marit heard the sigh echo inside her, reminding her of the echo of the trapped souls of Abarrach's living dead.

## CHAPTER 8

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

ABARRACH#WORLD OF FIRE, WORLD OF STONE. WORLD OF the dead. And of the dying.

In the dungeons of Necropolis, dead city of a dead world, Haplo lay dying.

He lay on a stone bed, his head pillowed on stone. It was not comfortable, but Haplo was past the need for comfort. He had been in terrible pain, but the worst of the pain was gone now. He could feel nothing except

the burning pull of every ragged breath, each breath more difficult to draw in than the previous. He was a little afraid of that last breath, the final spasmodic gasp that would not sustain his life; the choke, the rattle. He imagined it, feared it would be similar to the time on Chelestra when he had thought he was drowning.

Then he had drawn water into his lungs and the water had been life-giving. Now he would draw in nothing. He would struggle to keep away the darkness, a struggle terrifying, but mercifully brief.

And his lord was here beside him. Haplo was not alone.

"This is not easy for me, my son," Xar said.

He was not being sarcastic, or ironic. He was truly grieving. He sat beside Haplo's hard bed and the lord's shoulders were stooped, his head bowed. He looked far older than his many, many years. His eyes, watching Haplo die, shimmered with unshed tears.

Xar could have killed Haplo, but he didn't.

Xar could have saved Haplo's life, but he wasn't doing that either.

"You must die, my son," Xar said. "I dare not let you live. I cannot trust you. You are more valuable to me dead than you are alive. And so I must let you die. But I cannot kill you. I gave you life. Yes, I suppose that this makes it my right to take that life away. But I cannot. You were one of the best. And I loved you. I still love you. I would save you if only ... if only . . ."

Xar did not finish.

Haplo said nothing, made no argument, no plea for his life. He knew the pain this must cause his lord and he knew that if there were any way, Xar would spare him. But there wasn't. Xar was right. The Lord of the Nexus could no longer trust his "son." Haplo would fight him and continue to fight until, as now, he had no more strength left.

Xar would be a fool to give Haplo back that strength. Once Haplo was dead, his corpse—poor mindless, soulless shell—would be at Xar's command. Haplo—the living, breathing, thinking Haplo—would not.

"There is no other way," Xar said, his thoughts running parallel with Haplo's, as they often did. "I must let you die. You understand, my son. I know you do. You will serve me in death, as you did in life. Only better. Only better."

The Lord of the Nexus sighed. "But this is still not easy for me. You understand that, too, don't you, my son?"

"Yes," Haplo whispered. "I understand."

And so the two remained together in the darkness of the dungeon. It was quiet; very, very quiet. Xar had ordered all the other Patrins to leave them alone. The only sounds were Haplo's shuddering breaths; Xar's occasional question; Haplo's whispered answers.

"Do you mind talking?" Xar asked. "If it pains you, I will not press you."

"No, Lord. I don't feel any pain. Not anymore."

"A sip of water, to ease the dryness."

"Yes, Lord. Thank you."

Xar's touch was cool. His hand smoothed back Haplo's sweat-damp hair from his feverish forehead. He lifted Haplo's head, held a cup of water to the dying man's lips. Gently, the lord laid Haplo back down on the stone.

"That city in which I found you, the city of Abri. A city in the Labyrinth. And I never knew it was there. Not surprising, of course, since it was in the very heart of the Labyrinth. Abri has been there a long, long time, I assume, judging by its size."

Haplo nodded. He was very tired, but it was comforting to hear his lord's voice. Haplo had a dim recollection of being a boy riding on his father's back. The boy's small arms wrapped around muscular shoulders, small head drooping. He could hear his father's voice and feel it at the same time, feel it resonate in his chest. He could hear his lord's voice and feel it at the same time an odd sensation, as if it were coming to him through the cold hard stone.

"Our people are not city-builders," Xar commented.

"The Sartan," Haplo whispered.

"Yes, so I judged. The Sartan who, long ago, defied Samah and the Council of Seven. They were punished for their defiance, sent to the Labyrinth with their enemies. And we did not turn on them and kill them. I find that strange."

"Not so strange," said Haplo, thinking of Alfred.

Not when two people have to fight to survive in a terrible land that is intent on destroying them both. He and Alfred had survived only by helping each other. Now Alfred was in the Labyrinth, in Abri, perhaps helping Haplo's people to survive.

"This Vasu, the leader of Abri, a Sartan, isn't he?" Xar continued. "Part Sartan, at least. Yes, I thought so. I did not meet him, but I saw him on the fringes of my mind. Very powerful, very capable. A good leader. But ambitious, certainly. Especially now that he knows the world is not bounded by Abri's walls. He will want his share, I am afraid. Perhaps the whole of it. That is the Sartan in him. I can't permit it. He must be eradicated. And there may be more like him. All those of our people whose blood has been tainted by the Sartan. I am afraid they will seek to overthrow my rule."

I am afraid . . .

You are wrong, Lord, Haplo said silently. Vasu cares only for his people, not for power. He is not afraid. He is what you were, Lord. He will not become what you are afraid. You will rid yourself of Vasu, because you fear him. Then you will destroy all those Patryns who have Sartan ancestry. Then you will destroy the Patryns who were friends of those who have been destroyed. And at the end, there will be no one left but yourself—the person you fear most.

"The end is the beginning," Haplo murmured.

"What?" Xar leaned forward, sharp, intent. "What did you say, my son?"

Haplo had no recollection. He was in Chelestra, world of water, drifting in the seawater, sinking slowly beneath the waves, as he had done once before. Except that now he was no longer afraid. He was only a little sad, a little regretful. Leaving matters undone, unfinished.

But others were left to pick up what he had been forced to let fall. Alfred, bumbling, clumsy . . . golden, soaring dragon. Marit, beloved, strong. Their child . . . unknown. No, that was not quite true. He knew her. He'd seen her face . . . faces of his children . . . in the Labyrinth. All of these . . . drifting on the waves.

The wave bore him up, cradled him, rocked him. But he saw it as it had once been—a tidal wave, rising, rising to a fearful promontory, crashing down to engulf, deluge the world, split it apart.

Samah.

And then the ebb. Debris, wreckage, floating on the water. The survivors clinging to fragments until they found safe haven on strange shores. They flourished, for a time. But the wave must correct itself.

Slowly, slowly, the wave built again, in the opposite direction. A vast mountain of water, threatening to again crash down on and drown the world.

Xar.

Haplo struggled, briefly. It was hard—hard to leave. Especially now that he was finally beginning to understand . . .

Beginning. Xar was talking to him, cajoling him. Something about the Seventh Gate. A child's poem. End is the beginning.

A muffled whimper came from beneath the stone bed, was louder than Xar's voice. Haplo found just strength enough to move his hand. He felt a wet lick. He smiled, fondled the dog's silky ears.

"Our last journey together, boy," he said. "But no sausages . . ."

The pain was back. Bad. Very bad.

A hand took hold of his. A hand gnarled and old, strong and supportive.

"Easy, my son," said Xar, holding fast. "Rest easy. Give up the struggle. Let go . . ."

The pain was agony.

"Let go . . ."

Closing his eyes, Haplo sighed his last breath and sank beneath the waves.

## CHAPTER 9

### NECROPOLIS THE LABYRINTH

XAR CLASPED HIS HAND AROUND HAPLO'S WRIST. THE LORD kept his hand on the wrist even when he could no longer feel life pulsing through it. Xar sat silently, staring into the darkness, seeing nothing at first. And then, as time passed and the flesh in his fingers grew cool, Xar saw himself.

An old man, alone with his dead.

An old man, sitting in a dungeon cell far below the surface of a world that was its own tomb. An old man, head bowed, stoop-shouldered, grieving over his loss. Haplo. Dearer to him than any son he'd fathered. But more than Haplo.

Closing his eyes against the bitter darkness, Xar saw another darkness, the terrible darkness that had fallen over the Final Gate. He saw the faces of his people, lifted to him in hope. He saw that hope change to disbelief, then to fear in some, anger in others, before his ship swept him into Death's Gate.

He could remember a time, countless times, when he'd emerged from the Labyrinth, weary, wounded, but triumphant. His people, stern and taciturn, had not said much, but their very silence was eloquent. In their eyes he saw respect, love, admiration . . .

Xar looked into Haplo's eyes ~~wide open and staring~~ and the lord saw only emptiness.

Xar let fall Haplo's wrist. The lord gazed in dull despair around the dark cell.

"How have I come to this?" he asked himself. "How, from where I began, did I end up here?"

And he thought he heard, in the darkness, sibilant, hissing laughter.

Furious, Xar bounded to his feet. "Who is there?" he called.

No reply, but the sounds ceased.

His moment of self-doubt was over, however. That hissing laughter had caused the emptiness to fill with rage.

"My people are disappointed in me now," Xar muttered to himself. He turned back, slowly and purposefully, to the corpse. "But when I rejoin them in victory, coming to them through the Seventh Gate, bringing to them a single world to conquer, to rule ~~then~~ they will revere me as never before!

"The Seventh Gate," Xar whispered, as he gently, tenderly, composed the body's limbs, folding the flaccid arms across the chest, stretching out the legs. Last, he shut the staring, empty eyes. "The Seventh Gate, my son. When you were a living man, you wanted to take me there. Now you will have the chance. And I will be grateful, my son. Do this for me, and I will grant you rest."

The flesh was cool beneath his fingers now. The heart-rune ~~with its dreadful, gaping wound~~ ~~was~~ beneath his hand. All he had to do was close the sigil, mend it, then work the magic of the necromancy on Haplo's corpse, on all the rest of the runes tattooed upon the body.

Xar rested his fingers on the heart-rune, the words of mending on his lips. Abruptly, he drew his hand back. His fingertips were stained with blood. His hand, which had always held firm in battle against his foes, began to tremble.

Again a sound, outside the cell. Not a hissing sound, but a shuffling. Xar turned, staring hard into the darkness. "I know you are there. I hear you. Are you spying on me? What do you want?"

In response, a figure advanced on the cell. It was one of the lazar, one of the frightful living dead of Abarrach. Xar eyed the shambling corpse suspiciously, thinking it might be Kleitus. Former Dynast of Abarrach, now a lazar, murdered by his own people, the Sartan Kleitus would have been quite happy to return the favor by murdering Xar. The lazar had tried arid failed, but was ever on the lookout for another opportunity.

This lazar was not Kleitus, however. Xar breathed an involuntary sigh. He was not afraid of Kleitus, but the Lord of the Nexus had other, more important matters to consider now. He did not presume to waste his magical talents fighting a dead man.

"Who are you? What do you want here?" Xar demanded testily. He thought he recognized the lazar, but could not be certain. One dead Sartan looked a great deal like another to the Patryn.

"My name is Jonathon," said the lazar.

". . . Jonathon . . ." came the echo that was the trapped soul, forever trying to free itself from the body.

"I come, not to you, but to him."

". . . to him . . ."

The lazar's strange eyes, which were sometimes the blank eyes of the dead and sometimes the pain-filled eyes of one living in torment, fixed on Haplo.

"The dead call to us," the lazar continued. "We hear their voices . . ."

". . . voices . . ." whispered the echo sadly.

"Well, this is one call you needn't bother to answer," Xar said sharply. "You may depart. I have need of this corpse myself."

"Perhaps you could use my assistance," the lazar offered.

". . . assistance . . ."

Xar started to rebuff the lazar, bid it be gone. Then he remembered that the last time he'd tried to use the necromancy on Samah's corpse, the spell had failed. Giving life to Haplo was far too important to Xar to take a chance. The lord glanced distrustfully at the lazar, doubting its motives.

All he saw was a being in torment, like every other lazar on Abarrach. The ghouls had only one ambition, so far as Xar knew, and that was to turn other beings into horrid copies of themselves.

"Very well," Xar said, his back to the lazar. "You may stay. But do not interfere unless you see me doing something wrong."

And that would not happen. The Lord of the Nexus was confident. This time, his spell would succeed.

The lord went resolutely back to work. Swiftly now, ignoring the blood on his hands, he closed the heart-rune on Haplo's body. Then, mindful of the spell, he began to trace over the other sigla, muttering the runes as he worked.

The lazar stood silent, unmoving, outside the cell door. Soon, concentrating solely on his spell-casting, Xar forgot all about the undead. He moved slowly, patiently, taking his time. Hours passed.

And suddenly, an eerie blue glow began to spread over the dead body. The glow started at the heart-rune, then spread slowly, one sigil catching fire from another. Xar's spell was causing each individual sigil to burn with a mockery of life.

The lord drew in a shivering breath. He was shaking with eagerness, elation. The spell was working! Working! Soon the body would rise to its feet, soon it would lead him to the Seventh Gate.

He lost all feeling, all pity, all grief. The man he'd loved as a son was dead. The corpse was no longer known to Xar. It was an it. A means to an end. A tool. A key to unlock the door of Xar's ambition. When the last sigil flared to life, Xar was so excited that, for a moment, he actually struggled to recall the corpse's name—an essential in the concluding moments of the spell.

"Haplo," said the lazar softly.

". . . Haplo . . ." sighed the echo.

The name seemed whispered by the darkness. Xar never noticed who spoke it, nor did he notice the scrabbling, scuffling sound that came from behind the stone bier on which the corpse lay.

"Haplo!" Xar said. "Of course. I must be wearier than I thought. When this is done, I shall rest. I will need all my strength to work the magic of the Seventh Gate."

The Lord of the Nexus paused, going over everything one last time in his mind. All was perfect. He had not made a single error, as was evidenced by the shimmering blue of the runes on the dead body.

Xar raised his hands. "You will serve me in death, Haplo, as you served me in life. Stand. Walk. Return to the land of the living."

The corpse did not move.

Xar frowned, studied the runes intently. There was no change. None whatsoever. The sigla continued to glow; the corpse continued to lie on the bier.

Xar repeated his command, a hint of sternness in his voice. It seemed impossible that Haplo should, even now, continue to defy him.

"You will serve me!" Xar repeated.

No response. No change. Except that perhaps the blue glow was starting to fade.

Xar hurriedly repeated the most critical of the rune-structures and the blue glow strengthened.

But still the corpse did not move.

Frustrated, the Lord of the Nexus turned to the lazar, waiting patiently outside the cell.

"Well, what is wrong?" Xar demanded. "No, don't go into long explanations," he added irritably, when the lazar started to speak. "Just . . . whatever it is, fix it!" He waved his hand at the corpse.

"I cannot, Lord," said the lazar.

". . . cannot . . ." came the echo.

"What? Why?" Xar was aghast, then furious. "What trick is this? I'll cast you into oblivion!"

"No trick, Lord Xar," said Jonathon. "This corpse cannot be raised. It has no soul."

Xar glared at the lazar, wanting to doubt, yet something in the back of his mind was nudging him painfully toward the truth.

No soul.

"The dog!" Xar gasped, outrage and frustration combining to nearly choke him.

The sound he'd heard, from behind the bier. Xar dashed behind it, arrived just in time to see the tip of a plummy tail disappear around the front.

The dog sped for the cell door, which had been left standing wide open. Rounding the corner, the animal skidded on the damp stone floor, went down on its hind legs. Xar called on his magic to halt it, but the necromancy had left him weak. The dog, with a wild scramble, managed to get its legs underneath it and sped off through the corridor of cells.

Xar reached the cell door, planning to vent his anger on the lazar. He had at last recalled where he'd seen this particular dead Sartan before. This "Jonathon" had been present at the death of Samah. Xar's spell had also failed to resurrect that corpse. Was this lazar deliberately thwarting him? Why? And how?

But Xar's questions went unanswered. The lazar was gone.

The dungeons of Necropolis are a maze of intersecting and bisecting corridors, burrowing far beneath the surface of the stone world. Xar stood in the doorway of Haplo's cell and stared down first one corridor, then another, as far as he could see by the fitful, sputtering torchlight.

No sign, no sound of anything living or dead.

Xar turned back, glared at the body on the stone bier. The runes glowed faintly, the spell preserving the flesh. He had only to catch that fool dog . . .

"The creature won't go far," Xar reasoned, when he was at last calm enough to reason. "It will stay in the dungeons, near its master's body. I will set an army of Patrins to the task of searching for it.

"As for the lazar, I will put out search teams for it, too. Kleitus said something about this Jonathon," Xar mused. "Something about a prophecy. 'Life to the dead ... for him the gate will open ...' All nonsense. A prophecy implies a higher power, a higher ruling power, and I am the ruler of this world and any other I care to take over."

Xar started to leave, to order his Patrins to their various tasks. Pausing, he glanced back a final time at Haplo's corpse.

Ruling power . . .

"Of course I am," Xar repeated and left.

## CHAPTER 10

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

THE DOG WAS CONFUSED. IT COULD HEAR ITS MASTER'S VOICE clearly, but its master was not around. Haplo lay in a cell far from the dog's current hiding place. The dog knew something was terribly wrong with Haplo, but every time the animal attempted to go back to help, a sharp and peremptory voice—Haplo's voice, sounding very near, almost as if Haplo were right beside it—ordered the dog to lie still, stay put.

But Haplo wasn't here. Was he?

People—other people—were passing back and forth outside the dark cell where the dog crouched hidden in a corner. These people were searching for the dog, whistling, calling, cajoling. The dog wasn't particularly in the mood for people, but it did have the thought that perhaps they could help its master. They were, after all, the same kind of people. And, formerly, some of them had even been friends.

Not now, apparently.

The unhappy animal whimpered a little, to indicate that it was unhappy and lonely and forlorn. Haplo's voice ordered the dog sharply to keep quiet. And with no conciliatory pat on the head to mitigate the severity of the command. A pat that would indicate "I know you don't understand, but you must obey."

The dog's only comfort—ableak one—was that it sensed from its master's tone that Haplo was also unhappy, confused, and frightened. He himself didn't seem to quite know what was going on. And if the master was frightened . . .

Nose on its paws, the dog lay shivering in the darkness, its body pressed against the damp stone floor of a cell, and wondered what to do.

Xar sat in his library, the Sartan book of necromancy on a table nearby, but unopened, unread. Why bother? He knew it by rote, could have recited it in his sleep.

The lord picked up one of the rectangular rune-bones lying on his desk. Idly, lost in thought, he tapped the rune-bone rhythmically against the kairn-grass desktop, tapping the bone on one corner, sliding the bone through his fingers, tapping it on the next corner of the rectangle, sliding it down, and so on. Tap, slide. Tap, slide. Tap, slide. He had been sitting thus for so long that he'd entered into a trancelike state. His body—except for the hand with the rune-bone—felt numb, heavy, unable to move, as if he were asleep. Yet he was aware of being awake.

Xar was confounded, completely, totally confounded. He had never before come up against such an insurmountable obstacle. He had no idea what to do, where to turn, how to act. At first he'd been raging, furious. Anger gave way to frustration. Now he was . . . bemused.

The dog might be anywhere. A legion of tytans could hide in that rat's nest of a tunnel system and no one stumble across them, let alone one insignificant animal.

And suppose I do find the dog? Xar wondered, tapping the rune-bone, sliding it through his fingers. What do I do then? Kill it? Would that force Haplo's soul back to his body? Or would I kill the soul? Cause Haplo to die as Samah died—of no use to me.

And how to find the Seventh Gate without him? I must find the Seventh Gate! Swiftly. My people are fighting, dying in the Labyrinth. I promised them ... I promised them I would return . . .

Tap, slide. Tap, slide. Tap, slide.

Xar closed his eyes. A man of action, who had fought and overcome every enemy he had ever faced, he was now relegated to sitting at a desk, doing nothing. Because there was absolutely nothing he could do. He slid the problem through his mind, as he slid the rune-bone through his fingers. Examined it from every angle.

Nothing. Tap, slide. Nothing. Tap, slide. Nothing.

How, from where he began, had he arrived here?

Failure ... he would fail . . .

"My Lord!"

Xar jerked to full consciousness. The rune-bone flew from his fingers, clattered onto the desk.

"Yes, what is it?" he said harshly. Hastily, he flipped open the book, pretended to be reading.

A Patryn entered the library, stood in respectful silence, waiting for Xar to complete the task at hand.

The lord permitted himself another moment to completely restore his wandering mental faculties; then he glanced up.

"What news? Have you found the dog?"

"No, Lord. I have been sent to report to you that Death's Gate in Abarrach has been opened."

"Someone's entered," Xar said, his interest caught. A premonition of what he was about to hear surged through him. He was fully awake, fully functional now. "Marit!"

"Yes, Lord!" The Patryn regarded him with admiration.

"Did she come alone? Who is with her?"

"She arrived by ship—one of yours, My Lord. From the Nexus. I recognized the runes. Two men are with her. One of them is a mensch."

Xar was not interested in mensch.

The Patryn continued, "The other is a Sartan."

"Ah!" Xar had a good idea who. "A tall, balding, clumsy-looking Sartan?"

"Yes, Lord."

Xar rubbed his hands together. He could see the plan now, see it leap out of the darkness with extraordinary clarity, as an object is suddenly and brilliantly illuminated during a lightning storm.

"What did you do?" Xar regarded the Patryn with narrowed eyes. "Did you accost them?"

"No, Lord. I left immediately to report to you. The others are keeping watch on the three. When I left, they were still on the ship, conferring together. What are your orders, Lord? Do we bring them to you?"

Xar considered his plan a moment longer. He picked up the rune-bone, slid it through his fingers swiftly.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. All angles covered. Perfect.

"This is what you will do . . ."

## CHAPTER 11

### SAFE HARBOR ABARRACH

THE PATRYN SHIP, DESIGNED AND BUILT BY LORD XAR FOR HIS journeys through Death's Gate, hovered over the Fire Sea—river of molten lava that winds through Abarrach. The ship's runes protected it from the searing heat, which would have set an ordinary wooden ship ablaze. Alfred had brought the ship down near a dock running out into the Fire Sea, a dock belonging to an abandoned town known as Safe Harbor.

He stood near the porthole, gazing out on the churning river of flame, and recalled with vivid and terrifying clarity the last time he'd been in this dread world.

He could see it all so clearly. He and Haplo had barely reached their ship alive, fleeing the murderous lazar, led by the former Dynast, Kleitus. The lazar had only one goal—to destroy all the living and, when they were dead, grant them a terrible form of tormented, eternal life. Safely on board ship, Alfred watched in shock as the young Sartan nobleman, Jonathon, gave himself—a willing victim—into the bloodstained hands of his own murdered wife.

What had Jonathon seen, in the so-called Chamber of the Damned, that led him to commit that tragic act?

Or had he truly seen anything? Alfred wondered sadly. Perhaps Jonathon had gone mad, driven insane by his grief, the horror.

Alfred knew, he understood . . .

. . . The ship moves beneath my feet, nearly throwing me off balance. I look back at Haplo. The Patryn has his hands on the steering stone. The sigla glow a bright, intense blue. Sails shiver, ropes tighten. The

dragon ship spreads its wings, prepares to fly. On the pier, the dead begin to clamor and clash their weapons together. The lazar lift their horrible visages, move as a group toward the ship.

Apart from them, at the far end of the dock, Jonathon rises to his feet. He is a lazar; he has become one of the dead who is not dead, one of the living who is not living. He begins walking toward the ship.

"Stay! Stop!" I cry to Haplo. I press my face against the glass, trying to see more clearly. "Can't we wait a minute longer?"

Haplo shrugs. "You can go back if you want to, Sartan. You've served your purpose. I don't need you any longer. Go on, get out!"

The ship begins to move. Haplo's magical energies flow through it ...

I should go. Jonathon had faith enough. He was willing to die for what he believed. I should be able to do the same.

I start toward the ladder. Outside the ship, I can hear the chill voices of the dead, shouting in fury, enraged to see their prey escaping. I can hear Kleitus and the other lazar raise their voices in a chant. They are attempting to break down our ship's fragile protective rune-structure.

The ship lurches, begins to sink.

A spell comes, unbidden, to my mind. I can enhance Haplo's failing energy.

The lazar that was Jonathon stands apart from the other lazar. The eyes of his soul—~~not~~ quite torn from the body—gaze up at the ship, gaze through the runes, through the wood, through the glass, through flesh and bone into my heart . . .

"Sartan! Alfred!"

Alfred turned fearfully, fell back against the bulkheads. "I'm not! I can't! . . ." He blinked. "Oh, it's you."

"Of course it's me. Why did you bring us to this forsaken place?" Marit demanded. "Necropolis is over there, on the other side. How are we going to get across the Fire Sea?"

Alfred looked helpless. "You said that Xar would have Death's Gate watched—"

"Yes, but if you'd done what I told you to do and flown the ship straight to Necropolis, we could be safely hidden in the tunnels by now."

"It's just that I—Well, that I ..." Alfred lifted his head, glanced around. "It sounds foolish, I know, but . . . but ... I was hoping to meet someone here."

"Meet someone!" Marit repeated grimly. "The only people we're likely to meet are my lord's guards."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Alfred looked out at the empty dock and sighed. "What should we do now?" he asked meekly. "Fly the ship to Necropolis?"

"No, it's too late for that. We've been seen. They're probably already coming for us. We'll have to bluff our way out of this."

"Marit," Alfred said hesitantly, "if you are so certain of your lord, why are you afraid to meet him?"

"I wouldn't be, if I were by myself. But I'm not. I'm traveling with a mensch and a Sartan. Come on," she said abruptly, turning away. "We better disembark. I need to strengthen the runes protecting the ship."

The ship, similar in build and design to the dragon ships of Arianus, floated only a few feet above the dock. Marit jumped easily from the foredeck, landed lightly on her feet. Alfred, after a few false starts, launched himself overboard, caught his foot in one of the ropes, and ended by dangling upside down above the molten lava. Marit, her face grim, managed to free him, get him standing more or less upright on the dock.

Hugh the Hand had been staring in awe and disbelief at the new and terrifying world into which they'd flown. He leapt off the ship, landed on the dock. But almost immediately he stumbled to his knees. His hand clutched his throat. He began to choke, gasp for air.

"Thus did the mensch on this world die, so many long years ago," came a voice.

Alfred turned fearfully.

A figure emerged from the sulfurous haze that hung over the Fire Sea.

"One of the lazar," Marit said in disgust. Her hand closed over the hilt of her sword. "Begone!" she shouted.

"No, wait!" Alfred cried, staring hard at the shambling corpse. "I know . . . Jonathon!"

"I am here, Alfred. I've been here, all this time."

". . . all this time . . ."

Hugh the Hand lifted his head, gazed in disbelief at the terrifying apparition, at its waxen visage, the death-marks upon its throat, the eyes that were sometimes empty and dead, sometimes bright with life. Hugh tried to speak, but each breath he drew carried poisonous fumes into his lungs. He coughed until he gagged.

"He can't survive here," Alfred said, hovering over Hugh anxiously. "Not without magic to protect him."

"We'd best get him back on board the ship, then," Marit said, with a distrustful glance at the lazar, which stood silently watching them. "The runes will maintain an atmosphere he can breathe."

Hugh the Hand shook his head. Reaching out his hand, he caught hold of Alfred. "You promised . . . you could help me!" He managed to gasp. "I'm . . . going with . . . you!"

"I never promised!" Alfred protested, stooping over the choking man. "I never did!"

"Whether he did or he didn't, Hugh, you better get back on board. You—"

At that moment, Hugh pitched forward onto the dock, writhing in agony, his hands clutching at his throat.

"I'll take him," Alfred offered.

"You better hurry," Marit said, eyeing the mensch. "He's about finished."

Alfred began to sing the runes, performed a graceful and solemn dance around Hugh. Sigla sparkled in the brimstone air, twinkling around the Hand like a thousand fireflies. He disappeared.

"He's back on board," Alfred said, ceasing his dance. He glanced at the ship nervously. "But what if he tries to leave again—"

"I'll fix that." Marit drew a sigil in the air. It burst into flame, soared upward, hit a sigil burned into the ship's outer hull. The fire flared, spread from rune to rune more swiftly than the eyes could follow. "There. He cannot leave. And nothing can get inside."

"Poor man. He is like me, isn't he?" Jonathon asked.

". . . like me . . ." came the sad echo.

"No!" Alfred spoke sharply, so sharply that Marit stared at him in amazement. "No, he is not . . . like you!"

"I do not mean a lazar. His death was noble. He died sacrificing himself for one he loved. And he was brought back, not by hatred, but out of love and compassion. Still," Jonathon added softly, "he is like me."

Alfred's face was red, mottled with white. He stared down at his shoes. "I ... I never meant this to happen."

"None of this was meant to happen," Jonathon replied. "The Sartan did not mean to lose control of their new creation. The mensch were not meant to die. We were not meant to practice necromancy. But all this did happen, and now we must take the responsibility. You must take it. Hugh is right. You can save him. Inside the Seventh Gate."

". . . Seventh Gate . . ."

"The one place I dare not go," Alfred murmured.

"True. Lord Xar searches for it. So does Kleitus."

Alfred gazed across the Fire Sea at the city of Necropolis, a towering structure of black rock, its walls reflecting the red glow of the lava river.

"I won't go back," said Alfred. "I'm not certain I could find the way."

"It would find you," said Jonathon.

". . . find you . . ."

Alfred paled. "I'm here to look for my friend. Haplo. You remember him? Have you seen him? Is he safe? Could you take us to him?" In his anxiety, he stretched out his hand to the lazar.

Jonathon backed up, away from the warm flesh reaching toward it. Its voice was stern. "My help is not for the living. It is for the living to help each other."

"But if you could just tell us? . . ."

Jonathon had turned around and was walking, with the undead's halting gait, down the dock, toward the abandoned town.

"Let the thing go," Marit said. "We've got other problems."

Turning, Alfred saw Patryn runes light the air. The next moment, three Patryns stepped out of the fiery circle of magic and stood on the dock in front of them.

Marit wasn't surprised. She'd been expecting this.

"Play along with me," she said softly, beneath her breath. "No matter what I do or say."

Alfred gulped, nodded.

Taking hold of his arm, Marit gave the Sartan a rough tug that nearly jerked him off his feet. She advanced to meet the Patryns, dragging the stumbling Alfred along with her.

"I must see Lord Xar," Marit called. She thrust Alfred forward. "I've brought a prisoner."

Fortunately, Alfred generally always managed to appear as wretched as if he'd just been taken captive by someone. He didn't need to act to look forlorn and desperately unhappy. He only had to stand on the dock, his head bowed, his expression guilty, his feet shuffling.

Does he trust me? Marit wondered. Or does he think I've betrayed him? Not that it matters what he thinks. This is our only hope.

She had decided on this plan of action before they had even left the Labyrinth. Knowing that the Patryns would be watching Death's Gate, Marit guessed that she and Alfred would be accosted. If they tried to flee or fight, they would be captured and imprisoned, possibly killed. But if she were transporting a Sartan prisoner to Lord Xar . . .

Marit brushed back the hair on her forehead. She had washed away the blood. The sigil of joining between herself and Xar was broken by a slashing weal. But his mark on her was still plainly visible.

"I must speak to Xar immediately. As you see," Marit added proudly, "I bear our lord's authority." ;  
"You are wounded," said the Patryn, studying the mark.

"A terrible battle is being fought in the Labyrinth," Marit returned. "An evil force is attempting to seal shut the Final Gate."

"The Sartan?" asked the Patryn, with a baleful glance at Alfred.

"No," Marit replied. "Not the Sartan. That is why I must see Lord Xar. The situation is dire. Unless help arrives, I fear . . ." She drew a deep breath. "I fear we are lost."

The Patryn was troubled. The bond between Patryns as a race is strong; he knew Marit wasn't lying. He was alarmed, shocked by the news.

Perhaps this man has a wife, children, left behind in the Nexus. Perhaps the woman with him has a husband, parents, still caught in the Labyrinth.

"If the Final Gate shuts," Marit continued, "our people will be trapped inside that terrible place forever. ' Hasn't our lord told you any of this?" she asked, almost wistfully.

"No, he has not," said the woman.

"But I am certain Lord Xar had good reason," the man added coldly. He paused, thinking, then said, "I will take you to Lord Xar."

The other guard started to argue. "But our orders—"

"I know my orders!" the man said.

"Then you know that we are supposed—"

The guards drew off to one side of the dock, began to talk in undertones, an edge of tension audible in the conversation.

Marit sighed. All was going as she had hoped. She remained standing where she was, arms crossed over her chest, in seeming unconcern. But her heart was heavy. Xar hadn't told his people about the struggle in the Labyrinth. Perhaps he is trying to spare them pain, she argued. But something whispered back: perhaps he feared they might rebel against him.

As Haplo had rebelled . . .

Marit put her hand to her forehead, rubbed the sigil, which burned and itched. What was she doing? Wasting time. She needed to talk to Alfred. The guards were still debating, keeping only casual watch on their prisoners.

They know we're not going anywhere, Marit said to herself bitterly. Moving slowly, so as not to draw attention to herself, she sidled closer to the Sartan.

"Alfred!" she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

He jumped, startled.

"Oh! What—"

"Shut up and listen!" she hissed. "When we arrive in Necropolis, I want you to cast a spell on these three."

Alfred's eyes bulged. He went nearly as white as a lazar and began shaking his head emphatically. "No! I couldn't! I wouldn't know!"

Marit was keeping an eye on her fellow Patryns, who seemed to be near reaching some consensus. "Your people once fought mine!" she said coldly. "I'm not asking you to kill anyone! Surely there's some type of spell you can use that will incapacitate these guards long enough for us to—"

She was forced to break off, move away. The Patryns had ended their discussion and were returning.

"We will take you to Lord Xar," said the guard.

"About time!" Marit returned irritably.

Fortunately, her irritation could be mistaken as eagerness to see her lord, not eagerness to shake Alfred until his teeth rattled.

He was silently pleading with her, begging her not to force this on him. He looked truly pathetic, pitiful.

And suddenly Marit realized why. He had never, in his entire life, cast a magical spell in anger on a fellow being, Patryn or mensch. He had gone to great lengths to avoid it, in fact—~~fainting~~, leaving himself defenseless, accepting the possibility that he might be killed rather than use his immense power to kill others.

The three guards, working together, began to redraw the sigla in the air. Concentrating on their magic, they were not paying close attention to their prisoners. Marit took firm hold of Alfred's arm, as she might well have done if he were really her prisoner.

Digging her nails through the velvet fabric of his coat, she whispered urgently, "This is for Haplo. It's our only chance."

Alfred made a whimpering sound. She could feel him trembling in her grasp.

Marit only dug her nails in more deeply.

The Patryn leader motioned to them. The other two Patryns came to lead them forward. The sigil burned in the air, a flaring circle of flame.

Alfred pulled back. "No, don't make me!" he said to Marit.

One of the Patryn guards laughed grimly. "He knows what lies ahead of him."

"Yes, he does," said Marit, staring hard at Alfred, granting him no reprieve, no hope of reprieve.

Taking firm hold of him, she pulled him into the fiery ring of magic.

## CHAPTER 12

### NECROPOLIS

#### ABARRACH

I'M NOT ASKING YOU TO KILL! THE REALIZATION STRUCK ALfred. Incapacitate. Of course. That's what she'd said. Incapacitate.

What had he been thinking? A shudder, starting inside the marrow of his bones, shook Alfred's body. All he'd been able to think of was killing.

And he'd actually considered it!

It's this world, he decided, horrified at himself. This world of death where nothing is permitted to die. That and the battle in the Labyrinth. And his anxiety, his soul-wrenching anxiety over Haplo. Alfred was so close to finding his friend, and these ~~his~~ enemies were blocking his way. Fear, anger . . .

"Make all the excuses you want," Alfred accused himself. "But the truth of the matter is this ~~for~~ one single instant, I was looking forward to it! When Marit told me to cast a spell, I saw the bodies of those Patrins lying at my feet and I was glad they were dead!"

He sighed. " 'You created us,' the dragon-snakes said. And now I see how . . . "

Marit's elbow dug into his ribs. Alfred came back to himself with a start that must have been perceptible, for the Patrins were looking at him oddly.

"I recognize this place," he said for the sake of saying something.

And he did, much to his regret. They had walked through the Patrins' magical tunnel, created by the possibility that they were here and not there. Now they stood in Necropolis.

A city of tunnels and corridors, burrowing far beneath the world's stone surface, Necropolis had been a desolate, depressing place when Alfred last stood on its winding streets. But then, at least, it had been filled with people ~~his~~ people, remnants of a race of demigods who had discovered, too late, that they weren't.

Now the streets were empty, empty and blood-spattered. For it was here in these streets, in these houses, in the palace itself, where the dead Sartan had taken out their fury on the living. The dead roamed the hallways now. The terrifying lazar watched him from the shadows with their ever-shifting eyes ~~hating~~, despairing, vengeful.

The Patrins guided their prisoners down the empty, echoing streets, heading for the palace. One of the lazar joined them, trailed after, its shuffling footfalls scraping behind, its cold voice, with its eerie double, telling of what it would like to do to them.

Alfred shivered all over, and even the steel-nerved Patrins appeared shaken. Their faces tightened; the tattoos on their arms flared in defensive response. Marit had gone extremely pale; her jaw was clenched. She did not look at the thing, but walked forward, grimly resolute.

She's thinking of Haplo, Alfred realized, and he himself was sick with horror. What if Haplo . . . what if he is now one of them? . . .

Alfred broke out in a chill sweat; his stomach wrenched. He felt faint—~~truly~~ faint, sick and dizzy.

He came to a halt, forced to lean against a wall to support himself.

The Patryns stopped, turned. "What's the matter with him?"

"He's a Sartan," Marit answered, her tone scornful. "He's weak. What do you expect? I'll deal with him."

She turned toward him and Alfred saw in her eyes—~~an~~ eagerness, expectation.

Blessed Sartan! She thinks this is an act! That I'm shamming, preparing to ... to cast the spell!

No! Alfred wanted to cry. No, you've got it all wrong. Not now ... I wasn't thinking ... I can't think . . .

But he knew he had to go through with it. The Patryns weren't suspicious at the moment, but in about another half a second—~~as~~ he stood staring and stammering—they would be.

What can I do? he wondered frantically. He had never fought a Patryn, never fought someone with magic that worked the same—~~only~~ opposite—as his own. To make matters worse, the Patryns' magical defenses were already raised, protecting them from the lazar. Possibilities whirled through Alfred's mind, dazzling, confusing, terrifying.

I'll make the cavern roof collapse.

(No, that would kill us all!)

I'll bring a fire dragon up through the floor.

(No, same outcome!)

A flower garden will suddenly appear out of nowhere.

(What good will that do?!)

The lazar will attack.

(Someone might get hurt . . . )

The floor will open and swallow me up ...

(Yes! That's it!)

"Hang on!" Alfred grabbed hold of Marit.

He began to do a dance, hopping from one foot to the other, faster and faster.

Marit clung to him. Alfred's dance grew more frantic, his feet pounding on the rock floor.

The Patryns, who had at first assumed Alfred had gone mad, suddenly became suspicious. They made a lunge for him.

The magic sparked, the possibility occurred. The floor beneath Alfred's feet crumbled. A hole gaped in the rock. He jumped into it, pulled Marit in with him. The two tumbled down through rock and choking dust, plunging into darkness.

The fall was a short one. As Alfred knew from his last visit, Necropolis was a warren of tunnels stacked up one on top of the other. He had assumed (or at least desperately hoped) that another corridor would be running under the one in which they were standing. It didn't occur to him until after he'd cast the spell that there were also immense pools of lava beneath the city . . .

Fortunately, they landed in a dark tunnel. Above them, light poured through a hole in the ceiling. The Patryn guards had surrounded the hole, were peering down at them, talking together in urgent tones.

"Close it!" Marit cried, shaking Alfred. "They're going to come after us!"

Imagining how he might have dropped them into a pool of lava, Alfred had momentarily gone blank. Now, realizing their danger, he belatedly summoned the possibility that the hole had never existed.

The hole disappeared. Darkness thick and heavy closed over them. It was soon lit by the glimmer of the sigla tattooed on Marit's body.

"Are ... are you all right?" Alfred quavered.

Instead of answering, Marit shoved him. "Run!"

"Which way?" he gasped.

"It doesn't matter!" She pointed up at the ceiling. "They can use the magic too, remember?"

The glow of Marit's runes increased, giving them light enough to see by. They ran down the corridor, not knowing where they were going, not caring, hoping only to shake off pursuit.

At length, they came to a halt, paused to listen.

"I think we lost them," Alfred ventured a guess.

"By losing ourselves. You know, though, I don't believe they even tried to pursue us." Marit frowned. "That's strange."

"Maybe they went to report to Lord Xar."

"Possibly." She looked up and down the dark tunnel. "We have to figure out where we are. I don't have any idea. Do you?"

"No," Alfred said, shaking his head. "But I know how to find out."

He knelt down, touched the bottom of the corridor, sang softly beneath his breath. A sigil glimmered to life beneath his fingers. Its glow spread to another sigil, and another, until a line of runes burned with a soft, soothing light along the bottom of the wall.

Marit breathed a sigh. "The Sartan runes. I forgot they were here. Where will they lead us?"

"Wherever we want to go," Alfred said simply.

"To Haplo," she said.

Alfred heard the hope in her voice. He had no hope himself. He dreaded what they would find.

"Where would Xar have taken Haplo? Not ... not to the lord's own chambers?"

"To the dungeons," Marit said. "It was where he took Samah and . . . and the others he . . ." Her voice trailed off. She turned away. "We better hurry. It won't take them long to figure out where we've gone. Then they'll come after us."

"Why didn't they come after us before?" Alfred asked.

Marit didn't answer. She didn't need to. Alfred knew well enough anyway.

Because Xar already knows where we're going!

They were walking into a trap. They had been ~~all~~ along, Alfred realized unhappily. The Patryn guards had not only let him and Marit escape, they had actually provided the opportunity.

Their magic could have taken us directly to Xar. Planted us on his very doorstep, as it were, Alfred thought. But no. The Patryns take us into Necropolis, into empty streets. They let us go and don't even bother to pursue us.

And just when all seemed most dark, Alfred was startled to notice a tiny bit of hope flickering to life inside him.

If Haplo was dead, and Lord Xar had used the necromancy on him, then the lord would already be in the Seventh Gate. He wouldn't need us.

Something's gone wrong ... or right.

The sigla flared on the wall, burning with the speed of a brushfire. In some places, where cracks on the wall had broken the sigla, the runes remained dark. The Sartan living on Abarrach had forgotten how to restore their magic. But the breaks never completely stopped the flow. The magical light would leap over a broken sigil, catch the next one, and so on. All he had to do was keep the image of the dungeons on his mind and the sigla would guide them to them.

To what? Alfred wondered fearfully.

He formed a resolve, there and then. If I am wrong and Xar has turned Haplo into one of the wretched undead, I will end such a terrible existence for him. I will grant him peace. No matter what anyone says or does to try to stop me.

The sigla led them steadily downward. Alfred had been in the dungeons before, knew they were going in the right direction. So did Marit. She led the way, walking rapidly, eagerly. Both kept watch, but saw nothing. Not even the dead roamed these corridors.

They walked for so long, seeing nothing except the Sartan runes on the wall and the glimmer of the Patryn nines on Marit's body, that Alfred fell into a sort of waking horrific dream.

When Marit stopped suddenly, Alfred ~~walking trancelike~~ ran right into her.

She shoved him back against the wall with a hissing shush.

"I see light ahead," she said in a low voice. "Torchtlight. And now I know where we are. Ahead of us are the cells. Haplo's probably being held in one of them."

"It seems very quiet down here," Alfred whispered. "Very quiet."

Ignoring him, Marit started down the corridor, heading for the torchlight.

It did not take Alfred long to find the right cell. The sigla on the walls no longer guided him; in the dungeons, most of the Sartan runes had been either broken or deliberately obliterated. But he moved toward the right place unerringly, as if invisible runes, brought into being by his heart, flared before his eyes.

Alfred looked into the cell first, for which he was grateful. Haplo lay on a stone bier. His eyes were closed, his hands folded over his chest. He did not move, did not draw breath.

Marit was following behind, keeping watch. Alfred had a moment to deal with his own emotions before Marit, seeing the Sartan come to a halt, guessed instantly what he had found.

He tried to catch hold of her, but she broke free, ran past him. Hastily, Alfred removed the cell bars with a spoken word of magic or Marit would have torn right through them.

She stood a moment over the stone bier, then ~~with a sob~~ she sank onto her knees. Lifting Haplo's cold and lifeless hand, she started to chafe it, as if she could warm it. The runes tattooed on his body glimmered faintly, but there was no life in the chill flesh.

"Marit," Alfred began awkwardly, softly. "There's nothing you can do."

Burning tears stung his eyes, tears of grief and bitter sorrow, yet tears of relief as well. Haplo was dead, yes. But he was dead! No terrible magical life burned inside him, like a candle inside a skull. His body lay composed on the bier. His eyes were closed, his face smooth, free of pain.

"He's at peace now," Alfred murmured.

He entered the cell slowly, came to stand beside his enemy, his friend.

Marit had replaced the flaccid hand on Haplo's chest, over the heart-rune. Now she sat hunched on the floor, grieving alone in fierce, aching silence.

Alfred knew he should say something, pay tribute, homage. But words were inadequate. What did you say to a man who had looked inside you and ~~seen~~ not what you were ~~but~~ what you could be? What did you say to a man who had wrenched that other, better person hiding inside of you outside? What did you say to a man who had taught you how to live, when you would much rather have died?

Haplo had done all this. And now Haplo was dead. He gave his life for me, for the mensch, for his people. Each of us drew on his strength and perhaps, unknowingly, each of us ended up draining a little of his life away.

"My dear friend," Alfred whispered, his voice choked. He bent down, rested his hand on Haplo's, over the heart-rune. "I promise you. I will continue the fight. I will do what I can, take up where you left off. You rest. Don't worry about it anymore. Farewell, my friend. Fare—"

At that moment, Alfred was interrupted by a whuff.

## CHAPTER 13

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

"No, BOY! STAY!"

Haplo's voice was insistent, peremptory. His command was final, the law. Yet . . .

The dog squirmed, whimpered. Here were trusted friends. Here were people who could make things right. And, above all else, here were people who were desperately unhappy. Here were people who needed a dog.

The dog half rose.

"Dog, no!" Haplo's voice, sharp, warning. "Don't! It's a trap . . ."

Well, there, you see? A trap! Here were trusted friends, walking into a trap. And, obviously, the master was only thinking of his faithful dog's safety. Which, so far as the dog could determine, left the decision up to it.

With a glad and excited whuff, the dog leapt from its hiding place and bounded joyfully down the corridor.

"What was that?" Alfred glanced fearfully around. "I heard something . . ."

He looked out into the corridor and saw a dog. Alfred sat down on the floor, very hard and very unexpectedly.

"Oh, my!" he repeated over and over. "Oh, my!"

The animal bounded into the cell, jumped into Alfred's lap, and licked his face.

Alfred flung his arms around the dog's neck and wept.

Objecting to being slobbered on, the dog wriggled free of Alfred's embrace and pattered over to Marit. Very gently, the dog lifted a paw, placed it on her arm.

She touched the offered paw, then buried her face in the dog's neck and began to sob. The dog whined in sympathy, looked pleadingly at Alfred.

"Don't cry, my dear! He's alive!" Alfred wiped away his own tears. Kneeling down beside Marit, he put his hands on her shoulders, forced her to lift her face, to look at him. "The dog. Haplo's not dead, not yet. Don't you see?"

Marit stared at the Sartan as if he'd gone mad.

"I don't know how!" Alfred was babbling. "I can't understand it myself. Probably the necromancy spell. Or perhaps Jonathon had something to do with it. Or maybe all together. Or none at all. Anyhow, my dear, because the dog is alive, Haplo is alive!"

"I don't . . ." Marit was bewildered.

"Let me see if I can explain."

Completely forgetting where he was, Alfred settled himself on the floor, prepared to launch into explanations. The dog had other plans, however. Catching hold of the toe of Alfred's over-large shoe in its mouth, the dog sank in its teeth and began to tug.

"When Haplo was a young man . . . Good dog," Alfred interrupted himself, attempted to free his shoe from the dog's mouth. "A young man in the Labyrinth, he-Haplo . . . Nice doggie. Let go. I ... Oh, dear."

The dog had released the shoe, was now tugging at Alfred's coat sleeve.

"The dog wants us to leave," said Marit.

She stood up, somewhat unsteadily. The dog, giving up on Alfred, switched its attention to her. Pressing its large body against her legs, it tried to herd her toward the cell door.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said, getting a firm grip on the loose skin around the dog's neck and hanging on. "I'm not leaving Haplo until I understand what's happened."

"I'm trying to tell you," Alfred said plaintively. "Only I keep getting interrupted. It all has to do with Haplo's 'good' impulses—pity, compassion, mercy, love. Haplo was raised to believe that such feelings were weaknesses."

The dog muttered in its throat, nearly knocked Marit down trying again to shove her toward the cell door.

"Stop it, dog!" she ordered and turned back to Alfred. "Go on."

Alfred sighed. "Haplo found it increasingly difficult to reconcile his true feelings with what he believed he should be feeling. Did you know he searched for you? After you left him? He realized he loved you, but he couldn't admit it—either to himself or to you."

Marit's gaze went to the body on the stone bier. Unable to speak, she shook her head.

"When Haplo believed he had lost you, he grew increasingly unhappy and confused," Alfred went on. "His confusion angered him. He concentrated all his energy on beating the Labyrinth, on escaping it. And then his goal was in sight—the Final Gate. When he reached it, he knew he had won, but winning didn't please him, as he had assumed it would. Rather, it terrified him. After he passed through that Gate, what would life hold for him? Nothing.

"When Haplo was attacked at the Gate, he fought desperately. His instinct for survival is strong. But when he was severely wounded by the chaodyn, he saw his chance. He could find death at the hands of the enemy. This death would be an honorable one. No one would say otherwise, and it would free him from the terrible feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and regret.

"Part of Haplo was determined to die, but another part—the best part of him—refused to give up. At that point, wounded and weak in body and spirit, angry with himself, Haplo solved his problem. He did so unconsciously. He created the dog."

The animal in question had, by this time, given up on attempting to drag everyone out of the cell. Flopping down on its belly, it rested its head on the floor between its paws and regarded Alfred with a resigned, doleful expression. Whatever happened now was not its fault.

"He created the dog?" Marit was incredulous. "Then it's not real."

"Oh, it's real." Alfred smiled, rather sadly. "As real as the souls of the elves, fluttering in their garden. As real as the phantasms, trapped by the lazar."

"And now?" Marit stared doubtfully at the animal. "What is it now?"

Alfred shrugged, helpless. "I'm not sure. Haplo's body appears to be in some sort of suspended state, like the stasis sleep of my people . . ."

The dog jumped up suddenly. Tense, hackles raised, it glared out into the dark corridor.

"There's someone there," Alfred said, stumbling to his feet.

Marit didn't move. Her eyes shifted from Haplo to the dog.

"Perhaps you're right. The runes on his skin are glowing." She looked at Alfred. "There must be a way to bring him back. Perhaps if you used the necromancy—"

Alfred blanched, backed away. "No! Please don't ask me!"

"What do you mean, no? No, it can't be done? Or no, you won't do it?" Marit demanded.

"It can't . . ." Alfred began lamely.

"Yes, it can!" someone said, speaking from the corridor.

". . . it can . . ." came a dismal echo.

The dog barked a sharp warning.

The lazar that had once been the Dynast, ruler of Abarrach, shambled into the cell.

Marit drew her sword. "Kleitus." Her tone was cool, though her voice shook slightly. "What do you want here?"

The lazar paid no attention to her, or to the dog, or to the body on the stone bier.

"The Seventh Gate!" Kleitus said, the dead eyes horribly alive.

". . . Gate . . ." sighed the echo.

"I ... I don't know what you mean," Alfred said faintly. He had gone extremely pale. Sweat beaded on his bald head.

"Yes, you do!" Kleitus returned. "You are a Sartan! Enter the Seventh Gate and you will find the way to release your friend."

The blood-mottled hand of the lazar pointed at Haplo. "You will bring him back to life."

"Is that true?" Marit asked, turning to Alfred.

All around him, the cell walls were starting to shrink and shrivel, to writhe and crawl. The darkness began to grow huge, swell and expand. It seemed about to jump on him, swallow him . . .

"Don't faint, damn it!" said a voice.

A familiar voice. Haplo's voice!

Alfred's eyes flared open. The darkness retreated. He looked for the source of the voice, found the dog's liquid eyes fixed intently on his face.

Alfred blinked, gulped. "Blessed Sartan!"

"Don't listen to the lazar. It's a trap," Haplo's voice continued, and it was coming from inside Alfred, from inside his head. Or perhaps from that elusive part of him that was his own soul.

"It's a trap," Alfred repeated aloud, without being truly conscious of what he was saying.

"Don't go to the Seventh Gate. Don't let the lazar talk you into it. Or anyone else, for that matter. Don't go."

"I won't go." Alfred had the confused impression of sounding very much like the lazar's echo. He added to Marit, "I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't apologize!" Haplo ordered irritably. "And don't let Kleitus fool you. The lazar knows where the Seventh Gate is. He died in that room."

"But he can't get back inside!" Alfred said in sudden understanding. "The warding runes prevent him!"

"And he's not worried about me," Haplo added dryly. "He's thinking of himself. Maybe hoping you'll bring him back!"

"I won't be the one to let you in," Alfred said.

"A mistake, Sartan!" The lazar snarled.

". . . mistake, Sartan . . ."

"I am on your side! We are brothers." Kleitus advanced several shuffling steps into the cell. "If you bring me back, I will be strong, powerful. Far stronger than Xar! He knows this and he fears me. Come! Swiftly! This is your only chance to escape him!"

"I won't!" Alfred shuddered.

The lazar moved toward him. Alfred fell back until he hit the wall and could go no farther. He pressed both hands against the stone, as if he would seep into it. "I won't . . ."

"You've got to get out of here!" Haplo urged. "You and Marit! You're in danger! If Xar finds you here . . ."

"What about you?" Alfred asked.

Marit was looking at him strangely, suspiciously. "What about me?"

"No, no!" Alfred was losing control. "I ... I was talking to Haplo."

Her eyes widened. "Haplo?"

"Can't you hear him?" Alfred asked and realized, in the instant of asking, that she could not. She and Haplo had been close, but they had not exchanged souls, as had Haplo and Alfred, that one time, crossing through Death's Gate.

Alfred wavered.

"Never mind me! Just leave, damn it!" Haplo urged. "Use your magic!"

Alfred swallowed. Licking dry lips with a dry tongue, trying ineffectually to moisten a parched throat, he began to sing the runes in a cracked, almost inaudible voice.

Kleitus understood the forgotten rune-language enough to realize what Alfred was doing. Reaching out its wasted hand, the lazar caught hold of Marit.

She tried to break free, tried to stab the lazar with her sword. But the dead know no physical limitations. With inhuman strength, Kleitus wrested the sword from Marit's grasp. The lazar wrapped its bloodstained hand around her throat.

The sigla on Marit's skin flared, her magic acting to defend her. Another living being would have been paralyzed by the shock, but the corpse of the Dynast absorbed the punishment without apparent harm. The long blue nails of the skeletal hand dug into Marit's flesh.

She flinched in pain, choked back a cry. Blood trickled down her skin.

"Sing one more rune," Kleitus warned Alfred, "and I will turn her into the undead."

Alfred's tongue clicked against the roof of his mouth, froze there. Before he could cast the spell, Marit would be dead.

"Take me to the Seventh Gate!" Kleitus demanded. He stabbed his fingers deeper into Marit's throat.

She cried out. Her hands tore frantically at the corpse's.

The dog whined and whimpered.

Marit began to gulp, gasp for breath. Kleitus was slowly strangling her.

"Do something!" Haplo ordered furiously.

"What?" Alfred cried.

"This is what you do, Sartan."

Lord Xar entered the cell. He lifted his hand, formed a sigil in the air, and sent it flashing toward Kleitus.

## CHAPTER 14

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

THE SIGIL STRUCK THE LAZAR IN THE CHEST, EXPLODED.

Kleitus cried out in rage; the corpse felt no pain. It fell to the floor, the dead limbs jerking and twitching spasmodically.

But Kleitus fought against the magic. The corpse seemed about to win, was struggling to regain its feet.

Xar spoke sharply. The single rune expanded. Its arms became tentacles, surrounding, subduing the writhing corpse.

At length, the lazar shuddered, then lay still.

Lord Xar regarded it suspiciously, thinking it was shamming. He had not killed it. He couldn't kill something that was already dead. But he had rendered it harmless, for the moment. The sigil, burning feebly, flickered and died out. The spell ended. The lazar did not move.

Satisfied, Xar turned to Alfred.

"Well met, Serpent Mage," said the Lord of the Nexus. "At last."

The Sartan's eyes were bulging out of his balding head. His jaw worked; no sound came out. Xar thought he had never seen such a pitiful, wretched-looking specimen. But he wasn't fooled by outward appearances.

This Sartan was powerful, extraordinarily powerful. The weak and foolish act of his was just that—an act.

"Although I must say that I am disappointed in you, Alfred," Xar continued. No harm in letting the Sartan think he was succeeding in his foolery. Xar prodded the unmoving lazar with his toe. "You could have done this yourself, or so I presume."

The lord bent over Marit. "You are not hurt badly, are you, Daughter?"

Weak and shaken, Marit shrank back from him, but there was nowhere for her to go. She had come up against the stone bier.

Xar took hold of her. She cringed, but he was gentle. He helped her to her feet. She swayed, unsteady, and he supported her.

"The wounds burn where he touched you. Yes, I know, Daughter. I, too, have felt the lazar's foul touch. Some type of poison, I would guess. But I can give you ease."

He placed his hand on her forehead. Brushing aside her hair, his fingers lightly, delicately retraced the sigil mark that had been there, the mark he had slashed in the Labyrinth. At his touch, the rune closed, healed completely.

Marit did not notice. She was burning with fever, dizzy and disoriented. Xar alleviated her pain somewhat, but not entirely.

"Soon you will feel better. Sit here"—Xar guided Marit to the edge of Haplo's stone bier—"and rest. I have certain matters to discuss with the Sartan."

"My Lord!" Marit grasped hold of Xar's hand, clung to him. "My Lord! The Labyrinth! Our people are fighting for their lives."

Xar's face hardened. "I am aware of this, Daughter. I plan to return. They will be able to hold out until—"

"Lord! You don't understand! The dragon-snakes have set fire to the Nexus. The city is in flames! Our people . . . dying . . ."

Xar was aghast. He could not believe what he was hearing. It wasn't possible. "The Nexus, burning?"

He thought at first she was lying. But they were now joined again and he saw the truth in her mind. He saw the Nexus, beautiful, white-spined city; his city. Never mind the fact that his enemy had built it. He had first set foot in it. He had first claimed it. He had won it with blood and unceasing toil. He had brought his people to it. His people had made that city their home.

Now, in Marit's eyes, he saw the Nexus red with flame, black with smoke and death.

"All I worked for . . . gone . . .," he murmured. His grip on her loosened.

"Lord, if you went back . . ." Marit held fast to his hand. "If you returned to them, the people would have hope. Go to them, Lord. They need you!"

Xar hesitated. Remembered. . . .

... He did not walk through the Final Gate. He crawled, dragged himself between its rune-covered stone supports on his belly. He left a trail of blood behind him, a trail that marked his path through the Labyrinth itself. Some of the blood was his; more of it belonged to his enemies.

Pulling himself across the border, he collapsed onto the soft grass. He rolled over onto his back, stared up into a twilight sky, a sky of blush reds and hazy purples, banded with gold and orange. He should heal

himself, sleep. And he would, in time. But for a moment, he wanted to feel everything, including the pain. This was his moment of triumph, and when he remembered it, he wanted to remember the pain with it.

The pain, the suffering. The hatred.

When he knew he must soon heal himself or die, he raised up on one elbow and looked around for shelter.

And he saw, for the first time, the city his enemies had named the Nexus.

It was beautiful—white stone shimmering with the colors of perpetual sunset. Xar saw the beauty, but he also saw something more.

He saw people; his people, living and working in peace and safety. No longer afraid of the wolfen, the snog, the dragon.

He had survived the Labyrinth. He had beaten it. He had escaped. He was the first. The very first. And he would not be alone. He would go back. Tomorrow, when he was completely healed and rested, he would go back through the Gate and would bring out someone else.

The next day, he would return again. And the day after that. He would go back into that dread prison and he would lead his people to freedom. He would bring them to this city, this sanctuary.

Tears blinded him. Tears wrung from him by pain and weariness and—for the first time in his dark life—hope.

Later, much later, Xar would look at that city with clear, cold eyes and he would see armies.

But not then. Then he saw, through his tears, children playing . . .

And now the twilight skies were black with smoke. The bodies of the children lay charred and twisted in the streets.

Xar's hand stole to his heart-rune, tattooed long, long ago on his chest. His name, then . . . What had been his name? The name of the man who had dragged himself through the Final Gate? Xar couldn't remember. He had obliterated it, written it over with runes of strength and power.

Just as he had written over his vision.

If only he could think of his name . . .

"I will return to the Nexus." Xar spoke into the awe-tinged silence that emanated from him. A silence that had, for a moment, bound them all together in hope. Bound even his enemy to him. "I will return . . . through the Seventh Gate."

Xar's gaze fixed on the Sartan. Alfred, he called himself. Not his real name either. "And you will take me there."

The dog barked loudly, almost a command. But it might have spared itself the trouble.

"No," Alfred said, his voice mild, sad. "I won't."

Xar looked at Haplo, at the body lying on the cold stone bier. "He still lives. You are right about that. But he might as well be dead. What do you intend to do about it?"

Alfred's face was exceedingly pale. He licked dry lips. "Nothing," he said, swallowing. "There is nothing I can do."

"Isn't there?" Lord Xar asked, pleasantly. "The necromancy spell I cast preserves his flesh. His essence—or soul, as you call it—is trapped inside the dog. Inside the body of a dumb animal."

"Some might say we are all trapped that way," Alfred said, but he spoke in a low voice and no one, except the dog, heard him.

"You can change all that," Xar was saying. "You can bring Haplo back to life."

The Sartan shuddered. "No, I can't."

"A Sartan lying!" Xar smiled. "I wouldn't have said it was possible."

"I'm not lying," Alfred returned, drawing himself up. "You cast the necromancy spell using Patryn magic. I can't undo it or change it—"

"Ah, but you could," Xar interrupted. "Inside the Seventh Gate."

Alfred raised his hands as if to ward off an attack, though no one had made a move toward him. He backed into a corner, staring around the prison cell, perhaps seeing it for the first time—as a prison. "You can't ask that of me!"

"But we do, don't we, Daughter?" Xar said, turning to Marit.

She was shivering, feverish. Reaching out her shaking hand, she touched Haplo's chill flesh.

"Alfred . . ."

"No!" Alfred shrank back against the wall. "Don't ask me! Xar doesn't care about Haplo, Marit. Your lord plans to destroy the world!"

"I plan to undo what you Sartan did!" Xar snarled, losing patience. "To return the four worlds to one—"

"Which you would rule! Only you wouldn't. Any more than Samah was able to rule the worlds he created. What he did was wrong. But he has answered for his crimes. Over time, the wrong has been made right. The mensch have built new lives on these worlds. If you commit this act, millions of innocents will die—"

"The survivors will be better off," Xar returned. "Isn't that what Samah said?"

"And what of your people, caught inside the Labyrinth?" Alfred demanded.

"They will be free! I will free them!"

"You will doom them. They may escape the Labyrinth. But they will never escape the new prison you will build for them. A prison of fear. I know," he added sadly, softly. "I have lived in one like it almost all my life."

Xar was silent. He was not pondering Alfred's words; he had ceased paying attention to the sniveling Sartan. Xar was trying to figure out how to coerce the wretch into doing his will. The lord recognized Alfred's power, probably more than Alfred did himself. Xar had no doubt he could win a battle, should one take place between the two of them. But he would not come out unscathed and the Sartan would likely be dead. Considering Xar's luck with necromancy so far, such an outcome was not advisable.

There was one possibility . . .

"I think you had better move to a safe place, Daughter." Xar took firm hold of Marit, drew her away from the stone bier on which lay Haplo's body.

The Lord of the Nexus traced a series of runes on the base of the bier, spoke the command.

The stone burst into flame.

"What . . . what are you doing?" Marit cried.

"I could not succeed in raising Haplo's body," Xar said offhandedly. "The Sartan will not use his power to restore him. The corpse is, therefore, of no use to me. This will be Haplo's funeral pyre."

"You can't!" Marit hurled herself at Xar. She clutched at his robes, pleading. "You can't, Lord! Please! This . . . this will destroy him!"

The sigla spread slowly around the bottom of the stone bier, forming a fiery circle. Flames licked upward, devouring the magic, since they had no other fuel.

Until they reached the body.

Marit sank to her knees, too weak and ill from the effects of the poison to stand. "Lord, please!"

Xar reached down, stroked back her hair. "You plead with the wrong person. Daughter. The Sartan has it in his power to save Haplo. Beg him!"

The flames were growing stronger, rising higher. The heat was increasing.

"—Alfred opened his mouth.

"Don't!" Haplo commanded.

The dog regarded Alfred sternly, growled warningly.

"But—Alfred stared at the flames—"If your body is burned"

"Let it! If Xar opens the Seventh Gate, then what? You said yourself what would happen."

Alfred gulped, gasped for air. "I can't stand here and watch—"

"Then faint, damn it!" Haplo said irritably. "This would be the one time in your life when passing out might be of some use!"

"I won't," Alfred said, recovering himself. He even managed to smile bleakly. "I am afraid I must put you in my prison for a while, my friend."

The Sartan began to dance, moving solemnly to music he hummed beneath his breath.

Xar watched with suspicion, wondering what the Serpent Mage was up to. Surely not an offensive spell. That would be too dangerous in the small cell.

"Dog, go to Marit!" Alfred murmured, doing a graceful slide-step around the animal. "Now!"

The animal ran to Marit's side, stood protectively near her. At the same instant, two crystal coffins sprang into being. One covered Haplo's body. The other surrounded Lord Xar.

Inside Haplo's coffin, the flames dwindled, died.

Inside the other coffin, Xar fought to free himself, fumed in impotent rage.

Alfred took hold of Marit, helped her escape the cell. They ran into the dark corridor. The dog dashed along behind.

"Out!" Alfred gasped for the benefit of the magic. "We want out!"

Blue sigla flashed along the base of the wall. Supporting Marit, Alfred followed the sigla's lead, stumbling blindly through the rune-lit darkness, with no idea where he was or which way he was going. But it seemed to Alfred that they were going down, descending deeper into Abarrach . . .

And then the terrifying thought came to him that the runes might be guiding him right to the Seventh Gate! After all, the runes would take him to wherever it was he wanted to go and the Seventh Gate had certainly been on his mind.

"Well, put the thought out of your mind!" Haplo ordered. "Think about Death's Gate! Concentrate on that!"

"Yes," Alfred panted. "Death's Gate . . ."

The sigla suddenly flashed, went out, leaving them in fearful, mind-numbing darkness.

## CHAPTER 15

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

ENTOMBED IN SARTAN MAGIC, XAR QUELLED HIS ANGER, RE-lie on patience and calm to free himself. His brain, like a sharp knife, slid into each chink in the Sartan runes, searching for a weakness. He found it, and worked at it patiently, breaking down the sigil, chipping away at the magic. One crack, and the rest of the hastily designed structure shattered.

Xar gave Alfred credit; the Serpent Mage was good. Never before had any magic completely stopped and confounded the Lord of the Nexus. Had the situation not been so critical, so dire, Xar would have enjoyed the mental exercise.

He stood in the prison cell, alone except for Kleitus, and that heap of bones and rotting flesh scarcely counted. The lazar continued under the constraints of Xar's spell and did not move. Xar ignored it. He walked over to stand beside Haplo's body, encased in the Sartan's magical coffin.

The funeral fire had been snuffed out. Xar could always start it again. He could break the magic that protected Haplo as the lord had broken that which had imprisoned him.

But he did not.

He gazed down at the body and smiled.

"They won't abandon you, my son. No matter how much you try to persuade them otherwise. Because of you, Alfred will lead me to the Seventh Gate!"

Xar touched the sigil on his own forehead, the rune-mark he had drawn, destroyed, then redrawn on Marit's forehead. Once again, they were joined. Once again, he could share her thoughts, hear her words. Except that this time, provided he was careful, she wouldn't be conscious of his presence.

Xar left the dungeons, began his pursuit.

No sigla lit their path. Alfred guessed this was a result of the confusion in his own mind—he couldn't decide where he wanted to go. And then he considered that it might be safer to travel without guidance. If he didn't know where he was going, no one else would, either. Or such was his rather confused logic.

He spoke a sigil, caused it to burn softly in the air in front of him, giving them light enough to walk by. They stumbled on, as fast as they could, until Marit could go no farther.

She was very ill. He could feel the poison's heat on her skin. Her body shook with chills; pain gripped her, twisted her. She'd fought gamely to keep up, but the last few hundred paces or so, he'd been forced to almost carry her. Now her body was dead weight. His arms were trembling and limp with fatigue. He let go of her. She sagged to the floor.

Alfred knelt down beside her. The dog whined, nosed her limp hand.

"Give me time ... to heal myself." She gasped for breath.

"I can help you." Alfred hovered over her, peering at her in the darkness. The sigla on her skin barely glimmered.

"No. Keep watch," she ordered. "Your magic won't stop Xar ... for long."

She hunched into a ball, bringing her knees to her chin, resting her head on her knees. Wrapping her arms around her body, she closed her eyes, closed the circle of her being. The sigla on her arms glowed more warmly. Her chills and shivering ceased. She huddled in the darkness, enveloped in warmth.

Alfred watched anxiously. Generally a healing sleep was required to make Patryns perfectly well. He wondered if she had fallen asleep, wondered what he would do if she did. He was very tempted to let her rest. He'd seen no sign that Xar was following them.

Timidly, he reached out his hand to smooth back the damp hair from her forehead. And he saw, suddenly, with a pang of fear, that the sigil Xar had marked on her forehead, the sigil joining the two together, was once more whole. Swiftly, Alfred snatched his hand away.

"What?" Startled at his chill touch, Marit lifted her head. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," Alfred stammered. "I ... thought you might want to sleep . . ."

"Sleep? Are you crazy?"

Refusing his help, Marit rose slowly to her feet.

She was no longer feverish, but the marks on her throat were still plainly visible—black slashes, cutting through the rune-light. She gingerly touched the wounds, winced, as if they burned. "Where are we going?"

"Out of here!" Haplo ordered peremptorily. "Off of Abarrach. Go back through Death's Gate."

Alfred looked at the dog, didn't know quite how to respond.

Marit saw his glance, understood. She shook her head.

"I won't leave Haplo."

"My dear, there's nothing we can do for him . . ."

Alfred's lie trailed into silence. There was something he could do. Kleitus had spoken the truth. Alfred had, by this time, given a lot of thought to the Seventh Gate. He had gone over all that he'd heard about it from Orlah, who had described to him how Samah and the Council used the magic of the Seventh Gate to sunder the world. Alfred had also delved deep in his own memory, recalling passages he'd read in the books of the Sartan. From his research, he guessed that, once inside, he could use the Gate's powerful magic to work

wonders beyond belief. He could restore Haplo to life. He could grant Hugh the Hand peace in death. He could, perhaps, even come to the aid of those fighting for their lives in the Labyrinth.

But the Seventh Gate was the one place in the four worlds where Alfred dared not go. Not with Xar watching, waiting for him to do that very thing.

The dog pattered nervously back and forth, up and down the corridor.

"Get yourself out of here, Sartan!" Haplo told Alfred, reading his thoughts as usual. "You're the one Xar wants."

"But I can't leave you," Alfred protested.

"You're not." Marit gave him a puzzled look. "No one ever said you were."

"All right, then." Haplo was talking at the same moment. "Don't leave me. Take the damn dog with you! So long as the dog is safe, Xar can't do anything to me."

Alfred, listening to two voices speaking simultaneously, opened and shut his mouth in hopeless confusion.

"The dog . . ." he murmured, attempting to grasp one solid point in the strange conversation.

"You and Marit take the dog to a world where it will be safe," Haplo repeated, patiently, insistently. "Where Xar can't possibly find it. Pryan, maybe . . ."

The suggestion sounded good, made sense—take the dog and themselves out of harm's way. But something about it wasn't quite right. Alfred knew that if he could only take the time to stop and think about the matter long and hard, he'd discover what was wrong with it. But between fear, confusion, and amazement at being able to communicate with Haplo at all, Alfred was completely befuddled.

Marit leaned against the wall, her eyes closed. Her magic was too much weakened by her injury to sustain her, apparently. She was once more shivering, in obvious pain. The dog crouched at her feet, gazed up at her forlornly.

"If she doesn't heal herself—or if you don't heal her, Sartan—she's going to die!" Haplo said urgently.

"Yes, you're right."

Alfred made up his mind. He put his arm around Marit, who stiffened at his touch but then went limp against him.

A very bad sign.

"Who are you talking to?" she murmured.

"Never mind," Alfred said quietly. "Come along . . ."

Mark's eyes opened wide. For an instant, strength suffused her body, hope eased her suffering. "Haplo! You're talking to Haplo! How is that possible?"

"We shared consciousness once. In Death's Gate. Our minds exchanged bodies ... At least!"—Alfred sighed—  
"that's the only explanation I can think of."

Marit was silent long moments; then she said in a low voice, "We could go to the Seventh Gate now. While my lord is still imprisoned by your magic."

Alfred hesitated. And, as the thought came into his mind, the sigla on the wall suddenly flared to life, lit up a corridor previously dark. So dark, they had never, before now, suspected its existence.

"That's it," Marit said, awed. "That's the way . . ."

Alfred gulped, excited, tempted . . . afraid.

But then, when in his life hadn't he been afraid?

"Don't go!" Haplo warned. "I don't like this. Xar must have unraveled your spell by now."

Alfred blanched. "Do you know where he is? Can you see him?"

"What I see, I see through the dog's eyes. So long as the mutt's with you, I'm with you, for all the good that's likely to do any of us. Forget the Seventh Gate. Get off of Abarrach while you still have a chance."

"Alfred, please!" Marit begged. She pushed away from him, tried to stand on her own. "Look, I'm well enough—"

The dog barked sharply, leapt to its feet.

Alfred's heart lurched.

"I don't . . . Haplo's right. Xar is searching for us. We've got to leave Abarrach! We'll take the dog with us," Alfred said to Marit, who was glaring at him, the glow of the runes bright in her feverish eyes. "We'll go someplace where we can rest and you can heal yourself. Then we'll come back. I promise—"

Marit shoved him out of her way, prepared to go around him, over him, through him, if necessary. "If you won't take me to the Seventh Gate, I'll find—"

Her words were cut off. A spasm shook her body. She clutched at her throat, fighting to breathe. Doubling over, she fell to her hands and knees.

"Marit!" Alfred gathered her into his arms. "You have to save yourself before you can save Haplo."

"Very well," she whispered, half choked. "But . . . we're coming back for him."

"I promise," Alfred said, no doubt at all remaining in him. "We'll go to the ship."

The sigla lighting the way to the Seventh Gate flickered and died.

Alfred began to sing the runes, softly, sonorously. Sparkling, shimmering runes enveloped him, Marit, and the dog. He continued to sing the runes, the runes that would stretch forth into the possibility that they were safely on board the ship . . .

And within a heartbeat, Alfred and Marit and the dog were standing on the deck.

And there, waiting for them, was Lord Xar.

## CHAPTER 16

### SAFE HARBOR ABARRACH

ALFRED BLINKED, STARED. MARIT CLUTCHED AT HIM, NEARLY falling.

Xar ignored them both. He reached out his hand to grab the dog, which was standing stiff-legged, teeth bared, growling.

"Dragon!" said Haplo.

Dragon!

Alfred grasped at the possibility, at the spell. He sprang high into the air, his body twisting and dancing with the magic. And suddenly Alfred was no longer on the ship but flying high above it. Xar was not a threatening figure standing next to the Sartan, but a small insignificant one far below, staring up at him.

Marit clung groggily to Alfred's back. She had been hanging on to his coat when the spell transformed him and apparently the magic had taken her with him. But the dog was still down on the deck, dashing back and forth, gazing up at Alfred and barking.

"Give up, Sartan!" Xar called. "You're trapped. You cannot leave Abarrach."

"You can leave, Alfred!" Haplo said to him. "You are stronger than he is! Attack him! Take back the ship!"

"But I might hurt the dog . . ." Alfred wavered.

Xar now had hold of the animal, hanging on to it by the scruff of its neck. "You might well be able to take back your ship from me, Sartan. But what will you do then? Leave without your friend? The dog cannot pass through Death's Gate."

The dog cannot pass through Death's Gate.

"Is that true, Haplo?" Alfred demanded. He answered his own question, realizing that Haplo wouldn't. "It is, isn't it. I knew something about that suggestion of yours wasn't right. The dog can't go through Death's Gate! Not without you!"

Haplo did not respond.

The dragon circled, unhappy, irresolute. Down below, the dog, caught in Xar's grasp, watched them and whined.

"You won't leave your friend here alone to die, Alfred," Xar shouted. "You can't. Love breaks the heart, doesn't it, Sartan . . ."

The dragon wavered. Its wings dipped. Alfred prepared to surrender.

"No!" Haplo shouted.

The dog twisted in Xar's grasp, snapped viciously at him. Its slashing teeth tore through the sleeve of the lord's black robes. Xar let loose, backed up a step from the slavering animal.

The dog leapt from the deck, landed on the dock. It raced off, running as fast as it could run, heading for the abandoned town of Safe Harbor.

The dragon swooped down, flew protectively above the dog until it had disappeared into the shadows of the crumbling buildings. Creeping into an empty house, the dog waited, panting, to see if it was pursued.

It wasn't.

The Lord of the Nexus could have stopped the dog.

He could have killed it with a single spoken sigil. But he let the animal go. He had accomplished his purpose. Alfred would never leave Abarrach now. And, sooner or later, he would lead Xar to the Seventh Gate.

Love breaks the heart.

Smiling, pleased with himself, Xar left the ship, returned to his library to consider what to do next. As he went, he rubbed the sigil on his forehead.

Barely conscious, clinging to the dragon's back, Marit moaned.

The dragon circled above the abandoned town of Safe Harbor, waiting to see what Xar would do. Alfred was prepared for anything except the lord's sudden departure.

When Xar disappeared, Alfred waited and watched, thinking it might be a trick. Or perhaps the lord had gone to fetch reinforcements.

Nothing happened. No one came.

"Alfred," Marit said weakly. "You better land. I ... don't think I can hang on much longer."

"Take her to Salfag Caverns," Haplo suggested. "They're up ahead, not far. The dog knows the way."

The dog emerged from hiding, dashed out into the middle of the empty street. Gazing up at Alfred, the animal barked once, then trotted off down the road.

The dragon flew after the dog, veering sharply over Safe Harbor, followed a road up the coastline of the Fire Sea until the road itself disappeared. The dog began to pick its way among gigantic boulders, jutting out from the shoreline. Recognizing the place as near the entrance to Salfag Caverns, the dragon spiraled downward, seeking a suitable landing site.

As he did so, as he flew closer to the ground, Alfred thought he detected movement—a shadow detaching itself from a jumble of rocks and dead trees and hurrying away, losing itself in more shadows. He stared hard at the site, could see nothing. Finding a clear spot among a jumble of boulders, the dragon settled to the ground.

Marit slid from the dragon's back, slumped down among the rocks, and did not move. Alfred changed back to his usual form, bent over her anxiously.

Her healing powers had kept her from dying, but not much beyond. The poison still coursed through her veins. She was burning with fever and struggled to draw every breath. She seemed to be in pain. She lifted her hand to her forehead, pressed on it.

Alfred brushed back her hair. He saw the sigil—Xar's sigil—glowing with an eerie light. Alfred understood, sighed deeply.

"No wonder Xar let us go," he said. "Wherever we go, she'll lead him right to us."

"You've got to heal her," Haplo said. "But not here. Inside the cavern. She'll need to sleep."

"Yes, of course."

Alfred gently lifted Marit in his arms. The dog, knowing Alfred, regarded this maneuver dubiously. The animal obviously expected that at any moment it would have to save both of them from tumbling headlong into the Fire Sea.

Alfred began to hum to himself, singing the runes as he might have sung a lullaby to a child. Marit relaxed in his arms, ceased to cry out. She drew a deep and peaceful breath. Her head lolled on his shoulder. Smiling to himself, Alfred carried her easily, without slipping once, to the entrance to Salfag Caverns. He started to enter.

The dog refused to follow. It sniffed the air. Its legs went stiff, its hackles rose. It growled warningly.

"Something's in there," Haplo said. "Hiding in the shadows. To your right."

Alfred blinked, unable to see in the dark after the lurid light of the Fire Sea. "It . . . It's not the lazar . . ." His voice quavered nervously.

"No," said Haplo.

The dog crept closer, growling softly.

"This person's alive. I think . . ." Haplo paused. "Do you remember Balthazar? That Sartan necromancer we left behind when we fled Abarrach?"

"Balthazar!" Alfred couldn't believe it. "But he must be dead. All the Sartan with him. The lazar must have destroyed them."

"Apparently not. My guess is we've stumbled onto where Balthazar and his people have been hiding. Remember, this is where we came across them the first time."

"Balthazar!" Alfred repeated in disbelief. He peered into the shadows, attempted to see. "Please, I need help," he called, speaking Sartan. "I was here once before. Do you remember me? My name is—"

"Alfred," said a dry, rasping voice from the shadows. A Sartan clad in ragged, threadbare black robes stepped out from the shadows. "Yes, I remember you."

The dog stood protectively in front of Alfred, barked a warning that said Keep your distance.

"Don't be afraid. I won't harm you. I haven't the strength to harm anyone," Balthazar added, a bitter tinge to his voice.

The Sartan had been slightly built to begin with; suffering and deprivation had left him thin and wasted. His beard and hair, once shining black—unusual among Sartan—were now prematurely streaked with gray. Though movement obviously fatigued him, he managed to carry himself with dignity and pride. But the tattered black robes that marked a necromancer hung from bony shoulders, as if they covered a skeleton.

"Balthazar," said Alfred in shocked recognition. "It is you. I . . . wasn't certain."

The pity in his voice was all too apparent. Balthazar's black eyes flashed in anger. He drew himself up, clasped his emaciated arms across his shrunken chest.

"Yes, Balthazar! Whose people you left to die on the docks of Safe Harbor!"

The dog, having recognized Balthazar, had been about to make advances in friendly fashion. The animal growled, backed up to stand near its charges.

"You know why we left you behind. I could not permit you to take necromancy into the other worlds," Alfred said quietly. "Especially after I'd seen the harm done to this one."

Balthazar sighed. His anger had been more reflexive than real, a flickering spark, all that was left of a fire that had long since died. His arms, clasped across his chest, slid apart, dropped wearily to his sides.

"I understand. I didn't then, of course. And I can't help my anger. You have no idea—the black eyes were shadowed, filled with anguish and pain—what we have suffered. But what you say is true. We brought this evil upon ourselves by our own rash actions. It is up to us to deal with it. What is wrong with the woman?"

Balthazar eyed Marit closely. "She must belong to the same race of people as that friend of yours—what was his name? Haplo. I recognize the rune-markings on the skin."

"She was attacked by one of the lazar," Alfred explained, gazing down at Marit. She was no longer in pain. She was unconscious.

Balthazar's expression grew dark, grim. "Some of our people have met the same fate. There is nothing that can be done for her, I fear."

"On the contrary." Alfred flushed. "I can heal her. But she needs to be someplace quiet, where she can sleep undisturbed for many hours."

Balthazar gazed at Alfred with unblinking eyes. "I forgot," the necromancer said at last. "I forgot you possessed skills that we have lost ... or no longer have the strength to practice. Bring her inside. She will be safe here ... as safe as anywhere in this doomed world."

The necromancer led the way deeper into the cave. As they went, they passed by another Sartan, a young woman. Balthazar nodded to her, made her a sign. She cast one curious glance at Alfred and his companions, then left, heading outside. Within a few moments, two other Sartan appeared.

"If you want, they will take the woman on ahead to our living area, make her comfortable," Balthazar suggested.

Alfred hesitated. He wasn't entirely certain he trusted these people ... his people.

"I will only keep you a few moments," Balthazar said. "But I would like to talk with you."

The black eyes penetrated, probed. Alfred had the uneasy feeling that they were seeing much more than he wanted them to see. And it was obvious the necromancer wasn't going to permit Alfred to do anything for Marit until Balthazar's curiosity—or whatever it was—was satisfied.

Reluctantly, Alfred relinquished Marit to the care of the Sartan. They treated her with tenderness and bore her carefully back to the interior of the cavern. He couldn't help noting, however, that the two Sartan who had taken charge of Marit were almost as weak as the injured Patryn.

"You were warned of our coming," Alfred said, thinking back to the person he'd seen moving among the rocks.

"We keep watch for the lazar," Balthazar answered. "Please, let us sit a moment. Walking fatigues me." He sank down, almost collapsing, upon a boulder.

"You're not using the dead ... for scouts," Alfred said slowly, remembering the last time he'd been on this world. "Or to fight for you?"

Balthazar cast him a sharp, shrewd glance. "No, we are not." His gaze shifted to the shadows that had deepened around them as they moved farther into the cave. "We do not practice the necromancy anymore."

"I am glad," Alfred said emotionally. "So very glad. Your decision was the right one. The power of necromancy has already done great harm to our people."

"The ability to bring the dead back to life is a strong temptation, arising as it does out of what we call love and compassion." Balthazar sighed. "Unfortunately, it is really only the selfish desire to hold on to something we should let go. Shortsighted and arrogant, we imagine that this mortal state is the apex, the best we can achieve. We have learned that such is not the case."

Alfred regarded him with astonishment. "You have learned? How?"

"My prince, my cherished Edmund, had the courage to show us. We honor his memory. The souls of our dead are free to depart now, their bodies laid to rest with respect.

"Unfortunately," he added, the bitterness returning, "burying our dead is a task that has become all too common . . ."

Lowering his head into his hand, he sought vainly to hide his tears. The dog pattered forward, willing to forgive the earlier misunderstanding. It placed its paw on the necromancer's knee, gazed up at him with sympathetic eyes.

"We fled inland to escape the lazar. But they caught up with us. We fought them, a losing battle, as we well knew. Then one of their number—a young nobleman known as Jonathon—stepped forward. He freed Prince Edmund, sent his spirit to rest, and proved to us that what we had feared all these centuries was not true. The soul does not fall into oblivion, but lives on. We had been wrong to chain that soul to its prison of flesh. Jonathon held off Kleitus and the other lazar, gave us time to escape to safety.

"We hid in the outback for as long as we could. But our food supplies were scarce, our magic weakening daily. Finally, driven by hunger, we came back to this abandoned town, scavenged what meagre supplies remained, and moved into this cave. Now our food is almost completely gone and we have no hope of obtaining more. What little we have left goes to feed the very young, the sick . . ."

Balthazar paused, shut his eyes. He seemed about to faint. Alfred put his arm around him, supported him until he was able to sit by himself.

"Thank you," Balthazar said, with a wan smile. "I am better now. These dizzy spells are a weakness with me."

"A weakness brought on by lack of sustenance. My guess is that you have been depriving yourself of food so that your people could eat. But you are their leader. What will happen to them if you fall ill?"

"The same thing that will happen to them whether I live or die," Balthazar said grimly. "We have no hope. No means of escape. We wait only for death." His voice softened. "And after seeing what peace my prince found, I must confess that I am looking forward to it."

"Come, come," Alfred said hastily, alarmed by such talk. "We're wasting time. If you have any food left at all, I can use my magic to provide more."

Balthazar smiled wanly. "That would be a great help. And undoubtedly you have large stores of food on your ship."

"Well, yes, of course, —" Alfred stopped. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

"Now you've done it," Haplo muttered.

"So that ship we saw is yours!" Balthazar's eyes burned with a fevered glow. He stretched forth a skeletal hand, clutched at Alfred's faded velvet lapel. "At last we can escape! Leave this world of death!"

"H—" Alfred stammered. "That is ... you see . . ."

Alfred could see—could see exactly where all this had been leading. He rose, trembling, to his feet.

"We will discuss this later. I need to be with my friend. To heal her. Then I will do what I can to help your people."

Balthazar also stood up. He leaned near Alfred. "We will escape!" he said softly. "No one will stop us this time."

Alfred gulped, backed up a pace. He said nothing. Balthazar said nothing. The two walked on, moving deeper into the cavern. The necromancer walked slowly and weakly, but he politely refused any type of aid. Alfred, miserable and unhappy, could not control his wandering feet. If it hadn't been for the dog, he would have tumbled down any number of crevices, fallen over any number of rocks.

A mensch saying came to Alfred's mind.

"Out of the frying pan. Into the fire."

## CHAPTER 17

### SALFAG CAVERNS ABARRACH

BALTHAZAR REMAINED SILENT DURING THEIR WALK, FOR which Alfred was extremely grateful. Having endeavored to extricate himself from one problem, he had—as usual—become embroiled in another. Now he had to find a way out of both. Try as he might, he could see no solution to either.

They walked on, the dog pattering watchfully behind. And then they came to the portion of the cavern in which the Sartan lived.

Alfred peered through the darkness. His worries about Haplo and Marit, his suspicions of Balthazar, were submerged beneath a wave of pity and shock. Fifty or so Sartan men, women, and a few—far too few—children were sheltered in this dismal cavern. The sight of them, their wretched plight, was heart-wrenching. Starvation had taken its terrible toll, but worse than physical deprivation, terror and fear and despair had left their souls as emaciated as their bodies.

Balthazar had done what he could to keep up their spirits, but he was near the end himself. Many of the Sartan had given up. They lay on the hard, cold floor of the cavern, doing nothing but staring into the darkness, as if beseeching it to come down and wrap around them.

Alfred knew such hopelessness well, knew where it could lead, for he himself had once walked that dread road. If it had not been for the coming of Haplo—and Haplo's dog—Alfred might have followed the road to its bitter conclusion.

"This is what we live on," Balthazar said, gesturing to a large sack. "Kairn-grass seed, meant to be used for planting, salvaged from Safe Harbor. We grind the seeds, mix them with water to make gruel. And this is the last sack. When it is gone . . ."

The necromancer shrugged.

What magical powers the Sartan had left were being used to simply stay alive, to breathe the poisonous air of Abarrach.

"Don't worry," said Alfred. "I will aid you. But first, I must heal Marit."

"Certainly," Balthazar said.

Marit lay on a pile of ragged blankets. Several Sartan women were tending her, doing what they could to make her comfortable. She'd been warmly covered, given water. (Alfred couldn't help wondering at the apparent abundance of fresh water; the last time he'd been on Abarrach, water had been extremely scarce. He would have to remember to ask.)

Thanks to these ministrations, Marit had regained consciousness. She was quick to catch sight of Alfred. Weakly raising her hand, she reached out to him. He started to kneel beside her. Marit grabbed hold of him, nearly pulled him off-balance.

"What . . . where are we?" she asked through teeth clenched against the chills that shook her. "Who are these?"

"Sartan," said Alfred, soothing her, trying to coax her to lie back down. "You are safe here. I'm going to heal you, then you need sleep."

An expression of defiance hardened Mark's face. Alfred was reminded of the time—another time—in Abar-rach, when he'd healed Haplo, against his will.

"I can take care of myself," Marit began, but her words were choked off. She couldn't catch her breath.

Alfred took hold of her hands, her right in his left, her left in his right, completing, sharing the circle of their beings.

She attempted feebly to snatch her hand away, but Alfred was stronger now than she was. He held on to her tightly and began to sing the runes.

His warmth and strength flowed into Marit. Her pain and suffering and loneliness entered his. The circle wrapped around them, bound them together, and for just a brief instant, Haplo was included within it.

Alfred had a strange, eerie image of the three of them, floating on a wave of light and air and time, talking to each other.

"You have to leave Abarrach, Alfred," Haplo said. "You and Marit. Go someplace safe, where Xar can't find you."

"But we can't take the dog, can we?" Alfred argued. "Xar is right. The dog cannot pass through Death's Gate. Not without you."

"We won't go," Mark said. "We won't leave you."

She seemed surrounded by light, was beautiful in Alfred's eyes. She leaned near Haplo, reached out her hand to him, but he couldn't touch her. She couldn't touch him. The wave carried them, supported them, but it also separated them.

"I lost you once, Haplo. I left you because I didn't have the courage to love you. I have the courage now. I love you and I won't lose you again. If the situation were reversed," Marit continued, not letting him speak, "and I were the one lying back there on that stone bier, would you leave me? Then how can you think I am less strong than you are?"

Haplo's voice faltered. "I don't ask you to be less strong than I am. I ask you to be stronger. You must find the strength to leave me, Marit. Remember our people, fighting for their lives in the Labyrinth. Remember what will happen to them and to everyone in the four worlds if our lord succeeds in closing the Seventh Gate."

"I can't leave you," Marit said.

Her love poured out from her. Haplo's love flowed from him, and Alfred was the fine silk cloth through which both passed. The tragedy of their separation grieved him deeply. If he could have given them ease by tearing himself apart, he would have done so. As it was, he could only be a poor sort of go-between.

What made it worse was that he knew Haplo was speaking to him, too to Alfred as well as Marit. Alfred, too, must find the strength to leave someone he had come to love.

"But in the meantime, what do I do about Balthazar?" Alfred asked.

Before Haplo could answer, the light began to fade, the warmth receded. The wave ebbed, leaving Alfred stranded and alone in darkness. He sighed deeply, shud-deringly, not wanting to let go, not wanting to return. And, as he did so, he heard his name.

"Alfred." Marit was half sitting up, propped on her elbow. The fever had left her eyes, although the lids were now heavy with the longing for sleep. "Alfred," she repeated urgently, struggling to remain awake.

"Yes, my dear, I am here," he replied, close to tears. "You should be lying down."

She sank back onto the blankets, permitted him to fuss over her, because she was too distracted to stop him. When he started to leave, she caught hold of his hand.

"Ask the Sartan . . . about the Seventh Gate," she whispered. "What he knows about it."

"Do you really think that's wise?" Alfred demurred.

Now that he had seen Balthazar again, he was reminded of the power of the necromancer. And though weakened from anxiety and lack of food, Balthazar would regain his strength quickly enough if he thought he'd found a way out for him and his people.

"I'm not certain I want Balthazar to find the Seventh Gate, any more than Lord Xar. Perhaps I shouldn't bring it up."

"Just ask what he knows," Marit pleaded. "What harm can there be in that?"

Alfred was reluctant. "I doubt if Balthazar knows anything . . ."

Marit held fast to his hand, squeezed it painfully. "Ask him. Please!"

"Ask me what?"

Balthazar had been standing at a distance, watching the healing process with intense interest. Now, hearing his name, he glided forward. "What is it you want to know?"

"Go ahead," said Haplo's voice suddenly, startling Alfred. "Ask him. See what he says."

Alfred sighed, gulped. "We were wondering, Balthazar, have you ever heard of ... of something called the Seventh Gate?"

"Certainly," Balthazar answered calmly, but with a stabbing glance of his black eyes that slid through Alfred like a sharp blade. "All on Abarrach have heard of the Seventh Gate. Every child learns the litany."

"What . . . what litany would that be?" Alfred asked faintly.

" 'The Earth was destroyed,' " Balthazar began, repeating the words in a high, thin voice. " 'Four worlds were created out of the ruin. Worlds for ourselves and the mensch: Air, Fire, Stone, Water. Four Gates connect each world to the other: Arianus to Pryan to Abarrach to Chelestra. A house of correction was built for our

enemies: the Labyrinth. The Labyrinth is connected to the other worlds through the Fifth Gate: the Nexus. The Sixth Gate is the center, permits entry: the Vortex. And all was accomplished through the Seventh Gate. The end was the beginning.' "

"So that was how you knew about Death's Gate, about the other worlds," Alfred said, recalling the first time he'd met Balthazar, how the necromancer had seen through the lies Haplo had used to conceal his true identity. "And you say this is taught to children?"

"It was," Balthazar said, with rueful emphasis on the word. "When we had leisure to teach our children other things besides how to die."

"How did your people come to be in this condition?" Marit asked, fighting drowsiness, fighting sleep. "What happened to this world?"

"Greed is what happened," Balthazar replied. "Greed and desperation. When the magic that kept this world alive started to fail, our people began to die. We turned to necromancy, to hold on to those dear to us, at first. Then, eventually, we used that black art to increase our numbers, to add soldiers to our armies, servants to our houses. But things grew worse instead of better for us."

"Abarrach was always intended to be dependent on the other three worlds for its survival," Alfred explained. "Conduits, known on this world as colossi, were meant to channel energy flowing from the citadels of Pryan into Abarrach. The energy would provide light and heat, enable the people to live near the surface, where the air is breathable. The plan did not work out. When the Kicksey-winsey failed, the light of Pryan's citadels failed as well, and Abarrach was left in the darkness."

He stopped. His didactic lecture had worked. Marit's eyes were closed, her breathing deep and even. Alfred smiled slightly, carefully tucked the blankets around her to keep her warm. Then he stole silently away. Balthazar, after a glance at Marit, followed Alfred.

"Why do you ask about the Seventh Gate?"

Another one of the stabbing glances penetrated Alfred, who was immediately rendered incoherent.

"I ... I ... curious . . . heard . . . somewhere . . . something . . ."

Balthazar frowned. "What are you trying to find out, Brother? The location? Believe me, if I had any idea where the Seventh Gate was, I would have used it myself, to help my people escape this terrible place."

"Yes, of course."

"What else do you want to know about it, then?"

"Nothing, really. Just . . . just curious. Let's go see what we can do about feeding your people."

Truly concerned for his people's welfare, the necromancer said nothing more. But it was apparent to Alfred that, as he had feared, his sudden interest in the Seventh Gate had aroused Balthazar's interest as well. And the necromancer was a great deal like Haplo's dog. Once he had something in his teeth, he would not easily let go.

Alfred began replicating sacks of the kairn-grass seed, [1] providing enough so that the Sartan could turn it into flour, bake it into hardbread—far more substantial and nourishing than the gruel. As he worked, he glanced surreptitiously around the cavern. No dead Sartan served the living, as had been the case the last time Alfred had visited these people. No soldier-corpses guarded the entrance, no cadaver-king tried to rule. Wherever the dead lay, they lay at rest—~~as~~ Balthazar had said.

Alfred looked at the children huddled around him, begging for a handful of seed that, on Arianus, he would have thrown to the birds.

His eyes filled with tears, and that reminded him of a question. He turned to Balthazar, who kept near him, watching each spell Alfred cast, almost as hungry for the magic as he was for the food.

The necromancer had, at Alfred's insistence, eaten a small amount and was looking somewhat stronger—although the renewal of hope probably accounted more for the change than the unappetizing kairn-grass paste he had consumed.

"You seem to have plenty of water," Alfred remarked. "That's different from when I was here last."

Balthazar nodded. "You recall that one of the colossi stands not far from here. We had assumed it was dead, its power gone out. But, quite suddenly, not too long ago, its magic returned to life."

1 Sartan and Patryn magic can replicate already existing food supplies. This can be done quite easily, merely by advancing the possibility that one sack of grain is twenty sacks of grain. Certain powerful magic-users are able to alter the possibilities to produce food out of objects not normally edible, such as changing stone into bread. Or they might change one food substance into another—turn a fish into a beefsteak. Alfred could undoubtedly perform such magic, but it would require a tremendous expenditure of will and energy.

Alfred brightened. "Indeed? Do you have any idea why?"

"There has been no change on this world. I can only assume that there have been changes on others."

"Why, yes! You're right!" Alfred was all eager enthusiasm. "The Kicksey-winsey . . . and the citadels on Pryan . . . they're working now! . . . Why, this means—"

"—nothing to us," Balthazar finished coolly. "Change comes too late. Suppose the heat from the conduits has returned, suppose it is causing the ice that rimes this world to begin to melt. We once again find water. But it will be many, many lifetimes before this world of the dead can be inhabited by the living. And by then the living will be no more. The dead alone will rule Abarrach."

"You are determined to leave," Alfred said, troubled.

"Or die trying," Balthazar said grimly. "Can you envisage a future for us, for our children, here, on Abarrach?"

Alfred couldn't answer. He handed over more food. Balthazar took it and left, doling it out to his people.

"I can't blame them for wanting to leave," Alfred said quietly. "I want to leave very badly myself at this moment. But I know perfectly well what will happen when these Sartan arrive on the other worlds. It will only be a matter of time before they begin to try to take over, disrupting the lives of the mensch."

"They're a sad-looking lot," Haplo said.

Alfred, not realizing he'd spoken aloud, jumped to hear Haplo's voice. Or maybe he hadn't spoken aloud. Haplo had always been able to read his thoughts.

"You're right," Haplo went on. "These Sartan are weak now, but once they are able to quit using their magic for survival, their magic will strengthen. They'll discover its power."

"And then there are your people." Alfred glanced at the sleeping Marit. The dog lay protectively at her side, growling warningly at anyone who ventured near her. "If they escape from the Labyrinth and enter the worlds, who can say what will happen? Patryns have sucked in hatred with their mothers' milk, and who can blame them?"

Alfred began to tremble. He dropped the food, pressed his hands to his burning eyes. "I see it all happening again! The rivalries, the wars, the deadly confrontations. The innocent victims caught up in it, dying for something they don't understand ... All ... all ending in disaster!"

The last burst from Alfred in a hollow cry. Looking up, he encountered the necromancer's glittering black-eyed gaze. Balthazar had returned. Alfred had the sudden, uncanny impression that the necromancer had followed every twist and turn of his thoughts. Balthazar had seen what Alfred had seen, shared the vision that had led to his horrified cry.

"I will leave Abarrach," Balthazar said to Alfred, softly. "You cannot stop me."

Alfred, shaken and disturbed, was forced to quit using his magic. He didn't feel strong enough to turn ice to water on a hot summer's day.

"It was a mistake to come here," he muttered.

"But if we hadn't, they would have all died," Haplo observed.

"Perhaps it would have been best." Alfred stared at his hands—large, with large-boned wrists; slender, tapering fingers; graceful, elegant . . . and capable of causing so much harm. He could use them for good, too, but at the moment he was not disposed to see that. "It would be best for the mensch if we all died."

"If their 'gods' left them, you mean?"

"'Gods!'" Alfred repeated, with contempt. "'Enslavers' is nearer the mark. I would rid the universe of us and our corrupt 'power!'"

"You know, my friend"—Haplo sounded thoughtful—"there may be something in what you say . . ."

"There may be?" Alfred was startled. He'd been babbling, flailing about mentally, not expecting to hit anything. "What exactly did I say?"

"Don't worry about it. Go make yourself useful."

"Do you have any suggestions?" Alfred asked meekly.

"You might want to find out what Balthazar's scouts are reporting to him," Haplo suggested dryly. "Or hadn't you noticed that they'd returned?"

Alfred hadn't noticed, as a matter of fact. His head jerked up, his body twitched. The Sartan he'd seen posted near the cavern's entrance—the one Balthazar had sent on some sort of errand—was back. Balthazar brought the young woman food. She was eating ravenously, but between mouthfuls, she was talking to him, their discussion low-voiced and intense.

Alfred started to stand up, slipped on a smattering of kairn-grass seeds, and sat back down again.

"Stay here," Haplo said. He gave the dog a silent command.

The animal rose to its feet. Padding silently over to Balthazar, the dog flopped down at his feet.

"He sent her to inspect the ship. He's going to try to seize it," Haplo reported, hearing through the dog's ears.

"But they can't, can they?" Alfred protested. "Marit surrounded it with Patryn runes . . ."

"Under ordinary circumstances, no," Haplo said. "But apparently someone else on Abarrach has had the same idea. Someone else is also trying to steal the ship."

Alfred was astonished. "Surely not Xar . . ."

"No, my lord has no need for that ship. But someone else on this world does."

Suddenly, Alfred knew the answer.

"Kleitus!"

## CHAPTER 18

### SALFAG CAVERNS ABARRACH

"I WISH WE WERE STRONGER!" BALTHAZAR WAS SAYING, AS ALFRED hesitantly approached the necromancer and the guard. The dog, tail wagging, pattered over to greet Alfred.

"Our numbers greater! But ... it will have to suffice." The necromancer glanced around. "How many of us are physically capable . . ."

"Um . . . what's going on?" Alfred remembered just in time to pretend that he didn't know.

"The lazar, Kleitus, is attempting to steal your ship," Balthazar reported, with a calm that astonished Alfred. "Of course, the fiend must be stopped."

So that you can take it yourself, Alfred added, but he added it silently. "The ... um ... that is ... Patryn rune-magic guards the ship. I don't think it can be broken . . ."

Balthazar smiled, thin-lipped, grim. "As you recall, I once saw a demonstration of 'Patryn' magic. The rune-structures are visible, they glow with light when they are activated. Isn't that true?"

Alfred, wary, nodded.

"Half the sigla on your ship are now dark," Balthazar reported. "Kleitus is unraveling it."

"That's impossible!" Alfred protested in disbelief. "How could the lazar have learned such a skill—"

"From Xar," Haplo said. "Kleitus has been watching my lord and the rest of my people. The lazar has discovered the secret of the rune-magic."

"The lazar are capable of learning," Balthazar was saying at the same time, "because of the soul's proximity to the body. And they have long wanted to leave Abarrach. They can find no living flesh here on which to feed. I do not need to tell you what terrible tragedies will befall in the other worlds if the lazar succeed in entering Death's Gate."

He was right. He had no need to tell Alfred, who could envision such horror all too clearly. Kleitus had to be stopped, but—once the lazar was stopped, it was—who was going to stop Balthazar?

Alfred sank down on a rock ledge, stared unseeing into the darkness. "Will it never end? Will we go on forever perpetuating the misery and the sorrow?"

The dog flopped down, whined a little in sympathy. Balthazar stood near, black eyes probing, plodding. Alfred flinched, as if the sharp gaze had drawn blood. He had the distinct feeling he knew what Balthazar was going to say next.

Balthazar placed his gaunt, wasted hand on Alfred's shoulder.

Leaning over him, the necromancer spoke in low tones. "Once I might have been able to cast such spells as are required. But not now. You, on the other hand . . ."

Alfred blanched, shrank away from the man's touch. "I ... couldn't! I wouldn't know how . . ."

"I do," Balthazar said smoothly. "I have been thinking long on the matter, as you might guess. The lazar are dangerous because—unlike the ordinary dead—the living soul remains attached to the dead. If that attachment were to be severed, the soul wrenched from the body, I believe the lazar would be destroyed."

"You 'believe'?" Alfred retorted. "You don't know for certain."

"As I said, I have not been strong enough to conduct such an experiment myself."

"I couldn't," Alfred said flatly. "I couldn't possibly."

"Yet he's right," said Haplo. "Kleitus must be stopped. Balthazar's too weak to do it."

Alfred groaned again. What do I do about Balthazar? he asked silently, conscious of the necromancer hovering at his elbow. How do I stop him!

"Worry about one thing at a time," Haplo returned.

Alfred shook his head dismally.

"Look at these Sartan," Haplo told him. "They can barely walk. The ship is a Patryn ship, covered with Patryn runes—inside and out. Even if Kleitus destroys all the runes, new ones will have to be crafted to enable the ship to fly. Balthazar won't be leaving anytime soon. Plus I don't think Lord Xar will be too pleased with the idea of letting these Sartan escape him."

Alfred did not find this cheering. "But that will mean more fighting, more killing . . ."

"One problem at a time, Sartan," Haplo said, with an inexplicable calm. "One problem at a time. Can you work this magic the necromancer proposes?"

"Yes," said Alfred softly, subdued. He sighed. "Yes, I believe I can."

"You can work the magic?" The voice was Balthazar's. "Is that what you are talking about?"

"Yes," Alfred said, flushing.

Balthazar's black eyes narrowed. "With what—and with whom—do you commune, Brother?"

The dog, not liking the man's tone, raised its head and growled.

Alfred smiled, reached out to pat it. "Myself," he said quietly.

Balthazar insisted on taking all of his people with them.

"We will seize control of the ship, begin to work on it immediately," he told Alfred. "The strongest among us will stand guard for any attack. Barring interruptions, we should be able to leave Abarrach in a relatively short time."

There will be interruptions, Alfred said silently. Lord Xar will not let you go. And I cannot go. I can't leave Haplo behind. Yet I can't stay. Xar is hunting me, to lead him to the Seventh Gate. What do I do? What do I do?

"What you must," Haplo answered calmly, quietly.

And it was then Alfred realized Haplo had a plan.

Alfred's heart quivered with hope. "You have an idea . . ."

"I beg your pardon?" Balthazar turned to him. "What were you saying?"

"Shut up, Alfred!" Haplo ordered. "Don't say a word. It's nothing firm yet. And circumstances may not work out. But, just in case, be ready. Now, go wake up Marit"

Alfred started to protest, felt the heat of Haplo's irritation wash over him—an uncomfortable and uncanny experience.

"She'll be weak, but you're going to need help and she's the only one who can provide it."

Alfred nodded, did as he was told. The Sartan were gathering together their few belongings, preparing to move out. Word had spread among them rapidly: a ship, escape, hope. They spoke in awed tones of fleeing this dread land, of finding new lives in beautiful new worlds. It was all Alfred could do to keep from shrieking in frustration.

He knelt down beside Marit. She slept so peacefully, so deeply, it seemed criminal to wake her. Looking at her, untroubled as she was by dreams or memories, he was suddenly and shockingly reminded of another—Hugh the Hand—free of the burdens and pain of life, finding a haven and a sanctuary in death . . . until wrenched back . . .

Alfred's throat constricted. He choked, attempted to clear his throat and at the strange sound, Marit woke up.

"What? What is it? What's wrong?" Patrins are accustomed to waking instantly, mindful always—even in slumber—of the danger that surrounds them in the Labyrinth. Marit sat up, her hand fumbling for her weapon, almost before Alfred could comprehend that she was awake and moving.

"It's . . . it's all right." He hastened to reassure her.

She blinked, brushed back her hair. Alfred saw, again, the sigil on her forehead. His heart sank. He'd forgotten. Xar would know . . . every move . . . Perhaps he should tell her.

"Don't say a word," Haplo counseled him swiftly. "Yes, Xar knows, through her, what is happening. But that may work to our advantage. Don't let him know you know."

"What is it?" Marit demanded. "Why are you staring at me?"

"You . . . look . . . much better," Alfred managed.

"Thanks to you," she said, smiling, relaxing. When she did, he saw that she was still ill, still weak. She glanced around, was immediately aware of the sudden activity.

"What's going on?"

"Kleitus is attempting to steal the ship," Alfred explained.

"My ship!" Marit stood up swiftly; too swiftly. She almost fell.

"I'm going to try to stop him," Alfred said, rising awkwardly himself.

"And who's going to stop them?" Marit demanded, with an impatient, sweeping gesture that encompassed all the Sartan in the cave. "They're packing up! Moving out! In my ship!"

Alfred didn't know what to say; Haplo gave him no help. Alfred blinked at her like a baffled owl and stammered something unintelligible.

Marit strapped her sword around her waist. "I understand," she said to him, calm, grim. "I forgot. They're your people. Of course you'll be glad to help them escape."

"Keep quiet . . ." Haplo cautioned.

Alfred clamped his lips shut tightly, to avoid temptation. If he opened his mouth at all, even to breathe, he was afraid the words would come spewing out. Not that he could actually tell Marit anything constructive. He didn't know what Haplo was plotting.

Alfred had the strange impression of Haplo's mind racing down a track, like the flash rafts of the Kicksey-winsey, the great iron carriages that scuttled along on iron rails, powered by the lightning of the 'lectric zingers. Alfred was being carried along with it and he feared he was going to be in for an unnerving jolt whenever Haplo arrived at the end of the line. Meanwhile, the Sartan had no choice but to bumble on and hope that somehow, somewhere, he managed to do his part right.

Balthazar's people had joined together to form a tiny army that looked more dead than the dead they were going out to face. Their thin, wan faces hardened by determination, they moved slowly, but with resolve. Alfred admired them. He could have wept for them.

Yet, looking at them, he saw the beginning of evil, not an end to it.

The Sartan left Salfag Caverns, traveling along the broken road that led to the town of Safe Harbor. With characteristic logic, Balthazar had seen to it that the younger Sartan, who served to guard their people, had been given food enough to keep up their strength. These Sartan were in relatively good condition, though their numbers were few. They moved out in front, acting as advance guards and scouts.

But for the most part, it was a ragged, shabby, and pitifully weak group of people who trudged along the shore of the burning sea, intending to make a stand against the dead, which could not be harmed, which could not die.

Alfred and Marit accompanied them. Alfred's mind was in such turmoil over the spell he would have to cast—a spell he had never ever even considered casting—that he paid no attention to where he was going or how he got there. He lurched into boulders, fell over the feet of his companions, if they were available; tumbled over his own feet if not.

The dog was kept busy hauling Alfred out of one potential disaster after another and, within a short time, even that faithful animal began to evince signs of irritation with the man. A snap and a snarl warned Alfred away from a bubbling mud pit, when before a gentle nudge would have taken him clear.

Marit marched silently, her hand on her sword hilt. She, too, was plotting something, but obviously had no intention of sharing her strategy. Alfred had become—once again—one of the enemy.

The thought made him miserable, but he couldn't blame her. He didn't dare trust her either; not with Xar's mark on her.

Evil beginning again . . . without end. Without end.

At Balthazar's command, the Sartan left the road before they came near the town, moving into the dark shadows created by the lurid light glowing from the Fire Sea. The Sartan herded the children and those too weak to keep going into abandoned buildings. The younger Sartan went with their leader to view from hidden vantage points the dock and the Patryn ship.

Kleitus was alone; none of the other lazar were working with him, which Alfred found inexplicable at first. Then it occurred to him that these lazar probably didn't trust each other. Kleitus would jealously guard the secrets he had learned from Xar. Crouched in the shadows, the Sartan watched the lazar slowly, patiently, unravel the complex Patryn rune-structure.

"It is well we came when we did," Balthazar whispered, before moving off to issue commands to his people.

Alfred was too harried and flurried to reply. Marit also had no comment. She was staring, amazed and aghast, at her ship. Almost two-thirds of the runes protecting the ship were destroyed, their magical power broken. Perhaps she hadn't believed the Sartan. Now she knew they were telling the truth.

"Do you suppose Xar put Kleitus up to this?" Alfred was, in truth, asking Haplo, but Marit apparently thought he was talking to her.

Her eyes flashed. "My lord would never have permitted the lazar to learn the rune-magic! Besides, what purpose would this serve?"

Alfred flushed, stung by her anger. "You must admit, this is a convenient way to rid himself of the lazar ... and keep us trapped here on Abarrach."

Marit shook her head, refusing to consider the idea. She lifted her hand to her forehead, to rub the sigil put there by Xar. Catching Alfred watching her, she snatched her hand away, wrapped her fingers tightly about her sword hilt.

"What do you plan to do?" she asked coldly. "Are you going to change into the dragon?"

"No." Alfred spoke reluctantly, not wanting to think about what he was going to do, what he was going to have to do. "It will take all my energy to perform the spell to free this tormented soul." His sad-eyed gaze was on the lazar. "I couldn't do that and be the dragon, too."

He added softly, first checking to make certain Balthazar was nowhere near, "Marit, I'm not going to let the Sartan have the ship."

She regarded him silently, thoughtfully, taking his measure. Finally she nodded, once, abruptly.

"How are you going to stop them?"

"Marit . . ." Alfred licked dry lips. "What if I were to destroy the ship?"

She was thoughtful, did not protest.

"We'd be trapped in Abarrach. There would be no other way out for us," he said to her, wanting to make certain she understood.

"Yes, there is," Marit replied. "The Seventh Gate."

"Mv LORD!" A PATRYN ENTERED XAR'S LIBRARY. "A GROUP of what appear to be Sartan have arrived in Safe Harbor. The scouts believe they are going to attempt to seize the ship."

Xar knew, of course, what was transpiring. He had been with Marit mentally, following events through her ears and eyes, although she had no idea she was being used for such a purpose. He made no mention of this fact, however, but looked up with interest at the Patryn making the report.

"Indeed. Sartan-native to Abarrach. I heard rumor of this before our arrival, but the lazar led me to believe all the Sartan were dead."

"They might as well be, Lord. They are a ragged, wretched-looking lot. Half starved."

"How many of them?"

"Perhaps fifty or so, My Lord. Including children."

"Children . . ." Xar was nonplussed. Marit had made no mention of children. He hadn't figured them into his calculations.

Still, he reminded himself coldly, they are Sartan children.

"What is Kleitus doing?"

"Attempting to destroy the rune-magic protecting the ship, My Lord. He appears to be oblivious to all else."

Xar made an impatient gesture. "Of course he is. He, too, is half starved for fresh blood."

"What are your orders, My Lord?"

What indeed? Xar had been pondering this ever since he had known, from Marit's whispered conversation with Alfred, what was being planned. Alfred was going to attempt to wrench the soul from the lazar's body. Xar had a great deal of respect for the Serpent Mage more respect for Alfred than Alfred had for himself. He might very well be capable of ending the lazar's tormented existence.

Xar didn't care a rune-bone what happened to the lazar. If they all turned to dust, if they fled Abarrach it was all the same to him. He would be happy to be rid of them. But once Kleitus was destroyed, Alfred would be free to take over the ship. True, he had told Marit he intended to destroy it. But Xar didn't trust the Sartan.

The Lord of the Nexus made his decision. He rose to his feet.

"I will come," he said. "Send all our people to the Anvil. Have my ship there, ready to sail. We must be prepared to move . . . and move swiftly."

Out beyond the New Provinces, directly across from Safe Harbor, stood a promontory of jagged rock known—for its black color and distinctive shape as the Anvil. The Anvil guarded the mouth of a bay created eons ago when a tremor had caused part of the rock peak to crack and break off. It had slid into the sea, creating an opening in the cliff that permitted the magma to flow into a low-lying section of land.

This created a bay, which was named Firepool. The lava, fed continually by the Fire Sea and surrounded by sheer rock walls on all sides, formed a slow-moving, sluggish maelstrom.

Around and around flowed the viscous magma, carrying chunks of black rock on its glowing surface. A person standing on the Anvil could pick out a particular rock and watch it being carried inexorably to its doom. Watch it enter the Firepool, watch it revolve around the outer surface, watch it drift nearer and nearer the Fire-pool's heart, watch it vanish, dragged down into the sucking maw of the fiery maelstrom.

Xar often came to the Anvil, often stood and stared into the mesmerizing swirl of fiery lava. When he was in a fatalistic mood, he compared the Firepool to life. No matter what a man did, how much he struggled and fought to avoid his fate, the end was always the same. But Xar was not indulging in such morbid thoughts

this day. He looked down on the maelstrom and saw not rocks, but one of the iron, steam- and magic-driven ships built by the Sartan to sail the Fire Sea. The iron ship floated in the bay, hidden from the eyes of the dead and the living.

Perched on the Anvil, Xar gazed across the Fire Sea at the abandoned town of Safe Harbor, at the dock, at Marit's ship and the lazar Kleitus. Xar had no fear of being observed. He was too far away, a black-robed figure against black rocks. The iron ship was out of sight behind the promontory. Besides, he doubted that anyone over there—lazar or Sartan—would bother to look for him. They had more urgent matters at hand.

All Patrins remaining on Abarrach, with the sole exception of Haplo, lying in the dungeons below Necropolis, were on board the ship. They awaited the signal of their lord to sail out of the bay, surge across the Fire Sea. They were prepared to intercept Alfred should he attempt to leave Abarrach.

The Patrins were also—and this Xar considered an incredible thing, but one he was driven to by necessity—prepared to save Alfred should anything go wrong.

Xar used the rune-magic to enhance his vision. He had a clear view of the docks of Safe Harbor, of Kleitus working to unravel Marit's spells. Xar could even see, through a porthole in the ship, what appeared to be a mensch—the human assassin, Hugh the Hand—moving from one side of the ship to the other, nervously watching the lazar at work.

The mensch—another walking corpse, Xar thought, somewhat bitterly. It irritated him that Alfred had been able to work the necromancy by giving life back to the mensch, whereas Xar had been able to do nothing with necromancy except provide a dog a soul.

Xar could see, but he could not hear, for which he was grateful. He had no need to hear what was going on, and the echo of Kleitus's soul, trapped in the dead body, had been getting on his nerves lately. It was bad enough watching the corpse shuffling and shambling about the dock, the imprisoned phantasm struggling constantly to break free. The chained soul undulating around the body gave the lazar a fuzzy look, as if Xar were watching it through a flawed crystal. He found himself constantly blinking, trying to bring the watery image into focus.

And then came a figure, stepping out onto the docks, a figure that was sharp and clear, if somewhat stoop-shouldered and faltering. Two figures walked beside it—one clad in the black robes of a necromancer, the other one a woman, a Patrinn.

Xar's eyes narrowed. He smiled.

"Make ready," he said to the Patrinn standing beside him, who gave a signal to the ship, waiting below.

"I think it will be much better if I go on ahead alone," Alfred said to a disapproving Balthazar and a skeptical Marit. "If Kleitus sees an army approaching, he will feel threatened and immediately attack. But if he just sees me—"

"—he'll laugh?" Balthazar suggested.

"Perhaps," Alfred replied gravely. "At least he might not pay me much heed. And that will give me time to cast the spell."

"How long will this take?" Marit demanded, dubious, her gaze on the lazar, her hand on the hilt of her sword.

Alfred flushed, embarrassed.

"You don't know."

Alfred shook his head.

Balthazar looked back at his people, huddled in the shadows of the buildings, the weak who could walk supporting those weaker who couldn't. Children's faces pinched, eyes huge and staring, hung to their parents or, in those cases where the parents were dead, to those who now held their responsibility. After all, what help could his people give?

The necromancer sighed. "Very well," he said grudgingly. "Do this your way. We will come to your aid if need be."

"At least let me go with you, Alfred," Marit urged.

He again shook his head, cast a swift, oblique glance at Balthazar.

Marit saw the look, understood, made no further argument. She was to watch the necromancer, prevent him from trying to seize control of the ship, which he might do while Alfred was busy with the lazar.

"We will wait for you here," Marit said, giving the word emphasis to indicate she understood.

Alfred nodded, rather dismally. Now that he had achieved his aim, he was extremely sorry he'd done so. What if his spell failed? Kleitus would attempt to murder him, make him one of the lazar. Alfred looked at the corpse, scarred with the marks of its own violent death. He looked at the hapless phantasm, struggling to escape, and at the waxen hands, longing to end life-his life. He remembered Kleitus's attack on Marit, the poison . . . Even now, she was not free of it. Her cheeks had an unnatural flush; her eyes were too bright. The slashes on her throat were inflamed, painful.

Alfred went hot and then extremely cold. The words to the spell slipped out of his mind, fluttering like the butterfly souls of the elves of Arianus, flapping off in a thousand different directions.

"You think too damn much," came Haplo's voice. "Just go out there and do what you have to do!"

Do what you have to do. Yes, Alfred told himself. I will do what I have to do.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped out of the shadows and headed for the docks.

The dog, knowing Alfred and foreseeing a hundred obstacles in his path, trotted along watchfully at his side.

The runes surrounding the ship were now more than three-quarters dark. From her vantage point in the shadows of a ruined building, Marit could see Hugh the Hand, moving about restlessly on board, keeping watch on the ghastly being walking about the ship. She wondered suddenly how the Cursed Blade would react to Kleitus. He was Sardan, or had been. Most likely, the blade would fight for the lazar. She hoped Hugh had sense enough not to intervene, wished she had thought to warn Alfred of this additional danger.

Too late, though. Her duty was here. She cast a sidelong glance at Balthazar. His gaze slid across hers like a fencer's sword, testing, seeking out his opponent's weakness.

Marit caught herself just before she laughed aloud. Weakness! Both of us so damn weak neither one could likely melt butter. What a fight that would be. What an inglorious battle. Yet we would fight. Until both dropped down dead.

Tears filled her eyes. Angry, she blinked them away.

She was beginning, at last, to understand Alfred.

Kleitus was systematically unraveling the magic. The blood-mottled, waxen hand made plucking motions in the air, as if he were ripping apart a woven rug. The glimmering rune-structure surrounding the ship was fading, flickering, dying. Kleitus was watching Alfred. Or rather, the trapped phantasm was watching Alfred.

The shambling corpse of the Dynast paid the approaching Sartan scant attention, preferring to concentrate instead on the destruction of the ship's protective magic.

Alfred crept closer, the dog pressed against his leg, offering both its support and ~~if the truth be known~~—urging the reluctant Sartan along.

Alfred was terribly, horribly frightened, more frightened of this than he'd ever been of anything, even the red dragon in the Labyrinth. He looked at Kleitus and he saw himself. ~~Saw~~ with awful fascination ~~the~~ blood on the decomposing hands, saw the hunger for blood in the dead, living eyes. A hunger that might well become his own. He saw, in the brief flicker of the imprisoned phantasm, peering out of the moldering body, the suffering, the torment of a trapped soul. He saw . . .

Suffering.

Alfred stopped walking so suddenly that the dog pattered on ahead a few steps before realizing it was alone. Turning, the animal fixed Alfred with a stern look, suspecting he was about to cut and run.

This is a person suffering. This is a being in torment.

I've been thinking about this all wrong. I'm not going to kill this man. I'm going to give him rest, ease.

Keep thinking that, Alfred told himself, resuming his advance, somewhat stronger now. Keep thinking about that. Don't think about the fact that, in order to cast this spell, you must grasp the lazar's dead hands . . .

Kleitus ceased his work, turned to face Alfred. The phantasm flicked in and out of the eyes.

"Come to share immortal life?" the lazar asked.

". . . life . . ." moaned the phantasm.

"I ... don't want immortality," Alfred managed to gasp from a throat closing with fear.

Somewhere on board the ship, Hugh the Hand watched and listened. Perhaps he was exultant. Now you understand!

Now I understand . . .

The lazar's bluish lips drew back in a smiling grimace.

The dog growled low in its chest.

"Stay behind," Alfred said softly, with a brief touch on the animal's head. "You can't do anything for me now."

The dog eyed him dubiously, then ~~hearing~~ another word of command ~~fell~~ back meekly, to watch and to wait.

"You ~~are~~ responsible!" Kleitus accused. The dead eyes were cold and empty, the living eyes filled with hatred . . . and pleading. "You brought this on us!"

"... us .. ." hissed the echo.

"You brought it on yourselves," Alfred said sadly. He had to take hold of the dead hand. He stared at it, and his own flesh crawled. He saw again the long nails digging savagely into Marit's flesh. He felt them closing over his own throat.

Alfred tried to drive himself to do what he had to do ... and then he had no choice.

Kleitus sprang at him. The hands of the lazar grappled for Alfred's neck, seeking to choke the life from him.

Acting on instinct, in self-defense, Alfred grabbed hold of the lazar's wrists. But instead of trying to break Kleitus's hold, Alfred clasped the lazar's hands even tighter, closed his eyes to blot out the horror of the murdered corpse's twisted, anguished face so near his own.

Alfred began to extend the circle of his being. He let his own soul flow into that of Kleitus. He sought to draw the tormented soul into his own.

"No!" the lazar said softly, "Yours will be mine!"

To his horror and astonishment, Alfred was suddenly aware of brutal hands reaching inside him. Kleitus had grasped hold of Alfred's soul and was attempting to wrench it from his body.

Alfred shrank back in panic, released his hold on Kleitus to defend himself. The battle was an unequal one, Alfred realized in despair. He could not win, because he had too much to lose. Kleitus had nothing, feared nothing.

Alfred heard shouts behind him. He was vaguely aware of the dog leaping and snarling, of Marit attempting to drive Kleitus away from his victim, of Balthazar frantically summoning weak magic.

But they could not save Alfred. The fight had been joined on an immortal plane. These others were like insects buzzing far, far away, Kleitus's dead hands were tearing apart Alfred's being as surely as they were ripping apart his flesh.

Alfred struggled, fought, and knew he was losing.

And then a powerful explosion of rune-magic dazzled his eyes. The starlit blast burst between him and his enemy. Kleitus reeled back, dead mouth open and screaming. The lazar's hands released Alfred's soul and he fell amid a shower of glittering runes, landing heavily on the dock.

Lying on his back, Alfred looked up, with fast-beating heart, to see a white-robed Sartan, standing above him.

"Samah . . ." Alfred murmured, his failing senses catching only the vague outline of the man's features.

"I am not Samah. I am Samah's son, Ramu," the Sartan corrected, his voice cold and flaring as the starbursts of his magic. "You are Alfred Montbank. What horror was that thing?"

Alfred, dazzled, dazed, clutched his soul to him and struggled to sit up. Fearful, he gazed around, bleary-eyed. Kleitus was nowhere to be seen. The lazar had vanished.

Destroyed? Alfred didn't think it likely.

Driven off, escaped. To wait. Bide its time. There would be other ships. Death's Gate would always be open . . .

Alfred shuddered. Marit knelt beside him, put her arm around him. The dog ~~which~~ entertained bad memories of Ramu ~~stood~~ stood over them both protectively.

Other white-robed Sartan were proceeding down the dock. Above them floated an enormous vessel, its blue protective Sartan runes flaring brightly in Abarrach's sullen, red-tinged darkness.

"Who is this Sartan? What does he want?" Marit demanded, suspicious.

Ramu's gaze was on her, on the sigla that flared defensively on her skin.

"I see we come in good time. The warning we received was well founded."

Alfred looked up, dazed. "What warning? Why have you come? Why did you leave Chelestra?"

Ramu was cold, grim. "We were warned that the Patrins had broken out of their prison, that they had launched an assault on the Final Gate. We are sailing to the Labyrinth. We intend to return the prisoners to their cells, keep them trapped there. We will close the Final Gate. We will make certain—once and for all—that our enemy never again escapes."

## CHAPTER 20

### SAFE HARBOR ABARRACH

ACROSS THE FIRE SEA, XAR, LORD OF THE NEXUS, SAW HIS carefully conceived plans sucked down into chaos, like chunks of broken rock caught in the maelstrom.

The Sartan ship had appeared out of nowhere, materializing above the Fire Sea in a shimmering blaze of blue sigla. An enormous construction, long and sleek, with a swanlike shape, it hovered over the magma river as if loath to touch it. Those people aboard it dropped ladders of magic from the sides, rune-constructs that carried them down to the docks below.

Xar heard Ramu's words through Mark's ears, heard them as clearly as if he had been standing beside her. We will close the Final Gate. We will make certain—once and for all—that our enemy never again escapes.

The Sartan ship was visible to the Patrins waiting on board their own iron dragon ship, floating above the molten lava in the bay below. A group of them were now scaling the rocks, hastening to join their lord.

Xar remained standing, silent, unmoving.

Several Patrins, arriving on the promontory, prepared for action, came up against the high, chill wall of Xar's silence. He paid no attention to them, to their arrival. They glanced at each other, uncertain. Eventually, one of them—the eldest—moved forward.

"Sartan, My Lord!" he ventured.

Xar did not reply aloud. He nodded grimly, thought, We are outnumbered almost four to one.

"We will fight, Lord," said the Patrinn eagerly. "Give us the word . . ."

Fight! Battle! Revenge at last on the ancient enemy. The anticipation, the desire clenched Xar's stomach, burned the breath from his lungs, nearly burst his heart. It was like being young again and waiting to meet a lover.

The fire was doused swiftly by the icy waters of logic.

"Ramu is lying," Xar said to himself. "This talk of going to the Labyrinth is a ruse, a diversion. He's hoping we'll abandon Abarrach. He wants this world for his own. He came here to find the Seventh Gate."

"My Lord!" cried the Patrinn, peering across the Fire Sea. "They have captured Marit! They're taking her prisoner!"

"What is your command, Lord?" His people clamored for, yearned for blood.

Outnumbered four to one. Yet my people are strong. If I was with them . . .

"No." Xar spoke harshly. "Keep watch on the Sartan. See what they do, where they go. They claim they are bound for the Labyrinth."

"The Labyrinth, Lord!" His people must have heard rumors of the fighting there.

"They plan to finish us for good this time," one said.

"Over my dead body," said another.

Over many, many dead bodies, Xar thought. "I don't trust them," he said aloud. "I don't believe they really plan to go to the Labyrinth. However, it is well to be prepared. Don't interfere with them here. Make ready to sail. If they actually enter Death's Gate, follow them."

"Do we take all our people, Lord?"

Xar pondered a moment. "Yes," he said at last. If Ramu was sending his forces into the Labyrinth, the Patryns would need all the manpower they could muster. "Yes, take everyone. I put you in charge, Sadet. In my absence."

"But, My Lord!" The Patryn started to protest, to question. Xar's flashing glare halted the words on the man's lips. "Yes, My Lord."

Xar waited to see his orders being carried out. The Patryns left the Anvil, slid down the rocks back to their iron ship below. Once they were gone and he was alone, the Lord of the Nexus began tracing a circle of fiery runes in the air. When the circle was complete, he stepped through it and vanished.

The Patryns left behind saw the sigla flare on top of the Anvil. They watched until the rune-circle had flickered and died. Then, slowly, cautiously, they eased their iron dragon ship out of the bay, moved into position to keep watch on their enemy, made ready to sail into Death's Gate.

"Fool Sartan, you have this all wrong!" Surrounded by a shell of protective blue and red light, her own runes acting to defend her, Marit faced Ramu defiantly. In her hand she held her sigla-covered sword. "Ask one of your own, if you don't believe me. Ask Alfred. He has been in the Labyrinth! He has seen what is happening!"

"She is telling the truth," Alfred said earnestly. "The serpents—those you know as dragon-snakes—are the ones attempting to shut the Final Gate. The Patryns are defending themselves against this terrible evil. I know! I've been there!"

"Yes, you've been there." Ramu sneered. "And that is why I do not believe you. As my father said, you are more Patryn than Sartan."

"You can see the truth in my words—"

Ramu rounded on him. "I see Patryns massing around the Final Gate. I see the city we built for them in flames. I see hordes of evil creatures, coming to their aid, including the dragon-snakes ... Do you deny any of this?"

"Yes," Alfred said, trying desperately to keep everyone calm, to keep the situation from deteriorating. "You see, Ramu, but you are not seeing!"

Marit could have told Alfred he was wasting his time.

Ramu could have told him he was wasting his time.

Alfred included them both in a despairing, pleading glance.

Marit ignored him.

Ramu turned away in disgust. "Some of you disarm her." He gestured to Marit. "Take her prisoner, bring her on board her own ship. We will use that ship to transport our Abarach brethren."

The Sartan moved to surround Marit. She paid no heed to them. Her gaze was fixed, intent on Ramu.

"Several of you come with me," he continued. "We will finish breaking down the rune-structure."

The odds were impossibly against Marit. She was weak from the effects of the poison, not completely healed. Yet she had determined to fight Ramu, to over-

1 The Sartan language is capable of causing images to form in the minds of those hearing the words. Alfred is projecting what he has seen to Ramu, who receives a clear picture of it as a result. The way he interprets that picture, however, is up to him.

whelm and destroy him. Her fury at the sight of this sleek, complacent Sartan, talking so coolly of sentencing her people to further torment, when they were now fighting for their very lives, drove her to madness.

She would kill him, though killing him would cost her own life, for the other Sartan would be swift to retaliate.

That doesn't matter now anyway, she said to herself. I have lost Haplo. We will never find the Seventh Gate. I will never see him alive again. But I will see to it that his final wishes are carried out, that our people are safe. I will see to it that this Sartan does not make it to the Labyrinth.

The spell Marit was going to cast was powerful, deadly, and would take Ramu completely by surprise,

The fool had turned his back on her.

Having never before fought a Patryn, Ramu knew them only by repute, could have never conceived that Marit would be willing to sacrifice her own life to end his.

But Alfred knew, knew even before Haplo's voice warned him of what Marit was planning.

"I'll stop her," Haplo told him. "You deal with Ramu."

Still shaking from his terrible encounter with the lazar, Alfred prepared to work his magic. He peered dazedly into the possibilities and discovered them so jumbled up and confused that he couldn't sort one from the other. Panic took hold of him. Marit was going to die. She was already speaking the runes; he could see her lips moving, though no sound came out. Ramu was walking off but he would never, could never walk far enough. The dog was gathering itself together for a great leap . . .

And that gave Alfred an idea. He gathered himself together for a great leap.

The dog jumped at Marit.

Alfred jumped arms and legs flailing wildly straight at Ramu.

The dog hurled itself onto Marit's protective rune-shell. Sigla crackled and flared. The animal yelped in pain and fell, lifeless, to the wooden dock.

Marit cried out in dismay. The spell, her concentration, her will were shattered. She sank down beside the animal, gathered its limp head into her arms and bowed over it.

Alfred jumped on Ramu's back, knocked him flat.

For an instant, all was confusion.

The Councillor landed face first with a bone-breaking thud. The air left his lungs and, for a terrifying moment, he couldn't breathe. Flares burst in his vision; a heavy weight crushed him down, prevented him from drawing a breath.

And then the weight was suddenly removed. Hands helped him stand. Ramu rounded on his assailant, more furious than he'd ever been in his life.

Alfred jabbered incoherently, trying vainly to explain.

Ramu wasn't interested. "Traitor! Imprison him along with his Patryn friend!"

"No, Councillor," cried several Sartan. "The brother saved your life."

Ramu stared at them wordlessly, not believing, not wanting to believe.

They pointed to Marit.

She sat on the dock, the dog cradled in her arms. The sigla glimmered only faintly on her skin.

"She was going to attack you," one of the Sartan explained. "The brother threw himself on top of you, shielded you with his own body. If she had cast her spell, she would have killed him, Councillor, not you."

Ramu stared hard, intently at Alfred, who had suddenly ceased talking. He didn't look guilty or innocent, only extremely foolish and considerably confused. Ramu suspected the Sartan of some devious ulterior motive, though what that might be he couldn't begin to conceive. All would be made plain, no doubt.

The Patryn runes surrounding the Patryn ship were almost all destroyed. His people had worked swiftly and well. Ramu gave the orders to have both Marit and Alfred taken on board. The Patryn female, as one might have expected, seemed determined to resist, though she was so weak she could barely walk. She refused to leave the dog.

It was Alfred who finally convinced her to come.

He put his arm around her, whispered something to her—probably another plot. She suffered herself to be taken aboard, though she continued to look behind her at the dog.

Ramu thought the animal was dead, discovered his mistake when he walked up to it.

Snapping jaws missed his ankles by inches.

"Dog! Here, dog!" A scandalized Alfred whistled for the beast.

Ramu would have liked to have pitched it into the Fire Sea, but he would look ridiculous—venting his spleen on a dumb animal. He coldly ignored it, went on with his business.

The dog rose groggily to its feet, shook itself, and staggered—listing slightly to one side—after the Sartan and Marit.

Ramu left the docks, entered the main street of the abandoned town. He had arranged a meeting with the leader of the Abarrach Sartan, found the man—anecromancer, by report. Ramu was shocked at the sight of the man, who was pale, wasted, and weak. Recalling what he knew of the Sartan who lived on Abarrach (knowledge gained from Alfred), Ramu regarded this brother with pity and curiosity.

"My name is Balthazar," said the Sartan in the black robes. He smiled faintly. "Welcome to Abarrach, World of Stone, Brother."

Ramu didn't like that smile, didn't like the man's dark and piercing gaze. The black eyes jabbed-knife-like-through Ramu's head.

"Your greeting seems less than cordial, Brother," Ramu observed.

"Forgive me, Brother." Balthazar bowed stiffly. "We have been waiting over a thousand years to give it."

Ramu frowned.

Balthazar fixed his brother with the dagger-gaze. "We've been dying to see you."

Ramu's frown deepened. Angry words came to his lips, but at that moment, Balthazar shifted his gaze to his people, huddled, ragged, starving, and then to . Ramu's people, well fed, well dressed, in excellent health. Ramu swallowed his anger, actually felt moved enough to be gracious.

"I am sorry for your plight, Brother. Truly sorry. We heard of it some time back from the one who calls himself Alfred. We would have come to your aid, but circumstances . . ."

Ramu's voice trailed off. Sartan cannot lie to each other and what he had been going to say was a lie. Samah had come to Abarrach, but not to help his desperate brethren. He had come to learn the necromancy. Ramu had the grace to feel and took ashamed.

"We have had our troubles, too, though, I admit, not as dire as yours. If we had known . . . but I could not believe that false Sartan."

Ramu's grim gaze turned in the direction of Alfred, who was assisting a faltering Marit to board her own ship. Balthazar followed Ramu's glance, looked back at the Councillor.

"The one of whom you speak so disparagingly has been the only one of our people to help us," Balthazar returned. "Even though he was shocked and appalled-rightly so-by what we had done to ourselves, to this world, he did what he could to save lives."

"He had his reasons, you may be sure," Ramu said, sneering.

"Yes, I believe he did," Balthazar replied. "Pity, mercy, compassion. And why have you come to us now?" he asked coolly, catching Ramu by surprise.

The Councillor was not accustomed to being confronted in this insolent manner, nor did he like this Sartan. The words he spoke were Sartan words, but-as Alfred had discovered when he had first visited Abar-rach-they conjured up images of death and suffering, images that Ramu found quite distasteful. He was forced, however, into admitting the truth. He hadn't come to give aid, but to beg for it.

Briefly, he explained what was happening in the Labyrinth, how the Patryns were attempting to break out of their prison, how they would-undoubtedly-~~seek~~ to rule the four worlds.

"Whereas we alone should be allowed to rule," Balthazar said. "As we have ruled here. Look around you. See what a magnificent job we've done."

Ramu was outraged, but he took care not to let his anger show. He sensed in this black-robed Sartan a latent power, a power perhaps as great as Ramu's own.

Looking ahead into the future, a future where the Sartan would rule the four worlds, the Councillor saw a potential rival. One who knew the necromancy. It would never do to reveal weakness.

"Take your people on board our ships," Ramu said. "We will give them aid and succor. I presume you want to leave this world?" he added, with his own measure of sarcasm.

Balthazar paled; the dark eyes narrowed. "Yes," he said quietly, "we want to leave. We are grateful to you, Brother, for making this possible. Grateful for any aid you can give us."

"And, in turn, I will be grateful for any aid you can give me," Ramu replied.

He guessed they understood each other, though what the necromancer might be thinking was as murky as the poisonous air in this hellish cavern.

Ramu bowed and left. He saw no point in continuing the conversation. Time was running out; every moment that passed was a moment the Patryns were nearer to breaking free.

Once Balthazar was healed and fed and rested, once he was inside the Nexus and came face to face with the savage Patryns, he would understand. He would fight. Of that, Ramu was confident. Balthazar would use every means at his disposal to win the battle. Including the necromancy. And he'd be happy to teach it to others. Ramu would see to that.

He returned to the docks to make preparations for the Sartan of Abarrach to be transported onto the former Patryn ship. Boarding, he made a quick inspection, began working out his strategy.

The journey to the Nexus, through Death's Gate, would ordinarily be a quick one. But now he'd have to allow time for these Abarrach Sartan to heal, if they were going to make an effective fighting force.

Considering this, trying to figure how long the healing would take, Ramu came across Alfred. The Sartan leaned dolefully against the ship's rail. The dog crouched, tense and nervous, at his side. The Patryn female sat huddled dejectedly on the deck. Sartan stood guard at her side.

Ramu frowned. The Patryn female was taking all this much too calmly. She'd surrendered too easily. So had Alfred. They must be plotting something . . .

A strong arm grabbed Ramu from behind, encircled his throat. A sharp object prodded him in the ribs.

"I don't know who you are, you bastard, or why you're here," grated a harsh voice—a mensch voice—in Ramu's ear. "I don't much care. But if you so much as twitch I'll drive this knife into your heart. Let Marit and Alfred go."

## CHAPTER 21

### SAFE HARBOR ABARRACH

ALFRED HAD BEEN LEANING OVER THE SHIP'S RAIL, STARING AT nothing, wondering despairingly what to do. On the one hand, it seemed vitally important that he travel to the Labyrinth with Ramu.

I have to continue to try to make the Councillor understand the true situation. Make him understand that the serpents are the true enemy, that the Patryns and Sartan must join forces against this evil or it will end up devouring us.

"Not only ourselves," Alfred said to himself, "but the mensch. We brought them to these worlds, they're our responsibility."

Yes, in this his duty was clear, although just how he was going to convince Ramu of the danger was rather foggy in Alfred's mind at this moment.

But, on the other hand, there was Haplo.

"I can't leave you," Alfred argued, and waited in some trepidation for Haplo to argue back. But his friend's voice had been strangely silent lately, ever since he had ordered the dog to stop Marit. This silence was ominous, made Alfred uneasy. He wondered if it was Haplo's way of forcing them to leave him. Haplo would sacrifice himself in a minute if he thought that by doing so he could help his people . . .

All this was what Alfred had been thinking when Marit sprang to her feet with a startled cry.

"Alfred!" She clutched at his arm, nearly sent him backward over the rail. "Alfred! Look!"

"Blessed Sartan!" Alfred whispered in shock.

He had forgotten about Hugh the Hand, had forgotten that the assassin was on board the ship. And now Hugh had hold of Ramu, had the Cursed Blade pointed at the Sartan's throat.

Alfred understood all too clearly what must have happened.

Hidden in the cabin, Hugh had witnessed the arrival of the Sartan. He had watched them take Marit and Alfred captive. His one thought—as their friend and companion and self-appointed bodyguard—would be to secure their freedom. His only weapon—the Sartan blade.

But he could not realize that these were the very Sartan who had forged that blade.

"Don't any of you move," Hugh the Hand warned, his gaze taking in all on board the ship. He clenched Ramu tighter, nearly bending the man over backward. The Hand exhibited enough of the knife to the horrified watchers to let them know he was in earnest. "Or your leader will find six inches of steel in his neck. Alfred, Marit, come over and stand by me."

Alfred didn't move. He couldn't.

How will the magical blade react? he wondered frantically. Its first loyalty was to its wielder, Hugh the Hand. The knife might well stab Ramu—especially if he attempted to use magic against it—before it knew its mistake.

And if Ramu died, there would be an end to all hope of bringing the Patryns and Sartan together.

As it was, the other Sartan were staring at the two in amazement, not quite realizing what was going on. Ramu himself appeared stunned. Probably never in his life had such an outrage been perpetrated against him. He didn't know how to react. But he was quick-thinking. He soon would . . .

"Councillor!" Alfred cried desperately. "The weapon that man holds is a magic one. Don't use magic against it! That will only make things worse!"

"Well done!" Marit said to him softly. "Keep him busy."

Alfred was horrified. She'd completely misread his intentions. "No, Marit. I didn't mean that . . . Marit, don't . . ."

She wasn't listening. Her sword lay on the deck, guarded by Sartan. Sartan who were staring in stunned disbelief at their leader. Marit grabbed her sword easily, ran across the deck toward Hugh. Alfred tried to stop her, but he wasn't watching where he was going and fell headlong over the dog. The animal, yelping painfully, bristled and barked at everyone on general principle.

The Sartan, confused, looked to Ramu for orders.

"Please! Stay calm. Don't anybody do anything!" Alfred was pleading, but no one heard him over the dog's frantic barks, and it would probably have made no difference if they had.

At that moment, Ramu cast a paralyzing jolt of electricity through Hugh's body.

Hugh collapsed, writhing in agony. But the jolt did more than fell the assassin. The shock galvanized the Cursed Blade. It recognized the magic—Sartan magic—recognized the fact that Hugh, the one who wielded the blade, was in peril. The blade sensed Marit, approaching at a run, as the enemy.

The Cursed Blade reacted. As it had been trained to do, it summoned the strongest force available in the vicinity to fight its foe.

Kleitus the lazar appeared on the deck of the ship. Within the space of a heartbeat, the dead of Abarrach were crawling up and over the ship's rails.

"Control the magic!" Alfred cried. "Ramu—you have to regain control of the magic!"

The blade had merely summoned the dead to its aid; it had no control over them. Control was not the blade's purpose. Having fulfilled its creator's intent, it changed back to its original form, fell to the deck beside a groaning Hugh the Hand.

Kleitus lunged for Marit, his wasted hands grasping for her throat. Marit struck him with her sword—ablow that sliced open one of the bony arms. No blood flowed; the dead flesh hung in tatters. Kleitus never felt the wound.

Marit could strike the lazar as often as she liked, without the least effect. Its nails scraped across her skin, and she gasped in pain. She was weakening rapidly. She could not last long against the formidable lazar.

The dog jumped at Kleitus. A savage kick sent the animal rolling. Now there was no one to help Marit, even if they could have. The Sartan on board ship were battling for their own lives.

Summoned by the blade, the dead smelted the warm blood of the living, a smell they craved and hated. Ramu watched, helpless and appalled, as the lazar attacked his people.

Alfred bumbled his way through the melee, disrupting magic, tripping up the shambling corpses, leaving confusion and chaos in his wake. But he managed to reach Ramu.

"These dead ... are ours!" Ramu whispered, awed. "This horror . . . our people . . ."

Alfred ignored him. "The blade! Where's the blade?"

He had seen it fall near Hugh the Hand. He knelt by the assassin's side, searched frantically for the knife. He couldn't find it. The blade was gone. Tramping feet had kicked it aside, perhaps.

Marit was nearly finished. The sigla on her skin no longer glowed. She had dropped the useless sword, was fighting Kleitus with her bare hands. The lazar was slowly choking the life out of her.

"Here!" Hugh the Hand rolled over, shoved something at Alfred. It was the knife. He'd been lying on it, his body hiding it.

Alfred hesitated, but only an instant. If this was what it took to save Marit ... He picked up the blade, felt it squirm in his hand. He was about to launch an attack at Kleitus when a black-robed form stopped him.

"Our creation," said Balthazar grimly. "Our responsibility."

The necromancer advanced on Kleitus. Intent on its kill, the lazar was unaware of Balthazar's approach.

The necromancer reached out, took hold of one of Kleitus's arms, and began to speak the words of a spell.

Balthazar had hold of Kleitus's soul.

Feeling the dread touch, realizing his doom, Kleitus released Marit. With a fearful shriek, the lazar turned on Balthazar, attempted to destroy the necromancer's soul.

The battle was a strange and terrifying one, for it appeared to those watching that the two were locked in an embrace, an embrace which might have been—but for the hideous contortion of the faces—a loving one.

Balthazar was nearly as pale as a corpse himself, but he held firm. A slight gasp escaped him. Kleitus's dead eyes widened. The phantasm flitted in and out of the lazar's body, a prisoner longing for freedom yet fearful of venturing into the unknown.

Balthazar forced Kleitus to his knees. The lazar's screams and curses were frightful to hear, echoed mournfully by the man's own soul.

And then Balthazar's grim expression relaxed. His hands, which had been exerting deadly force, eased their grip, though they held the lazar firmly.

"Let go," he said. "The torment is ended."

Kleitus made a final, desperate effort, but the necromancer's spell had strengthened the phantasm, weakened the decaying body. The phantasm wrenched itself free. The body crumpled, collapsed onto the deck. The phantasm hovered over it, regretfully; then it drifted off, as if blown away by the breath of a whispered prayer.

Alfred's shaking hand closed tightly over the blade's hilt. "Stop!" He gave the magical command to the blade in a quivering voice.

The battle ended abruptly. The lazar, either frightened by the loss of their leader or commanded by the magic of the blade, broke off the attack. The dead disappeared.

Balthazar, weak almost to the point of falling, turned slowly.

"Still want to learn necromancy?" Balthazar asked Ramu with a strained and bitter smile.

Ramu looked down at the ghastly remains of the Sartan who had once been the Dynast of Abarrach. The Councillor made no reply.

Balthazar shrugged. He knelt down beside Marit, began to do what he could to aid her.

Alfred started to go to Marit, discovered Ramu blocking his way.

Before Alfred quite knew what was happening, Ramu had taken hold of the Cursed Blade, wrenched it from Alfred's grasp. The Councillor examined the knife curiously at first, and then with dawning recognition.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I remember weapons like this."

"Heinous weapons," Alfred said in a low voice. "Designed to help the mensch kill. And be killed in their turn. For us—their protectors, their defenders. Their gods."

Ramu flushed in swift anger. But he could not deny the truth of the words, or deny the ugly thing he held in his hand. The blade quivered with life. Ramu grimaced; his hand flinched. He seemed loath to touch it, but he could not very well relinquish it.

"Let me have it," said Alfred.

Ramu thrust it into the belt of his robes.

"No, Brother. As Balthazar said, it is our responsibility. You may leave it in my care. Safely," he added, his gaze meeting Alfred's.

"Let him have it," said Hugh the Hand. "I'll be glad to be rid of the damn thing."

"Councillor," Alfred begged, "you've seen what terrible forces our power can unleash. You've seen the evil we've brought on ourselves and others. Don't perpetuate it . . ."

Ramu snorted. "What happened here the Patryn brought on herself. She and her kind will continue to cause disruption unless they are finally halted. We sail for the Labyrinth, as planned. You had best prepare for departure."

He walked off.

Alfred sighed. Well, at least when they reached the Labyrinth he would see to it that . . .

At any rate he would . . .

Or then he might . . .

Confused, miserable, he tried once again to go to Marit.

This time, the dog blocked his way.

Alfred attempted to circle around the animal.

The dog thwarted him, dodging to its left when Alfred went to his right, jumped to its right when Alfred veered to his left. Becoming hopelessly entangled in his own feet, Alfred halted. He regarded the animal with perplexity.

"What are you doing? Why are you keeping me away from Marit?"

The dog barked loudly.

Alfred attempted to shoo it aside.

The dog would not be shooed and, in fact, took offense at the suggestion. It growled and bared its teeth at him.

Startled, Alfred stumbled several steps backward.

The dog, pleased, trotted forward.

"But . . . Marit! She needs me," Alfred said and made a clumsy attempt to outflank the dog.

Quick off the mark, as if it were herding sheep, the dog swerved in. Nipping at Alfred's ankles, the animal continued to drive him backward across the deck.

Balthazar raised his head; the black eyes pierced Alfred.

"She will be well cared for, I promise you, Brother. Go do what you must without fear for her. As to the people of the Labyrinth, I have heard what you said. I will make my own judgments, based on the hard lessons I have learned. Farewell, Alfred." Balthazar added, with a smile, "Or whatever your name might be."

"But I'm not going anywhere—" Alfred protested.

The dog leapt, hit Alfred squarely in the chest, and knocked him over the ship's rail, into the Fire Sea.

## CHAPTER 22

### FIRE SEA ABARRACH

SNAPPING JAWS CAUGHT HOLD OF THE COLLAR OF ALFRED'S frayed velvet coat. A gigantic dragon—its scales the red-orange of the flaming sea in which it lived—caught the Sartan in midair and carried him, curled up like a frightened spider, to her back, where she deposited him gently. The dog's teeth sank into the rear of his breeches, took firm hold of him, steadied him.

Alfred required several moments to recover himself, to realize that he was not being immolated in the Fire Sea. He was, instead, seated on the back of a fire dragon next to Hugh the Hand and the lazar Jonathon.

"What?" Alfred gasped feebly, and could only continue to repeat the word in a confused manner. "What? What?"

No one answered him. Jonathon was speaking to the fire dragon. Hugh the Hand, a cloth over his nose and mouth, was doing his best to try to stay alive.

"You might help him," Haplo advised.

Alfred emitted a final faint "What?" Then, compassion causing him to forget about himself, he began to sing a song in his reedy, thin voice, his hands fluttering, weaving the magic around Hugh the Hand. The mensch coughed, retched, drew in a deep breath and looked startled.

"Who said that?" Hugh the Hand eyed Alfred; then, his eyes widening, he stared at the dog. "I heard Haplo's voice! That animal has learned to talk!"

Alfred gargled. "How can he hear you? I don't understand ... Of course," he added on reflection, "I'm not certain how I can hear you."

"The mensch is as much in my realm as I am in his," Haplo said. "He hears my voice. So does Jonathon. I asked Jonathon to bring the fire dragon here, to snatch you off that ship, if necessary."

"But . . . why?"

"Do you remember what we talked about, back in Salfag Caverns? How the Sartan would go out into the four worlds and then the Patrins after them and the fighting would start all over again?"

"Yes," Alfred said quietly, sadly.

"That gave me an idea, made me realize what we had to do to stop Xar's threat, to help both our peoples, and the mensch. I was trying to think of the best way to go about it, when suddenly Ramu arrived and took the matter out of my hands. He settled everything far better than I could have. And so I—"

"But . . . Ramu's going to the Labyrinth!" Alfred cried. "To fight your people!"

"Precisely." Haplo was grim. "That's just where I want him."

"It is?" Alfred was beyond amazement, well into bewilderment.

"It is. I explained my plan to Jonathon. He agreed to accompany us, so long as we brought Hugh the Hand with us."

"Us." Alfred gulped.

"I'm sorry, old friend." Haplo's voice softened. "I didn't want you involved. But Jonathon insisted. He's right. I need you."

"For what?" Alfred was about to ask, wondered unhappily if he truly wanted to know.

The fire dragon skimmed across the lava sea, heading for the shoreline, for Necropolis. Marit's ship, now bright with Sartan runes, was preparing to depart, as was the Sartan ship from Chelestra. Alfred glanced up as their dragon sailed beneath the prow and caught a glimpse of Ramu, glaring at them. The Councillor was grim, stony-faced. He turned coldly away. Probably considered Alfred's abrupt departure good riddance. One person, watching from the rail, did not turn away. Balthazar raised his hand in farewell.

"I will take care of Marit," he called out. "Have no fear for her."

Alfred waved disconsolately back. He recalled the necromancer's words, spoken just before the dog tumbled Alfred over the side.

Go do what you must . . .

Which was? . . .

"Would someone mind telling me what's happening?" Alfred asked meekly. "Where are you taking me?"

"To the Seventh Gate," Haplo replied.

Alfred lost his grip on the dragon's mane, nearly fell overboard. This time it was Hugh the Hand who caught hold of him. "But . . . Lord Xar . . ."

"A risk we have to take," Haplo replied.

Alfred shook his head.

"Listen, my friend." Haplo spoke earnestly. "This is the chance you've wanted. Look-look at the ships sailing away, sailing for Death's Gate."

Alfred lifted his gaze. The two ships, both flaring with Sartan runes, soared up into the smoke-tinged air of Abarrach. The sigla glowed brilliant blue against the black shadows of the vast cavern's ceiling. Both ships, under Ramu's guidance, were headed for Death's Gate. And beyond that, the Nexus, the Labyrinth, the four worlds.

"And there!" Jonathon lifted his wasted, waxen hand, pointed. "There, look what follows."

"... follows . . ." mourned the echo.

Another ship, this one forged in the shape of an iron dragon, covered with Patryn runes, soared up from a hidden bay. It was taking the same course as the Sartan ship, its sigla burning red with the heat and the magical power that propelled it.

"Patryns!" Alfred said, staring in disbelief. "Where are they going?"

"They are chasing Ramu. He will lead them to the Labyrinth, where they will join the battle."

"Perhaps Xar is with them?" Alfred was hopeful.

"Perhaps . . ." Haplo wasn't.

Alfred heaved a deep sigh. "But this accomplishes nothing . . . except more bloodshed . . ."

"Think about it, my friend. The Sartan and the Patrynsnow gathered together in one place. All of them in the Labyrinth. And with them—the serpents."

Alfred raised his head, blinked.

"Blessed Sartan," he murmured. He was beginning to see, beginning to understand.

"The worlds: Arianus, Pryan, Chelestra, Abarrach—free of them. Free of us. The elves and humans and dwarves left to live and die, love and hate all on their own. No interference from demigods or the evil we create."

"That's all very well now," Alfred pointed out, hope slipping again. "But the Sartan won't stay in the Labyrinth. Neither will your people. No matter who wins ... or loses."

"That's why we have to find the Seventh Gate," Haplo said. "We find it ... and we destroy it."

Alfred was amazed. Then appalled. The enormity of the task confounded him. It was too unreal even to be frightening.

Bitter, mortal enemies, with a legacy of hatred passed down through generations, locked up in a prison of their own creation with an immortal enemy: a product of their hatred. Sartan, Patryn, serpents—battling through eternity with no way to escape.

Or was there no way? Alfred looked over at the dog, reached out his hand to give it a timid pat. He and Haplo had once been mortal, bitter enemies. Alfred thought about Marit and Balthazar, two enemies drawn together by shared suffering, sorrow.

A handful of seeds, fallen onto burned, charred ground, had taken root, found nourishment in love, pity, compassion. If these seeds could blossom and grow strong, why not others?

The dread city of Necropolis was very close now, the fire dragon sailing toward it rapidly. Alfred couldn't believe this was happening to him and wondered rather wistfully if he weren't really on that Sartan ship, perhaps suffering from a blow to the head.

But the mane of the fire dragon, with its glistening bright red scales, pricked his flesh uncomfortably. The heat from the Fire Sea radiated around him. Beside him, the dog shivered in terror (it had never grown accustomed to riding dragon-back) and Hugh the Hand stared around at this strange new world in awe. Near him sat Jonathon—like Hugh, dead, not dead. One brought back by love, the other by hate.

Perhaps there was hope, after all. Or perhaps . . .

"Destroying the Seventh Gate might well destroy everything," he observed in a low voice, after giving the matter some thought.

Haplo was silent a moment, then said, "And what will happen when Ramu and the Sartan arrive in the Labyrinth, along with my people and Lord Xar? The wars they wage will be meat and drink to the evil of the dragon-snakes, who will grow fat and sleek and urge them on. Perhaps my people will flee through Death's Gate. Your people will chase after them. The battles will escalate, expand out into the four worlds. The

mensch will be sucked in, as they were the last time. We will arm them, give them weapons like the Cursed Blade.

"You see the dilemma we face, my friend," Haplo added, after a pause to allow Alfred a good long look. "You understand?"

Alfred shuddered. He covered his face with his hands. "What will happen to the worlds if we do shut Death's Gate?" He lifted his head. His face was pale, his voice quivering. "They need each other. The citadels need the energy from the Kicksey-winsey. Such energy could stabilize the sun in Chelestra. And because of the citadels, the conduits on Abarrach are starting to carry water . . ."

"If the mensch have to, they can manage on their own," Haplo said. "What would be better for them, my friend? To allow them to control their own destiny? Or to be pawns in ours?"

Alfred sat hunched in silent thought. He glanced back, one last time, at the ships. The Sartan vessels gleamed faintly, bright specks against the darkness. The Patryn ship tracked them, magic burning.

"You are right, Haplo," Alfred said, with a deep sigh. He stared after the ships. "You let Marit go with them."

"I had to," Haplo said quietly. "She is marked by Lord Xar's sigil, bound to him. He would know our plans through her. Besides, there's another reason."

Alfred drew in a shivering breath.

"In destroying the Seventh Gate, we may well destroy ourselves," Haplo said calmly. "I am sorry to bring this fate upon you, my friend, but, as I said, I need you. I couldn't do this without you."

Alfred's eyes dimmed with tears. For long minutes, he couldn't speak for the lump in his throat. If Haplo had been there, Alfred would have reached out, clasped his friend's hand. Haplo wasn't. His body lay, still and lifeless, back in the chill dungeon cell. It was difficult to touch a spirit, but Alfred did his best. He reached out his hand anyway. The dog, with a glad bark, jumped down to be comforted. The animal would be relieved to get off the dragon.

Alfred smoothed the silky fur.

"This is the greatest compliment you could have paid me, Haplo. You are right. We must take this chance."

Alfred continued to pet the dog's head; his hand began to tremble slightly. He spoke his doubts aloud. "But have you considered, my friend, the doom we might bring on our people? By closing Death's Gate, we seal off their only escape route. They could be trapped forever inside the Labyrinth, forever battling the serpents, forever battling each other."

"I've thought about that," Haplo answered. "The choice would be theirs, wouldn't it? To keep fighting ... or to try to find peace. And remember, the good dragons are in the Labyrinth now, too. The Wave could correct itself."

"Or drown us all," Alfred said.

## CHAPTER 23

### NECROPOLIS ABARRACH

THE FIRE DRAGON CARRIED THEM AS NEAR THE CITY OF NECropolis as she could, swimming into the very bay in which the Patryns had been hiding their ship. The dragon kept close to shore, avoiding the massive whirlpool rotating slowly in the center of the bay. Alfred glanced once at the whirlpool, at the molten

rock sluggishly spiraling downward, at the steam and smoke lazily coiling up from the gaping maw in the center. He hastily averted his gaze.

"I always knew there was something strange about that dog," remarked Hugh the Hand.

Alfred smiled tremulously; then the smile faded. There was one other problem he had to resolve. One for which he had to take responsibility.

"Sir Hugh," Alfred began hesitantly, "did you understand . . . any of what you heard?"

Hugh the Hand eyed him shrewdly, shrugged. "Doesn't seem to me it much matters whether I understand or not, does it?"

"No," Alfred answered in some confusion. "I guess it doesn't." He cleared his throat. "We're ... um ... going to a place known as the Seventh Gate. Here, I think ... I believe ... I may be wrong, but—"

"That's where I'll die?" Hugh asked bluntly.

Alfred gulped, licked dry lips. His face burned, and not from the heat of the Fire Sea. "If that is truly what you want . . ."

"I do," Hugh the Hand said firmly. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm a ghost. Things happen and I can't feel them anymore."

"I don't understand." Alfred was puzzled. "It wasn't that way at the beginning. When I—~~he~~ swallowed, but he had to take responsibility—when I first brought you back."

"Perhaps I can explain," Jonathon offered. "When Hugh came back to the realm of the living, he left that of the dead far behind. He clung to life, to the people in his life. Thus he remained closely bound to the living. But one by one, he has severed those ties. He has come to realize that he has nothing more to give them. They have nothing to give him. He had everything. And now he can only mourn its loss."

". . . loss . . ." sighed the echo.

"But there was a woman who loved him," Alfred said in a low voice. "She loves him still."

"Her love is only a very small fraction of the love he found. Mortal love is our introduction to the immortal."

Alfred was chagrined, aggrieved.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Brother," Jonathon said. The phantasm entered the body, gleamed in the dead eyes. "You used the necromancy out of compassion, not for gain or hatred or vengeance. Those among the living who have encountered this man have learned from him—~~some~~ to their despair and fear. But he has given others hope."

Alfred sighed, nodded. He still didn't understand, not completely, but he thought he might perhaps forgive himself.

"Good luck in your endeavors," said the dragon, when she deposited them on the jagged-toothed shore surrounding the Firepool. "And if you are responsible for ridding the world of those who have ravaged it, you have my gratitude."

They meant well, Alfred said to himself. That seemed the saddest indictment of all.

Samah meant well. The Sartan all meant well. Undoubtedly Ramu meant well. Maybe even, in his own way, Xar meant well.

They simply lacked imagination.

Though the dragon had taken them as near as she could, the journey from the bay to Necropolis was still a long one, particularly on foot. Particularly on Alfred's feet. He had no sooner stumbled onto shore when he nearly fell into a bubbling pool of boiling-hot mud. Hugh the Hand dragged him back from the edge.

"Use your magic," Haplo suggested wryly, "or you'll never make it to the Chamber of the Damned alive."

Alfred considered this suggestion, hesitated. "I can't take us inside the Chamber itself."

"Why not? All you have to do is visualize it in your mind. You've been there before." Haplo sounded irritated.

"Yes, but the warding runes would prevent us from entering. They would block my magic. Besides"—Alfred sighed—"I can't see it all that clearly. I believe I must have blotted it out of my memory. It was a horrifying experience."

"In some ways," Haplo said, thoughtful. "Not in others."

"Yes, you are right about that."

Though neither would admit it at the time, their experience in the Chamber of the Damned had brought the two enemies closer together, had proved to them that they were not as different as each had believed.

"I remember one part," Alfred said softly. "I remember the part where we entered the minds and bodies of those who lived—and died—in that Chamber centuries ago . . ."

... A sense of regret and sadness filled Alfred. And though painful to him, the feelings of sorrow and unhappiness were better—~~far better~~—than not feeling anything, the emptiness he'd experienced before joining this brotherhood. Then he had been a husk, a shell containing nothing. The dead—~~dead~~—dreadful creations of those who were beginning to dabble in necromancy—~~had~~ more life than he. Alfred sighed deeply, lifted his head. A glance around the table revealed feelings similar to his softening the faces of the men and women gathered together in this sacred chamber.

His sadness, his regret wasn't bitter. Bitterness comes to those who have brought tragedy on themselves through their own misdeeds. But unless they changed, Alfred foresaw a time for his people when bitter sorrow must encompass them all. The madness must be halted. He sighed again. Just moments before, he had been radiant with joy; peace had spread like a balm over the boiling magma sea of his doubts and fears. But that heady sense of exaltation could not last in this world. He must return to face its problems and perils and, thus, the sadness, the regret.

A hand reached on, clasped his. The hand's grip was firm, the skin smooth and unwrinkled, a contrast to Alfred's aged, parchment-paper skin, his weakened grasp.

"Hope, Brother," said the young man quietly. "We must have hope."

Alfred turned to look at the young man seated beside him. The Sartan's face was handsome, strong, resolute—~~fine~~—steel emerging from a forging fire. No doubts marred its shining surface; its blade was honed to a sharp, cutting edge. The young man looked familiar to Alfred. He could almost put a name to him, but not quite.

Now he could. The man had been Haplo.

Alfred smiled. "I remember the feeling of elation, of knowing that I wasn't alone in the universe, that a higher power was watching over me, caring for me and about me. I remember that, for the first time in my life, I wasn't afraid."

He paused, shook his head. "But that's all I do remember."

"Very well," Haplo said, resigned. "You can't take us to the Chamber. Where can you take us? How close can we come?"

"Your dungeon cell?" Alfred suggested in a low, subdued voice.

Haplo was silent. Then, "If that's the best you can do, do it," he muttered.

Alfred invoked the possibility that they were there and not here and, quite suddenly, they were there.

"Ancestors protect me," Hugh the Hand murmured.

They stood in the cell. A sigil, formed by Alfred, glowed with a soft white radiance above Haplo's body. The Patryn lay cold and seemingly lifeless on the stone bed.

"He's dead!" Hugh cast a dark and suspicious glance at the dog. "Then whose voice am I hearing?"

Alfred was about to launch into an explanation—all about the dog and Haplo's soul—when the dog sank its teeth into Alfred's velvet breeches and began tugging him toward the cell door.

A thought occurred to Alfred. "Haplo. What . . . what will happen to you?"

"It doesn't matter," Haplo said shortly. "Get moving. We don't have much time. If Xar should find us—"

Alfred gasped. "But you said Lord Xar went to the Labyrinth!"

"I said maybe," Haplo retorted grimly. "Stop wasting time."

Alfred wavered. "The dog can't enter Death's Gate. Maybe it can't enter the Seventh Gate, either. Not without you. Jonathon, do you know? What will happen?"

The lazar shrugged. "Haplo is not dead. He lives, though only barely. My care is for those who have passed beyond."

". . . beyond . . ."

"You don't have any choice, Alfred," Haplo said impatiently. "Get on with it!"

The dog growled.

Alfred sighed. He had a choice. There was always a choice. And he always seemed to make the wrong one. He peered down the hallway that traveled into impenetrable night. The white sigil he had lit above Haplo's body faded; its light died. They stood blind in the darkness.

Alfred thought back a long, long time, to when he had first met Haplo on Arianus. He remembered the night he'd cast the magical sleep on Haplo, had lifted the bandages that hid his hands, had discovered the sigla tattooed on the flesh. Alfred recalled his despair, his stark terror, his bewilderment.

The ancient enemy has returned! What do I do?

And in the end, he'd done very little, it seemed. Nothing calamitous or catastrophic. He had followed the precepts of his heart, had acted for what he believed to be the best. Was there a higher power guiding his way?

Alfred looked down at the dog, crowding against his leg. At that moment, he thought he understood.

He began to sing the runes softly, in a nasal tone that echoed eerily in the tunnel.

Blue sigla flared to life on the base of the wall at his feet. The darkness was banished.

"What's that?" Hugh the Hand had been standing near the wall. At the flare of magic, he jumped away from it.

"The runes," said Alfred. "They will lead us to what is known on this world as the Chamber of the Damned."

"Sounds appropriate," Hugh the Hand said dryly.

The last time Alfred had made this journey, he'd been running in fear for his life. He thought he'd forgotten the way, but now that the runes were flickering—lighting the darkness—he began to recognize his surroundings.

The corridor sloped downward, as if it were leading them to the very core of the world. Obviously ancient, but in good repair, the tunnel—unlike most of the catacombs in this unstable world—was smooth and wide. It had been intended to accommodate vast numbers of people. Alfred had thought this odd the last time he'd walked this path. But then, he hadn't known where the corridor led.

Now he knew and now he understood. The Seventh Gate. The place from which the Sartan had worked the magic that had sundered a world.

"Do you have any idea how the magic worked?" Haplo asked. He spoke in a hushed, subdued voice, though only inner ears could hear him.

"Orlah told me," Alfred replied, pausing occasionally in his explanation to softly chant the runes. "After they made the decision to sunder the world, Samah and the Council members brought together all the Sartan population and those of the mensch they deemed worthy. They transported these fortunate few to a place which was probably similar to the time well we saw used in Abri-awell in which there exists the possibility that no possibilities exist. Here the people would be safe until the Sartan could transport them to the new worlds.

"The most talented of the Sartan came together with Samah inside a chamber he termed the Seventh Gate. Aware that the casting of such powerful magic, which would break apart one world and forge new ones, would drain the strongest magic-user, Samah and the Council endowed the chamber itself with a great deal of their power. It would operate rather like one of the Kicksey-winsey machines Limbeck calls a 'gen'rator.'

"The Seventh Gate stored up the magical power left there in reserve. The Sartan called on it when their own magic waned and diminished. The danger was, of course, that once the power was transferred to the Seventh Gate, the magic would always remain inside. Only by destroying the Seventh Gate could Samah destroy the magic. He should have done so, of course, but he was afraid."

"Of what?" Haplo demanded.

Alfred hesitated. "Upon first entering the Seventh Gate, after they had endowed it with power, the Council members encountered something they hadn't expected."

"A power greater than their own."

"Yes. I'm not sure how or why; Orlah couldn't tell me much. The experience was an awful one for the Sartan. Rather like what we experienced when we entered. But whereas ours was comforting and uplifting, theirs was terrible. Samah was made aware of the enormity of his actions, of the horrendous consequences of what he planned. He was given to know that he had—in essence—overstepped his bounds. But he was also made aware that he had the free will to continue, if he chose.

"Appalled by what they had seen and heard, the Council members began to doubt themselves. This led to violent arguments. But their fear of their enemy—the Patryns—was great. The memory of the experience in the Chamber faded. The Patryn threat was very real. Led by Samah, the Council voted to proceed with the Sundering. Those Sartan who opposed them were cast, along with the Patryns, into the Labyrinth."

Alfred shook his head. "Fear our downfall. Even after he had successfully sundered a world and built four new ones, after he had locked his enemies into prison, Samah was still afraid. He feared what he had discovered inside the Seventh Gate, but he also feared he might have need of the Seventh Gate again and so, instead of destroying it, he sent it away."

"I was with Samah when he died," Jonathon said. "He told Lord Xar he did not know where the Seventh Gate was."

"Probably not," Alfred conceded. "But Samah could have found it easily enough. He had my description to go on—I told him all about the Chamber of the Damned."

"My people found it," Jonathon said. "We recognized its power, but we had forgotten how to use it."

". . . use it . . ." repeated the echo.

"Something for which we should be grateful. Can you imagine what would have happened had Kleitus discovered how to use the true power of the Seventh Gate?" Alfred shuddered.

"What I find interesting is that through all the magical upheaval and turmoil, those we derisively refer to as 'the mensch' prevailed. The humans and elves and dwarves have had their problems, but they have—by and large—managed to thrive and prosper. What you call the Wave has kept them afloat."

"Let's hope they continue," Haplo said. "This next Wave—should it crash down on top of them—might be the end."

They continued traversing the corridors, traveling always downward. Alfred sang the runes softly, beneath his breath. The sigla on the wall burned brightly, led them on.

The tunnel narrowed. They were forced to walk in single file, Alfred leading the way, followed by Jonathon. The dog and Hugh the Hand brought up the rear.

Either the air was thinner down here—something Alfred didn't remember from last time—or his nervousness was robbing him of breath. The rune-song seemed to cling to his raw throat; he had difficulty forcing it out. He was afraid and at the same time excited, quivering, filled with a nervous anticipation.

Not that the sigla seemed to need his song now anyway. They flashed into light almost joyfully, moving far more rapidly than he and the others could keep up.

Alfred eventually ceased singing, saved his breath for what was coming.

Perhaps you're worrying about nothing. It could all be so easy, so simple, he told himself. A touch of magic and the Seventh Gate is destroyed, Death's Gate is shut forever . . .

The dog barked, suddenly, loudly.

The unexpected sound, echoing in the tunnel, nearly caused Alfred's heart to stop. As it was, it gave a great lurch, ending up in his throat, momentarily blocking his windpipe.

"What?" Alfred choked, coughed.

"Hsst! Quiet! Stop a moment," ordered Hugh the Hand.

All of them halted. The blue of the sigla reflected in their eyes—the living and the dead.

"The dog heard something. And so did I," Hugh the Hand continued grimly. "Someone's following along behind us."

Alfred's heart slid from his throat right out of his body.

Lord Xar.

"Go on," said Haplo. "We've come too far to stop now. Go on."

"No need," said Alfred faintly, almost without a voice.

The sigla left the base of the wall, traveled upward to form an arch of glowing blue light. Blue light that changed to glaring, ominous red at his approach.

"We are here. The Seventh Gate."

## CHAPTER 24

### THE SEVENTH GATE

THE RUNES OUTLINED AN ARCHED ENTRYWAY, WHICH LED—Alfred remembered—to a wide and airy tunnel. And Alfred remembered suddenly, too, the feeling of peace and tranquillity that had enveloped him when he had stepped into that tunnel. He longed for that sensation again, longed for it as a grown man sometimes longs to rest his head on a comforting breast; to feel gentle arms around him; to hear a voice, softly singing, lulling him to sleep with songs of his childhood.

Alfred stood before the archway, watching the sigla flicker and glimmer. To anyone else looking at the runes inscribed on the wall, the sigla would have appeared similar to those running along the base of the wall. Harmless runes, meant to serve as guides. But Alfred could read the subtle differences: a dot placed over a line instead of beneath; a cross instead of a star; a square drawn around a circle. Such differences changed these runes of guiding into runes of warding—the strongest a Sartan could forge. Anyone approaching this arch—

"What the devil are you waiting for?" Hugh the Hand demanded. He glared at Alfred dubiously. "You're not feeling faint, are you?"

"No, Sir Hugh, but—Wait! Don't!"

Hugh the Hand brushed past Alfred, headed straight for the arch.

The blue runes changed color, flaring from blue to red. The Hand, somewhat startled, halted, eyed the runes suspiciously.

Nothing happened. Alfred kept silent. The mensch probably wouldn't have believed him anyway. He was the type who had to find out for himself.

Hugh took a step forward. The sigla smoldered, burst into flame. The archway was surrounded by an arc of fire.

The dog cringed away.

"Damn!" Hugh the Hand muttered, impressed. He backed off precipitously.

The moment he stepped away from the arch, the fire died. The sigla once again gleamed a sullen red, did not change back to blue. The heat of the flames lingered in the hallway.

"We are not meant to pass," said Alfred quietly.

"I gathered that," Hugh the Hand growled, rubbing his arms where the flames had singed the thick, dark hair. "How in the name of the ancestors do we get in-side?"

"I can break the runes," Alfred said, but he made no move to do so.

"Dithering?" said Haplo.

"No," Alfred replied, defensive. "It's just . . ." He glanced back down the corridor, down the way they'd come.

The blue runes on the wall's base had faded by now, but at his look, his thought, they began to glow again. They would lead back to the cell, to Haplo.

Alfred looked down at the dog. "I have to know what will happen to you."

"It doesn't matter."

"But—"

"Damn it, I don't know what will happen!" Haplo returned, losing patience. "But I do know what will happen if we fail here. And so do you."

Alfred said nothing more. He began to dance.

His movements were graceful, slow, solemn. He accompanied himself with a song, his hands weaving the sigla to the melody, his feet marking out the same intricate pattern on the stone floor. The dance, the magic entered him, like intoxicating bubbles in his blood. His body, which oftentimes felt so awkward and clumsy, as if it belonged to someone else and was only on loan to him, was sloughed off, shed like a snake's skin. The magic was his flesh, his bone, his blood. He was light and air and water. He was happy, content, and unafraid.

The red light of the warding runes flared once, brightly, then faded and died altogether.

Darkness floated down into the corridor. Darkness extinguished Alfred.

The bubbles burst and grew flat, stale. The magic seeped out of him. His old heavy body hung before him, like a massive coat on a hook. He had to struggle into it again, feel its weight drag on his shoulders, try to walk around again in the flesh, which was too cumbersome, which didn't fit.

Alfred's feet shuffled to a halt. He sighed once, then said quietly, "We can pass now. The runes will light again once we are through the arch. Perhaps that will stop Lord Xar."

Haplo grunted, didn't even bother to respond.

Alfred led the way. Hugh the Hand followed, keeping a wary eye on the runes, obviously expecting them to burst into flame at any moment. The dog, looking bored, trotted along at Hugh's heels. Jonathon entered last, the lazar's shuffling steps leaving a path in the dust. Alfred glanced down, was intrigued and somewhat disquieted to see his own footprints, left in the dust from the last time they had passed through the arch. He knew them by their erratic pattern, that wandered aimlessly all over the place.

And Haplo's footprints—walking in a straight line, with fixed purpose and determination. On leaving that room, his walk had been less certain. His path altered drastically, the course of his life forever changed.

And Jonathon. He had been a living man, the last time they'd come here. Now his corpse—neither living nor dead—walked through the dust, obscuring the path he'd left in life. But the dog's tracks from that last time were not visible. Even now, it left no trace of its passing. Alfred stared, marveling that he'd never noticed this before.

Or maybe I saw tracks, he thought, smiling wistfully, because I wanted to see them.

He reached down, patted the animal's smooth head. The dog looked up at him with its liquid, bright eyes. Its mouth opened, parted in what might have been a grin.

"I am real," it seemed to say. "In fact, maybe I'm the only reality."

Alfred turned. His feet no longer stumbled. He walked upright and steadily toward the Seventh Gate, known to those who once lived on Abarrach as the Chamber of the Damned.

As it had the last time, the tunnel led them straight to a blank wall made of solid black rock. Two sets of runes marked it. The first set were simple locking sigla, undoubtedly inscribed by Samah himself. The other sigla had been added by those early Sartan living on Abarrach. While attempting to contact their brethren on other worlds, they had accidentally stumbled across the Seventh Gate. Inside, they found peace, self-knowledge, fulfillment—granted to them by a higher power, a power beyond their comprehension and understanding. And so they had marked this chamber sacred, holy.

In this chamber, they had died.

In this chamber, Kleitus had died.

Alfred, recalling that terrible experience, shuddered. His hand had been touching the runes on the wall. Now it dropped, trembling, to his side. He could see with horrible clarity the skeletons lying on the floor. Mass murder. Mass suicide.

Any who bring violence into this chamber will find it visited upon themselves.

So it was written on the walls. Alfred had wondered at the time how and why. Now he thought he understood. Fear—it came down always to fear. Who knew for certain what Samah had feared or why, [1] but he had been afraid, even in this chamber which the Council had endowed with its most powerful magic. It had been meant to destroy the Council's enemies. It had ended up destroying its creators.

A chill hand touched Alfred's. He jumped, startled, and found Jonathon standing at his side.

"Do not be afraid of what is within."

". . . within . . ." came the sad echo.

"The dead are now, at long last, at rest. No trace remains of their tragic end. I have seen to that myself."

". . . myself . . ."

"You have entered here?" Alfred asked, amazed.

"Many times." And it seemed the lazar smiled, the

1 See Appendix I, "Being a Concise History of the Seventh Gate . . ."

phantasm lighting the dead, dark eyes. "I enter, I leave. This chamber has been as much as any place can be—my home. Here I can find ease from the torment of my existence. Here I am given patience to endure, to wait, until the end."

"The end?" Alfred didn't quite like the sound of that.

The lazar said nothing; the phantasm slid out of the corpse, fluttered restlessly near the body.

Alfred drew in a shivering breath; what confidence he'd felt was rapidly oozing out of him.

"What happens if we fail?"

Repeating Haplo's words, Alfred placed his hands on the walls, began to chant the runes. The rock dissolved beneath his fingers. The sigla, glowing blue, framed a doorway that led, not into darkness, as it had the last time they had entered the Chamber, but into light.

The Seventh Gate was a room with seven marble walls, covered by a domed ceiling. A globe suspended from the ceiling cast a soft, white glow. As Jonathon had promised, the dead whose bodies had littered the floor were gone. But the words of warning remained inscribed on the walls: Any who bring violence into this chamber will find it visited upon themselves.

Alfred stepped over the threshold. He felt again that same enveloping, loving warmth he'd experienced the first time he'd walked into this chamber. The feeling of comfort and calm spread like a balm over his troubled soul. He drew near the oblong table, carved of pure white wood—wood that had come from the ancient, sundered world—and regarded it with reverence and sadness.

Jonathon moved over to stand beside the table. If Alfred had been paying attention, he would have noticed a change come over the lazar when it entered this room. The phantasm remained outside the body, no longer writhing, struggling to escape. Its vague, shapeless form coalesced into a shimmering image of the duke as he had been when Alfred first knew him: young, vibrant, joyful. The corpse was, it seemed, the soul's shadow.

Alfred didn't notice, however. He stared at the runes carved on the table, stared at them as if hypnotized, unable to look away. He drew nearer, nearer.

Hugh the Hand stood in the doorway, gazing into the chamber with awe, perhaps reluctant—now that the moment was at hand—to cross the threshold.

The dog nudged Hugh, urged him forward, reassuringly wagging its tail.

Hugh's grim face relaxed. He smiled. "Well, if you say so," he said to the animal and walked inside. Glancing around, taking in everything, he walked over to the white table and, placing his hands on it, began idly to trace the runes with his fingers.

The dog pattered inside the room . . . and vanished.

The door to the Seventh Gate slid shut.

Alfred didn't notice Hugh. Alfred didn't see the dog disappear. He didn't hear the door close. He was standing at the table. Stretching out his hands, he placed his fingers gently, reverently on the white wood . . .

"We are come today, Brethren," said Samah from his place at the head of the table, "to sunder the world."

## CHAPTER 25

### THE SEVENTH GATE

THE CHAMBER KNOWN AS THE SEVENTH GATE WAS CROWDED with Sartan. The Council of Seven sat around the table; all others stood. Alfred was shoved against a wall near the back, near one of the seven doors. The doors themselves and a series of seven squares on the floor in front of each were left clear.

The faces so near his were strained, pale, haggard. It was, Alfred thought, like seeing himself in a mirror. He must look exactly the same, for he felt exactly the same. Only Samah—seen occasionally when there was a shift in the numbers of people who surrounded him—appeared master of himself and the situation. Stern and implacable, he was the dire force holding them all together.

If his will falters, the rest of us will crumble like moldy cheese.

Alfred shifted from one foot to the other, trying to ease the discomfort of standing for such an interminably long period. He was not normally claustrophobic, but the tension, the fear, the crowded conditions were creating the impression that the walls were about to close in on him. It was hard to breathe. The room suddenly seemed a vacuum.

He pressed back against the wall, wishing it would give way behind him. He had wonderful, wild visions of the marble blocks collapsing, the fresh air flowing inside, the vast expanse of blue sky opening above him. He would flee this place, flee Samah and the Council guards, escape back into the world, instead of away from it.

"Brethren." Samah rose to his feet. The entire Council was now standing. "It is time. Prepare yourselves to cast the magic."

Alfred could see Orlah now. She was pale, but composed. He knew her reluctance, knew how vehemently she had fought this decision. She could. She was Samah's wife. He would never cast her into the prison along with their enemies, not as he had done some of the others.

The Sartan stood with heads bowed, hands folded, eyes closed. They had begun sinking into the relaxed, meditative state required to summon such vast magical power as Samah and the Council were demanding.

Alfred endeavored to do the same, but his thoughts refused to focus, went dashing about desperately, running hither and yon with no escape, like mice trapped in a box with a cat.

"You seem unable to concentrate, Brother," said a low, calm voice, very near Alfred.

Startled, Alfred looked for the voice's source, saw a man leaning on the wall beside him. The man was young, but beyond that it was difficult to tell much about him. His head was covered by the cowl of his robe and his hands were swathed in bandages.

Bandages. Alfred stared at the white linen wrappings covering the man's hands, wrists, and forearms, and was filled with a vague sense of dread.

The young man turned to him and smiled—a quiet smile.

"The Sartan will come to regret this day, Brother." His voice changed, grew bitter. "Not that their regret will ease the suffering of the innocent victims. But at least, before the end, the Sartan will come to understand the enormity of what they have done. If that is of any comfort to you."

"We will understand," Alfred said, hesitantly, "but will understanding help us? Will the future be better for it?"

"That remains to be seen, Brother," said Haplo.

It is Haplo! And I am Alfred, not some nameless, faceless Sartan who once, long, long ago, stood trembling in this very chamber. And yet, at the same time, I am that unhappy Sartan. I am here and I was there.

"I should have been more courageous," Alfred whispered. Sweat trickled down his balding head, soaked the collar of his robes. "I should have spoken up, tried to stop this madness. But I'm such a coward. I saw what happened to the others. I ... couldn't face it. Though now, perhaps, I think it would have been better ... At least I could live with myself, though I wouldn't live long. Now I must carry this burden with me the rest of my life."

"It isn't your fault," said Haplo. "For the last time, quit apologizing."

"Yes, it is . . ." Alfred said. "Yes, it is. For each of us who have turned a blind eye to prejudice, hatred, intolerance ... it is our fault . . ."

"Reach out, Brethren," Samah was saying. "Reach out with your minds to the farthest point of your power and then reach beyond that. Envision the possibility that this world is not one, but has been reduced to its elemental parts: earth, air, fire, and water."

A single sigil began to shine blue in the centers of four doors. Alfred recognized the symbols—one for each of the four elements. These, then, were the doors which would lead to the new worlds. He began to shiver.

"Our enemies, the Patryns, have been confined to prison. They are now contained, immobilized," Samah continued. "We could have easily destroyed them, but we do not seek their destruction. We seek their redemption, their rehabilitation. Their prison house—no, let us term it a correction center—is ready to be sealed shut."

A sigil on the fifth door burst into flame, burned an angry, fiery red. The Labyrinth. Redemption. Haplo laughed harshly.

"You must stop this, Samah!" Alfred wanted to shout frantically. "The Labyrinth is not a prison but a torture chamber. It hears the hatred and the fear that lie hidden behind your words. The Labyrinth will use that hatred to murder and destroy."

But Alfred didn't speak aloud. He was too afraid.

"We created a haven for the Patryns." Samah smiled, tight-lipped, grim. "Once they have learned their hard lesson, the Labyrinth will free them. We will build for them a city, teach them how to live like civilized people."

"Yes," Alfred said to himself, "the Patryns will continue to study the 'lesson.' The lesson of hate you taught them. They will emerge from the Labyrinth stronger in their fury than ever. Except for some. Some like Haplo, who learned that true strength lies in love."

The sixth door began to glimmer with twilight colors, soft, shimmering. The Nexus.

"And last," said Samah, with a gesture toward the door that stood behind him, a door that—as he moved his hand—slowly began to open, "we create the path that will take us to these worlds. We create Death's

Gate. As this world dies, newer, better worlds will be born from it. And now the time has come."

Samah turned slowly, faced the door, which now stood wide open. Alfred tried to catch a glimpse of what it revealed. Standing on his toes, he peered over the heads of the restive crowd.

Blue sky, white clouds, green trees, rolling oceans . . . The old world . . .

"Take it apart, my brethren," Samah commanded. "Take the world apart."

Alfred couldn't cast the magic. He couldn't. He saw the faces of the "regrettable but necessary civilian casualties." He saw their disbelief, their fear, their panic. Thousands and thousands, running to their own ends, for there was no refuge, no sanctuary.

He was weeping, blubbering. He couldn't help it, he couldn't stop himself.

Haplo rested a bandaged hand on his shoulder. "Pull yourself together. This won't help. Samah is watching you."

Fearfully Alfred raised his head. His eyes met Samah's and he saw the fear and anger in the man.

And then Samah wasn't Samah any longer.

He was Xar.

## CHAPTER 26

### THE SEVENTH GATE

"ALFRED!"

The voice called to him across a vast distance, through time and space. It was faint, yet compelling. Urging him to leave, withdraw, return . . .

"Alfred!"

A hand on his shoulder, shaking him. Alfred looked down at the hand, saw it was bandaged. He was frightened, tried to get away, but he couldn't. The hand gripped him tightly.

"No, please, let me alone!" Alfred whimpered. "I'm in my tomb. I'm safe. It's peaceful and quiet. No one can hurt me here. Let me go!"

The hand didn't let him go. It kept fast hold of him and drew him on, its strong grip no longer frightening, but welcome and comforting, supportive and reassuring. It was drawing him back, back into the world of the living.

And then, before he was quite there yet, the hand pulled away. The bandages fell off. He saw that the hand was covered with blood. Pity filled his heart. The hand was outstretched, reaching for him.

"Alfred, I need you."

And there, at his feet, was the dog, gazing up at him with liquid eyes.

"I need you."

Alfred reached out, caught hold of the hand . . .

The hand squeezed his painfully, jerked him backward, dragged him completely off his feet. He tumbled to the floor.

"And stay away from that damn table, will you?" Haplo ordered, standing over him, glaring down at him. "We almost lost you for good that time." He eyed Alfred grimly, but with a touch of concern in the quiet smile. "Are you all right?"

Crouched on his hands and knees on the dusty marble, Alfred had no answer. He could only gaze in wordless astonishment at Haplo-Haplo, standing right there in front of him, Haplo whole, alive!

"You look," said Haplo, suddenly grinning, "exactly like the dog."

"My friend . . ." Alfred sat back on his heels. His eyes filled with tears. "My friend . . ."

"Now don't start blubbering," Haplo warned. "And get up, damn it. We don't have much time. Lord Xar—"

"He's here!" Alfred said fearfully, clambering to his feet. He stumbled around to face the head of the table.

Alfred blinked. Not Samah. Certainly not Xar. Jonathon stood at the table's head. Beside him, grim and tense, was Hugh the Hand.

"Why ... I saw Xar . . ." Another thought occurred to Alfred. "You!" He staggered back around to face Haplo. "You. Are you real?"

"Flesh and blood," said Haplo.

His hand—~~sigla-~~covered, strong and warm—~~took~~ hold of Alfred, steadied the Sartan, who was extremely pale and wobbly.

Timidly, Alfred extended a bony finger, poked cautiously at Haplo. "You seem real," he said, stiltedly dubious. He glanced around. "The dog?"

"The mutt's run off," said Haplo. He smiled. "Probably smelled sausages."

"Not run off," said Alfred tremulously. "Part of you. At last. But how did it all happen?"

"This chamber," Jonathon answered. "Cursed . . . and blessed. In Haplo's case, the rune-magic kept his body alive. The magic in this chamber, inside the Seventh Gate, has enabled the soul to rejoin the body."

"When Prince Edmund came in here," Alfred said, remembering, "his soul was freed from his body."

"He was dead," Jonathon replied. "And raised through the necromancy. His soul was in thrall. That is the difference."

"Ah," said Alfred, "I think I'm beginning to understand—"

"I'm very glad for you," Haplo interrupted. "How many years do you think it might take you to completely understand? As I said, we don't have much time. We have to establish contact with the higher power—"

"I know how! I was there, during the Sundering! Samah was here and the Council members were all gathered around the table. And you were here . . . Never mind," Alfred concluded meekly, catching Haplo's impatient glance. "I'll tell you that later, too."

"Those four doors"—~~Alfred pointed—~~the ones that are slightly ajar, each lead to the four worlds. The door over there leads to the Labyrinth. That door—~~the one that is shut—~~must go to the Vortex, which, if you'll remember, collapsed, and that door"—~~the pointing finger shook slightly—~~that door, the one that's wide open, leads to Death's Gate."

Haplo grunted. "I told you to stay away from that damn table. That door doesn't lead anywhere except out into the hall. In case you've forgotten, my friend, that was the door we went through last time we were in here. Although, as I recall, you shut it when we left. Or rather, it almost shut you."

"But that was in Abarrach," Alfred argued. He looked around helplessly, the knowledge suddenly terrifying. "We're not in the Chamber of the Damned. We're not on Abarrach. We are inside the Seventh Gate."

Haplo frowned, skeptical.

"You're here," Alfred said. "How did you get here?"

Haplo shrugged again. "I woke up, half frozen, in a prison cell. I was alone. No one was around. I walked out into the corridor and saw the blue runes shining on the wall, I followed them. Then I heard your voice, chanting. The warding runes let me pass. I came down here, found the door open. I walked inside. You were sitting at that damn table, whimpering and apologizing ... as usual."

Perplexed, Alfred looked at Jonathon. "Are we on Abarrach still? I don't understand."

"Because you went to the Seventh Gate, you found the Seventh Gate. You are now in the Seventh Gate."

". . . Seventh Gate . . ." said the echo and it had a joyous sound.

"That door"—Jonathon glanced in the direction of the door with the sigil marking it as Death's Gate—"has stood open all these centuries. To close Death's Gate, that is the door you must shut."

The enormity of the task overwhelmed Alfred. It had taken the Council of Seven, and hundreds of other powerful Sartan, to create and open that door. To shut it—only him.

"Then how did I get here?" Haplo demanded, obviously still not believing. "I didn't use any magic—"

"Not magic," Jonathon replied. "Knowledge. Self-knowledge. That is the key to the Seventh Gate. If my people, who found this place long ago, had truly known themselves, they could have discovered its power. They came close. But not close enough. They could not let go."

". . . let go . . ."

"I need proof. Open a door," said Haplo. "Not that one!" He purposefully avoided going near the door that already stood ajar. "Open another door, one that's closed. Let's see what's out there."

"Which door?" Alfred asked, gulping.

Haplo was silent a moment, then said, "The one that you claim leads to the Labyrinth."

Alfred slowly nodded. He thought back to the Chamber as he had seen it just before the Sundering. He saw again the door with the fiery red sigil.

He located the correct door. Edging his way around the table—careful not to touch the runes on the white wood—he came to stand before the door.

He reached out his hand, gently touched the sigil etched into the marble. He began to sing, very softly; then his song grew stronger. He traced over the sigil with his fingers and the sigil flared to life, glowed red.

The song caught in Alfred's throat. He coughed, swallowed, tried to continue singing, though now the song was cracked and off-key. He pushed on the door.

The door swung silently open.

And they were inside the Labyrinth.

CHAPTER 27

THE LABYRINTH

TRAVELING THROUGH DEATH'S GATE, THE TWO SARTAN SHIPS arrived in the Nexus. The ships landed near what had once been Lord Xar's house, now a mass of charred wood. On landing, the Sartan stared out the portholes, shocked into stunned silence at the sight of the destruction.

"You see the magnitude of the hatred these Patrins bear us," Ramu could be heard saying. "They wreak destruction upon the city and land we made for them, although it means they will be the ones who suffer. There is no reasoning with such savagery. These people will never be fit to live among civilized men."

Marit could have told him the truth that it was the serpents who had destroyed the Nexus but she knew he would never believe her and she refused to let him provoke her into a meaningless argument. She maintained a haughty, dignified silence, kept her face averted so that they would not see her tears.

Ordering the majority of the Sartan to remain safely on board ship, where the runes could protect them, Ramu sent out scouting parties.

While the scouts were abroad, the Sartan of Chelestra came to tend to the needs of their Abarrach brethren. They were gentle, patient, and kind, giving of their own strength unstintingly. Several Sartan, passing by Marit, even paused to ask if they could do anything to aid her. She refused their help, of course, but—astonished and touched by the offers—she managed to be gracious about it.

The only Sartan she came close to trusting (and not all that close, either) was Balthazar. She couldn't quite explain why. Perhaps it was because he and his people also knew what it was to watch their children die. Or perhaps it was because he had taken the time to talk to her on their journey through Death's Gate, to ask her what was happening in the Labyrinth.

Marit waited impatiently for the return of the Sartan scouts, who went immediately to Ramu. Marit would have given several gates to have heard their report. She could do nothing but wait, however.

At last Ramu left his cabin. He motioned grudgingly, Marit thought to Balthazar. The Councillor obviously didn't like sharing his position of authority, but he had little choice. The Abarrach Sartan had made it clear during the journey that they would follow no leader but their own.

"I don't like what I am hearing," Ramu said in a low voice. "The scouts' reports are conflicting. They tell me—"

Marit could not hear what the scouts reported, but she could guess. The scouts would see whatever it was the serpents wanted the scouts to see.

Balthazar listened, then halted Ramu with a polite gesture. The necromancer looked over to Marit, motioned to her to join them.

Ramu frowned. "Do you think that wise? She is a prisoner. I do not like giving away our plans to the enemy."

"As you say, she is a prisoner and would find it difficult if not impossible to escape. I would like to hear what she has to say."

"If you are interested in lies, then, by all means, Brother, let us hear her," Ramu said bitinglly.

Marit came up, stood silently between the two.

"Please continue, Councillor," said Balthazar.

Ramu remained silent for a moment, displeased and angry, forced to rethink what and how much he was going to reveal. "I was going to say that I plan to go to the Final Gate. I want to see for myself what is transpiring."

"Excellent idea," Balthazar agreed. "I will accompany you."

Ramu did not appear pleased. "I would think, Brother, that you would prefer to remain on board. You are still very weak."

Balthazar shrugged this off. "I am the representative of my people. Their ruler, if you will. You cannot, by Sartan law, refuse my request, Councillor."

Ramu bowed. "I was thinking only of your health."

"Of course you were," Balthazar said smiling, smooth. "And I will take Marit along to act as my adviser."

Caught completely by surprise, she stared at him in astonishment.

"Absolutely not." Ramu refused to consider the matter. "She is far too dangerous. She will stay here, under guard."

"Be sensible, Councillor," Balthazar returned coolly. "This woman has lived both in the Nexus and in the Labyrinth itself. She is familiar with the surroundings, with the inhabitants. She knows what is transpiring—something that, in my mind, your scouts do not."

Ramu flushed in outrage. He was not accustomed to having his authority challenged. The other Council members, overhearing, looked uncomfortable, exchanged uneasy glances.

Balthazar remained polite, politic. Ramu had no choice but to acquiesce. He needed the help of the Abarrach Sartan and this was neither the time nor the place for the Councillor to challenge Balthazar's authority.

"Very well," Ramu said unpleasantly. "She may accompany you, but she is to be kept under strict watch. If anything happens—"

"I take full responsibility for her upon myself," Balthazar said humbly.

Ramu, with a dark glance at Marit, turned on his heel and left.

Outright confrontation had been avoided. But every Sartan who witnessed the clash of these two strong wills knew that war had been declared. Two suns do not travel in the same orbit, as the saying goes.

"I want to thank you, Balthazar," Marit began awkwardly.

"Do not thank me," he said coldly, cutting her words off. Placing his thin, wasted hand on her arm, he drew her over to one of the portholes. "Look out here a moment. I want you to explain something to me."

The bony fingers dug into Marit's arm with such force that the sigla beneath them began to glow, defending her. She didn't like his touch, started to pull away. His grip tightened.

"Watch for your chance," he said softly, urgently, before she could speak. "When it comes, take it. I will do what I can for you."

Escape! Marit knew instantly what he had meant. But why? She held back, suspicious.

He glanced over his shoulder. A few Sartan were watching them, but they were his people, whom he could trust. The other Sartan had either left with Ramu or were occupied with helping their brethren.

Balthazar turned back to Marit, spoke in a low voice. "Ramu does not know this, but I sent out my own scouts. They report that vast armies of terrible creatures—red dragons, wolves who walk like men, gigantic

insects are massed around the Final Gate. You might be interested to know that Ramu's scouts captured one of your people, interrogated him, forced him to talk."

"A Patryn?" Marit was bewildered. "But there are no Patrins left in the Nexus. I told you the serpents drove all my people back through the Final Gate."

"There was something odd about this Patryn," Balthazar went on, studying her intently. "He had very strange eyes."

"Let me guess. The eyes glowed red. That wasn't one of my people! It was one of the serpents. They can take any form"

"Yes. From what little you said, I gathered this might be something like that. The Patryn admitted that his people are in league with the serpents, fighting to open the Final Gate."

"That part is true!" Marit cried, feeling helpless. "We have to! If the Final Gate closes, my people will be trapped inside forever . . ."

Fear and despair choked her. For a moment she could not go on. Desperately, she fought to maintain control, speak calmly. "But we are not in league with the serpents. We know them for what they are. We would remain locked inside the Labyrinth forever before we would side with them! How can that fool Ramu believe such a thing!"

"He believes what he wants to believe, Marit. What serves his purpose. Or perhaps he is blind to their evil." The necromancer smiled, thin-lipped, rueful. "We are not. We have looked inside that dark mirror. We recognize the reflection."

Balthazar sighed; his face had gone exceedingly pale. He was, as Ramu had pointed out, still weak. But he refused Marit's suggestion that he return to his quarters, lie down.

"You need to get word to your people, Marit. Tell them we are here. We must ally together to fight these creatures, or all of us will be destroyed. If only there was some one of your people who could talk to Ramu, convince him"

"But there is!" Marit gasped, clutched at Balthazar. "Headman Vasu! He is part Sartan himself! I will try to reach him. I can use my magic to go to him. But Ramu will see what I'm doing and try to stop me."

"How long do you need?"

"Long enough to draw the runes. A count of thirty heartbeats, no more."

Balthazar smiled. "Wait and watch."

Marit stood huddled beside a wall surrounding the burned-cut shells of what had once been the beautiful buildings of the Nexus. The city that had shone like the first star of the evening, gleaming bright against the twilight sky, was a mass of blackened stone. Its windows were dark and empty as the eyes of its dead. Smoke from still smoldering beams of wood clouded the sky, brought a dirty and ugly night by patches of orange to the land.

Two Sartan were supposed to be keeping watch on her, but they only glanced at her occasionally, more interested in what was transpiring beyond the Gate than in one subdued and seemingly harmless Patryn prisoner.

What she saw beyond the Gate weakened Marit far more than any Sartan magic.

"The reports were correct," Ramu was saying grimly. "Armies of darkness massing for an assault against the Final Gate. We have arrived here just in time, it seems."

"You fool!" Marit told him bitterly. "Those armies are massing for an assault against us."

"Don't believe her, Sartan," hissed a sibilant voice from behind the walls. "It is a trick. She lies. Their armies will break through the Final Gate and, from there, advance into the four worlds."

A huge, snakelike head reared up from behind the wall, loomed over them, swaying slowly back and forth. Its eyes glinted red; its tongue flicked in and out of toothless jaws. Its skin was old and wrinkled and hung loose on its sinuous body. It stank of death and corruption and burned-out ruins.

Balthazar recoiled in horror. "What ghastly creature is this?"

"Don't you know?" The red eyes glinted in what might have been laughter. "You created us . . ."

The two Sartan guards were pale and shaking. This was Marit's chance to flee, but the serpent's terrible gaze was on her, or so it seemed, and she could not move or think or do anything except watch in dread fascination.

Only Ramu was proof against its dire spell. "And so you are here, in league with your friends, the Patryns. One of their own people told me as much."

The snake's head sank. Its eyes were hooded, the red glint fading. "You wrong us, Councillor. We are here to help you. As you surmised, the Patryns are attempting to break out of their prison. They have summoned hordes of dragons to fight at their behest. Even now, their armies approach the Final Gate."

The head slid over the wall, followed by part of the enormous, foul-smelling body. Ramu could not help himself. He fell back before it, but only a step or two. Then he held his ground.

"Your kind are with them."

The snake's head oscillated. "We serve our creators. Give the command, and we will destroy the Patryns and seal shut the Final Gate forever!"

The serpent rested its head on the ground in front of Ramu. Its red eyes closed in servile submission.

"And when they have destroyed us, they will turn against you, Ramu!" Marit warned. "You will find yourself inside the Labyrinth! Or worse!"

The serpent ignored her. And so did Ramu.

"Why should we trust you? You attacked us on Chelestra—"

The giant reptile lifted its head. Its red eyes flared in hurt indignation. "It was the wicked mensch who attacked you, Councillor. Not us. There is proof. When your city was flooded with the magic-nullifying seawater, when you were bereft of your power, weak and helpless, did we harm you? We could have."

The red eyes glinted for an instant; then ~~again~~ the hooded lids shadowed them. "But we did not. Your esteemed father ~~honor to his memory~~ opened Death's Gate for us. We were only too happy to flee our mensch persecutors. And a good thing we did. Otherwise, you would now face this threat from your most terrible enemies alone."

"You do face it alone, Ramu. In the end, we will all face it alone," Marit said softly.

"This from one who helped murder your father!" the serpent hissed. "She listened to his screams and she laughed!"

Ramu went deathly pale. He turned to look at Marit.

"I didn't laugh," she said through trembling lips. She remembered Samah's screams. Burning tears stung her eyelids. "I didn't laugh."

Ramu's fist clenched.

"Kill her . . ." whispered the dragon-snake. "Kill her now . . . Take your just revenge."

Ramu reached into his robes, drew forth the Sartan knife, the Cursed Blade. He stared at it, looked back at her.

Marit came forward, apparently eager, ready to fight.

Balthazar stepped in between the two.

"Are you mad, Ramu? Look what this foul snake has driven you to do! Don't trust it! I know it. I recognize it! I've seen it before."

Ramu seemed ready to shove Balthazar aside. "Get out of my way. Or by my father's memory, I will kill you, too!"

The serpent watched, grew fatter, sleeker.

The two Sartan guards looked on in horror, not certain what to do.

The Cursed Blade in Ramu's hand was wriggling, starting to come to life. Marit drew a magical circle of blue and red sigla. Its fire shone brightly. Speaking the name "Vasu," she stepped through the rune-circle and was gone.

Ramu thrust the Cursed Blade back into its sheath. Cold with anger, he turned on the necromancer.

"You helped her escape. An act of treason! When this is ended, you will be brought up on charges before the Council!"

"Don't be a fool, Ramu!" Balthazar returned.

"Marit was right. Look at that foul serpent! Don't you know it? Haven't you seen it before? Take a good look—inside yourself!"

Ramu regarded Balthazar grimly, then turned back to face the serpent. The creature was bloated, surfeited. The red eyes smiled and winked.

"I will ally myself with you. Attack the Patrins," Ramu ordered. "Kill them. Kill them all."

"Yes, Master!" The serpent bowed low.

## CHAPTER 28

### THE SEVENTH GATE

"YOU SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING?" SAID HAPLO.

Alfred shook his head. "It is hopeless. We will never learn. Our people will destroy each other . . ." His shoulders slumped in despair.

Haplo rested a hand on his arm. "It may not be that bad, my friend. If your people and mine can find a way to meet in peace, they will see the evil of the serpents. The dragon-snakes can't keep playing one side off the other if both sides stand together. We have people like Marit and Balthazar and Vasu . . . They are our hope. But the Gate must be closed!"

"Yes." Alfred lifted his head, a tinge of color in his gray cheeks. He stared at the door, the door marked Death's Gate. "Yes, you're right. The Gate must be shut and sealed. At least we can contain the evil, keep it from spreading."

"Can you do it?"

Alfred flushed. "Yes, I believe I can. The spell is not all that difficult. It involves, you see, the possibility that—"

"No need to explain," Haplo interrupted. "No time."

"Oh, urn, yes." Alfred blinked. Approaching the door, he eyed it wistfully, sadly. "If only this had never come to be. I'm not sure, you know, what will happen when the Gate is shut." He waved his hand. "To this chamber, I mean. There exists the possibility that . . . that it could be destroyed."

"And us with it," Haplo said quietly.

Alfred nodded.

"Then I guess that's a risk we'll have to take."

Alfred looked back into the door leading to the Labyrinth. The serpents twined about the ruins of the Nexus, their huge bodies roiling over the blackened stones and broken, charred beams. Red eyes glinted. He could hear their laughter.

"Yes," Alfred said softly, exhaling an indrawn breath. "And now—"

"Wait a minute!" Hugh the Hand was standing near the door through which they'd entered. "I've got a question. This involves me as well," he added harshly.

"Of course, Sir Hugh," Alfred said, flustered, apologizing. "Please forgive . . . I'm sorry ... I wasn't thinking—"

Hugh the Hand made an impatient gesture, cut off Alfred's rambling.

"Once you shut the Gate, what will happen to the four mensch worlds?"

"I've been considering that," Alfred pondered. "From my earlier studies, I think it highly possible that the conduits which connect each world to the other will continue working, even though the Gate is shut. Thus the Kicksey-winsey on Arianus will still send energy to the citadels on Pryan, which will beam energy to the conduits on Abarrach, which will in turn send—"

"So all the worlds would continue to function."

"I'm not certain, of course, but the probability is such that—"

"But no one could travel between them."

"No. Of that, I am certain," Alfred said gravely. "Once Death's Gate is shut, the only way to go from world to world would be to fly through space. Which is—given the mensch's present state of magical development—the

only way they could have traveled from one world to another anyway. So far as we know, the child Bane was the only mensch ever to enter Death's Gate, and he did so only—

A sharp nudge from an elbow caught Alfred in the ribs.

"I want to talk to you for a moment." Haplo motioned Alfred over to stand near the table.

"Certainly," Alfred replied, "just after I finish explaining to Hugh—"

"Now," Haplo said. "Don't you find that an odd question?" he asked beneath his breath.

"Why, no," Alfred said, defending a brilliant pupil. "In fact, I thought it quite a good one. If you remember, you and I discussed this on Arianus."

"Exactly," said Haplo beneath his breath, looking at Hugh the Hand through narrowed eyes. "We discussed it. What's it to an assassin from Arianus whether or not the mensch on Pryan can go visit their cousins on Chelestra? Why should he care?"

"I don't understand." Alfred was puzzled.

Haplo was silent, eyeing Hugh the Hand. He had shoved open one of the doors, was peering through it. Haplo saw, in the distance, the floating continent of Drevlin. Once shrouded in storm clouds, Drevlin now basked in sunshine. Light glinted and flashed off the gold and silver and brass parts of the fabulous Kicksey-winsey.

"I'm not sure I understand, either," Haplo said at last. "But I think you'd better cut short the academics, get on with your magic."

"Very well," Alfred replied, troubled. "But I'll have to go back in time."

"Back? Back where?"

"Back to the Sundering." Alfred looked down at the white table, shivered. "I don't want to, but it's the only way. I must know how Samah cast the spell."

"Do it, then," Haplo said. "But don't forget to return. And don't get yourself sundered in the process."

Alfred smiled wanly. "No," he said, blushing. "No, I'll be careful . . ."

Slowly, reluctantly, fingers trembling, he placed his hands on the white table . . .

. . . Chaos swirled around him. Alfred stood, terrified, in the center of a storm of magic. Howling winds buffeted him, slammed him back against the wall, breaking his bones. Crashing waves washed over him. He was drowning, suffocating. Lightning flared, crackled, blinded; thunder rumbled in his head. Flames roared, burned, consumed his flesh. He was sobbing in fear and in pain; he was dying.

"A single drop, though it falls into an ocean, will yet cause a ripple. I need all of you! Don't give up. The magic!" Samah was shouting to be heard over the tumult. "Use the magic or none of us will survive!"

The magic drifted toward Alfred like a bit of flotsam on a storm-tossed sea. He saw hands reaching out for it, saw some grasp it, saw others miss and disappear. He made a desperate grab.

His fingers closed over something solid. The noise and terror subsided for an instant, and he saw the world—whole, beautiful, shining blue-green in the blackness of space. He must break the world, or the power of the chaotic magic would break him.

"I'm sorry!" he wept and repeated the words over and over. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry . . ."

A single drop . . .

The world exploded.

Alfred reached desperately for the possibility that it could be re-formed, and he felt hundreds of other Sartan minds surge toward the same goal. Yet he still wept, even as he created, and his tears flowed into a sea of gently swelling waves . . .

Alfred lifted his head. Jonathon sat opposite him, on the other side of the table. The lazar said nothing, the eyes sometimes alive, sometimes dead. But Alfred knew that the eyes had seen.

"So many died!" Alfred cried, shuddering. He couldn't breathe; spasmodic sobs choked him. "So many!"

"Alfred!" Haplo shook him. "Let go! Leave it!"

Alfred sat hunched over, his head in his hands, shoulders heaving.

"Alfred . . ." Haplo urged quietly. "Time . . ."

"Yes," Alfred said, drawing in a shivering breath. "Yes, I'm all right. And ... I know how. I know how to shut Death's Gate."

He looked up at Haplo. "It will be for the best. I have no more doubts. Sundering the world was a great evil. But attempting to 'fix' one evil by means of another—by collapsing the worlds back into one—would be even more devastating. And Lord Xar might not succeed. There is a chance the magic could fail utterly. The worlds might break apart, never to be re-formed. Those living on the worlds would all die. Xar could be left with nothing but motes of dust, droplets of water, wisps of smoke, and blood . . ."

Haplo smiled his quiet smile.

"I know something else, too." Alfred rose, tall and dignified, elegant and graceful, to his feet. "I can cast the spell myself. I don't need your help, my friend. You can go back." He gestured toward the door marked Labyrinth. "They need you there. Your people. Mine."

Haplo looked in that direction, looked back at a land he had once despised, a land that now held everything dear to him. He shook his head.

Alfred, prepared for this, launched into his argument. "You are needed there. I will do what has to be done. It's best this way. I'm not afraid. Well, not much," he amended. "The point is, there's nothing for you to do here. I don't need you. And they do."

Haplo said nothing, continued to shake his head.

"Marit loves you!" Alfred prodded at the weak point in Haplo's armor. "You love her. Go back to her. My friend," he continued earnestly, "for me to know that you two are together . . . well ... it would make what I have to do so much easier . . ."

Haplo was still shaking his head.

Alfred looked pained. "You don't trust me. I don't blame you. I know that in the past I've let you down, but, truly, I'm strong now. I am—"

"I know you are," Haplo said. "I trust you. I want you to trust me."

Alfred stared, blinked.

"Listen to me. In order to cast the spell, you'll have to leave this chamber, enter Death's Gate. Right?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'm staying here." Haplo was firm.

"Why? I don't—"

"To stand guard," Haplo said.

Alfred's hopes, which had been bright, were suddenly dimmed; a dark cloud passed over his sun. "Lord Xar. I forgot. But surely if he was going to try to stop us, he would have done so by now—"

"Just get on with the spell," Haplo said sharply.

Alfred regarded him anxiously, sadly. "You know something. Something you're not telling me. Something's wrong. You're in danger. Perhaps I shouldn't leave . . ."

"You and I don't matter. Think of them," Haplo said quietly.

"Let go," said Jonathon. "And take hold."

". . . let go ... take hold . . ." The phantasm's voice was strong; stronger, almost, than that of the body.

"Cast the spell," said Hugh the Hand. "Set me free."

A single drop, though it falls into an ocean, will yet cause a ripple.

"I will," said Alfred suddenly, lifting his head. "I can."

Turning to Haplo, Alfred reached out his hand.

"Farewell, my friend," he said. "Thank you. For bringing me back to life."

Haplo took Alfred's hand, then embraced the embarrassed and startled Sartan.

"Thank you," Haplo said, his voice gruff, "for giving me life. Farewell, my friend."

Alfred was extremely red. He patted Haplo's back awkwardly, then turned away, wiping his eyes and nose with his coat sleeve.

"You know," said Alfred, voice muffled, his face averted, "I ... I miss the dog."

"You know," said Haplo, grinning, "so do I."

With a last fond look, Alfred turned and walked over to the door marked with the sigil meaning "death."

He didn't stumble once.

CHAPTER 29

THE SEVENTH GATE

HAPLO STOOD NEAR DEATH'S GATE, WATCHED AS ALFRED ENTERED. The patryn was aware of a presence near him. Hugh the Hand had come up to stand at his side, join him in his vigil. Haplo did not turn around, did not take his gaze from the doorway.

Alfred placed his hand on the sigil, spoke the rune.

The door swung open. Alfred, without a look behind, entered and disappeared.

Hugh the Hand began walking toward the door.

"I wouldn't go any farther," Haplo advised mildly.

The assassin halted, glanced back. "I only want to see what's going on."

"If you take another step, My Lord," Haplo said, and his voice was respectful, "I will be forced to stop you."

"My Lord?" " Hugh the Hand appeared puzzled.

Haplo moved to stand between the Hand and the door.

"Do no violence," Jonathon warned quietly.

". . . no violence . . ."

Hugh the Hand stared at the Patryn intently; then he shrugged and spoke several words—words in the Patryn language. Words a mensch could not possibly know.

A shower of sparkling runes swirled around the assassin. The light was dazzling; Haplo was forced to squint against it. When he could see, Hugh the Hand was gone. Lord Xar stood in his place.

"The question about the four worlds," Xar said. "That's what gave me away."

"Yes, My Lord." Haplo smiled, shook his head. "It wasn't the type of question a mensch would ask. Hugh the Hand didn't much care about his one world, let alone three others. Where is he, by the way?"

Xar shrugged; his gaze was now concentrated on Death's Gate. "In the Fire Sea. In the Labyrinth. Who knows? The last I saw of him, he was on board the Sartan ship. While you were fooling with that bumbling Sartan, I was able to assume Hugh's form, take his place on the back of the fire dragon. That thing knew the truth." Xar's gaze flicked to Jonathon.

The lazar remained seated at the table, seemingly uncaring, oblivious.

"But what do the living mean to those walking corpses? You were a fool to trust it. It has betrayed you."

"Do no violence," Jonathon repeated softly.

". . . no violence . . ."

Xar snorted. The glittering eyes flicked back to Haplo. "So you truly intend—you and this Sartan master you serve—to shut Death's Gate."

"I do," said Haplo.

The lord's eyes narrowed. "You doom your own people! You doom the woman you love. You doom your child! Yes, she is alive. But she won't remain alive if you permit the Sartan to shut the Gate."

Haplo said nothing, tried to maintain his outward composure. Xar was swift to read the clenched jaw muscle, the faint pallor, the swift and doubtful glance toward the door that led to the Labyrinth.

"Go to her, my son," Xar said gently. "Go to Marit, find your child. I found her. I know where she is. She is not far, not far at all. Take her and her mother to the Nexus. You will be safe there. When my work here is complete—the lord made an all-encompassing gesture with his hands—I will return in triumph to join you. Together, we will defeat our enemies, lock the Sartan in the prison they designed for us! And we will be free!"

Again, Haplo said nothing. But he did not move, did not step aside. He remained, blocking the door.

Xar looked past Haplo, inside Death's Gate. He could not see Alfred, but he could see the swirl of chaos, guessed that Alfred must be having a difficult time of it. So long as chaos prevailed, Xar had nothing to worry about. He had time. He glanced at the runes glowing on the walls. He could read their warning. The Lord of the Nexus turned back to Haplo, who was blocking his way.

"Alfred has tricked you, my son," Xar warned. "He is using you. He will turn on you in the end. Mark my words. He will cast you back into prison!"

Haplo did not move.

Xar was beginning to grow angry. He marched forward until he stood directly in front of Haplo. "Your loyalty belongs to me, my son. I gave you life."

Haplo remained silent. His left hand moved to his chest, to the scars over the heart-rune.

Xar reached out, gripped that hand, nails digging into the flesh. "Yes, I let you die! It was my right to take your life, if I needed it. You pledged as much to me there—the gnarled finger pointed back to the Labyrinth—in front of the Final Gate."

"Yes, Lord. It was your right."

"I could have killed you, my son. I could have. I did not. Love breaks the heart." Xar sighed. "There is a weakness in me. I admit it—"

"Not a weakness, Lord. Our strength," said Haplo. "That is why we have survived."

"Hatred!" Xar was displeased, his voice cold. "That is why we have survived! And now vengeance is within our grasp! Not only vengeance, but a chance to put the great wrong right! The four worlds will become one again—under our rule!"

"Thousands, millions will die," said Haplo.

"Mensch!" Xar was scornful; then glancing back at Haplo's face—the lord realized he'd said the wrong thing.

But he was distracted. Keeping one eye on Death's Gate, Xar could see the mad whirl of chaos slowing. He had not overestimated Alfred's power. The Serpent Mage might actually be able to pull this off.

Xar was running out of time. "Forgive my callous attitude, my son. I spoke hastily, without thought. You know that I will do what I can to save as many of the mensch as possible. We will need them to help us rebuild. Tell me the names of those mensch you particularly want protected and I will arrange for them to be transported to the Nexus. You yourself can watch over them. You will be the guarantor of their safety—something you cannot do if Death's Gate is shut. I will not be able to rescue them then. Go to Death's Gate. Take this opportunity. I will send you back to Marit, to your child—"

Haplo did not hesitate. "No, My Lord."

Xar was furious, frustrated. He saw that the chaos inside Death's Gate was ending. A door, at the far end of a long corridor, stood open. Alfred was reaching out his hand to shut it ...

The Lord of the Nexus had no choice.

"You have thwarted my wishes for the last time, my son!" Xar stretched forth his hand, began to chant the runes.

Jonathon's voice rose. "Do no violence!" The phantasm repeated the warning, but its voice could no longer be heard.

## CHAPTER 30

### DEATH'S GATE

ALFRED HAD FORGOTTEN THE TERROR OF JOURNEYING through Death's Gate, which compresses and combines, sorts out and divides all possibilities at precisely the same moment in time.

Thus he found himself entering an immense, cavernous corridor that was a small aperture growing smaller all the time. The walls and floors and ceiling rushed away from him, expanding ever outward, as the corridor collapsed in on him, crushing him with emptiness.

"I have to ignore this, or I'll go mad!" he realized frantically. "I have to focus on something ... on the Gate. On shutting the Gate. Where . . . where is it?"

He looked and instantly the possibility that he had found the Gate caused it to appear, even as the possibility that he would never find it made it vanish. He refused to admit the second possibility, held on fast to the first, and he ~~saw~~ at the far end of the corridor, in front of him, to his rear, moving rapidly toward him, continually receding, growing ever more distant the closer he came—a door.

It was marked with a sigil, the same sigil as the door he'd entered. In between the two doors was the corridor known as Death's Gate. Shut both doors, and he would shut off that corridor forever.

But in order to shut that far door, he had to walk down the corridor.

Chaos danced and shifted around him, the possibilities happening simultaneously, no two at the same time. He was shivering with cold because he was too hot. He had eaten so much he was starving to death. His voice was too loud; he couldn't hear it. He moved extremely fast and never left the place where he was floating, standing, hopping, running, on his head, on his feet, sideways.

"Control," Alfred said to himself desperately. "Control the chaos."

He focused, concentrated, grappled with the possibilities, and finally the corridor was a corridor and it remained a corridor and the ceiling was up and the floor was down and all things were where they should be. The door was at the end of the corridor. It was open. He had only to shut it.

Alfred started forward.

The door moved backward.

He stopped. It kept going.

It stopped. He kept going. Away from it.

"Let go," Jonathon's voice echoed. "And take hold."

"Of course!" Alfred cried. "That is my mistake! That was Samah's mistake. That has always been our mistake, all through the centuries! We seek to control the uncontrollable. Let go ... let go."

But letting go was not an easy thing to do. It meant giving himself up completely to the chaos.

Alfred tried. He opened his hands. The corridor began to shift; the walls closed in, flew outward. Alfred clenched his fists tight over nothing and held on for dear life.

"I don't think I'm doing this right," he said miserably. "Perhaps I wasn't meant to let go completely. Surely it won't hurt if I hold on to just a tiny piece . . .,"

A joyful whuff sounded at the far end of the corridor. Alfred whirled about, standing stock-still, and saw a dog-mouth open in a wide grin, tongue lolling-bounding down the corridor, heading straight for him.

"No!" Alfred shouted, raising his hands to ward off the animal. "No! There's a good boy. Don't come any closer! Nice dog! Good dog! No!"

The dog leapt, struck Alfred squarely in the chest. The Sartan tumbled head over feet backward. Pieces of the magic flew everywhere. He was falling up, soaring down . . .

And there was the door, right in front of him.

Alfred slammed to a halt. And he remained halted.

Thankfully, he mopped his sweating head with his shirt sleeve. It was all so easy, really.

In front of him an ordinary wooden door with a silver handle. Not very prepossessing, almost a disappointment. Alfred looked through the door, saw the four worlds, saw the Nexus, the Labyrinth, the shattered Vortex.

The Labyrinth. Patryns and Sartan stood drawn up in battle formation on either side of a charred and blackened wall. High above the armies flew the good dragons of Pryan, but few could see them through the smoke and darkness. Everyone could see the Labyrinth's creatures, terrible monsters that lurked in the forests, waiting to fall on the victor. If there could ever be a victor in this hopeless battle.

Other than the serpents.

Bloated, fat with the hatred and the fear, the serpents slithered along on either side of the wall, aiding both armies, whispering, urging, exhorting, lying, fanning the flames of war.

Horrified, sickened, Alfred reached out to slam shut the door.

One of the serpents caught sight of sudden movement, reared its head. It looked up, through the chaos, and saw Alfred.

Death's Gate stood wide open, visible to anyone who knew where to find it.

The snake's red eyes flared in alarm. It saw the danger: forever trapped in the Labyrinth. The way to the lush mensch worlds closed off.

Shrieking a warning, the serpent uncoiled its huge body. Red eyes caught Alfred in their lurid gaze. The serpent screeched hideous threats, conjured up terrifying images of pain-racked torment. Toothless maw gaping wide, the dragon-snake surged toward the open door, moving with the speed and force of a cyclone.

Alfred's hand closed over the silver handle. Shutting out the serpent's hideous voice, the Sartan fought to pull the door shut.

And then, from far, far behind him, he heard a distant voice—Lord Xar's voice.

"You have thwarted my wishes for the last time, my son!"

And Jonathon's voice, "Do no violence!"

Haplo's voice, a cry of pain and anguish . . . and a shouted warning to Alfred.

Too late.

A sigil, red and flaming, shot down the corridor. It burst, like a lightning blast, on Alfred's chest.

Blinded, consumed by fire, he lost his grip on the door handle.

The door swung wide open.

The serpent roared inside.

## CHAPTER 31

### THE SEVENTH GATE

THE SERPENT BURST THROUGH THE DOOR AND INTO DEATH'S Gate at the precise moment that Xar's sigil struck Alfred.

Chaos broke free of Alfred's fragile grasp and began to feed off the serpent, which, in turn, fed off chaos. The serpent cast one glance at the Sartan, saw him horribly injured, probably dying. Satisfied that Alfred posed no threat, the serpent slithered through the corridor, heading for the chamber.

Alfred could not stop it. Xar's deadly magic seared his skin like molten iron. Falling to his knees, Alfred clutched his chest in agony. Sartan of ancient times would have known how to defend themselves. Alfred had never fought a Patryn. He had never been trained in warfare. The burning pain robbed him of his senses; he couldn't think. He only wanted to die and end the torment. But then he heard Haplo's hoarse shout.

Fear for his friend penetrated the blazing wall of agony. Hardly knowing what he was doing, acting out of instinct, Alfred began to do what Ramu would have known to do immediately. Alfred started to unravel Xar's lethal magic.

The moment he broke the first rune-structure, the pain eased. Breaking down the rest of the sigla was simple after that, similar to ripping out a seam once the first thread has been pulled. But though he was no longer dying, he had let the magical attack go on too long. It had hurt him, wounded him.

Weakened, Alfred cast a despairing glance at the door leading from Death's Gate into the Labyrinth. He could never shut it now. Chaos buffeted it like a hurricane wind.

He turned, looked down the corridor, trying to see what was happening in the Chamber. But the other door was far, far away from him and so small; he might have been trying to enter a child's dollhouse. The hall leading back to the door undulated and swayed, the floor now the wall, the wall now the ceiling, the ceiling now the floor.

"Violence," Alfred said to himself in despair. "Violence has entered the Sacred Chamber."

What was happening in there? Was Haplo alive or dead?

Alfred tried to stand, but chaos ripped the floor out from under his feet. He tumbled down, landed heavily, gasping for breath. He was too weak to fight, in too much pain, too distracted by his own fear. His clothes hung from him in charred rags. He was afraid to look at the flesh beneath, afraid of what he would see. Gripping hold of the remnants of his faded velvet jacket, he drew the cloth over the wound, hid it from sight.

His hands came away covered with blood.

But he had to do something. He couldn't just sit here. If Haplo was alive, he was fighting his enemies alone .

..

Alfred was about to make another effort to stand when movement caught his attention. He looked out of Death's Gate into the Labyrinth. Hundreds of serpents were surging for the open door.

Haplo lay sprawled on the floor in front of the doorway leading to Death's Gate. He was either unconscious or dead; Xar didn't know which and he didn't care. The lord had also dealt with the so-called Serpent Mage. Another glance showed him Alfred bleeding, weak, crawling about aimlessly on his hands and knees. So much for the powerful Sartan.

Certain he was now safe from interference, Xar immediately turned his attention to the doors leading to the four mensch worlds, began to chant the spell that would collapse all the worlds into one. He paid no attention to the lazar, which was ranting on about bringing violence into the Sacred Chamber.

Xar knew the spell. The Lord of the Nexus, in the guise of Hugh the Hand, had been sitting at the white table. He had shared Alfred's visions of the Sundering. Alfred had, in fact, seen him—alapse on Xar's part. Fortunately, the Sartan had been so unnerved by the entire experience that he had not known what he'd seen. At that point, Alfred could have made Xar's task far more difficult. As it was now, the Lord of the Nexus had only to reach into the possibilities.

It had taken hundreds of Sartan to work the magic that had broken the world apart. Xar was not daunted by the task, however. It would be far easier to collapse the world, especially since he could call on the power imbued in the Seventh Gate.

Lord Xar had a clear view of each of the four worlds. He began to draw the runes swiftly in the air, sigla of destruction, of reversal and upheaval.

Ferocious storm clouds massed on Arianus.

The four bright suns on Pryan went dark.

The seawaters of Chelestra bubbled and boiled.

Tremors shook the unstable world of Abarrach.

"Your power is immense, Lord of the Nexus," hissed a voice behind Xar. "All honor to you."

Xar turned. A serpent in man's form—resembling one of Xar's own people—stood in the center of the Chamber. The serpent looked exactly like a Patryn in all respects, except that the sigla tattooed on its skin were meaningless scrawls.

Xar was wary. He knew enough about the serpents now not to trust them. He also knew they were powerful in magic. This one might very well disrupt his spell, although it had not done so yet.

"Who are you?" Xar demanded. "What do you want?"

"You know me, Lord," said the serpent. "I am Sang-drax."

"Sang-drax is dead," Xar said crisply. "The serpent died in the Labyrinth."

"Yet here I stand, very much alive. I told your minion—a red-eyed glance at the fallen Haplo—and I tell you, Lord of the Nexus, that we cannot die. We have always been. We will always be."

Xar snorted. "What are you doing here, then? The last I saw, you and your kind were in the Labyrinth, killing my people!"

The serpent was shocked, saddened. "Alas that you refused to take time to let us explain, Lord of the Nexus. Those we attacked in the Labyrinth are not your people, not true Patryns. No, they are an evil mixture—Patryn blood mingled with Sartan. Such a weak strain should not be perpetuated, don't you agree? After all," Sang-drax added, eyes glittering red through hooded lids, "you were there. You could have stopped us."

Xar waved this aside as unimportant. "I heard something of this from Haplo. I do not like the idea, but I will deal with these half-breeds when I return to the Labyrinth. I ask you again, why are you here? What do you want?"

"To serve you, My Lord," said the serpent, bowing.

"Then keep watch on Death's Gate," Xar ordered. "I don't want that fool Sartan interfering."

"As you command, My Lord."

Xar kept watch on the serpent from the corner of his eye. Sang-drax moved obediently to take up his post. The lord no longer trusted the serpents, and he understood that he would eventually have to prove to them, once and for all, who was master. But, for now, the serpent was probably telling the truth. It was here to serve, its interests coinciding with his own. He turned back to his magic, which had already started to wane, gave it his full and complete attention.

The moment Xar's back was turned, Sang-drax examined Haplo's body. The Patryn appeared to be dead. The sigla on his skin did not glow in the serpent's presence. Sang-drax, glancing back at Xar, surreptitiously kicked the fallen Patryn with a toe of his boot.

Haplo didn't move.

Engulfed by his magic, Xar didn't notice.

Sang-drax reached into the folds of his clothing, drew forth a dagger, wrought in the shape of a striking snake.

Playing dead had saved Haplo's life more than once in the Labyrinth. The trick was to control the magic, his body's natural defense; prevent the sigla from reacting. The drawback was that this did, in fact, leave him defenseless. But Haplo knew that this Sang-drax the Second or the Second Millionth or whatever the serpent termed itself was not interested in him. The serpent was playing for far larger stakes. It was playing for control of the universe.

Forcing himself to relax, Haplo let his body go limp, absorbed the kick from the serpent without flinching. Fear and revulsion surged through him, his body aching to fight, to defend and protect against the evil that was nearly overwhelming his senses. Haplo grit his teeth. He risked a glance, peering through half-closed eyelids.

He saw Sang-drax and he saw the dagger—hideous, sinuously curved blade the same gray color as, in its other form, the dragon-snake's scaled body. Sang-drax had no further interest in Haplo. The serpent's red-eyed gaze was fixed on Xar.

Haplo risked surveying the Chamber. Jonathon continued to sit at the white table. The lazar had made no move, seemed unconcerned, uncaring, dead. Haplo glanced back at the door leading to Death's Gate. He couldn't see Alfred through the swirling madness of the chaos, had no idea if the Sartan was dead or alive.

"If he's alive, he's probably fighting his own battle," Haplo reasoned. "Sang-drax undoubtedly brought reinforcements."

As if in response, he heard Alfred give a low cry of horror and despair. He wouldn't be coming to Haplo's aid. And there was nothing Haplo could do to help the Sartan.

Haplo had problems of his own.

Against a ghastly backdrop of storms and fire, of darkness and churning seas, Lord Xar was drawing the intricate pattern of runes that would, when complete, cause the elements of the four worlds to shift and alter, to break apart and collapse. Intent on his spell-casting, Xar did not dare allow his concentration to shift for even a minuscule fraction of a second. So difficult, so immense was the spell, he was forced to pour every portion of his being into it. His own defenses were lowered; the sigla on his wrinkled skin barely glowed.

The magic was a blazing inferno in front of the Lord of the Nexus. His back was unprotected.

Sang-drax raised the dagger. The serpent's red eyes focused on the base of the lord's skull, the place where the protective runes ended.

Silently, the serpent glided toward its victim. But in order to reach Xar, Sang-drax would have to go around Haplo.

If my lord dies, the spell he is casting will be disrupted. The worlds will be safe. I should let Xar die.

As he let me die.

I should do nothing. Let my lord die ...

I must ...

"My Lord!" Haplo shouted as he sprang to his feet. "Behind you!"

## CHAPTER 32

### THE SEVENTH GATE

ALFRED STARED IN HORROR THROUGH DEATH'S GATE. OTHER serpents had left the battle in the Labyrinth, were speeding toward the open door. One, in the vanguard, was almost there.

"Haplo!" Alfred started to call for help and at that moment heard Haplo's warning shout to Lord Xar.

Glancing back over his shoulder, down the chaotic corridor, Alfred could see the Patryn springing to attack the serpent.

Alfred choked back his own cry. He turned helplessly to the open doorway, to the serpent—red eyes gleaming—lunging for it. If that serpent succeeded in entering, it would join its fellow, and Haplo would be fighting two of them. His chances against one were slim; against two the odds would be insurmountable, particularly if Xar turned against him, as seemed very likely.

"I have to stop this one myself!" Alfred said, groping around within himself for the courage, for the other Alfred, for the Alfred whose name was truly Coreñ—The Chosen.

And suddenly the possibility was enacted that Alfred was back inside the mausoleum of Arianus.

He couldn't believe it. He stared around, confused, yet immeasurably relieved, thankful, as if he'd wakened in his bed to find that the preceding had all been nothing but a terrible nightmare.

The tomb was peaceful, silent. He was secure, safe. The coffins of his friends, sleeping in tranquillity, surrounded him. And as he gazed around in thankful bewilderment, wondering what all this meant, Alfred saw the door of his own coffin open.

He had only to crawl inside, lie down, close his eyes.

Gratefully, he took a step toward it ... and fell over the dog.

He tumbled to the cold marble floor of the mausoleum, entangled in a confused flurry of paws and plummy tail. The animal yelped in pain. Alfred had landed squarely on top of it.

Crawling out from underneath the spread-eagled Sartan, the animal shook itself indignantly, regarded him with reproachful eyes.

"I'm sorry . . ." Alfred stammered.

His apology echoed through the chamber like the voice of a phantasm. The dog barked irritably.

"You're right," Alfred said, flushing, smiling faintly. "There I go—apologizing. I won't let it happen again."

The door to the coffin slammed shut.

He was back in Death's Gate, inside the corridor, and the serpent was in the doorway.

Alfred let go ... and seized hold.

A green-scaled and golden-winged dragon, its burnished crest shining like a sun, shattered the corridor of chaos, burst out of Death's Gate, and attacked the serpent.

The dragon's powerful back claws slammed into the serpent's body, slid through the gray-scaled skin, dug deep into flesh.

The serpent, impaled on the dragon's claws, writhed and twisted in an attempt to free itself, but the movement only drove the claws deeper into its body. In terrible pain, the serpent fought back, its toothless, powerful jaws attempting to close around the dragon's slender neck, crack and break it.

The dragon's fangs closed over the snake's snapping jaws, sank into the head, between the red, hate-filled eyes. Blood spurted, raining down on the Labyrinth. The serpent shrieked in its death throes, and its cries reached its fellows.

They began to close ranks around the dragon, preparing to rush in for the kill.

Alfred loosed his claws from the dead serpent, let it fall to the ground. He longed to return to the Chamber, to come to Haplo's aid, but Alfred dared not leave the door unguarded.

The green and golden dragon flew before Death's Gate, awaited the onslaught.

Haplo's cry jolted Xar from his magic. He had no need to look around to know what was happening. The serpent had betrayed him. Xar had barely time enough to reestablish his body's own magical defenses when he was hit from behind. A flash of pain seared the back of his head.

Xar stumbled, turned to defend himself.

Haplo was struggling with Sang-drax, both of them grappling for a bloodstained dagger.

"Lord Xar! This traitor tried to kill you!" Sang-drax snarled, striking viciously at Haplo.

Haplo said nothing, his breath coming in sharp, painful gasps. The sigla on his skin flared blue. There was blood on his hands.

Xar reached to touch the wound, drew back fingers wet with blood.

"Indeed," he said and watched the battle between Haplo and the serpent with a strange detachment. The pain was a distraction, but he didn't have time to heal himself. The rune-construct he had created blazed with a bright light in front of the four doors—the doors that led to the four worlds. But, here and there, the light was starting to fade. Bereft of the lord's power, the magic he had cast was starting to unravel.

Xar irritably wiped away the blood that was starting to ooze down his neck and into his robes. The blood might have been someone else's for all the thought he gave it.

Sang-drax struck Haplo again and again—savage, vicious blows that cracked open the rune-magic, began to bruise and batter flesh and bone. Haplo's face was smeared with blood. He was half-blind, stunned, could do little to halt the brutal attack. Blow after blow drove Haplo to his knees. A vicious kick in the face sent him reeling backward. He fell, lay unconscious. On the floor near him was the snake-shaped dagger.

Sang-drax turned to face Xar.

The Lord of the Nexus tensed. The serpent stood between Xar and the magical rune-construct.

Sang-drax pointed at the fallen Haplo.

"This treacherous servant of yours tried to murder you, Lord of the Nexus! Fortunately, I was able to stop him. Say the word and I will end his life."

Haplo rolled over, lay face first on the blood-spattered floor.

"You needn't waste your time," Xar said, drawing closer to Haplo, to the serpent, to the magic. "I will deal with him. Stand aside."

The serpent's red eyes gleamed with a bright, suspicious light. Swiftly, Sang-drax hooded his emotion, lowering the eyelids.

"I am only too pleased to obey you, Lord. First"—the serpent swooped down—"allow me to retrieve the traitor's dagger. He might be shamming again."

Sang-drax's hand closed over empty air.

Xar—quite by inadvertence—had placed his foot on the blood-covered blade. He knelt beside Haplo, all the while keeping an eye on Sang-drax. The lord grasped hold—not gently—of Haplo's chin, turned his face to the light. A savage cut had split open Haplo's forehead, practically to the bone.

The lord traced, swiftly, obliquely, a healing sigil over the wound, closing it, stopping the bleeding. Then, after a moment's hesitation, Xar traced another sigil on Haplo's forehead, a copy of the one over Xar's own heart. He traced it in blood; it wouldn't last. It had no power ... no magical power.

At his lord's touch, Haplo groaned; his eyes flickered open. Xar increased the pressure, digging his gnarled fingers deep into Haplo's flesh.

Haplo looked up, blinked. He was having difficulty focusing, and when he could see, he seemed puzzled. Then he sighed and smiled. Reaching out his hand, he clasped Xar's wrist.

"My Lord," Haplo murmured. "I'm here . . . I've reached it. The Final Gate."

"What is he talking about, Lord?" Sang-drax demanded nervously. "What is he telling you? Lies, My Lord. Lies."

"He's not saying anything important," Xar replied. "He imagines he is back in the Labyrinth."

Haplo shuddered. His voice hardened, grew strong. "I beat it, Lord. I defeated it."

"You did, my son," Xar said. "You won a great victory."

Haplo smiled. He clung to Xar's hand a moment longer, then let go. "Thank you for your help, My Lord, but I do not need you now. I can walk through the Gate on my own."

"So you can, my son," said Xar softly. "So you can."

Sang-drax spoke a sigil—aSartan sigil—and drew a Patryn sigil in the air at the same time. The two runes flared, flashed, and flew toward the construct Xar had created.

But the Lord of the Nexus had been watching, waiting for the serpent to make just such a move. He reacted swiftly, cast his own rune. The constructs met, burst, exploded in a shower of sparks, and canceled each other out.

Xar rose to his feet. He held the snake dagger in his hand.

"I know the real traitor," he said, watching Sang-drax, who watched the lord through narrowed, glittering red eyes. "I know who has tried to bring my people to ruin."

"You want to see the person who has brought destruction to his people?" Sang-drax sneered, mocking. "Look in a mirror, Lord of the Nexus!"

"Yes," said Xar quietly, "I look in a mirror."

Sang-drax shed the Patryn body, took on serpent form, growing, expanding until the great, slime-covered bulk filled the Chamber of the Damned.

"Thank you, Lord of the Nexus, for casting the spell to tear down the worlds," said the serpent, its head rearing upward. "It was, I admit, a plan we had not considered. But it will work out well for us. We will feed off the turmoil and chaos for eons to come. And your people, trapped forever in the Labyrinth. I regret you will not live to see it, Lord Xar, but you are far too dangerous—"

The serpent's toothless maw opened. Xar looked at his doom. Then he turned away.

He gave his attention to the magic, to the wondrous rune-construct he had created. The magic he had spent his life creating—a dream forged out of hatred.

He knew the snake was attacking, lethal jaws opening wide to devour him.

With a steady hand, he drew the sigil in the air. Its fire glowed blue, then red, then hot white, blazing, blinding. Xar spoke the command, his voice firm, clear, loud.

The sigil struck the magical rune-construct, burst on it like an exploding star, tore the heart out of the spell.

Snapping jaws closed over the Lord of the Nexus.

## CHAPTER 33

### THE SEVENTH GATE

THE SERPENTS FLEW TOWARD DEATH'S GATE. THE OPENING WAS clearly visible now, a black patch in the gray, smoke-filled sky above the Labyrinth. Below, the Final Gate remained open, but the Sartan were massing their forces along it; the Patryns were doing the same on the opposite side.

Alfred tried to contain his despair, but he could not hope to hold the Gate against the enormous power of the enemy. Frightful sounds from the Chamber behind him unnerved him, distracted his attention when he needed to concentrate on his magic. Frantically, he searched through the possibilities, trying to find one that would come to his aid, but it seemed he was seeking to do the impossible.

Whatever spell he cast, the serpents had the ability to rip it asunder. He had never realized before how truly powerful the creatures were—either that or they were gaining strength and power from the war below. Sick at heart, the green and golden dragon kept guard before Death's Gate and waited for the end.

A shape loomed into view, swooping at him from the side.

Bracing himself, Alfred swerved to fight.

He faced an old man seated on a dragon's back. The old man was dressed in mouse-colored robes, his white hair flew out wildly behind.

"Red Leader to Red One!" the old man howled. "Come in, Red One!"

The serpents were spreading out, sending some to deal with Alfred. The rest were massing to enter Death's Gate.

"Break off the attack, Red One," the old man shouted and waved a hand. "Go rescue the princess! My squadron'll take over!"

Behind the old man, legions of dragons of Pryan flew out of the smoke of the burning Nexus.

"How do you like my ship?" The old man patted the dragon's neck. "Made the Kessel run in six parsecs!"

The dragon dropped suddenly from the skies, diving for one of the serpents. The old man gave Alfred a salute before he disappeared from view. The other Pryan dragons followed, soaring into the battle against their enemies.

Alfred no longer had to deal with his enemies alone. He could return to the Chamber of the Damned. He flew inside Death's Gate. Once there, he altered his form, was again the tall and gangling, balding, velvet-coated Sartan. He stood for a moment watching the fight.

Confronted by a courageous, determined foe, most of the serpents were fleeing.

"Good-bye, Zifnab," Alfred said quietly.

Sighing, he turned back to face the chaos reverberating throughout the hall behind him.

And, as he did so, he heard a faint cry.

"The name's . . . Luke . . ."

Inside the Chamber of the Damned, the serpent crushed Xar in its toothless mouth, then flung the broken and bloodied body into the softly glowing walls of the Chamber of the Damned.

The lord's body hit with a bone-crushing thud, slid down the wall, leaving a smear of blood on the white marble. Xar lay in a crumpled heap at the bottom. The serpent shrieked in triumph.

"My Lord!" Haplo was on his feet, dizzy and weak, but no longer disoriented.

"There is nothing you can do," said the serpent. "The Lord of the Nexus is dead."

The serpent's red eyes turned on Haplo.

Through the four doors behind him, Haplo could see the four worlds. The storms on Arianus were beginning to abate. The seas of Chelestra were once more calm. Pryan's suns shone with blinding brilliance. Abarrach's crust shuddered and was still. The crumpled body of his lord lay in a pool of blood.

Seated at the white table, Jonathon intoned, "Do no violence."

"It's a little late for that," Haplo said grimly.

The serpent loomed over him, its huge head weaving hypnotically back and forth, red eyes staring down at him.

Haplo's only weapon was the snake-shaped dagger. He was surprised to feel how well it fit his hand, the hilt seeming to adapt itself to his touch. But the short blade would be less than an insect bite on the thick and magical skin of the serpent.

Haplo gripped the weapon, eyed the monster, waited for the attack. The sigla on his skin flared brightly.

The serpent began to shift form, dwindling in size until, within the span of an eyeblink, an elf lord stood in the Chamber.

Giving Haplo an ingratiating smile, Sang-drax began to sidle closer.

"Far enough," said Haplo, raising the knife.

Sang-drax halted. Slender, delicate hands raised, palms facing outward, in a gesture of surrender and conciliation. He looked hurt, disappointed.

"Is this how you thank me, Haplo?" Sang-drax made a graceful gesture toward Xar. "But for my intervention, he would have taken your life."

Haplo cast Xar's body a glance, quickly brought his attention back to Sang-drax, who in the intervening time had once again attempted to draw near the Patryn.

"You killed my liege lord," said Haplo quietly.

Sang-drax laughed in disbelief. "Liege lord! I killed the lord who ordered Bane to have you assassinated. The lord who seduced the woman you love, then convinced her to murder you. The lord who was going to chain you to a life of torment among the undead! That's your liege lord for you."

"If my lord required my death as payment for my life, then that was his right," Haplo returned, holding the dagger high and steady. "You are wasting my time. Whatever it is you mean to do to me, get on with it."

He wondered where Alfred was, could only assume the Sartan was dead.

Sang-drax was perplexed. "My dear Haplo, I have no weapons. I am not a threat to you. No, I want to serve you. My people want to serve you. Once I bowed down to you and called you 'Master.' I do so again."

The serpent in elf form made a low and servile bow, red eyes lowered, hooded. Crouching like a toad, he made another attempt to creep up on Haplo, halted at the flash of the snake-shaped blade.

"The Sartan have arrived in the Nexus," Sang-drax continued, voice sibilant. "Do you know that, Haplo? Ramu plans to seal shut the Final Gate. I can stop them. My people and I can destroy them. You have only to say the word, and your enemy's blood will be sweet wine for you to savor. We ask one small favor in return."

"And that is?" Haplo asked.

Sang-drax looked toward the four doors; the red eyes glinted eagerly, hungrily. "Cast the spell, the one your lord was weaving. You can do it, Haplo. You are as powerful as Xar. And I will be glad to offer my poor help—"

Haplo smiled grimly, shook his head.

"Surely you don't refuse?" Sang-drax was pained, sadly astonished.

Haplo didn't answer. Instead, he began walking backward, toward the first door—Arianus.

Sang-drax watched, red eyes narrowing. "What are you doing, Haplo, my friend?"

"Shutting the door, Sang-drax, my friend," Haplo returned. "Shutting all the doors."

"A mistake, Haplo." The serpent hissed softly. "A terrible mistake."

Haplo looked down onto Arianus, world of air. The storm clouds were being blown apart; Solarus was shining. He could see the continent of Drevlin, the metal parts of the great Kicksey-winsey flashing in the intermittent sunlight. He could picture Limbeck the dwarf, peering nearsightedly through his thick lenses, giving a speech to which no one was listening, except Jarre. And perhaps, someday, a host of small Limbecks who would change a world with their "whys."

Haplo smiled, said good-bye, and slammed shut the door.

Sang-drax hissed again in displeasure.

Haplo didn't look at the serpent; he could tell by the fact that the light was growing dark in the Chamber that the creature was once more altering its shape.

The next door, Pryan, world of fire. Blinding sunlight, a contrast to the growing shadows gathering around him. Tiny silver stars were glittering jewels set in a green velvet jungle. The citadels, come to life, beamed their light and energy out into the universe. Paithan and Rega, Aleatha and Roland and the dwarf Drugar—mankind, elfkind, dwarfkind—moving, fighting, living, dying. According to Xar, they had learned the secret of the tytans. They were operating the citadels. Haplo would never know their fate. But he was confident that—

resilient, strong in their many weaknesses, with an indomitable spirit—the mensch would thrive when the gods who had brought them to this world were gone and forgotten.

Haplo said good-bye and slammed shut the door.

"You have doomed yourself, Patryn," warned a sibilant voice. "You will meet the same end as your lord."

Haplo didn't look. He could hear the serpent's huge body scraping against the stone floor, could smell the foul odor of death and decay, could almost feel the slime on his skin.

He took a quick look at Abarrach, a dead world, populated by the dead. Jonathon had wanted to free them, free himself. That would not happen, apparently.

I have failed them, too, Haplo said to himself.

"I'm sorry," he said as he closed the door, and he smiled ruefully. He sounded very much like Alfred.

He reached the fourth door, Chelestra, world of water. On this world he had, at last, come to know himself.

He heard the serpent hiss behind him, but steadfastly ignored the sound. The dwarf maid Grundle had probably married her Hartmut by now. The wedding would have been quite a party: the elves, dwarves, and humans gathering together to celebrate. Haplo wondered how Grundle had done in the ax-throwing contest.

He whispered good-bye and good luck to her and to her husband, and shut the door softly, with a momentary pang of regret. Then he turned to face Sangdrax.

The snake-shaped dagger in Haplo's hand changed to a sword, made of fine steel, gleaming, heavy. His magic had not altered it. The serpent must have.

The gigantic gray body towered over him, its very presence crushing. The serpent could have struck him from behind at any time, but it didn't want him to die without a struggle, without a fight, without pain and fear . . .

Haplo raised the sword, braced himself for the attack.

"Don't, Haplo! Put the weapon down!"

Alfred tumbled out of Death's Gate. He would have gone sprawling on the floor, but he saved himself by grabbing hold of the white table. Clinging to it, he gasped, "Don't fight!"

"Yes, Haplo," the serpent mocked, "put the sword down! Your dying will be so much faster that way."

There was blood on Haplo's shirt. The wound over his heart had broken open, was bleeding again. Oddly, the dagger wound he'd taken on his forehead didn't pain him at all.

"Use nothing." Alfred sucked in a gulping breath, struggling to remain calm. "Refuse to fight. It's the fight the creature wants!" The Sartan pointed to the body of Lord Xar. " 'Those who bring violence in this place will find it turned against them.' "

Haplo hesitated. All his life, he had fought to survive. Now he was being asked to cast away his weapon, refuse to fight, meekly await torture, torment, death . . . Worse, endure the knowledge that his enemy would live to destroy others.

"You're asking too much, Alfred," he said harshly. "Next, I suppose you'll want me to faint!"

Alfred stretched forth his hands. "Haplo, I beg—"

The serpent's huge tail slashed around, struck the Sartan a blow across his back that doubled him over the white table.

Sang-drax reared up. The serpent's head hung poised over Alfred. The red eyes focused on Haplo. "The next blow will break his spine. And the one after that will crush his body. Fight, Haplo, or the Sartan dies."

Alfred managed to lift his head. His nose was broken, his lip split. Blood smeared his face. "Don't listen, Haplo! If you fight, you are doomed!"

The serpent waited, smug, knowing it had won.

Burning with anger and the strong need to kill this loathsome being, Haplo cast a bitter, frustrated glance at Alfred. "Do you expect me to stand here and die?"

"Trust me, Haplo!" Alfred pleaded. "It's all I've ever asked of you! Trust me!"

"Trust a Sartan!" Sang-drax laughed horribly. "Trust your mortal enemy! Trust those who sent you to the Labyrinth, who are responsible for the deaths of how many thousands of your people? Your parents, Haplo. Do you remember how they died? Your mother's screams. She screamed a long, long time, didn't she, before they finally left her to die of her wounds. And you saw it. You saw what they did to her. This man—responsible. And he begs you to trust him . . ."

Haplo closed his eyes. His head had begun to hurt; he felt blood sticky on his hands. He was that child again, cowering in the bushes, stunned and dazed from the blow inflicted by his father. The blow had been intended to knock him out, to keep him silent and safe while his parents drew their attackers away from their child. But his parents had not been able to run far. Haplo had regained consciousness.

His own wail of fear and terror was choked off by his horror. And hate. Hate for those who had done this, who were responsible . . .

Haplo gripped the sword tightly, waited for the blood-red tinge to fade from his eyes so that he could see his prey . . . and nearly dropped the weapon when he felt the quick swipe of a wet tongue.

There came a reassuring whine, a paw on his knee.

Haplo reached down his hand, stroked the silky ears. The dog's head pressed against his knee. He felt the hard bone, the warmth, the soft fur. And yet he wasn't surprised to find, when he opened his eyes, that no dog stood beside him.

Haplo threw down his sword.

Sang-drax laughed in derision. The serpent reared up. It would smash the helpless Patryn, crush him. But in its eager rage, the serpent miscalculated. It grew too big, soared upward too far. The gigantic head crashed through the marble ceiling of the Chamber of the Damned.

The runes traced on the ceiling crackled and flared; arcs of blue and red flame surged through the serpent's body. Sang-drax shrieked in agony, writhed and twisted, attempting to escape the jolting flashes. But the serpent couldn't pull itself out from the wreckage of the ceiling. It was trapped. It flailed wildly, furiously to free itself. Cracks in the ceiling started to expand, splitting the walls.

The Chamber of the Damned—the Seventh Gate—was crumbling. And there was only one way out—Death's Gate.

Haplo took a step. The serpent's tail thrashed out. Even in its agony, it was intent on killing him.

Haplo twisted to one side, but could not avoid the blow. It caught him on his left shoulder, already aching from the reopening of the wound over the heart-rune. He gasped with the pain, fought the blackness of unconsciousness stealing over him.

Slowly, he raised himself to his feet. His hand had, inexplicably, closed over the hilt of his sword.

"Fight me!" the serpent urged. "Fight me . . ."

Haplo lifted the sword, sent it crashing down upon the white stone table. The blade broke in two. Haplo raised the hilt for the serpent to see, then tossed it away.

The serpent tried desperately to free itself, but the magic of the Seventh Gate held it enthralled. Arcs of blue flame danced over the slime-covered body. It lashed out once again.

Haplo made a dive for Alfred, who lay bleeding and dazed on top of the white table. The serpent's tail smacked into the table, cracked it. But the serpent was in its death throes. Blind, in terrible pain, it could no longer see its prey. In a last desperate attempt to free itself, the serpent lunged against the forces of magic that bound it in place. The ceiling began to break apart under the strain. A large chunk of marble fell down, missing Alfred by only inches. Another block landed on the serpent's now feebly twitching tail. A wooden beam crashed down, smashing the white table into two complete and separate halves.

Stumbling through the raining debris, choking on the dust, Haplo managed to reach Alfred. He grabbed hold of the first part of the Sartan that came to hand—the back of Alfred's velvet coat—and pulled him up on his feet.

Alfred flopped and staggered, limp as a maltreated doll.

Haplo peered through the dust and ruin. "Jona-thon!" he shouted.

He thought he could see the lazar, still sitting calmly at one half of the broken table, oblivious to the destruction that was soon going to encompass it.

"Jonathon!" Haplo called.

No answer. And then he couldn't see the lazar at all. An enormous slab of marble smashed down between them.

Alfred slumped to the floor.

Haplo hooked his hand firmly in the Sartan's coat collar, began dragging him through the tumult. The runes tattooed on the Patryn's skin burned red and blue, protecting him from the falling debris. He expanded the aura of his magic to include Alfred. A glowing shell of runes encompassed them. Blocks of stone hit and bounced off. But each time something struck the shell, a sigil weakened. Soon one would give. And the unraveling would begin.

Haplo counted fifteen, maybe twenty steps to reach Death's Gate.

He didn't say to himself to reach the safety of Death's Gate, because for all he knew, once inside, they faced worse odds. But death was a possibility there, here a certainty. Already, he could see one sigil in the shell start to go dark . . .

He hauled Alfred across the floor, heading for the doorway, when suddenly the floor that had been in front of him wasn't anymore.

A gaping hole opened into endless nothing. Chunks of marble and splintered white wood slid into the crack and disappeared. Death's Gate glimmered on the other side.

The crack wasn't wide. Haplo could have jumped across it easily. But he couldn't jump across it and carry Alfred with him. He dragged Alfred to his feet. The Sartan's knees turned inward; his body sagged.

"Damn it!" Haplo shook the Sartan, hauled him to his feet again.

Alfred was conscious, but he was staring around him with the befuddled expression of one whose wits are wandering.

"So what else is new," Haplo muttered. "Alfred!" He smacked the Sartan across the face.

Alfred gasped, gargled. His eyes focused. He stared around him in horror. "What—"

Haplo didn't let him finish. He didn't dare give Alfred time to think about what he was going to have to do.

"When I say 'jump,' you jump."

Haplo spun Alfred around, positioned the muddled Sartan on the very edge of the gaping crack in the floor. "Jump!"

Not fully cognizant of what was happening, numb with terror and astonishment, Alfred did as he was told. He gave a convulsive leap, legs jerking like a galvanized spider, and flung himself across the crack.

His toes hooked the opposite edge. He landed flat on his stomach, the breath knocked from his body. Haplo cast a swift glance down into the abysmal darkness beneath him; then he jumped.

Landing easily on the other side, Haplo caught hold of Alfred. Together, the two stumbled out of the Chamber of the Damned and into the opening of Death's Gate.

Haplo, looking back, saw the Seventh Gate collapse in on itself.

And with the sickening sensation of sliding down a chute, Haplo felt himself falling into the chaos.

## CHAPTER 34

### THE SEVENTH GATE

"WHAT THE DEVIL'S HAPPENING?" HAPLO CRIED, SCRABBLING to hang on. His hands could find no purchase on the slick, listing floor. "What's going on?" , Alfred, too, was slowly sliding downward. The corridor that was Death's Gate had become a cyclone, whirling and spiraling, a vortex whose heart was the Chamber of the Damned—the Seventh Gate.

"Merciful Sartan!" Alfred gasped in shock. "The Seventh Gate is collapsing and taking the rest of creation with it!"

They were sliding right back into the Chamber of the Damned; Death's Gate was sliding back into the Chamber, and after that, everything else. Frantically, the Sartan tried to stop his fall, but there was nothing to hang on to; the floor was too slick.

"What do we do?" Haplo shouted.

"I can think of only one thing! And it might be the right thing and it might be the wrong. You see—"

"Just do it!" Haplo bellowed. He was very near the door.

"We've got ... to shut Death's Gate!"

They were falling into the ruined Chamber with a rapidity that made Alfred sick to watch. He had the horrible impression that he was sliding into the serpent's gaping maw. He could swear that he saw two red eyes, burning with hunger . . .

"The spell, damn it!" Haplo yelled, trying vainly to halt his fall.

This is the moment in my life I've been dreading! Alfred thought. The one I've tried all my life to avoid. Everything depends on me.

He shut his eyes, tried to concentrate, reached forth into the possibilities. He was close, so very close. He began singing the runes in a trembling voice. His hand touched the door. He pushed on it ...

Pushed hard, harder . . .

The door wouldn't budge.

Fearfully, Alfred opened his eyes. Whatever he had done had at least slowed their descent. But Death's Gate remained open; the universe was still tumbling down into it.

"Haplo! I need your help!" Alfred quavered.

"Are you mad? Patryn magic and Sartan magic can't work together!"

"How do we know?" Alfred returned desperately. "Just because it's never been done, at least that we're aware of. Who knows but that somewhere, sometime in the past—"

"All right! All right! Shutting Death's Gate. That's it? That's what we've got to do?"

"Concentrate on that!" Alfred cried. Their rate of descent was increasing once again.

Haplo spoke the runes. Alfred sang them. Sigla flared in the middle of the slanting corridor. The rune-structures were similar, but the differences were clearly obvious—appallingly obvious. The two magicks hung far apart, glowing with a weak and sullen flame that would soon flicker and die. Alfred stared at them, despaired.

"Well, we tried . . ."

Haplo swore in frustration. "It won't end like this! Try harder. Sing, damn you! Sing!"

Alfred sucked in a deep breath, began to sing.

To his astonishment, Haplo joined him. The Patryn's baritone slid in under, lifted, and supported Alfred's high-pitched tenor.

A warmth flooded through Alfred. His voice grew stronger; he sang louder and with more assurance. Uncertain of the melody, Haplo scrambled around the notes, hitting them as near he could, depending on volume rather than accuracy.

The sigla began to burn brighter. The runes moved closer together, and soon it was apparent to Alfred that the differences in the structures were designed to complement each other, just as the incisions on a latchkey adapt to the wards of a lock.

A flare of radiance, brighter than the white-glowing heart of Pryan's four suns, seared Alfred's eyeballs. He shut his eyes, but the light burned through them, dazzling, explosive, bursting inside his head.

He heard a muffled thud, as of, somewhere in the distance, a door slammed shut.

And then everything was dark. He was floating, not in a sickening spiral, but gently, as if his body were made of thistledown and he were riding on a rolling wave.

"I think it worked," he said to himself.

And the thought came to him that he could die now, without apology.

## CHAPTER 35

### THE LABYRINTH

WAS HURT AND EXHAUSTED. HE'D SPENT THE DAY RUNNING from his foes, turning and fighting when they had him cornered. Now, at last, he'd eluded them. But he was weak, wandering, needing desperately to stop and heal himself. But he dared not. He was alone in the Labyrinth. To lie down and sleep was to lie down and die.

Alone. It was what his name meant, after all. Haplo. Single. Alone.

And then a voice said softly, "You are not alone."

Haplo lifted his dimming eyes. "Marit?" He was disbelieving. She was illusion, the result of his pain, of his terrible longing and despair.

Strong arms, warm and supporting, reached around his shoulders, bore him up when he would have fallen. He leaned thankfully against her. Gently, she eased him to the ground, pillowed his hurting body on a bed of leaves. He looked up at her. She knelt beside him.

"I've been searching for you," he said.

"You've found me," she answered.

Smiling, she placed her hand over his torn heart-rune. Her touch eased his pain. He could see her clearly now.

"It will never heal completely, I'm afraid," she said.

He reached up his hand, brushed back her hair. The sigil on her skin, Xar's sigil, was starting to fade. But it, too, would never heal. She flinched at his touch, but she continued to smile. Taking hold of his hand, she pressed her lips against the palm.

Full consciousness brought awareness, the danger ...

"We can't stay here," he said, sitting up.

She stopped him, hands against his shoulders. "We're safe. At least for the moment. Let go, Haplo. Let go of the fear and the hatred. It is all ended now."

She was partly wrong. It had only just begun.

He lay back down in the leaves, drew her to lie beside him.

"I won't let go of you," he said.

She laid her head on his chest, over the heart-rune, the name-rune.

A single sigil, torn in two.

Stronger for the break.

## CHAPTER 36

### THE LABYRINTH

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH HIM?" ASKED A WOMAN. SHE sounded familiar, but Alfred couldn't place the voice. "Is he hurt?"

"No," a man answered. "He's likely just fainted."

I have not! Alfred wanted to return indignantly. I'm dead! ←

He heard himself make a noise, a croak.

"There, what did I tell you? He's coming round."

Alfred cautiously opened his eyes. He looked up into the branches of a tree. He was lying on soft grass. A woman knelt beside him.

"Marit?" he said, staring at her in wonder. "Haplo?"

His friend stood near.

Marit smiled down at Alfred, placed her hand gently on his forehead. "How do you feel?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure." Alfred gingerly examined his various body parts, was surprised not to experience any pain. But then, of course, he wouldn't, would he? "Are you dead, too?"

"You're not dead," said Haplo grimly. "Not yet, at any rate."

"Not yet . . ."

"You're in the Labyrinth, my friend. And likely to be here for a good long time."

"Then it worked!" Alfred breathed. He sat up. Tears filled his eyes. "Our magic worked! Death's Gate is—"

"Closed," said Haplo and he smiled his quiet smile. "The Seventh Gate destroyed. The magic dumped us here, apparently. And, like I said, we're going to be here a while."

Alfred sat up. "Is there fighting?"

Haplo's face darkened. "About to begin, according to Vasu. He's been trying to open negotiations with Ramu, but the Councillor refuses to even talk. Claims it's only a trap."

"The wolfen and the chaodyn are massing for an assault," Marit added. "There've already been skirmishes along the edges of the forest. If the Sartan would join together with us, but—"She shrugged, shook her head. "We thought maybe you could talk to Ramu."

Alfred staggered to his feet. He still couldn't quite believe that he wasn't dead. He gave himself a surreptitious pinch, winced in pain. Perhaps he was alive . . .

"I don't think I'd be of much help," he said ruefully. "Ramu thinks I'm every bit as bad as any Patryn who ever lived. Or maybe worse. And if he ever found out I combined my magic with yours . . ."

"And that they worked," Haplo added, grinning.

Alfred nodded, smiled back. He knew he should be downhearted over this, but couldn't help himself. Joy seemed to be bubbling up in his heart. He glanced around his surroundings, caught his breath.

Two bodies lay on a bower of leaves in the center of a glade. One was clad in black robes, gnarled hands rested across the chest. The other was the body of a mensch, a human.

"Hugh the Hand!" Alfred didn't know whether to be glad or to weep. "Is he ... is he ..."

"He is dead," said Marit gently. "He gave his life fighting to defend my people. We found him alongside the bodies of several chaodyn. He was as you see him now. At rest, at peace. When I found him dead—her voice broke, and Haplo moved near, put his arm around her—I knew that something awful had happened in Death's Gate. And I knew I should be afraid, but I wasn't."

Alfred could only nod, unable to speak. Next to Hugh lay Xar, Lord of the Nexus.

Haplo followed his gaze, guessed what he was thinking. "We found him here, like this."

With subdued heart and a mixture of conflicting emotions, Alfred approached the dead.

Xar's face, in death, looked far older than it had in life. Lines and wrinkles that had been drawn to a taut fierceness by the lord's hatred and his indomitable will sagged now, revealing hidden pain and suffering, deep and abiding sorrow. He stared up at the sky with dark, unseeing eyes, stared up at the sky of the prison house he had escaped, only to find himself back again.

Alfred knelt down beside the body. Reaching out a gentle hand, he closed the staring eyes.

"He understood ... at the end," came a voice, very near them. "Do not grieve for him."

Jonathon stood behind them.

And it was Jonathon! It wasn't the dreadful lazar, the walking corpse, covered with its own blood, the marks of its painful death visible upon it. It was Jonathon, the young man, as they had known him . . .

"Alive!" Alfred cried.

Jonathon shook his head. "I am no longer one of the tormented undead. But neither have I returned to life. Nor would I. As the prophecy foretold, the Gate has opened. I will soon go back to the worlds and lead forth those souls trapped within them. I remained only to free these two."

He gestured to Lord Xar and to Hugh the Hand.

"They have both passed beyond. And this will be the last time I walk among the living. Farewell."

Jonathon began to walk away. And, as he did so, his corporeal body started to fade, until he became as dust, glittering faintly in a shaft of bright sunlight.

"Wait!" Alfred cried desperately, running after, stumbling over rocks in his effort to catch up with the ephemeral being. "Wait! You must tell me what has happened. I don't understand!"

Jonathon did not pause.

"Please!" Alfred begged, "I feel strangely at peace. The same way I felt the first time I was in the Chamber of the Damned. Does . . . does this mean I can contact the higher power?"

There came no answer. Jonathon had disappeared.

"You rang?"

The pointed end of a disreputable-looking hat appeared from around the bole of a tree. The rest of the hat followed along, bringing with it an old wizard in mouse-colored robes.

"Zifnab," Haplo muttered. "Surely not—"

"Don't call me Shirley!" the old man snapped. Entering the glade, he stared around in vague confusion. "My name's . . . well . . . it's . . . Oh, the hell with it! Call me Shirley if you want. Rather a pleasant name. Grows on you. Now, what was the question?"

Alfred was staring at Zifnab in sudden, dawning comprehension. "You! You're the higher power. You are God!"

Zifnab stroked his beard, attempted to look modest. "Well, now that you mention it—"

"No, sir. Absolutely not." An enormous dragon emerged from the forest.

"Why not?" Zifnab appeared nettled, drew himself up indignantly. "I was a god once, you know."

"Was that before or after you joined Her Majesty's Secret Service, sir?" responded the dragon in a sepulchral tone.

"You needn't be insulting." Zifnab sniffed. He sidled close to Alfred, kept his voice low. "I was so too a god. They find out in the last chapter. He's just jealous, you know ..."

"I beg your pardon, sir?" said the dragon. "I couldn't quite hear that."

"Zealous," Zifnab amended hastily. "Said you were zealous."

"You are not a god, sir," repeated the dragon. "You must come to understand that."

"Sounds like my therapist," Zifnab said, but he didn't say it very loudly. Heaving a sigh, he twiddled his hat in his hand. "Oh, have it your way. Around here, I'm pretty much the same as all the rest of you. But I don't mind saying I'm extremely miffed about it." He cast a baleful glare at the dragon.

"But," Alfred argued, "then where is the higher power? I know there is one. Samah encountered it. The Abarrach Sartan who entered the Chamber ages ago discovered it."

"The Sartan on Chelestra did the same," Haplo added.

"So they did," said Zifnab. "So have you."

"Oh!" Alfred's face was alight, aglow. Then, slowly, his glow faded. "But I didn't see anything."

"Of course not," said Zifnab. "You looked in the wrong place. You've always looked in the wrong place."

"In a mirror," Haplo murmured, remembering his lord's last words.

"Ah, ha!" Zifnab shouted. "That's the ticket!" The old man reached out a skinny hand, jabbed Alfred on the breast. "Look in a mirror."

"D-dear me, no!" Alfred blushed, stammered. "I don't! I can't! I'm not the higher power!"

"But you are." Zifnab smiled, waved his arms. "And so is Haplo. And so am I. So is—let's see, on Arianus, we have four thousand six hundred and thirty-seven inhabitants of the Mid Realms alone. Their names, in alphabetical order, are Aaltje, Aaltruide, Aaron . . ."

"We get your point, sir," said the dragon sternly.

The old man was ticking them off on his fingers. "Aastami, Abbie . . ."

"But we can't all be gods," Alfred protested, confused.

"Don't know why not." Zifnab huffed. "Might be a damn good thing. Make us think twice. But if you don't like that notion, think of yourself as a teardrop in an ocean."

"The Wave," said Haplo.

"All of us, drops in the ocean, forming the Wave. Usually we keep the Wave in balance—water lapping gently on the shoreline, hula girls swaying in the sand," said Zifnab dreamily. "But sometimes we throw the Wave out of kilter. Tsunami. Tidal disturbances. Hula girls washed out to sea. But the Wave will always act to correct itself. Unfortunately—~~he sighed—~~that sometimes sends water foaming up in the opposite direction."

"I still don't understand, I'm afraid," Alfred said sadly.

"You will, old chap." Zifnab smote him on the back. "You're destined to write a book on the subject. Nobody will read it, of course, but ~~by that's~~ that's the publishing game for you. It's the creative process that counts. Consider Emily Dickinson. Wrote for years in an attic. Nobody ever read—"

"Excuse me, sir," the dragon mercifully interrupted. "But we don't have time to discuss Miss Dickinson. There is the matter of the impending battle."

"What? Ah, yes." Zifnab tugged on his beard. "I can't quite see how we're going to get out of this one. Ramu is a thickheaded, hardhearted, stubborn old—"

"If I may say so, sir," said the dragon, "it was you who gave him the wrong information—"

"Got him here, didn't I!" Zifnab cried triumphantly. "You think he would have come otherwise? Not on your Great-Aunt Minnie! He'd still be hanging around Chelestra, causing no end of trouble. Now, here, he's—"

"Causing no end of trouble," concluded the dragon gloomily.

"Well, actually, that's not precisely true anymore."

Headman Vasu, accompanied by Balthazar, entered the glade.

"We bring good news. For the time being, there will be no battle. At least not among ourselves. Ramu has been forced to resign his post as Councillor. I have taken over. Our people—~~Balthazar~~ Balthazar glanced at Headman Vasu, who smiled—~~are~~ are now forming an alliance. Working together, we should be able to drive back the armies of evil."

"That is truly good news, sir. My kind will welcome it. You both realize," the dragon added gravely, "that this battle will not be the end. The evil present in the Labyrinth will remain here forever, although its effect will be lessened by the advent of trust and reconciliation between your two peoples." The dragon glanced at Alfred. "The Wave correcting itself, sir."

"Yes, I see," said Alfred thoughtfully.

"And here remain our cousins, the serpents. They can never be defeated, I'm afraid. But they can be contained, and, I am thankful to say, most of them are now trapped in the Labyrinth. Very few live among the mensch on the four worlds."

"What will happen to the mensch, now that Death's Gate is closed?" Alfred asked wistfully. "Will all they have accomplished be wasted? Will they be completely shut off from each other?"

"The Gate is closed, but the conduits remain open. The great Kicksey-winsey continues working. Its energy beams through the conduits to the citadels. The citadels amplify that energy and send it to Chelestra and Abarrach. Chelestra's sun is starting to stabilize, which means that the seamoons will awaken. Life there will flourish."

"And Abarrach?"

"Ah, we are not certain about Abarrach. The dead have left it, of course. The citadels will warm the conduits, which will melt its icy shell. Regions now gripped by cold will be habitable once more."

"But who will come to repopulate it?" Alfred asked sadly. "Death's Gate is closed. The mensch could not have traveled through it anyway."

"No," said the dragon, "but one mensch currently living on Prya—an elf named Paithan Quindinia—is working on experiments begun by his father. Experiments having to do with rocketry. The mensch might reach Abarrach sooner than you think."

"As for us, life for our peoples will not be easy," said Vasu. "But if we work together, we can hold back the evil and bring a measure of peace and stability—even to the Labyrinth."

"We will rebuild the Nexus," said Balthazar. "Tear down the wall and the Final Gate. Perhaps, someday, our two peoples will be able to live there together in harmony."

"I am truly grateful. Truly thankful." Alfred wiped his eyes with the frayed lace of his collar.

"So am I," said Haplo. He put his arm around Marit, held her close. "All we need to do now is to find our daughter—"

"We'll find her," said Marit. "Together."

"But," said Alfred, with a sudden thought, "what in the name of the Labyrinth happened to Ramu? What caused him to relinquish command?"

"A peculiar incident," said Balthazar gravely. "He was wounded, I'm afraid. In rather a tender spot. And, what's truly odd, he can't seem to heal himself."

"What wounded him? A dragon-snake?"

"No." Balthazar glanced shrewdly at Haplo, almost smiled. "It seems poor Ramu was bitten by a dog."

## EPILOGUE

THE STRANGE STORM THAT HAD SWEEPED OVER ARIANUS ABATED as quickly as it had come up. There had never been a storm to equal it, not even on the continent of Drevlin, which was—or had been—subjected to severe storms on a nearly hourly basis. Some of the terrified inhabitants of the floating continents feared that the world was coming to an end, though the more rational among them—his included Limbeck Boltlightner—knew better.

"It is an environmental flux," he said to Jarre, or rather what he assumed to be Jarre, but which was, in fact, a broom. He had broken his glasses during the storm. Jarre, used to this, moved the broom and took its place, without the nearsighted Limbeck knowing the difference. "An environmental flux, no doubt caused by the increased activity of the Kicksey-winsey, which has created a heating up of the atmosphere. I will call it Winsey-warming."

Which he did, and made a speech about it that very night, to which no one listened, due to the fact that they were mopping up the water.

The ferocious storm winds threatened to cause considerable damage to the cities of the Mid Realms, particularly elven cities, which are large and densely populated. But at the height of the storm's fury, human mysteriarchs—high-ranking wizards of the Seventh House—arrived and, with their magical ability to exert control over the natural elements, did much to protect the elves. Damage was kept to a minimum and injuries were minor. Most important, this unasked-for and unlooked-for aid did much to ease tensions between former bitter enemies.

The only building to suffer extensive damage in the storm was the Cathedral of the Albedo, the repository for the souls of the dead.

The Kenkari elves had formed the Cathedral of crystal, stone, and magic. Its crystal-paned dome protected an exotic garden of rare and beautiful plants, some purportedly dating back to pre-Sundering times—plants brought from a world whose very existence was now mostly forgotten. Inside this garden, the souls of elves of royal blood fluttered among the leaves and the fragrant roses.

Each elf, before he or she died, bequeathed the soul to the Kenkari, leaving it in the care of keeper elves, who were known as geir or weesham. The geir brought the soul, imprisoned in an ornate box, to the Cathedral, where the Kenkari set it loose among the other souls held in the garden. It was believed, among the elves, that these souls of the dead granted the gift of strength and wisdom gained in life to the living.

The ancient custom had been started by the holy elf-woman Krenka-Anris, the souls of her own dead sons having returned to save their mother from a dragon.

The Kenkari elves lived in the Cathedral, tending to the souls, accepting and releasing new souls into the garden. At least, that was what had been done in the past. When it became clear to the Kenkari that the elven emperor Agah'ran was having young elves murdered in order to obtain their souls to aid his corrupt rule, the Kenkari closed the Cathedral, forbade the acceptance of any more souls.

Agah'ran was overthrown by his son, Prince Rees'ahn, and the human rulers Stephen and Anne of Volkaran. The emperor fled and disappeared. The elves and humans formed an alliance. The peace was an uneasy one, its overseers working hard to keep it, constantly forced to put out fires, quell riots, rein in headstrong followers. So far, it was working.

But the Kenkari had no idea what to do. Their last instructions, given to them by the Keeper of the Soul, revealed to him by Krenka-Anris, was to keep the Cathedral closed. And so they did. Every day, the three Keepers—Soul, Book, and Door—approached the altar and asked for guidance.

They were told to wait.

And then came the storm.

The wind began rising unexpectedly around midday. Frightful-looking dark clouds formed in the skies above and below the Mid Realms, completely obscured Solarus. Day turned to night in an instant. All commerce ceased in the city. People ran out into the streets, staring nervously at the sky. Ships plying the air between isles sought safe haven as fast as they could, putting down in any harbor close by, which meant that elves were landing in human ports, humans seeking refuge in elven towns.

The winds continued to rise. The brittle hargast trees shattered and cracked. Flimsy buildings were flattened as if smashed by a giant fist. The strong fortresses of the humans shook and shuddered. It was said that even the Kir death monks, who pay little attention to what is transpiring in the world of the living, actually emerged from their monasteries, looked up at the sky, nodded gloomily to themselves in anticipation of the end.

In the Cathedral, the Keepers of the Soul, the Book, and the Door all gathered together before the altar of Krenka-Anris to pray.

Now the rain began, slanting from the dark clouds like spears thrown by a fearsome army. Hailstones large as the head of a soldier's mace pelted the Cathedral's glass dome.

"Krenka-Anris," prayed Soul, "hear our—"

A cracking sound—loud and violent, like the blast of a pyrotechnic display—split the air. Door gasped. Book flinched. The Keeper of the Soul, shaken, halted in mid-prayer.

"The souls in the garden are highly agitated," said the Keeper.

Though the souls themselves were not visible to the eye, the leaves of the trees trembled and quivered. Petals were shaken from the flowers.

Another crack, sharp, ominous.

"Thunder?" ventured the Keeper of the Door, forgetting in his fear that he was not to speak unless spoken to.

The Keeper of the Soul rose to his feet and looked through the crystal window into the garden. With an incoherent cry, he staggered backward, grasping at the altar for support. The other two hastened to his side.

"What is it?" Book asked, her voice nearly failing her.

"The ceiling!" Soul gasped, pointing. "It is starting to break!"

They could all see the crack now, a jagged line, slanting like lightning, cutting through the crystal dome. As they watched, the crack grew longer, wider. A piece of glass broke loose, fell into the garden with a crash.

"Krenka-Anris, save us!" Book whispered.

"I do not think we are the ones she is saving," said the Keeper of the Soul. He was suddenly extremely calm. "Come. We must leave, seek shelter in the rooms underground. Quickly, now." He left the altar, headed for the door. Book and Door hastened behind, practically tripping on his heels.

Behind them, they could hear the shattering of more falling glass, the splintering of the great trees sheltered beneath the dome.

The Keeper of the Soul rang the bell that called the Kenkari together for prayer—except that this time he called them together for action.

"The great dome is being split asunder," he told his shocked followers. "There is nothing to be done to save it. This is the will of Krenka-Anris. We have been told to seek shelter. The matter is out of our hands. We have done what we could to help. Now we must pray."

"What did we do to help?" the Keeper of the Door whispered to the Keeper of the Book as they hastened after Soul down the stairs leading to the underground chambers.

The Keeper of the Soul, overhearing, looked around with a smile. "We helped a lost man find a dog."

The storm grew more and more fierce. All knew now that Arianus was doomed.

And then the tempest ended with the same suddenness with which it had begun. The dark clouds vanished, as if sucked through a gigantic open doorway. Solarus returned, dazzling the dazed elves with its bright light.

The Kenkari emerged from below ground to find the Cathedral completely and utterly destroyed. The crystal dome was shattered. The trees and flowers inside were cut to ribbons by shards of glass, buried beneath hailstones.

"The souls?" asked the Keeper of the Door, awed, stunned.

"Gone," said the Keeper of the Book sadly.

"Free," said the Keeper of the Soul.

## APPENDIX I

Being a Concise History of the Seventh Gate, the Sundering, and the Tragic Downfall of the Sartan in the New Worlds

compiled by Alfred Montbank

Author's Note: I wish to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of those Sartan who were witnesses to the events I have endeavored to record in this monograph. Their help and candor have been invaluable.

## DROPS OF WATER

"We each have within ourselves the ability to shape our own destinies. That much we understand. But, more important, each of us has an equal ability to shape the destiny of the universe. Ah, that you find more difficult to believe. But I tell you it is so. You do not have to be the leader of the Council of Seven. You do not have to be elven king or human monarch or the head of a dwarven clan to have a significant impact on the world around you.

"In the vastness of the ocean, is any drop of water greater than another?"

" 'No,' you answer, 'and neither has a single drop the ability to cause a tidal wave.'"

" 'But,' I argue, 'if a single drop falls into the ocean, it creates ripples. And these ripples spread. And perhaps—who knows—these ripples may grow and swell and eventually break foaming upon the shore.'"

"Like a drop in the vast ocean, each of us causes ripples as we move through our lives. The effects of whatever we do—insignificant as it may seem—spread out beyond us. We may never know what far-reaching impact even the simplest action might have on our fellow mortals. Thus we need to be conscious, all of the time, of our place in the ocean, of our place in the world, of our place among our fellow creatures.

"For if enough of us join forces, we can swell the tide of events—for good or for evil."

The above is a portion of a speech made to the Council of Seven in the days just prior to the Sundering, shortly after the creation of the Seventh Gate. The speaker was an elder Sartan of great wisdom. His true Sartan name may not be given here, since he is still alive and I do not have his permission to reveal it. (His permission cannot be obtained, because he has tragically lost all memory of what he was.) We know him now as Zifnab.

In the remainder of the speech, the elder Sartan—who was formerly Councillor before Samah—goes on to argue passionately against the proposal to sunder the world. Many of the Council members who heard him that day remember being deeply moved by his speech, and more than a few were starting to waver in their decision.

The Head of the Council, Samah—having listened with cold politeness—spoke afterward. Samah portrayed in vivid detail the rising power of the Patryns, how they had taken over mensch kingdoms, how they were raising armies with the intent to conquer and overthrow the Sartan.

The Council members recall being elevated by the elder Sartan's image of the world and terribly frightened by Samah's. Needless to say, fear won out over what Samah termed "worthy but impractical idealism." The Council voted to proceed with the Sundering, the capture and incarceration of their enemies.

## THE CREATION

### OF THE SEVENTH GATE

Were the Patryns actually plotting to conquer the world?

We have no way of knowing for certain, since—unlike the Sartan—no Patryns remain alive from that period in time. Knowing the nature of sentient beings, I think it quite probable that Samah had his counterpart on the Patryn side. We have some indication of this in the later portion of the elder Sartan's speech, in which he refers to a now forgotten Patryn leader by name and urges the Council to consider negotiating with this person, rather than fighting.

Perhaps negotiation would have been impossible. Perhaps war between the two powerful forces was inevitable. Perhaps just as much or more destruction and suffering would have come from such a war as from the Sundering. Those are questions to which we will never know the answers.

Having made its decision, the Council was faced with a monumental task, the working of magicks the likes of which had never been seen before in the universe.

First, the Council created a headquarters, an actual structure with a physical presence in the world. This is the room I knew later as the Chamber of the Damned. Samah referred to this room as the Seventh Gate, after the plan proposed by himself for the re-creation of the world, a plan which would in later days be reduced to a meaningless litany.

The Earth was destroyed.

Four worlds were created out of the ruin. Worlds for ourselves and the mensch: Air, Fire, Stone, Water.

Four Gates connect each world to the other: Arianus to Pryan to Abarrach to Chelestra.

A house of correction was built for our enemies: the Labyrinth.

The Labyrinth is connected to the other worlds through the Fifth Gate: the Nexus.

The Sixth Gate is the center, permits entry: the Vortex.

And all was accomplished through the Seventh Gate.

The end was the beginning.

Once the Seventh Gate had physical existence, the Sartan gave it existence on a magical plane, making it a "well" similar to that constructed by the Patryns on Abri—a hole in the fabric of magic wherein the possibility exists that no possibilities exist.

When this magical slate had been wiped clean, so to speak, the Sartan were able to go in and imbue this chamber with the specific rune-magic necessary to bring about (1) the defeat and imprisonment of their enemies, (2) the salvation of those mensch considered worthy of saving, (3) the destruction of the world, (4) the building of four new worlds. A monstrous undertaking. But the Sartan were strong in magic and desperate in their fear. Creating the Seventh Gate took them many years of work, during which they lived in constant terror that the Patryns would discover them before they were ready to act.

Finally, however, the Seventh Gate was completed, its magic ready. The Sartan entered and discovered, to their astonishment and terror and chagrin, that they were not alone. A possibility existed that they had never before considered—they were not the masters of the universe. A power existed that was far greater than themselves.

## BITTER WATER

How was this power manifested? How did the Sartan discover it? I could not find a single Sartan willing to discuss the experience, which each described as soul-shattering. Based on my own experience the first time I entered the Chamber of the Damned, I must conclude that the perceptions of the higher power are varied and highly personal. In my own case, I felt, for the first time in my life, loved and accepted, at peace with myself. But I gather that, for other Sartan, the revelations were not so pleasant.

(Certainly, it was—as Haplo has suggested—this very same force that drove the Sartan on Pryan out of their protected fortress-citadels and into the jungles, which they had created, but for which they refused to accept responsibility. I will return to this event later in the text.)

Unfortunately, the knowledge that a power existed in the universe greater than his own did not deter Samah from his plans. Rather, it fed his fear. What if the Patryns discovered this power? Could they somehow tap into it? Perhaps they already had! Samah and the Council members and the majority of the Sartan gave in to their fear. The drops of bitter water swelled to form a wave of terrible force and power, which crashed down on the world.

Those Sartan like Zifnab who protested against the Council's decision, who refused to join it, were considered traitors. In order to keep such treachery from contaminating and weakening the magic of the Seventh Gate, these traitor Sartan were rounded up and sent into the Labyrinth along with the Patryns.

## THE DOWNFALL OF THE PATRYNS

One might think that the capture and incarceration of the Patryns would have proved extremely difficult, provoking magical battles of the most tremendous magnitude. That the Sartan were afraid of this very outcome is witnessed by the fact that they created magical weapons such as the Cursed Blade and armed and trained the mensch to fight for the Sartan "cause."

But, in the end, according to the Sartan with whom I spoke, the capture of the Patryns was relatively simple, made so by the very nature of the Patryns themselves.

Unlike the gregarious Sartan, the Patryns tended to be loners, living for the most part by themselves or in small family groups. They were a selfish, haughty, proud people, having little compassion even for each other, no compassion for anyone else. Such were their jealousies and rivalries that they found it impossible to unite, even against a common foe. (This was one reason they preferred to live among the mensch, whom they could intimidate and control.) Thus, the Patryns were picked off one by one, easy prey for the united forces of the Sartan.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

The elder Sartan whom we now know as Zifnab refused to leave the world. When the Sartan guards (of whom Ramu was one) came to arrest him, the old Sartan could not be found. He had been tipped off,

forewarned. (Was it Orlah who warned him? She never said, but I often wonder.) The Sartan searched for him. To give them credit, they did not want any of their number to face the horror of what they knew was coming. But he eluded them. He remained in the world and witnessed the Sundering.

The sight drove him mad, and he would undoubtedly have perished, but he made his way ~~somehow~~ to the Vortex and from there entered the Labyrinth. How he managed this is not known, for Zifnab himself has no memory of it. The dragons of Pryan ~~the~~ manifestation of the higher power in its form for good might have had something to do with his rescue, but, if so, they refuse to discuss it.

The remaining Sartan removed those mensch deemed worthy to repopulate the new worlds, took them to a safe place (the Vortex). The Sartan then shut themselves up in the Seventh Gate and worked the magic. (I will not go into that here. You will find a description of what I saw and experienced when I was magically transported back to that time in Haplo's more extensive notes on the subject, compiled under the title The Seventh Gate.)

THE END

OF THE BEGINNING

Once the Sundering was complete and the new worlds were created, the Sartan ~~those~~ those who had survived the horrific forces they had themselves unleashed ~~were~~ sent out to begin new lives in new worlds. They took the mensch with them, intending to shepherd them like flocks of sheep.

Samah and the Council members chose Chelestra as their base of operation. At this point, Samah should have destroyed the Seventh Gate. (I believe that he had actually been directed by the Council to do so and that, in leaving the Gate intact, he directly disobeyed Council commands. I have no proof of this, however. The Council members to whom I spoke were all very evasive on the subject. They are still intent on honoring Samah's memory. Ah, well, he was not an evil man, merely a frightened one.)

I think it likely that Samah intended to destroy the Seventh Gate, but that circumstances combined to convince him that he should leave it open. He almost immediately ran into trouble in his new world. Events strange and unforeseen were happening events over which the Sartan had no control.

THE SERPENTS

The seawater of Chelestra turned out to have a devastating effect on Sartan magic, rendering it useless, themselves powerless. The Sartan were baffled. They had certainly not created such a magic-nullifying ocean. Who had? And how and why?

But this was not the worst.

The tremendous magical eruption had upset the delicate balance of creation ~~what~~ what the dwarves on Chelestra would later come to refer to as "the Wave." Think of the Wave as the sea on a calm day, the waves flowing in to shore, one after the other, falling and rising, falling and rising. Now, imagine a tidal wave a wave out of control, rising and rising and rising. The wave would naturally seek to correct itself and, in this instance, it did so. The evil that had always existed in the world prior to the Sundering had now gained the power to take on physical shape and form. Evil was manifested in the serpents or dragon-snakes.

The serpents followed Samah to Chelestra, hoping, undoubtedly, to learn more about the new world in which they suddenly found themselves. They knew of the existence of Death's Gate, but not how it worked. They could enter it only if the Sartan opened it for them. Perhaps they were also searching for the Seventh Gate, although that is conjecture. At any rate, their appearance was another bitter shock for the Sartan, who couldn't imagine how such loathsome creatures came into existence. Alas, it was the Sartan themselves who brought them into being.

They told Samah, "You created us," and, in a sense, he did. We all did. We all do, through fear and hatred and intolerance.

But I digress.

## THE GOOD DRAGONS OF PRYAN

Fortunately for the mensch and the Sartan—although they couldn't know it at the time—the Wave continued to try to correct itself. The evil of the dragon-snakes was balanced by good manifesting itself in the form of the dragons of Pryan. If Death's Gate had remained open, as was intended, the evil and the good would have balanced each other out—the Wave would have succeeded in correcting itself.

But, again, fear ruled Samah's life. Afraid of the dragon-snakes, and now afraid of the mensch—whose slight magical powers were not affected by the seawater—Samah sent out calls to other Sartan on other worlds, asking them to come to his aid, to fight and subdue these new foes.

His calls were never answered, or at least that is what Samah told his people. According to Orlah, Samah's wife, the calls were answered. The Sartan on the other worlds told Samah that they were powerless to come to his aid because they themselves were in serious trouble. Samah lied to spare his people—some of whom had relatives and friends in these other worlds—the terrible truth. The grand design was beginning to shatter.

## SHUTTING DEATH'S GATE

According to Orlah, at this point in time, Samah was baffled, angry. He had lost control of events and he had no idea how or why. The plan should have worked. It had all been so logical, rational. He laid blame on the mensch. He laid blame on weak Sartan. But that did not solve his immediate problem.

If the serpents attacked the Chalice—the Sartan's home base—the Sartan had no way to defend themselves. All the serpents had to do was toss a bucket of magic-nullifying water on the Sartan and they were finished. The mensch were quarreling among themselves, blaming the Sartan for the appearance of the serpents. Worse, the mensch had seen the Sartan humbled, chastened, routed by the serpents. Samah sent the mensch away from the Chalice, sent them out into the sea to find their own way in the world.

Some might consider this an appalling act. After all, Samah might well have been sending the mensch into the toothless maws of the serpents. But according to Orlah, Samah guessed rightly—that the serpents were not interested in the mensch. Their main goal was to enter Death's Gate, and to do that they had to rely on the Sartan.

Fearing that the evil serpents would spread from Chelestra into the other three worlds, Samah felt he had no recourse but to shut Death's Gate. He should have destroyed the Seventh Gate at this time, but he thought that perhaps its powerful magic might once again be needed. He cast the Seventh Gate into oblivion.

Once this was accomplished, Samah and his people sent themselves into a stasis sleep, planning to wake up in a hundred years. By that time, Samah reasoned, matters would have stabilized on the other worlds. The Kicksey-winsey would be up and running, the citadels in operation. When he awoke, life would be better.

Such was not the case.

## THE SERPENTS FROZEN

Again I find an example of the Wave correcting itself. Due to the fact that Sartan magic had no effect on the ocean of Chelestra, its sun remained unstable. The sun was supposed to be locked into position in the center of the water world, warming the inside of the globe, leaving the outer portion a shell of ice. But the sun could not be constrained and so it wandered, drifting slowly through the water, warming parts of that world, while the rest remained locked in ice.

When the Sartan first moved onto Chelestra, the sun warmed their portion of that world—a part known as the Chalice. (For a more complete description, refer to the volume Haplo called ~~over my objections~~ *Serpent Mage*.) But as time passed and the Sartan slept on, the sun began to drift away.

The evil serpents saw their doom too late. Unable to flee through Death's Gate and unwilling to leave the Sartan in case they woke up, the serpents waited too long to escape. When the sun wandered off, the serpents did not follow it and so were frozen in the icebound ocean.

The Wave was almost back to normal. The good serpents on Pryan, so as not to disturb the balance, went underground, doing what they could to avoid contact with the mensch and the Sartan.

#### THE WAVE ROLLS ON Arianus

Time passed while the Sartan slumbered. Samah's glorious vision of four worlds interconnected, working together, failed to materialize. The Sartan population dwindled. The numbers of mensch—who were now thriving on the new worlds (with the exception of Abarrach)—increased. Their populations grew too large for the few remaining Sartan to control. The Sartan retreated, hoping to fall back and regroup, waiting all the while for contact with their brethren on the other worlds—contact that would never come.

On Arianus, the great Kicksey-winsey went to work, but it lacked direction. The mensch had no idea what it was supposed to do. The Sartan left directions for the operation of the Kicksey-winsey with the Kenkari elves—arace the Sartan considered most trustworthy.

But the elves on Arianus were divided among themselves in a bitter power struggle. And all the elves feared and detested the humans, who in turn had no use for the elves. The Kenkari, reading the book on the Kicksey-winsey, realized that the machine would bring the lands of the elves and the humans together, that the dwarves would have control over the machine. This the elves deemed intolerable. The Kenkari hid the book in the libraries of the Cathedral of the Albedo, where it lay forgotten for many centuries.

After turning over the book, the Sartan on Arianus went into hiding in tunnels they had built underground. They sent their young people into stasis sleep, hoping again that when they woke up, things would have improved. Unfortunately, most of the young Sartan on Arianus died in that sleep. (I think it is likely that these mysterious deaths were due to the practice of necromancy on Abarrach, for so it is written that when one life is restored untimely another dies untimely. This is speculation, however. Hopefully, my theory will never be proved!)

#### Pryan

The Sartan on Pryan lived in the citadels with the mensch whom they had brought to this world. The Sartan ran the star chambers, which were designed to work with the Kicksey-winsey to beam energy to the other worlds. The Sartan were endeavoring to make the star chambers work, and were also trying to control the mensch, whose numbers were rapidly increasing.

Cooped up in the citadels, the mensch races began to fight among themselves. The Sartan, considering the mensch as annoying as quarrelsome children, treated them as such. Instead of working with the mensch to negotiate their problems, the Sartan created "nursemaids." Thus were born the tytans—fearsome giants who were meant to operate the star chambers (should they ever start functioning!) and serve as nannies to the mensch. Acting out of fear and blind prejudice, the Sartan made matters worse instead of better. The tytans proved too powerful a creation; they turned on their creators.

How or why the Sartan on Pryan came into contact with the higher power is open to conjecture. On his visit to Pryan, Haplo entered one of the citadels and there discovered a room that he describes as an almost exact replica of the Seventh Gate. I can only assume that the Sartan on Pryan constructed what might be called a miniature Seventh Gate, perhaps in the hope of reestablishing communication with their brethren on other worlds or even in a desperate attempt to reopen Death's Gate.

The Sartan on Pryan claimed that they were forced by this higher power to leave the citadels. I think it more likely that they found it easier to flee their problems than to seek solutions. They laid the blame conveniently on the higher power, rather than on where it belonged—on themselves.

## Abarrach

As for the Sartan on Abarrach, their situation was the most desperate of all. The mensch they had brought to Abarrach had almost all died due to the poisonous atmosphere. The Sartan were faced with the knowledge that unless help came soon, they were doomed as well. It was a group of Sartan on Abarrach who, seeking to regain contact with their lost brethren, stumbled on to the Seventh Gate.

The Sartan knew they had found a tremendous source of power, but—having lost much of their ability to perform Sartan magic—they had no idea what it was they had discovered. These Sartan came closest of all who had gone before to understanding the higher power. But their own evil—brought about by greed for power, exacerbated by the heinous practice of necromancy—proved their downfall. Violence entered the sacred chamber and all within were destroyed.

Appalled, terrified, the Sartan who survived inscribed runes of warding on what was now called the Chamber of the Damned. No one dared enter it, and eventually, all knowledge of the location of the Seventh Gate was lost.

## The Labyrinth

The Labyrinth had become a prison house of horrors. According to Orlah, Samah had intended that the Sartan serve as wardens of this prison, monitoring it as well as their prisoners' progress toward rehabilitation. When the Sartan lost control of their own lives, they could not hope to control the Labyrinth. The dark magic of the Labyrinth fed off the Sartan's hatred and fear. It turned deadly. And from the Labyrinth, born of hatred, came Lord Xar.

## XAR, LORD OF THE NEXUS

The history of Xar's early life is unknown, but certainly it must have been similar to the countless histories of those Patryns who were born in that dreadful prison. Xar is different in that he was the first Patryn [1] to escape the Labyrinth, to fight his way out through the Final Gate. He was the first Patryn to see the Nexus.

To give Xar credit, he worked unselfishly, often in dire peril of his own life, to save his fellow Patryns from the Labyrinth. It is no wonder that, to this day, the lord's memory is still honored among them.

Xar's ambition was his downfall. He was not content to lead his people, but on discovering that four worlds existed, sought to rule them as well. He learned how to open Death's Gate—not completely, only a crack. But this was enough. He was able to enter, and this brought about catastrophic change. Xar's rise to power caused the Wave to shift out of balance.

Death's Gate opened. The first Patryn, Haplo, left the Nexus, entered Arianus. At the same time, Chelestra's sun floated back around to the Chalice. The warmth caused the ice to melt, freeing the serpents. The

1 I make the distinction—first Patryn—because the Sartan known as Zifhab apparently managed to escape the Labyrinth and enter the Nexus. He claims to have written a large portion of the manuscripts and books which Xar found in the Nexus. These works are mostly lost to us now, having been destroyed in the fire set by the serpents—one reason that Haplo and I are working to replace them.

No one (including Zifhab himself!) is quite certain how he managed to leave the Nexus. During his more lucid moments, he claims that the good dragons of Pryan traveled to the Nexus and found him there. Impressed with his abilities as a great and powerful wizard, they turned to him for leadership and guidance.

The dragons of Pryan tell quite a different story, one which I refrain from repeating, since it might unnecessarily hurt the old man's feelings.

knowledge that their cousins were awake caused the good dragons of Pryan to come out of hiding. These events, occurring simultaneously, might be taken as coincidence. I prefer to see in them the Wave attempting, once again, to restore the balance.

What happened after that I will not describe here. Suffice it to say that by a curious series of incidents, I met Haplo and his remarkable dog.

Those interested in reading more about the exciting adventures of Haplo and the humbler adventures of myself can find them in what has come to be known as the Death Gate Cycle.

In closing, I will add, for those who might be interested, that the Wave continues to ebb and flow. The Patryns and the Sartan now live together in an uneasy peace. The Sartan have split into two factions: one led by Balthazar, which desires alliance with the Patryns; the other led by Ramu, who though still somewhat bothered by his unfortunate injury refuses to trust the Patryns at all.

Headman Vasu is leader of the Patryns. He and Haplo and Marit have formed bands of what are known as Rescuers, brave men and women both Patryn and Sartan who risk their lives venturing deep into the Labyrinth to try to aid those still trapped in the prison. I am proud to say that I am myself a Rescuer.

The evil serpents are diminished in power, but are present still and will be forever, I suppose. They are kept in check by the dragons of Pryan, however, and by the concerted efforts of the Rescuers.

We have no knowledge of what is transpiring in the worlds of the mensch, but I hope all is well with them. I like to think of them traveling between worlds in fantastical ships, propelled by hope and curiosity.

Haplo and Marit set out on a search for their daughter and returned with numerous daughters, all orphans whom they rescued from the Labyrinth. Haplo states proudly that any one of them could be his child, and Marit always agrees. They have several sons now as well. They all call me "Grandfather Alfred" and tease me unmercifully about my big feet.

Haplo has a dog now. A real one.

The mad old Sartan Zifnab wanders the Labyrinth happily, watched over by his dragon. He hardly ever remembers the bad times, and we take care not to remind him.

He has decided, now, that he is God.

And who are we to argue with him?

## APPENDIX II

### Concerning the Theory and Practice of Chaos, Order, and the Power of Magic

Author's Note: I have elsewhere noted the history of the Seventh Gate and the Sundering (see Appendix I) and the chronology of events that brings us to our present era. It occurred to me, however, that there may be students of the magical arts who might have wondered what went wrong with the Sundering and why the Sartan vision of the Sundered Realms did not work as they had hoped. To this end I now write.

In reviewing the histories I note there is but one recorded instance of Sartan and Patryn magical structures being used together—that being when Haplo and I fought our final fight. While reflecting on the various treatises of magic that have attempted to illuminate this chronicle—as well as the now seemingly incredible events in which we have played a part—was moved to pen these observations.

Is there a greater power than rune magic? Most certainly. Is this a benevolent mind in the realm of spirit that exists beyond our physical world, or the combined essence of our joint spirits? Are these musings the window to where we have come from and how we arrived at our present state? Are they the key to our future hope? I cannot say. It is left to our children and their children to answer such questions fully. As for me, I am at peace with what I believe.

—~~A~~fred Montbank

## DEFINITION IN MAGIC

The quest for magical power has, throughout the ages\*! been a quest for definition. This is inherent in both Sartan and Patryn rune magic. Both forms look into the Omniwave in search of a possibility that the rune wizard wishes to bring into existence. Once the possibility is found, the wizard then uses rune structures to weave the possibility found in the Wave into the reality of existence. These basic principles form the foundation of rune magic. These principles have been thoroughly studied for uncounted ages. [1] Yet the question of definition—being able to fully define the possibility that the rune < magician has in mind—has never been resolved completely.

Patryn magic came closer to understanding in this regard than did that of the Sartan. While Sartan magic talked about looking, "concentrating on the Wave of possibilities," the Patryns spoke in terms of an object's "true name." Patryn magic saw itself as a search for true name of a possibility and the calling of that name into reality. Naming an object completely was the ultimate objective of Patryn magic. [2] While Sartan magic

1 Dragon Wing, vol. 1 of The Death Gate Cycle, Appendix titled "I in the Sundered Realms: Excerpt from a Sartan's Musings," for detailed explanation of the Wave and the basic principles of rune magic.

2 Elven Star, vol. 2 of The Death Gate Cycle, Appendix titled "I Runes and the Variability of Magic." See text under heading "Rune Magic: Theory and Practice."

viewed this process in more nebulous terms, it is essentially this process of defining completely the probability required that was the essence of all magic.

## THE GRAIN OF MAGIC

The flaw in all our epochs of magical theory and practice came down to a single word: completely. The Patryns were first to understand the limits of their own rune structures through the insights of Sendric Klausten. [3] Rune magic is constructed of runes within runes. Before Klausten it was believed that this succession could be infinite—rather like cutting an apple in half, then cutting the half in half, then cutting the half of the half in half, and so on an infinite number of times. Klausten, however, realized that there came a point in writing the definition where the presence of the rune itself affected the definition—and beyond which magic rune structures could not go.

The Sartan of Abarrach also discovered this limitation during their research into Necromancy. [4] The limits of the runes they defined as the "Runestate Boundary" in necromantic writings. Other advanced research writings in Patryn magic talk about the "Barrier of Uncertainty," beyond which runes are too coarse in structure to pass. Both of these terms speak to the same limits written of by the Patryn Klausten: the inability to define any magic beyond the grain of the runes themselves.

3 Ibid. See text under heading Grain of Magic and Variability.

4 Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle, Appendix titled "Necromancy." See text under heading Material as Coarse Existence Structure.

## BEYOND THE BOUNDARY:

### FINE AND COARSE STRUCTURES

Both magicks attempted to come to grips with this Runestate Boundary or Barrier of Uncertainty, and how to pass beyond it in different ways and for different reasons.

### Patryn Magic and the Barrier of Uncertainty

Sage Rethis [5] established the laws of Patryn rune magic. While Patryn magic certainly existed before Rethis, his attempts at defining the magic itself became the touchstone for Patryn magical thought for many ages and included the writings of Klausten in their definition. His thoughts shaped Patryn approaches to the barrier from that moment on. His basic laws are:

First Law of Rethis: An object's name has balance. For a Patryn rune to work—or that of a Sartan, for that matter—the rune structure must be balanced. A pillar whose base is not square with its sides will not stand upright. Nor will that pillar stand if one side is heavier than the other. So it is with rune structures.

The problem came when the "true name" of the object—the name that was fully balanced—extended past the Barrier of Uncertainty, where the rune structure could no longer fully define it. No matter how carefully the rune was constructed, it remained unbalanced because the true name required a balance that had a finer grain of definition than the runes could provide.

5 Elven Star, vol. 2 of The Death Gate Cycle, Appendix titled "Patryn Runes and the Variability of Magic."

Rethis reasoned that if this alone were true, all advanced and intricate magic would be unbalanced and, therefore, could not work. This he knew from experience was just not true. His research at this point was taken as somewhat ridiculous by some fellow Patryns and as bordering on heretical by others: Why did Patryn magic work at all? His research turned in astonishing results and led him to his second and third laws.

Second Law of Rethis: An unbalanced name tends to balance itself. This has also been called the Equilibrium Factor. He found that the Wave of probabilities from which all magic was born was not a static state entity but rather a dynamic force that obeyed laws of its own beyond the Barrier of Uncertainty. The Wave itself—from beyond this barrier—acted to correct for any small imbalances and imperfections of the rune structure itself.

Third Law of Rethis: No rune has infinite balance. In the end, I believe, Rethis gave the equivalent of a shrug in his third law. Essentially he was saying, since no rune has infinite balance and since the Wave will correct for any small imperfections anyway—well, why worry? Make your magicks, trust that the Wave will correct for any small flaws in its balance, and get on with getting out of the Labyrinth.

It was this Third Law of Rethis that attracted the attention and the praise of Patryn researchers and popular thought. From that time on, Patryns explored ways of influencing the Wave in their approaches to the barrier in order to bring the exact probability they wanted into existence.

Forgotten in the thunderous clamor over the third law was the astounding implications of the second law, that the Wave itself may have something to say about the fate of all creation.

### Sartan Necromancy and the Runestate Boundary

In their attempts at Necromancy, the Abarrach Sartan had more success in penetrating their Runestate Boundary than the Patryns had with their Barrier of Uncertainty—although both proved to be the same thing.

The first major insights came from an aging Sartan mage named Delsart Sparanga, [6] who discovered the Delsart Near State, or Delsart Similitude. Delsart said that the "spiritual state of all things is a much finer reflection of the physical state. All things that exist in the physical are also expressed in this spiritual state. Delsart taught that no thing exists in what he terms the coarse physical state except that it also have existence in the spiritual state." [7] This spiritual reflection of all things was thought to exist beyond the

Runestate Boundary; thus all things existed in a coarse physical state (accessible by runes) and a spiritual state (beyond runes). [8]

The mensch have had many gods in all their wonderful and varied lands. They have always believed in the spirit state. We the Sartan and the Patryns thought such whisperings to be foolish and childlike imaginings. How could we have known that in our ignorance of such things we would cause such misery on an unprecedented scale.

6 Fire Sea, vol. 3 of The Death Gate Cycle, Appendix titled "Necromancy." See text under heading The Delsart Solution.

1 Ibid.

8 Ibid. See text under Cycle 290: Coarse and Fine Existence.

## THE NATURE OF CHAOS

Both Sartan and Patryn had considered the working of the universe to be something like a Geg machine: If you turned the wheelie then the lifter-arm would raise. The universe was absolutely predictable. No matter how often you turned the wheelie, that lifter-arm would raise just the same.

All of this was fine in the coarse state—that crude physical world that we had increasingly come to recognize as the domain of the runes. However, the runes' power shattered entirely at the Runestate Boundary. Beyond that lay a realm of Chaos where entropic forces were at work. It was truly an "Uncertainty Barrier" in that nothing that happened beyond it could be predicted with any surety.

However, this image of complete chaos was incongruent with Delsart's teachings of the Near State as a finer reflection of the physical state, as well as with the Second Law of Rethis. If complete chaos reigned beyond the barrier, why then did the spiritual effects of Necromancy work? Further, why did the Omniwave, which by definition existed on both sides of the barrier, act dynamically toward a stable, ordered state when chaos and entropy were the accepted rule beyond the barrier?

The problems of spiritual essence were not confined to the realms of rune magic alone but were also reflected in the lesser magicks of the mensch as well. The Kenkari elf practice of trapping the souls of their ancestors [9] for the enhancement of their own crude magicks touched on this spiritual world beyond. They, too, had no context in which to put their discoveries and, like

9 The Hand of Chaos, vol. 5 of The Death Gate Cycle. See also Dragon Wing, vol. 1 of The Death Gate Cycle.

both the Sartan and the Patryns, covered their ignorance with cobbled-together theory that either masked or excused the truth.

## DEATH'S GATE

The Sundering, in the light of the knowledge we have gained since that time, was an arrogant folly of unparalleled proportions. In structuring the complex runes to sunder creation into the realms, we had supposed that the magic would be perfect in all its detail. Yet the magtc was coarse even in its finest detail when it came to the Uncertainty Barrier. Its magic had no choice but to extend itself beyond that boundary and into the spiritual realms. In doing so, the Wave corrected as best it could to such a catastrophic inclusion.

Part of that correction, I believe, involved the rune structures that gave name to "Death's Gate." Imperfect as it was and heavily intrusive into the realms of the finer spiritual structures, the calling of Death's Gate into reality was more apt than the original designers had supposed.

Death may well be a gate: a spiritual gate through which our finer selves pass on to other realms and other realities. Indeed, I am left to ponder if we truly exist more in that spirit state than in this physical one. Who is to say which is real and which is ephemeral?

When the Sundering opened Death's Gate in the physical, coarse reality, I believe it closed the spiritual gate beyond the Uncertainty Barrier. Our actions not only brought suffering and horror in the physical realms but damned the souls of our countless dead as well, cutting us off from whatever higher existence we would have beyond this physical realm as well as from other spirits that may already exist in that finer place.

Yet we were not entirely cut off, for the Wave continued to correct itself. We may have upset the boat, but the waves of our foolishness subside and the pond again becomes placid and at peace.

#### THE ORDER BEYOND

Who or what observes the Wave in the realms beyond? Are there gods of the spirit with powers higher than our own? Were the mensch far wiser in this than we with all our power?

I believe now that there is an existence beyond the physical whose purpose we can only now guess at. It is in that realm of the spirit that the greatest power of all is found, somewhere in the correcting Wave. If there is something or someone out there beyond this life, I know I shall find it when the time is come. We have closed the physical gate; the spirit gate is now open once again.

Only in closing the gate on our prison are we now truly free.

Closing the Seventh Gate