

and for Arthur,

who showed me the way to become a man and who shows me still.

PROLOGUE

Being a History of the War of the Gods and the Acts of Belgarath
the

Sorcerer

-adapted from The Book of Alorn

WHEN THE WORLD was new, the seven Gods dwelt in harmony, and
the

races of man

were as one people. Belar, youngest of the Gods, was beloved by the
Alorns. He

abode with them and cherished them, and they prospered in his
care.

The other

Gods also gathered peoples about them, and each God cherished his
own

people.

of the Will and the Word and became a sorcerer. In the years that followed, others also sought out the solitary God. They joined in brotherhood to learn at the feet of Aldur, and time did not touch them. Now it happened that Aldur took up a stone in the shape of a globe, no larger than the heart of a child, and he turned the stone in his hand until it became a living soul. The power of the living jewel, which men called the Orb of Aldur, was very great, and Aldur worked wonders with it. Of all the Gods, Torak was the most beautiful, and his people were the Angaraks. They burned sacrifices before him, calling him Lord of Lords, and Torak found the smell of sacrifice and the words of adoration sweet. The day came, however,

counsel. Put

aside this jewel which hath seduced thy mind from our fellowship."

Aldur looked into his brother's soul and rebuked him. "Why lost
thou

seek lordship and dominion, Torak? Is not Angarak enough for thee?

Do not

in thy

pride seek to possess the Orb, lest it slay thee."

Great was Torak's shame at the words of Aldur, and he raised his
hand

and smote

his brother. Taking the jewel, he fled.

The other Gods besought Torak to return the Orb, but he would
not.

Then the

races of man rose up and came against the hosts of Angarak and
made

war on them.

came in. But

Belar and Aldur joined their wills and set limits upon the sea. The
races of

man, however, were separated one from the others, and the Gods
also.

Now when Torak raised the living Orb against the earth, its mother,
it awoke and

began to glow with holy flame. The face of Torak was seared by the
blue fire. In

pain he cast down the mountains; in anguish he cracked open the
earth; in agony

he let in the sea. His left hand flared and burned to ashes, the
flesh on the

left side of his face melted like wax, and his left eye boiled in its
socket.

With a great cry, he cast himself into the sea to quench the burn-
ing,

but his

people away to the east, where they built a great city on the plains
of
Mallorea, which they called Cthol Mishrak, City of Night, for Torak
hid his
maiming in darkness. The Angaraks raised an iron tower for their

God

and placed
the Orb in an iron cask in the topmost chamber. Often Torak stood
before the
cask, then fled weeping, lest his yearning to look on the Orb
overpower him and
he perish utterly.

The centuries rolled past in the lands of the Angarak, and they
came

to call
their maimed God Kal-Torak, both King and God.
Belar had taken the Alorns to the north. Of all men, they were the
most hardy

Alorns, traveled to the Vale of Aldur to seek out Belgarath the Sorcerer. "The

way to the north is open," he said. "The signs and the auguries are propitious.

Now is the time ripe for us to discover the way to the City of Night and regain the Orb from One-eye."

Poledra, wife of Belgarath, was great with child, and he was reluctant to leave

her. But Cherek prevailed. They stole away one night to join

Cherek's

sons, Dras

Bull-neck, Algar Fleet-foot, and Riva Iron-grip.

Cruel winter gripped the northland, and the moors glittered beneath the stars

with frost and steel-gray ice. To seek out their way, Belgarath cast an

ever after the

hair and beard of Belgarath were silver.

Through snow and mist they crossed into Mallorean and came at last
to

Cthol

Mishrak. Finding a secret way into the city, Belgarath led them to
the foot of

the iron tower. Silently they climbed the rusted stairs which had
known no step

for twenty centuries. Fearfully they passed through the chamber
where

Torak

tossed in pain-haunted slumber, his maimed face hidden by a steel
mask.

Stealthily they crept past the sleeping God in the smoldering
darkness and came

at last to the chamber where lay the iron cask in which rested the
living Orb.

It will not

be so used again. It reads our souls. Only one without ill intent,
who is pure

enough to take it and convey it in peril of his life, with no thought
of power

or possession, may touch it now."

"What man has no ill intent in the silence of his soul?" Cherek
asked. But Riva

Iron-grip opened the cask and took up the Orb. Its fire shone
through

his

fingers, but he was not burned.

"So be it, Cherek," Belgarath said. "Your youngest son is pure. It
shall be his

doom and the doom of all who follow him to bear the Orb and pro-
tect

it." And Belgarath sighed, knowing the burden he had placed upon
Riva.

along

the secret

way to the gates of the city, and into the wasteland beyond.

Soon after, Torak awoke and went as always into the Chamber of
the

Orb. But the

cask stood open, and the Orb was gone. Horrible was the wrath of
Kal-Torak.

Taking his great sword, he went down from the iron tower and
turned

and smote it

once, and the tower fell. To the Angaraks he cried out in a voice of
thunder.

"Because you are become indolent and unwatchful and have let a
thief

steal that

for which I paid so dear, I will break your city and drive you forth.

Angarak

Three leagues to the north, Belgarath heard the wailing from the
city
and knew
that Torak had awakened. "Now will he come after us," he said, "and
only the
power of the Orb can save us. When the hosts are upon us, Iron-
grip,
take the
Orb and hold it so they may see it."
The hosts of Angarak came, with Torak himself in the forefront,
but
Riva held
forth the Orb so that the maimed God and his hosts might behold
it.
The Orb knew
its enemy. Its hatred flamed anew, and the sky became alight with
its
fury.

again through

the marches of the north, bearing the Orb of Aldur once more into
the

Kingdoms

of the West.

Now the *Gods*, knowing all that had passed, held council, and Aldur
advised them,

"If we raise war again upon our brother Torak, our strife will
destroy the

world. Thus we must absent ourselves from the world so that our
brother may not

find us. No longer in flesh, but in spirit only may we remain to
guide and

protect our people. For the world's sake it must be so. In the day
that we war

again, the world will be unmade." The *Gods* wept that they must de-
part. But Chaldan, Bull-God of the

Arends, asked,

that the Orb in the hand of Riva denied him dominion cankered his soul.

Then Belgarath spoke with Cherek and his sons. "Here we must part, to

guard the

Orb and to prepare against the coming of Torak. Let each turn aside as I have

instructed and make preparations."

"We will, Belgarath," vowed Cherek Bear-shoulders. "From this day, Aloria is no

more, but the Alorns will deny dominion to Torak as long as one Alorn

remains."

Belgarath raised his face. "Hear me, Torak One-eye," he cried. "The living Orb

is secure against thee, and thou shalt not prevail against it. In the day that

thou comest against us, I shall raise war against thee. I will

rain

and smote

about him in fury, for he knew that the living Orb was forever beyond

his reach.

Then Cherek embraced his sons and turned away, to see them no more.

Dras went

north and dwelt in the lands drained by River Mrin. He built a city at Boktor

and called his lands Drasnia. And he and his descendants stood athwart the

northern marches and denied them to the enemy. Algar went south with

his people

and found horses on the broad plains drained by Aldur River. The horses they

tamed and learned to ride for the first time in the history of man,

his

kingdom Cherek, for now he was alone and without sons. Grimly he
built tall

ships of war to patrol the seas and deny them to the enemy.

Upon the bearer of the Orb, however, fell the burden of the longest
journey.

Taking his people, Riva went to the west coast of Sendaria. There
he

built

ships, and he and his people crossed to the Isle of the Winds. They
burned their

ships and built a fortress and a walled city around it. The city
they called

Riva and the fortress the Hall of the Rivan King. Then Belar, God of
the Alorns,

caused two iron stars to fall from the sky. Riva took up the stars
and forged a

blade from one and a hilt from the other, setting the Orb upon it as

The sword was set against the black rock that stood at the back of

Riva's

throne, with the Orb at the highest point, and the sword joined to
the rock so

that none but Riva could remove it. The Orb burned with cold fire
when Riva sat

upon the throne. And when he took down his sword and raised it, it
became a

great tongue of cold fire.

The greatest wonder of all was the marking of Riva's heir. In each
generation,

one child in the line of Riva bore upon the palm of his right hand
the mark of

the Orb. The child so marked was taken to the throne chamber, and

his

hand was

placed upon the Orb, so that it might know him. With each infant

touch, the Orb

Aldur. But there he found that Polgara, his wife, had borne twin

daughters and

then had died. In sorrow he named the elder Polgara. Her hair was

dark as the

raven's wing. In the fashion of sorcerers, he stretched forth his

hand to lay it

upon her brow, and a single lock at her forehead turned frost-white

at his

touch. Then he was troubled, for the white lock was the mark of the

sorcerers,

and Polgara was the first female child to be so marked.

His second daughter, fair-skinned and golden-haired, was unmarked.

He

called her

Beldaran, and he and her dark-haired sister loved her beyond all

else

and

contended with each other for her affection.

therefore, which of
thy daughters thou wilt give to the Rivan King to be his wife and the
mother of his line, for in that line lies the hope of the world, against
which

the dark
power of Torak may not prevail."

In the deep silence of his soul, Belgarath was tempted to choose
Polgara. But,
knowing the burden which lay upon the Rivan King, he sent Beldaran
instead, and
wept when she was gone. Polgara wept also, long and bitterly, know-
ing

that her
sister must fade and die. In time, however, they comforted each
other

and came
at last to know each other.

THE FIRST THING the boy Garion remebered was the kitchen at Faldor's

farm. For

all the rest of his life he had a special warm feeling for kitchens and those

peculiar sounds and smells that seemed somehow to combine into a bustling

seriousness that had to do with love and food and comfort and security and,

above all, home. No matter how high Garion rose in life, he never forgot that

all his memories began in that kitchen.

The kitchen at Faldor's farm was a large, low-beamed room filled with

ovens and

kettles and great spits that turned slowly in cavernlike arched fireplaces.

played under

those tables and soon learned to keep his fingers and toes out from under the

feet of the kitchen helpers who worked around them. And sometimes in

the late

afternoon when he grew tired, he would lie in a corner and stare into one of the

flickering fires that gleamed and reflected back from the hundred polished pots

and knives and long-handled spoons that hung from pegs along the whitewashed

walls and, all bemused, he would drift off into sleep in perfect peace and

harmony with all the world around him.

The center of the kitchen and everything that happened there was Aunt

were

several

others who worked in the kitchen, no loaf, stew, soup, roast, or

vegetable ever

went out of it that had not been touched at least once by Aunt Pol.

She knew by

smell, taste, or some higher instinct what each dish required, and

she seasoned

them all by pinch or trace or a negligent-seeming shake from

earthenware spice

pots. It was as if there was a kind of magic about her, a knowledge

and power

beyond that of ordinary people. And yet, even at her busiest, she

always knew

precisely where Garion was. In the very midst of crimping a pie

crust

or

decorating a special cake or stitching up a freshly stuffed chicken

until she

seemed far too busy to notice him, and then, laughing, he would run on his

sturdy little legs toward a door. But she would always catch him.

And

he would

laugh and throw his arms around her neck and kiss her and then go back to

watching for his next chance to run away again.

He was quite convinced in those early years that his Aunt Pol was quite the most

important and beautiful woman in the world. For one thing, she was taller than

the other women on Faldor's farm-very nearly as tall as a man-and

her

face was

always serious-even sternexcept with him, of course. Her hair was long and very

touch

that white

lock; she would smile at him and touch his face with a soft hand.

Then he would

sleep, content in the knowledge that she was there, watching over him.

Faldor's farm lay very nearly in the center of Sendaria, a misty kingdom

bordered on the west by the Sea of the Winds and on the east by the

Gulf of

Cherek. Like all farmhouses in that particular time and place,

Faldor's farmstead was not one building or two, but rather was a solidly

constructed

complex of sheds and barns and hen roosts and dovecotes all facing inward upon a

central yard with a stout gate at the front. Along the second story

dining hall

where his workers assembled three times a day-sometimes four
during

harvest

time-to feast on the bounty of Aunt Pol's kitchen.

All in all, it was quite a happy and harmonious place. Farmer Faldor
was a good

master. He was a tall, serious man with a long nose and an even
longer jaw.

Though he seldom laughed or even smiled, he was kindly to those
who

worked for

him and seemed more intent on maintaining them all in health and
well-being than

extracting the last possible ounce of sweat from them. In many
ways

he was more

like a father than a master to the sixty-odd people who lived on his

restraining influence

on some of the younger ones who tended sometimes to be boisterous.

Farmer Faldor

was a devout man, and he invariably invoked with simple eloquence the

blessing

of the Gods before each meal. The people of his farm, knowing this, filed with

some decorum into the dining hall before each meal and sat in the semblance at

least of piety before attacking the heaping platters and bowls of food that Aunt

Pol and her helpers had placed before them.

Because of Faldor's good heart-and the magic of Aunt Pol's deft fingers-the farm

was known throughout the district as the finest place to live and work for

other farms were frequently seen, after several pots of ale, to
weep
openly at
descriptions of one of Aunt Pol's roasted geese, and the fame of
Faldor's farm
spread wide throughout the district..The most important man on the
farm, aside from Faldor, was Durnik the
smith. As
Garion grew older and was allowed to move out from under Aunt
Pol's
watchful
eye, he found his way inevitably to the smithy. The glowing iron that
came from
Durnik's forge had an almost hypnotic attraction for him. Durnik
was
an
ordinary-looking man with plain brown hair and a plain face, ruddy
from the heat

were spotted with burns from the sparks which flew from his forge.

He

also wore

tight-fitting hose and soft leather boots as was the custom in that part of

Sendaria. At first Durnik's only words to Garion were warnings to keep his

fingers away from the forge and the glowing metal which came from it.

In time,

however, he and the boy became friends, and he spoke more frequently.

"Always finish what you set your hand to," he would advise. "It's bad for the

iron if you set it aside and then take it back to the fire more than is

needful."

"Why is that?" Garion would ask.

was repairing.

"But that piece goes underneath," Garion said. "No one will ever see it."

"But I know it's there," Durnik said, still smoothing the metal. "If it isn't

done as well as I can do it, I'll be ashamed every time I see this wagon go

by-and I'll see the wagon every day."

And so it went. Without even intending to, Durnik instructed the small boy in

those solid Sendarian virtues of work, thrift, sobriety, good manners, and

practicality which formed the backbone of the society.

At first Aunt Pol worried about Garion's attraction to the smithy with its

obvious dangers; but after watching from her kitchen door for a while, she

told the smith on one occasion when she had brought a large copper
kettle to
the smithy
to be patched, "or tell me, and I'll keep him closer to the kitchen."
"He's no bother, Mistress Pol," Durnik said, smiling. "He's a
sensible boy and
knows enough to keep out of the way."
"You're too good-natured, friend Durnik," Aunt Pol said. "The boy is
full of
questions. Answer one and a dozen more pour out."
"That's the way of boys," Durnik said, carefully pouring bubbling
metal into the
small clay ring he'd placed around the tiny hole in the bottom of the
kettle. "I
was questionsome myself when I was a boy. My father and old Barl,
the
smith who

knew that one wrong word on either side would have instantly banished him from the smithy. As Aunt Pol walked back across the hard-packed dirt of the yard toward her kitchen with the new-mended kettle, he noticed the way that Durnik watched her, and an idea began to form in his mind. It was a simple idea, and the beauty of it was that it provided something for everyone.

"Aunt Pol," he said that night, wincing as she washed one of his ears with a rough cloth.

"Yes?" she said, turning her attention to his neck.

"Why don't you marry Durnik?"

She stopped washing. "What?" she asked.

"I think it would be an awfully good idea."

"Oh, do you?" Her voice had a slight edge to it, and Garion knew he

I can tell him about it tomorrow morning, if you'd like.

His head was turned around quite firmly by one ear. Aunt Pol, Garion felt, found

his ears far too convenient.

"Don't you so much as breathe one word of this nonsense to Durnik

or

anyone

else," she said, her dark eyes burning into his with a fire he had never seen

there before.

"It was only a thought," he said quickly.

"A very bad one. From now on leave thinking to grown-ups." She was still holding

his ear.

"Anything you say," he agreed hastily.

Later that night, however, when they lay in their beds in the quiet darkness, he

approached the problem obliquely.

close your mouth and go to sleep.

"I think I've got a right to know," he said in an injured tone.

"Garion!"

"All right. I'm going to sleep, but I don't think you're being very fair about all this."

She drew in a deep breath. "Very well," she said. "I'm not thinking of getting

married. I have never thought of getting married and I seriously doubt that I'll

ever think of getting married. I have far too many important things to attend to for any of that."

"Don't worry, Aunt Pol," he said, wanting to put her mind at ease.

"When I grow up, I'll marry you."

She laughed then, a deep, rich laugh, and reached out to touch his face in the

Where's my mother? It was a question he had been meaning to

ask for

quite some

time.

There was a long pause, then Aunt Pol sighed.

"She died," she said quietly.

Garion felt a sudden wrenching surge of grief, an unbearable anguish.

He began

to cry.

And then she was beside his bed. She knelt on the floor and put her arms around

him. Finally, a long time later, after she had carried him to her own bed and

held him close until his grief had run its course, Garion asked

brokenly, "What

was she like? My mother?"

"She was fair-haired," Aunt Pol said, "and very strong and very

anguished.

Aunt Pol held him closely until he cried himself to sleep.

There were other children on Faldor's farm, as was only natural in a community

of sixty or so. The older ones on the farm all worked, but there were three

other children of about Garion's age on the freeholding. These three

became his

playmates and his friends.

The oldest boy was named Rundorig. He was a year or two older than Garion and

quite a bit taller. Ordinarily, since he was the eldest of the children,

Rundorig would have been their leader; but because he was an Arend,

his sense

number of

Tolnedrans had merged to form the elemental Sendar. Arends, of course, were very brave, but were also notoriously thick-wined.

Garion's second playmate was Doroon, a small, quick boy whose background was so

mixed that he could only be called a Sendar. The most notable thing about Doroon

was the fact that he was always running; he never walked if he could run. Like

his feet, his mind seemed to tumble over itself, and his tongue as well. He

talked continually and very fast and he was always excited.

The undisputed leader of the little foursome was the girl Zubrette,

a

golden-haired charmer who invented their games, made up stories to tell them,

and set them to stealing apples and plums from Faldor's orchard for

in the winter. They slid on wide boards down the snowy hillside behind
the
farmhouse and returned home, wet and snow-covered, with chapped
hands
and
glowing cheeks as evening's purple shadows crept across the snow.

Or,
after
Durnik the smith had proclaimed the ice safe, they would slide
endlessly across
the frozen pond that lay glittering frostily in a little dale just to
the east
of the farm buildings along the road to Upper Gralt. And, if the
weather was too
cold or on toward spring when rains and warm winds had made the
snow
slushy and

the pond and

climbed trees to stare in wonder at the tiny blue eggs the birds had
laid in

twiggy nests in the high branches.

It was Doroon, naturally, who fell from a tree and broke his arm one
fine spring

morning when Zubrette urged him into the highest branches of a
tree

near the

edge of the pond. Since Rundorig stood helplessly gaping at his
injured friend

and Zubrette had run away almost before he hit the ground, it fell
to

Garion to

make certain necessary decisions. Gravely he considered the situa-
tion

for a few

moments, his young face seriously intent beneath his shock of sandy

dark cloak

sat astride a large black horse not far away, watching intently.

When

their eyes

met, Garion felt a momentary chill, and he knew that he had seen

the

man

before—that indeed that dark figure had hovered on the edge of his

vision for as

long as he could remember, never speaking, but always watching.

There

was in

that silent scrutiny a kind of cold animosity curiously mingled with

something

that was almost, but not quite, fear. Then Doroon whimpered, and

Garion turned

back.

Who?" Rundorig said, looking around.

Garion turned to point at the dark-cloaked man, but the rider was gone.

"I didn't see anyone," Rundorig said.

"It hurts," Doroon said.

"Don't worry," Garion said. "Aunt Pol will fix it."

And so she did. When the three appeared at the door of her kitchen,

she took in

the situation with a single glance.

"Bring him over here," she told them, her voice not even excited.

She

set the

pale and violently trembling boy on a stool near one of the ovens and

mixed a

tea of several herbs taken from earthenware jars on a high shelf in

the back of

one of her pantries.

It's supposed to," she told him. "Drink it all."

"I don't think I want any more," he said.

"Very well," she said. She pushed back the splints and took down a

long, very

sharp knife from a hook on the wall.

"What are you going to do with that?" he demanded shakily.

"Since you don't want to take the medicine," she said blandly, "I

guess it'll

have to come off."

"Off?" Doroön squeaked, his eyes bulging.

"Probably about right there," she said, thoughtfully touching his arm

at the

elbow with the point of the knife.

Tears coming to his eyes, Doroön gulped down the rest of the liquid

and a few

minutes later he was nodding, almost drowsing on his stool. He

screamed once,

mother and then had Durnik carry him up to bed.

"You wouldn't really have cut off his arm," Garion said.

Aunt Pol looked at him, her expression unchanging. "Oh?" she said,

and he was no

longer sure. "I think I'd like to have a word with Mistress Zubrette

now," she

said then.

"She ran away when Doroan fell out of the tree," Garion said.

"Find her."

"She's hiding," Garion protested. "She always hides when something

goes wrong. I

wouldn't know where to look for her."

"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "I didn't ask you if you knew where to look.

I told you

to find her and bring her to me."

"What if she won't come?" Garion hedged.

"Garion!" There was a note of awful finality in Aunt Pol's tone, and

Garion

you, Aunt Pol said to Garion, pointing at the kitchen door, but

Garion left hurriedly.

Ten minutes later a sobbing little girl stumbled out of the kitchen.

Aunt Pol

stood in the doorway looking after her with eyes as hard as ice.

"Did you thrash her?" Garion asked hopefully.

Aunt Pol withered him with a glance. "Of course not," she said. "You don't

thrash girls." "I would have," Garion said, disappointed. "What did you do to her?"

"Don't you have anything to do?" Aunt Pol asked.

"No," Garion said, "not really."

That, of course, was a mistake.

"Good," Aunt Pol said, finding one of his ears. "It's time you started to earn

your way. You'll find some dirty pots in the scullery. I'd like to have them scrubbed."

quiet.

Doroon, of

course, could not play until his arm mended, and Zubrette had been

so

shaken by

whatever it was that Aunt Pol had said to her that she avoided the

two other

boys. Garion was left with only Rundorig to play with, and Rundorig

was not

bright enough to be much fun. Because there was really nothing else

to do, the

boys often went into the fields to watch the hands work and listen

to

their

talk.

As it happened, during that particular summer the men on Faldor's

farm were

The west

some five hundred years before.

It had all begun in 4865, as men reckoned time in that part of the world, when

vast multitudes of Murgos and Nadraks and Thulls had struck down across the

mountains of the eastern escarpment into Drasnia, and behind them

in

endless

waves had come the uncountable numbers of the Malloreans.

After Drasnia had been brutally crushed, the Angaraks had turned southward onto

the vast grasslands of Algaria and had laid siege to that enormous fortress

called the Algarian Stronghold. The siege had lasted for eight years until

finally, in disgust, Kal Torak had abandoned it. It was not until he turned his

west. In the summer of 4875 Kal Torak had come down upon the

Arendish

plain

before the city of Vo Mimbire, and it was there that the combined
armies of the west awaited him.

The Sendars who participated in the battle were a part of the force
under the

leadership of Brand, the Rivan Warder. That force, consisting of
Rivans, Sendars

and Asturian Arends, assaulted the Angarak rear after the left had
been engaged

by Algars, Drasnians and Ulgos; the right by Tolnedrans and

Chereks;

and the

front by the legendary charge of the Mimbrate Arends. For hours
the

battle had

raged until, in the center of the field, Brand had met in a single

still as fresh in the memory of the Sendarian farmers who worked

on

Faldor's

farm as if it had happened only yesterday. Each blow was described,
and each

feint and parry. At the final moment, when it seemed that he must
inevitably be

overthrown, Brand had removed the covering from his shield, and

Kal

Torak, taken

aback by some momentary confusion, had lowered his guard and had

been

instantly

struck down.

For Rundorig, the description of the battle was enough to set his

Arendish blood

seething. Garion, however, found that certain questions had been

left

with about

it agrees on that."

"Was it a magic shield?" Garion persisted.

"It may have been," Cralto said, "but I've never heard anyone say so.

All I know

is that when Brand uncovered his shield, Kal Torak dropped his own shield, and

Brand stabbed his sword into Kal Torak's head through the eye, or so

I am told."

Garion shook his head stubbornly. "I don't understand," he said.

"How

would

something like that have made Kal Torak afraid?"

"I can't say," Cralto told him. "I've never heard anyone explain it."

Despite his dissatisfaction with the story, Garion quite quickly

enjoyable. Two kettles and two large pots mysteriously disappeared from Aunt Pol's kitchen; and Garion and Rundorig, now with helmets and shields, repaired to a quiet place to do war upon each other. It was all going quite splendidly until Rundorig, who was older, taller and stronger, struck Garion a resounding whack on the head with his wooden sword. The rim of the kettle cut into Garion's eyebrow, and the blood began to flow. There was a sudden ringing in Garion's ears, and a kind of boiling exaltation surged up in his veins as he rose to his feet from the ground. He never knew afterward quite what happened. He had only sketchy memories of

hideously maimed

and ugly. In a fury Garion struck at that face again and again with fire

seething in his brain.

And then it was over. Poor Rundorig lay at his feet, beaten senseless by the

enraged attack. Garion was horrified at what he had done, but at the

same time

there was the fiery taste of victory in his mouth.

Later, in the kitchen, where all injuries on the farm were routinely taken, Aunt

Pol tended their wounds with only minimal comments about them.

Rundorig seemed

not to be seriously hurt, though his face had begun to swell and turn purple in

several places and he had difficulty focusing his eyes at first. A

few cold

up

the cut as
calmly as she would have repaired a rip in a sleeve, all the while
ignoring the
howls from her patient. All in all, she seemed much more concerned
about the
dented kettles and battered pot lids than about the war wounds of
the
two boys.

When it was over, Garion had a headache and was taken up to bed.

"At least I beat Kal Torak," he told Aunt Pol somewhat drowsily.

She looked at him sharply.

"Where did you hear about Torak?" she demanded.

"It's Kal Torak, Aunt Pol," Garion explained patiently.

"Answer me."

"The farmers were telling stories-old Cralto and the others-about
Brand and Vo.Mimbre and Kal Torak and all the rest. That's what
Rundorig and I

carefully. You are never to speak the name of Torak again.

"It's Kal Torak, Aunt Pol," Garion explained again, "not just Torak."

Then she hit him - which she had never done before. The slap across his mouth

surprised him more than it hurt, for she did not hit very hard.

"You will never speak the name of Torak again. Never!" she said.

"This is

important, Garion. Your safety depends on it. I want your promise."

"You don't have to get so angry about it," he said in an injured tone.

"Promise."

"All right, I promise. It was only a game."

"A very foolish one," Aunt Pol said. "You might have killed Rundorig."

"What about me?" Garion protested.

"You were never in any danger," she told him. "Now go to sleep."

And as he dozed fitfully, his head light from his injury and the

near her

call, "Father, I need you." Then he plunged again into a troubled sleep, haunted

by a dark figure of a man on a black horse who watched his every movement with a

cold animosity and something that hovered very near the edge of fear;

and behind

that dark figure he had always known to be there but had never overtly

acknowledged, even to Aunt Pol, the maimed and ugly face he had briefly seen or

imagined in the fight with Rundorig loomed darkly, like the hideous fruit of an

unspeakable evil tree.

Chapter Two

NOT LONG AFTER in the endless noon of *Garion's* boyhood, the storyteller appeared

of his nose were patched and his mismatched shoes were out at the toes. His long-sleeved woolen tunic was belted about the waist with a piece of rope, and his hood, a curious garment not normally worn in that part of Sendaria and one which Garion thought quite fine with its loosely fitting yoke covering shoulders, back and chest, was spotted and soiled with spilled food and drink. Only his full cloak seemed relatively new. The old storyteller's white hair was cropped quite close, as was his beard. His face was strong, with a kind of angularity to it, and his features provided no clue to his background. He did not resemble Arend nor Cherek, Algar nor Drasnian, Rivan nor Tolnedran, but

was

always

welcome. He was in truth a rootless vagabond who made his way in

the

world by

telling stories. His stories were not always new, but there was in

his telling

of them a special kind of magic. His voice could roll like thunder or

hush down

into a zepherlike whisper. He could imitate the voices of a dozen

men

at once;

whistle so like a bird that the birds themselves would come to him

to

hear what

he had to say; and when he imitated the howl of a wolf, the sound

could raise

the hair on the backs of his listeners' necks and strike a chill into

filled with sounds that made them come alive, and through the
sounds
and the
words with which he wove the tales, sight and smell and the very
feel
of strange
times and places seemed also to come to life for his spellbound
listeners.

All of this wonder he gave freely in exchange for a few meals, a few
tankards of
ale, and a warm spot in the hay barn in which to sleep. He roamed
about the
world seemingly as free of possessions as the birds.

Between the storyteller and Aunt Pol there seemed to be a sort of
hidden
recognition. She had always viewed his coming with a kind of wry
acceptance,
knowing, it seemed, that the ultimate treasures of her kitchen were

slab of

breast meat with three swift slices when her back was turned. She called him

"Old Wolf," and his appearance at the gate of Faldor's farm marked the

resumption of a contest which had obviously been going on for years.

He

flattered her outrageously even as he stole from her. Offered cookies

or dark

brown bread, he would politely refuse and then steal half a plateful before the

platter had moved out of his reach. Her beer pantry and wine cellar might as

well have been delivered into his hands immediately upon his appearance at the

gate. He seemed to delight in pilferage, and if she watched him with steely eye,

treasuring

one, Aunt Pol would arm herself with a broom and drive them both
from

her

kitchen with hard words and resounding blows. And the old

storyteller, laughing,

would flee with the boy to some secluded place where they would
feast

on the

fruits of their pilferage and the old man, tasting frequently from a

flagon of

stolen wine or beer, would regale his student with stories out of the

dim past.

The best stories, of course, were saved for the dining hall when,

after the

evening meal was over and the plates had been pushed back, the old

man would

rise from his place and carry his listeners off into a world of

subject, Faldor,

but a dry and dusty one."

"I've noticed that you find all subjects dry and dusty, Old Wolf,"

Aunt Pol

said, going to the barrel and drawing off a tankard of foamy beer
for

him.

He accepted the tankard with a stately bow. "It's one of the haz-
ards

of my

profession, Mistress Pol," he explained. He drank deeply, then set
the tankard

aside. He lowered his head in thought for a moment, then looked

directly, or so it seemed, at Garion. And then he did a strange thing
which he had

never before

done when telling stories in Faldor's dining hall. He drew his cloak
about him

across the night sky and did set the sun and his wife, the moon, in
the heavens
to give light unto the world.

"And the Gods caused the earth to bring forth the beasts, and the
waters to bud
with fish, and the skies to flower with birds.

"And they made men also, and divided men into Peoples.

"Now the Gods were seven in number and were all equal, and their
names were
Belar, and Chaldan, and Nedra, and Issa, and Mara, and Aldur, and
Torak."

Garion knew the story, of course; everyone in that part of Sendaria
was familiar
with it, since the story was of Alorn origin and the lands on three
sides of

Sendaria were Alorn kingdoms. Though the tale was familiar, how-
ever,
he had

Torak.

He listened intently as the storyteller described how each God selected a people---for Belar the Alorns, for Issa the Nyissans, for Chaldan the Arends, for Nedra the Tolnedrans, for Mara the Marags which are no more, and for Torak the Angaraks. And he heard how the God Aldur dwelt apart and considered the stars in his solitude, and how some very few men he accepted as pupils and disciples.

Garion glanced at the others who were listening. Their faces were rapt with attention. Durnik's eyes were wide, and old Cralto's hands were clasped on the

dur

caused to

be made a jewel in the shape of a globe, and behold, in the jewel was
captured

the light of certain stars that did glitter in the northern sky.

And great was

the enchantment upon the jewel which men called the Orb of Aldur,
for

with the

Orb could Aldur see that which had been, that which was, and that
which was yet

to be."

Garion realized he was holding his breath, for he was now completely
caught up

in the story. He listened in wonder as Torak stole the Orb and the
other Gods

made war on him. Torak used the Orb to sunder the earth and let in
the sea to

close about her, brought him another, her movements somehow

stately

and her eyes

burning.

"I've never heard the story told so," Durnik said softly.

"It's The Book of Alorn. * It's only told in the presence of kings,"

Cralto

said, just as softly. "I knew a man once who had heard it at the

king's court at

Sendar, and he remembered some of it. I've never heard it all before,

though."

The story continued, recounting how Belgarath the Sorcerer led Cherek

and his

three sons to regain the Orb two thousand years later, and how the western lands

While the Orb

remained there and the line of Riva sat on the throne, Torak could not prevail.

Then Belgarath sent his favorite daughter to Riva to be a mother to kings, while

his other daughter remained with him and learned his art, for the mark of the

sorcerers was upon her.

The old storyteller's voice was now very soft as his ancient tale drew to its

close. "And between them," he said, "did Belgarath and his daughter, the

Sorceress Polgara, set enchantments to keep watch against the coming

of Torak.

And some men say they shall abide against his coming even though it be until the

very end of days, for it is prophesied that one day shall maimed

world.

And then the old man fell silent and let his mantle drop from about his

shoulders, signifying that his story was at an end.

There was a long silence in the hall, broken only by a few faint cracks from the

dying fire and the endless song of frogs and crickets in the summer night

outside.

Finally Faldor cleared his throat and rose, his bench scraping loudly on the

wooden floor. "You have done us much honor tonight, my old

* Several shorter, less formal versions of the story existed, similar to the

adaptation used here in the Prologue. Even The Book of Alorn was said

to be an

abridgment of a much older document, friend," he said, his voice

many kings of late, Faldor. He laughed. They all seem to be too

busy to listen

to the old tales, and a story must be told from time to time if it is
not to be

lost-besides, who knows these days where a king might be hiding?"

They all laughed at that and began to push back their benches, for
it

was

growing late and time for those who must be up with the first light
of the sun

to seek their beds.

"Will you carry a lantern for me to the place where I sleep, boy?"

the

storyteller asked Garion.

"Gladly," Garion said, jumping up and running into the kitchen. He

fetches down

a square glass lantern, lights the candle inside it from one of the
banked

Are we ready then, boy?" The old man asked as Garion came up to him.

"Whenever you are," Garion replied, and the two of them turned and left the hall.

"Why is the story unfinished?" Garion asked, bursting with curiosity.

"Why did you stop before we found out what happened when Torak met the Rivan King?"

"That's another story," the old man explained.

"Will you tell it to me sometime?" Garion pressed.

The old man laughed. "Torak and the Rivan King have not as yet met,"

he said, "so I can't very well tell it, can I?-at least not until after their meeting."

It's only a story," Garion said stubbornly, suddenly feeling very

hardheaded

and practical like any good Sendar. "It can't really be true. Why,

Belgarath the

Sorcerer would be - would be I don't know how old - and people

don't

live that

long."

"Seven thousand years," the old man said.

"What?"

"Belgarath the Sorcerer is seven thousand years old - perhaps a bit older."

"That's impossible," Garion said.

"Is it? How old are you?"

"Nine-next Erastide."

"And in nine years you've learned everything that's both possible

and

impossible? You're a remarkable boy, Garion."

How old are you?" Garion asked, not wanting to give up.

"Old enough, boy," the old man said.

"It's still only a story," Garion insisted.

"Many good and solid men would say so," the old man told him, looking

up at the

stars, "good men who will live out their lives believing only in what

they can

see and touch. But there's a world beyond what we can see and touch,

and that

world lives by its own laws. What may be impossible in this very

ordinary world

is very possible there, and sometimes the boundaries between the two

worlds

disappear, and then who can say what is possible and impossible?"

"I think I'd rather live in the ordinary world," Garion said. "The

that must

be done - some great and noble thing."

"Me?" Garion said incredulously.

"Stranger things have happened. Go to bed, boy. I think I'll look at the stars

for a while. The stars and I are very old friends."

"The stars?" Garion asked, looking up involuntarily. "You're a very strange old man - if you don't mind my saying so."

"Indeed," the storyteller agreed. "Quite the strangest you'll likely meet."

"I like you all the same," Garion said quickly, not wanting to give offense.

"That's a comfort, boy," the old man said. "Now go to bed. Your Aunt

Pol will be

worried about you."

Later, as he slept, Garion's dreams were troubled. The dark figure of

that other

world reached out to claim him.

Chapter Three

SOME FEW MORNINGS later, when Aunt Pol had begun to scowl at his

continued

lurking in her kitchen, the old man made excuse of some errand to the

nearby

village of Upper Galt.

"Good," Aunt Pol said, somewhat ungraciously. "At least my pantries will be safe while you're gone."

He bowed mockingly, his eyes twinkling. "Do you need anything, Mistress Pol?" he

asked. "Some trifling thing I might purchase for you - as long as I'm going anyway?"

The trip is likely to be dry," the old man admitted pleasantly. And

lonely,

too. Ten leagues with no one to talk to is a long way."

"Talk to the birds," Aunt Pol suggested bluntly.

"Birds listen well enough," the old man said, "but their speech is
repetitious

and quickly grows tiresome. Why don't I take the boy along for
company?"

Garion held his breath.

"He's picking up enough bad habits on his own," Aunt Pol said tartly.

"I'd

prefer his not having expert instruction."

"Why, Mistress Pol," the old man objected, stealing a cruller almost
absently,

"you do me an injustice. Besides, a change will do the boy good -
broaden his

horizons, you might say."

"His horizons are quite broad enough, thank you," she said.

mind, I don't

want you taking him into any low or disreputable places."

"Mistress Pol!" the old man said, feigning shock. "Would I frequent such places?"

"I know you too well, Old Wolf," she said dryly. "You take to vice and

corruption as naturally as a duck takes to a pond. If I hear that you've taken

the boy into any unsavory place, you and I will have words."

"Then I'll have to make sure that you don't hear of anything like that, won't I?"

Aunt Pol gave him a hard look. "I'll see which spices I need," she said.

"And I'll borrow a horse and cart from Faldor," the old man said, stealing another cruller.

shadows under the hedgerows. After a few hours, however, the sun

became hot, and

the jolting ride became tiresome.

"Are we almost there?" Garion asked for the third time.

"Not for some time yet," the old man said. "Ten leagues is a goodly distance."

"I was there once before," Garion told him, trying to sound casual.

"Of course I

was only a child at the time, so I don't remember too much about it.

It seemed

to be quite a fine place."

The old man shrugged. "It's a village," he said, "much like any other." He

seemed a bit preoccupied.

Garion, hoping to nudge the old man into a story to make the miles

go

faster,

began asking questions.

So far.

"What?"

"You only have one name so far," the old man explained. "In time you may get

another - or even several. Some people collect names as they go along

through

their lives. Sometimes names wear out just like clothes."

"Aunt Pol calls you Old Wolf," Garion said.

"I know," the old man said. "Your Aunt Pol and I have known each other for a

very long time."

"Why does she call you that?"

"Who can say why a woman such as your Aunt does anything?"

"May I call you Mister Wolf?" Garion asked. Names were quite important to

Garion, and the fact that the old storyteller did not seem to have one had

Mister Wolf indeed. How very appropriate. I think I like that name

better than

any I've had in years."

"May I then?" Garion asked. "Call you Mister Wolf, I mean?"

"I think I'd like that, Garion. I think I'd like that very much."

"Now would you please tell me a story, Mister Wolf?" Garion asked.

The time and distance went by much faster then as Mister Wolf

wove

for Garion

tales of glorious adventure and dark treachery taken from those

gloomy, unending

centuries of the Arendish civil wars.

"Why are the Arends like that?" Garion asked after a particularly
grim tale.

"The Arends are very noble," Wolf said, lounging back in the seat of
the cart

with the reins held negligently in one hand. "Nobility is a trait
that's not

It's the effect of all that nobility," Wolf said. "Arenas spend so much time concentrating on being noble that they don't have time to think of other things."

They came over the crest of a long hill, and there in the next valley lay the village of Upper Gralt. To Garion the tiny cluster of gray stone houses with slate roofs seemed disappointingly small. Two roads, white with thick dust, intersected there, and there were a few narrow, winding streets besides. The houses were square and solid, but seemed almost like toys set down in the valley

their tired horse plodded down the hill toward the village, his hooves stirring little clouds of dust with each step, and soon they were clattering along the cobblestoned streets toward the center of the village. The villagers, of course, were all too important to pay any attention to an old man and a small boy in a farm cart. The women wore gowns and high-pointed hats, and the men wore doublets and soft velvet caps. Their expressions seemed haughty, and they looked with obvious disdain at the few farmers in town who respectfully stood aside to let them pass.

"They're very fine, aren't they?" Garion observed.

suddenly ravenous. "Where will we go," he asked. "They all seem so splendid.

Would any of them let strangers sit at their tables?"

Wolf laughed and shook a jingling purse at his waist. "We should have

no trouble

making acquaintances," he said. "There are places where one may buy

food."

Buy food? Garion had never heard of such a thing before. Anyone who

appeared at

Faldor's gate at mealtime was invited to the table as a matter of course. The

world of the villagers was obviously very different from the world of

Faldor's

farm.

Garion could

not read them.

"What do the words say, Mister Wolf?" he asked.

"They say that food and drink may be bought inside," Wolf told him, getting down from the cart.

"It must be a fine thing to be able to read," Garion said wistfully.

The old man looked at him, seemingly surprised. "You can't read, boy?" he asked incredulously.

"I've never found anyone to teach me," Garion said. "Faldor reads, I think, but no one else at the farm knows how."

"Nonsense," Wolf snorted. "I'll speak to your Aunt about it. She's been neglecting her responsibility. She should have taught you years ago."

"Can Aunt Pol read?" Garion asked, stunned.

education.

Garion, however, was far too interested in the smoky interior of the tavern to

pay much attention. The room was large and dark with a low, beamed ceiling and a

stone floor strewn with rushes. Though it was not cold, a fire burned

in a stone

pit in the center of the room, and the smoke rose errantly toward a chimney set

above it on four square stone pillars. Tallow candles guttered in clay dishes on

several of the long, stained tables, and there was a reek of wine and stale beer

in the air.

"What have you to eat?" Wolf demanded of a sour, unshaven man wearing

a

very well," Wolf said, sitting down. And I'll have a pot of your

best ale and

milk for the boy."

"Milk?" Garion protested.

"Milk," Wolf said firmly.

"You have money?" the sour-looking man demanded.

Wolf jingled his purse, and the sour man looked suddenly less sour.

"Why is that man over there sleeping?" Garion asked, pointing at a snoring

villager sitting with his head down on one of the tables.

"Drunk," Wolf said, scarcely glancing at the snoring man.

"Shouldn't someone take care of him?"

"He'd rather not be taken care of."

"Do you know him?"

"I know of him," Wolf said, "and many others like him. I've

occasionally been in

that condition myself."

"Why?"

second pot

of ale.

"Quite splendid," he said, more to be saying something than out of any real

conviction. All in all he found that Upper Gralt did not live up to his

expectations.

"Adequate." Wolf shrugged. "Village taverns are much the same the world over..I've seldom seen one I'd hurry to revisit. Shall we go?"

He laid down

a few

coins, which the sour-looking man snatched up quickly, and led Garion back out

into the afternoon sunlight.

"Let's find your Aunt's spice merchant," he said, "and then see to a night's

lodging-and a stable for our horse." They set off down the street, leaving horse

the street

at his front door near a fierce-looking black horse wearing a curious armored

saddle. The two men stared with dull-eyed disinterest at passers-by in the lane.

Mister Wolf stopped when he caught sight of them.

"Is something wrong?" Garion asked.

"Thulls," Wolf said quietly, looking hard at the two men.

"What?"

"Those two are Thulls," the old man said. "They usually work as porters for the

Murgos."

"What are Murgos?"

"The people of Cthol Murgos," Wolf said shortly. "Southern Angaraks."

"The ones we beat at the battle of Vo Mimbres?" Garion asked. "Why would they be here?"

Stay close to

me, boy, and don't say anything."

They walked past the two heavyset men and entered the spice merchant's shop.

The Tolnedran was a thin, baldheaded man wearing a brown, belted gown

that

reached to the floor. He was nervously weighing several packets of pungent-smelling powder which lay on the counter before him.

"Good day to you," he said to Wolf. "Please have patience. I'll be with you

shortly." He spoke with a slight lisp that Garion found peculiar.

"No hurry," Wolf said in a wheezy, cracking voice. Garion looked at him sharply

and was astonished to see that his friend was stooped and that his head was

nodding foolishly.

"See to their needs," the other man in the shop said shortly. He was

His eyes looked curiously angular, and his voice was harsh and thickly accented.

"No hurry," Wolf said in his wheezy cackle.

"My business here will take some time," the Murgo said coldly, "and I prefer not

to be rushed. Tell the merchant here what you need, old man."

"My thanks, then," Wolf cackled. "I have a list somewhere about me."

He began to

fumble foolishly in his pockets. "My master drew it up. I do hope you can read

it, friend merchant, for I cannot." He finally found the list and presented it

to the Tolnedran.

The merchant glanced at the list. "This will only take a moment," he told the

Murgo.

The Murgo nodded and stood staring stonily at Wolf and Garion. His

boy, but Wolf's manner had opened before his eyes an entire world
of
deception
and subterfuge. Somewhere in the back of his mind he seemed to
hear a
warning
voice, a dry, calm voice advising him that the situation was
dangerous and that
he should take steps to protect himself. He hesitated only an in-
stant
before
telling his first deliberate lie. He allowed his mouth to drop open
and his face
to assume an expression of vacantheaded stupidity. "Rundorig, your
Honor," he
mumbled.
"An Arendish name," the Murgo said, his eyes narrowing even more.
"You don't

My father was," he said finally, "but my mother is a Sendar, and

people say I

favor her."

"You say was," the Murgo said quickly. "Is your father dead, then?"

His scarred

face was intent.

Garion nodded foolishly. "A tree he was cutting fell on him," he

lied. "It was a

long time ago."

The Murgo suddenly seemed to lose interest. "Here's a copper
penny

for you,

boy," he said, indifferently tossing a small coin on the floor at

Garion's feet.

"It has the likeness of the God Torak stamped on it. Perhaps it will
bring you luck-or at least more wit."

Wolf stooped quickly and retrieved the coin, but the coin he handed
to Garion

left the

shop.

"You played a dangerous game, boy," Wolf said once they were out of

earshot of

the two lounging Thulls.

"You seemed not to want him to know who we were," Garion explained.

"I wasn't

sure why, but I thought I ought to do the same. Was what I did wrong?"

"You're very quick," Wolf said approvingly. "I think we managed to deceive the Murgos."

"Why did you change the coin?" Garion asked.

"Sometimes Angarak coins are not what they seem," Wolf said. "It's better for

you not to have any of them. Let's fetch our horse and cart. It's a

Oran as the sun went down ahead of them.

"Why wouldn't you let me keep the Angarak penny, Mister Wolf?"

Garion

persisted.

The subject still puzzled him.

"There are many things in this world that seem to be one thing and

are in fact

another," Wolf said somewhat grimly. "I don't trust Angaraks, and I

particularly

don't trust Murgos. It would be just as well, I think, if you never

had in your

possession anything that bears the likeness of Torak."

"But the war between the west and the Angaraks has been over for

five

hundred

years now," Garion objected. "All men say so."

"Not all men," Wolf said. "Now take that robe out of the back of

the

that it be a comfort, boy," Wolf said.

"Mister Wolf," Garion said after some time, "did you know my mother

and father?"

"Yes," Wolf said quietly.

"My father's dead too, isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so." Garion sighed deeply. "I thought so," he said. "I wish I'd known

them. Aunt Pol

says I was only a baby when-" He couldn't bring himself to say it.

"I've tried

to remember my mother, but I can't."

"You were very small," Wolf said.

"What were they like?" Garion asked.

Wolf scratched at his beard. "Ordinary," he said. "So ordinary you wouldn't look

twice at either one of them."

Garion was offended by that. "Aunt Pol says my mother was very

who saw them thought that they were just simple village people - a young man with a young wife and their baby - that's all anyone ever saw. That's all anyone was ever supposed to see."

"I don't understand."

"It's very complicated."

"What was my father like?"

"Medium size," Wolf said. "Dark hair. A very serious young man. I liked him."

"Did he love my mother?"

"More than anything."

"And me?"

"Of course."

"What kind of place did they live in?"

"It was a small place," Wolf said, "a little village near the mountains, a long

neighborhood. The old

man's voice droned on, describing the village and the house and the
two who

lived there. Garion listened, not even realizing it when he fell
asleep.

It must have been very late, almost on toward dawn. In a half
drowse,

the boy

felt himself lifted from the cart and carried up a flight of stairs.

The old man

was surprisingly strong. Aunt Pol was there - he knew that without
even opening

his eyes. There was a particular scent about her that he could have
found in a

dark room.

"Just cover him up," Mister Wolf said softly to Aunt Pol. "Best not
to wake him
just now."

It's impossible to tell. Not even I can distinguish between Murgos

and Grolim

with any certainty."

"What happened to the coin?"

"I was quick enough to get it. I gave the boy a Sendarian penny

instead. If our

Murgo was a Grolim, we'll let him follow me. I'm sure I can give him

several

months of entertainment."

"You'll be leaving, then?" Aunt Pol's voice seemed somehow sad.

"It's time," Wolf said. "Right now the boy is safe enough here, and I

must be

abroad. There are things afoot I must see to. When Murgos begin

to

appear in

remote places, I begin to worry. We have a great responsibility and

a

great care

He laughed. Sentimentally, Poirot he said dryly. "That's hardly in character."

"You know what I mean. I'm not suited for this task you and the others have given me. What do I know about the raising of small boys?"

"You're doing well," Wolf said. "Keep the boy close, and don't let his nature

drive you into hysterics. Be careful; he lies like a champion."

"Garion?" Her voice was shocked.

"He lied to the Murgo so well that even I was impressed."

"Garion?"

"He's also started asking questions about his parents," Wolf said.

"How much have you told him?"

"Very little. Only that they're dead."

"Let's leave it at that for now. There's no point in telling him things he isn't old enough to cope with yet."

Their voices went on, but Garion drifted off into sleep again, and he

blaze of

autumn died into winter; winter grudgingly relented to the urgency
of

spring;

and spring bloomed into summer again.

With the turning of the seasons the years turned, and Garion

imperceptibly grew

older.

As he grew, the other children grew as well - all except poor
Doroon,

who seemed doomed to be short and skinny all his life. Rundorig
sprouted like a

young tree

and was soon almost as big as any man on the farm. Zubrette, of

course, did not

grow so tall, but she developed in other ways which the boys began
to

find

a pond and a handy supply of logs - They had built a raft that

summer. The raft

was neither very large nor was it particularly well-built. It had a

tendency to

sink on one end if the weight aboard it were improperly distributed

and an

alarming habit of coming apart at unexpected moments.

Quite naturally it was *Garion* who was aboard the raft - showing off

-

on that

fine autumn day when the raft quite suddenly decided once and for

all

to revert

to its original state. The bindings all came undone, and the logs

began to go

their separate ways.

Realizing his danger only at the last moment, *Garion* made a desper-

ate

desperately searching for some aid, swept the marshy shore. Some distance up the slope behind his playmates he saw the familiar figure of the man on the black horse. The man wore a dark robe, and his burning eyes watched the boy's plight.

Then the spiteful log rolled under Garion's feet, and he toppled and fell with a resounding splash.

Garion's education, unfortunately, had not included instruction in the art of swimming; and while the water was not really very deep, it was deep enough.

The bottom of the pond was very unpleasant, a kind of dark, weedy ooze inhabited by frogs, turtles and a singularly unsavory-looking eel that slithered away snakelike when Garion plunged like a sinking rock into the weeds.

quick, sputtering breaths and heard the screams of his playmates.

The

dark

figure on the slope had not moved, and for a single instant every detail of that

bright afternoon was etched on Garion's mind. He even observed that,

although

the rider was in the open under the full glare of the autumn sun,

neither man

nor horse cast any shadow. Even as his mind grappled with that

impossibility, he

sank once more to the murky bottom.

It occurred to him as he struggled, drowning, amongst the weeds that

if he could

launch himself up in the vicinity of the log, he might catch hold of

it and so

longer struggling, back toward the weeds which seemed to reach up
for

him.

And then Durnik was there. Garion felt himself lifted roughly by the
hair toward

the surface and then towed by that same convenient handle toward
shore behind

Durnik's powerfully churning strokes. The smith pulled the
semiconscious boy out

onto the bank, turned him over and stepped on him several times to
force the

water out of his lungs.

Garion's ribs creaked.

"Enough, Durnik," he gasped finally. He sat up, and the blood from
the splendid

cut on top of his head immediately ran into his eyes. He wiped the
blood clear

bandages.

Aunt Pol stood beside his bed, her eyes blazing. "You stupid boy!" she cried.

"What were you doing in that pond?"

"Rafting," Garion said, trying to make it sound quite ordinary.

"Rafting?" she said. "Rafting? Who gave you permission?"

"Well-" he said uncertainly. "We just "

"You just what?"

He looked at her helplessly.

And then with a low cry she took him in her arms and crushed him to her almost suffocatingly.

Briefly Garion considered telling her about the strange, shadowless figure that

had watched his struggles in the pond, but the dry voice in his mind that

sometimes spoke to him told him that this was not the time for that.

face each other in some kind of contest of will or deed. To speak of

it now to

Aunt Pol would involve her in the matter, and he did not want that.

He was not

sure exactly why, but he did know that the dark figure was an enemy,

and though

that thought was a bit frightening, it was also exciting. There was no question

that Aunt Pol could deal with this stranger, but if she did, Garion knew that he

would lose something very personal and for some reason very important. And so he said nothing.

"It really wasn't anything all that dangerous, Aunt Pol," he said instead,

rather lamely. "I was starting to get the idea of how to swim. I'd have been all

she

said

bluntly.

"Well-" he faltered, and then decided to let it drop.

That marked the end of Garion's freedom. Aunt Pol confined him to the

scullery.

He grew to know every dent and scratch on every pot in the kitchen intimately.

He once estimated gloomily that he washed each one twenty-one times a

week. In a

seeming orgy of messiness, Aunt Pol suddenly could not even boil water without

dirtying at least three or four pans, and Garion had to scrub every one. He

hated it and began to think quite seriously of running away.

size had made

him - even more than Garion - subject to more and more frequent labor.

When he could, Garion slipped away to be with Zubrette and Doroon, but they no

longer found much entertainment in leaping into the hay or in the endless games

of tag in the stables and barns. They had reached an age and size where adults

rather quickly noticed such idleness and found tasks to occupy them.

Most often

they would sit in some out of the way place and simply talk - which

is to say, that Garion and Zubrette would sit and listen to the end-

less flow of

Doroon's

chatter. That small, quick boy, as unable to be quiet as he was to

sit still,

Garion looked at the perfectly round, white patch on the palm of his right hand.

"I've noticed it too," Doroon said, quickly changing subjects in midsentence.

"But Garion grew up in the kitchen, didn't you, Garion? It's probably a place

where he burned himself when he was little - you know, reached out before anyone

could stop him and put his hand on something hot. I'll bet his Aunt Pol really

got angry about that, because she can get angrier faster than anybody

else I've

ever seen, and she can really-"

"It's always been there," Garion said, tracing the mark on his palm with his

left forefinger. He had never really looked closely at it before. It covered the

comes

by to pick

up the turnip crop in the fall - anyway, the mark was all over the side of his

face, and I thought it was a big bruise at first and thought that he must have

been in an awful fight - those wagoneers fight all the time - but then I saw

that it wasn't really a bruise but - like Zubrette just said - it was a

birthmark. I wonder what causes things like that."

That evening, after he'd gotten ready for bed, he asked his Aunt about it.

"What's this mark, Aunt Pol?" he asked, holding his hand up, palm out.

She looked up from where she was brushing her long, dark hair.

"It's nothing to worry about," she told him.

"I wasn't worried about it," he said. "I just wondered what it was.

he

reached out

with the hand and touched the white lock at his Aunt's brow. "Is

it like that

white place in your hair?" he asked.

He felt a sudden tingle in his hand, and it seemed somehow that a

window opened

in his mind. At first there was only the sense of uncountable years

moving by

like a vast sea of ponderously rolling clouds, and then, sharper than

any knife,

a feeling of endlessly repeated loss, of sorrow. Then, more recent,

there was

his own face, and behind it more faces, old, young, regal or quite

ordinary, and

behind them all, no longer foolish as it sometimes seemed, the face

of Mister

What was it?" he asked, burning with curiosity and wanting to open

the window

again.

"A simple trick," she said.

"Show me how."

"Not yet, my Garion," she said, taking his face between her hands.

"Not yet.

You're not ready yet. Now go to bed."

"You'll be here?" he asked, a little frightened now.

"I'll always be here," she said, tucking him in. And then she went

back to

brushing her long, thick hair, humming a strange song as she did in a

deep,

melodious voice; to that sound he fell asleep.

After that not even Garion himself saw the mark on his own palm

very

often.

There suddenly seemed to be all kinds of dirty jobs for him to do

seven Gods joined hands to create the world with a single word. The

festival of

Erastide took place in midwinter, and, because there was little to do

on a farm

like Faldor's at that season, it had by custom become a splendid

two-week

celebration with feasts and gifts and decorations in the dining hall

and little

pageants honoring the Gods. These last, of course, were a reflection

of Faldor's

piety. Faldor, though he was a good, simple man, had no illusions

about how

widely his sentiments were shared by others on the farm. He

thought,

however,

that some outward show of devotional activity was in keeping with

the

Anhelda, and her husband, Eibrig, made their customary annual visit to remain on speaking terms with her father. Anhelda had no intention of endangering her inheritance rights by seeming inattention. Her visits, however, were a trial to Faldor, who looked upon his daughter's somewhat overdressed and supercilious husband, a minor functionary in a commercial house in the capital city of Sendar, with scarcely concealed contempt.

Their arrival, however, marked the beginning of the Erastide festival

at

Faldor's farm; so, while no one cared for them personally, their appearance was always greeted with a certain enthusiasm.

crisp, bright powder which came later in the winter, but a damp
slush, always
half melting. For Garion, whose duties in the kitchen now prevented
him from
joining with his former playmates in their traditional preholiday
orgy of
anticipatory excitement, the approaching holiday seemed somehow
flat
and stale.

He yearned back to the good old days and often sighed with regret
and
moped
about the kitchen like a sandy-haired cloud of doom.

Even the traditional decorations in the dining hall, where Erastide
festivities
always took place, seemed decidedly tacky to him that year. The fir
boughs
festooning the ceiling beams were somehow not as green, and the

She routinely checked his brow with her hand for signs of fever and then dosed him with the foulest-tasting tonic she could concoct. Garion was careful after that to moan in private and to sigh less audibly. That dry, secret part of his mind informed him matter-of factly that he was being ridiculous, but

Garion chose not to listen. The voice in his mind was much older and wiser than he, but it seemed determined to take all the fun out of life..On the morning of Erastide, a Murgo and five Thulls appeared with a wagon outside the gate and asked to see Faldor. Garion, who had long since learned that no one pays attention to a boy and that many interesting things may be

time he moved.

He wore a black, hooded robe, and his sword was much in evidence.

His

eyes moved

constantly, taking in everything. The Thulls, in muddy felt boots and

heavy

cloaks, lounged disinterestedly against the wagon, seemingly

indifferent to the

raw wind whipping across the snowy fields.

Faldor, in his finest doublet - it was after all Erastide - came

across the

yard, closely followed by Anhelda and Eilbrig.

"Good morrow, friend," Faldor said to the Murgo. "Joyous Erastide

to

you."

The Murgo grunted. "You are, I take it, the farmer Faldor?" he

asked

in his

Faldor bowed. "First thing tomorrow morning," he said.

The Murgos stared.

"This is a pious household," Faldor explained. "We do not offend the Gods by

breaking the sanctity of Erastide."

"Father," Anhelda snapped, "don't be foolish. This noble merchant has

come a

long way to do business."

"Not on Erastide," Faldor said stubbornly, his long face firm.

"In the city of Sendar," Eilbrig said in his rather high-pitched, nasal voice,

"we do not let such sentimentality interfere with business."

"This is not the city of Sendar," Faldor said flatly. "This is

Faldor's farm,

and on Faldor's farm we do no work and conduct no business on Erastide."

"Father," Anhelda protested, "the noble merchant has gold. Gold,

all of

Sendaria and the opportunity to honor the Gods on this special day.

No man is made poorer by attending to his religious obligations."

"We do not observe this holiday in Cthol Murgos," the scar-faced man

said

coldly. "As the noble lady says, I have come a long way to do

business and have

not much time to tarry. I'm sure there are other farmers in the

district with

the merchandise I require."

"Father!" Anhelda wailed.

"I know my neighbors," Faldor said quietly. "Your luck today will be small, I

fear. The observance of this day is a firm tradition in this area."

The Murgos thought for a moment. "It may be as you say," he said finally. "I will

accept your invitation, provided that we can do business as early as

That afternoon the feast was laid in the dining hall. The kitchen
helpers and a
half dozen others who had been pressed into service for the special
day scurried
from kitchen to hall bearing smoking roasts, steaming hams and
sizzling geese
all under the lash of Aunt Pol's tongue. Garion observed sourly as he
struggled
with an enormous baron of beef that Faldor's prohibition of work on
Erastide
stopped at the kitchen door.

In time, all was ready. The tables were loaded, the fires in the
fireplaces
burned brightly, dozens of candles filled the hall with golden light,
and
torches flared in their rings on the stone pillars. Faldor's people,
all in
their best clothes, filed into the hall, their mouths watering in

The Gods.

"The Gods," the people responded in unison, rising respectfully.

Faldor drank

briefly, and they all followed suit. "Hear me, O Gods," he prayed.

"Most humbly

we thank you for the bounty of this fair world which you made on

this

day, and

we dedicate ourselves to your service for yet another year." He

looked for a

moment as if he were going to say more, but then sat down instead.

Faldor always

labored for many hours over special prayers for occasions such as

this, but the

agony of speaking in public invariably erased the words so care-

fully.prepared

from his mind. His prayers, therefore, were always very sincere and

very short.

I have long thought of visiting Cihor Murgos," Eilbrig stated rather pompously.

"Don't you agree, friend merchant, that greater contact between east and west is the way to overcome those mutual suspicions which have so marred our relationships in the past?"

"We Murgos prefer to keep to ourselves," the scar-faced man said shortly.

"But you are here, friend," Eilbrig pointed out. "Doesn't that suggest that greater contact might prove beneficial?"

"I am here as a duty," the Murgo said. "I don't visit here out of preference."

He looked around the room. "Are these then all of your people?" he asked Faldor.

"Every soul is here," Faldor told him.

said.

"He was

accompanied by an Arendish boy - Rundorig, I believe his name was."

Garion, seated at the next table, kept his face to his plate and listened so

hard that he thought his ears must be growing.

"We have a boy named Rundorig here," Faldor said. "That tall lad at the end of

the far table over there." He pointed.

"No," the Murgo said, looking hard at Rundorig. "That isn't the boy who was

described to me."

"It's not an uncommon name among the Arends," Faldor said. "Quite probably your

friend met a pair from another farm."

"That must be it," the Murgo said, seeming to dismiss the affair.

"This ham is

excellent," he said, pointing at his plate with the point of the

scarred face.

"One can always try," he said. "I would, however, compliment your cook."

"A compliment for you, Mistress Pol," Faldor said, raising his voice slightly.

"Our friend from Cthol Murgos finds your cooking much to his liking."

"I thank him for his compliment," Aunt Pol said, somewhat coldly.

The Murgo looked at her, and his eyes widened slightly as if in recognition.

"A noble meal, great lady," he said, bowing slightly in her direction. "Your

kitchen is a place of magic."

"No," she said, her face suddenly very haughty, "not magic. Cooking is an art

which anyone with patience may learn. Magic is quite something else."

"But magic is also an art, great lady," the Murgo said.

passed

between

them that had nothing to do with the words they spoke - a kind of
challenge

seemed to hang in the air. And then the Murgo looked away almost

as

if he feared

to take up that challenge.

When the meal was over, it was time for the rather simple pageant
which

traditionally marked Erastide. Seven of the older farmhands who

had

slipped away

earlier appeared in the doorway wearing the long, hooded robes and
carefully

carved and painted masks which represented the faces of the Gods.

The

costumes

where Faldor

sat. Then each in turn spoke a short piece which identified the God he represented.

"I am Aldur," Cralto's voice came from behind the first mask, "the God who dwells alone, and I command this world to be."

"I am Belar," came another familiar voice from behind the second mask, "Bear-God of the Alorns, and I command this world to be." And so it went down the line,

Chaldan, Issa, Nedra, Mara and then finally the last figure, which, unlike the

others, was robed in black and whose mask was made of steel instead

of painted wood.

"I am Torak," Durnik's voice came hollowly from behind the mask,

him, at the

far table, the five Thulls were ashen-faced and trembling.

The seven figures at the foot of Faldor's table joined their hands.

"We are the

Gods," they said in unison, "and we command this world to be."

"Hearken unto the words of the Gods," Faldor declaimed. "Welcome

are

the Gods in

the house of Faldor."

"The blessing of the Gods be upon the house of Faldor," the seven

responded,

"and upon all this company." And then they turned and, as slowly as

they had

come, they paced from the hall.

And then came the gifts. There was much excitement at this, for

the

gifts were

all from Faldor, and the good farmer struggled long each year to

shedding

dagger.

"He's nearly a man," Faldor explained to Aunt Pol, "and a man always has need of a good knife."

Garion, of course, immediately tested the edge of his gift and quite promptly managed to cut his finger.

"It was inevitable, I suppose," Aunt Pol said, but whether she was speaking of the cut or the gift itself or the fact of Garion's growing up was not entirely clear.

The Murgo bought his hams the next morning, and he and the five Thulls departed.

A few days later Anhelda and Eilbrig packed up and left on their return journey to the city of Sendar, and Faldor's farm returned to normal.

was the arrival of Brill, the new hand. One of the younger farmers

had married

and rented a small nearby croft and had left, laden down with

practical gifts

and good advice from Faldor to begin his life as a married man. Brill

was hired

to replace him.

Garion found Brill to be a definitely unattractive addition to the

farm. The

man's tunic and hose were patched and stained, his black hair and

scraggly beard

were unkempt, and one of his eyes looked off in a different direc-

tion

from its fellow. He was a sour, solitary man, and he was none too

clean. He

seemed to

carry with him an acrid reek of stale sweat that hung in his vicinity

like a

a genuine playmate, quite suddenly he began to notice Zubrette. He had always known that she was pretty, but until that particular season that fact had been unimportant, and he had much preferred the company of Rundorig and Doroon. Now matters had changed. He noticed that the two other boys had also begun to pay more attention to her as well, and for the first time he began to feel the stirrings of jealousy. Zubrette, of course, flirted outrageously with all three of them, and positively glowed when they glared at each other in her presence. Rundorig's duties in the

make certain that Doroon and Zubrette were not alone together.

His own campaign was charmingly simple - he resorted to bribery.

Zubrette, like

all little girls, was fond of sweets, and Garion had access to the entire

kitchen. In a short period of time they had worked out an arrangement. Garion

would steal sweets from the kitchen for his sunnyhaired playmate, and

in return

she would let him kiss her. Things might perhaps have gone further if

Aunt Pol

had not caught them in the midst of such an exchange one bright summer afternoon

in the seclusion of the hay barn.

"That's quite enough of that," she announced firmly from the doorway.

I- he started.

"Now, Garion."

And that was the end of that. Garion's time thereafter was totally

occupied in

the kitchen, and Aunt Pol's eyes seemed to be on him every moment.

He

moonied

about a great deal and worried desperately about Doroan, who now

appeared.hatefully smug, but Aunt Pol remained watchful, and

Garion remained

in the

kitchen.

Chapter Five

IN MIDAUTUMN that year, when the leaves had turned and the

wind had

showered

them down from the trees like red and gold snow, when evenings

were

afternoon under a lowering autumn sky with the new-fallen leaves

tumbling about

him and his great, dark cloak whipping in the wind.

Garion, who had been dumping kitchen slops to the pigs, saw his

approach and ran

to meet him. The old man seemed travel-stained and tired, and his

face under his

gray hood was grim. His usual demeanor of happy-go-lucky cheerful-

ness

had been

replaced by a somber mood Garion had never seen in him before.

"Garion," Wolf said by way of greeting. "You've grown, I see."

"It's been five years," Garion said.

"Has it been so long?"

Garion nodded, falling into step beside his friend.

"Is everyone well?" Wolf asked.

"Oh yes," Garion said. "Everything's the same here-except that

Brelido

better if you

rested in one of the barns. I can sneak some food and drink to you
in

a bit."

"We'll have to chance her mood," Wolf said. "What I have to say to
her can't
wait."

They entered the gate and crossed the courtyard to the kitchen
door.

Aunt Pol

was waiting. "You again?" she said tartly, her hands on her hips. "My
kitchen
still hasn't recovered from your last visit."

"Mistress Pol," Wolf said, bowing. Then he did a strange thing. His
fingers

traced an intricate little design in the air in front of his chest.

Garion was

quite sure that he was not intended to see those gestures.

of the kitchen garden. Take a spade and a pail and fetch me some.

"But " he protested, and then, warned by her expression, he left quickly. He got

a spade and pail from a nearby shed and then loitered near the kitchen door.

Eavesdropping, of course, was not a nice habit and was considered the

worst sort

of bad manners in Sendaria, but Garion had long ago concluded that whenever he

was sent away, the conversation was bound to be very interesting and

would

probably concern him rather intimately. He had wrestled briefly with

his

conscience about it; but, since he really saw no harm in the practice

- as long

He doesn't have to," Wolf replied. "The thing itself will make its trail known to me. I can follow it as easily as a fox can scent out the track of a rabbit."

"Where will he take it?" he asked.

"Who can say? His mind is closed to me. My guess is that he'll go north to Boktor. That's the shortest route to Gar og Nadrak. He'll know that I'll be after him, and he'll want to cross into the lands of the Angaraks as soon as possible. His theft won't be complete so long as he stays in the west."

"When did it happen?"

"Four weeks ago."

"He could already be in the Angarak kingdoms."

"That's not likely. The distances are great; but if he is, I'll have to follow

the

kitchen door.

"The boy'll be safe enough here," Wolf said. "This is an urgent matter."

"No," Aunt Pol contradicted. "Even this place isn't safe. Last Erastide a Murgio

and five Thulls came here. He posed as a merchant, but he asked a few

too many

questions - about an old man and a boy named Rundorig who had been seen in Upper

Gralt some years ago. He may also have recognized me."

"It's more serious than I thought, then," Wolf said thoughtfully.

"We'll have to

move the boy. We can leave him with friends elsewhere."

"No," Aunt Pol disagreed again. "If I go with you, he'll have to go.along. He's

reaching an age where he has to be watched most carefully."

Pol, Wolf said sharply, "Think where we may have to go. You can't

deliver the

boy into those hands."

"He'd be safer in Cthol Murgos or in Mallorea itself than he would
be

here

without me to watch him," Aunt Pol said. "Last spring I caught him in
the barn

with a girl about his own age. As I said, he needs watching."

Wolf laughed then, a rich, merry sound.

"Is that all?" he said. "You worry too much about such things."

"How would you like it if we returned and found him married and
about

to become

a father?" Aunt Pol demanded acidly. "He'd make an excellent
farmer,

and what

Sendrid, and the

boy has been raised to do the proper and honorable thing. The girl is

a

bright-eyed little minx who's maturing much too rapidly for my

comfort. Right

now charming little Zubrette is a far greater danger than any Murgio

could ever

be. Either the boy goes along, or I won't go either. You have your

responsibilities, and I have mine."

"There's no time to argue," Wolf said. "If it has to be this way,

then so be

it."

Garion almost choked with excitement. He felt only a passing,

momentary pang at

leaving Zubrette behind. He turned and looked exultantly up at the

clouds

scudding across the evening sky. And, because his back was turned,

he

I had to look for the spade," he said unconvincingly.

"Really? I see that you found it, however." Her eyebrows arched dangerously.

"Only just now."

"Splendid. Carrots, Garion-novel"

Garion grabbed his spade and pail and ran.

It was just dusk when he returned, and he saw Aunt Pol mounting the

steps that led to Faldor's quarters. He might have followed her to listen, but a

faint

movement in the dark doorway of one of the sheds made him step instead into the

shadow of the gate. A furtive figure moved from the shed to the foot

of the

stairs Aunt Pol had just climbed and silently crept up the stairs as soon as she

There came the sound of a movement inside the chambers upstairs,
and
the figure
at the door straightened quickly and scurried down the steps.

Garion

slipped
back out of sight, his spade still held at the ready. As the figure
passed him,
Garion briefly caught the scent of stale, musty clothing and rank
sweat. As
certainly as if he had seen the man's face, he knew that the figure
that had
followed his Aunt had been Brill, the new farmhand.

The door at the top of the stairs opened, and Garion heard his
Aunt's
voice.

"I'm sorry, Faldor, but it's a family matter, and I must leave
immediately."

more than you can know - but I must leave.

"Perhaps when this family business is over, you can come back,"

Faldor almost

pleaded.

"No, Faldor," she said. "I'm afraid not."

"We'll miss you, Pol," Faldor said with tears in his voice.

"And I'll miss you, dear Faldor. I've never met a better-hearted man.

I'd take

it kindly if you wouldn't mention my leaving until I've gone. I'm not

fond of

explanations or sentimental good-byes."

"Whatever you wish, Pol."

"Don't look so mournful, old friend," Aunt Pol said lightly. "My

helpers are

well-trained. Their cooking will be the same as mine. Your stomach

will never

know the difference."

to reveal to his Aunt that he had seen Brill listening at the door.
would
immediately raise
questions about his own activities that he would prefer not to have
to answer.
In all probability Brill was merely curious, and there was nothing
menacing or
ominous about that. To observe the unsavory Brill duplicating his
own
seemingly
harmless pastime, however, made Garion quite uncomfortable - even
slightly
ashamed of himself.
Although Garion was much too excited to eat, supper that evening
seemed as
ordinary as any meal on Faldor's farm had ever been. Garion cov-
ertly
watched

farm, Mister

Wolf was prevailed upon to tell a story. He rose and stood for a moment deep in

thought as the wind moaned in the chimney and the torches flickered

in their

rings on the pillars in the hall.

"As all men know," he began, "the Marags are no more, and the Spirit

of Mara

weeps alone in the wilderness and wails among the mossgrown ruins of

Maragor.

But also, as all men know, the hills and streams of Maragor are heavy

with fine

yellow gold. That gold, of course, was the cause of the destruction

of the

was

the

lamentable fact that the Marags were cannibals. While this habit is distasteful

to civilized men, had there not been gold in Maragor it might have been

overlooked.

"The war, however, was inevitable, and the Marags were slain. But the

Spirit of

Mara and the ghosts of all the slaughtered Marags remained in

Maragor, as those

who went into that haunted kingdom soon discovered."

"Now it chanced to happen that about that time there lived in the town of Muros

in southern Sendaria three adventuresome men, and, hearing of all that gold,

they resolved to journey down to Maragor to claim their share of it.

upper reaches of Maragor, but the smell of the gold drew them on.

And

so it

happened, one dark and stormy night, that they crept across the border into

Maragor past the patrols which had been set to turn back just such as

they. That

nearby kingdom, having gone to all the expense and inconvenience of war, was

quite naturally reluctant to share the gold with anyone who chanced to pass by.

"Through the night they crept, burning with their lust for gold. The Spirit of

Mara wailed about them, but they were brave men and not afraid of spirits - and

besides, they told each other, the sound was not truly a spirit, but merely the

along the banks of rivers, and so they made quickly toward that
sound.

"Then one of them chanced to look down in the dim light, and behold,

the ground

at his feet was strewn with gold-lumps and chunks of it. Overcome

with greed, he

remained silent and loitered behind until his companions were out of

sight; then

he fell to his knees and began to gather up gold as a child might

pick flowers.

"He heard a sound behind him and he turned. What he saw it is best

not to say.

Dropping all his gold, he bolted.

"Now the river they had heard cut through a gorge just about
there,

and his two

One went quite mad and leaped with a despairing cry into the same
gorge which
had just claimed his companion, but the third adventurer, the brav-
est
and
boldest of all, told himself that no ghost could actually hurt a
living man and
stood his ground. That, of course, was the worst mistake of all. The
ghosts
encircled him as he stood bravely, certain that they could not hurt
him."
Mister Wolf paused and drank briefly from his tankard. "And then,"
the old
storyteller continued, "because even ghosts can become hungry,
they
divided him
up and ate him." Garion's hair stood on end at the shocking conclu-
sion of Wolf's tale,

on his

plain face. Finally he spoke. "I would not question the truth of your story for

the world," he said to Wolf, struggling with the words, "but if they ate him -

the ghosts, I mean - where did it go? I mean -if ghosts are insubstantial, as

all men say they are, they don't have stomachs, do they? And what would they

bite with?"

Wolf's face grew sly and mysterious. He raised one finger as if he were about to

make some cryptic reply to Durnik's puzzled question, and then he suddenly began

to laugh.

Durnik looked annoyed at first, and then, rather sheepishly, he too began to

bad, but

fear is worse, and the world is dangerous enough without cluttering

it with

imaginary hobgoblins." Trust Faldor to twist a good story into a

moralistic

sermon of some kind.

"True enough, good Faldor," Wolf said more seriously, "but there
are

things in

this world which cannot be explained away or dismissed with

laughter."

Brill, seated near the fire, had not joined in the laughter.

"I have never seen a ghost," he said sourly, "nor ever met anyone
who

has, and I

for one do not believe in any kind of magic or sorcery or such

childishness."

with his conscience finally came into the open. That dry, interior voice

informed him most pointedly that concealing what he had seen was not

merely

foolish, but possibly dangerous as well. He set down the pot he was scrubbing

and crossed to where they were. "It might not be important," he said

carefully, "but this afternoon, when I was coming back from the garden, I saw

Brill

following you, Aunt Pol."

She turned and looked at him. Wolf set down his tankard.

"Go on, Garion," Aunt Pol said.

"It was when you went up to talk with Faldor," Garion explained. "He waited

ing.

"He came just last spring," Garion said, "after Breldo got married and moved away."

"And the Murgo merchant was here at Erastide some months before?"

Aunt Pol looked at him sharply.

"You think-" She did not finish.

"I think it might not be a bad idea if I were to step around and have a few

words with friend Brill," Wolf said grimly, "Do you know where his room is,

Garion?"

Garion nodded, his heart suddenly racing.

"Show me." Wolf moved away from the table against which he had been

lounging,

and his step was no longer the step of an old man. It was curiously

Garion quickly led Wolf out into the yard and around to the far end

where the

steps mounted to the gallery that led to the rooms of the farm-hands.

They went

up, their soft leather shoes making no sound on the worn steps.

"Down here," Garion whispered, not knowing exactly why he whispered.

Wolf nodded, and they went quietly down the dark gallery.

"Here," Garion whispered, stopping.

"Step back," Wolf breathed. He touched the door with his fingertips.

"Is it locked?" Garion asked.

"That's no problem," Wolf said softly. He put his hand to the latch, there was a

click, and the door swung open. Wolf stepped inside with Garion close

behind.

sparks. A

wisp of frayed rope caught the sparks and began to glow. Wolf blew
on

the spark

for a second, and it flared into flame. He raised the burning wisp
over his head, and looked around the empty room.

The floor and bed were littered with rumpled clothes and personal
belongings.

Garion knew instantly that this was not simple untidiness, but rather
was the

sign of a hasty departure, and he did not know exactly how it was
that he knew.

Wolf stood for a moment, holding his little torch. His face seemed
somehow

empty, as if his mind were searching for something.

"The stables," he said sharply. "Quickly, boy!"

Garion turned and dashed from the room with Wolf close behind.

The

shone through the weathered cracks in the door. The horses were

stirring

uneasily.

"Stay clear, boy," Wolf said as he jerked the stable door open.

Brill was inside, struggling to saddle a horse that shied from his rank smell.

"Leaving, Brill?" Wolf asked, stepping into the doorway with his arms

crossed.

Brill turned quickly, crouched and with a snarl on his unshaven face.

His off

center eye gleamed whitely in the half muffled light of the lantern hanging from

a peg on one of the stalls, and his broken teeth shone behind his pulled-back

lips.

"A strange time for a journey," Wolf said dryly.

"Don't interfere with me, old man," Brill said, his tone menacing.

emerged

with a short, rust-splotched sword.

"Don't be stupid," Wolf said in a tone of overwhelming contempt.

Garion,

however, at the first flash of the sword, whipped his hand to his

belt, drew his

dagger, and stepped in front of the unarmed old man. "Get back,

boy," Wolf

barked.

But Garion had already lunged forward, his bright dagger thrust out

ahead of

him. Later, when he had time to consider, he could not have explained

why he

reacted as he did. Some deep instinct seemed to take over.

"Garion," Wolf said, "get out of the way!"

"So much the better," Brill said, raising his sword.

drumpt. The breath whooshed from Brill's lungs, and he collapsed,

gasping and

writhing to the straw-littered floor.

"For shame, Garion," Durnik said reproachfully. "I didn't make that knife of

yours for this kind of thing."

"He was going to kill Mister Wolf," Garion protested.

"Never mind that," Wolf said, bending over the gasping man on the floor of the

stable. He searched Brill roughly and pulled a jingling purse out from under the

stained tunic. He carried the purse to the lantern and opened it.

"That's mine," Brill gasped, trying to rise. Durnik raised the ox yoke, and

Brill sank back again.

"A sizable sum for an ordinary farmhand to have, friend Brill," Wolf said,

pouring the jingling coins from the purse into his hand. "How did you

you don't really need to answer, friend Brill," Wolf said, examining

one of the

coins. "Your gold speaks for you." He dumped the coins back in the purse and

tossed the small leather pouch back to the man on the floor. Brill grabbed it

quickly and pushed it back inside his tunic.

"I'll have to tell Faldor of this," Durnik said.

"No," Wolf said.

"It's a serious matter," Durnik said. "A bit of wrestling or a few blows

exchanged is one thing, but drawing weapons is quite another."

"There's no time for all of that," Wolf said, taking a piece of harness strap

from a peg on the wall. "Bind his hands behind him, and we'll put him in one of

the grain bins. Someone will find him in the morning."

Durnik stared at him.

well?" she demanded.

"He was attempting to leave," Wolf said. "We stopped him."

"Did you-?" she left it hanging.

"No. He drew a sword, but Durnik chanced to be nearby and knocked the

belligerence out of him. The intervention was timely. Your cub here was about to

do battle. That little dagger of his is a pretty thing, but not really much of a match for a sword."

Aunt Pol turned on Garion, her eyes ablaze. Garion prudently stepped back out of

reach.

"There's no time for that," Wolf said, retrieving the tankard he had set down

before leaving the kitchen. "Brill had a pouchful of good red Angarak

tween

us and Brill

before he manages to free himself. I don't want to be looking over
my

shoulder

for Murgos every place I go."

Durnik, who had just come into the kitchen, stopped and stood
staring

at them.

"Things aren't what they seem here," he said. "What manner of folk
are you, and

how is it that you have such dangerous enemies?"

"That's a long story, good Durnik," Wolf said, "but I'm afraid
there's no time

to tell it now. Make our apologies to Faldor, and see if you can't
detain Brill

for a day or so. I'd like our trail to be quite cold before he or his
friends

you safely

away from here."

Aunt Pol suddenly laughed.

"You, Durnik? You mean to protect us?"

He drew himself up.

"I'm sorry, Mistress Pol," he said. "I will not permit you to go unescorted."

"Will not permit?" she said incredulously.

"Very well," Wolf said, a sly look on his face.

"Have you totally taken leave of your senses?" Aunt Pol demanded, turning on him.

"Durnik has shown himself to be a useful man," Wolf said. "If nothing else,

he'll give me someone to talk with along the way. Your tongue has grown sharper

with the years, Pol, and I don't relish the idea of a hundred leagues

few necessary things, and let's be away from here. The night is

passing

rapidly."

She glared at him a moment and then stormed out of the kitchen.

"I'll have to fetch some things too," Durnik said. He turned and went

out into

the gusty night.

Garion's mind whirled. Things were happening far too fast.

"Afraid, boy?" Wolf asked.

"Well-" Garion said. "It's just that I don't understand. I don't

understand any

of this at all."

"You will in time, Garion," Wolf said. "For now it's better perhaps

that you

don't. There's danger in what we're doing, but not all that great a

danger. Your

bottles of wine

into a sack which he took down from a peg.

It was nearly midnight, as closely as Garion could tell, when they quietly left

the kitchen and crossed the dark courtyard. The faint creak of the gate as

Durnik swung it open seemed enormously loud.

As they passed through the gate, Garion felt a momentary pang.

Faldor's farm had

been the only home he had ever known. He was leaving now, perhaps forever, and

such things had great significance. He felt an even sharper pang at the memory

of Zubrette. The thought of Doroan and Zubrette together in the hay

barn almost

made him want to give the whole thing up altogether, but it was far too late

more than a

little frightening. He walked a bit closer to Aunt Pol.

At the top of the hill he stopped and glanced back. Faldor's farm
was

only a

pale, dim blur in the valley behind. Regretfully, he turned his back

on it. The

valley ahead was very dark, and even the road was lost in the gloom

before them.

Chapter Six

THEY HAD WALKED for miles, how many Garion could not say. He
nodded.as he

walked, and sometimes stumbled over unseen stones on the dark
road.

More than

anything now he wanted to sleep. His eyes burned, and his legs

trembled on the

verge of exhaustion.

Is that wise?" Durnik asked. "There are woods hereabout, and I've

heard that

there may be robbers hiding there. Even if there aren't any robbers,

aren't we

likely to lose our way in the dark?" He looked up at the murky sky,

his plain

face, dimly seen, troubled. "I wish there was a moon."

"I don't think we need to be afraid of robbers," Wolf said

confidently, "and I'm

just as happy that there isn't a moon. I don't think we're being

followed yet,

but it's just as well that no one happens to see us pass. Murgo gold

can buy

most secrets." And with that he led them into the fields that lay

beside the

road.

For Garion the fields were impossible. If he had stumbled now and

How can we find our way in there?" he demanded, peering into the utter darkness of the woods.

"There's a woodcutter's track not far to this side," Wolf said, pointing. "We only have a little farther to go." And he set off again, following the edge of the dark woods, with Garion and the others stumbling along behind him. "Here we are," he said finally, stopping to allow them to catch up. "It's going to be very dark in there, and the track isn't wide. I'll go first, and the rest of you follow me."

"I'll be right behind you, Garion," Durnik said. "Don't worry. Everything will be all right." There was a note in the smith's voice, however, that hinted that

know where

he was going and was merely floundering along blindly, trusting to luck.

"Stop," a rumbling voice suddenly, shockingly, said directly ahead of them.

Garion's eyes, accustomed slightly now to the gloom of the woods, saw

a vague

outline of something so huge that it could not possibly be a man.

"A giant!" he screamed in a sudden panic. Then, because he was exhausted and

because everything that had happened that evening had simply piled too much upon

him all at one time, his nerve broke and he bolted into the trees.

"Garion!" Aunt Pol's voice cried out after him, "come back!"

But panic had taken hold of him. He ran on, falling over roots and bushes,

crashing into trees and tangling his legs in brambles. It seemed like

He lay on the damp earth, gasping and sobbing, trying to clear his head.

And then there were hands on him, horrid, unseen hands. A thousand terrors flashed through his mind at once, and he struggled desperately, trying to draw his dagger.

"Oh, no," a voice said. "None of that, my rabbit." His dagger was taken from him.

"Are you going to eat me?" Garion babbled, his voice breaking.

His captor laughed.

"On your feet, rabbit," he said, and Garion felt himself pulled up by a strong hand. His arm was taken in a firm grasp, and he was half dragged through the woods.

Somewhere ahead there was a light, a winking fire among the trees,

There were three wagons sitting in a rough half circle around the fire. Durnik was there, and Wolf, and Aunt Pol, and with them a man so huge that

Garion's mind simply refused to accept the possibility that he was real. His tree-trunk sized legs were wrapped in furs cross-tied with leather thongs, and he wore a chain-mail shirt that reached to his knees, belted at the waist. From the belt hung a ponderous sword on one side and a short-handled axe on the other. His

hair was in braids, and he had a vast, bristling red beard.

As they came into the light, Garion was able to see the man who had captured

him. He was a small man, scarcely taller than Garion himself, and his face was

sword did little to contradict the implications of the face.

"Here's our rabbit," the small, weasel-like man announced as he pulled Garion

into the circle of the firelight. "And a merry chase he led me, too." Aunt Pol was furious.

"Don't you ever do that again," she said sternly to Garion.

"Not so quick, Mistress Pol," Wolf said. "It's better for him to run than to

fight just yet. Until he's bigger, his feet are his best friends."

"Have we been captured by robbers?" Garion asked in a quavering voice.

"Robbers?" Wolf laughed. "What a wild imagination you have, boy.

These two are our friends."

"Friends?" Garion asked doubtfully, looking suspiciously at the redbearded giant

and the weasel-faced man beside him. "Are you sure?" The giant laughed then too,

This is Garion," Wolf said, pointing at the boy. "You already know

Mistress

Pol." His voice seemed to stress Aunt Pol's name. "And this is

Durnik, a brave

smith who has decided to accompany us."

"Mistress Pol?" the smaller man said, laughing suddenly for no
apparent reason.

"I am known so," Aunt Pol said pointedly.

"It shall be my pleasure to call you so then, great lady," the small
man said

with a mocking bow.

"Our large friend here is Barak," Wolf went on. "He's useful to have
around when

there's trouble. As you can see, he's not a Sendar, but a Cherek
from

Val

Alorn."

Silk - not

much of a name, I'll admit, but one which suits me - and I am
from Boktor in

Drasnia. I am a juggler and an acrobat."

"And also a thief and a spy," Barak rumbled good-naturedly.

"We all have our faults," Silk admitted blandly, scratching at his
scraggly
whiskers.

"And I'm called Mister Wolf in this particular time and place," the
old man
said. "I'm rather fond of the name, since the boy there gave it to
me."

"Mister Wolf?" Silk asked, and then he laughed again. "What a
merry

name for

you, old friend."

"I'm delighted that you find it so, old friend," Wolf said flatly.

"Mister Wolf

names.

The fact

that Aunt Pol might not be whom he had always thought she was was
very

disturbing. One of the foundation stones of his entire life had just
disappeared.

The food which Silk brought was rough, a turnip stew with thick
chunks of meat

floating in it and crudely hacked off slabs of bread, but Garion,
amazed at the

size of his appetite, fell into it as if he had not eaten for days.

And then, his stomach full and his feet warmed by the crackling
campfire, he sat

on a log, half dozing.

"What now, Old Wolf?" he heard Aunt Pol ask. "What's the idea be-
hind

these

clumsy wagons?"

Nothing is more unremarkable in Sendaria than wagons. They're so common that they're almost invisible. This is how we're going to travel. We're now honest freight haulers."

"We're what?" Aunt Pol demanded.

"Wagoneers," Wolf said expansively. "Hard-working transporters of the

goods of

Sendaria - out to make our fortunes and seek adventure, bitten by the

desire to

travel, incurably infected by the romance of the road."

"Have you any idea how long it takes to travel by wagon?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Six to ten leagues a day," he told her. "Slow, I'll grant you, but it's better to move slowly than to attract attention."

She shook her head in disgust.

And what exactly are we carrying to Darine?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Turnips, great lady," Silk said. "Last morning my large friend and I purchased

three wagonloads of them in the village of Winold."

"Turnips?" Aunt Pol asked in a tone that spoke volumes.

"Yes, great lady, turnips," Silk said solemnly.

"Are we ready, then?" Wolf asked.

"We are," the giant Barak said shortly, rising with his mail shirt clinking.

"We should look the part," Wolf said carefully, eyeing Barak up and down. "Your

armor, my friend, is not the sort of garb an honest wagoneer would wear. I think

you should change it for stout wool."

Barak's face looked injured.

"I could wear a tunic over it," he suggested tentatively.

"You rattle," Silk pointed out, "and armor has a distinctive fragrance about it.

reddish rust

stains.

"I'd change tunics as well," Silk suggested. "Your shirt smells as bad as the armor."

Barak glowered at him. "Anything else?" he demanded. "I hope, for decency's sake, you don't plan to strip me entirely."

Silk laughed.

Barak pulled off his tunic. His torso was enormous and covered with thick red hair.

"You look like a rug," Silk observed.

"I can't help that," Barak said. "Winters are cold in Cherek, and the hair helps me to stay warm." He put on a fresh tunic.

"It's just as cold in Drasnia," Silk said. "Are you absolutely sure your

Silk laughed again. "I've been in trouble most of my life, friend

Barak."

"I wonder why," Barak said ironically.

"I think all this could be discussed later," Wolf said pointedly.. "I'd rather

like to be away from here before the week's out, if I can."

"Of course, old friend," Silk said, jumping up. "Barak and I can amuse each other later."

Three teams of sturdy horses were picketed nearby, and they all helped to harness them to the wagons.

"I'll put out the fire," Silk said and fetched two pails of water from a small brook that trickled nearby. The fire hissed when the water struck it, and great clouds of steam boiled up toward the low-hanging tree limbs.

open

fields, and

Wolf looked around carefully to see if anyone was in sight.

"I don't see anybody," he said. "Let's get moving."

"Ride with me, good smith," Barak said to Durnik. "Conversation with

an honest

man is much preferable to a night spent enduring the insults of an

over-clever

Drasnian."

"As you wish, friend," Durnik said politely.

"I'll lead," Silk said. "I'm familiar with the back roads and lanes

hereabouts.

I'll put us on the high road beyond Upper Gralt before noon. Barak

and Durnik

can bring up the rear. I'm sure that between them they can dis-

courage

anyone who

might feel like following us."

for Mister

Wolf to say that the two they had just met were friends, but the
fright he had
suffered in the wood was still too fresh in his mind to make him
quite
comfortable with them.

The sacks of musty-smelling turnips were lumpy, but Garion soon
managed to push
and shove a kind of half reclining seat for himself among them just
behind Aunt

Pol and Mister Woif. He was sheltered from the wind, Aunt Pol was
close, and his

cloak, spread over him, kept him warm. He was altogether comfort-
able,

and,

despite the excitement of the night's events, he soon drifted into a
half

of

a small

village sleeping in the last chill hours of the autumn night. Garion

opened his

eyes and looked sleepily at the tall, narrow houses with their tiny

windows all

dark.

A dog barked briefly, then retreated back to his warm place under

some stairs.

Garion wondered what village it might be and how many people slept

under those

steep-peaked tile roofs, unaware of the passage of their three

wagons.

The cobbled street was very narrow, and Garion could almost have

reached out and

touched the weathered stones of the houses as they passed.

And then the nameless village was behind them, and they were back

on

tone.

It occurred to Garion that in all the excitement he had never actually found out exactly what it was that they were seeking. He kept his eyes closed and listened.

"Don't start with the `what ifs,' " Wolf said irritably. "If we sit around saying `what if,' we'll never do anything."

"I was merely asking," Aunt Pol said.

"If he hasn't gone through Darine, we'll turn south - to Muros. He may have joined a caravan there to take the Great North Road to Boktor."

"And if he hasn't gone through Muros?"

"Then we go on to Camaar."

"And then?"

"We'll see when we get to Camaar." His tone was final, as if he no longer wished

lowering clouds,

and they moved on through the tattered, windswept end of the long
night in their

search for something which, though he could not yet even identify
it,

was so

important that Garion's entire life had been uprooted in a single day
because of

it..Chapter Seven

IT TOOK THEM FOUR DAYS to reach Darine On the north coast.

The first

day went

quite well, since, though it was cloudy and the wind kept blowing,

the air was

dry and the roads were good. They passed quiet farmsteads and an

occasional

farmer bent to his labor in the middle of a field. Inevitably each

man stopped

excitement. The villagers watched, idly curious, until it became

obvious that

the wagons were not going to stop, and then they sniffed and went

back to their

own concerns.

As afternoon of that first day lowered toward evening, Silk led
them

into a

grove of trees at the roadside, and they made preparations for the

night. They

ate the last of the ham and cheese Wolf had filched from Faldor's

pantry and

then spread their blankets on the ground beneath the wagons. The

ground was hard

and cold, but the exciting sense of being on some great adventure

helped Garion

to endure the discomfort.

The next morning, however, it began to rain. It was a fine, misty

The adventure

was growing much less exciting.

The road became muddy and slick, and the horses struggled their way

up each hill

and had to be rested often. On the first day they had covered eight leagues;

after that they were lucky to make five.

Aunt Pol became waspish and short-tempered.

"This is idiocy," she said to Mister Wolf about noon on the third day.

"Everything is idiocy if you choose to look at it in the proper light," he

replied philosophically.

"Why wagoneers?" she demanded. "There are faster ways to travels wealthy family

in a proper carriage, for instance, or Imperial messengers on good horses -

Sendaria is

looking for us by now."

"Why are we hiding from the Murgos, Mister Wolf?" Garion asked,

hesitant to

interrupt, but impelled by curiosity to try to penetrate the mystery

behind

their flight. "Aren't they just merchants-like the Tolnedrans and

the

Drasnians?"

"The Murgos have no real interest in trade," Wolf explained.

"Nadraks

are

merchants, but the Murgos are warriors. The Murgos pose as mer-

chants

for the

same reason that we pose as wagoneers - so that they can move

about

more or less

Not really," Garion said, and then instantly knew that he had made a

mistake.

"Good," she said. "In the back of Barak's wagon you'll find the dirty dishes

from this morning's meal. You'll also find a bucket. Fetch the bucket

and run to

that stream ahead for water, then return to Barak's wagon and wash

the dishes."

"In cold water?" he objected.

"Now, Garion," she said firmly.

Grumbling, he climbed down off the slowly moving wagon.

In the late afternoon of the fourth day they came over a high hill-top

and saw

below the city of Darine and beyond the city the leaden gray sea.

Garion caught his breath. To his eyes the city looked very large. Its

that smell

had been coming to him on the wind for the past league or so, but

now, inhaling

deeply, he breathed in that perfume of the sea for the first time in

his life.

His spirit soared.

"Finally," Aunt Pol said.

Silk had stopped the lead wagon and came walking back. His hood

was

pulled back

slightly, and the rain ran down his long nose to drip from its

pointed tip.

"Do we stop here or go on down to the city?" he asked.

"We go to the city," Aunt Pol said. "I'm not going to sleep under a

wagon when there are inns so close at hand."

"Honest wagoneers would seek out an inn," Mister Wolf agreed, "and

a

warm

At the city gate two watchmen in stained tunics and wearing

rustspotted helmets

came out of the tiny watch house just inside the gate.

"What's your business in Darine?" one of them asked Silk.

"I am Ambar of Kotu," Silk lied pleasantly, "a poor Drasnian merchant

hoping to

do business in your splendid city."

"Splendid?" one of the watchmen snorted.

"What have you in your wagons, merchant?" the other inquired.

"Turnips," Silk said deprecatingly. "My family has been in the spice trade for

generations, but I'm reduced to peddling turnips." He sighed. "The world is a

topsy-turvy place, is it not, good friend?"

"We're obliged to inspect your wagons," the watchman said. "It'll take some

time, I'm afraid."

That's difficult when one doesn't have much money. The watchman suggested hopefully.

"I'd be more than pleased if you'd accept some small token of friendship from me to aid you in your wetting," Silk offered.

"You're most kind," the watchman replied with a slight bow.

Some coins changed hands, and the wagons moved on into the city uninspected.

From the hilltop Darine had looked quite splendid, but Garion found it much less

so as they clattered through the wet streets. The buildings all seemed the same

with a kind of self important aloofness about them, and the streets were

littered and dirty. The salt tang of the sea was tainted here with the smell of

dead fish, and the faces of the people hurrying along were grim and

Don't fill the boy's head with nonsense," Aunt Poi said. "The people aren't really unhappy, Garion. They're just all in a hurry. They have important affairs

to attend to and they're afraid they'll be late. That's all."

"I don't think I'd like to live here," Garion said. "It seems like a bleak, unfriendly kind of place." He sighed. "Sometimes I wish we were all back at Faldor's farm."

"There are worse places than Faldor's," Wolf agreed.

The inn Silk chose for them was near the docks, and the smell of the sea and the rank detritus of the meeting of sea and land was strong there. The inn, however, was a stout building with stables attached and storage sheds for the

It's a suitable place," Silk announced as he came back out to the wagons after speaking at some length with the innkeeper. "The kitchen seems clean, and I saw no bugs when I inspected the sleeping chambers."

"I will inspect it," Aunt Pol said, climbing down from the wagon.

"As you wish, great lady," Silk said with a polite bow.

Aunt Pol's inspection took much longer than Silk's, and it was nearly dark when she returned to the courtyard. "Adequate," she sniffed, "but only barely."

"It's not as if we planned to settle in for the winter, Pol," Wolf said. "At most we'll only be here a few days."

She ignored that.

"I've ordered hot water sent up to our chambers," she announced.

"I'll take the

difficult a name

to remember. He was gloomily convinced that even if he lived to
have

a long gray

beard, they would still speak of him as the boy.

After the horses and wagons had been attended to and they had all
washed up,

they went down again to the common room and dined. The meal cer-
tainly

didn't

match up to Aunt Pol's, but it was a welcome change from turnips.

Garion was

absolutely certain that he'd never be able to look a turnip in the
face again

for the rest of his life.

After they had eaten, the men loitered over their ale pots, and
Aunt

Pol's face

The next day Mister Wolf and Silk left the inn early and were gone all day.

Garion had positioned himself in a strategic place in hopes that he might be

noticed and asked to go along, but he was not; so when Durnik went down to look

after the horses, he accompanied him instead.

"Durnik," he said after they had fed and watered the animals and the

smith was

examining their hooves for cuts or stone bruises, "does all this seem strange to

you?"

Durnik carefully lowered the leg of the patient horse he was checking.

"All what, Garion?" he asked, his plain face sober.

"Everything," Garion said rather vaguely. "This journey, Barak and Silk, Mister

things

aren't

what they seem - not what they seem at all."

"Does Aunt Pol seem different to you?" Garion asked. "What I mean is,

they all

treat her as if she were a noblewoman or something, and she acts differently

too, now that we're away from Faldor's farm."

"Mistress Pol is a great lady," Durnik said. "I've always known that." His voice

had that same respectful tone it always had when he spoke of her, and

Garion

knew that it was useless to try to make Durnik perceive anything unusual about her.

"And Mister Wolf," Garion said, trying another tack. "I always

better for simple folk such as you and I not to ask too many

questions, but to

keep our eyes and ears open."

"Will you be going back to Faldor's farm when this is all over?"

Garion asked

carefully.

Durnik considered that, looking out across the rainswept courtyard

of

the inn.

"No," he said finally in a soft voice. "I'll follow as long as Mistress

Pol

allows me to."

On an impulse Garion reached out and patted the smith's shoulder.

"Everything is

going to turn out for the best, Durnik."

Durnik sighed.

"Let's hope so," he said and turned his attention back to the horses.

"Durnik," Garion asked, "did you know my parents?"

quite so

angry. She talked with Faldor for a while and then went to work in the kitchen -

you know Faldor. He never turned anyone away in his whole life. At first she was

just a helper, but that didn't last too long. Our old cook was getting fat and

lazy, and she finally went off to live with her youngest daughter.

After that,

Mistress Pol ran the kitchen."

"She was a lot younger then, wasn't she?" Garion asked.

"No," Durnik said thoughtfully. "Mistress Pol never changes. She looks exactly

the same now as she did that first day."

"I'm sure it only seems that way," Garion said. "Everybody gets older."

"Not Mistress Pol," Durnik said.

That evening Wolf and his sharp-nosed friend returned, their faces

polishing.

"No trace at all?" he asked.

"Not a hint," Wolf said. "He hasn't gone through here."

"Where now, then?" Barak asked, setting his mail shirt aside.

"Muros," Wolf said.

Barak rose and went to the window. "The rain is slackening," he said,

"but the

roads are going to be difficult."

"We won't be able to leave tomorrow anyway," Silk said, lounging on

a

stool near

the door. "I have to dispose of our turnips. If we carry them out of

Darine with

us, it will seem curious, and we don't want to be remembered by

anyone who might

have occasion to talk to any wandering Murgo."

"I suppose you're right," Wolf said. "I hate to lose the time, but

there's no

might even

make a good profit."

"Don't worry about that," Wolf said. "The turnips have served their purpose. All

we need to do now is to get rid of them."

"It's a matter of principle," Silk said airily. "Besides, if I don't try to

strike a hard bargain, that too would be remembered. Don't be concerned. The

business won't take long and won't delay us."

"Could I go along with you, Silk?" Garion asked hopefully. "I haven't seen any

part of Darine except for this inn."

Silk looked inquiringly at Aunt Pol.

She considered for a moment. "I don't suppose it would do any harm,"

she said,

"and it'll give me time to attend to some things."

said as

they walked along the littered, cobblestoned streets, "is not to appear too

eager to sell - and to know the market, of course."

"That sounds reasonable," Garion said politely.

"Yesterday I made a few inquiries," Silk went on. "Turnips are selling on the

docks of Kotu in Drasnia for a Drasnian silver link per hundredweight."

"A what?" Garion asked.

"It's a Drasnian coin," Silk explained, "about the same as a silver imperial -

not quite, but close enough. The merchant will try to buy our turnips for no

more than a quarter of that, but he'll go as high as half."

"How do you know that?"

"It's customary."

"How many turnips do we have?" Garion asked, stepping around a pile

Fifteen imperials," Silk supplied. Or three gold crowns.

"Gold?" Garion asked. Because gold coins were so rare in country dealings, the

word seemed to have an almost magic quality.

Silk nodded. "It's always preferable," he said. "It's easier to carry. The

weight of silver becomes burdensome."

"And how much did we pay for the turnips?"

"Five imperials," Silk said.

"The farmer gets five, we get fifteen, and the merchant gets thirty?" Garion

asked incredulously. "That hardly seems fair."

Silk shrugged. "It's the way things are," he said. "There's the merchant's

house." He pointed at a rather imposing building with broad steps.

"When we go

in, he'll pretend to be very busy and not at all interested in us.

Later, while

he'll think to gain advantage over me by flattering you.

"What a strange notion," Garion said.

"I'll tell him many things," Silk went on, talking very rapidly now.

His eyes

seemed to glitter, and his nose was actually twitching. "Pay no

attention to

what I say, and don't let any surprise show on your face. He'll be

watching us

both very closely."

"You're going to lie?" Garion was shocked.

"It's expected," Silk said. "The merchant will also lie. The one of

us who lies

the best will get the better of the bargain."

"It all seems terribly involved," Garion said.

"It's a game," Silk said, his ferretlike face breaking into a grin.

"A very

exciting game that's played all over the world. Good players get

rich, and bad

color

and a

close-fitting cap. He behaved much as Silk had predicted that he

would, sitting

before a plain table and leafing through many scraps of parchment

with a busy

frown on his face while Silk and Garion waited for him to notice

them.

"Very well, then," he said finally. "You have business with me?"

"We have some turnips," Silk said somewhat deprecatingly.

"That's truly unfortunate, friend," the merchant said, assuming a

long face.

"The wharves at Kotu groan with turnips just now. It would hardly

pay

me to take

them off your hands at any price."

Silk shrugged. "Perhaps the Chereks or the Algars then," he said.

"Their markets

and I are countrymen. Perhaps as a favor I'll look at your turnips.

"Your time is valuable," Silk said. "If you aren't in the market for turnips,

why should we trouble you further?"

"I might still be able to find a buyer somewhere," the merchant protested, "if

the merchandise is of good quality." He took the bag from Garion and

opened it.

Garion listened with fascination as Silk and the merchant fenced politely with

each other, each attempting to gain the advantage.

"What a splendid boy this is," the merchant said, suddenly seeming to

notice

Garion for the first time.

"An orphan," Silk said, "placed in my care. I'm attempting to teach him the

Silk and the

merchant wove intricate designs in the air, sometimes flickering so rapidly that

the eye could scarce follow them. Silk's long, slender fingers seemed

to dance,

and the merchant's eyes were fixed upon them, his forehead breaking

into a sweat

at the intensity of his concentration.

"Done, then?" Silk said finally, breaking the long silence in the room.

"Done," the merchant agreed somewhat ruefully.

"It's always a pleasure doing business with an honest man," Silk said.

"I've learned much today," the merchant said. "I hope you don't intend to remain

in this business for long, friend. If you do, I might just as well

I thought so at first," the merchant said, shaking his head, "but

I'm no match

for you. Deliver your turnips to my warehouse on Bedik wharf tomorrow morning."

He scratched a few lines on a piece of parchment with a quill. "My overseer will pay you."

Silk bowed and took the parchment. "Come along, boy," he said to Garion, and led the way from the room.

"What happened?" Garion asked when they were outside in the blustery street.

"We got the price I wanted," Silk said, somewhat smugly.. "But you didn't say anything," Garion objected.

"We spoke at great length, Garion," Silk said. "Weren't you watching?"

presence of

strangers without being overheard. An adept can conduct business while

discussing the weather, if he chooses."

"Will you teach it to me?" Garion asked, fascinated.

"It takes a long time to learn," Silk told him.

"Isn't the trip to Muros likely to take a long time?" Garion suggested.

Silk shrugged. "As you wish," he said. "It won't be easy, but it will help pass

the time, I suppose."

"Are we going back to the inn now?" Garion asked.

"Not right away," Silk said. "We'll need a cargo to explain our entry into

Muros."

"I thought we were going to leave with the wagons empty."

"We are."

"But you just said-"

or

Camaar."

"It sounds very complicated," Garion said doubtfully.

"It's not really," Silk assured him. "Come along, my boy, you'll see." The

merchant was a Tolnedran who wore a flowing blue robe and a disdainful

expression on his face. He was talking with a grim-faced Murgo as Silk and

Garion entered his counting room. The Murgo, like all of his race Garion had

ever seen, had deep scars on his face, and his black eyes were penetrating.

Silk touched Garion's shoulder with a cautionary hand when they entered and saw

the Murgo, then he stepped forward. "Forgive me, noble merchant,"

he

something important,

"I was just wondering if you might have a cargo for me," Silk replied.

"No," the Tolnedran said shortly. "Nothing." He started to turn back to the

Murgo, then stopped and looked sharply at Silk. "Aren't you Ambar of

Kotu?" he

asked. "I thought you dealt in spices."

Garion recognized the name Silk had given the watchmen at the gates

of the city.

It was evident that the little man had used the name before.

"Alas," Silk sighed. "My last venture lies at the bottom of the sea just off the

hook of Arendia - two full shiploads bound for Tol Honeth. A sudden storm and I

am a pauper."

Kotu.

"Reverses come to us all," the Tolnedran said philosophically.

"So this is the famous Ambar of Kotu," the Murgo said, his harshly accented

voice quite soft. He looked Silk up and down, his black eyes probing.

"It was a

fortunate chance that brought me out today. I am enriched by meeting

so

illustrious a man."

Silk bowed politely. "You're too kind, noble sir," he said.

"I am Asharak of Rak Goska," the Murgo introduced himself. He turned

to the

Tolnedran. "We can put aside our discussion for a bit, Mingan," he

said. "We

will accrue much honor by assisting so great a merchant to begin

recouping his

impassive and

his eyes dull even as his thoughts raced.

"I would gladly help you, my friend," Mingan said, "but I have no cargo in

Darine at the moment."

"I'm already committed from Darine to Medalia," Silk said quickly.

"Three

wagonloads of Cherek iron. And I also have a contract to move furs from Muros to

Camaar. It's the fifty leagues from Medalia to Muros that concerns me. Wagons

traveling empty earn no profit."

"Medalia." Mingan frowned. "Let me examine my records. It seems to me

that I do

have something there." He stepped out of the room. "Your exploits are

legendary

investigating the extent of Tolnedran intelligence gathering

activities in your

kingdom. I took some chances I probably shouldn't have, and the

Tolnedrans found

out what I was up to. The charges they leveled at me were

fabrications."

"How did you manage to escape?" Asharak asked. "The soldiers of

King

Taur Urgas

nearly dismantled the kingdom searching for you."

"I chanced to meet a Thullish lady of high station," Silk said. "I

managed to

prevail upon her to smuggle me across the border into Mishrak ac

Thull."

"Ah," Asharak said, smiling briefly. "Thullish ladies are notoriously

easy to

prevail upon."

asked

casually.

"They won't even talk to me," Silk said with a gloomy expression.

"Ambar the

spice merchant is useful to them, but Ambar the poor wagoneer is

quite another

thing."

"Of course," Asharak said, and his tone indicated that he obviously

did not

believe what he had been told. He glanced briefly and without

seeming

interest

at Garion, and Garion felt a strange shock of recognition. Without

knowing

exactly how it was that he knew, he was instantly sure that Asharak

of Rak Goska

had known him for all of his life. There was a familiarity in that

glance, a

Garion

returned the gaze without expression, and the faintest hint of a smile flickered

across Asharak's scarred face.

Mingan returned to the room then. "I have some hams on a farm near

Medalia," he

announced. "When do you expect to arrive in Muros?"

"Fifteen or twenty days," Silk told him.

Mingan nodded. "I'll give you a contract to move my hams to Muros," he offered.

"Seven silver nobles per wagonload." "Tolnedran nobles or Sendarian?" Silk asked quickly.

"This is Sendaria, worthy Ambar."

"We're citizens of the world, noble merchant," Silk pointed out.

"Transactions

between us have always been in Tolnedran coin."

Mingan sighed. "You were ever quick, worthy Ambar," he said. "Very

Silk muttered when they reached the street. The rate should have been ten, not seven."

"What about the Murgos?" Garion asked. Once again there was the familiar reluctance to reveal too much about the strange, unspoken link that had existed between him and the figure that now at least had a name.

Silk shrugged.

"He knows I'm up to something, but he doesn't know exactly what just

as I know

that he's up to something. I've had dozens of meetings like that.

Unless our

purposes happen to collide, we won't interfere with each other.

Asharak and I

are both professionals."

"You're a very strange person, Silk," Garion said.

their turnips

to the warehouse of the Drasnian merchant. Then, their wagons
rumbling empty,

they rolled out of Darine, bound toward the south.

The rain had ceased, but the morning was overcast and blustery.

On the hill outside town Silk turned to Garion, who rode beside him.

"Very well," he said, "let's begin." He moved his fingers in front of
Garion's

face. "This means 'Good morning.' "

Chapter Eight

AFTER THE FIRST DAY the wind blew itself out, and the pale
autumn sun

reappeared. Their route southward led them along the Darine River,

a

turbulent

stream that rushed down from the mountains on its way to the Gulf

of

Cherek. The

ing.fingers.

"Don't shout," Silk instructed as Garion practiced.

"Shout?" Garion asked, puzzled.

"Keep your gestures small. Don't exaggerate them. The idea is to make

the whole

business inconspicuous."

"I'm only practicing," Garion said.

"Better to break bad habits before they become too strong," Silk said. "And be

careful not to mumble."

"Mumble?"

"Form each phrase precisely. Finish one before you go on to the next.

Don't

worry about speed. That comes with time."

By the third day their conversations were half in words and half in gestures,

It progresses," Silk said. "I expect it will go more rapidly when

the boy

outgrows his tendency to use baby talk."

Garion was crushed.

Barak, who was also dismounting, laughed.

"I've often thought that the secret language might be useful to know," he said,

"but fingers built to grip a sword are not nimble enough for it." He held out

his huge hand and shook his head.

Durnik lifted his face and sniffed at the air. "It's going to be cold tonight,"

he said. "We'll have frost before morning."

Barak also sniffed, and then he nodded. "You're right, Durnik," he rumbled.

"We'll need a good fire tonight." He reached into the wagon and lifted out his axe.

and

reached

back into the wagon for his sword.

"Four," Silk said. He stepped to his own wagon and took his own sword

out from

under the seat.

"We're far enough from the road," Wolf said. "If we stay still, they'll pass without seeing us."

"That won't hide us from Grolims," Aunt Pol said. "They won't be searching with their eyes." She made two quick gestures to Wolf which Garion did not

recognize..No, Wolf gestured back. Let us instead - He also made an unrecognizable gesture.

Aunt Pol looked at him for a moment and then nodded.

"All of you stay quite still," Wolf instructed them. Then he turned

approaching riders and the threat they seemed to pose, a kind of

dreamy

lassitude fell over him. It was as if his mind had quite suddenly

gone to sleep,

leaving his body still standing there watching incuriously the

passage of those

dark-mantled horsemen along the road.

How long he stood so he was not able to say; but when he roused

from

his half

dream, the riders were gone and the sun had set. The sky to the

east

had grown

purple with approaching evening, and there were tatters of sun-

stained

clouds

along the western horizon.

"Murgos," Aunt Pol said quite calmly, "and one Grolim." She started

something else.

I think it might be better if we moved off the welltraveled roads.

Do

you know a

back way to Medalia?"

"Old friend," Silk replied modestly, "I know a back way to every place."

"Good," Wolf said. "Let's move deeper into these woods. I'd prefer

it

if no

chance gleam from our fire reached the road."

Garion had seen the cloaked Murgos only briefly. There was no way

to

be sure if

one of them had been that same Asharak he had finally met after

all

the years of

knowing him only as a dark figure on a black horse, but somehow he

while with it

the next morning, and the horses' breath steamed in the chill air as they set

out. They moved along lanes and little-used tracks that were partially

weed-choked. The going was slower than it might have been on the main

road, but

they all felt much safer..It took them five more days to reach the village of Winold, some

twelve leagues

to the north of Medalia. There, at Aunt Pol's insistence, they stopped overnight

at a somewhat rundown inn. "I refuse to sleep on the ground again," she

announced flatly.

After they had eaten in the dingy common room of the inn, the men turned to

habit of

being deliberately deceptive, but it had occurred to him in the last day or so

that he had not had a single moment alone since they had left Faldor's farm. He

was not by nature a solitary boy, but he had begun to feel quite keenly the

restriction of always being in the presence of his elders.

The village of Winold was not a large one, and he explored it from one end to

the other in less than half an hour, loitering along its narrow, cobblestoned

streets in the crispness of the early evening air. The windows of the houses

glowed with golden candlelight, and Garion suddenly felt a great surge of

homesickness.

Then, at the next corner of the crooked street, in the brief light

The sudden white gleam from one of his eyes. It was Brill. The

unkempt man moved

quickly out of the light, obviously not wishing to be seen, then he stopped.

Garion hugged the wall, watching Brill's impatient pacing at the corner. The

wisest thing would have been to slip away and hurry back to the inn, but Garion

quickly dismissed that idea. He was safe enough here in the deep shadow beside

the wall, and he was too caught up by curiosity to leave without seeing exactly

what Brill was doing here.

After what seemed hours, but was really only a few more minutes, another shadowy

shape came scurrying down the street. The man was hooded, so it was

impossible

ordinary. While it was not precisely illegal for Sendar's of the lower classes to bear arms, it was uncommon enough to attract notice.

Garion tried to edge close enough to hear what Brill said to the man with the

sword, but they spoke only briefly. There was a clink as some coins changed

hands, and then the two separated. Brill moved quietly off around the

corner,

and the man with the sword walked up the narrow, crooked street toward the spot

where Garion stood.

There was no place to hide, and as soon as the hooded man came close

enough, he

would be able to see Garion. To turn and run would be even more dangerous. Since

into the

squeaky registers of a much younger boy. "Cold night, isn't it?"

The hooded man grunted and seemed to relax.

Garion's legs quivered with the desire to run. He passed the man
with

the sword,

and his back prickled as he felt that suspicious gaze follow him.

"Boy," the man said abruptly.

Garion stopped.

"Yes, sir?" he said, turning.

"Do you live here?"

"Yes, sir," Garion lied, trying to keep his voice from trembling.

"Is there a tavern hereabouts?"

Garion had just explored the town, and he spoke confidently.

"Yes, sir," he said. "You go on up this street to the next corner and

turn to

your left. There are torches out front. You can't miss it."

The man did not answer, and Garion marched on down to the corner, exhilarated by his brief encounter. Once he was around the corner, however, he dropped the guise of a simple village boy and ran.

He was breathless by the time he reached the inn and burst into the

smoky common

room where Mister Wolf and the others sat talking by the fire.

At the last instant, realizing that to blurt out his news in the common room

where others might overhear would be a mistake, he forced himself to

walk calmly to where his friends sat. He stood before the fire as if warming

himself and

spoke in a low tone. "I just saw Brill in the village," he said.

"Brill?" Silk asked. "Who's Brill?"

you should have killed him," Barak rumbled.

"This isn't Cherek," Wolf said. "Sendars are touchy about casual killings." He

turned to Garion. "Did he see you?" he asked.

"No," Garion said. "I saw him first and hid in the dark. He met another man and

gave him some money, I think. The other man had a sword." Briefly

he

described

the whole incident.

"This changes things," Wolf said. "I think we'll leave earlier in the morning

than we'd planned."

"It wouldn't be hard to make Brill lose interest in us," Durnik said.

"I could

probably find him and hit him on the head a few times."

"Tempting." Wolf grinned. "But I think it might be better just to slip out of

said,

rising. "If it turns out that he's following us, I'd rather know what he looks

like. I don't like being followed by strangers."

"Discreetly," Wolf cautioned.

Silk laughed. "Have you ever known me to be otherwise?" he asked.

"This won't

take long. Where did you say that tavern was, Garion?"

Garion gave him directions.

Silk nodded, his eyes bright and his long nose twitching. He turned, went

quickly across the smoky common room and out into the chill night.

"I wonder," Barak considered. "If we're being followed this closely, wouldn't it

be better to discard the wagons and this tiresome disguise, buy good

horses and

simply make straight for Muros at a gallop?"

Brin is still working for the Murgos, I'd rather just slip away and leave them all beating the bushes here in central Sendaria." He stood up. "I'm going to step upstairs and let Pol know what's happened." He crossed the common room and mounted the stairs.

"I still don't like it," Barak muttered, his face dark.

They sat quietly then, waiting for Silk's return. The fire popped, and Garion started slightly. It occurred to him as he waited that he had changed a great deal since they'd left Faldor's farm. Everything had seemed simple then with the world neatly divided into friends and enemies. In the short time since they'd left, however, he'd begun to perceive complexities that he hadn't

learned not to accept anything at face value. Briefly he regretted the loss of his former innocence, but the dry voice told him that such regret was childish.

Then Mister Wolf came back down the stairs and rejoined them.

After

about a half hour Silk returned. "Thoroughly disreputable-looking fellow," he said, standing in front of the fire. "My guess is that he's a common footpad." "Brill's seeking his natural level," Wolf observed. "If he's still working for the Murgos, he's probably hiring ruffians to watch for us. They'll be looking for four people on foot, however, rather than six in wagons. If we can get out

tween

us and

this place when the sun comes up."

Garion scarcely slept that night; when he did, there were night-
mares

about a

hooded man with a cruel sword chasing him endlessly down dark,
narrow

streets.

When Barak woke them, Garion's eyes felt sandy, and his head was
thick from the
exhausting night.

Aunt Pol carefully drew the shutters in their chamber before light-
ing

a single

candle. "It's going to be colder now," she said, opening the large
bundle she'd

I'm not a baby any more, Aunt Poi," Garion said.. Do you enjoy being cold?"

"Well, no, but " He stopped, unable to think of any words to explain how he felt. He began to dress. He could hear the faint murmur of the others

talking softly in the adjoining chamber in that curious, hushed tone that men

always assume when they rise before the sun.

"We're ready, Mistress Poi," Silk's voice came through the doorway.

"Let's leave then," she said, drawing up the hood of her cloak.

The moon had risen late that night and shone brightly on the frostsilvered

stones outside the inn. Durnik had hitched the horses to the wagons and had led them out of the stable.

looking

moonlight

seemed to have leached all color from them.

"As soon as we're well out of earshot," Wolf said, climbing up into his wagon,

"let's put some significant distance between us and this place. The wagons are

empty, and a little run won't hurt the horses."

"Truly," Silk agreed.

They all mounted their wagons and set off at a walk. The stars glittered

overhead in the crisp, cold sky. The fields were very white in the moonlight,

and the clumps of trees back from the road very dark.

Just as they went over the first hilltop, Garion looked back at the dark cluster

of houses in the valley behind. A single flicker of light came from a window

again, and they began to trot.

"Hang on, boy," he instructed, reached forward and slapped the reins

down

smartly on the rumps of the horses.

The wagon bounced and clattered fearfully behind the running team, and the

bitterly chill air rushed at *Garion's* face as he clung to the wagon seat.

At full gallop the three wagons plunged down into the next valley, rushing

between the frost-white fields in the bright moonlight, leaving the village and

its single light far behind.

By the time the sun rose, they had covered a good four leagues, and *Silk* reined

in his steaming horses. *Garion* felt battered and sore from the wild ride over

saged

his

fingers.

Garion offered him the reins.

"You drive," Silk told him. "My hands are frozen stiff. Just let the

horses

walk."

Garion clucked at the horses and shook the reins slightly.

Obediently, the team

started out again.

"The lane circles around to the back of that hill," Silk said,

pointing with his

chin since his hands were tucked inside his tunic. "On the far side

there's a

copse of fir trees. We'll stop there to rest the horses."

"Do you think we're being followed?" Garion asked.

"This'll be a good time to find out," Silk said.

They rounded the hill and drove on down to where the dark firs

I want to have a look at that road behind us," Silk said. "We'll go

up through

the trees to the top of the hill and see if our back trail has

attracted any

interest."

And he started up the hill, moving quite rapidly but making

absolutely no sound

as he went. Garion floundered along behind him, his feet cracking

the

dead twigs

underfoot embarrassingly until he began to catch the secret of it.

Silk nodded

approvingly once, but said nothing.

The trees ended just at the crest of the hill, and Silk stopped

there. The

valley below with the dark road passing through it was empty except

for two deer

He sat on a stump and watched the empty valley.

After a while, a cart moved slowly along the road toward Winold. It looked tiny in the distance, and its pace along the scar of the road seemed very slow.

The sun rose a bit higher, and they squinted into its full morning.brightness.

"Silk," Garion said finally in a hesitant tone.

"Yes, Garion?"

"What's this all about?" It was a bold question to ask, but Garion felt he knew

Silk well enough now to ask it.

"All what?"

"What we're doing. I've heard a few things and guessed a few more, but it

doesn't really make any sense to me."

"And just what have you guessed, Garion?" Silk asked, his small eyes very bright

Mister Wolf and Aunt Poi are not at all what they seem to be,

Garion went on.

"No," Silk agreed, "they aren't."

"I think they can do things that other people can't do," Garion said,
struggling

with the words. "Mister Wolf can follow this thing - whatever it is -
without

seeing it. And last week in those woods when the Murgos passed,
they

did

something - I don't even know how to describe it, but it was almost
as if they

reached out and put my mind to sleep. How did they do that? And
why?"

Silk chuckled.

"You're a very observant lad," he said. Then his tone became more
serious.

"We're living in momentous times, Garion. The events of a thousand

same again.

"I think that if I had my choice, I'd prefer one of those quiet centuries,"

Garion said glumly.

"Oh, no," Silk said, his lips drawing back in a ferretlike grin.

"Now's the time

to be alive - to see it all happen, to be a part of it. That makes the blood

race, and each breath is an adventure."

Garion let that pass.

"What is this thing we're following?" he asked.

"It's best if you don't even know its name," Silk told him seriously,

"or the

name of the one who stole it. There are people trying to stop us; and what you

don't know, you can't reveal."

"I'm not in the habit of talking to Murgos," Garion said stiffly.

"It's not necessary to talk to them," Silk said. "There are some

a conversation he had once had with Mister Wolf about the possible
and the
impossible.

Silk sat on the stump in the newly risen sun looking thoughtfully
down into the
still-shadowy valley, an ordinary-looking little man in ordinary-
looking
tunic
and hose and a rough brown shoulder cape with its hood turned up
over
his head.

"You were raised as a Sendar, Garion," he said, "and Sendars are
solid,
practical men with little patience for such things as sorcery and
magic and
other things that can't be seen or touched. Your friend, Durnik, is a
perfect
Sendar. He can mend a shoe or fix a broken wheel or dose a sick

Silk turned and looked at him closely.

"No," he said, "you aren't. I know a Sendar when I see one just as I can

recognize the difference between an Arend and a Tolnedran or a Cherek

and an

Algar. There's a certain set of the head, a certain look about the eyes of

Sendars that you don't have. You're not a Sendar."

"What am I then?" Garion challenged.

"I don't know," Silk said with a puzzled frown, "and that's very unusual, since

I've been trained to know what people are. It may come to me in time,

though."

"Is Aunt Pol a Sendar?" Garion asked.

"Of course not." Silk laughed.

"That explains it then," Garion said. "I'm probably the same thing

know that

now."

"That's impossible," Silk said flatly.

"Impossible?"

"Absolutely out of the question. The whole notion's unthinkable."

"Why?"

Silk chewed at his lower lip for a moment. "Let's go back to the

wagons," he

said shortly.

They turned and went down through the dark trees with the bright

morning sunlight slanting on their backs in the frosty air.

They rode the back lanes for the rest of the day. Late in the

afternoon when the

sun had begun to drop into a purple bank of clouds toward the west,

they arrived

at the farm where they were to pick up Mingan's hams. Silk spoke

with

the stout

That's frequently the case when one has dealings with Toineards,

Silk

observed. "They're gifted at getting a bit more than they pay for - even

if it's

only the free use of someone else's storage sheds."

The farmer glumly agreed.

"I wonder," Silk said as if the thought had just occurred to him, "I wonder if

you might have seen a friend of mine - Brill by name? A medium-sized

man with

black hair and beard and a cast to one eye?"

"Patched clothes and a sour disposition?" the stout farmer asked.

"That's him," Silk said.

"He's been about the area," the farmer said, "looking - or so he said - for an

old man and a woman and a boy. He said that they stole some things

up.

"I can't for my life think why," the farmer said bluntly. "To be honest with you, I didn't care much for your friend."

"I'm not overfond of him myself," Silk agreed, "but the truth is that

he owes me

some money. I could quite easily do without Brill's companionship, but I'm

lonesome for the money, if you take my meaning."

The farmer laughed.

"I'd take it as a kindness if you happened to forget that I asked after him,"

Silk said. "He'll likely be hard enough to find even if he isn't warned that I'm

looking for him."

"You can depend on my discretion," the stout man said, still laughing. "I have a

you wagoners lead adventuresome lives," the stout man said almost enviously.

"Free as birds with always a new horizon just beyond the next hilltop."

"It's much overrated," Silk told him, "and winter's a thin time for birds and wagoners both."

The farmer laughed again, clapped Silk on the shoulder and then showed him where to put up the horses.

The food in the stout farmer's dining hall was plain, but there was plenty; and

the loft was a bit drafty, but the hay was soft. Garion slept soundly. The farm

was not Faldor's, but it was familiar enough, and there was that comforting

sense of having walls about him again that made him feel secure.

The following morning, after a solid breakfast, they loaded the

The sky during the night, and it was cold and gray as they set out

for Muros,

fifty leagues to the south.

Chapter Nine

THE ALMOST TWO WEEKS it took them to reach Muros were the most

uncomfortable

Garion had ever spent. Their route skirted the edge of the foothills

through

rolling and sparsely settled country, and the sky hung gray and cold overhead.

There were occasional spits of snow, and the mountains loomed black

against the

skyline to the east.

It seemed to Garion that he would never be warm again. Despite

Durnik's best

efforts to find dry firewood each night, their fires always seemed

His education in the Drashian secret language continued and he

became, if not

adept, at least competent by the time they passed Lake Camaar and

began the

long, downhill grade that led to Muros.

The city of Muros in south-central Sendaria was a sprawling,

unattractive place

that had been since time immemorial the site of a great annual fair.

Each year

in late summer, Algar horsemen drove vast cattle herds through the

mountains

along the Great North Road to Muros where cattle buyers from all

over the west

gathered to await their coming. Huge sums changed hands, and, be-

cause

the Algar

clansmen also commonly made their yearly purchases of useful and

ornamental

still inadequate to contain the herds which arrived at the height of the season.

Beyond the pens to the east lay the more or less permanent encampment of the Algars.

It was to this city one midmorning at the tail end of the fair, when the cattle pens were nearly empty and most of the Algars had departed and only the most desperate merchants remained, that Silk led the three wagons laden with the hams of Mangan the Tolnedran.

The delivery of the hams took place without incident, and the wagons soon drew into an innyard near the northern outskirts of the city.

assured her

delicately. "I know them well."

"I'm certain you do," she said with an arched eyebrow.

"My profession sometimes requires me to seek out places I might otherwise prefer

to avoid," he said blandly.

The inn, Garion noted, was surprisingly clean, and its guests seemed for the

most part to be Sendarian merchants.

"I thought there'd be many different kinds of people here in Muros,"

he said as

he and Silk carried their bundles up to the chambers on the second floor.

"There are," Silk said, "but each group tends to remain aloof from the others.

The Tolnedrans gather in one part of town, the Drasnians in another,

Garion nodded. "You know," he said as they entered the chambers
they
had taken
for their stay in Muros, "I don't think I've ever seen a Nyissan."
"You're lucky," Silk said with distaste. "They're an unpleasant race."
"Are they like Murgos?"
"No," Silk said. "The Nyissans worship Issa, the Snake-God, and it's
considered
seemly among them to adopt the mannerisms of the serpent. I don't
find it at all
that attractive myself. Besides, the Nyissans murdered the Rivan
King, and all
Alorns have disliked them since then."
"The Rivans don't have a king," Garion objected.
"Not anymore," Silk said. "They did once, though - until Queen
Salmissra decided
to have him murdered."
"When was that?" Garion asked, fascinated.

that afternoon to search the streets of Muros for those strange,

lingering

traces that Wolf could apparently see or feel and which would tell him whether

the object they sought had passed this way. Garion sat near the fire in the

chamber he shared with Aunt Pol, trying to bake the chill out of his feet. Aunt

Pol also sat by the fire, mending one of his tunics, her shining needle

flickering in and out of the fabric.

"Who was the Rivan King, Aunt Pol?" he asked her. She stopped sewing.

"Why do you ask?" she said.

"Silk was telling me about Nyissans," he said. "He told me that their queen

murdered the Rivan King. Why would she do that?"

"You're full of questions today, aren't you?" she asked, her needle

Silk says that I'm not a Sendar," Garion said. He says that he

doesn't know

what I am, but that I'm not a Sendar."

"Silk talks too much," Aunt Pol observed.

"You never tell me anything, Aunt Pol," he said in irritation.

"I tell you everything you need to know," she said calmly. "Right now
it's not

necessary for you to know anything about Rivan kings or Nyissan
queens."

"All you want to do is keep me an ignorant child," Garion said
petulantly. "I'm

almost a man, and I don't even know what I am - or who."

"I know who you are," she said, not looking up.

"Who am I then?"

"You're a young man who's about to catch his shoes on fire,"
she said.

He jerked his feet back quickly.

"You didn't answer me," he accused.

The world's full of injustice," she said. "Now, since you're feeling so manly, why don't you fetch some more firewood? That'll give you something useful to think about."

He glared at her and stamped across the room.

"Garion," she said.

"What?"

"Don't even think about slamming the door."

That evening when Wolf and Silk returned, the usually cheerful old man seemed impatient and irritable. He sat down at the table in the common room of the inn and stared moodily at the fire. "I don't think it passed this way," he said finally. "There are a few places left to try, but I'm

There was no way to know, Aunt Poi told him. Why would he go to

Camaar if

he's trying to carry it to the Angarak kingdoms?"

"I can't even be certain where he's going," Wolf said irritably.

"Maybe he wants

to keep the thing for himself. He's always coveted it." He stared into the fire

again.

"We're going to need some kind of cargo for the trip to Camaar,"

Silk

said.

Wolf shook his head. "It slows us too much," he said. "It's not unusual for

wagons to return to Camaar from Muros without cargo, and it's reaching the point

where we'll have to gamble our disguise for the sake of speed. It's forty

in a snowbank.

Durnik dropped his knife suddenly and started to scramble to his feet.

"What's amiss?" Barak asked quickly.

"I just saw Brill," Durnik said. "He was in that doorway."

"Are you sure?" Wolf demanded.

"I know him," Durnik said grimly. "It was Brill, all right."

Silk pounded his fist down on the table.. "Idiot!" he accused himself.

"I underestimated the man."

"That doesn't matter now," Mister Wolf said, and there was almost

a

kind of

relief in his voice. "Our disguise is useless now. I think it's time for speed."

"I'll see to the wagons," Durnik said.

"No," Wolf said. "The wagons are too slow. We'll go to the camp of the Algars

and buy good horses." He stood up quickly.

soon

as you

can." He went quickly to the door and out into the cold night.

It was only a few minutes later that they all met near the door to

the stable in

the cobblestoned innyard, each carrying a small bundle. Hulking Ba-

rak

jingled as

he walked, and Garion could smell the oiled steel of his mail shirt.

A few Bakes

of snow drifted down through the frosty air and settled like tiny

feathers to

the frozen ground.

Durnik was the last to join them. He came breathlessly out of the

inn

and

pressed a small handful of coins upon Mister Wolf.

"It was the best I could do," he apologized. "It's scarce half the

value behind. They nag at the mind and distract one from the business

at hand."

Silk laughed. "Durnik," he said, "you're the absolute soul of a Sendar."

"One must follow one's nature," Durnik said.

"Thank you, my friend," Wolf said gravely, dropping the coins in his purse.

"Let's lead the horses," he went on. "Galloping through these narrow streets at

night would only attract attention."

"I'll lead," Barak announced, drawing his sword. "If there's any trouble, I'm

best equipped to deal with it."

"I'll walk along beside you, friend Barak;" Durnik said, hefting a stout cudgel

of firewood.

Barak nodded, his eyes grimly bright, and led his horse out through

swung it a few times to get the feel of it. Then he saw Aunt Poi

watching him, and

he hurried

on without any further display.

The streets through which they passed were narrow and dark, and
the

snow had

begun to fall a bit more heavily now, settling almost lazily through

the dead

calm air. The horses, made skittish by the snow, seemed to be fear-
ful

and

crowded close to those who led them.

When the attack came, it was unexpected and swift. There was a
sudden

rush of

footsteps and a sharp ring of steel on steel as Barak fended off the

first blow

his veins

as he leaped into the fight, ignoring the single cry from Aunt Pol.

He received a smart rap on the shoulder, whirled and struck with his stick. He

was rewarded with a muffled grunt. He struck again - and then again,

swinging

his club at those parts of his shadowy enemy which he instinctively knew were

most sensitive.

The main fight, however, surged around Barak and Durnik. The ring of

Barak's

sword and the thump of Durnik's cudgel resounded in the narrow street

along with

the groans of their assailants.

"There's the boy!" a voice rang out from behind them, and Garion

but Silk was there. The small man launched himself from the shad-

ows

directly at

the feet of the two, and all three crashed to the street in a tangle of arms and

legs. Silk rolled to his feet like a cat, spun and kicked one of the floundering

men solidly just below the ear. The man sank twitching to the cobblestones. The

other scrambled away and half rose just in time to receive both of Silk's heels

in his face as the rat-faced Drasnian leaped into the air, twisted and struck

with both legs. Then Silk turned almost casually.

"Are you all right?" he asked Garion.

"I'm fine," Garion said. "You're awfully good at this kind of thing."

"I'm an acrobat," Silk said. "It's simple once you know how."

of the

attackers were fleeing.

At the end of the street in the snow-speckled light from a small window was

Brill, almost dancing with fury. "Cowards!" he shouted at his hirelings.

"Cowards!" And then Barak started for him, and he too turned and ran.

"Are you all right, Aunt Pol?" Garion said, crossing the street to where she stood.

"Of course I am," she snapped. "And don't do that again, young man. Leave street brawling to those better suited for it."

"I was all right," he objected. "I had my stick here."

"Don't argue with me," she said. "I didn't go to all the trouble of raising you to have you end up dead in a gutter."

Certainly, Mistress Pol, Durnik said mildly.

"A splendid little fight," Barak said, wiping his sword as he joined them. "Not

much blood, but satisfying all the same."

"I'm delighted you found it so," Aunt Pol said acidly. "I don't much care for

such encounters. Did they leave anyone behind?"

"Regrettably no, dear lady," Barak said. "The quarters were too narrow for good

strokes, and these stones too slippery for good footing. I marked a couple of

them quite well, however. We managed to break a few bones and dent a

head or

two. As a group, they were much better at running than at fighting."

Silk came back from the alley where he had pursued the two who had

tried to

"We're all intact," Barak rumbled. "The business was hardly worth
drawing a
sword for."

Garion's mind was racing; in his excitement, he spoke without
stopping to
consider the fact that it might be wiser to think the whole thing
through first.

"How did Brill know we were in Muros?" he asked.

Silk looked at him sharply, his eyes narrowing.

"Perhaps he followed us from Winold," he said.. "But we stopped and
looked back," Garion said. "He wasn't following

when we
left, and we've kept a watch behind us every day."

Silk frowned.

"Go on, Garion," he said.

"I think he knew where we were going," Garion blurted, struggling
against a

strange compulsion not to speak what his mind saw clearly now.

his dealings to somebody like Brin.

"But Asharak the Murgo was in Mingan's counting room when Mingan hired us." The

compulsion was so strong now that Garion's tongue felt stiff.

Silk shrugged.

"Why should it concern him? Asharak didn't know who we were."

"But what if he did?" Garion struggled. "What if he isn't just an ordinary

Murgo, but one of those others - like the one who was with those ones

who passed

us a couple days after we left Darine?"

"A Grolim?" Silk said, and his eyes widened. "Yes, I suppose that if

Asharak is

a Grolim, he'd have known who we are and what we're doing."

"And what if the Grolim who passed us that day was Asharak?"

Garion

fought to

compliments, Mistress Poi. You've raised a rare boy here.

"What did this Asharak look like?" Wolf asked quickly.

"A Murgo." Silk shrugged. "He said he was from Rak Goska. I took him

to be an

ordinary spy on some business that didn't concern us. My mind seems

to have gone

to sleep."

"It happens when one deals with Grolims," Wolf told him.

"Someone's watching us," Durnik said quietly, "from that window up there."

Garion looked up quickly and saw a dark shape at a second-story window outlined

by a dim light. The shape was hauntingly familiar. Mister Wolf did not look up,

but his face turned blank as if he were looking inward, or his mind were

long, needle-pointed dirk. He took two quick steps away from the house where the Grolim stood watching, spun and threw the dirk with a smooth, overhand cast.

The dirk crashed through the window. There was a muffled shout, and

the light went out. Garion felt a strange pang in his left arm.

"Marked him," Silk said with a grin.

"Good throw," Barak said admiringly.

"One has picked up certain skills," Silk said modestly. "If it was Asharak, I

owed him that for deceiving me in Mingan's counting room."

"At least it'll give him something to think about," Wolf said.

"There's no point in trying to creep through town now. They know we're here. Let's mount and

There was no chance for that as they rode.

Once they reached the outskirts of the city, they nudged their horses

into a

fast canter. The snow was falling more seriously now, and the hoof churned

ground in the vast cattle pens was already faintly dusted with white.

"It's going to be a cold night," Silk shouted as they rode.

"We could always go back to Muros," Barak suggested. "Another scuffle

or two

might warm your blood."

Silk laughed and put his heels to his horse again.

The encampment of the Algars was three leagues to the east of Muros.

It was a

large area surrounded by a stout palisade of poles set in the ground.

The snow

steel

helmets. The points of their lances glittered in the torchlight.

"Halt," one of the warriors commanded, leveling his lance at Mister

Wolf. "What

business have you here at this time of night?"

"I have urgent need of speaking with your herd master," Wolf replied

politely.

"May I step down?"

The two guards spoke together briefly.

"You may come down," one of them said. "Your companions, however, must withdraw

somewhat - but not beyond the light."

"Algars!" Silk muttered under his breath. "Always suspicious."

Mister Wolf climbed down from his horse, and, throwing back his hood,

approached

the two guards through the snow.

bowed

deeply to

Wolf.

"There isn't time for that," Wolf said in annoyance. "Convey me to your herd master."

"At once, Ancient One," the elder guard said quickly and hurried to open the gate.

"What was that about?" Garion whispered to Aunt Pol.

"Algars are superstitious," she said shortly. "Don't ask so many questions."

They waited with snow settling down upon them and melting on their horses. After

about a half hour, the gate opened again and two dozen mounted

Algars, fierce in

their rivet-studded leather vests and steel helmets, herded six saddled horses

and I wish you all speed on your journey.

"I have little fear of being delayed with Algar horses under us,"

Wolf replied.

"My riders will accompany you along a route they know which will put

you on the

far side of Muros within a few hours," the tall man said. "They will

then linger

for a time to be certain you are not followed."

"I cannot express my gratitude, noble herd master," Wolf said,

bowing.

"It is I who am grateful for the opportunity to be of service," the

herd master

said, also bowing.

The change to their new horses took only a minute. With half of

their

contingent

of Algar's leading and the other half bringing up the rear, they

turned and rode

inexhaustible

horses pounded on through the growing light, the sound of their
hooves muffled

by the snow now lying fetlock-deep on the broad surface of the

Great

North Road.

Garion glanced back once and saw the jumbled tracks of their pas-
sage

stretching

behind them and, already at the hazy gray limit of his vision,
beginning to fill with concealing snow.

When it was fully light, Mister Wolf reined in his steaming horse
and

proceeded

at a walk for a time.

"How far have we come?" he asked Silk.

The weasel-faced man who had been shaking the snow out of the
folds

as he

shifted his bulk in the saddle.

"Think of how your horse must feel." Silk grinned at him.

"How far is it to Camaar?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Forty leagues from Muros," Silk told her.

"We'll need shelter then," she said. "We can't gallop forty leagues without

rest, no matter who's behind us."

"I don't think we need to worry about pursuit just now," Wolf said.

"The Algars

will detain Brill and his hirelings or even Asharak if they try to follow us."

"At least there's something Algars are good for," Silk said dryly.

"If I remember correctly, there should be an imperial hostel about five leagues

farther to the west," Wolf said. "We ought to reach it by noon."

"Will we be allowed to stay there?" Durnik asked doubtfully. "I've never heard

walls.

"Why should there be Tolnedran soldiers in Sendaria?" Garion asked,

feeling a brief surge of patriotic resentment at the thought.

"Wherever the great roads are, you'll find the legions," Silk said.

"Tolnedrans are even better at writing treaties than they are at giving short weight to their customers."

Mister Wolf chuckled. "You're inconsistent, Silk," he said. "You don't object to their highways, but you dislike their legions. You can't have the one without the other."

"I've never pretended to be consistent," the sharp-nosed man said airily. "If we want to reach the questionable comfort of the imperial hostel by

of the

Algar horse which had already begun to prance impatiently under him.

The hostel, when they reached it in the full light of snowy noon, proved to be a series of stout buildings surrounded by an even stouter wall. The legionnaires who manned it were not the same sort of men as the Tolnedran merchants Garion had seen before. Unlike the oily men of commerce, these were hard-faced professional fighting men in burnished breastplates and plumed helmets. They carried themselves proudly, even arrogantly, each bearing the knowledge that the might of all Tolnedra was behind him. The food in the dining hall was plain and wholesome, but dreadfully expensive.

thought of

how much their lodging was costing, but Wolf paid for it all with
seeming

indifference as if his purse were bottomless.

"We'll rest here until tomorrow," the white-bearded old man announced

when they

had finished eating. "Maybe it will snow itself out by morning. I'm
not happy

with all this plunging blindly through a snowstorm. Too many things
can hide in

our path in such weather."

Garion, who by now was numb with exhaustion, heard these words
gratefully as he

half drowsed at the table. The others sat talking quietly, but he was
too tired

to listen to what they said.

"Garion," Aunt Pol said finally, "why don't you go to bed?"

better than

to argue.

He stood up and was surprised to feel that his legs were trembling.

Aunt Pol

also rose and led him from the dining hall.

"I can find my way by myself," he objected.

"Of course," she said. "Now come along."

After he had crawled into bed in his cubicle, she pulled his blankets up firmly

around his neck. "Stay covered," she told him. "I don't want you taking cold."

She laid her cool hand briefly on his forehead as she had done when he was a small child.

"Aunt Pol?" he asked drowsily.

"Yes, Garion?"

"Who were my parents? I mean, what were their names?"

She looked at him gravely. "We can talk about that later," she said.

"I want to know," he said stubbornly.

It's a very long story," she said, "and you're much too tired to hear it just now."

On a sudden impulse he reached out and touched the white lock at her

brow with

the mark on the palm of his right hand. As had some times happened before, a

window seemed to open in his mind at the tingling touch, but this time that

window opened on something much more serious. There was anger, and a

single

face-a face that was strangely like Mister Wolf's, but was not his face, and all

the towering fury in the world was directed at that face.

Aunt Pol moved her head away. "I've asked you not to do that, Garion," she said,

By the next morning it had stopped snowing. The world outside the walls of the imperial hostel was mantled in thick, unbroken white, and the air was filmy with a kind of damp haze that was almost-but not quite-fog.

"Misty Sendaria," Silk said ironically at breakfast. "Sometimes I'm amazed that the entire kingdom doesn't rust shut."

They traveled all that day at a mile-eating canter, and that night there was

another imperial hostel, almost identical to the one they had left that morning

- so closely identical in fact that it almost seemed to Garion that they had

ridden all day and merely arrived back where they had started. He commented on

that to Silk as they were putting their horses in the stable.

"Tolnedrans are nothing if not predictable," Silk said. "All their

Don't they get tired of doing the same thing over and over again?" "It makes them feel comfortable, I guess." Silk laughed. "Let's go

see about
supper."

It snowed again the following day, but by noon Garion caught a scent other than that faintly dusty odor snow always seemed to have. Even as he had done when they had approached Darine, he began to smell the sea, and he knew their journey was almost at an end.

Camaar, the largest city in Sendaria and the major seaport of the north, was a sprawling place which had existed at the mouth of the Greater Camaar River since antiquity. It was the natural western terminus of the Great North

capital at Tol Honein. With some accuracy it could be said that all

roads ended

at Camaar.

Late on a chill, snowy afternoon, they rode down a gradual hill
toward the city.

Some distance from the gate, Aunt Pol stopped her horse. "Since
we're

no longer

posing as vagabonds," she announced, "I see no further need for
selecting the

most disreputable inns, do you?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," Mister Wolf said.

"Well, I have," she said. "I've had more than enough of wayside
hostels and

seedy village inns. I need a bath, a clean bed and some decent food.

If you

don't mind, I'll choose our lodging this time."

"Of course, Pol," Wolf said mildly. "Whatever you say."

gate asked rather rudely.

Aunt Pol threw back her hood and fixed the man with a steely gaze.

"I

am the

Duchess of Erat," she announced in ringing tones. "These are my

retainers, and

my business in Camaar is my own affair."

The guard blinked and then bowed respectfully.

"Forgive me, your Grace," he said. "I didn't intend to give offense."

"Indeed?" Aunt Pol said, her tone still cold and her gaze still

dangerous.

"I did not recognize your Grace," the poor man floundered, squirm-

ing

under that

imperious stare. "May I offer any assistance?"

"I hardly think so," Aunt Pol said, looking him up and down. "Which

is the

finest inn in Camaar?" "That would be the Lion, my Lady."

Follow this street until you reach Customs Square. Anyone there

can

direct you

to the Lion."

Aunt Pol pulled her hood back up.

"Give the fellow something," she said over her shoulder and rode on

into the

city without a backward glance.

"My thanks," the guard said as Wolf leaned down to hand him a small

coin. "I

must admit that I haven't heard of the Duchess of Erat before."

"You're a fortunate man," Wolf said.

"She's a great beauty," the man said admiringly.

"And has a temper to match," Wolf told him.

"I noticed that," the guard said.

"We noticed you noticing," Silk told him slyly.

They nudged their horses and caught up with Aunt Pol.

"The Duchess of Erat?" Silk asked mildly.

possible,

pulling his horse directly in front of the startled merchant. "My mistress, the

Duchess of Erat, requires directions to an inn called the Lion. Be so good as to provide them."

The merchant blinked, his face flushing at the rat-faced man's tone.

"Up that street," he said shortly, pointing. "Some goodly way. It will be on your left. There's a sign of a Lion at the front."

Silk sniffed ungraciously, tossed a few coins into the snow at the man's feet

and whirled his horse in a grand manner. The merchant, *Garion* noted,

looked

outraged, but he did grope in the snow for the coins Silk had thrown.

good a disguise as any we've tried.

When they arrived at the inn, Aunt Pol commanded not just the usual sleeping

chambers but an entire apartment. "My chamberlain there will pay you," she said

to the innkeeper, indicating Mister Wolf. "Our baggage horses are some days

behind with the rest of my servants, so I'll require the services of a dressmaker and a maid. See to it." And she turned and swept imperially up the

long staircase that led to her apartment, following the servant who scurried

ahead to show her the way.

"The duchess has a commanding presence, doesn't she?" the innkeeper

ventured as

Wolf began counting out coins.

"She has indeed," Wolf agreed. "I've discovered the wisdom of not

maid.

"Many thanks, friend," Silk told him. "Our Lady becomes most irritable

when those

things she desires are delayed, and we're the ones who suffer most from her displeasure."

They trooped up the stairs to the apartments Aunt Pol had taken and

stepped into

the main sitting room, a splendid chamber far richer than any Garion had seen

before. The walls were covered by tapestries with intricate pictures woven into

the fabric. A wealth of candles - real wax instead of smoky tallow - gleamed in

sconces on the walls and in a massive candelabra on the polished table. A good

better

than some shabby, wharfside inn reeking of fish and unwashed sailors?" she

asked.

"If the Duchess of Erat will forgive my saying so," Wolf said somewhat tartly,

"this is hardly the way to escape notice, and the cost of these lodgings would feed a legion for a week."

"Don't grow parsimonious in your dotage, Old Wolf," she replied.

"No

one takes a

spoiled noblewoman seriously, and your wagons weren't able to keep that

disgusting Brill from finding us. This guise is at least comfortable, and it

permits us to move more rapidly."

Wolf grunted. "I only hope we won't regret all this," he said.

of the

gentry."

"It's quite simple, Durnik," she said. She eyed him up and down,

noting his

plain, dependable face and his solid competence. "How would you like

to be chief

groom to the Duchess of Erat? And master of her stables?"

Durnik laughed uncomfortably. "Noble titles for work I've done all

my

life," he

said. "I could manage the work easily enough, but the titles might

grow a bit

heavy."

"You'll do splendidly, friend Durnik," Silk assured him. "That honest

face of

yours makes people believe anything you choose to tell them. If I

had

a face

Slrk bowed ironically.

"And I?" Barak said, grinning openly.

"My man-at-arms," she said. "I doubt that any would believe you to be

a dancing

master. Just stand around looking dangerous."

"What of me, Aunt Pol?" Garion asked. "What do I do?"

"You can be my page."

"What does a page do?"

"You fetch things for me."

"I've always done that. Is that what it's called?"

"Don't be impertinent. You also answer doors and announce visitors;

and when I'm

melancholy, you may sing to me."

"Sing?" he said incredulously. "Me?"

"It's customary."

"You wouldn't make me do that, would you, Aunt Pol?"

"Your Grace," she corrected.

said.

"My chief steward," she told him. "Manager of my estates and
keeper

of my

purse."

"Somehow I knew that would be part of it."

There was a timid rap at the door.

"See who that is, *Garion*," Aunt Pol said.

When he opened the door, *Garion* found a young girl with light brown
hair in a

sober dress and starched apron and cap standing outside. She had
very

large

brown eyes that looked at him apprehensively.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I've been sent to wait upon the duchess," she said in a low
voice.. "Your maid has arrived, your *Grace*," *Garion* announced.

"Splendid," Aunt Pol said. "Come in, child."

A lovely name," Aunt Poi said. Now to important matters. Is there

a

bath on

the premises?"

It was still snowing the next morning. The roofs of nearby houses
were piled

high with white, and the narrow streets were deep with it.

"I think we're close to the end of our search," Mister Wolf said as
he stared

intently out through the rippled glass of the window in the room

with

the

tapestries.

"It's unlikely that the one we're after would stay in Camaar for
long," Silk

said.

"Very unlikely," Wolf agreed, "but once we've found his trail, we'll
be able to

tremely

attractive.

Things were going along well between them until Aunt Pol's dress-maker

arrived

and Donia's presence was required in the chamber where the Duchess of

Erat was

being fitted for her new gowns.

Since Durnik, obviously ill at ease in the luxurious surroundings of their

chambers, had adjourned to the stables after breakfast, Garion was left in the

company of the giant Barak, who worked patiently with a small stone,

polishing a

nick out of the edge of his sword - a memento of the skirmish in

Muros. Garion

of the

sitting room. The tapestries depicted knights in full armor and castles on hilltops and strangely angular-looking maidens moping about in gardens.

"Arendish," Barak said, directly behind him. Garion jumped. The huge

man had

moved up so quietly that Garion had not heard him.

"How can you tell?" Garion asked politely.. "The Arends have a fondness for tapestry," Barak rumbled, "and the

weaving of

pictures occupies their women while the men are off denting each other's armor."

"Do they really wear all that?" Garion asked, pointing at a heavily armored

knight pictured on the tapestry.

"Oh yes." Barak laughed. "That and more. Even their horses wear

How did it get here all the way from Mallorean? Garion asked.

"I've

heard that

Mallorean's all the way on the other end of the world."

"It's a goodly way off," Barak agreed, "but a merchant would go
twice

as far to

make a profit. Such goods as this commonly move along the North

Caravan Route

out of Gar og Nadrak to Boktor. Mallorean carpets are prized by the
wealthy. I

don't much care for them myself, since I'm not fond of anything
that

has to do

with the Angaraks."

"How many kinds of Angaraks are there?" Garion asked. "I know
there

are Murgos

poisoning, Murgos and Thulls, Nadraks and Malloreans, and of

course

the

Grolims. They live in the four kingdoms of the east Mallorean, Gar og
Nadrak,

Mishrak ac Thull and Cthol Murgos."

"Where do the Grolims live?"

"They have no special place," Barak replied grimly. "The Grolims are
the priests

of Torak One-eye and are everywhere in the lands of the Angarak.

They're the

ones who perform the sacrifices to Torak. Grolim knives have spilled
more

Angarak blood than a dozen Vo Mimbres."

Garion shuddered.

"Why should Torak take such pleasure in the slaughter of his own
people?" he

asked.

How could the world be cracked?" Garion asked. "I've never

understood that part

of the story." "The power of the Orb of Aldur is such that it can
accomplish

anything," Barak

told him. "When Torak raised it, the earth was split apart by its
power, and the

seas came in to drown the land. The story's very old, but I think
that it's

probably true."

"Where is the Orb of Aldur now?" Garion asked suddenly.

Barak looked at him, his eyes icy blue and his face thoughtful, but
he didn't

say anything.

"Do you know what I think?" Garion said on a sudden impulse. "I
think

that it's

Barak warned.

"But I want to know," Garion protested, his curiosity driving him even in the

face of Barak's words and the warning voice in his mind. "Everyone treats me

like an ignorant boy. All I do is tag along with no idea of what we're doing.

Who is Mister Wolf, anyway? Why did the Algars behave the way they

did when they

saw him? How can he follow something that he can't see? Please tell me, Barak."

"Not I." Barak laughed. "Your Aunt would pull out my beard whisker by

whisker if

I made that mistake."

"You're not afraid of her, are you?"

"Any man with good sense is afraid of her," Barak said, rising and

really afraid. It's more- He left it hanging, not knowing how to explain it.

"Exactly," Barak said. "And I'm no more foolhardy than you, my boy.

You're too

full of questions I'd be far wiser not to answer. If you want to know about

these things, you'll have to ask your Aunt."

"She won't tell me," Garion said glumly. "She won't tell me anything.

She won't

even tell me about my parents-not really."

Barak frowned.

"That's strange," he said.

"I don't think they were Sendars," Garion said. "Their names weren't

Sendarian,

and Silk says that I'm not a Sendar - at least I don't look like one."

Barak looked at him closely. "No," he said finally. "Now that you

of those

questions I hadn't better answer," he said.

"I'm going to find out someday," Garion said.

"But not today," Barak said. "Come along. I need some exercise.

Let's

go out

into the innyard and I'll teach you how to use a sword."

"Me?" Garion said, all his curiosity suddenly melting away in the

excitement of

that thought.

"You're at an age where you should begin to learn," Barak said. "The

occasion

may someday arise when it will be a useful thing for you to know."

Late that afternoon when Garion's arm had begun to ache from the

effort of

swinging Barak's heavy sword and the whole idea of learning the

skills of a

warrior had become a great deal less exciting, Mister Wolf and Silk

led them all back up the stairs to the sitting room.

"Ask your Aunt to join us," he told Garion as he removed his sodden mantle and stepped to the fire to warm himself.

Garion sensed quickly that this was not the time for questions. He hurried to the polished door where Aunt Pol had been closeted with her dressmaker all day and rapped.

"What is it?" her voice came from inside.

"Mister-uh-that is, your chamberlain has returned, my Lady," Garion said,

remembering at the last moment that she was not alone. "He requests a word with you."

"Oh, very well," she said. After a minute she came out, firmly closing the door

pointe.

"You're beautiful, Aunt Pol," he blurted.

"Yes, dear," she said, patting his cheek, "I know. Now where's the Old Wolf?"

"In the room with the tapestries," Garion said, still unable to take his eyes from her.

"Come along, then," she said and swept down the short hall to the sitting room.

They entered to find the others all standing by the fireplace.

"Well?" she asked.

Wolf looked up at her, his eyes still bright. "An excellent choice, Pol," he

said admiringly. "Blue has always been your best color."

"Do you like it?" she asked, holding out her arms and turning almost girlishly

so that they all might see how fine she looked. "I hope it pleases you, old man,

red, then finally settled into an expression of such hopelessness

that Garion

was touched to the quick by it.

Silk and Barak in curious unison both bowed deeply and wordlessly to

Aunt Pol,

and her eyes sparkled at their silent tribute.

"It's been here," Wolf announced seriously.

"You're certain?" Aunt Pol demanded.

He nodded. "I could feel the memory of its passage in the very

stones."

"Did it come by sea?" she asked.

"No. He probably came ashore with it in some secluded cove up the

coast and then

traveled here by land."

"And took ship again?"

"I doubt that," Wolf said. "I know him well. He's not comfortable on

the sea."

you're right," Wolf agreed. "I think he'll avoid the domains of the

Alorns.

That's probably why he chose not to pass along the North Road
through

Algaria

and Drasnia. The Spirit of Belar is strong in the kingdoms of the

Alorns, and

not even this thief is bold enough to risk a confrontation with the
Bear-God."

"Which leaves Arendia," Silk said, "or the land of the Ulgos."

"Arendia, I think," Wolf said. "The wrath of UL is even more fear-
some

than that

of Belar."

"Forgive me," Durnik said, his eyes still on Aunt Pol. "This is all

most

confusing. I've never heard just exactly who this thief is."

"I'm sorry, gentle Durnik," Wolf said. "It's not a good idea to speak

A sorcerer?" Durnik asked unbelievably.

"The word isn't one I'd choose," Wolf said. "It's a term used by men

who don't

understand that particular art. Instead let's call him `thief,'

though there are

a few other names I might call him which are far less kindly."

"Can we be certain that he'll make for the kingdoms of the

Angaraks?" Silk

asked, frowning. "If that's the case, wouldn't it be quicker to take

a ship

directly to Tol Honeth and pick up his trail on the South Caravan

Route into

Cthol Murgos?"

Wolf shook his head. "Better to stay with this trail now that we've

found it. We

don't know what he intends. Maybe he wants to keep the thing he's

stolen for

pie

has tampered

with things that are none of her concern," Wolf pointed out.

"If that turns out to be true," Aunt Pol said grimly, "I think I'll

give myself

the leisure to deal with the snake-woman permanently."

"It's too early to know," Wolf said. "Tomorrow we'll buy provisions

and ferry

across the river to Arendia. I'll take up the trail there. For the

time being

all we can do is follow that trail. Once we know for certain where it

leads,

we'll be able to consider our alternatives."

From the evening-darkened innyard outside there came suddenly the

sound of many

horses.

Barak stepped quickly to the window and glanced out.

"Soldiers," he said shortly.

or another

aren't that difficult to come by."

"They aren't Murgos," Barak said. "I'd recognize Murgos."

"Brill isn't a Murgo either," Silk said, staring down into the innyard.

"See if you can hear what they say," Wolf instructed.

Barak carefully opened one of the windows a crack, and the candles all flickered

in the gust of icy wind. In the yard below the captain of the soldiers was

speaking with the innkeeper.. "He's a man of somewhat more than medium height, with white hair and

a short

white beard. He may be traveling with some others."

"There's such a one here, your Honor," the innkeeper said dubiously,

"but I'm

sure he isn't the one you seek. This one is chief steward to the

Duchess of

climbing

down from his horse.

"I'll ask her if she will receive your Honor," the innkeeper replied.

Barak closed the window.

"I'll deal with this meddlesome captain," he said firmly.

"No," Wolf said. "He's got too many soldiers with him, and if they're

who they

seem to be, they're good men who haven't done us any harm."

"There's the back stairs," Silk suggested. "We could be three streets

away

before he reached our door."

"And if he stationed soldiers at the back of the inn?" Aunt Pol

suggested. "What

then? Since he's coming to speak with the Duchess of Erat, why don't

we let the

before he comes back.

"Perhaps," Wolf said, "but this captain sounds like a determined man."

"I've dealt with determined men before," she said.

"We'll have to decide quickly," Silk said from the door. "He's on the stairs right now."

"We'll try it your way, Pol," Wolf said, opening the door to the next chamber.

"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "you stay here. A duchess wouldn't be unattended."

Wolf and the others quickly left the room.

"What do you want me to do, Aunt Pol?" Garion whispered.

"Just remember that you're my page, dear," she said, seating herself

in a large

chair near the center of the room and carefully arranging the folds of her gown.

sober-looking man with penetrating gray eyes. Garion, trying his

best

to sound officious, requested the soldier's name and then turned to Aunt Pol.

"There's a Captain Brendig to see you, your Grace," he announced.

"He

says that

it's a matter of importance."

Aunt Pol looked at him for a moment as if considering the request.

"Oh, very

well," she said finally. "Show him in."

Captain Brendig stepped into the room, and the innkeeper left hurriedly.

"Your Grace," the captain said, bowing deferentially to Aunt Pol.

"What is it, Captain?" she demanded.

"I would not trouble your Grace if my mission were not of such urgency," Brendig

There's a certain man the king wishes to have apprehended,

Brendig

said. "An

elderly man with white hair and beard. I'm informed that you have
such a one

among your servants."

"Is the man a criminal?" she asked.

"The king didn't say so, your *Grace*," he told her. "I was only told
that the man

was to be seized and delivered to the palace at Sendarand, all who
are with him

as well."

"I am seldom at court," Aunt Pol said. "It's most unlikely that any
of my

servants would be of such interest to the king."

"Your *Grace*," Brendig said delicately, "in addition to my duties in
one of the

Aunt Pol inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment of the

compliment. "I

suppose I should have guessed, my Lord Brendig," she said. "Your

manners are not

those of a common soldier."

"Moreover, your *Grace*," he continued, "I'm familiar with all the

holdings of the

kingdom. If I'm not mistaken, the district of Erat is an earldom, and

the Earl

of Erat is a short, stout man - my great uncle incidentally. There

has been no

duchy in that part of Sendaria since the kingdom was under the

dominion of the

Wacite Arends."

Aunt Pol fixed him with an icy stare.

"My Lady," Brendig said almost apologetically, "the Wacite Arends

were

continued. "I am

bidden by my king to seek out the man of whom I spoke. Upon your honor, Lady, do you know such a man?"

The question hung in the air between them, and Garion, knowing in sudden panic that they were caught, almost shouted for Barak.

Then the door to the next chamber opened, and Mister Wolf stepped into the room.

"There's no need to continue with this," he said. "I'm the one you're looking for. What does Fulrach of Sendaria want with me?"

Brendig looked at him without seeming surprise. "His Majesty did not see fit to

take me into his confidence," he said. "He will explain it himself, I have no

night. I'd prefer not to subject the Duchess of Erat to the indignity
of
confinement at the local barracks. The cells there are most
uncomfortable, I'm
told."
"You have my word," Mister Wolf said.
"Thank you," Brendig said, bowing slightly. "I must also advise you
that I am
obliged to post guards about this inn - for your protection, of
course."
"Your solicitude overwhelms us, my Lord," Aunt Pol said dryly.
"Your servant, my Lady," Brendig said with a formal bow. And then
he
turned and
left the room.
The polished door was only wood; Garion knew that, but as it closed
behind the

captain at

Sendar,

though it was only fifty-five leagues. Captain Brendig measured
their

pace

carefully, and his detachment of soldiers was arranged in such
fashion that even

the thought of escape was impossible. Although it had stopped
snowing, the road

was still difficult, and the wind which blew in off the sea and
across the

broad, snow-covered salt marshes was raw and chill. They stayed
each night in

the evenly spaced Sendarian hostels which stood like mileposts along
that

uninhabited stretch of coast. The hostels were not quite so well
appointed as

were their Tolnedran counterparts along the Great North Road, but

moodily into the flames. Durnik was his oldest friend, and Garion

felt a

desperate need for friendship just then.

"Durnik," he said finally.

"Yes, lad?"

"Have you ever been in a dungeon?"

"What could I have done to be put in a dungeon?"

"I thought that you might have seen one sometime."

"Honest folk don't go near such places," Durnik said.

"I've heard they're awful-dark and cold and full of rats." "What is
this talk of

dungeons?" Durnik asked.

"I'm afraid we may find out all about places like that very soon,"

Garion said,

trying not to sound too frightened.

"We've done nothing wrong," Durnik said.

"Then why would the king have us seized like this? Kings don't do
things like

dungeon with him just because we happened to be his companions.

"Thing like that don't happen in Sendaria," Durnik said firmly.

The next day the wind was very strong as it blew in off the sea; but it was a

warm wind, and the foot-deep snow on the road began to turn slushy.

By midday it

had started to rain. They rode in sodden misery toward the next hostel.

"I'm afraid we'll have to delay our journey until this blows out,"

Captain

Brendig said that evening, looking out one of the tiny windows of the hostel.

"The road's going to be quite impassable by morning."

They spent the next day, and the next, sitting in the cramped main room of the

hostel listening to the wind-driven rain slashing at the walls and roof, all the

king?

"Which king?"

"Of Sendaria."

"A foolish man - like all kings." Silk laughed. "The Sendarian kings are perhaps

a bit more foolish, but that's only natural. Why do you ask?"

"Well" Garion hesitated. "Let's suppose that somebody did something

that the

king didn't like, and there were some other people traveling with him, and the

king had these people seized. Would the king just throw them all into

the

dungeon? Or would he let the others go and just keep the one who'd angered him?"

Silk looked at him for a moment and then spoke firmly.

"That question is unworthy of you, Garion."

The kings of Sendaria are just and honest men," Silk told him. "Not

too bright,

I'm afraid, but always fair."

"How can they be kings if they aren't wise?" Garion objected.

"Wisdom's a useful trait in a king," Silk said, "but hardly essential."

"How do they get to be kings, then?" Garion demanded.

"Some are born to it," Silk said. "The stupidest man in the world can be a king

if he has the right parents. Sendarian kings have a disadvantage because they started so low."

"Low?"

"They were elected. Nobody ever elected a king before - only the Sendars."

"How do you elect a king?"

Silk smiled.

"Very badly, Garion. It's a poor way to select a king. The other ways

It's a way to pass the time," he said. And then he leaned back,

stretched his

feet toward the fire and began.

"It all started about fifteen hundred years ago," he said, his voice
loud enough

to reach the ears of Captain Brendig, who sat nearby writing on a
piece of

parchment. "Sendaria wasn't a kingdom then, nor even a separate
country. It had

belonged from time to time to Cherek, Algaria or the northern

Arends

- Wacite or

Asturian, depending on the fortunes of the Arendish civil war. When
that war finally came to an end and the Wacites were destroyed and

the

Asturians had been

defeated and driven into the untracked reaches of the great forest

in

asked.

"The arm of the Empire is very long," Silk said. "The Great North Road had been built during the Second Borune Dynasty- I think it was Ran Borune

IV

who started

the construction, wasn't it, Captain?"

"The fifth," Brendig said somewhat sourly without looking up. "Ran Borune V."

"Thank you, Captain," Silk said. "I can never keep the Borune Dynasties

straight. Anyway, there were already imperial legions in Sendaria to maintain

the highway, and if one has troops in an area, one has a certain authority,

wouldn't you say, Captain?"

"It's your story," Brendig said shortly.

"Indeed it is," Silk agreed. "Now it wasn't really out of any kind of

ery

- and

Tolnedra couldn't afford to allow the Mimbrates to expand into the north. The

creation of an independent kingdom in Sendaria would block Mimbrate

access to

the trade routes down out of Drasnia and prevent the seat of world power from

moving to Vo Mimbire and leaving the imperial capital at Tol Honeth

in

a kind of

backwater."

"It all sounds terribly involved," Garion said.

"Not really," Silk said. "It's only politics, and that's a very simple game,

isn't it, Captain?"

"A game I do not play," Brendig said, not looking up.

were a few

retired Tolnedran nobles living on estates here and there, assorted pretenders

to this or that Wacite or Asturian title, a Cherek war chief or two with a few

followers, but no genuine Sendarian nobility. And so it was that they decided to

hold a national election - select a king, don't you see, and then leave the

bestowing of titles up to him. A very practical approach, and typically

Sendarian."

"How do you elect a king?" Garion asked, beginning to lose his dread of dungeons

in his fascination with the story.

"Everybody votes," Silk said simply. "Parents, of course, probably cast the

votes for their children, but it appears that there was very little

"And there were over a thousand candidates," Silk said expansively.

"Seven hundred and forty-three," Brendig said tightly.

"I stand corrected, noble Captain," Silk said. "It's an enormous comfort to have

such an expert here to catch my errors. I'm but a simple Drasnian merchant with

little background in history. Anyway, on the twenty-third ballot, they finally

elected their king - a rutabaga farmer named Fundor."

"He raised more than just rutabagas," Brendig said, looking up with an angry face.

"Of course he did," Silk said, smacking his forehead with an open palm. "How

could I have forgotten the cabbages? He raised cabbages, too, Garion.

Never

King of

Sendaria,' and fell on their knees in his august presence."

"Must we continue with this?" Brendig asked in a pained voice, looking up.

"The boy wants to know, Captain," Silk replied with an innocent face.

"It's our

duty as his elders to instruct him in the history of our past,

wouldn't you

say?"

"Say whatever you like," Brendig said in a stiff voice.

"Thank you for your permission, Captain," Silk said, inclining his head. "Do you

know what the King of Sendaria said then, Garion?" he asked.

"No," Garion said. "What?"

"`I pray you, your eminences,' the king said, `have a care for your finery. I

have just well manured the bed in which you are kneeling.' "

you're a courteous man, Captain," Silk said mildly, "and a noble

man. I'm

merely a poor man trying to make his way in the world."

Brendig looked at him helplessly and then turned and stamped from
the

room.

The following morning the wind had blown itself out and the rain had
stopped.

The road was very nearly a quagmire, but Brendig decided that they
must

continue. Travel that day was difficult, but the next was somewhat
easier as the

road began to drain.

Aunt Pol seemed unconcerned by the fact that they had been seized
at

the king's

orders. She maintained her regal bearing even though Garion saw no
real need to

that Garion

found particularly distressing. For the first time in his life he

felt a

distance between them, and it left a vacancy that had never been

there before.

To make matters worse, the gnawing uncertainty which had been

steadily growing

since Silk's unequivocal declaration on the hilltop outside Winold

that Aunt Pol

could not possibly be his Aunt sawed roughly at his sense of his own

identity,

and Garion often found himself staring at the awful question, "Who

am

I?"

Mister Wolf seemed changed as well. He seldom spoke either on the

road nor at

night in the hostels. He spent a great deal of time sitting by

himself with an

him about midday just as the pale winter sun broke through the

clouds, and

there in the valley below them the walled city of Sendar lay facing the sea.

The detachment of guards at the south gate of the city saluted smartly as

Captain Brendig led the little party through, and he returned their salute

crisply. The broad streets of the city seemed filled with people in the finest clothing, all moving about importantly as if their errands

were the

most vital

in the world.

"Courtiers." Barak, who chanced to be riding beside Garion, snorted with

contempt. "Not a real man amongst them."

"A necessary evil, my dear Barak," Silk said back over his shoulder to the big

and broad

wings extending out on each side of the paved courtyard. The entire structure

was surmounted by a round tower that was easily the highest edifice

in the whole

city.

"Where do you suppose the dungeons are?" Garion whispered to Durnik

when they

stopped.

"I would take it most kindly, Garion," Durnik said with a pained

look, "if you

would not speak so much of dungeons."

Captain Brendig dismounted and went to meet a fussy-looking man in an

embroidered tunic and feathered cap who came down the wide steps

at

they said. I am commanded to deliver these people directly to him

immediately

upon our arrival."

"My orders are also from the king," the fussy-looking man said, "and

I am

commanded to have them made presentable before they are delivered to

the throne

room. I will take charge of them."

"They will remain in my custody, Count Nilden, until they have been

delivered to

the king himself," Brendig said coldly.

"I will not have your muddy soldiers tracking through the halls of

the palace,

Lord Brendig," the Count replied.

"Then we will wait here, Count Nilden," Brendig said. "Be so good as

to fetch

his Majesty."

way. At least have them wipe their feet.

Brendig bowed coldly.. "I won't forget this, Lord Brendig," Nilden threatened.

"Nor shall I, Count Nilden," Brendig replied.

Then they all dismounted and, with Brendig's soldiers drawn up in close order

about them, they crossed the courtyard to a broad door near the center of the

west wing.

"Be so good as to follow me," Count Nilden said, glancing with a shudder at the

mud-spattered soldiers, and he led them into the wide corridor which

lay beyond

the door.

Apprehension and curiosity struggled in Garion's mind. Despite the assurances of

Silk and Durnik and the hopeful implications of Count Nilden's

in a palace
before, and his eyes tried to be everywhere at once. That part of
his

mind which
sometimes spoke to him in dry detachment told him that his fears
were

probably
groundless and that his gawking made him appear to be a doltish
country bumpkin.

Count Nilden led them directly to a part of the corndor where there
were a

number of highly polished doors. "This one is for the boy," he
announced,
pointing at one of them.

One of the soldiers opened the door, and Garion reluctantly stepped
through,

looking back over his shoulder at Aunt Pol.

"Come along now," a somewhat impatient voice said. Garion whirled,

wooden tub

with steam rising from it. "Quickly, boy, take off those filthy rags and get

into the tub. His Majesty is waiting."

Too confused to object or even answer, Garion numbly began to unlace

his tunic.

After he had been bathed and the knots had been brushed out of his

hair, he was

dressed in clothes which lay on a nearby bench. His coarse woolen hose of

serviceable peasant brown were exchanged for ones of a much finer weave in a

lustrous blue. His scuffed and muddy boots were traded for soft leather shoes.

His tunic was soft white linen, and the doublet he wore over it was a rich blue, trimmed with a silvery fur.

instructions.

"Well, go along, boy. You mustn't keep his Majesty waiting."

Silk and Barak stood in the corridor, talking quietly. Barak was

hugely splendid

in a green brocade doublet, but looked uncomfortable without his

sword. Silk's

doublet was a rich black, trimmed in silver, and his scraggly

whiskers had been

carefully trimmed into an elegant short beard.

"What does all of this mean?" Garion asked as he joined them.

"We're

to be

presented to the king," Barak said, "and our honest clothes might

have given

offense. Kings aren't accustomed to looking at ordinary men."

Durnik emerged from one of the rooms, his face pale with anger.

"That

overdressed fool wanted to give me a bath!" he said in choked

told him that I'd drown him in his own tub if he didn't keep his hands to himself. After that, he didn't pester me anymore, but he did steal my clothes. I had to put these on instead." He gestured at his clothes which were quite similar to Garion's. "I hope nobody sees me in all this frippery." "Barak says the king might be offended if he saw us in our real clothes," Garion told him. "The king won't be looking at me," Durnik said, "and I don't like this business of trying to look like something I'm not. I'll wait outside with the horses if I can get my own clothes back." "Be patient, Durnik," Barak advised. "We'll get this business with the king

robe,

deeply cowed at the back. "Someone's going to pay for this," he raged.

"It does become you," Silk said admiringly.

"Your taste has always been questionable, Master Silk," Wolf said in a frosty

tone. "Where's Pol?"

"The lady has not yet made her appearance," Silk said.. "I should have known," Wolf said, sitting down on a nearby bench. "We

may as

well be comfortable. Pol's preparations usually take quite a while."

And so they waited. Captain Brendig, who had changed his boots and doublet,

paced up and down as the minutes dragged by. Garion was totally baffled by their

reception. They did not seem to be under arrest, but his imagination still saw

dungeons, and that was enough to make him very jumpy.

rushed.

She ignored that and examined each of them in turn.

"Adequate, I suppose," she said finally, absently adjusting the collar of

Garion's doublet. "Give me your arm, Old Wolf, and let's find out what the King

of the Sendars wants with us."

Mister Wolf rose from his bench, extended his arm, and the two of them started

down the corridor. Captain Brendig hastily assembled his soldiers and

followed

them all in some kind of ragged order. "If you please, my Lady," he called out

to Aunt Pol, "permit me to show you the way."

"We know the way, Lord Brendig," she replied without so much as turning her head.

Fulrach, the King of Sendaria, was a dumpy-looking man with a short brown beard.

He sat, rather uncomfortably it appeared, on a highbacked throne which stood on a dais at one end of the great hall into which Count Nilden led them.

The throne room was vast, with a high, vaulted ceiling and walls covered with what seemed acres of heavy, red velvet drapery. There were candles everywhere, and dozens of people strolled about in fine clothes and chatted idly in the corners, all but ignoring the presence of the king.

"May I announce you?" Count Nilden asked Mister Wolf.

"Fulrach knows who I am," Wolf replied shortly and strode down the long scarlet carpet toward the throne with Aunt Pol still on his arm. Garion and the others

Burnik and Garion followed suit, though not nearly as gracefully.

"If it please your Majesty," Brendig's voice came from behind them,
"these are
the ones you sought."

"I knew you could be depended upon, Lord Brendig," the King replied
in a rather
ordinary-sounding voice. "Your reputation is well deserved. You have
my thanks."

Then he looked at Mister Wolf and the rest of them, his expression
undecipherable.

Garion began to tremble.

"My dear old friend," the king said to Mister Wolf. "It's been too
many years
since we met last."

"Have you lost your wits entirely, Fulrach?" Mister Wolf snapped in

a

voice

you trying to

announce my presence to every Murgo from here to the hook of
Arendia?"

The king's face looked pained. "I was afraid you might take it this
way," he

said in a voice no louder than Mister Wolf's had been. "I'll explain
when we can

speak more privately." He turned quickly to Aunt Pol as if trying to
preserve

the appearance at least of dignity. "It's been much too long since
we

have seen

you, dear Lady. Layla and the children have missed you, and I have
been desolate

in your absence."

"Your Majesty is too kind," Aunt Pol said, her tone as cold as
Wolf's. The king

wincing. "Pray, dear Lady," he apologized, "don't judge me too

unchanged. She

glanced once at Brendig, who had grown visibly pale.

"And you, my Lord Barak," the king hurned on as if trying to make the

best of a

bad situation, "how fares your cousin, our dear brother king, Anheg of Cherek?"

"He was well when last I saw him, your Majesty," Barak replied formally. "A bit

drunk, but that's not unusual for Anheg."

The king chuckled a bit nervously and turned quickly to Silk.

"Prince.Kheldar of

the Royal House of Drasnia," he said. "We are amazed to find such noble visitors

in our realm, and more than a little injured that they chose not to call upon us

so that we might greet them. Is the King of the Sendars of so little note that

The king flickered a warning glance at Thad and surprisingly wove his fingers in the scarce perceptible gestures of the Drasnian secret language.

Not

here. Too

many ears about. He then looked inquiringly at Durnik and Garion.

Aunt Pol stepped forward.

"This is Goodman Durnik of the District of Erat, your Majesty," she said, "a

brave and honest man."

"Welcome, Goodman Durnik," the king said. "I can only hope that men

may also one

day call me a brave and honest man."

Durnik bowed awkwardly, his face filled with bewilderment. "I'm just

a simple

blacksmith, your Honor," he said, "but I hope all men know that I am

A boy, your Majesty," she said rather indifferently. Garion by

name. He was

placed in my care some years ago and accompanies us because I didn't

know what

else to do with him."

A terrible coldness struck at Garion's stomach. The certainty that her casual

words were in fact the bald truth came crashing down upon him. She had not even

tried to soften the blow. The indifference with which she had destroyed his life

hurt almost more than the destruction itself.

"Also welcome, Garion," the king said. "You travel in noble company for one so young."

"I didn't know who they were, your Majesty," Garion said miserably.

"Nobody

told things of late that I'd much prefer not to know.

"May we speak privately now, Fulrach?" Mister Wolf said, his voice still irritated.

"In good time, my old friend," the king replied. "I've ordered a banquet

prepared in your honor. Let's all go in and dine. Layla and the children are

waiting for us. There will be time later to discuss certain matters." And with

that he rose and stepped down from the dais.

Garion, sunk in his private misery, fell in beside Silk. "Prince Kheldar?" he

said, desperately needing to take his mind off the shocking reality that had

just fallen upon him.

"An accident of birth, Garion," Silk said with a shrug. "Something over which I

had no control. Fortunately I'm only the nephew of the King of

his shoulder.

"What is your exact rank, Barak?" he asked.

"The Earl of Trellheim," Barak rumbled. "Why do you ask?"

"The lad here was curious," Silk said.

"It's all nonsense anyway," Barak said, "but when Anheg became king,

someone had

to become Clan-Chief. In Cherek you can't be both. It's considered unlucky -

particularly by the chiefs of the other clans."

"I can see why they might feel that way." Silk laughed.

"It's an empty title anyway," Barak observed. "There hasn't been a clan war in

Cherek for over three thousand years. I let my youngest brother act

in my stead.

He's a simpleminded fellow and easily amused. Besides, it annoys my wife."

mean.

"Would it have made any difference?" Silk asked.

"Well - no," Garion admitted, "but " He stopped, unable to put his feelings

about the matter into words. "I don't understand any of this," he concluded

lamely.

"It will all become clear in time," Silk assured him as they entered the banquet

hall.

The hall was almost as large as the throne room. There were long tables covered

with fine linen cloth and once again candles everywhere. A servant stood behind each chair, and everything was supervised by a plump

little woman

with a beaming

face and a tiny crown perched precariously atop her head. As they

all

Mother of

Sendaria. The four children over there are hers. She has four or five

others -

older and probably away on state business, since Fulrach insists that his

children earn their keep. It's a standard joke among the other kings that Queen

Layla's been pregnant since she was fourteen, but that's probably because

they're expected to send royal gifts at each new birth. She's a good

woman,

though, and she keeps King Fulrach from making too many mistakes."

"She knows Aunt Pol," Garion said, and that fact disturbed him for some reason.

"Everybody knows your Aunt Pol," Silk told him.

Since Aunt Pol and the queen were deep in conversation and already

Once they were all seated and the food began to arrive, Garion began
to relax.
He found that all he had to do was follow Silk's lead, and the intricate
niceties of formal dining no longer intimidated him. The talk around
him was
dignified and quite incomprehensible, but he reasoned that no one
was
likely to
pay much attention to him and that he was probably safe if he kept
his mouth
shut and his eyes on his plate.
An elderly nobleman with a beautifully curled silvery beard, however,
leaned
toward him. "You have traveled recently, I'm told," he said in a
somewhat

anticipated

under the present circumstances, Silk replied.

Garion dutifully repeated that.

"Ah," the old nobleman said, "much as I had expected. You're a very observant

boy for one so young. I enjoy talking with young people. Their views are so fresh."

Who is he? Garion gestured.

The Earl of Seline, Silk replied. He's a tiresome old bore, but be polite to

him. Address him as my Lord.

"And how did you find the roads?" the earl inquired.

"Somewhat in disrepair, my Lord," Garion replied with Silk's prompting. "But

that's normal for this time of year, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is," the earl said approvingly. "What a splendid boy you are."

At last the banquet was over, and the king rose from his seat at the head of the table. "And now, dear friends," he announced, "Queen Layla and I would like to visit privately with our noble guests, and so we pray you will excuse us." He offered his arm to Aunt Pol, Mister Wolf offered his to the plump little queen, and the four of them walked toward the far door of the hall. The Earl of Seline smiled broadly at Garion and then looked across the table. "I've enjoyed our conversation, Prince Kheldar," he said to Silk. "I may indeed be a tiresome old bore as you say, but that can sometimes be an advantage, don't you think?" Silk laughed ruefully. "I should have known that an old fox like you would be an

fingers were a bit stiff. I'll correct the problem when we have

leisure."

The old nobleman seemed enormously pleased with himself at having outsmarted

Silk. "Splendid boy," he said, patting Garion's shoulder, and then he went off

chuckling to himself.

"You knew he understood all along," Garion accused Silk.

"Of course," Silk said. "Drasnian intelligence knows every adept at our secret

speech. Sometimes it's useful to permit certain carefully selected messages to

be intercepted. Don't ever underestimate the Earl of Seline, however.

It's not

impossible that he's at least as clever as I am, but look how much he enjoyed

catching us."

such as I

continually practice deception -even when it's not necessary. Our
lives

sometimes depend on how cunning we are, and so we need to keep
our

wits sharp."

"It must be a lonely way to live," Garion observed rather shrewdly
at

the silent

prompting of his inner voice. "You never really trust anyone, do
you?"

"I suppose not," Silk said. "It's a game we play, Garion. We're all
very skilled

at it - at least we are if we intend to live very long. We all know
each other,

since we're members of a very small profession. The rewards are
great, but after

a while we play our game only for the joy of defeating each other.

The boy join him and your other friends in his private apartments,

Prince

Kheldar," he said. "If you'll be so good as to follow me."

"Of course," Silk said. "Come along, Garion."

The king's private apartments were much simpler than the ornate
halls

in the

main palace. King Fulrach had removed his crown and state robes and
now looked

much like any other Sendar in rather ordinary clothes. He stood
talking quietly

with Barak. Queen Layla and Aunt Pol were seated on a couch deep
in

conversation, and Durnik was not far away, trying his best to look
inconspicuous. Mister Wolf stood alone near a window, his face like a
thundercloud.

"Ah, Prince Kheldar," the king said. "We thought perhaps you and
Garion had been

shrewd even for one of your talents.

"I have a great deal of respect for the old scoundrel." Silk laughed.

King Fulrach glanced apprehensively at Mister Wolf, then squared his

shoulders

and sighed. "I suppose we'd better get this unpleasantness over with," he said.

"Layla, would you entertain our other guests while I give our grim-faced

old

friend there and the Lady the opportunity to scold me. It's obvious that he's not going to be happy until they've said a few unkind things to me

about some

matters that weren't really my fault."

"Of course, dear," Queen Layla said. "Try not to be too long and please don't

shout. The children have been put to bed and they need their rest."

Forenn of

Drasnia to you should the occasion arise," Silk said in a courtly manner. "She

asks leave of you to broach a correspondence on a matter of some delicacy."

"Why, of course," Queen Layla beamed. "She's a dear child, far too pretty and

sweet-natured for that fat old bandit, Rhodar. I hope he hasn't made

her

unhappy."

"No, your Highness," Silk said. "Amazing though it may seem, she loves my uncle

to distraction, and he, of course, is delirious with joy over so young and

beautiful a wife. It's positively sickening the way they dote on each other."

"Some day, Prince Kheldar, you will fall in love," the queen said

It's a question of fertility, your Highness," Silk said with a

delicate cough.

"She wants to present my uncle with an heir and she needs to seek

your advice in

the business. The entire world stands in awe of your gifts in that

particular

area."

Queen Layla blushed prettily and then laughed.

"I'll write to her at once," she promised.

Garion by now had carefully worked his way to the door through

which

King

Fulrach had taken Aunt Pol and Mister Wolf. He began a meticulous

examination of

a tapestry on the wall to conceal the fact that he was trying to hear

what was

going on behind the closed door. It took him only a moment to begin

to pick up

you know that I'm aware of everything that happens," Wolf said.. "Did you know that we are defenseless if the Accursed One awakens?"

That which

held him in check has been stolen from off the throne of the Rivan King."

"As a matter of fact, I was following the trail of the thief when your noble

Captain Brendig interrupted me in my search."

"I'm sorry," Fulrach said, "but you wouldn't have gone much farther anyway. All

the Kings of Aloria have been searching for you for three months now.

Your

likeness, drawn by the finest artists, is in the hands of every ambassador,

agent and official of the five kingdoms of the north. Actually, you've been

for war, and even my poor Sendaria is being quietly mobilized. If the

Accursed

One arises now, we're all doomed. The power that's been stolen can
very possibly

be used to awaken him, and his first move will be to attack the west

- you know

that, Belgarath. And you also know that until the return of the Rivan
King, the

west has no real defense."

Garion blinked and started violently, then tried to cover the sudden
movement by

bending to look at some of the finer detail on the tapestry. He told
himself

that he had heard wrong. The name King Fulrach had spoken could
not

have really

been Belgarath. Belgarath was a fairy-tale figure, a myth.

"Just tell the Alorn Kings that I'm in pursuit of the thief," Mister

Don't tempt fate, Fulrach," Aunt Poi advised. "Your interference is

costing us

time we can't afford to lose. Presently I'll become vexed with you."

The king's voice was firm as he answered. "I know your power, Lady Polgara," he

said, and Garion jumped again. "I don't have any choice, however," the king

continued. "I'm bound by my word to deliver you all up at Val Alorn to the Kings

of Aloria, and a king can't break his word to other kings."

There was a long silence in the other room while Garion's mind raced through a dozen possibilities.

"You're not a bad man, Fulrach," Mister Wolf said. "Not perhaps as bright as I

might wish, but a good man nonetheless. I won't raise my hand against

you - nor

stop interfering.

"I think age is beginning to soften your brain, Father," Aunt Pol said. "We

don't have the time for this excursion to Val Alorn. Fulrach can explain to the Alorn Kings."

"It won't do any good, Lady Polgara," the king said rather ruefully.

"As your father so pointedly mentioned, I'm not considered very bright. The Alorn Kings won't listen to me. If you leave now, they'll just send someone like Brendig to apprehend you again."

"Then that unfortunate man may suddenly find himself living out the remainder of

his days as a toad or possibly a radish," Aunt Pol said ominously.

"Enough of that, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "Is there a ship ready, Fulrach?"

Alorns. Will you

be going with us?"

"I'm obliged to," Fulrach said. "The council's to be general, and

Sendaria's

involved."

"You haven't heard the last of this, Fulrach," Aunt Pol said.

"Never mind, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "He's only doing what he thinks is right.

We'll straighten it all out in Val Alorn."

Garion was trembling as he stepped away from the door. It was impossible. His

skeptical Sendarian upbringing made him at first incapable of even considering

such an absurdity. Reluctantly, however, he finally forced himself to look the

idea full in the face.

What if Mister Wolf really was Belgarath the Sorcerer, a man who had

she could

not be his Aunt. Garion's orphaning was complete now. He was
adrift in the world

with no ties of blood or heritage to cling to. Desperately he wanted
to go home,

back to Faldor's farm, where he could sink himself in unthinking
obscurity in a

quiet place where there were no sorcerers or strange searches or
anything that

would even remind him of Aunt Pol and the cruel hoax she had made
of

his life.

Part Two

CHEREK

Chapter Twelve

IN THE GRAY FIRST LIGHT Of early morning they rode through
the quiet

streets of

resembled nothing

quite so much as two moderately prosperous Sendars on a business trip. Queen

Layla, who was not to go with them, rode beside her husband, talking earnestly

to him with an expression on her face that seemed almost to hover on

the verge

of tears. The party was accompanied by soldiers, cloaked against the

raw, chill

wind off the sea.

At the foot of the street which led down from the palace to the harbor, the

stone wharves of Sendar jutted out into the choppy water, and there,

rocking and

Lounging

about on her deck were a number of savage-looking sailors, bearded and garbed in

shaggy garments made of fur. With the exception of Barak, these were

the first

Chereks Garion had ever seen, and his first impression was that they

would

probably prove to be totally unreliable.

"Barak!" a burly man halfway up the mast shouted and dropped hand over hand down

a steeply slanting rope to the deck and then jumped across to the wharf.

"Grelidik!" Barak roared in response, swung down from his horse and clasped the

evil-looking sailor in a bear hug.. "It would seem that Lord Barak is acquainted with our captain," the

and sea travel to begin with.

"I'm told that Captain Gredrik is one of the finest seamen in all of Cherek,"

the earl assured him.

"My Lord," Silk said with a pained look, "Cherek definitions can be deceptive."

Sourly he watched Barak and Gredrik toasting their reunion with tankards of ale

that had been passed down to them from the ship by a grinning sailor.

Queen Layla had dismounted and she embraced Aunt Pol. "Please watch

out for my

poor husband, Pol," she said with a little laugh that quivered a bit.

"Don't let

those Alorn bullies goad him into doing anything foolish."

"Of course, Layla," Aunt Pol said comfortingly.

"Now, Layla," King Fulrach said in an embarrassed voice. "I'll be all

Anneg.

"We're on serious business, Layla," the kind said. "There won't be time for any of that."

"I know Anheg too well," the queen sniffed. She turned to Mister Wolf, stood on

her tiptoes and kissed his bearded cheek. "Dear Belgarath," she said.

"When this is over, promise that you and Pol will come back for a long visit."

"I promise, Layla," Mister Wolf said gravely.

"The tide is turning, Lord King," Gredlik said, "and my ship is growing restless."

"Oh dear," the queen said. She put her arms around the king's neck and buried her face in his shoulder.

"Now, now," Fulrach said awkwardly.

swayed

dangerously, but they all managed to board without accident. The
sailors slipped

the hawsers and took their places at the oars. The lean vessel
leaped

away from

the wharf and moved swiftly into the harbor past the stout and
bulky

merchantmen anchored nearby. Queen Layla stood forlornly on the
wharf, surrounded

by tall

soldiers. She waved a few times and then stood watching, her chin
lifted

bravely.

Captain Gredrik took his place at the tiller with Barak by his side
and signaled

to a squat, muscular warrior crouched nearby. The squat man nodded
and pulled a

grew

so ponderous

that the ship no longer rocked but ran instead down the back of
each

wave and up

the face of the next. The long oars, dipping to the rhythm of the
sullen drum,

left little swirls on the surface of the waves. The sea was lead-gray
beneath

the wintry sky, and the low, snow-covered coastline of Sendaria slid
by on their

right, bleak and desolate-looking.

Garion spent most of the day shivering in a sheltered spot near the
high prow,

moodily staring out at the sea. The shards and shambles into which
his life had

fallen the night before lay in ruins around him. The idea that Wolf
was

looking at her as

much as possible, and did not speak to anyone.

They slept that night in cramped quarters beneath the stern deck
of
the ship.

Mister Wolf sat talking for a long time with King Fulrach and the
Earl of

Seline. Garion covertly watched the old man whose silvery hair and
short-cropped

beard seemed almost to glow in the light from a swinging oil lamp
hanging from

one of the low beams. He still looked the same as always, and Garion
finally

turned over and went to sleep.

The next day they rounded the hook of Sendaria and beat north-
easterly
with a

rigging

crackled with ice, and sleet hissed into the sea around them. "If

this doesn't

break, it will be a rough passage through the Bore," Barak

said, frowning into

the sleet.

"The what?" Durnik asked apprehensively. Durnik was not at all

comfortable on

the ship. He was just recovering from a bout of seasickness, and he

was

obviously a bit edgy.

"The Cherek Bore," Barak explained. "It's a passage about a league

wide between

the northern tip of Sendaria and the southern end of the Cherek

peninsula -

riptides, whirlpools, that sort of thing. Don't be alarmed, Durnik.

This is a

good ship, and Grelidik knows the secret of navigating the Bore. It

I make a special point of not going through it sober," Silk told

him.

Barak laughed. "You ought to be thankful for the Bore, Silk," he

said. "It keeps

the Empire out of the Gulf of Cherek. All Drasnia would be a

Tolnedran province

if it wasn't there."

"I admire it politically," Silk said, "but personally I'd be much

happier if I

never had to look at it again."

On the following day they anchored near the rocky coast of north-

ern

Sendaria and

waited for the tide to turn. In time it slackened and reversed, and

the waters

of the Sea of the Winds mounted and plunged through the Bore to

raise

the level

It was foolish. Garion knew that, even as he stood up and began to follow the red-bearded man toward the prow, but four days of solitary brooding

over a

problem that refused to yield to any kind of logic made him feel almost

belligerently reckless. He set his teeth together and took hold of a rusted iron

ring embedded in the prow.

Barak laughed and clapped him a stunning blow on the shoulder.

"Good

boy," he

said approvingly. "We'll stand together and look the Bore right down the

throat."

Garion decided not to answer that.

enormous whirlpool in the center of the Bore until they were almost upon it. He seemed to hear a vast roar and cleared his eyes just in time to see it yawning in front of him.

"What's that?" he yelled over the noise.

"The Great Maelstrom," Barak shouted. "Hold on."

The Maelstrom was fully as large as the village of Upper Galt and descended horribly down into a seething, mist-filled pit unimaginably far below.

Incredibly, instead of guiding his vessel away from the vortex, Grelidik steered directly at it.

"What's he doing?" Garion screamed.

"It's the secret of passing through the Bore," Barak roared. "We circle the

If the ship doesn't whirl,

"Sometimes a ship is torn apart in the Maelstrom," Barak said.

"Don't

worry,

boy. It doesn't happen very often, and Grelidik's ship seems stout enough."

The ship's prow dipped hideously into the outer edges of the Maelstrom and then

raced twice around the huge whirlpool with the oarsmen frantically bending their

backs to the frenzied beat of the drum. The wind tore at Garion's face, and he

clung to his iron ring, keeping his eyes averted from the seething maw gaping

below.

And then they broke free and shot like a whistling stone through the

churning

from the Maels from carried them on to calm water in a partially

sheltered cove

on the Sendarian side.

Barak was laughing gleefully and mopping spray from his beard.

"Well,

lad," he

said, "what do you think of the Bore?"

Garion didn't trust himself to answer and concentrated on trying to pry his numb

fingers from the iron ring.

A familiar voice rang out from the stern.. "Garion!"

"Now you've gone and got me in trouble," Garion said resentfully, ignoring the

fact that standing in the prow had been his own idea. Aunt Pol spoke scathingly

to Barak about his irresponsibility and then turned her attention to Garion.

"Well?" she said. "I'm waiting. Would you like to explain?"

like it," he said, half-defiantly. For the first time in his life he

felt on the

verge of open rebellion.

"You what?"

"I felt like it," he repeated. "What difference does it make why I
did it?"

You're going to punish me anyway."

Aunt Pol stiffened, and her eyes blazed.

Mister Wolf, who was sitting nearby, chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she snapped.

"Why don't you let me handle this, Pol?" the old man suggested.

"I can deal with it," she said.

"But not well, Pol," he said. "Not well at all. Your temper's too
quick, and

your tongue's too sharp. He's not a child anymore. He's not a man
yet, but he's

not a child either. The problem needs to be dealt with in a special
way. I'll

Why is she so mean?" Garion blurted.

"She isn't," Mister Wolf said. "She's angry because you frightened her. Nobody likes to be frightened."

"I'm sorry," Garion mumbled, ashamed of himself.

"Don't apologize to me," Wolf said. "I wasn't frightened." He looked for a moment at Garion, his eyes penetrating. "What's the problem?" he asked.

"They call you Belgarath," Garion said as if that explained it all, "and they call her Polgara."

"So."

"It's just not possible."

"Didn't we have this conversation before? A long time ago?"

"Are you Belgarath?" Garion demanded bluntly.

"Some people call me that. What difference does it make?"

"I'm sorry," Garion said. "I just don't believe it:"

kinship between himself and Aunt Poi, he could not bear the thought of having it finally and irrevocably confirmed.

"You're confused," Wolf said. "Is that it? Nothing seems to be like it ought to be, and you're angry with your Aunt because it seems like it has to be her fault."

"You make it sound awfully childish," Garion said, flushing slightly.

"Isn't it?"

Garion flushed even more.

"It's your own problem, Garion," Mister Wolf said. "Do you really think it's proper to make others unhappy because of it?"

"No," Garion admitted in a scarcely audible voice.

"Your Aunt and I are who we are," Wolf said quietly. "People have made up a lot of nonsense about us, but that doesn't really matter. There are

your liking. That's not only childish, it's ill-mannered, and you're

a better

boy than that. Now, I really think you owe her an apology, don't you?"

"I suppose so," Garion said.

"I'm glad we had this chance to talk," the old man said, "but I wouldn't wait

too long before making up with her. You wouldn't believe how long she

can stay

angry." He grinned suddenly. "She's been angry with me for as long

as

I can

remember, and that's so long that I don't even like to think about it."

"I'll do it right now," Garion said.

"Good," Wolf approved.

Garion stood up and walked purposefully to where Aunt Pol stood

yes, she said, you were.

"I won't do it again."

She laughed then, a low, warm laugh, and ran her fingers through his tangled

hair. "Don't make promises you can't keep, dear," she said, and she embraced

him, and everything was all right again.

After the fury of the tide through the Cherek Bore had abated, they sailed north

along the snow-mufled east coast of the Cherek peninsula toward the

ancient city

which was the ancestral home of all Alorns, Algar and Drasnian as well as Cherek

and Rivan. The wind was chill and the skies threatening, but the remainder of

the voyage was uneventful. After three more days their ship entered

than the
construction of human hands. The narrow, crooked streets were
clogged

with snow,
and the mountains behind the city loomed high and white against the
dark sky.

Several horse-drawn sleighs awaited them at the wharf with
savagelooking drivers
and shaggy horses stamping impatiently in the packed snow. There
were

fur robes
in the sleighs, and Garion drew one of them about him as he waited
for Barak to
conclude his farewells to Gredik and the sailors.

"Let's go," Barak told the driver as he climbed into the sleigh. "See
if you
can't catch up with the others."

"If you hadn't talked so long, they wouldn't be so far ahead, Lord

Cherek

warriors

swaggered up and down the narrow streets, and many of them bel-
lowed

greetings to

Barak as the sleigh passed. At one corner their driver was forced to
halt while

two burly men, stripped to the waist in the biting cold, wrestled
savagely in

the snow in the center of the street to the encouraging shouts of a
crowd of
onlookers.

"A common pastime," Barak told *Garion*. "Winter's a tedious time in
Val Alorn."

"Is that the palace ahead?" *Garion* asked.

Barak shook his head. "The temple of Belar," he said. "Some men say
that the

woolen

robes stood
with a long staff clutched in one honey hand and her stringy hair
wild about her face. "Hail, Lord Barak," she called in a cracked voice
as they

passed. "Thy
Doom still awaits thee."

"Stop the sleigh," Barak growled at the driver, and he threw off his
fur robe

and jumped to the ground. "Martje," he thundered at the old woman.

"You've been
forbidden to loiter here. If I tell Anheg that you've disobeyed him,
he'll have

the priests of the temple burn you for a witch."

The old woman cackled at him, and Garion noted with a shudder that
her eyes were

milk-white blankness.

"The fire will not touch old Martje," she laughed shrilly. "That is

remember the
words of old Martje." And then she seemed to look at the sleigh
where

Garion
sat, though her milky eyes were obviously blind. Her expression
suddenly changed
from malicious glee to one strangely awestruck.
"Hail, greatest of Lords," she crooned, bowing deeply. "When thou
comest into
throe inheritance, remember that it was old Martje who first
greeted
thee."

Barak started toward her with a roar, but she scurried away, her
staff tapping
on the stone steps.
"What did she mean?" Garion asked when Barak returned to the
sleigh.

"She's a crazy woman," Barak replied, his face pale with anger.

grewed at

the driver.

Garion looked back over his shoulder as they sped away, but the old

blind woman

was nowhere in sight.

Chapter Thirteen

THE PALACE OF KING ANHEG Of Cherek was a vast, brooding
structure

near the

center of Val Alorn. Huge wings, many of them crumbled into decay

with unpaned

windows staring emptily at the open sky through collapsed roofs,

stretched out

from the main building in all directions. So far as Garion could tell

there was

no plan to the palace whatsoever. It had, it seemed, merely
grown over the three

thousand years and more that the kings of Cherek had ruled there.

ter

with the

blind woman at the temple.

The others had all dismounted and stood waiting.

"You've been away from home too long if you can get lost on the way

from the

harbor to the palace," Silk said pleasantly.

"We were delayed," Barak grunted.

A broad, ironbound door at the top of the wide steps that led up to

the palace

opened then as if someone behind it had been waiting for them all to

arrive. A

woman with long flaxen braids and wearing a deep scarlet cloak

trimmed with rich

fur stepped out onto the portico at the top of the stairs and stood

looking down

at them. "Greetings, Lord Barak, Earl of Trelheim and husband,"

she

wife said, as

is my right and my duty."

"You've always been most attentive to your duties, Merel," Barak

said. "Where

are my daughters?"

"At Trellheim, my Lord," she said. "I didn't think it would be a good

idea for

them to travel so far in the cold." There was a faintly malicious

note in her

voice.

Barak sighed. "I see," he said.

"Was I in error, my Lord?" Merel asked.

"Let it pass," Barak said.

"If you and your friends are ready, my Lord," she said, "I'll escort

you to the

throne room."

Barak went up the stairs, briefly and rather formally embraced his

wife, and the

you're a cruel man, Prince Kheladr," The Earl said.

"Not really," Silk said. "I'm a realist, that's all. Barak spent all those years

yearning after Merel, and now he's got her. I'm delighted to see such

steadfastness rewarded. Aren't you?".The Earl of Seline sighed.

A party of mailed warriors joined them and escorted them through a

maze of

corridors, up broad stairs and down narrow ones, deeper and deeper into the vast

pile.

"I've always admired Cherek architecture," Silk said sardonically.

"It's so

unanticipated."

"Expanding the palace gives weak kings something to do," King Ful-rach

observed.

keep bad kings out of mischief?

"Prince Kheldar," King Fulrach said, "I don't wish your uncle any misfortune,

but I think it might be very interesting if the crown of Drasnia just happened to fall to you."

"Please, your Majesty," Silk said with feigned shock, "don't even suggest that."

"Also a wife," the Earl of Seline said slyly. "The prince definitely needs a wife."

"That's even worse," Silk said with a shudder.

The throne room of King Anheg was a vaulted chamber with a great fire

pit in the

center where whole logs blazed and crackled. Unlike the lushly draped

hall of

warriors,

gleaming in chain mail. At one end of the room sat five thrones, each surmounted

by a banner. Four of the thrones were occupied, and three regal-looking

women

stood talking nearby.

"Fulrach, King of Sendaria!" one of the warriors who had escorted them boomed,

striking the butt of his spear hollowly on the rush-strewn stone floor.

"Hail, Fulrach," a large, black-bearded man on one of the thrones called, rising

to his feet. His long blue robe was wrinkled and spotted, and his hair was

shaggy and unkempt. The gold crown he wore was dented in a place or

two, and one

welcome the

wisdom of the King of Sendaria at this council."

Garion found the stilted, archaic form of address strangely impressive.

"Which king is which, friend Silk?" Durnik whispered as they approached the thrones.

"The fat one in the red robe with the reindeer on his banner is my uncle, Rhodar of Drasnia. The lean-faced one in black under the horse banner is Cho-Hag of Algaria. The big, grim-faced one in gray with no crown who sits beneath the sword banner is Brand, the Rivan Warder."

"Brand?" Garion interrupted, startled as he remembered the stories of the Battle of Vo Mimbire.

golden sheaf of wheat that was the emblem of Sendaria.

"Hail Belgarath, Disciple of Aldur," Anheg said, "and hail Lady

Polgara, honored

daughter of immortal Belgarath."

"There's little time for all this ceremony, Anheg," Mister Wolf said

tartly,

throwing back his cloak and striding forward. "Why have the Kings

of

Aloria

summoned me?"

"Permit us our little ceremonies, Ancient One," Rhodar, the grossly

fat King of

Drasnia said slyly. "We so seldom have the chance to play king. We

won't be much

longer at it."

Mister Wolf shook his head in disgust.

One of the three regal-looking women came forward then. She was a

tall,

Queen Islena, Slik murmured to Burnik and Garion, "Anney's wife."

The little
man's nose twitched with suppressed mirth. "Watch her when she
greet's

Polgara."

The queen turned and curtsied deeply to Mister Wolf. "Divine
Belgarath," she
said, her rich voice throbbing with respect.

"Hardly divine, Islena," the old man said dryly.

"Immortal son of Aldur," she swept on, ignoring the interruption,

"mightiest

sorcerer in all the world. My poor house trembles at the awe-
some power you bring

within its walls."

"A pretty speech, Islena," Wolf said. "A little inaccurate, but
pretty all the
same."

With an elaborate gesture the queen produced a green jewel and

presented it to

Aunt Pol.

"She had it up her sleeve," Silk whispered gleefully.

"A royal gift, Islena," Aunt Pol said in a strange voice. "A pity
that I can

only offer this in return." She handed the queen a single deep red
rose.

"Where did she get that?" Garion asked in amazement. Silk winked
at
him.

The queen looked at the rose doubtfully and cupped it between her
two
hands. She
examined it closely, and her eyes widened. The color drained out of
her face,
and her hands began to tremble.

embraced Aunt Pol warmly. Her affection seemed simple and
unselfconscious.

"Porenn, Queen of Drasnia," Silk said, and his voice had an odd note
to it.

Garion glanced at him and saw the faintest hint of a bitter, self
mocking

expression flicker across his face. In that single instant, as
clearly as if it

had suddenly been illuminated by a bright light, Garion saw the
reason for

Silk's sometimes strange manner. An almost suffocating surge of
sympathy welled
up in his throat.

The third queen, Silar of Algaria, greeted King Fulrach, Mister Wolf
and Aunt

Pol with a few brief words in a quiet voice.

"Is the Rivan Warder unmarried?" Durnik asked, looking around for
another queen.

Anheg's Throne.

"Welcome home, cousin," King Anheg said. "I thought perhaps you'd lost your

way." "Family business, Anheg," Barak said. "I had to have a few words with

my wife."

"I see," Anheg said and let it drop.

"Have you met our friends?" Barak asked.

"Not as yet, Lord Barak," King Rhodar said. "We were involved with the customary

formalities." He chuckled, and his great paunch jiggled. "I'm sure you all know

the Earl of Seline," Barak said, "and this is Durnik, a smith and a brave man.

The boy's name is Garion. He's in Lady Polgara's care - a good lad."

"Do you suppose we could get on with this?" Mister Wolf asked impatiently.

Cho-Hag, King of the Algars, spoke in a strangely soft voice. "Are

all this

theeing and thouing really necessary?"

Cho-Hag looked embarrassed and glanced at King Anheg.

"My fault, Belgarath," Anheg said ruefully. "I set scribes to work to record our

meetings. Cho-Hag was speaking to history as well as to you." His crown had

slipped a bit and perched precariously over one ear.

"History's very tolerant, Anheg," Wolf said. "You don't have to try to impress

her. She'll forget most of what we say anyway." He turned to the Rivan Warder.

"Brand," he said, "do you suppose you could explain all this without too much

embellishment?"

"I'm afraid it's my fault, Belgarath," the gray-robed Warder said in a deep

voice. "The Apostate was able to carry off his theft because of my

being

destroyed by its power."

Brand spread his hands helplessly. "We woke one morning, and it was gone. The

priests were only able to divine the name of the thief. The Spirit of the

Bear-God wouldn't say any more. Since we knew who he was, we were

careful not to

speak his name or the name of the thing he took."

"Good," Wolf said. "He has ways to pick words out of the air at great

distances.

I taught him how to do that myself."

Brand nodded. "We knew that," he said. "It made phrasing our message

to you

I'm here

then," he said. "I borrowed your messenger. I had to get word to some

people in

Arendia. I suppose I should have known better."

Silk cleared his throat. "May I speak?" he asked politely.

"Certainly, Prince Kheldar," King Anheg said.

"Is it entirely prudent to continue these discussions in public?"

Silk asked.

"The Murgos have enough gold to buy ears in many places, and the arts

of the

Grolims can lift the thoughts out of the minds of the most loyal

warriors. What

isn't known can't be revealed, if you take my meaning."

"The warriors of Anheg aren't so easily bought, Silk," Barak said

testily, "and

there aren't any Grolims in Cherek."

thoughtful. Drashia has centuries of experience in the gathering of information, and Kheldar is one of our best. If he thinks that our words might go further than we'd want them to, we might be wise to listen to him."

"Thank you, uncle," Silk said, bowing.

"Could you penetrate this palace, Prince Kheldar?" King Anheg challenged.

"I already have, your Majesty," Silk said modestly, "a dozen times or more."

Anheg looked at Rhodar with one raised eyebrow.

Rhodar coughed slightly. "It was some time ago, Anheg. Nothing serious. I was just curious about something, that's all."

"All you had to do was ask," Anheg said in a slightly injured tone.

"I didn't want to bother you," Rhodar said with a shrug. "Besides, it's more fun to do it the other way."

King Anheg frowned and then shrugged. "Whatever you wish," he said.

"We'll

continue in private then. Cousin, would you clear old King Eldrig's hall for us

and set guards in the hallways near it?"

"I will, Anheg," Barak said. He took a dozen warriors and left the hall.

The kings rose from their thrones-all except Cho-Hag. A lean warrior,

very

nearly as tall as Barak and with the shaved head and flowing scalp.lock of the

Algars, stepped forward and helped him up.

Garion looked inquiringly at Silk.

"An illness when he was a child," Silk explained softly. "It left his legs so

weak that he can't stand unaided."

warrior who's helping him is Hettar, his adopted son.

"You know him?" Garion asked.

"I know everyone, Garion." Silk laughed softly. "Hettar and I have met a few times. I like him, though I'd rather he didn't know that."

Queen Porenn came over to where they stood. "Islena's taking Silar and me to her private quarters," she said to Silk. "Apparently women aren't supposed to be involved in matters of state here in Cherek."

"Our Cherek cousins have a few blind spots, your Highness," Silk said. "They're arch-conservatives, of course, and it hasn't occurred to them yet that women are human."

Queen Porenn winked at him with a sly little grin. "I'd hoped that we might get a chance to talk, Kheldar, but it doesn't look like it now. Did you

to have a

council of queens while the kings were meeting. She'd have invited

Layla too,

but everyone knows how terrified she is of sea travel."

"Has your council produced anything momentous, Highness?" Silk asked

lightly.

Queen Porenn made a face. "We sit around and watch Islena do tricks -

disappearing coins, things up her sleeves, that kind of thing," she said. "Or

she tells fortunes. Silar's too polite to object, and I'm the youngest, so I'm

not supposed to say too much. It's terribly dull, particularly when she goes

into trances over that stupid crystal ball of hers. Did Layla think she could

help me?"

grown woman, after all.

"Of course," Silk said. "I just wanted to prepare you, that's all."

"Are you making fun of me, Kheldar?" she asked.

"Would I do that, your Highness?" Silk asked, his face full of innocence.

"I think you would," she said.

"Coming, Porenn?" Queen Islena asked from not far away.

"At once, your Highness," the queen of Drasnia said. Her fingers flickered

briefly at Silk. What a bore.

Patience, Highness, Silk gestured in reply.

Queen Porenn docilely followed the stately Queen of Cherek and the silent Queen

of Algaria from the hall. Silk's eyes followed her, and his face had that same

self mocking expression as before.

"The others are leaving," Garion said delicately and pointed to the far end of

that if Aunt Pol saw him, she'd probably find a reason to send him away.

As he loitered along at the rear of the procession, a furtive movement flickered

briefly far down one of the side corridors. He caught only one glimpse of the

man, an ordinary-looking Cherek warrior wearing a dark green cloak, and then

they had moved past that corridor. Garion stopped and stepped back to

look

again, but the man in the green cloak was gone.

At the door to King Eldrig's hall, Aunt Pol stood waiting with her arms crossed.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I was just looking," he said as innocently as possible.

"I see," she said. Then she turned to Barak. "The council's probably going to

What would I do in an armory?" Garion demanded.

"Would you prefer the scullery?" Aunt Pol asked pointedly.

"On second thought, I think I might like to see the armory."

"I thought you might."

"It's at the far end of this corridor, Garion," Barak said. "The room

with the

red door."

"Run along, dear," Aunt Pol said, "and try not to cut yourself on

anything."

Garion sulked slowly down the corridor Barak had pointed out to him,

keenly feeling the injustice of the situation. The guards posted in the

passageway

outside King Eldrig's hall even made eavesdropping impossible.

Garion

sighed and

continued his solitary way toward the armory.

obvious that they at least did believe it. Then there was the question of the rose Aunt Pol had given to Queen Islena. Setting aside the fact that roses do not bloom in the winter, how had Aunt Pol known that Islena would present her with that green jewel and therefore prepared the rose in advance?

He

deliberately avoided the idea that his Aunt had simply created the rose on the spot.

The corridor along which he passed, deep in thought, was dim, with only a few torches set in rings on the walls to light the way. Side passages branched out from it here and there, gloomy, unlighted openings that stretched back into the darkness. He had almost reached the armory when he heard a faint

looked

around furtively. He was an ordinary-looking man with a short, sandy beard, and

he probably could have walked anywhere in the palace without attracting much

notice. His manner, however, and his stealthy movements cried out louder than

words that he was doing something he was not supposed to be doing.

He

hurried up

the corridor in the direction from which Garion had come, and

Garion

shrank back

into the protective darkness of his hiding place. When he carefully poked his

head out into the corridor again, the man had disappeared, and it

was

impossible

time being

was to keep his eyes open for the man in the green cloak..Chapter

Fourteen

IT WAS SNOWING the following morning, and Aunt Pol, Silk, Barak, and

Mister Wolf

again met for council with the kings, leaving Garion in Durnik's

keeping. The

two sat near the fire in the huge hall with the thrones, watching the

two dozen

or so bearded Cherek warriors who lounged about or engaged in

various

activities

to pass the time. Some of them sharpened their swords or polished

their armor;

others ate or sat drinking-even though it was still quite early in

the morning;

haven't seen anyone actually working since we arrived, have you?"

Garion shook his head. "I think these are the king's own warriors," he said just

as quietly. "I don't think they're supposed to do anything except sit around and

wait for the king to tell them to go fight someone."

Durnik frowned disapprovingly. "It must be a terribly boring way to live," he said.

"Durnik," Garion asked after a moment, "did you notice the way Barak

and his

wife acted toward each other?"

"It's very sad," Durnik said. "Silk told me about it yesterday. Barak fell in

love with her when they were both very young, but she was highborn and didn't

take him very seriously."

Meret objected, but it didn't do her any good. Silk said that Barak

found out

after they were married that she's really a very shallow person, but
of course

it was too late by then. She does spiteful things to try to hurt him,
and he

spends as much time away from home as possible."

"Do they have any children?" Garion asked.

"Two," Durnik said. "Both girls - about five and seven. Barak loves
them very

much, but he doesn't get to see them very often."

Garion sighed. "I wish there was something we could do," he said.

"We can't interfere between a man and his wife," Durnik said.

"Things

like that

just aren't done."

"Did you know that Silk's in love with his aunt?" Garion said without
stopping

like she was

his real aunt."

"She's married to his uncle," Durnik said firmly. "Who made up this scandalous story?"

"Nobody made it up," Garion said. "I was watching his face when he talked to her yesterday. It's pretty plain the way he feels about her."

"I'm sure you just imagined it," Durnik said disapprovingly. He stood up. "Let's

look around. That will give us something better to do than sit here gossiping

about our friends. It's really not the sort of thing decent men do."

"All right," Garion agreed quickly, a little embarrassed. He stood up and

followed Durnik across the smoky hall and out into the corridor.

"Let's have a

look at the kitchen," Garion suggested.

Unlike Aunt

Pol's well-ordered kitchen at Faldor's farm, everything here was chaos and

confusion. The head cook was a huge man with a red face who screamed

orders

which everyone ignored. There were shouts and threats and a great deal of

horseplay. A spoon heated in a fire and left where an unsuspecting cook would

pick it up brought shrieks of mirth, and one man's hat was stolen and

deliberately thrown into a seething pot of stew.

"Let's go someplace else, Durnik," he said. "This isn't what I expected at all."

Durnik nodded. "Mistress Pol would never tolerate all of this foolishness," he agreed disapprovingly.

haven't

seen you before."

"We're just visiting," Durnik said.

"Where are you from?" she demanded.

"Sendaria," Durnik said.

"How interesting. Perhaps the boy could run this errand for you, and you and I could talk for a while." Her look was direct.

Durnik coughed, and his ears reddened. "The smithy?" he asked again.

The maid laughed lightly. "In the courtyard at the end on this corridor," she

said. "I'm usually around here someplace. I'm sure you can find me when you

finish your business with the smith."

"Yes," Durnik said, "I'm sure I could. Come along, Garion."

They went on down the corridor and out into a snowy inner courtyard.

crossed the courtyard through the lightly falling snow.

The smithy was presided over by a huge, black-bearded man with forearms as big

as Garion's thighs. Durnik introduced himself and the two were soon happily

talking shop to the accompaniment of the ringing blows of the smith's hammer.

Garion noticed that instead of the plows, spades, and hoes that would

fill a

Sendarian smithy, the walls here were hung with swords, spears, and war axes. At

one forge an apprentice was hammering out arrowheads, and at another,

a lean,

one-eyed man was working on an evil-looking dagger.

their tasks. There were coopers and wheelwrights, cobblers and carpenters, saddlers and candlemakers, all busily at work to maintain the huge household of King Anheg. As he watched, Garion also kept his eyes open for the sandy-bearded man in the green cloak he'd seen the night before. It wasn't likely that the man would be here where honest work was being done, but Garion stayed alert all the same.

About noon, Barak came looking for them and led them back to the great hall where Silk lounged, intently watching a dice game.

"Anheg and the others want to meet privately this afternoon," Barak said. "I've got an errand to run, and I thought you might want to go along."

strangers."

Barak grinned. "I'm sure they'd be glad to let you play, Silk," he said.. "They've got just as much chance of winning as you do."

"Just as the sun has as much chance of coming up in the west as in the east,"

Silk said.

"Are you that sure of your skill, friend Silk?" Durnik asked.

"I'm sure of theirs." Silk chuckled. He jumped up. "Let's go," he said. "My

fingers are starting to itch. Let's get them away from temptation."

"Anything you say, Prince Kheldar." Barak laughed.

They all put on fur cloaks and left the palace. The snow had almost stopped, and

the wind was brisk.

"I'm a bit confused by all these names," Durnik said as they trudged toward the

central part of Val Alorn. "I've been meaning to ask about it. You,

of Erdi. Where I come from, people usually have one name.

"Names are like clothes, Durnik," Silk explained. "We put on what's most

suitable for the occasion. Honest men have little need to wear strange clothes

or strange names. Those of us who aren't so honest, however, occasionally have

to change one or the other."

"I don't find it amusing to hear Mistress Pol described as not being honest,"

Durnik said stifly.

"No disrespect intended," Silk assured him. "Simple definitions don't

apply to

Lady Polgara; and when I say that we're not honest, I simply mean that this

business we're in sometimes requires us to conceal ourselves from people who are

I'm a little behind in my religious duties," Barak said with a

pained look,

"and I'd rather not be reminded of it by the High Priest of Belar.

His voice is

very penetrating, and I don't like being called down in front of the whole city.

A prudent man doesn't give either a priest or a woman the opportunity

to scold

him in public."

The streets of Val Alorn were narrow and crooked, and the ancient stone houses

were tall and narrow with overhanging second stories. Despite the intermittent

snow and the crisp wind, the streets seemed full of people, most of them garbed in furs against the chill.

There was much good-humored shouting and the exchange of bawdy insults. Two

sing old

songs together until they fall off their benches. They've been doing it for years now."

"What do they do in the summer?" Silk asked.

"They throw rocks," Barak said. "The drinking and singing and falling off the benches stays the same, though."

"Hello, Barak," a green-eyed young woman called from an upper window.

"When are you coming to see me again?"

Barak glanced up, and his face flushed, but he didn't answer.

"That lady's talking to you, Barak," Garion said.

"I heard her," Barak replied shortly.

"She seems to know you," Silk said with a sly look.

"She knows everyone," Barak said, flushing even more. "Shall we move

people quickly made way for them.

"Hail, Lord Barak," their leader intoned.

"Hail, Lord Barak," the others said in unison, still swaying. Barak

bowed

stiffly.

"May the arm of Belar protect thee," the leader said. "All praise to

Belar,

Bear-God of Aloria," the others said. Barak bowed again and stood

until the

procession had passed.

"Who were they?" Durnik asked.

"Bear-cultists," Barak said with distaste. "Religious fanatics."

"A troublesome group," Silk explained. "They have chapters in all

the

Alorn

kingdoms. They're excellent warriors, but they're the instruments

of

the High

Alorn kingdoms together. They were all one nation. The cultists want
to reunite
them."

"That doesn't seem unreasonable," Durnik said.

"Aloria was divided for a reason," Barak said. "A certain thing had
to be protected, and the division of Aloria was the best way to do
that."

"Was this thing so important?" Durnik asked.

"It's the most important thing in the world," Silk said. "The
Bearcultists tend
to forget that."

"Only now it's been stolen, hasn't it?" Garion blurted as that dry
voice in his
mind informed him of the connection between what Barak and Silk
had
just said

and the sudden disruption of his own life. "It's this thing that
Mister Wolf is

His weasel face was grave. "You're right, of course, Garion," he

said. "We don't

know how yet, but somebody's managed to steal it. If Belgarath
gives

the word,

the Alorn Kings will take the world apart stone by stone to get it
back."

"You mean war?" Durnik said in a sinking voice.

"There are worse things than war," Barak said grimly. "It might be a
good

opportunity to dispose of the Angaraks once and for all."

"Let's hope that Belgarath can persuade the Alorn Kings otherwise,"
Silk said.

"The thing has to be recovered," Barak insisted.

"Granted," Silk agreed, "but there are other ways, and I hardly
think

a public

street's the place to discuss our alternatives."

and came to several large yards where the skeletons of ships lay in the snow.

A limping man in a leather smock came from a low stone building in the center of one of the yards and stood watching their approach.

"Ho, Krendig," Barak called.

"Ho, Barak," the man in the leather smock replied.

"How does the work go?" Barak asked.

"Slowly in this season," Krendig said. "It's not a good time to work with wood.

My artisans are fashioning the fittings and sawing the boards, but we

won't be

able to do much more until spring."

Barak nodded and walked over to lay his hand on the new wood of a ship prow

rising out of the snow. "Krendig is building this for me," he said, patting the

Garion heard a gleeful shout from the hillside above the shipyard
and
looked up
quickly. Several young people were sliding down the hill on smooth
planks. It
was obvious that Barak and the others were going to spend most of
the
rest of
the afternoon discussing the ship. While that might be all very
interesting,
Garion realized that he hadn't spoken with anyone his own age for a
long time.
He drifted away from the others and stood at the foot of the hill,
watching.
One blond girl particularly attracted his eye. In some ways she
reminded him of
Zubrette, but there were some differences. Where Zubrette had
been

That looks like fun," Garion said as her improvised sled came to

rest nearby.

"Would you like to try?" she asked, getting up and brushing the snow from her

woolen dress.

"I don't have a sled," he told her.

"I might let you use mine," she said, looking at him archly, "if you give me

something."

"What would you want me to give you?" he asked.

"We'll think of something," she said, eyeing him boldly. "What's your

name?"

"Garion," he said.

"What an odd name. Do you come from here?"

"No. I'm from Sendaria."

"A Sendar? Truly?" Her blue eyes twinkled. "I've never met a Sendar

Garion blushed furiously, and Maidee laughed.

A large red-haired boy in a long tunic slid to a stop nearby and rose with a menacing look on his face.

"Maidee, come away from there," he ordered.

"What if I don't want to?" she asked.

The red-haired boy swaggered toward Garion.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I was talking with Maidee," Garion said.

"Who gave you permission?" the red-haired boy asked. He was a bit taller than Garion and somewhat heavier.

"I didn't bother to ask permission," Garion said.

The red-haired boy glowered, flexing his muscles threateningly.

"I can thrash you if I like," he announced.

Garion realized that the redhead was feeling belligerent and that a fight was inevitable. The preliminaries—threats, insults and the like—would probably go on

down

heavily in

the snow. He raised one hand to his nose and brought it away bright red.

"It's bleeding!" he wailed accusingly. "You made my nose bleed."

"It'll stop in a few minutes," Garion said.

"What if it doesn't?"

"Nose bleeds don't last forever," Garion told him.

"Why did you hit me?" the redhead demanded tearfully, wiping his nose. "I didn't

do anything to you."

"You were going to," Garion said. "Put snow on it, and don't be such a baby."

"It's still bleeding," the boy said.

"Put snow on it," Garion said again.

"What if it doesn't stop bleeding?"

"Then you'll probably bleed to death," Garion said in a heartless tone. It was a

Are all Sendars so cruel?" Maidee asked.

"I don't know all the people in Sendaria," Garion said. The affair hadn't turned out well at all, and regretfully he turned and started back toward the shipyard.

"Garion, wait," Maidee said. She ran after him and caught him by the arm. "You forgot my kiss," she said, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the lips.

"There," she said, and she turned and ran laughing back up the hill, her blond braids flying behind her.

Barak, Silk and Durnik were all laughing when he returned to where they stood.

"You were supposed to chase her," Barak said.

"What for?" Garion asked, flushing at their laughter.

"She wanted you to catch her."

to tell her.

"Why don't we throw dice for the privilege?" Silk suggested.

"I've seen you throw dice before, Silk." Barak laughed.

"Of course we could simply stay here a while longer," Silk said

slyly. "I rather

imagine that Garion's new playmate would be quite happy to complete

his

education, and that way we wouldn't have to bother Lady Polgara about

it."

Garion's ears were flaming. "I'm not as stupid as all that," he said

hotly. "I

know what you're talking about, and you don't have to say anything to

Aunt Pol

about it." He stamped away angrily, kicking at the snow.

After Barak had talked for a while longer with his shipbuilder and

which had hung overhead since their arrival in Val Aiora had begun

to

tatter,

and patches of clear sky began to appear. Here and there single
stars

twinkled

as evening slowly settled in the snowy streets. The soft light of
candles began

to glow in the windows of the houses, and the few people left in the
streets

hurried to get home before dark.

Garion, still loitering behind, saw two men entering a wide door
beneath a crude

sign depicting a cluster of grapes. One of them was the sandy-
bearded

man in the

green cloak that he had seen in the palace the night before. The
other man wore

fore,

Garion felt

that peculiar restraint, almost like a ghostly finger touching his

lips. The

hooded man was Asharak, and, though the Murgos' presence here

was

very

important, it was for some reason impossible for Garion to speak of

it. He

watched the two men only for a moment and then hurried to catch

up

with his

friends. He struggled with the compulsion that froze his tongue, and

then tried

another approach.

"Barak," he asked, "are there many Murgos in Val Alorn?"

"There aren't any Murgos in Cherek," Barak said. "Angaraks aren't

allowed in the

That evening, when they were all seated at the long table in King

Anheg's

central hall with a great feast set before them, Barak entertained them with a

broadly exaggerated account of Garion's encounter with the young people on the hillside.

"A great blow it was," he said in expansive tones, "worthy of the mightiest

warrior and truly struck upon the nose of the foe. The bright blood flew, and

the enemy was dismayed and overcome. Like a hero, Garion stood over

the

vanquished, and, like a true hero, did not boast nor taunt his fallen opponent,

but offered instead advice for quelling that crimson flood. With simple dignity

KISS

that is

the true hero's greatest reward. Her eyes flamed with admiration,
and

her chaste

bosom heaved with newly wakened passion. But modest Garion innocently

departed

and tarried not to claim those other sweet rewards the gentle
maid's

fond

demeanor so clearly offered. And thus the adventure ended with
our

hero tasting

victory but tenderly declining victory's true compensation."

The warriors and kings at the long table roared with laughter and
pounded the

table and their knees and each others' backs in their glee. Queen

she looked

at her husband.

Garion sat with his face aflame, his ears besieged with shouted suggestions and advice.

"Is that really the way it happened, nephew?" King Rhodar demanded of

Silk,

wiping tears from his eyes.

"More or less," Silk replied. "Lord Barak's telling was masterly, though a good deal embellished."

"We should send for a minstrel," the Earl of Seline said. "This exploit should

be immortalized in song." "Don't tease him," Queen Porenn said, looking sympathetically at

Garion.

Aunt Pol did not seem amused. Her eyes were cold as she looked at

Really?" she said. "And what's it going to be next time? A duel with swords, perhaps, and even greater foolishness afterward?"

"There was no real harm in it, Mistress Pol," Durnik assured her.

Aunt Pol shook

her head. "I thought you at least had good sense, Durnik," she said,

"but now I

see that I was wrong."

Garion suddenly resented her remarks. It seemed that no matter what

he did, she

was ready to take it in the worst possible light. His resentment

flared to the

verge of open rebellion. What right had she to say anything about

what he did?

There was no tie between them, after all, and he could do anything he

wanted

THE NEXT MORNING dawned bright and crisp. The sky was a deep blue,

and the
sunlight was dazzling on the white mountaintops that rose behind the

city. After

breakfast, Mister Wolf announced that he and Aunt Pol would again meet privately

that day with Fulrach and the Alorn Kings.

"Good idea," Barak said. "Gloomy ponderings are good for kings.

Unless one has

regal obligations, however, it's much too fine a day to be wasted indoors." He

grinned mockingly at his cousin.

"There's a streak of cruelty in you that I hadn't suspected, Barak,"

King Anheg

said, glancing longingly out a nearby window.

thin their

numbers a bit," Barak said, his grin even wider now.

"I was almost sure you had something like that in mind," Anheg said moodily,

scratching at his unkempt hair.. "I'm doing you a service, Anheg," Barak said. "You don't want your

kingdom

overrun with the beasts, do you?"

Rhodar, the fat King of Drasnia, laughed hugely. "I think he's got you, Anheg,"

he said.

"He usually does," Anheg agreed sourly.

"I gladly leave such activities to younger and leaner men," Rhodar said. He

slapped his vast paunch with both hands. "I don't mind a good supper,

but I'd

rather not have to fight with it first. I make too good a target. The

nds to

represent the honor of Drasnica in this venture."

Silk's face looked pained.

"You can be my champion," she said, her eyes sparkling.

"Have you been reading Arendish epics again, your Highness?" Silk asked acidly.

"Consider it a royal command," she said. "Some fresh air and exercise

won't hurt

you. You're starting to look dyspeptic."

Silk bowed ironically. "As you wish, your Highness," he said. "I suppose that if

things get out of hand I can always climb a tree."

"How about you, Durnik?" Barak asked.

"I don't know much about hunting, friend Barak," Durnik said doubtfully, "but

I'll come along if you like."

"My Lord?" Barak asked the Earl of Seline politely.

Go along, Hettar," Cho-Hag said in his soft voice. "I'm sure King

Anheg will

lend me a warrior to help me walk."

"I'll do it myself, Cho-Hag," Anheg said. "I've earned heavier burdens."

"I'll go with you then, Lord Barak," Hettar said. "And thanks for asking me."

His voice was deep and resonant, but very soft, much like that of his father.

"Well, lad?" Barak asked Garion.

"Have you lost your wits entirely, Barak?" Aunt Pol snapped. "Didn't you get him

into enough trouble yesterday?"

That was the last straw. The sudden elation he'd felt at Barak's invitation

turned to anger. Garion gritted his teeth and threw away all caution.

"If Barak

doesn't think I'll just be in the way, I'll be glad to go along," he

made his decision, and you're not going to humiliate him by unmaking it for him.

Garion isn't a child now. You may not have noticed, but he's almost man high and filling out now. He'll soon be fifteen, Pol. You're going to have to relax your grip sometime, and now's as good a time as any to start treating him like a man."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Whatever you say, father," she said at last with deceptive meekness.

"I'm sure we'll want to discuss this later, though-in private."

Mister Wolf winced.

Aunt Pol looked at Garion then. "Try to be careful, dear," she said, "and when you come back, we'll have a nice long talk, won't we?"

Have I my Lord's permission then to withdraw?" she asked.

"You have," he said shortly.

"Perhaps you ladies would like to join me," Queen Islena said. "We'll
cast

auguries and see if we can predict the outcome of the hunt."

Queen Porenn, who stood somewhat behind the Queen of Cherek,
rolled

her eyes

upward in resignation.

Queen Silar smiled at her.

"Let's go then," Barak said. "The boars are waiting."

"Sharpening their tusks, no doubt," Silk said.

Barak led them down to the red door of the armory where they
were

joined by a

grizzled man with enormously broad shoulders who wore a bullhide
shirt with

metal plates sewn on it.

asked

politely. "I've never done it before."

"It's a simple thing," Torvik explained. "I take my huntsmen into the forest and

we drive the beasts with noise and shouting. You and the other hunters wait for

them with these." He gestured at a rack of stout, broad-headed boar

spears.. "When the boar sees you standing in his way, he charges you and tries

to kill

you with his tusks, but instead you kill him with your spear."

"I see," Durnik said somewhat doubtfully. "It doesn't sound very complicated."

"We wear mail shirts, Durnik," Barak said. "Our hunters are hardly ever injured seriously."

"`Hardly ever' has an uncomfortable ring of frequency to it,

Not with your dice, my friend. Barak laughed.

They began pulling on mail shirts while Torvik's huntsmen carried several armloads of boar spears out to the sleighs waiting in the snowy courtyard of the palace.

Garion found the mail shirt heavy and more than a little uncomfortable. The steel rings dug at his skin even through his heavy clothes, and every time he tried to shift his posture to relieve the pressure of one of them, a half dozen others bit at him. The air was very cold as they climbed into the sleighs, and the usual fur robes seemed hardly adequate.

They drove through the narrow, twisting streets of Val Alorn toward the great

in the bright morning sun. "Hail, Lord Barak," she croaked. "Thy

Doom

is at

hand. Thou shalt taste of it before this day's sun finds its bed."

Without a word Barak rose in his sleigh, took up a boar spear and

cast it with

deadly accuracy full at the old woman.

With surprising speed, the witch-woman swung her staff and

knocked

the spear

aside in midair. "It will avail thee not to try to kill old Martje."

She laughed

scornfully. "Thy spear shall not find her, neither shall thy sword.

Go thou,

Barak. Thy Doom awaits thee." And then she turned toward the

sleigh

in which

Garion sat beside the startled Durnik. "Hail, Lord of Lords," she

his hands on

another spear.

"What was that about, *Garion*?" Durnik asked, his eyes still surprised.

"Barak says she's a crazy old blind woman," *Garion* said. "She stopped

us when we

arrived in Val Alorn after you and the others had already passed."

"What was all that talk about Doom?" Durnik asked with a shudder.

"I don't know," *Garion* said. "Barak wouldn't explain it."

"It's a bad omen so early in the day," Durnik said. "These Chereks are a strange people."

Garion nodded in agreement.

Beyond the west gate of the city were open fields, sparkling white in

the full

glare of the morning sun. They crossed the fields toward the dark

were

all made of

logs and had high-peaked wooden roofs.

"These people seem to be indifferent to danger," Durnik said. "I

certainly

wouldn't want to live in a wooden house - what with the possibility

of fire and

all."

"It's a different country, after all," Garion said. "We can't expect

the whole

world to live the way we do in Sendaria."

"I suppose not," Durnik sighed, "but I'll tell you, Garion, I'm not

very

comfortable here. Some people just aren't meant for travel. Some-

times

I wish

we'd never left Faldor's farm."

"I do too, sometimes," Garion admitted, looking at the towering

temper

and his

good spirits, and he set about placing the hunters as if nothing had happened.

He led Garion through the calf deep snow to a large tree some distance from the narrow sleigh track.

"This is a good place," he said. "There's a game trail here, and the boars may

use it to try to escape the noise of Torvik and his huntsmen. When one comes,

brace yourself and hold your spear with its point aimed at his chest.

They don't

see very well, and he'll run full into your spear before he even knows it's

there. After that it's probably best to jump behind a tree. Sometimes the spear

makes them very angry."

it. More

likely he'll try to split you up the middle with his tusks. At that point it's

usually a good idea to climb a tree."

"I'll remember that," Garion said.

"I won't be far away if you have trouble," Barak promised, handing

Garion a pair

of heavy spears. Then he trudged back to his sleigh, and they all galloped off,

leaving Garion standing alone under the large oak tree.

It was shadowy among the dark tree trunks, and biting cold.

Garion

walked

around a bit through the snow, looking for the best place to await

the boar. The

trail Barak had pointed out was a beaten path winding back through

the dark

brush, and Garion found the size of the tracks imprinted in the snow

ground and meet the charge of the boar, and he decided that he
would
rather die
than hide in a tree like a frightened child.
The dry voice in his mind advised him that he spent far too much
time
worrying
about things like that. Until he was grown, no one would consider him
a man, so
why should he go to all the trouble of trying to seem brave when it
wouldn't do
any good anyway?
The forest was very quiet now, and the snow muffled all sounds. No
bird sang,
and there was only the occasional padded thump of snow sliding
from
overloaded
branches to the earth beneath. Garion felt terribly alone. What was

What had the pig ever done to him? He realized that he didn't even particularly like the taste of pork.

He was some distance from the beaten forest track along which their

sleighs had

passed, and he set his back to the oak tree, shivered, and waited.

He didn't realize how long he had been listening to the sound when he became

fully aware of it. It was not the stamping, squealing rush of a wild boar he had

been expecting but was, rather, the measured pace of several horses

moving

slowly along the snow-carpeted floor of the forest, and it was coming

from

behind him. Cautiously he eased his face around the tree.

warriors, in the different from dozens of others Garion had seen in

King Anheg's

palace. The third man, however, had long, flaxen-colored hair and

wore

no beard.

His face had the sullen, pampered look of a spoiled child, although

he was a man

of middle years, and he sat his horse disdainfully as if the company

of the

other two somehow offended him.

After a time, the sound of another horse came from near the edge

of

the forest.

Almost holding his breath, Garion waited. The other rider slowly

approached the

three who sat their horses in the snow at the edge of the trees. It

was the

other

three.

"Where have you been?" the flaxen-haired man demanded.

"Lord Barak took some of his guests on a boar hunt this morning. His route was

the same as mine, and I didn't want to follow too closely."

The nobleman grunted sourly.

"We saw them deeper in the wood," he said. "Well, what have you heard?"

"Very little, my Lord. The kings are meeting with the old man and the

woman in a

guarded chamber. I can't get close enough to hear what they're saying."

"I'm paying you good gold to get close enough. I have to know what they're

saying. Go back to the palace and work out a way to hear what they're

wait, The nobleman commended. Were you able to meet with our friend?"

"Your friend, my Lord," the other corrected with distaste. "I met him, and we went to a tavern and talked a little." "What did he say?"

"Nothing very useful. His kind seldom do."

"Will he meet us as he said he would?"

"He told me that he would. If you want to believe him, that's your affair."

The nobleman ignored that.

"Who arrived with the King of the Sendars?"

"The old man and the woman, another old man-some Sendarian noble,

I

think, Lord

Barak and a weasel-faced Drasnian, and another Sendar - a commoner of some sort."

to be some kind of servant to the woman.

"Very well. Go back to the palace and get close enough to that chamber to hear

what the kings and the old man are saying."

"That may be very dangerous, my Lord."

"It'll be more dangerous if you don't. Now go, before that ape Barak

comes back

and finds you loitering here." He whirled his horse and, followed by his two

warriors, plunged back into the forest on the far side of the snowy track that

wound among the dark trees.

The man in the green cloak sat grimly watching for a moment, then he

too turned

his horse and rode back the way he had come.

Garion rose from his crouched position behind the tree. His hands

And then, some way off in the snowy depths of the wood, he heard
the
sound of
hunting horns and the steely clash of swords ringing rhythmically on
shields.

The huntsmen were coming, driving all the beasts of the forest before
them.

He heard a crackling in the bushes, and a great stag bounded into
view, his eyes
wild with fright and his antlers flaring above his head. With three
huge leaps
he was gone. Garion trembled with excitement.

Then there was a squealing rush, and a red-eyed sow plunged down
the
trail
followed by a half dozen scampering piglets. Garion stepped behind
his tree and

This was no fat, sleepy porker, but rather a savage, infuriated

beast. The

horrid tusks jutting up past the flaring snout were yellow, and bits

of twigs

and bark clung to them, mute evidence that the boar would slash at

anything in

his path-trees, bushes or a Sendarian boy without sense enough to

get

out of his

way.

Then a peculiar thing happened. As in the long-ago fight with

Rundorig or in the

scuffle with Brill's hirelings in the dark streets of Muros, Garion

felt his

blood begin to surge, and there was a wild ringing in his ears. He

seemed to

hear a defiant, shouted challenge and could scarcely accept the fact

that it

The boar charged. Red-eyed and frothing from the mouth, with a deep-throated squeal of fury, he plunged at the waiting Garion. The powdery snow sprayed up from his churning hooves like foam from the prow of a ship. The snow

crystals seemed to hang in the air, sparkling in a single ray of sunlight that chanced just there to reach the forest floor.

The shock as the boar hit the spear was frightful, but Garion's aim was good.

The broad-bladed spearhead penetrated the coarsely haired chest, and

the white froth dripping from the boar's tusks suddenly became bloody foam. Garion felt himself driven back by the impact, his feet slipping out from under

and

slash

caught his hip as he tried to roll, gasping, out of the way. His

chain-mail

shirt deflected the tusks, saving him from being wounded, but the

blows were

stunning. The boar's third slash caught him in the back, and he was

flung

through the air and crashed into a tree. His eyes filled with

shimmering light

as his head banged against the rough bark.

And then Barak was there, roaring and charging through the snow-

but

somehow it seemed not to be Barak. Garion's eyes, glazed from the

shock of the

blow to his

head, looked uncomprehendingly at something that could not be

true.

superimposed,

their movements identical as if in sharing the same space they also
shared the
same thoughts.

Huge arms grasped up the wriggling, mortally wounded boar and
crushed

in upon

it. Bright blood fountained from the boar's mouth, and the shaggy,
half man

thing that seemed to be Barak and something else at the same time
raised the

dying pig and smashed it brutally to the ground. The man-thing
lifted

its awful

face and roared in earthshaking triumph as the light slid away from
Garion's

eyes and he felt himself drifting down into the gray well of
unconsciousness.

I see you've decided to live." Silk grinned at him.

"Where's Barak?" Garion mumbled groggily.

"In the sleigh behind us," Silk said, glancing back.

"Is he-all right?"

"What could hurt Barak?" Silk asked.

"I mean -,does he seem like himself?"

"He seems like Barak to me." Silk shrugged. "No, boy, lie still. That wild pig may have cracked your ribs." He placed his hands on Garion's chest and gently held him down.

"My boar?" Garion demanded weakly. "Where is it?"

"The huntsmen are bringing it," Silk said. "You'll get your triumphal entry. If I might suggest it, however, you should give some thought to the virtue of constructive cowardice. These instincts of yours could shorten your life."

him while they were tussling. I think the boy's all right - a little
rap on the
head is all."

"Bring him," Aunt Pol said curtly and led the way up the
stairs toward Garion's
room.

Later, with his head and chest wrapped and a foul-tasting cup of
Aunt

Pol's
brewing making him light-headed and sleepy, Garion lay in his bed
listening as

Aunt Pol finally turned on Barak.

"You great overgrown dolt," she raged. "Do you see what all your
foolishness has
done?"

"The lad is very brave," Barak said, his voice low and sunk in a kind
of bleak
melancholy.

eyes and then

slowly released him. "Oh," she said softly, "it finally happened, I see."

"I couldn't control it, Polgara," Barak said in misery.

"It'll be all right, Barak," she said, gently touching his bowed head.

"It'll never be all right again," Barak said.

"Get some sleep," she told him. "It won't seem so bad in the morning."

The huge man turned and quietly left the room.

Garion knew they were talking about the strange thing he had seen when Barak had

rescued him from the boar, and he wanted to ask Aunt Pol about it; but the

bitter drink she had given him pulled him down into a deep and dreamless sleep

before he could put the words together to ask the question.

Chapter Sixteen

particularly flattering, and each of them praised his courage. Then

the queens

came and made a great fuss over his injuries, offering warm sympa-

thy

and gentle,

stroking touches to his forehead. The combination of praise, sympa-

thy

and the

certain knowledge that he was the absolute center of attention was

overwhelming,

and his heart was full.

The last visitor of the day, however, was Mister Wolf, who came

when

evening was

creeping through the snowy streets of Val Alorn. The old man wore

his

usual

has been

speared?"

"I didn't really think about it," Garion admitted, "but wouldn't that seem -

well - cowardly?"

"Were you that concerned about what a pig might think of you?"

"Well," Garion faltered, "not really, I guess."

"You're developing an amazing lack of good sense for one so young,"

Wolf

observed. "It normally takes years and years to reach the point you seem to have

arrived at overnight." He turned to Aant Pol, who sat nearby.

"Polgara, are you

quite certain that there's no hint of Arendish blood in our Garion's background?

He's been behaving most Arendish lately. First he rides the Great Maelstrom like

a rocking horse, and then he tries to break a wild boar's tusks with

Garion snaked, mortally offended by Mister Wolf's words. Tears welled up in his eyes despite all his efforts to control them.

"Thank you for stopping by, Father," Aunt Pol said.

"It's always a pleasure to call on you, my daughter," Wolf said and quietly left the room.

"Why did he have to talk to me like that?" Garion burst out, wiping his nose.

"Now he's gone and spoiled it all."

"Spoiled what, dear?" Aunt Pol asked, smoothing the front of her gray

dress.

"All of it," Garion complained. "The kings all said I was very brave."

"Kings say things like that," Aunt Pol said. "I wouldn't pay too much attention,

natural. Now,

what would you like for supper?"

"I'm not hungry," Garion said defiantly.

"Really? You probably need a tonic then. I'll fix you one."

"I think I've changed my mind," Garion said quickly.

"I rather thought you might," Aunt Pol said. And then, without explanation, she suddenly put her arms around him and held him

close to her for a long

time.

"What am I going to do with you?" she said finally.

"I'm all right, Aunt Pol," he assured her.

"This time perhaps," she said, taking his face between her hands.

"It's a

splendid thing to be brave, my Garion, but try once in a while to

think a little

bit first. Promise me."

"All right, Aunt Pol," he said, a little embarrassed by all this.

Oddly enough

to feel a little better about the whole thing.

The next day he was able to get up. His muscles still ached a bit, and his ribs were somewhat tender, but he was young and was healing fast.

About

midmorning he was sitting with Durnik in the great hall of Anheg's palace when the silvery-bearded Earl of Seline approached them.

"King Fulrach wonders if you would be so kind as to join us in the council

chamber, Goodman Durnik," he said politely.

"Me, your Honor?" Durnik asked incredulously.

"His Majesty is most impressed with your sensibility," the old gentleman said.

"He feels that you represent the very best of Sendarian practicality.

What we

face involves all men, not just the Kings of the West, and so it's

we've all heard of your adventure, my boy," The Earl of Selme said

pleasantly

to Garion. "Ah, to be young again," he sighed. "Coming, Durnik?"

"Immediately, your Honor," Durnik said, and the two of them made
their way out

of the great hall toward the council chamber.

Garion sat alone, wounded to the quick by his exclusion. He was at an
age where

his self esteem was very tender, and inwardly he writhed at the lack
of regard

implicit in his not being invited to join them. Hurt and offended, he
sulkily

left the great hall and went to visit his boar which hung in an ice-
filled

cooling room just off the kitchen. At least the boar had taken him
seriously.

One could, however, spend only so much time in the company of a
dead

ing

room and

sore muscles stiffened quickly in chilly places.

There was no point in trying to visit Barak. The red-bearded man
had

locked

himself in his chamber to brood in blackest melancholy and refused
to

answer his

door, even to his wife. And so Garion, left entirely on his own,
moped about for

a while and then decided that he might as well explore this vast
palace with its

dusty, unused chambers and dark, twisting corridors. He walked for
what seemed

hours, opening doors and following hallways that sometimes ended
abruptly

against blank stone walls.

wandered

there for a time in the second-floor corridors of the ruin, his mind
filled with

gloomy thoughts of mortality and transient glory as he looked into
rooms where

snow lay thickly on ancient beds and stools and the tiny tracks of
mice and

squirrels ran everywhere. And then he came to an unroofed corridor
where there

were other tracks, those of a man. The footprints were quite fresh,
for there

was no sign of snow in them and it had snowed heavily the night
before. At first

he thought the tracks might be his own and that he had somehow
circled and come

back to a corridor he had already explored, but the footprints were
much larger

than his.

was hiding

somewhere in the forest with obviously unfriendly intentions.

Garion realized that the situation might be dangerous and that he was

unarmed

except for his small dagger. He retraced his steps quickly to a snowy

chamber he

had just explored and took down a rusty sword from a peg where it had

hung

forgotten for uncountable years. Then, feeling a bit more secure, he returned to

follow the silent tracks..So long as the path of the unknown intruder lay in that roofless and

long-abandoned corridor, following him was simplicity itself; the undisturbed

snow made tracking easy. But once the trail led over a heap of fallen

necessary to do a great deal of stooping and bending over. Garion's ribs and legs were still sore, and he winced and grunted each time he had to bend down to examine the stone floor. In a very short while he was sweating and gritting his teeth and thinking about giving the whole thing up.

Then he heard a faint sound far down the corridor ahead. He shrank back against the wall, hoping that no light from behind him would filter dimly through to allow him to be seen. Far ahead, a figure passed stealthily through the pale light from a single tiny window. Garion caught a momentary flicker of green and knew finally whom he was following. He kept close to the wall and moved with

been following.

"Is it at all possible, noble Belgarath, that our enemy can be awakened before

all the conditions of the ancient prophecy are met?" the earl was asking.

Garion stopped. Directly ahead of him in a narrow embrasure in the wall of the

corridor, he caught sight of a slight movement. The green cloaked man

lurked

there, listening in the dimness to the words that seemed to come from

somewhere

beneath. Garion shrank back against the wall, scarcely daring to breathe.

Carefully he stepped backward until he found another embrasure and

drew himself

The power is there. The familiar voice of Mister Wolf said, "but
he
might be
afraid to use it. If it isn't done properly, the power will destroy
him. He
won't rush into such an act, but will think very carefully before
he tries it.

It's that hesitation that gives us the little bit of time we have."
Then Silk spoke. "Didn't you say that he might want the thing for
himself? Maybe
he plans to leave his Master in undisturbed slumber and use the
power
he's
stolen to raise himself as king in the lands of the Angaraks."
King Rhodar of Drasnica chuckled. "Somehow I don't see the Grolim
Priesthood so
easily relinquishing their power in the lands of Angarak and bowing
down to an

I've

studied the power of this thing, and if even half of what I've read
is true, he

can use it to rip down Rak Cthol as easily as you'd kick apart an
anthill. Then,

if they still resist, he could depopulate all of Cthol Murgos from
Rak Goska to

the Tolnedran border. No matter what, however, whether it's the
Apostate or the

Accursed One who eventually raises that power, the Angaraks will
follow and they
will come west."

"Shouldn't we inform the Arends and Tolnedrans-and the Ulgos as
well-what

has

happened then?" Brand, the Rivan Warder, asked. "Let's not be
taken

by surprise

Emperor's

legions are soldiers. They can respond quickly when the need arises,
and the

Arends are always ready for war. The whole kingdom hovers on the
brink of

general warfare all the time."

"It's premature," Aunt Pol's familiar voice agreed. "Armies would
just get in

the way of what we're trying to do. If we can apprehend my fa-
ther's

old pupil

and return the thing he pilfered to Riva, the crisis will be past.

Let's not

stir up the southerners for nothing."

"She's right," Wolf said. "There's always a risk in a mobilization. A
king with

an army on his hands often begins to think of mischief. I'll advise
the King of

at

this time

of the year?"

"It's hard to say, Ancient One," Cho-Hag said. "The passes into those

mountains

are difficult in the winter. I'll try, though."

"Good," Wolf said. "Beyond that, there's not much more we can do.

For

the time

being it might not be a bad idea to keep this matter in the family-so to speak.

If worse comes to worst and the Angaraks invade again, Aloria at least will be

armed and ready. There'll be time for Arendia and the Empire to make

their

preparations."

farmers and

tradesmen. Kal Torak made a mistake when he chose the battlefield

at

Vo Mimbire;

and it's not likely that the Angaraks will make the same mistake

again. I think

they'll strike directly across the grasslands of northern Algaria and

fall upon

Sendaria. We have a lot of food and very few soldiers. Our country

would provide

an ideal base for a campaign in the west, and I'm afraid that we'd

fall quite

easily."

Then, to Garion's amazement, Durnik spoke. "Don't cheapen the men

of

Sendaria

so, Lord King," he said in a firm voice. "I know my neighbors, and

they'll

won't be all

that much food for them to eat."

There was a long silence, and then Fulrach spoke again in a voice
strangely

humble. "Your words shame me, Goodman Durnik," he said. "Maybe

I've

been king

for so long that I've forgotten what it means to be a Sendar."

"One remembers that there are only a few passes leading through

the

western

escarpment into Sendaria," Hettar, the son of King Cho-Hag, said

quietly. "A few

avalanches in the right places could make Sendaria as inaccessible

as

the moon.

If the avalanches took place at the right times, whole armies of

Angaraks might

much,

we might

be able to accommodate him."

Far down the dusty passageway in which he was hiding, Garion caught

the sudden

flicker of a torch and heard the faint jingling of several mail

shirts. He

almost failed to recognize the danger until the last instant. The man

in the

green cloak also heard the sounds and saw the light of the torch. He

stepped

from his hiding place and fled back the way he had come-directly past

the

embrasure where Garion had concealed himself. Garion shrank back,

clutching his

rusty sword; but as luck had it, the man was looking back over his

explain what he was doing in the dark hallway. He briefly considered

following

the spy again, but decided that he'd had enough of that for one day.

It was time

to tell someone about the things he'd seen. Someone had to be told-
someone

to

whom the kings would listen. Once he reached the more frequented
corridors of

the palace, he firmly began to make his way toward the chamber
where

Barak

brooded in silent melancholy.

Chapter Seventeen

"BARAK," GARION CALLED through the door after he had knocked
for

several minutes

without any answer.

His red

beard was matted, the long braids he usually wore were undone, and his hair was

tangled. The haunted look in his eyes, however, was the worst. The look was a

mixture of horror and self loathing so naked that Garion was forced to avert his

eyes.

"You saw it, didn't you, boy?" Barak demanded "You saw what happened.to me out

there."

"I didn't really see anything," Garion said carefully. "I hit my head on that

tree, and all I really saw were stars."

"You must have seen it," Barak insisted. "You must have seen my Doom."

"Doom?" Garion said. "What are you talking about? You're still alive."

your

imagination," Garion said.

"It's not only Martje," Barak said. "She's just repeating what

everybody in

Cherek knows. An augurer was called in when I was born - it is the

custom here.

Most of the time the auguries don't show anything at all, and noth-

ing

special is

going to happen during the child's life. But sometimes the future

lies so

heavily on one of us that almost anyone can see the Doom."

"That's just superstition," Garion scoffed. "I've never seen any

fortune-teller

who could even tell for sure if it's going to rain tomorrow. One of

them came to

Faldor's farm once and told Durnik that he was going to die twice.

Isn't that

going to turn into a beast. I've had dozens of them tell me the same thing. And now it's happened. I've been sitting here for two days now, watching.

The hair

on my body's getting longer, and my teeth are starting to get pointed."

"You're imagining things," Garion said. "You look exactly the same to me as you always have."

"You're a kind boy, Garion," Barak said. "I know you're just trying to make me feel better, but I've got eyes of my own. I know that my teeth are getting pointed and my body's starting to grow fur. It won't be long until Anheg has to chain me up in his dungeon so I won't be able to hurt anyone, or I'll have to

said

again,

trying to make it sound true.

"I just want to know what kind of beast I'm turning into," Barak

said, his voice

thick with self pity. "Am I going to be a wolf or a bear or some kind

of monster

no one even has a name for?"

"Don't you remember anything at all about what happened?" Garion

asked

carefully, trying to blot the strange double image of Barak and the

bear out of

his memory.

"Nothing," Barak said. "I heard you shouting, and the next thing I

remember was

the boar lying dead at my feet and you lying under that tree with his

blood all

over you. I could feel the beast in me, though. I could even smell

No, Garion. I've been berserk before. It doesn't feel at all the

same. This was

completely different." He sighed.

"You're not turning into a beast," Garion insisted.

"I know what I know," Barak said stubbornly.

And then Lady Merel, Barak's wife, stepped into the room through
the

still-open

door. "I see that my Lord is recovering his wits," she said.

"Leave me alone, Merel," Barak said. "I'm not in the mood for these
games of
yours."

"Games, my Lord?" she said innocently. "I'm simply concerned about
my

duties. If

my Lord is unwell, I'm obliged to care for him. That's a wife's
right, isn't
it?"

bedchamber was

enough to curb his insistence."

"All right," Barak said, Hushing slightly. "I'm sorry about that. I

hoped that

things might have changed between us. I was wrong. I won't bother

you

again."

"Bother, my Lord?" she said. "A duty is not a bother. A good wife is

obliged to

submit whenever her husband requires it of her - no matter how

drunk

or brutal

he may be when he comes to her bed. No one will ever be able

to accuse me of

laxity in that regard."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Barak accused.

"Enjoying what, my Lord?" Her voice was light, but there was a

cutting edge to

careful, Merel.

I might take it into my head to insist that you stay with me. How would you like

that? How would you like to be locked in this room with a raging beast?"

"If you grow unmanageable, my Lord, I can always have you chained to

the wall,"

she suggested, meeting his enraged glare with cool unconcern.

"Barak," Garion said uncomfortably, "I have to talk to you."

"Not now, Garion," Barak snapped.

"It's important. There's a spy in the palace."

"A spy-",

"A man in a green cloak," Garion said. "I've seen him several times."

"Many men wear green cloaks," Lady Merel said.

"Stay out of this, Merel," Barak said. He turned to Garion. "What makes you

could

hear every

word they said."

"How do you know what he could hear?" Merel asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I was up there too," Garion said. "I hid not far from him, and I could hear

them myself - almost as if I were in the same room with them."

"What does he look like?" Barak asked.

"He has sandy-colored hair," Garion said, "and a beard and, as I said, he wears

a green cloak. I saw him the day we went down to look at your ship.

He was going

into a tavern with a Murgos."

"There aren't any Murgos in Val Alorn," Merel said.

"There's one," Garion said. "I've seen him before. I know who he is." He had to

tongue seem stiff and his lips numb.

"Who is he?" Barak demanded.

Garion ignored the question. "And then on the day of the boar hunt

I

saw him in the forest."

"The Murgo?" Barak asked.

"No. The man in the green cloak. He met some other men there.

They

talked for a

while not far from where I was waiting for the boar to come. They

didn't see

me."

"There's nothing suspicious about that," Barak said. "A man can

meet

with his

friends anywhere he likes."

"I don't think they were friends exactly," Garion said. "The one in

the green

Did they

say anything else?"

"The flaxen-haired man wanted to know about us," Garion said. "You,

me, Durnik,

Silk - all of us."

"Flaxen-colored hair?" Merel asked quickly.

"The one he called 'my Lord,' " Garion explained. "He seemed to know

about us.

He even knew about me."

"Long, pale-colored hair?" Merel demanded. "No beard? A little older

than

Barak?"

"It couldn't be him," Barak said. "Anheg banished him on pain of death."

"You're a child, Barak," she said. "He'd ignore that if it suited him. I think

ought to have his head removed.

Barak was already pulling on his mail shirt.

"Fix your hair," Merel told him in a tone that oddly had no hint of her former

rancor in it. "You look like a haystack."

"I can't stop to fool with it now," Barak said impatiently. "Come along, both of

you. We'll go to Anheg at once."

There was no time for any further questions, since Garion and Merel almost had

to run to keep up with Barak. They swept through the great hall, and startled

warriors scrambled out of their way after one look at Barak's face.

"My Lord Barak," one of the guards at the door of the council hall greeted the

huge man.

"One side," Barak commanded and flung open the door with a crash.

King Anheg looked up, startled at the sudden interruption.

Alorn, and

some of his plotting has been overheard."

"Who is this Jarvik?" the Rivan Warder asked.

"An earl I banished last year," Anheg said. "One of his men was

stopped, and we

found a message on him. The message was to a Murgo in Sendaria,

and

it gave the

details of one of our most secret councils. Jarvik tried to deny that

the

message was his, even though it had his own seal on it and his

strongroom bulged

with red gold from the mines of Cthol Murgos. I'd have had his head

on a pole,

but his wife's a kinswoman of mine and she begged for his life. I

banished him

to one of his estates on the west coast instead." He looked at Ba-

rak.

rang with

challenge.

"I don't doubt him, Merel," Anheg said, looking at her with a faintly surprised

expression. "I just wanted to know how he learned about Jarvik, that's all."

"This boy from Sendaria saw him," Merel said, "and heard him talk to

his spy. I

heard the boy's story myself, and I stand behind what my husband said, if anyone

here dares to doubt him."

"Garion?" Aunt Pol said, startled.

"May I suggest that we hear from the lad?" Cho-Hag of the Algars said

quietly.

"A nobleman with a history of friendship for the Murgos who chooses

green cloak

hiding here in your palace several times since we came here. He
creeps along the
passageways and takes a lot of trouble not to be seen. I saw him the
first night
we were here, and the next day I saw him going into a tavern in the
city with a

Murgo. Barak says there aren't any Murgos in Cherek, but I know
that

the man he was with was a Murgo."

"How do you know?" Anheg asked shrewdly.

Garion looked at him helplessly, unable to say Asharak's name.

"Well, boy?" King Rhodar asked.

Garion struggled with the words, but nothing would come out.

"Maybe you know this Murgo?" Silk suggested.

Garion nodded, relieved that someone could help him.

"You wouldn't know many Murgos," Silk said, rubbing his nose with
one

I - I couldn't, Garion stammered.

"Couldn't?"

"The words wouldn't come out," Garion said. "I don't know why, but I've never been able to talk about him."

"Then you've seen him before?" Silk said.

"Yes," Garion said.

"And you've never told anybody?"

"No."

Silk glanced quickly at Aunt Pol. "Is this the sort of thing you might know more about than we would, Polgara?" he asked.

She nodded slowly. "It's possible to do it," she said. "It's never been very reliable, so I don't bother with it myself. It is possible, however." Her expression grew grim.

"The Grolims think it's impressive," Mister Wolf said. "Grolims are

first. The

damage has already been done. Go ahead, Garion. What else did you see?"

Garion took a deep breath. "All right," he said, relieved to be talking to the

old man instead of the kings. "I saw the man in the green cloak again that day

we all went hunting. He met in the forest with a yellowhaired man who

doesn't

wear a beard. They talked for a while, and I could hear what they were saying.

The yellow-haired man wanted to know what all of you were saying in this hall."

"You should have come to me immediately," King Anheg said.

"Anyway," Garion went on, "I had that fight with the wild boar. I hit my head

footprints.

I followed them, and then after a while I saw the man in the green cloak again.

That was when I remembered all this. I followed him, and he went along a

corridor that passes somewhere over the top of this hall. He hid up there and

listened to what you were saying."

"How much do you think he could hear, *Garion*?" King Cho-Hag asked.

"You were talking about somebody called the Apostate," *Garion* said, "and you

were wondering if he could use some power of some kind to awaken an

enemy who's

been asleep for a long time. Some of you thought you ought to warn the *Arends*

and the *Tolnedrans*, but *Mister Wolf* didn't think so. And *Durnik* talked about how

away. That's when I decided that I ought to tell Barak about all

this."

"Up there," Silk said, standing near one of the walls and pointing at
a corner

of the ceiling of the hall. "The mortar's crumbled away. The sound
of

our voices

carries right up through the cracks between the stones into the up-
per

corridor."

"This is a valuable boy you've brought with you, Lady Polgara," I
King Rhodar

said gravely. "If he's looking for a profession, I think I might find
a place

for him. Gathering information is a rewarding occupation, and he
seems to have

certain natural gifts along those lines."

"He has some other gifts as well," Aunt Pol said. "He seems to be

cousin, Anheg said then to Barak, "It seems that we have an

unwelcome visitor

somewhere in the palace. I think I'd like to have a little talk with

this lurker

in the green cloak."

"I'll take a few men," Barak said grimly. "We'll turn your palace

upside down

and shake it and see what falls out."

"I'd like to have him more or less intact," Anheg cautioned.

"Of course," Barak said.

"Not too intact, however. As long as he's still able to talk, he'll

serve our purposes."

Barak grinned. "I'll make sure that he's talkative when I bring him

to you,

cousin," he said.

A bleak answering grin touched Anheg's face, and Barak started to-

ward

the door.

A very great deal, actually," The king said, "but you're going to

have to find

that out for yourself."

"Garion," Aunt Pol said, "come here."

"Yes, ma'am," Garion said and went to her a little nervously.

"Don't be silly, dear," she said. "I'm not going to hurt you." She

put her

fingertips lightly to his forehead.

"Well?" Mister Wolf asked.

"It's there," she said. "It's very light, or I'd have noticed it

before. I'm

sorry, Father."

"Let's see," Wolf said. He came over and also touched Garion's

heart

with his

hand. "It's not serious," he said.

"It could have been," Aunt Pol said. "And it was my responsibility to

see that

right hand and

touched it for a moment to the white lock at her brow. Garion felt a surge, a

welter of confused impressions, and then a tingling wrench behind his

ears. A

sudden dizziness swept over him, and he would have fallen if Aunt Pol

had not

caught him.

"Who is the Murgos?" she asked, looking into his eyes.

"His name is Asharak," Garion said promptly.

"How long have you known him?"

"All my life. He used to come to Faldor's farm and watch me when I was little."

"That's enough for now, Pol," Mister Wolf said. "Let him rest a little first.

I'll fix something to keep it from happening again."

shoulders. Are you steady enough on your feet to get there

by yourself?"

"I'm all right," he said, still feeling a little light-headed.

"No side trips and no more exploring," she said firmly.

"No, ma'am."

"When you get there, lie down. I want you to think back and remember

every

single time you've seen this Murgo - what he did, what he said."

"He never spoke to me," Garion said. "He just watched."

"I'll be along in a little while," she went on, "and I'll want you to

tell me

everything you know about him. It's important, Garion, so concentrate

as hard as

you can."

"All right, Aunt Pol," he said.

Then she kissed him lightly on the forehead. "Run along now, dear,"

on swords

and picking up vicious-looking battle-axes in preparation for the search of the

palace. Still bemused, he went through without stopping.

Part of his mind seemed half asleep, but that secret, inner part was wide awake.

The dry voice observed that something significant had just happened.

The

powerful compulsion not to speak about Asharak was obviously gone.

Aunt Pol had

somehow pulled it out of his mind entirely. His feeling about that was oddly

ambiguous. That strange relationship between himself and dark-robed,

silent

Asharak had always been intensely private, and now it was gone. He felt vaguely

of Barak's search for the man in the green cloak. Garion stopped.

Something was

wrong, and he shook off his half daze. This part of the palace was
much too

populated to make it very likely that the spy would be hiding here.

His heart

began racing, and step by step he began to back away toward the

top

of the

stairs he had just climbed. The warriors looked like any other

Chereks in the

palace-bearded, dressed in helmets, mail shirts, and furs, but

something didn't

seem exactly right.

A bulky man in a dark, hooded cloak stepped through the doorway of

Garion's room

into the corridor. It was Asharak. The Murgo was about to say

Garion felt a tentative tug at his mind that seemed to slip away as

if it

somehow could not get a sure grip. He shook his head mutely and

continued to

back away.

"Come along now," Asharak said. "We've known each other far too

long

for this.

Do as I say. You know that you must."

The tug became a powerful grasp that again slipped away. "Come

here,

Garion!"

Asharak commanded harshly. Garion kept backing away, step by

step.

"No," he said. Asharak's eyes blazed, and he drew himself up an-

grily.

This time it was not a tug or a grasp, but a blow. Garion could feel

the force

want to. You're not strong enough to refuse me.

Garion looked at his enemy and answered out of some need for defiance. "Maybe

I'm not," he said, "but I think you'll have to catch me first."

Asharak turned quickly to his warriors. "That's the boy I want," he barked

sharply. "Take him!"

Smoothly, almost as if it were done without thought, one of the warriors raised

his bow and leveled an arrow directly at Garion. Asharak swung his arm quickly

and knocked the bow aside just as the steelpointed shaft was loosed.

The arrow

sang in the air and clattered against the stones of the wall a few feet to

Garion's left.

He didn't bother to look back. The sound of heavy feet told him that

Asharak and

his men were after him. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned sharply to the

left and fled down a long, dark passageway that led back into the maze of

Anheg's palace.

Chapter Eighteen

THERE WERE WARRIORS everywhere, and the sounds of fighting.

In the

first instant of his flight, Garion's plan had been simple. All he had to do was to

find some

of Barak's warriors, and he would be safe. But there were other warriors in the

palace as well. The Earl of Jarvik had led a small army into the palace by way

he could

find Barak or someone else he recognized, he did not dare reveal himself to any

of them. The frustrating knowledge that he was running from friends

as well as

enemies added to his fright. It was altogether possible - even quite likely -

that he would run from Barak's men directly into the arms of Jarvik's.

The most logical thing to do would be to go directly back to the council hall,

but in his haste to escape from Asharak, he had run down so many dim

passageways

and turned so many corners that he had no idea where he was or how to

get back

For had

shattered with her touch. It was that which had to be avoided at
any

cost. Once

Asharak had him again, he would never let go. The only alternative to
him was to

find some place to hide.

He dodged into another narrow passageway and stopped, panting and
with his back

pressed tightly against the stones of the wall. Dimly, at the far end
of this

hallway, he could see a narrow flight of worn stone steps twisting
upward in the

flickering light of a single torch. He quickly reasoned that the
higher he went,

the less likely he would be to encounter anyone. The fighting would
most likely

stairs, no way to escape and no place to hide. He had to get to the

top quickly

or chance discovery and capture, or even worse.

"Boy!" a shout came from below.

Garion looked quickly over his shoulder. A grim-faced Cherek in mail and helmet was coming up the stairs behind him, his sword drawn.

Garion started

to run,

stumbling up the stairs.

There was another shout from above, and Garion froze. The warrior

at

the top was

as grim as the one below and wielded a cruel-looking axe. He was

trapped between

them. Garion shrank back against the stones, fumbling for his dag-

ger,

though he

The axe swung wide, missed and clashed a shower of sparks from
the
stones of the
wall. The sword was more true. With his hair standing on end in
horror, Garion
saw it slide through the downward-plunging body of the axeman. The
axe fell
clattering down the stairs, and the axeman, still falling on top of
his
opponent, pulled a broad dagger from its sheath at his hip and drove
it into the
chest of his enemy. The impact as the two men came together tore
them
from their
feet, and they tumbled, still grappled together down the stairs,
their daggers
flashing as each man struck again and again.
In helpless horror Garion watched as they rolled and crashed past

to close his ears to the awful sounds coming from below as the two
dying men
continued their horrid work on each other.

He no longer even considered stealth; he simply ran-fleeing more
from

that

hideous encounter on the stairs than from Asharak or the Earl of
Jarvik. At

last, after how long he could not have said, gasping and winded, he
plunged

through the partially open door of a dusty, unused chamber. He
pushed

the door

shut and stood trembling with his back against it.

There was a broad, sagging bed against one wall of the room and a
small window

set high in the same wall. Two broken chairs leaned wearily in
corners and an

If anyone opened this door, he would be trapped. Desperately he

began to look

around the

dusty room.

Hanging on the bare wall across from the bed were some drapes;

and

thinking that

they might conceal some closet or adjoining chamber, Garion

crossed

the room and

pulled them aside. There was an opening behind the drapes, though

it

did not

lead into another room but instead into a dark, narrow hall. He

peered into the

passageway, but the darkness was so total that he could only see a

short

across the

room to stand on so that he could see out. Perhaps he might be able to see

something from the window that would give him some idea of his location. He

climbed up on the chest, stood on his tiptoes and looked out.

Towers loomed here and there amid the long slate roofs of the endless

galleries

and halls of King Anheg's palace. It was hopeless. He saw nothing that he could

recognize. He turned back toward the chamber and was about to jump

down from the

chest when he stopped suddenly. There, clearly in the dust which lay heavily on

the floor, were his foot punts. He hopped quickly down and grabbed up

obliterate the

footprints which, because of their size, would immediately make it obvious to

Asharak or any of his men that whoever had been i hiding here was not

yet

full-grown. When he finished, he tossed the bolster back on the bed.

The job

wasn't perfect, but at least it was better than it had been.

Then there was a shout in the corridor outside and the ring of steel on steel.

Garion took a deep breath and plunged into the dark passageway behind

the

drapes.

He had gone no more than a few feet when the darkness in the narrow

rapidly, wanting more than anything to put as much distance between himself and the fighting in the corridor as possible, but then he stumbled, and for one heart-stopping instant it seemed that he would fall. The picture of a steep stairway dropping down into the blackness flashed through his mind, and he realized that at his present pace there would be no possible way to catch himself. He began to move more cautiously, one hand on the stones of the wall and the other in front of his face to ward off the cobwebs which hung thickly from the low ceiling.

moment of

panic. Did the passageway end here? Was it a trap?

Then, flickering at one corner of his vision, he saw dim light. The

passageway

did not end, but rather made a sharp turn to the right. There

seemed

to be a

light at the far end, and Garion gratefully followed it.

As the light grew stronger, he moved more rapidly, and soon he

reached the spot

that was the source of the light. It was a narrow slot low in the

wall. Garion

knelt on the dusty stones and peered out.

The hall below was enormous, and a great fire burned in a pit in the

center with

the smoke rising to the openings in the vaulted roof which lofted

even above the

gross shape of King Rhodur and the smaller form of King Cho-Hag

with

the

ever-present Hettar standing behind him. Some distance from the
thrones, King

Fulrach stood in conversation with Mister Wolf, and nearby was

Aunt

Pol. Barak's

wife was talking with Queen Islena, and Queen Porenn and Queen

Silar

stood not

far from them. Silk paced the floor nervously, glancing now and then
at the

heavily guarded doors. Garion felt a surge of relief. He was safe.

He was about to call down to them when the great door banged
open,

and King

Anheg, mail-shined and with his sword in his hand, strode into the

This treason will cost you dearly, Jarvik," Anheg said grimly over

his shoulder

as he strode toward his throne.

"Is it over, then?" Aunt Pol asked.

"Soon, Polgara," Anheg said. "My men are chasing the last of Jarvik's

brigands

in the furthest reaches of the palace. If we hadn't been warned, it might have

gone quite differently, though."

Garion, his shout still hovering just behind his lips, decided at the last

instant to stay silent for a few more moments.

King Anheg sheathed his sword and took his place on his throne.

"We'll talk for a bit, Jarvik," he said, "before what must be done is done."

The flaxen-haired man gave up his hopeless struggle against Barak and

Not quite," Anheg said. "I want the details. You might as well tell me. One way or another, you're going to talk."

"Do your worst," Jarvik sneered. "I'll bite out my own tongue before I tell you anything."

"We'll see about that," Anheg said grimly.

"That won't be necessary, Anheg," Aunt Pol said, walking slowly toward the captive. "There's an easier way to persuade him."

"I'm not going to say anything," Jarvik told her. "I'm a warrior and I'm not afraid of you, witch-woman."

"You're a greater fool than I thought, Lord Jarvik," Mister Wolf said. "Would you rather I did it, Pol?"

"I can manage, Father," she said, not taking her eyes off Jarvik.

"Carefully," the old man cautioned. "Sometimes you go to extremes."

The Earl of Jarvik began to sweat and tried desperately to pull his eyes away from Aunt Pol's gaze, but it was hopeless. Her will commanded him, locking his eyes. He trembled, and his face grew pale. She made no move, no gesture, but merely stood before him, her eyes burning into his brain.

And then, after a moment, he screamed. Then he screamed again and

collapsed, his weight sagging down in the hands of the two men who held him.

"Take it away," he whimpered, shuddering uncontrollably. "I'll talk, but please

take it away."

Silk, now lounging near Anheg's throne, looked at Hettar. "I wonder what he saw," he said.

"I think it might be better not to know," Hettar replied.

beginning. I want it all.

"It was a little thing at first," Jarvik said in a shaking voice.

"There didn't

seem to be any harm in it."

"There never does," Brand said.

The Earl of Jarvik drew in a deep breath, glanced once at Aunt Pol and shuddered

again. Then he straightened. "It started about two years ago," he said. "I'd

sailed to Kotu in Drasnia, and I met a Nadrak merchant named

Grashor

there. He

seemed to be a good enough fellow and after we'd gotten to know

each

other he

asked me if I'd be interested in a profitable venture. I told him

that I was an

earl and not a common tradesman, but he persisted. He said he was

chest - not very large. I think it was some jewels he'd managed to

smuggle past

the customs houses in Boktor, and he wanted them delivered to

Darine

in

Sendaria. I said that I wasn't really interested, but then he opened

his purse

and poured out gold. The gold was bright red, I remember, and I

couldn't seem to

take my eyes off it. I did need money - who doesn't after all?-and I

really

couldn't see any dishonor in doing what he asked.

"Anyway, I carried him and his cargo to Darine and met his associ-

ate

- a Murgo

named Asharak."

Garion started at the name, and he heard Silk's low whistle of

surprise.

needed more

gold, he'd be happy to find ways for me to earn it.

"I now had more gold than I'd ever had at one time before, but it somehow seemed that it wasn't enough. For some reason I felt that I needed more."

"It's the nature of Angarak gold," Mister Wolf said. "It calls to its own. The

more one has, the more it comes to possess him. That's why Murgos are

so lavish

with it. Asharak wasn't buying your services, Jarvik; he was buying your soul."

Jarvik nodded, his face gloomy. "At any rate," he continued, "it wasn't long

before I found an excuse to sail to Darine again. Asharak told me that since

Murgos are forbidden to enter Cherek, he'd developed a great curiosity about us

other

pouch full.

I went to Jarviksholm and put the new gold with that I already had.

I

saw that I

was a rich man, and I still hadn't done anything dishonorable. But

now it seemed

that there weren't enough hours in the day. I spent all my time

locked in my

strongroom, counting my gold over and over, polishing it until it

gleamed red as

blood and filling my ears with the sound of its tinkling.

But after a while it seemed that I didn't really have very much, and

so I went

back to Asharak. He said he was still curious about Cherek and that

he'd like to

know Anheg's mind. He told me that he'd give me as much gold as I

already had if

in

the hall

below. Their faces had a curious mingling of pity and contempt as

Jarvik's story

continued.

"It was then, Anheg," he said, "that your men captured one of my

messengers, and

I was banished to Jarviksholm. At first I didn't mind, '' because I

could still

play with my gold. But again it wasn't long before it seemed that I

didn't have

enough. I sent a fast ship through the Bore to Darine with a message

to Asharak

begging him to find something else for me to do to earn more gold.

When the ship

came back, Asharak was aboard her, and we sat down and talked about

No Angarak

has set foot on Cherek soil since the days of Bear-shoulders himself."

Jarvik shrugged. "I didn't really care by then," he said. "Asharak had a plan,

and it seemed like a good one to me. If we could get through the city

a few at a

time, we could hide an army in the ruined southern wings of the palace. With

surprise and a bit of luck we could kill Anheg and the other Alorn Kings, and I

could take the throne of Cherek and maybe of all Aloria as well."

"And what was Asharak's price?" Mister Wolf demanded, his eyes narrowing. "What

did he want in return for making you king?"

"A thing so small that I laughed when he told me what he wanted," Jarvik said.

Fulrach of

Sendaria. He told me that as soon as that boy was delivered to him,
he'd give me

more gold than I could count and the throne of Cherek as well."

King Fulrach looked startled.

"The boy Garion?" he asked. "Why would Asharak want him?"

Aunt Pol's single frightened gasp carried even up to where Garion
was

concealed.

"Durnik!" she said in a ringing voice, but Durnik was already on his
feet and

racing toward the door with Silk close behind him. Aunt Pol spun
with

eyes

blazing and the white lock at her brow almost incandescent in the
midnight of

her hair. The Earl of Jarvik flinched as her glare fell on him.

"If anything's happened to the boy, Jarvik, men will tremble at the

I'm all right, Aunt Pol, he called down to her through the narrow

slot in the

wall. "I'm up here."

"Garion?" She looked up, trying to see him. "Where are you?"

"Up here near the ceiling," he said, "behind the wall."

"How did you get up there?"

"I don't know. Some men were chasing me, and I ran. This is where I ended up."

"Come down here at once."

"I don't know how, Aunt Pol," he said. "I ran so far and took so many turns that

I don't know how to get back. I'm lost." "All right," she said, regaining her composure. "Stay where you are.

We'll think

of a way to get you down."

"I hope so," he said.

Chapter Nineteen

"Well it has to come out someplace," King Anheg said, squinting up

palace.

"As I recall, he's not even supposed to be in the kingdom," she said pointedly.

"All right Pol," Mister Wolf said. He called up, "Garion, which way does the passage run?"

"It seems to go on toward the back of the hall where the thrones are," Garion answered. "I can't tell for sure if it turns off or not. It's pretty dark up here."

"We'll pass you up a couple of torches," Wolf said. "Set one at the spot where you are now and then go on down the passage with the other. As long as you can see the first one, you'll be going in a straight line."

"Very clever," Silk said. "I wish I were seven thousand years old so I could

first, he

asked.

Barak shrugged. "You're the king."

"Thanks," Anheg said dryly.

A warrior fetched a long pole and two torches were passed up to

Garion.

"If the line of the passageway holds straight," Anheg said, "he

should come out

somewhere in the royal apartments."

"Interesting," King Rhodar said with one raised eyebrow. "It would

be

most

enlightening to know if the passage led to the royal chambers or

from

them."

"It's entirely possible that the passageway is just some long-

forgotten

escape

passageway, looking back often to be sure that the torch was still in

plain

sight. Eventually he came to a narrow door which opened into the
back

of an

empty closet. The closet was attached to a splendid-looking
bedchamber, and

outside there was a broad, well-lighted corridor.

Several warriors were coming down the corridor, and Garion recog-
nized

Torvik the

hunter among them. "Here I am", he said, stepping out with a
surge

of relief.

"You've been busy, haven't you?" Torvik said with a grin.

"It wasn't my idea," Garion said.

"Let's get you back to King Anheg," Torvik said. "The lady, your

Aunt, seemed

us for one

reason or another. It's one of the things you'll have to get used to as you get older."

Aunt Pol was waiting at the door to the throne room. There were no reproaches -

not yet, at any rate. For one brief moment she clasped him fiercely to her and

then looked at him gravely. "We've been waiting for you dear," she said almost

calmly; then she led him to where the others waited.

"In my grandmother's quarters, you say?" Anheg was saying to Torvik.

"What an

astonishing thing. I remember her as a crotchety old lady who walked

with a

cane."

factually.

"The dust is very thick. It's possible that it hasn't been used in centuries."

"What an astonishing thing," Anheg said again.

The matter was then delicately allowed to drop, though King Rhodard's

sly

expression spoke volumes.

The Earl of Seline coughed politely. "I think young Garion here may have a story

for us," he said.

"I expect he has," Aunt Pol said, turning toward Garion. "I seem to remember

telling you to stay in your room."

"Asharak was in my room," Garion said, "and he had warriors with him.

He tried

Brand, the Rivah warder, chuckled. I don't see how you can find

much

fault with

that, Polgara," he said. "I think if I found a Grolim priest in my room, I'd

probably run away too."

"You're sure it was Asharak?" Silk asked.

Garion nodded. "I've known him for a long time," he said. "All my life, I guess.

And he knew me. He called me by name."

"I think I'd like to have a long talk with this Asharak," Anheg said.

"I want to

ask him some questions about all the mischief he's been stirring up in my

kingdom."

"I doubt if you'll find him, Anheg," Mister Wolf said. "He seems to be more than

just a Grolim Priest. I touched his mind once - in Muros. It's not an

ports in Cherek and then put my warriors to searching the moun-

tains

and forests

for him. They get fat and troublesome in the wintertime anyway,

and

it'll give

them something to do."

"Driving fat, troublesome warriors into the snow in the dead of

winter isn't

going to make you a popular king, Anheg," Rhodar observed.

"Offer a reward," Silk suggested. "That way you get the job done

and

stay

popular as well."

"That's an idea," Anheg said. "What kind of reward would you sug-

gest,

Prince

Kheldar?"

kingdom apart looking. Your gold is safe, your warriors get a bit of exercise,
you get a reputation for generosity, and, with every man in Cherek looking for him with an axe, Asharak's going to be much too busy hiding to stir up
any more mischief. A man whose head is more valuable to others than it is to himself has little time for foolishness."
"Prince Kheldar," Anheg said gravely, "you are a devious man."
"I try, King Anheg," Silk said with an ironic bow.. "I don't suppose you'd care to come to work for me?" the King of Cherek offered.
"Anheg!" Rhodar protested.
Silk sighed. "Blood, King Anheg," he said. "I'm committed to my uncle
by our

traitors.

What's a poor fat old man to do?"

A grim-looking warrior entered the hall and marched up to Anheg.

"It's done,

King," he said. "Do you want to look at his head?"

"No," Anheg said shortly.

"Should we put it on a pole near the harbor?" The warrior asked.

"No," Anheg said. "Jarvik was a brave man once and my kinsman by marriage. Have

him delivered to his wife for proper burial."

The warrior bowed and left the hall.

"This problem of the Grolim, Asharak, interests me," Queen Islena said to Aunt

Pol. "Might we not between us, Lady Polgara, devise a way to locate him?" Her

expression had a certain quality of self-importance to it.

Mister Wolf spoke quickly before Aunt Pol could answer. "Bravely spoken,

Poigard wouldn't be in any danger, but I'm afraid your mind could be
blown out

like a candle. It would be a great shame to have the Queen of
Cherek

live out

the rest of her life as a raving lunatic."

Islena turned suddenly very pale and did not see the sly wink Mister
Wolf

directed at Anheg.

"I couldn't permit it.," Anheg said firmly. "My Queen is far too
precious for me

to allow her to take such a terrible risk."

"I must accede to the will of my Lord," Islena said in a relieved
tone. "By his

command I withdraw my suggestion."

"The courage of my Queen honors me," Anheg said with an abso-
lutely

straight

been sitting. I think the time has come to make some decisions,
he said.

"Things are beginning to move too fast for any more delay." He
looked

at Anheg.

"Is there some place where we can speak without risk of being
overheard?"

"There's a chamber in one of the towers," Anheg said. "I thought
about it before

our first meeting but-" He paused and looked at Cho-Hag.

"You shouldn't let it concern you," Cho-Hag said. "I can manage
stairs if I have

to, and it would have been better for me to have been a little
inconvenienced

than to have Jarvik's spy overhear us."

"I'll stay with Garion," Durnik said to Aunt Pol.

Aunt Pol shook her head firmly. "No," she said. "As long as Asharak
is on the

Shiar and

made no effort to follow as King Anheg led the way from the throne room.

I'll let you know what happens, King Rhodar signalled to his queen.

Of course, Porenn gestured back. Her face was placid, but the snap of

her

fingers betrayed her irritability.

Calmly, child, Rhodar's fingers told her. We're guests here and have to obey

local customs.

Whatever my Lord commands, she replied with a tilt of her hands that

spoke whole

volumes of sarcasm.

With Hettar's help, King Cho-Hag managed the stairs although his progress was

painfully slow. "I apologize for this," he puffed, stopping halfway

we might as

well be comfortable."

Barak nodded and put a torch to the wood in the fireplace.

The chamber was round and not too spacious, but there was adequate

room for them

all and chairs and benches to sit on.

Mister Wolf stood at one of the windows, looking down at the twinkling lights of

Val Alorn below. "I've always been fond of towers," he said, almost to himself.

"My Master lived in one like this, and I enjoyed the time I spent there."

"I'd give my life to have known Aldur," Cho-Hag said softly. "Was he really

surrounded by light as some say?" "He seemed quite ordinary to me," Mister Wolf said. "I lived with him for five

look him

several hundred years to do it." He turned from the window with a deep sigh. "To work then," he said.

"Where will you go to take up the search?" King Fulrach asked.

"Camaar," Wolf said. "I found the trail there, I think it led down into Arendia."

"We'll send warriors with you," Anheg said. "After what happened here, it looks like the Grolims may try to stop you."

"No, Wolf said firmly. "Warriors are useless in dealing with the Grolims. I

can't move with an army underfoot, and I won't have time to explain to the King

of Arendia why I'm invading his kingdom with a horde of troops at my back. It

you wouldn't necessarily need an army, Belgardn, King Rhodar said,

"but

wouldn't it be prudent to take along a few good men?"

There's very little that Polgara and I can't deal with by ourselves," Wolf said,

"and Silk, Barak and Durnik are along to deal with the more mundane problems.

The smaller our group, the less attention we'll attract." He turned to Cho-Hag.

"As long as we're on the subject, though, I'd like to have your son with us.

We're likely to need his rather specialized talents."

"Impossible," Hettar said flatly. "I have to remain with my father."

"No, Hettar," Cho-Hag said. "I don't intend for you to live out your life as a cripple's legs."

"I've never felt any restriction in serving you, Father," Hettar

asked

gravely?

Hettar looked at him sharply as if trying to tell him something with his eyes.

King Cho-Hag drew his breath sharply. "Hettar," he asked, "is this true?".Hettar shrugged. "It may be, Father," he said. "I didn't think

it was

important."

Cho-Hag looked at Mister Wolf.

Wolf nodded. "It's true," he said. "I knew it the first time I saw him. He's a

Sha-Dar. He had to find out for himself, though."

Cho-Hag's eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "My son!" he said proudly, pulling

Hettar into a rough embrace.

"It's no great thing, Father," Hettar said quietly, as if suddenly embarrassed.

"What are they talking about? Garion whispered to Silk.

It's very rare

- maybe only two or three in a whole generation. It's instant nobility for any

Algar who has it. Cho-Hag's going to explode with pride when he gets

back to

Algaria."

"Is it that important?" Garion asked.

Silk shrugged. "The Algars seem to think so," he said. "All the clans gather at

the Stronghold when they find a new Sha-Dar. The whole nation celebrates for six

weeks. There are all kinds of gifts. Hettar'll be a rich man if he chooses to

accept them. He may not. He's a strange man."

"You must go," Cho-Hag said to Hettar. "The pride of Algaria goes with you, your duty is clear."

blizzards in the mountains of Sendaria.

"We'll all leave here in the morning then," Wolf said. "Anheg can

give you a

ship. Take the horses along the *Great North Road* to the place a few

leagues east

of *Camaar* where another road strikes off to the south. It fords

the

Great Camaar

River and runs down to join the *Great West Road* at the ruins of *Vo*

Wacune in

northern *Arendia*. We'll meet you there in two weeks."

Hettar nodded.

"We'll also be joined at *Vo Wacune* by an *Asturian Arend*," Wolf

went

on, "and

somewhat later by a *Mimbrate*. They might be useful to us in the

south."

"And will also fulfill the prophecies," Anheg said cryptically.

you have enough to do," Wold said. "No matter how our search turns out, it's obvious that the Angaraks are getting ready for some kind of major action. If we're successful, they might hesitate, but Angaraks don't think the way we do. Even after what happened at Vo Mimbire, they may decide to risk an all-out attack on the west. It could be that they are responding to prophecies of their own that we don't know anything about. In any event, I think you should be ready for something fairly major from them. You'll need to make preparations."

Anheg grinned wolfishly. "We've been preparing for them for five thousand years," he said. "This time we'll purge the whole world of this

until the

war's over. Make your preparations quietly, and don't stir up the people in your

kingdoms any more than you have to. The west is crawling with Grolims, and

they're watching everything we do. The trail I'll be following could lead me

into Cthol Murgos, and I'd rather not have to deal with an army of Murgos massed on the border."

"I can play the watching game too," King Rhodar said with a grim look

on his

plump face. "Probably even better than the Grolims. It's time to send

a few more

caravans to the east. The Angaraks won't move without help from the

mining camps - who knows what a bit of diligent corruption might

turn

up? A

chance word or two could give us several months' warning."

If they're planning anything major, the Thulls will be building

supply dumps

along the eastern escarpment," Cho-Hag said. "Thulls aren't bright,

and it's

easy to observe them without being seen. I'll increase my patrols

along those

mountains. With a little luck, we might be able to anticipate their

invasion

route. Is there anything else we can do to help you, Belgarath?"

Mister Wolf thought for a moment. Suddenly he grinned. "I'm cer-

tain.our thief is

listening very hard, waiting for one of us to speak his name or the

name of the

thing he stole. Sooner or later someone's bound to make a slip; and

north start

retelling certain old stories - you know the ones. When those names start

sounding in every village marketplace north of the Camaar River, it'll set up a

roaring in his ears like a thunderstorm. If nothing else it will give us the

freedom to speak. In time he'll get tired of it and stop listening."

"It's getting late, Father," Aunt Pol reminded him.

Wolf nodded. "We're playing a deadly game," he told them all, "but our enemies

are playing one just as deadly. Their danger's as great as ours, and right now,

no one can predict what will finally happen. Make your preparations and send out

men you can trust to keep watch. Be patient and don't do anything rash. That

strange,

but there are

reasons for what we do. Please don't interfere again. I'll get word

to you now

and then about our progress; if I need you to do anything else, I'll

let you

know. All right?"

The kings nodded gravely, and everyone rose to his feet.

Anheg stepped over to Mister Wolf. "Could you come by my study in

an

hour or so,

Belgarath?" he said quietly. "I'd like to have a few words with you

and Polgara

before your departure."

"If you wish, Anheg," Mister Wolf said.

"Come along, Garion," Aunt Pol said. "We have packing to take care

of."

Garion, a little awed at the solemnity of the discussions, rose

gears

and

pulleys and tiny brass chains sat on tables and stands. Intricately drawn maps,

with beautiful illuminations were pinned up on the walls, and the floor was

littered with scraps of parchment covered with tiny writing. King Anheg, hus

coarse black hair hanging in his eyes, sat at a slanted table in the soft glow

of a pair of candles studying a large book written on thin sheets of crackling parchment.

The guard at the door let them enter without a word, and Mister Wolf

stepped

briskly into the center of the room. "You wanted to see us, Anheg?"

The King of Cherek straightened from his book and laid it aside.

my sight until I know for certain he's out of the reach of that

Grolim,

Asharak."

"Anything you say, Polgara," Anheg said. "Come in, Garion."

"I see that you are continuing your studies," Mister Wolf said

approvingly,

glancing at the littered room.

"There's so much to learn," Anheg said with a helpless gesture that

included all

the welter of books and papers and strange machines. "I have a

feeling that I

might have been happier if you'd never introduced me to this

impossible task."

"You asked me," said Wolf simply.

"You could have said no." Anheg laughed. Then his brutish face

turned

serious.

He glanced once more at Garion and began to speak in an obviously

little.

machines sitting on a nearby table, being careful not to touch it.

"We'll take care of Asharak," Aunt Pol said.

But Anheg persisted. There have been rumors for centuries that
you

and your

father have been protecting -" he hesitated, glanced at Garion, and

then

continued smoothly. "- A certain thing that must be protected at all
costs.

Several of my books speak of it."

"You read too much, Anheg," Aunt Pol said.

Anheg laughed again. "It passes the time, Polgara," he said. "The

alternative is

drinking with my earls, and my stomach's getting a little delicate

for that -

and my ears as well. Have you any idea of how much noise a hall
full of drunk

We're all foolish at one time or another," Anheg said

philosophically. "But

let's get back to this other matter. If these rumors I mentioned
are

true,

aren't you taking some serious risks? Your search is likely to be
very
dangerous."

"No place is really safe," Mister Wolf said.

"Why take chances you don't have to?" Anheg asked. "Asharak isn't
the

only

Grolim in the world you know."

"I can see why they call you Anheg the sly," Wolf said with a smile.

"Wouldn't it be safer to leave this certain thing in my care until
you return?"

Anheg suggested.

"We've already found that not even Val Alorn is safe from the

adventures
experienced at protecting this certain thing you mentioned. It will
be safe with
us."

"Thank you for your concern, however," Mister Wolf said.

"The matter concerns us all," Anheg said.

Garion, despite his youth and occasional recklessness, was not
stupid. It was
obvious that what they were talking about involved him in some way
and quite
possibly had to do with the mystery of his parentage as well. To
conceal the
fact that he was listening as hard as he could, he picked up a small
book bound
in a strangely textured black leather. He opened it, but there were
neither
pictures or illuminations, merely a spidery-looking script that
seemed strangely

Put it down immediately," she told him.

King Anheg smiled. "You wouldn't be able to read it anyway, Garion," he said.

"It's written in Old Angarak."

"What are you doing with that filthy thing anyway?" Aunt Pol asked Anheg. "You

of all people should know that it's forbidden." "It's only a book, Pol,"

Mister Wolf said. "It doesn't have any power

unless

it's permitted to."

"Besides," Anheg said, rubbing thoughtfully at the side of his face,

"the book

gives us clues to the mind of our enemy. That's always a good thing to know."

"You can't know Torak's mind," Aunt Pol said, "and it's dangerous to open

yourself to him. He can poison you without your even knowing what's happening."

you've

done me a

service today, and you can call on me at any time for service in

return. Know

that Anheg of Cherek is your friend." He extended his right hand,

and

Garion took

it into his own without thinking.

King Anheg's eyes grew suddenly wide, and his face paled slightly.

He

turned

Garion's hand over and looked down at the silvery mark on the boy's

palm.

Then Aunt Pol's hands were also there, firmly closing Garion's

fingers and

removing him from Anheg's grip.

"It's true, then," Anheg said softly.

"Enough," Aunt Pol said. "Don't confuse the boy." Her hands were

that had so

startled Anheg? The birthmark, he knew, was hereditary. Aunt Pol
had

once told

him that his father's hand had had the same mark, but why would
that

be of

interest to Anheg? It had gone too far, His need to know became
almost

unbearable. He had to know about his parents, about Aunt Pol -
about

all of it.

If the answers hurt, then they'd just have to hurt. At least he
would

know.

The next morning was clear, and they left the palace for the harbor
quite early.

They all gathered in the courtyard where the sleighs waited.

Barak signed. "Whatever you wish," he said..With King Annley and

Queen Islena in the lead, the sleighs whirled out

of the

courtyard and into the snowy streets.

The sun was very bright, and the air was crisp. Garion rode silently

with Silk

and Hettar.

"Why so quiet, Garion?" Silk asked.

"A lot of things have happened here that I don't understand,"

Garion

said.

"No one can understand everything," Hettar said rather senten-
tiously.

"Chereks are a violent and moody people," Silk said. "They don't
even

understand

themselves."

"It's not just the Chereks," Garion said, struggling with the words.

After

they've run for a while, though, they'll start to walk again, Then
there'll be

time to put everything together."

"I hope so," Garion said dubiously and fell silent again.

The sleighs came round a corner into the broad square before the
temple of

Belar. The blind woman was there again and Garion realized that he
had been

half-expecting her. She stood on the steps of the temple and raised
her staff.

Unaccountably, the horses which pulled the sleighs stopped,
trembling, despite
the urgings of the drivers.

"Hail, Great One," the blind woman said. "I wish thee well on thy
journey."

The sleigh in which Garion was riding had stopped closest to the
temple steps,

Mar-je when thou comest into mine inheritance.

It was the second time she'd said that, and Garion felt a sharp pang of

curiosity. "What inheritance?" he demanded.

But Barak was roaring with fury and struggling to throw off the fur robe and

draw his sword at the same time. King Anheg was also climbing down from his

sleigh, his coarse face livid with rage.

"No!" Aunt Pol said sharply from nearby. "I'll tend to this." She stood up.

"Hear me witch-woman," she said in a clear voice, casting back the hood of her

cloak. "I think you see too much with those blind eyes of yours. I'm going to do

you a favor so that you'll no longer be troubled by the darkness and these

disturbing visions which grow out of it."

Garion saw it happen quite plainly, so there was no way that he could

persuade

himself that it had all been some trick of the eye. He was looking

directly at

Martje's face and saw the white film drain down off her eyes like

milk draining

down the inside of a glass.

The old woman stood frozen on the spot as the bright blue of her

eyes

emerged

from the film which had covered them. And then she screamed. She

held

up her

hands and looked at them and screamed again. There was in her

scream

a wrenching

note of indescribable loss.

"What did you do," Queen Islena demanded.

But, Queen Porenn objected, with her eyes restored, she'll lose

that other

vision, won't she?"

"I imagine so," Aunt Pol said, "but that's a small price to pay,
isn't it?"

"She'll no longer be a witch, then?" Porenn pressed.

"She wasn't a very good witch anyway," Aunt Pol said. "Her vision
was

clouded

and uncertain. It's better this way, She won't be disturbing herself
and others

with shadows anymore." She looked at King Anheg who sat frozen in
awe

beside his

half-fainting queen. "Shall we continue?" she asked calmly. "Our ship

is

waiting."

The horses, as if released by her words, leaped forward, and the

we've been privileged to witness a miracle, my friends," Hettar
tar

said.

"I gather, however, that the beneficiary was not very pleased with
it," Silk

said dryly. "Remind me not to offend Polgara. Her miracles seem to
have two

edges to them."Chapter Twenty-one

The low-slanting rays of the morning sun glittered on the icy waters
of the

harbor as their sleighs halted near the stone quays. Grelidik's ship
rocked and

strained at her hawsers, and a smaller ship also waited with seeming
impatience.

Hettar stepped down and went over to speak to Cho-Hag and Queen
Silar. The three

of them talked together quietly and seriously, drawing a kind of
shell of

stopped
near the
sleigh of the Queen of Cherek.
"If I were you, Islena," she said firmly, "I'd find another hobby.
Your gifts in
the arts of sorcery are limited, and it's a dangerous area for
dabbling. Too
many things can go wrong if you don't know what you are doing.
The queen stared at her mutely.
"Oh," Aunt Pol said, "one other thing. It would be best, I think, if
you broke
off your connections with the Bear-cult. It's hardly proper for a
queen to have
dealings with her husband's political enemies."
Islena's eyes widened. "Does Anheg know?" she asked in a stricken
voice.
"I wouldn't be suprised," Aunt Pol said. "He's much more clever than

keep you

out of trouble. That's only a suggestion, of course, but you might think it

over. I've enjoyed our visit, dear. Thank you for your hospitality."

And with

that she turned and walked away.

Silk whistled softly. That explains a few things," he said.

"Explains what?" Garion asked.

"The High Priest of Belar's been dabbling in Cherek politics lately.

He's

obviously gone a bit further than I'd thought in penetrating the palace."

"The queen?" Garion asked, startled.

"Islena's obsessed with the idea of magic," Silk said. "The Bear-cultists

dabble

in certain kinds of rituals that might look sort of mystical to

someone as

Queen of Drashida stood looking out at the icy sea.

"Highness," Silk said deferentially.

"Dear Kheldar," she said, smiling at him.

"Could you give some information to my uncle for me?" he asked.

"Of course."

"It seems that Queen Islena's been a bit indiscreet," Silk said.

"She's been

involved with the Bear-cult here in Cherek."

"Oh dear," Porenn said. "Does Anheg know?"

"It's hard to say," Silk told her. "I doubt if he'd admit it if he did. Garion

and I happened to hear Polgara tell her to stop it."

"I hope that puts an end to it," Porenn said. "If it went too far, Anheg would

have to take steps. That could be tragic."

"Polgara was quite firm," Silk said. "I think Islena will do as she was told,

but advise my uncle. He likes to be kept aware of this kind of

It's been about 50 years since the last time the cult had to be suppressed."

Queen Porenn nodded gravely. "I'll see to it that he knows," she said. "I've got some of my own people planted in the Bear-cult. As soon as we get back to Boktor, I'll talk with them and see what's afoot."

"Your people? Have you gone that far already?" Silk asked in a bantering tone.

"You're maturing rapidly, my Queen. It won't be long until you're as corrupt as the rest of us."

"Boktor is full of intrigue, Kheldar," the queen said primly. "It isn't just the Bear-cult, you know. Merchants from all over the world gather in our city, and at least half of them are spies. I have to protect myself - and my husband."

with matters

involving other kingdoms. I try to keep an eye on things at home to leave his

mind free for that kind of thing. My operations are a bit more modest

than his,

but I manage to stay aware of things." She looked at him slyly from beneath her eyelashes. "If you ever decide to come home to Boktor and settle down

I might

just be able to find work for you."

Silk laughed. "The whole world seems to be full of opportunities lately," he said.

The queen looked at him seriously. "When are you coming home, Kheldar?" she

asked. "When will you stop being this vagabond, Silk, and come back where you

Highness," he said. "Belgarath needs me too, and this is a very

important thing

we're doing just now. Besides, I'm not ready to settle down yet. The

game is

still entertaining. Perhaps someday when we're all much older it

won't be

anymore - who knows?"

She sighed. "I miss you too Kheldar," she said gently.

"Poor, lonely little queen," Silk said, half-mockingly.

"You're impossible," she said, stamping her tiny foot.

"One does one's best." He grinned.

Hettar had embraced his father and mother and leaped across to

the

deck of the

small ship King Anheg had provided him. "Belgarath," he called as the

sailors

slipped the stout ropes that bound the ship to the quay, "I'll meet

you in two

wind. He waved

once, then turned to face the sea.

A long plank was run down over the side of Captain Gredrik's ship to the snow

covered stones.

"Shall we go on board, Garion?" Silk said. They climbed the precarious plank and stepped out onto the deck.

"Give our daughters my love," Barak said to his wife.

"I will, my Lord," Merel said in the same stiffly formal tone she always used

with him. "Have you any other instructions?"

"I won't be back for some time," Barak said. "Plant the south fields to oats

this year, and let the west fields lie fallow. Do whatever you think best with

the north fields. And don't move the cattle up to the high pastures until all

With my Lord embrace me before he leaves," she asked.

"What's the point?" Barak said. He jumped across to the ship and immediately went below.

Aunt Pol stopped on her way to the ship and looked gravely at Barak's wife.

Then, without warning, she suddenly laughed.

"Something amusing, Lady Polgara?" Merel asked.

"Very amusing, Merel," Aunt Pol said with a mysterious smile.

"Might I be permitted to share it?"

"Oh, you'll share it, Merel," Aunt Pol promised, "but I wouldn't want to spoil it for you by telling you too soon." She laughed again and stepped onto the plank that led to the ship. Durnik offered his hand to steady her, and the two of them crossed to the deck.

rising

behind.

"Farewell, Belgarath," King Anheg called.

Mister Wolf nodded. "Don't forget about the minstrels," he said.

"We won't," Anheg promised. "Good luck."

Mister Wolf grinned and then walked forward toward the prow of Grelidik's ship.

Garion, on an impulse, followed him. There were questions which needed answers,

and the old man would know if anyone would.

"Mister Wolf," he said when they had both reached the high prow.

"Yes, Garion?"

He was not sure where to start, so Garion approached the problem obliquely. "How

did Aunt Pol do that to old Martje's eyes?"

"The Will and the Word," Wolf said, his long cloak whipping about him

in the

That's all," Wolf said.

"Is the word a magic word?"

Wolf laughed, looking out at the sun glittering sharply on the winter sea. "No,"

he said. "There aren't any magic words. Some people think so, but they're wrong.

Grolims use strange words, but that's not really necessary. Any word

will do the

job. It's the Will that's important, not the Word. The Word's just a channel for

the Will."

"Could I do it?" Garion asked hopefully.

Wolf looked at him. "I don't know, Garion," he said. "I wasn't much older than

you are the first time I did it, but I'd been living with Aldur for several

years. That makes a difference, I suppose."

and I told it to move. It did. I was a little surprised, but my Master

didn't

think it so unusual."

"You just said, 'move?' That's all?" Garion was incredulous.

"That's all." Wolf shrugged. "It seemed so simple that I was surprised

I hadn't

thought of it before. At the time I imagined that anybody could do it, but men

have changed quite a bit since then. Maybe it isn't possible anymore.

It's hard

to say, really."

"I always thought that sorcery had to be done with long spells and strange signs

and things like that," Garion said.

"Those are just the devices of tricksters and charlatans," Wolf said.

"They make

but it isn't

really necessary. Your Aunt has always seemed to want to gesture
when

she makes

something happen. I've been trying to break her of that habit for
hundreds of
years now."

Garion blinked. "Hundreds of years?" he gasped. "How old is she?"

"Older than she looks," Wolf said. "It isn't polite to ask questions
about a

lady's age, however."

Garion felt a sudden, shocking emptiness. The worst of his fears
had

been

confirmed. "Then she isn't really my Aunt, is she?" he asked sickly.

"What makes you say that?" Wolf asked.

She couldn't be, could she? I always thought that she was my fa-
ther's

to it, nothing - or at least very little - is actually impossible.

"How could she be? My Aunt I mean?"

"All right," Wolf said. "Polgara was not strictly speaking your father's sister..Her relationship to him is quite more complex. She was the sister of

his

grandmother - his ultimate grandmother, it there is such a term - and

of yours

as well, of course."

"Then she'd be my great-aunt," Garion said with a faint in spark of hope. It was something, at least.

"I don't know that I'd use that precise term around her." Wolf grinned. "She

might take offense. Why are you so concerned about all of this?"

"I was afraid that maybe she'd just said that she was my Aunt, and that there

or what I am. Silk says I'm not a Sendar, and Barak says I look sort

of like a

Rivan - but not exactly. I always thought I was a Sendar - like

Durnik - but I

guess I'm not. I don't know anything about my parents or where

they

come from or

anything like that. If Aunt Pol isn't related to me, then I don't

have anybody

in the world at all. I'm all alone, and that's a very bad thing."

"But now it's alright, isn't it?" Wolf said, your Aunt really is your

Aunt - at

least your blood and hers are the same."

"I'm glad you told me," Garion said. "I've been worried about it."

Gredlik's sailors untied the hawsers and began to push the ship

away

from the

quay.

sometimes,

but I can't really deny it."

Garion took a deep breath and plunged directly into it. "If she's my

Aunt, and

you're her father," he said, "wouldn't that sort of make you my

Grandfather?"

Wolf looked at him with a startled expression. "Why yes," he said,

laughing

suddenly, "I suppose that in a way it does. I'd never thought of it

exactly like

that before."

Garion's eyes suddenly filled with tears, and he impulsively embraced

the old

man. "Grandfather," he said, trying the word out.

""Well, well," Wolf said, his own voice strangely thick. "What a

remarkable

Grandfather, Garion said after a little while.

"Yes?"

"What really happened to my mother and father? I mean, how did they die?"

Wolf's face became very bleak. "There was a fire," he said shortly.

"A fire?" Garion said weakly, his imagination lurching back from that awful

thought - of the unspeakable pain. "How did it happen?"

"It's not very pleasant," Wolf said grimly. "Aew you really sure you want to know?"

"I have to, Grandfather," Garion said quietly. "I have to know everything I can

about them. I don't know why, but it's very important."

Mister Wolf sighed. "Yes, Garion," he said, "I guess it would be at that. All

right, then. If you're old enough to ask the questions, you're old

Let's see," Wolf said, scratching thoughtfully at his beard, where

do we

start?" He pondered for a moment. "Your family's very old, Garion,"

he said

finally, "and like so many old families, it has a certain number of
enemies."

"Enemies?" Garion was startled. That particular idea hadn't oc-
curred

to him

before.

"It's not uncommon," Wolf said. "When we do something someone
else

doesn't like,

they tend to hate us. The hatred builds up over the years until it
turns into

something almost like a religion. They hate not only us, but
everything

connected with us. Anyway, a long time ago your family's enemies

safe for you

to know right now. If you knew certain things, you'd act differently, and people would notice that. It's safer if you remain ordinary for a while longer."

"You mean ignorant," Garion accused.

"All right, ignorant then. Do you want to hear the story, or do you want to argue?" "I'm sorry," Garion said.

"It's all right," Wolf said, patting Garion's shoulder. "Since your Aunt and I are related to your family in rather a special way, we were naturally interested in your safety. That's why we hid your people."

"Can you actually hide a whole family?" Garion asked.

"It's never been that big a family," Wolf said. "It seems, for one reason or another, to be a single, unbroken line - no cousins or uncles or that

artisans

mostly, sometimes ordinary peasants - the kind of people nobody would

ever look

at twice. Anyway, everything had gone well until about twenty years ago. We

moved your father, Geran, from a place in Arendia to a little village in eastern

Sendaria, about sixty leagues southeast of Darine, up in the mountains. Geran

was a stonecutter - didn't I tell you that once before?"

Garion nodded. "A long time ago," he said. "You said you liked him and used to

visit him once in a while. Was my mother a Sendar then?"

"No," Wolf said. "Ildera as an Algar, actually - the second daughter of a Clan

Chief. Your Aunt and I introduced her to Geran when they were about

I'm getting to that," Wolf said. "One of the enemies of your family

had been

looking for your people for a long time."

"How long?"

"Hundreds of years, actually."

"That means he was a sorcerer, too, doesn't it?" Garion asked. "I

mean, only

sorcerers live for that long, don't they?"

"He has certain capabilities along those lines," Wolf admitted.

"Sorcerer is a

misleading term, though. It's not the sort of thing we actually call

ourselves.

Other people do, but we don't exactly think of it that way. It's a

convenient

term for people who don't really understand what it's all about.

Anyway, your

Aunt and I happened to be away when this enemy finally tracked

down

I thought you said the house was made of stone.

"It was," Wolf said, "but you can make stone burn if you really want to. The

fire just has to be hotter, that's all. Geran and Ildera knew there was no way

they could get out of the burning building, but Geran managed to knock one of

the stones out of the wall, and Ildera pushed you out through the hole. The one

who started the fire was waiting for that. He picked you up and started out of

the village. We could never be sure exactly what he had in mind - either he was

going to kill you, or maybe he was going to keep you for some reason of his own.

At any rate, that's when I got there. I put out the fire, but Geran and Ildera

were already dead. Then I went after the one who'd stolen you."

unpleasant than killing. His eyes were icy. As it turned out

though, I never

got the chance. He threw you at me - you were only a baby - and I

had

to try to

catch you. It gave him time to get away. I left you with Polgara and

then I went

looking for your enemy. I haven't been able to find him yet,

though."

"I'm glad you haven't," Garion said.

Wolf looked a little surprised at that.

"When I get older, I'm going to find him," Garion said, "I think I

ought to be

the one who pays him back for what he did, don't you?"

Wolf looked at him gravely. "It could be dangerous," he said.

"I don't care. What's his name?"

"I think that maybe I better wait a while before I tell you that,"

Wolf said. "I

If you insist. And if I don't, I'm sure your Aunt will. She feels

the same way

you do."

"Don't you?"

"I'm much older," Wolf said. "I see things a little differently."

"I'm not that old yet," Garion said. "I won't be able to do the kind of things

you'd do, so I'll have to settle for just killing him." He stood up and began to

pace back and forth, a rage boiling in him.

"I don't suppose I'll be able to talk you out of this," Wolf said, "but

I really

think you're going to feel differently about it after it's over."

"Not likely," Garion said, still pacing.

"We'll see," Wolf said.

"Thank you for telling me, Grandfather," Garion said.

"You'd have found out sooner or later anyway," the old man said,

"and

things in a

much more personal way than I do. Sometimes that colors her perceptions. I try

to take the long view of things. I could take - under the circumstances."

Garion looked at the old man whose white hair and beard seemed somehow luminous

in the morning sun. "What's it like to live forever, Grandfather?" He asked.

"I don't know," Wolf said. "I haven't lived forever."

"You know what I mean."

"The quality of life isn't much different," Wolf said. "We all live as long as

we need to. It just happened that that I have something to do that's

taken a

very long time." He stood up abruptly. "This conversation's taken a gloomy

wolf looked at him gravely for a moment and then put one arm
round
his
shoulders. "I think you may be suprised about that before it's all
over,
Garion," he said.
And then they turned and looked out over the prow of the ship at

the
snowy coast
of Cherek sliding by on their right as the sailors rowed the ship
south towards
Camaar and whatever lay beyond.

*

Here ends Book One of the Belgariad. Book Two, Queen of Sorcery
will reveal Garion's own dangerous powers of sorcery and more on
his
heritage,
which underlies their quest.